



CHRA Congress Session Series 2023

A Tapestry of Experience: Unpacking the diversity and impact of housing stories

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Elder Marie McGregor, Pitawanakwat



**Canadian Housing and
Renewal Association**
A Home for the Housing Sector



BC HOUSING



THIS SUMMARY

This is a summary of the workshop session 'A Tapestry of Experience: Unpacking the diversity and impact of housing stories', which took place at the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association's 55th National Congress on Housing and Homelessness in Winnipeg, MB on April 19, 2023.

The session explored diverse first-person accounts of housing precarity, homelessness, and fleeing violence and highlighted how lived experience can help create better public policy and housing programs.

WITH THANKS

With thanks to BC Housing for their generous support for this initiative.



Sharing and learning about lived experience is how we provoke empathy, build understanding and bring about policy change.



Leigh's Tapestry of Experience

Leigh Bursey is a current full-time Housing Officer supporting the Province of Newfoundland's non-profit housing program. Previously, Leigh served as a Municipal Councillor for 11 years in Brockville, Ontario. Leigh has a variety of personal experiences that have shaped his worldview, including lived experience with homelessness, and domestic violence. He found his calling in being a voice for those who are often ignored. Leigh shared stories of communities, and people who may not show the best version of themselves, but are tired of being numbers on spreadsheets and victims to past and current policy failures¹. Leigh is an advocate for people that are sometimes "hard to love", and these are their stories:

"There is a disconnect from the people we are serving; we risk alienating them by not understanding that they are someone much like us"

- Leigh Bursey



Donnie & Uncle's Stories

Donnie was a friend of Leigh's. He was homeless and struggled with various health issues. Donnie's health improved dramatically when funding was available for specialized resources. Without ongoing supports, and cuts in funding, he ended up back on the streets and eventually passed away. Leigh reflected on the impact Donnie had in his community, and wondered what could have been done differently to support him and others like him. Leigh further emphasized the importance of lived experience shaping policy change, and called for continued efforts to address homelessness and inequity¹.

Uncle is the chosen name of the next person's story, and Leigh is proud to call him a friend. Uncle was described as having no serious previous criminal involvement, aside from driving without a license when he was 17 in 1990. However, Uncle had some economic challenges and was on disability support. He lived in substandard living conditions in a community known for drug trafficking and violence, which contributed to his depression, and consequent involvement.

Leigh shared that despite these challenges, he was an amazing beautiful human being, who took a photo with him on his wedding day. Uncle struggled to find suitable housing, and was eventually priced out of the market due to economic realities that value dollar figures over people. Leigh stressed the importance of remembering that hardships faced by people like Uncle are a result of systemic issues and not personal failings¹.

In the final story shared by Leigh, he asked the room to listen to the details, close their eyes, and ask ourselves if we would ignore this person.

Leigh describes a 53-year-old male who has recently been released from prison without a fixed address, money, or a winter jacket to protect him from the cold weather in Ontario. The man has been struggling with a severe crystal meth addiction for over three years and finds it hard to remain sober. The man was previously referred to community agencies for help, but he had mixed experiences and often received negative feedback, with many programs under-funded and unable to assist him in the ways that he had hoped. Leigh wondered what choice any of us has but to continue to see the best parts of people even when they don't, considering the system is often failing people like this man in the story.

Leigh highlighted the need for systemic change to ensure everyone has access to necessities and support. He urges us to remember that those experiencing homelessness are not just numbers on a spreadsheet, but real people with stories and struggles that deserve our attention and care.

¹ Leigh Bursey, "A Tapestry of Experiences" (presentation, CHRA Congress, Winnipeg, MB, April 19, 2023)

Searching for a Home After Violence: Stories of Indigenous, Black and Women of Color



Victoria's Research in a Tapestry of Experience

Victoria Barclay is a researcher at the Women Transport Cities organization and is also pursuing her masters degree in sociology from UBC. She grew up in Parkdale, Toronto, which influenced her perspectives on homelessness, housing, food security, immigration, and gentrification. Her research focuses on the housing experiences of women fleeing violence in Vancouver and Toronto. She collaborated with the BC Society of Transition Houses, an umbrella organization that supports the anti-violence sector and workers².

Victoria's research is situated in the community section of the literature, which refers to the sense of belonging and emotional connection that individuals have with their community. When it comes to housing, women fleeing domestic violence face unique challenges that can impact their sense of safety and belonging. While safety is an essential component of habilitation for all individuals, it takes on a different meaning for women fleeing domestic violence. They lack ontological security, which contributes to a sense of safety and security².

