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THE CROW
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EDITOR'S NEST

Journalism has been called history on the run. There are many forms of journalism, though. Magazine journalism moves at a slower pace than daily news. The best magazine writers often seek to tie history to the present. Looking deep into the heart of current affairs, they find history repeating, confounding and teaching.

Sometimes history simply endures, as illustrated by this issue's cover story, 'Riel Lasting Power,' by Dylan Bernhardt. This adds its own layer of complexity, as disparate views of history shift over time. If you look into a government policy that makes no sense today, for example, chances are it was shaped by experiences and attitudes of the past, as Eric Westhaver found in our first story, 'Bloody Shame,' an examination of Canada's blood donor restrictions.

Ashley Robinson takes a similarly long view of Saskatchewan's new agricultural vistas of lentil and pea fields. Her story, 'Pulse of a Province,' reveals dual histories of how pulse crops arrived in the province—and raises the spectre of history on repeat, as crops that promised diversity show signs of becoming the next monoculture.

A long and painful history underlies Taylor Rattray's 'The Terrorist' but, in this case, the patterns of the past show signs of being broken rather than repeated. In 'When the Mosquito Bites,' Sasha Gay-Lobban investigates how the short history of a new virus, chik-v, uncovers flaws in Jamaica's health care system and, hopefully, informs the country as it grapples with the next contagion, zika.

In the face of new uranium deposit discoveries, the Denesuline people have a very deep historical well to draw from, including a long-ago prophecy of a mineral that would sicken people. Shinoah Young travelled to English River, where she met a 104-year-old woman who lived during the time of the prophet Willow Heart, whose visions today guide Marius Paul, the central character in 'Prophecy.'

Historical moments are often rooted in the tension of change. Changing concepts of gender identity, for example, have been outpacing legal changes in recent years. Kendall Latimer found a family at the centre of this dilemma in 'Raising Change.' Creeden Martell also discovered something not changing with the times—Saskatchewan's drinking culture. 'Booze Cruise' raises an important question about why the provincial government is ramping up actions against individual offenders while turning a blind eye toward the alcohol industry's pervasive social influence.

'Fog on the Mountain' is a personal history that draws on the many centuries of humanity's quest for enlightenment. Author Josh Campbell looks at his own journey thus far, and talks to other travellers he encounters on the road to finding meaning in life, from a boy in a Ugandan refugee camp to a former provincial premier. The final story, Alec Salloum's 'The Devil You Know,' introduces us to those who are struggling with their personal demons. Saskatchewan's approach to addictions appears stuck in a deep rut, still awaiting its moment of change. But, if there's one thing we've learned from the stories that have come before, change will come. The wheel keeps turning, and churning up new stories for the next group of writers to discover.

In addition to showcasing the writing produced in the School of Journalism's magazine course, The Crow features the work of some of our photojournalism students. The result is a well illustrated package that delivers the full magazine experience, both for the student journalists and their readers. This year, we have answered reader feedback on the last issue with a larger, easier-to-read type size inside. We hope to hear more of your thoughts on the 2016 edition. Read on!

Patricia W. Elliott,
Editor

If you want to see The Crow continue to publish in-depth journalism that matters to Canadians, please consider making a donation to the School of Journalism. Your support is crucial to The Crow magazine and other free public outreach services, such as the School's annual Minifie Lecture. Together we can make journalism the best it can be!

ON THE
COVER

Photo illustration of
Louis Riel based on
archival photo by
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Journalism matters. And this book proves it.

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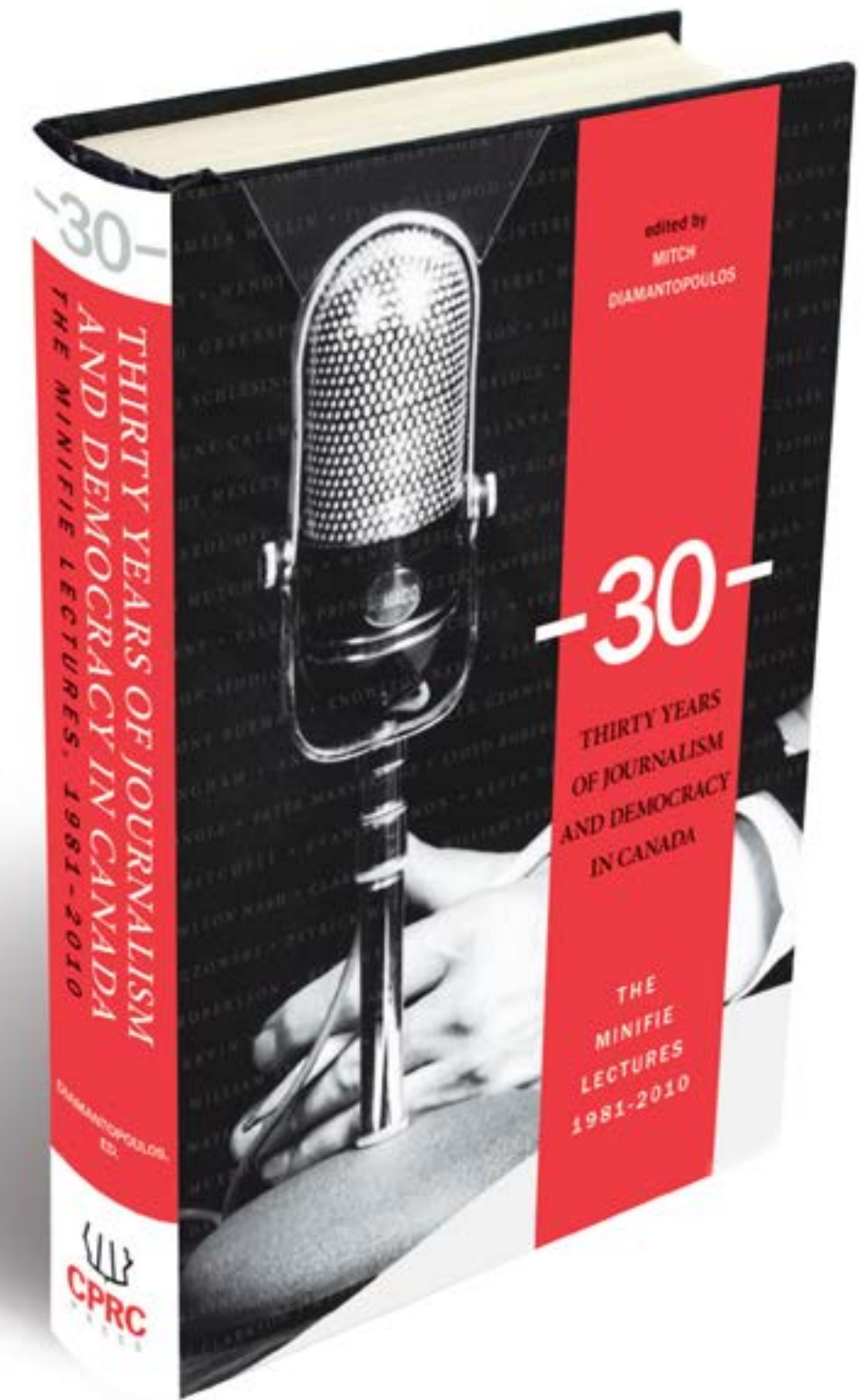
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BLOODY SHAME

OUTDATED RULES ARE BLOCKING SOME CANADIANS FROM GIVING THE GIFT OF LIFE.

Story and photos
by
ERIC WESTHAVER

I can only try to imagine what it feels like. It always looks the same. The sun isn't up yet and road traffic is still light. A man walks on a salt-stained sidewalk. He hasn't checked his watch or phone; he doesn't care what time it is. His brow is furrowed, eyes locked in the near-distance.

He's worried.

Not far away, there's a glass-fronted building with a red tear-drop-shaped sign out front. A smaller sign next to it shows the building's mission statement and motto: "It's in you to give!" The man sees it, stops for a moment, and forces out a small, shy chuckle. At this point, it's all he can do. He inhales deeply, exhales slowly, and goes inside. He will have to answer a few questions and declare anything that might complicate the procedure.

This is the part, I always imagine, that would make him shudder most—not the sharp needle entering his veins, not the light-headedness or bruise he may have after, or the salty snacks they might ply him with, post-needle. The issue is more complicated than that.

The patient, standing scared in the clinic, is a gay man. While he is a hypothetical construct, his experiences are not. For a gay man to donate blood in today's Canada, there are rules and standards he must meet; rules and standards which he most likely does not meet.

Let's snap back to the real world. In the corner of a crowded

"It is an extremely discriminatory policy to a certain demographic of people who actually want to be able to donate blood."

coffee shop, at the end of a long day of work, Jesse Ireland and Dan Shier take a seat. Hanging lights, modern furniture and expensive coffee are all around. Idle chatter fills the air. The table in front of them, quite conspicuously, is bare; no coffee, baked goods, or \$4 bottles of water here.

The men haven't come for coffee; they've come to talk. They're serious. Shier and Ireland both work with Queen City Pride, Regina's biggest LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) advocacy organization. Their work is still necessary in Saskatchewan's capital, which has its own issues with homophobia, whether it's from the inflammatory placards and sharp tongues of those who preach intolerance, the seething red fists of homophobes and gay-bashers, or the clotted, dried ink used to mark outdated and unjust laws.

Until a change in provincial law less than two years ago, in late December 2014, LGBTQ people could be evicted from their homes if their landlords found out about their orientation.

Both Shier and Ireland identify as gay men. Under CBS policy, neither is eligible for blood or organ donation—and changes announced in late June 2016 have not made much difference to their situation. Donating blood still requires gay men to first forgo sex with their partners for at least a year, a demand that isn't placed on women and heterosexuals.

"There's a lot of controversy around it," says Ireland. "I don't

agree with the policy, it's an extremely discriminatory policy to a certain demographic of people who actually want to be able to donate blood."

Shier agrees. While the policy affects both Shier and Ireland first-hand, the two also know several others who have been affected by the policy and the hurdles they face.

"The policy itself doesn't really take into consideration a lot of individual practices or situations people are in," says Shier, pointing out that monogamous relationships are less risky than non-monogamous relationships, no matter the person's orientation. The policy is based in generalized, outdated statistics that don't take into account how people actually live, he argues.

"I would love to be able to donate blood," chimes in Ireland. If he were straight he'd likely be considered an above-average candidate. He regularly gets tested for STIs and HIV, and knows his current health status, which is more than most can say. But because he's out, he's quite literally out.

The rules keeping Shier and Ireland from donating aren't new. Policies restricting donations from men who have sex with men—often addressed by the overly-simple acronym MSMs—have been on the books for more than 30 years. The restrictions emerged during a time when HIV-AIDS first exploded into public consciousness. Accurate information about the disease was scarce,

while fear and speculation ran rampant.

The new and deadly virus hurtled through the gay community like a freight train. At one point, in the days when the band played on and the discotheques were full, more than 80 per cent of Canadians with HIV-AIDS were MSMs.

In 1983, the Canadian Red Cross, then-operators of Canada's blood supply system, banned all MSMs from donating. The Red Cross said the organization was not condemning homosexuality; the issue was HIV-AIDS. At the time, there was a legitimate fear of people being infected with the virus during surgical procedures and blood transfusions. In 1984, U.S. teenager Ryan White received the virus through a transfusion and later died, showing the public that accidental HIV infections were possible.

Meanwhile, the Red Cross dragged its feet on testing the blood and plasma it collected from all its donors. This led to thousands of Canadians becoming infected with HIV-AIDS and Hepatitis C, a public inquiry found in 1997. In response, the federal government stepped in to regulate blood services. Two new nonprofits were created: Canadian Blood Services and Hema-Quebec. The MSM ban remained, now backed by legislative authority under Health Canada.

Yet the profile of HIV-AIDS has been changing. Today, more than 70,000 Canadians have HIV-AIDS. However, the portion categorized as MSM has dropped to 47 per cent, down from 80

per cent when the disease first emerged. There are no similar donor exclusions for the non-MSMs who make up the majority of cases. Neither are there any special rules for lesbians, who make up a small number of HIV-AIDS cases.

Blood isn't the only area where donation is problematic for MSMs. Eight years ago Health Canada introduced regulations that banned MSMs from donating their organs after death. The reason given was the same reason for the current restrictions on blood donation—an HIV-AIDS risk.

For the gay donor waiting nervously in the clinic, the only thing that matters is what the laws are like right now. The lifetime ban was repealed in 2013, replaced with a deferral period of five years after having sex with another man. That five-year period was repealed in June 2016, replaced with one year of MSM celibacy. The institution of the one-year period is slow and painful progress, but still presents a significant barrier to donating on an equal basis with other Canadians. Canadian Blood Services and Hema-Quebec are blocked from completely removing this barrier, since Health Canada holds the highest authority on the matter.

In a press release issued after the rule change, Health Canada stated, "This change brings Canada in line with several other countries which have implemented a one-year deferral period for men who have sex with men, including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland and France."

Today's rule is simple: if you're considered to be an MSM, and you haven't had sex in a year, you can donate. If you break the streak, you're in trouble.

The policies for transgender people, previously decided on a case-by-case basis, have now been more clearly defined: trans women will need to be celibate for one year to donate, but only after gender-confirming surgery—a surgery only performed by a single Canadian clinic. In these circumstances, unless a trans woman has the surgery, she will be officially considered to be a man.

According to the Canadian Red Cross, the original MSM policy was made to keep people needing blood away from one of the most devastating pathogens around. However, for MSMs today, the current rules are outdated, leaving thousands of potential donors on the sidelines.

Shier and Ireland are both leaning forward in their chairs. Our conversation, at first casual and relaxed, is now more intense. Change is in the air, but remains elusive.

Not long before our discussion, Shier and Ireland attended a conference in London, Ont., organized by Fierté Canada Pride, a group comprised of pride groups from coast to coast. During the conference, both attended a seminar where activists and Canadian Blood Services representatives spoke at length on the MSM restriction. All speakers, as well as Shier and Ireland themselves, agreed on one thing: the status quo needs to change.

At the time, it seemed that good news was on the horizon for potential MSM donors. In the federal political bull-ring, pressure was starting to mount. Mindsets among Parliament Hill's power brokers had changed. In the previous federal election, part of the Liberal Party's platform was to change Health Canada's rules around accepting MSM donations.

The Liberal platform didn't call for a reduction in the waiting period. It called for abolishing it completely. "It's a ban that ignores scientific evidence, and it needs to end," the party's platform doc-



From left, Queen City Pride co-chair Dan Shier, secretary Matthew Tovill, and event planner Tyler Hopson.

ument declared.

But while the new federal government has taken a hard stance and puffed out its chest regarding the law, they've been more cautious in power.

Although Canadian Blood Services and Hema-Quebec don't have the authority to get rid of the regulations themselves, they can recommend a future course of action. CBS and Hema-Quebec both supported shortening the deferral period for MSM donations from five years to one year. Any further reduction, both say officially, would need further review before their organizations could support it.