Another critical aspect of Victoria's research is the relationship between women fleeing violence and landlords. Landlords often prioritize tenants with high and reliable income, which makes it challenging for women fleeing violence, particularly women of colour and mothers. Landlords may be prejudiced, and use the appearance, demeanour, and race of applicants to determine their suitability as tenants, which further exacerbates discrimination².

Victoria used proposed sampling for her research, focusing on the housing experiences of Indigenous, Black, and women of colour who experienced domestic violence. Her work challenges the right to housing in Canada and advocates for housing equity and safety for all².

Results

Rachel, 47, Chinese-Canadian, 2 kids



“

I looked at hundreds and hundreds of rental places.. I actually felt discriminated against because I was a mom –a single mom at that. And they were not willing to rent to me because I had younger children, even though I had the money to rent it, I never got the call back. I had references. I have a very good resume.”

Elizabeth, 31, First Nations, Caribbean & Welsh, 3 kids



“

We've got a lot of support networks; doctors, social workers, our dentist, optical, everything is here in this one town. So for us to move to [a different community], I'd be losing my support workers, my counsellors, my children's counsellors, our congregation would change. Its hard to find a good connection with your doctor. It was just going to be too hard to try and find all that all over again.”

² Victoria Barclay, "A Tapestry of Experiences" (presentation, CHRA Congress, Winnipeg, MB, April 19, 2023)

Searching for a Home After Violence: Stories of Indigenous, Black and Women of Color



Implications



Victoria shared the implications of the research study being crucial in addressing community safety, relationships with landlords, and affordable housing for women experiencing domestic violence. To begin, she highlighted the importance of having affordable housing that includes three+ bedrooms for families in several areas of the city. In maintaining and promoting this, women can have the option to choose whether to relocate or stay and maintain their sense of community or build it elsewhere³.

Victoria added by avoiding concentration of affordable housing in a certain region, it makes it more difficult for abusers to locate their victims³.

Victoria further highlighted how addressing the concerns of landlords could be helpful to women experiencing domestic violence, as well as those who experience housing insecurity. Educating landlords on experiences like this could provide the necessary support, and build strong relationships between tenants and landlords³.

³ Victoria Barclay, "A Tapestry of Experiences" (presentation, CHRA Congress, Winnipeg, MB, April 19, 2023)

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Marie McGregor's Tapestry of Experience

Marie McGregor is an Indigenous woman from the Eastern Peninsula of Manitoulin Island in North Eastern Ontario who shares her lived experience with homelessness⁴.

Marie began by sharing her experience of being evicted from her family home, which her father built with his own hands. Amidst conflict with a family member, Marie was intimidated and was ultimately evicted. She had spent \$25,000 on renovations to the home, and attempted to receive compensation but was defeated at small claims court, the Ontario Superior Court, the Ontario Court of Appeals, and finally the Supreme Court of Canada⁴.

Marie realized the courts in Canada do not have jurisdiction over traditional Indigenous lands. She highlighted the Indian Act was put in place without consulting Indigenous peoples, it was a creation of the federal legislation. Marie learned that, in the Indian Act, there is a certificate possession section which is a quasi-ownership document that Indigenous peoples on reserves can invoke to show they have access to property. Eventually Marie got evicted, and went to stay at an emergency shelter for a few weeks⁴.

Marie persisted following this incident, and began creating her own home by adding onto a small garage, and eventually building a three bedroom tiny home with both new and salvaged materials. Marie took a carpentry course to learn skills to help build her new home⁴.

Eventually, Marie was evicted from the reserve by the band council, and had to move her tiny home to a friend's farm before being offered a place to live in her relatives' 100 year-old lock house⁴.

Marie ended the session by singing a song on behalf of those who do not have a voice.



A decoration inside Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat's home on Birch Island (Erik White/CBC)⁵

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“I need to talk about it... because of the trauma, the violence, the hurt, the rage, the same, the embarrassment, and the voiceless are not going to be able to talk about it.”

“

-Marie McGregor

⁴ Marie McGregor, "A Tapestry of Experiences" (presentation, CHRA Congress, Winnipeg, MB, April 19, 2023)

⁵ White, Erik, "One of the few decorations inside Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat's home on Birch Island" Photo, CBC, May 01, 2018