Back at the coffee shop, Dan Shier supports abolishing the policy completely, saying even the one-year period is unreasonable. "If I'm living with a partner who I'm monogamous with, I don't think I could be expected to abstain from anything for a year, or five years, to donate blood," he says. In that sense, reducing the deferral to one year changes nothing.

For a gay male patient going into a blood clinic today, the experience likely remains just as I imagined: clammy hands, rising pulse, scared to death of what may happen if he's somehow 'found out.'

I'm lucky. As a heterosexual man, I can donate whenever it's

medically feasible for me to do so. I know my health status, and I don't have any pressing health issues. Neither do Jesse, or Dan, or thousands of other gay men across Canada who want to help. Why should they be left behind?

The fact is, by medical standards, blood is blood, whether it's blood from a gay man, a straight woman, or any other group. The blood of a gay male donor is indistinguishable from that of a straight donor. One of the samples will not be green. It won't be toxic, nor will it be cold to the touch. Both are red, both can save lives, and both are needed by Canadians in their most desperate moments. 🐾



**FROM ONE GREEN SEED, AL SLINKARD SPARKED A FARMING REVOLUTION.
WILL IT BECOME TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?**

OF A PROVINCE

Story and photos
by
ASHLEY ROBINSON

The door on the old beater truck didn't close right. From Idaho to Saskatchewan the cold winter air crept in the farther north Alfred "Al" Slinkard drove. Crossing the border, he passed miles of frozen wheat fields. On the prairies, wheat was king.

That was about to change.

It was -40 C when Slinkard finally arrived in Saskatoon on Feb. 1, 1972—a true prairie welcome. The Crop Development Centre at the University of Saskatchewan had spent months courting him. Slinkard had been working at the University of Idaho as a researcher on winter peas and grass breeding—except he was allergic to grass. In October 1971, Slinkard and his wife, Marie, made their first trip to Saskatoon for a job interview. Not long after returning to Idaho, he received a letter inviting him back to work on peas at the U of S. The salary was enticing and Slinkard was getting tired of sneezing his way through working with grass.

At the time, Saskatchewan was still a wheat-first economy—but the wheat market was saturated and prices had tumbled. In 1971 the U of S opened the Crop Development Centre to help farmers find other options. There wasn't much happening yet when Slinkard arrived, just a few other researchers working on various 'special' crops, each to their own.

Slinkard would be the lone pea researcher. On his first day on the job, he sent for samples from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's pea collection at Oregon State College. His job was, after all, to breed pea varieties to grow in Saskatchewan. But he knew that back in Idaho, farmers also grew lentils. Slinkard had a hunch.

"What the heck," he thought. "Why not get the lentil collection, too?"

Slinkard started testing out lentil varieties. After years of line and plot tests he was left with two varieties he liked, a large and a small green lentil. However, farmers couldn't experiment with two

As farmers in Saskatchewan have moved to continuous cropping, no-till pulses have become an important part of crop rotations.

To fit into the crop cycle, pulses fix their own nitrogen, making man-made fertilizers less necessary. Bacteria enters the roots of the plant and the resulting symbiotic relationship allows the plant to take nitrogen from the air and turn it into plant available nitrogen. This nitrogen isn't just for the current plant; it stays in the soil and helps the following year's crop. Cereals, like wheat, barley and oats, and oil seeds, like flax and canola, can be planted the next year with no tillage needed. This allows for continuous cropping and for the most land base to be used for food production. As an added bonus, the flat, relatively rock-free land and semi-arid climate make pulse crops thrive in Saskatchewan.

In ancient societies pulses were revered not only for their soil benefits but also for their health benefits. They are high in protein, which makes them a favourite among vegetarians and vegans. They are high in fibre, too, which helps decrease cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Pulses are abundant in B-vitamins and key minerals including iron, potassium, magnesium and zinc.

The combination of everything made pulses the perfect fit for the narrow Saskatchewan agriculture world in the 1970s. But it wasn't the first time pulses had set their roots in Saskatchewan.

Shams Sallum (Salloum) arrived in Quebec City with her two sons, Adib (Eddie) and Habeeb, in 1924 from the French mandate of Syria and Lebanon. She then hopped on a train to the village of Gouverneur, in southwest Saskatchewan, where she met her husband Jiryas Ya'qub Sallum (George Jacob Salloum). George Jacob had already been in Canada for a year. He drove a horse and buggy through the countryside surrounding Gouverneur, selling wares from a relative's general store to farmers.

The Salloums had lived as peasant farmers in Syria. They now

The children went to school with lunches of lentils and peas. At lunchtime they hid so the other kids couldn't see what they were eating.

new crops at once, Slinkard reasoned. He would have to pick one to get them started. He knew 'eye appeal' mattered when choosing seed, and so the large green lentil seed—the biggest and brightest option—led the way into the market.

Until that moment Saskatchewan was basically a cereal-only place. This went against the grain of 10,000 years of farming practice. When the first hunter-gatherers were beginning to develop sedentary farming systems, to make their soil sustainable they rotated cereals with legumes. In the Middle East, wheat and barley were rotated with lentils, peas, faba beans and chickpeas. In sub-Saharan Africa, it was sorghum-millet with cowpea and in China, it was rice and soybean.

Pulses fall into the legume family and include beans, peas, chickpeas, faba beans, lentils and cowpea. Saskatchewan grows them all except for cowpea, but that wasn't the case 50 years ago.

lived in a one-room shack but had dreams of farming again. In 1927, the government granted them a quarter section of land at a homestead north of Val Marie, near the U.S. border, in the heart of the drought-prone Palliser Triangle. The growing family now included Ramza (Rose), a younger sister to sons Eddie and Habeeb, followed by another boy, Abdallah (Albert). In 1928, the family's hard work was rewarded with an excellent crop. One more healthy crop followed in 1929 before the Dirty Thirties hit. For the next three years, nothing grew on the parched soil. In 1930, in an attempt to save their now-failing farm, the family moved some 90 kilometres north toward Neville, Sask., where the growing conditions were somewhat better.

The Salloums had another idea to survive hard times. Back in Syria they had grown lentils, chickpeas and broad beans. The Salloums acquired seeds for these crops from relatives and started growing them in their garden. The plants thrived in the dry, warm

Habeeb Salloum and his brother, Adib (Eddie), pose with their mother, Shams, for her passport photo for their journey from the French mandate of Syria and Lebanon to Canada in 1924. Photo courtesy Habeeb Salloum.



Al Slinkard, a crop researcher at the U of S, is credited with introducing lentils to the Saskatchewan agriculture industry. Photo courtesy University of Saskatchewan Archives and Special Collections.

Al Slinkard sits in his easy chair in his Saskatoon apartment. To many, the 84-year-old retired U of S crop researcher is known as the father of the pulse crop industry in Saskatchewan.



climate and suddenly the family was no longer going hungry.

In the fields, the Salloums still grew wheat, feeling that their garden pulse crops would be seen as inferior by their neighbours. The children went to school with lunches of lentils and peas. At lunchtime they hid so the other kids couldn't see what they were eating. None of the other children would even want to try the food the Salloum children ate, Habeeb Salloum recalls today.

When the threshing crews came to the Salloum family farm during harvest time, the normal foods the family ate were hidden away, replaced with bologna and sardines bought from the store to feed the threshing crew. The children waited joyously for this time of year, hoping for leftovers. They craved 'normal' foods.

At 16, Habeeb left home for Moose Jaw, to take a course so he could work at a factory during the Second World War. He lived in a rooming house that served English roast beef and Irish stews. At first he relished the meals, but he soon found himself missing the flavours of his childhood. He connected with other immigrants who shared his love of Middle Eastern fare, and began teaching himself to make his mother's traditional dishes.

Meanwhile, Habeeb's younger brother Abdallah (Albert) took over the family's farm at Neville. In the late 1950's he decided he wanted to start commercially growing the pulse crops his family had grown in their garden in his childhood. The problem was, he needed seeds.

Habeeb decided to try and help him out. The two traveled to the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa. When they arrived, no one had any idea of anything to do with pulse crops. Undeterred, Albert contacted some family members in Massachusetts who sold Arabic food and asked them to send him chickpea seed.

Albert grew 20 bushels of chickpeas on his farm that year. The crop was never sold commercially. Fortunately, dried chickpeas have a decades-long shelf life. The bounty was distributed among the Salloum siblings who dined off that single crop for the next 20 years.

In 1977, about the same time the Salloums were finishing off their chickpeas, farmers from Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta were picked to grow test plots of lentils. All summer, Slinkard trekked across the prairies visiting the plots. Each one he saw showed the promise of the new crop.

Bruce Cheston, a former herbicide salesman who farmed near Grand Coulee, Sask., decided that a small test plot wasn't enough for him. He wanted to grow an 80-acre field instead. Slinkard thought he was crazy for growing such a big field. But Cheston planted the crop in 1978 and kept control of the weeds.

The timing was perfect. South of the border, in the lentil-growing Palouse area of Washington State and Idaho, a drought was underway. Brokers had already sold the anticipated crop the year before, and now they had no lentils. When the panicking brokers heard about a field in Saskatchewan, they rushed to buy Cheston's crop, bidding the price up

to an unprecedented 35 cents a pound. Cheston had 1,800 pounds per acre. He walked away with around \$700 per acre. In comparison, wheat farmers were fetching just \$100 an acre if they could even sell it. Word spread across Saskatchewan of Cheston's bounty crop.

Meanwhile, Slinkard found himself spending the winter travelling. He tromped from town to town, speaking in town halls about lentils and telling farmers how to grow this new crop. He gave at least three to four talks a week from January to March. He coined an acronym: ABC, Anything But Cereals. He preached it everywhere he went and farmers ate it up.

One night after a talk, a farmer approached Slinkard. "Boy,

you're a real salesman," he said. Slinkard stared at him dumbfounded. "No I'm not," he replied.

He had always considered himself a researcher.

The farmer's words stuck in Slinkard's thoughts as he travelled around the province. "Every time I do a presentation I'm selling the Crop Development Centre. I'm selling the University of Saskatchewan," he realized. "I'm selling lentils. I'm selling, and when I go out of province I sell Saskatchewan and if I go out of country, I'm selling Canada."

And it turns out he was a pretty good salesman. Over the next 15 years, lentil crops expanded to 14,000 acres. To Slinkard, it was unbelievable.

Cheston's crop was just the beginning. By 2015, Saskatchewan had 3.7 million acres of lentils seeded, selling at \$629 a tonne. That amounts to 28.5 cents per pound, while wheat was selling at just 22.2 cents per pound. Producers were already dreaming of fields full of lentils across the province for 2016. It's a long way from the wheat-filled past of only 50 years ago. Following that first large green seed, over 70 varieties of pulses have emerged through the doors of the Crop Development Centre.

Slinkard, now retired, spends his days with his wife at their apartment in Preston Park in Saskatoon. Pulses have been his life and, even though his memory isn't the best anymore, he can still rattle off almost any fact about his cherished crops. Many refer to him as the father of Saskatchewan's pulse industry. His walls are adorned with honours; he's a member of both the Saskatchewan and Canadian Agriculture Halls of Fame.

To most in the pulse industry, the Salloums and their fellow Syrian neighbours aren't thought of as pulse pioneers. Their experience is seen more as a family tradition. In 2005, Habeeb published a cookbook, *Arab Cooking on a Saskatchewan Homestead* (University of Regina Press, 2005). Mixed in among the recipes, Habeeb told the story of his family coming to Saskatchewan.

Pulses have lost their specialness. Now they are just a crop in Saskatchewan. Over 90 per cent of Canada's lentils are grown in Saskatchewan and Canada is known as the top exporter of lentils in the world. The United Nations has declared 2016 as International Year of Pulses, anticipated to drive up demand worldwide for these crops.

At the Crop Development Centre, researcher Albert 'Bert' Vandenburg ponders the pulse industry's future. He was one of the first extra hands to be hired to work on pulses with Slinkard, in 1991. He's seen the industry change over the years and now he wonders if the high prices will lead to greed in the industry. The key to pulses is crop rotation to stop the spread of soil diseases. Vandenberg wonders if the high prices will motivate people to start growing pulses year after year in the same fields, just like they used to do with wheat.

Driving across the Saskatchewan countryside in the summer you can now see fields of pulses beside fields of traditional wheat. So far, it's been a blessing. Some farmers say that pulses have saved their farms and brought them into a whole new prosperous era. But with this new bounty, how tempting will it become for them to start continuous cropping pulses? Will one day all of the fields in Saskatchewan be pulses? Will the soil deplete and markets crash? Is this new landscape sustainable? Hopefully, 10,000 years of good farming will carry the day. 🐾

THE TERRORIST

WHAT DRIVES A MAN TO VIOLENCE? WHAT BRINGS HIM BACK?

Story and photo
by
TAYLOR RATTRAY



It's January. The streets are painted muddy grey. The sky mirrors the same dull shade. The church is awash in brown-and-cream colours popular 40 years ago. The room is sparsely furnished. But John McGregor is glowing. His face has few creases for a man on the other side of 65. His greying hair looks vibrant. A skinny Irish boy is hidden behind a well-fed, exuberant man with a youthful grin. He has the look of a blissfully happy golden retriever.

Seated in a second floor coffee room of the Glencairn Alliance Church, surrounded by biblical posters made by the children of his congregation, John prepares to tell his story, a white coffee mug in hand. He takes a few sips and begins.

Most pastors are natural storytellers. They have the knack for speaking with flawless conviction. John's voice can fill a large room. But telling a personal story is much different, no matter how many times you've shared it. If it weren't for a few lilted words, it would be hard to guess he was born in a village more than 6,000 kilometres across the Atlantic.

He begins there, in the village of Dromore, County Down, Northern Ireland. John was born in the summer of 1950, in a drafty house at the top of a hill and at the end of a lane. He spent the first

“I made a decision that day. No one would ever pick on the ‘wee fella’ again.”

six years of his life running through grassy fields that surrounded his home. One of his earliest memories is his mother warning him and his older brother, Dennis, “Don't you go too close to the well.” As he grew older, hauling heavy water buckets from the well to the house became his daily chore.

The country was quiet during those days. There was still post-War gas rationing and materials rationing, right up to 1957. He remembers it as a good time. Everybody was poor—they just didn't know it. Life was about improvising to survive. John's father, Robert, was a travelling salesman. His mother, Margaret, stayed at home with the children, keeping books from time to time for local businesses. Eventually, the family moved into the nearby town, where a sister named Anne was born.

John was raised on stories of Irish, British and Greek heroes, but he himself felt far from heroic. As a child, the other kids called him ‘Shorty,’ ‘Tich’ and ‘Wee Man.’ By age 15, he stood just over 5'5", with little excess on his slender frame. One day at school, a group of John's friends picked him up and hung him from a coat hook by the back of his blazer. Part of the black material tore, and John's feet squirmed inches above the floor. Trapped on the hook, with his classmates laughing and taunting him, he swore in frustration. The clamour hustled two teachers to the scene. One lifted John off the hook and tried to fix his blazer, while the other turned to the group.

“Quit picking on the wee fella!” she exclaimed, doubling down on the humiliation.

Fifty years later, staring at a coffee-stained mug in a second-floor church coffee room, John explains the moment his life changed course.

“I made a decision that day. No one would ever pick on the ‘wee fella’ again,” he said.

Not long after that incident, the ‘wee fella’ enrolled in the Belfast College of Art to study printing. He spent three days a week smudging his fingers with ink at a print shop. The other two days and two nights were spent learning the theory of the trade. His studies led to an apprenticeship at McGowan and Ingram Printers and Stationers, in Belfast. All the while, he longed for strength—to, for once, gain the upper hand. He toughened up and became known as a fighter. Anger consumed him. It was him versus everyone else. Coincidentally, the political climate in Northern Ireland was the same.

In 1921, Ireland was partitioned into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, which became the Republic of Ireland, a sovereign state. Northern Ireland, prominently made up of unionist Protestants, remained part of the United Kingdom, while the Republic of Ireland was made up of mostly nationalist Catholics. Tensions began to flare up between the two districts again after the Second World War. On each side paramilitary organizations arose. The Irish Republican Army wanted Northern Ireland to become part of

the sovereign state. The Ulster Defence Association, alongside various other groups with similar names and intentions, was vigilant in keeping the status quo.

Political tension of the country had always backgrounded John's life. Roadblocks and weapons searches were a part of life. When he was five years old, on a trip to visit his grandfather, his family was stopped and ordered out of their van while it was searched by police looking for IRA sympathizers. As they stood on the side of the road, a car came flying through the barricade. He still remembers the sound of the gunfire as the vehicle sped into the distance.

“You don't understand all of it, but you understand there's a difference—there's us and them,” he recalls today.

As the violence escalated in the mid-1960s, John met the tensions head on. One evening after work, underage John sat in a pub with a beer in front of him, listening to a group of men go on about recent actions of the IRA.

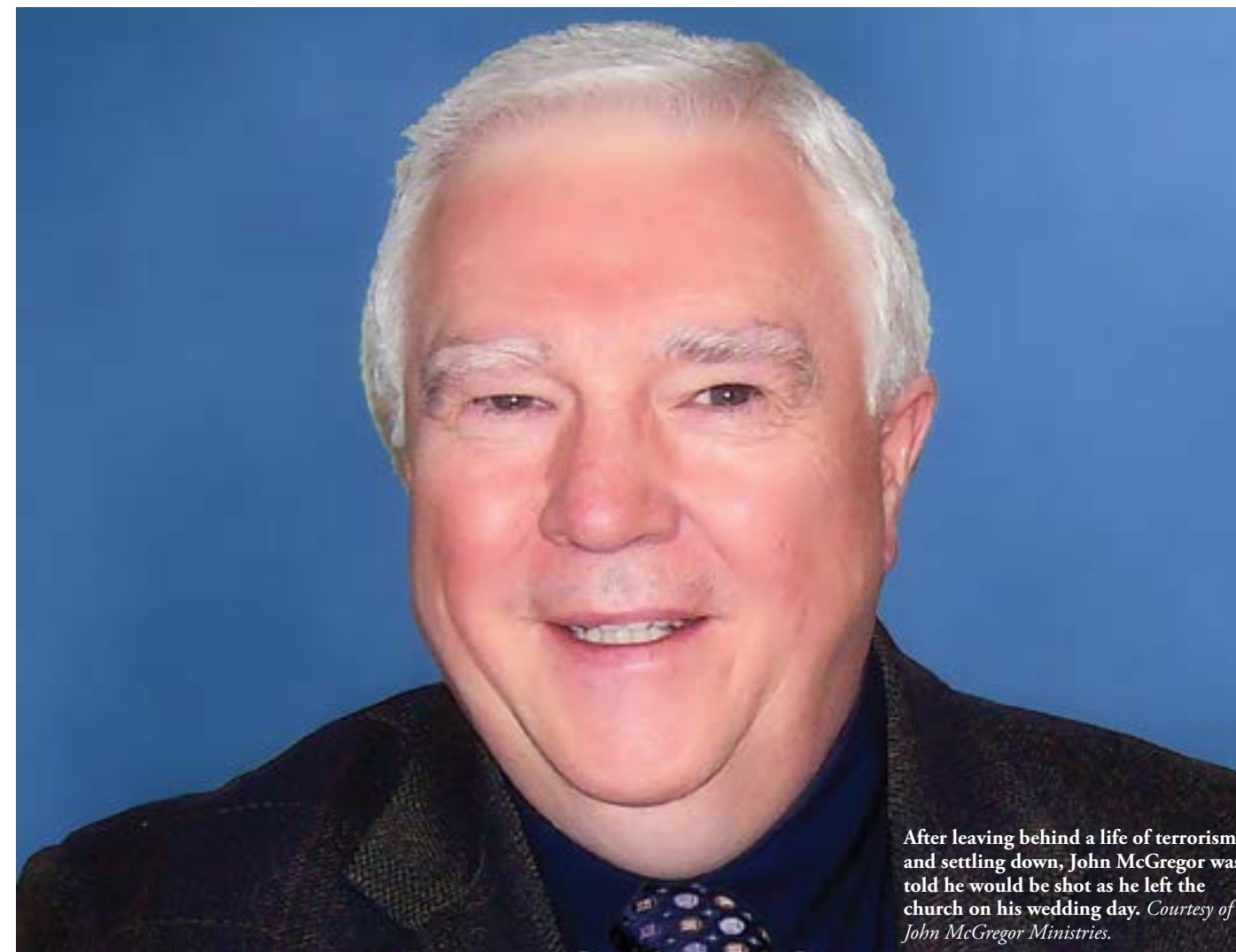
“Something should be done about them,” John said.

A pause.

“Well, would you like to do something about them?” one of them replied casually.

With those short words, John saw a path to the acceptance he desperately craved. Two weeks later, he stood in a community hall in Belfast. With his hand resting on the Bible and a gun, surrounded by angry faces, he swore to die for the Ulster Defence Association.

John's main job with the UDA was running illegal guns from place to place. He didn't think about what the guns would be used for. He packed the weapons in his car and sailed through



After leaving behind a life of terrorism and settling down, John McGregor was told he would be shot as he left the church on his wedding day. Courtesy of John McGregor Ministries.

road-blocks “brass-faced.”

Terrorist groups gain power within communities just by virtue of how bad the economic and social circumstances are, according to Lori Walker, a University of Regina sociology professor specializing in criminology. When groups of people lose their voice, they turn to any means necessary to gain it back. Extreme activities are legitimized as a way to do so. For John, a boy desperately trying to be a hero, the UDA was the perfect opportunity to gain his voice back. The group gave John a sense of belonging he had never known. It was a brotherhood of strangers, working to right all the wrongs happening in Northern Ireland. John's mind echoed with the stories of Irish heroes he memorized as a child. He could be a warrior to save his people. The drills and secret late-night meetings gave him something to latch onto. With that passion came a hatred for the other side.

One evening, the IRA exploded a bomb in downtown Belfast. Limbs torn from strangers still lay in the street when John walked to work the next morning. He was fuming by the time he reached the print shop and took his place beside co-worker Tom Johnston.

“These people are on the wrong side of the law,” he said bitterly to Tom.

“John, you are on the wrong side of the law,” Tom replied.

John McGregor's dark blue eyes clouded over with anger. He

turned and stood face to face with Tom, who stood nearly a foot taller.

“You leave me alone because, if you don't leave me alone, they are going to find you in a ditch.”

Tom was undeterred. He remained an ongoing annoyance at work, talking to John above the clattering presses about Jesus and nonviolence. Meanwhile, the UDA started responding to the IRA with not just bullets but bombs. Impressionable as he was, John refused to play a part in the bombings. Slowly, the stories of heroism began to crumble.

Two years into his involvement with the UDA, John met a girl named Roberta Burgess. She spotted him playing soccer one December. She remembers he was dressed all in black, and that it was love at first sight. For a few weeks, she would smile and shout at John when she saw him, her long, curly auburn hair dancing in the crisp winter wind. When they finally spoke, John asked if he could take her out.

“I'm not allowed to go out with boys. I'm only 13,” she replied. “But mom said you can come in for a cup of tea.”

The two got to know each other and became best friends. Roberta knew about John's activities with the UDA. It didn't deter her. In a country filled with political turmoil, it was normal for

young men to be involved with militia groups.

To see Roberta on Sunday nights, John realized he would have to go to church. So on Sunday evenings he sat in church, holding her hand, with a gun in his pocket.

Meanwhile, his workmate Tom continued to take every opportunity to share Christ with him. Sick of the religious talk, John decided to read the Bible to prove Tom wrong. Then, if his co-worker spoke of the wrongness of violent causes, John would be able to say, "That's not what the Bible says. I know what it says because I've read it."

Before he went to bed each night, John tucked his gun under his pillow and read a Bible chapter. Months went by and John read on. He didn't realize it, but gradually his study was no longer about proving Tom wrong. At 19, John had lived a life of bitterness. He was driven by anger and hardened against the pain of others. Meanwhile, the IRA had not backed down, and Northern Ireland was in turmoil.

In the early hours of one August morning, halfway through the gospel of Matthew, he realized he could still change the course of his life. At that moment, he decided to leave the UDA. The challenge was how to do it without ending up in a body bag.

For months, John tried everything he could to leave the UDA peacefully. He tried to get friends and group members, as well as political parties affiliated with the UDA, to speak to group leaders on his behalf. Nothing worked. One of John's close friends in the UDA, John Snoddy, also decided to leave the organization. The two men leaned on each other as they told their commanding offi-

times in his kitchen in front of his wife and two sons. The 35-year-old man died 20 minutes later, just as the ambulance drove into his yard. The following week, John was told he would be next. His doctor put him on the highest dose of Valium possible to calm his nerves. The pills had no effect.

John wanted to hit back for Snoddy's murder. He felt defeated and alone, with no place to turn for peace. Meanwhile, John's Aunt Sadie, who immigrated to Canada as a war bride during the Second World War, wrote to John and suggested the family make an application to come to Canada. At first, John and Roberta had both dismissed the idea. But as the threat of violence pulsed closer, the couple decided to book a trip to Canada for a short vacation.

With Snoddy's murder fresh on their minds, John, Roberta, and 15-month-old Sarah spent October of 1975 with Aunt Sadie in Vermillion, Alta. John wanted to stay, but learned they would have to return to Northern Ireland and apply to immigrate to Canada. Roberta wondered if they would survive the return.

Back in Northern Ireland they endured weeks of paperwork, interviews and anxious waiting. Then, in early January 1976, the family was approved for immigration to Canada. The McGregors landed at the Edmonton International Airport on Jan. 25, 1976 with just \$70 to their name. It was -38 C that night. The air froze in John's throat.

The family rented a mobile home in Vermillion, and John started work at the local print shop for \$4 an hour. His years of late-night Bible reading paid off: within a short time, he became an assistant pastor at a new Baptist church in town. Roberta gave birth to another daughter and two sons. Life in Canada carried on peace-

One evening, the IRA exploded a bomb in downtown Belfast. Limbs torn from strangers still lay in the street when John walked to work the next morning.

cer they would no longer be involved. The threat of death became theirs to share.

Finally, John turned himself into the police. In return for his information, he was spared terrorism charges. But now he was a marked man on the street. For the next few years, John and Roberta lived in fear. John was told he would be killed for leaving the organization. With the exception of Snoddy and his wife, friends turned away. They feared being caught in the crossfire when the UDA came to kill the couple. Isolated from their community, John and Roberta's only comfort was the Bible study that brought them closer together.

The couple married Sept. 9, 1972 at Magheragall Presbyterian Church. John was told he would be shot as he left the church that day, so friends and family gathered close to the couple as they left for the reception. In July 1974, the couple welcomed their first daughter, Sarah, into the world. John and his friend Snoddy continued to be threatened by the UDA on a weekly basis, but the threats had become so common that the two started to brush them off. It was all talk. Then, on Sept. 12, 1975, Snoddy was shot three

fully, but it took John two years to stop looking over his shoulder.

In 1987, John was ordained. The man whose life used to be filled with hatred became a voice of hope and forgiveness. Appointments at various churches took the family to Elk Ridge, then Saskatoon and, finally, Regina in 2003.

Seated in the second floor coffee room of Regina's Glencairn Alliance Church, John wipes his eyes and looks to the future. He's retiring this spring. Just a week earlier, he became a grandfather for the seventh time. His dark curls have faded to grey.

It took John and Roberta 17 years to go back to Northern Ireland. 'The Troubles'—as the conflict was called—raged on for nearly 30 years before officially ending in 1998. Since then, John has been back several times to tell his story to congregations across the newly united country.

A few years ago, John told his story while visiting a congregation in St. Louis, Missouri. Afterwards, a couple hung back to speak with him. The man had been a member of the IRA decades before. He shook hands with John and the men met eyes. In that moment, John finally forgave himself. 🐦

RIEL LASTING POWER

OVER 130 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH,
LOUIS RIEL'S WORDS STILL RING OUT.



Story by DYLAN BERNHARDT
Photos by EMILY PASIUK

Picture Louis Riel standing before Judge Hugh Richardson. His dark hair is matted in a mess of curls. His intense eyes burn with passion and determination. His trial had been going for several days.

Riel's defense has claimed insanity on his part, a claim fervently denied by Riel. He speaks clearly and eloquently, in English and in French. The judge is compelled to allow his final statement.

Riel stands as a symbol of Canada itself: part-Indigenous, part-European, Christian, but traditional. Yet, his presence is foreign inside the European-dominated court of Judge Richardson. Riel's voice fills the room.

"The North West is also my mother, it is my mother country and although my mother country is sick and confined in a certain way, there are some from Lower Canada who came to help her to take care of me during her sickness and I am sure that my mother country will not kill me more than my mother did 40 years ago when I came into the world, because a mother is always a mother, and even if I have my faults if she can see I am true she will be full of love for me."

I imagine a sense of inner turmoil rippling through the assembly. Riel is flanked by a defence that insists on his insanity, yet his skill as an orator tells a different story.

The accused man seamlessly weaves his appeal with the facts of his case. He stands trial for treason, but he will only admit to organizing the disenfranchised and starving people west of Hudson's Bay. His determination is stubborn, bold, and entirely sincere.

"The Ministers of an insane and irresponsible Government and its little one—the North-West Council—made up their minds to answer my petitions by surrounding me slyly and by attempting to jump upon me suddenly and upon my people in Saskatchewan. Happily when they appeared and showed their teeth to devour, I was ready: that is what is called my crime of high treason, and to which they hold me to-day. Oh, my good jurors, in the name of Jesus Christ, the only one who can save and help me, they have tried to tear me to pieces.

"I have acted reasonably and in self-defense, while the Government, my accuser, being irresponsible, and consequently insane, cannot but have acted wrong, and if high treason there is, it must be on its side and not on my part."

A momentary breath.

"Are you done?" Judge Richardson asks, perhaps exasperated by Riel's extended monologue.

"Not yet, if you have the kindness to permit me your attention for a while."

The judge agrees. What follows is an impassioned appeal to humanity, touching on Riel's family, his duty to his country, and his people. Finally, he settles on a single, summary sentence:

"What you will do in justice to me, in justice to my family, in justice to my friends, in justice to the North-West, will be rendered a hundred times to you in this world and, to use a sacred expression, life everlasting in the other."

Defense lawyer Charles Fitzpatrick advocates not for the innocence of Louis Riel, but instead for his insanity.

"I know, gentlemen, that right will be done," Fitzpatrick intones in his closing argument. "I know you will do him justice, and that this man shall not be sent to the gallows by you, and that you shall not weave the cord that shall hang and hang him high in

the face of all the world, a poor confirmed lunatic; a victim, gentlemen, of oppression or the victim of fanaticism."

I imagine a litany of questions ran through Riel's mind during the four hours that the jury spends deliberating. Would his life have any impact? Would his country ever recover? Would his people live on? Would they flourish? Or would his quest be in vain as the Métis people are quashed under the boot of a colonial power?

His speech had done more to characterize him than any rebellion. He offers no renunciation to anyone but God. Will that be enough?

The jury returns. They find him guilty. His fate is sealed. But not forgotten.

A narrative was born that day. The idea that Riel was well-intentioned but ultimately insane permeated press coverage. Even years beyond the trial, the story continued in this vein.

In the Sept. 1 issue of 1912, *Maclean's* magazine printed a piece by Frank Yeigh called "Riel's Religion of Rebellion: Did the North-West Agitator believe in the justice of his cause and have faith in the purpose of his mission?"

In the article, Yeigh parsed the Métis leader's psychological state. "One authority on insanity described the prisoner's disease as megalomania, one who often imagines he is a king and divinely inspired—suffering from supreme egotism in a word as one of the complications of paralytic insanity," he wrote. The irony of Canada being under the rule of one such divinely instigated kingships, embodied in the British Crown, was apparently lost on Yeigh.

An article by Reverend R.G. MacBeth followed on July 1, 1912. "He did not fight himself, but he could put others into the fighting mood," MacBeth observed. "Lacking the moral greatness, the consummate artistic skill, the mental force of Demosthenes, this Western outlaw must have possessed the Greek Orator's intensity and his strange power to move others to action."

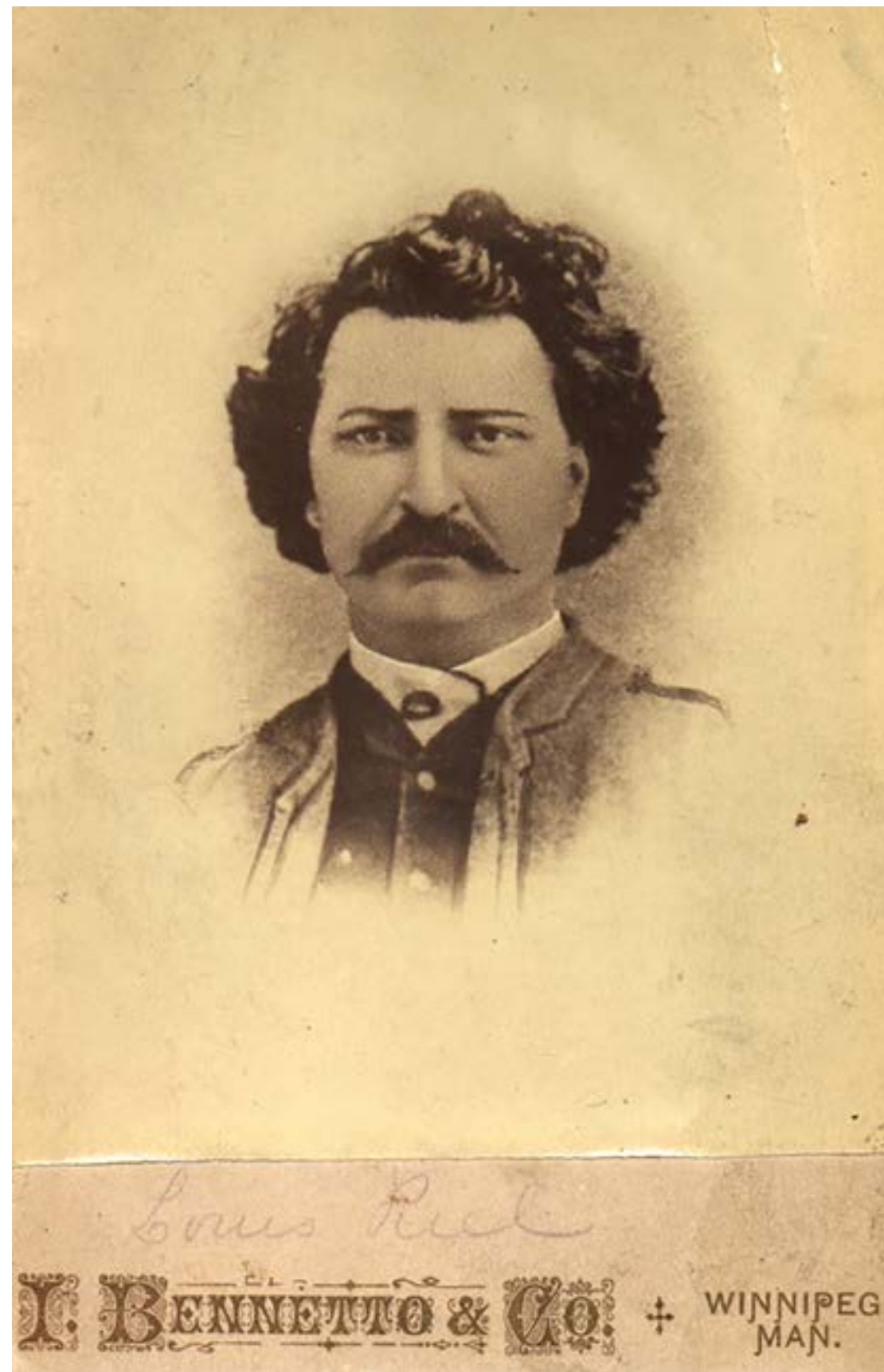
Mark Cronlund Anderson, co-author of *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canada's Newspapers*, says the coverage had a clear purpose.

"The history of Canadian news coverage of all things Aboriginal has been what you might politely categorize as colonial and hiding in that colonialism is a great deal of racism and sexism," says the Luther College philosophy professor. "What happens is, when there is what we called a flashpoint, when there is some sort of disturbance to the regular, normal, daily continuum of colonial reportage such as an uprising or a rebellion, then that normal racist colonial cant is just taken to another level."

Anderson notes that political affiliation did not matter to the narrative. Whether it was a paper favouring the left or the right, the single point of agreement was that the west must be settled in a colonial fashion.

"The press was remarkably consistent," he observes.

"It served a colonial purpose, and in that sense it's not political at all. There is no difference between the Tories and the Grits, between the Liberals and the Conservatives. They speak with one colonial voice. They argue about the mechanics of settling the west. The mechanics of dealing with Riel," says Anderson. "No one is arguing that Riel shouldn't swing at the end of a noose. Nobody is arguing that the west shouldn't be settled. Nobody is arguing that the Aboriginal people, including the Métis, shouldn't be dealt with sternly and violently if necessary. Nobody is arguing that at



An undated photo of Louis Riel by Israel Bennetto. Riel was found guilty of treason on July 31, 1885 and hung in Regina on Nov. 16, 1885. University of Manitoba archives, reference #PC 107



Wilfred Gayleard is one of the actors who played Riel in *The Trial of Louis Riel* play. Right: Riel's death certificate. University of Manitoba archives.

all. They all agree on that. They just argue about the best way to effect it.”

A book shelf sits behind Anderson. Peeking out among the many volumes, a single white spine spells out *Riel*, a reminder that the narrative is still under construction.

By the 1960's, things were beginning to turn around. The American Indian Movement was born. Ideas about the stereotypical Indigenous person were changing.

Riel's impassioned plea to his jury has been immortalized in *The Trial of Louis Riel*, a long-running play based in Regina. Playing the last three weeks of every July, the reenactment finished its 49th season this summer.

The production is a faithful adaptation of events. Playwright John Coulter based the play on the court transcript of the trial, edited down to two hours.

“What is quoted is verbatim. What you hear is what was said,” says producer Peter Champagne, who has been with the production for some 20 years. “It's not a typical play where you are hearing the words put in the mouths of actors by a writer.”

Champagne says the play began in 1967, commissioned by the City of Regina as a centennial project a little over 80 years after the actual trial. It is the longest-running play in North America. In 1985, the 100th anniversary of Riel's trial, the play toured Canada. In 2010, the Year of the Métis, the play again toured Canada, this time reaching the nation's capital for the first time.

“What I found particularly when we go out on the road is that so many people say, Why haven't we brought it to them before?”

Champagne describes a particularly meaningful performance. In 2011, the production travelled to Ottawa and performed for Parliament. Champagne recounts viewing the seat where Riel would have sat, if he would have been allowed to sit there any of the three times he was elected.

The show has a long history.

“One of the most interesting of the 11 shows we did was a special show in Regina and what we did was bring back all the former Riels. There were three Riels when it opened in '67, and two of them passed on. All the other Riels are still alive and well. So we made the whole jury of these Riels for this one performance.”

Champagne says the production has no plans to stop any time soon. Despite the regular difficulties in finding funding, Champagne says the group hopes to carry the play past many new milestones. The year 2017 will be an important one: the 150th anniversary of the dominion of Canada, and Champagne wants to bring back every former actor possible.

The story is important, according to Champagne. Besides the historic content, he says the play says something about broader social issues in Canada.

“It tells a very important story that is all of our story. It's not just the Métis story. It is of course about them fighting for their rights and the land issues and their language and all that. But it's a

story of the development of all of Canada, most particularly that of Saskatchewan. It's our history, all of our mutual history in Canada. We are all tied to it, in that regard.”

Champagne's voice takes a sombre tone.

“It doesn't represent, maybe, the best of our history. It recognizes some shortcomings that needed to be addressed at the time and were not, and still today need redress. It reminds us of that.”

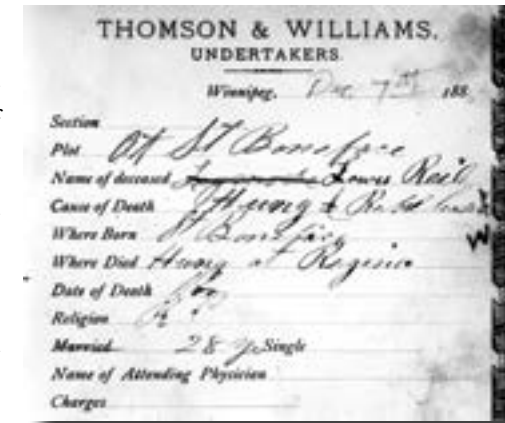
Despite the tragic content, people still love the play, according to Champagne.

“We get a really strong reception after. There is a paparazzi feeding frenzy where all the school kids want their picture with Riel

and his ball and chain for Facebook and Twitter. As a consequence, it's lots of discussion about the trial. People do want to identify with the character and understanding. Lots of stuff is talked about that covers that whole era of what happened.”

But the play is not entirely rooted in the past for Champagne.

“To understand what is going on today, you need to go back to this incident and how and where and all of this stuff that occurred at this time. That's where it all comes from.”



Unstable or not, Riel was clearly not without just argument. The trial was for treason, but he argued it was not trea-

son, but a necessary step in saving his people. In a letter exhibited in the trial, translated from French, Riel wrote to his comrades:

Dear Relatives and Friends: If you do not know it already, we shall tell you the reasons that induced us to take up arms. You know that time out of mind our fathers have defended, at peril of their lives, this land which was theirs and is ours. The Ottawa Government took possession of our country. For 15 years they have made sport of our rights, and offended God by overwhelming us with acts of injustice of every kind. The officials commit every species of crime. The men of the Mounted Police are the scandal of the whole country, by their bad language and their bad actions. They are so corrupt that our wives and daughters are no longer safe in their neighborhood. The laws of decency are to them a subject for pleasantry.

Oh, my brothers and friends, we should at all times have confidence in God; but now that evil is at its height, we specially require to commend ourselves to our Lord. Perhaps you will see things as we see them. They steal our country from us, and then they govern it so badly, that if we let things go on it would soon be impossible for us to be saved. The English half-breeds of Saskatchewan are with us heart and soul. The Indians are coming in and joining us from all sides.

Buy all the ammunition you can; go and get it, if necessary, on the other side of the line. Be ready. Do not listen to the offers the Ottawa Government make you. Those offers are robbers' offers. Sign no papers or petitions. Let your trust be in God.

I imagine observers of the trial wondered how the event would be remembered. Would it be an act of justice against an ungrateful rebel? Would it be a showing of bloodlust and vengeance against the uprising? Would it be remembered at all? Though the telling of the story has changed with time, one thing is for certain: Riel is long gone, but not forgotten. 🐾

WHEN THE MOSQUITO BITES

JOURNALIST JOHN TAVARES LOVED REPORTING ON THE CHALLENGES FACING JAMAICA. THEN HE BECAME ONE OF THE NEWS STORIES.

Story and photos
by
SASHA GAY-LOBBAN

Paradise is what visitors call it. And, indeed, paradise it is. Bordered by deep blue seas and crystal white sands, it is one of the best vacation spots and the perfect way to escape winter.

“Once you go, you know,” promises the Jamaica Tourist Board’s slogan, plastered on billboards in major resort towns, telling tales of adventure, freedom and relaxation.

Smiles are etched on the faces of locals, even though behind some smiles you can see years of hardships and hard work. Still, they warm hearts. Once you set foot on Jamaican soil, music of all sorts greets you, including performances of mento, a type of music unique to its culture. Drums, steels, guitars, and shaking instruments create sounds you’ve probably never heard before.

But, “Once you go, you know.”

It’s the land of beauty. With a melting pot of cultures, the country reflects its motto, “Out of Many, One People.” The land of the black, green and gold. It is the home of the world’s fastest man, Usain Bolt, and reggae music legend Bob Marley. The streets are lined with vendors selling a variety of goodies. They are, as they say, ‘hustling’ to make a dollar selling crafts, beer, peanuts, coconuts and Jamaican souvenirs to tourists looking for authentic experiences.

The streets bubble with never-ending activities. The cities are always bustling—horns tooting everywhere and piles of traffic at peak hours. Drivers can be seen at their wheels taking long deep breaths, heads leaned back to their seats, frustrated by the long lines of vehicles and sweating from the pelting heat.

The culture is rich.

The land is rich.

The heritage is rich. And the people are warm.

Not to mention, it’s summer all year round, hot and humid. But underneath all this richness lie tremendous problems. Beneath this beauty is the belly of social ills: corruption, crime and, to add insult to injury, a crippled health sector that fails to meet the needs of average citizens.

It’s a journalist’s job to highlight these issues and this was what John Tavares did with pride. It was gratifying for him to bring Jamaica’s challenges to the forefront through the daily news. Crime, road fatalities, economic hardships and politics—you name it, he reported on it. But things changed when he became the story.

The newsroom had not heard from John for several days. He was one of the station’s top correspondents covering the eastern end of the island. It was unlike him not to call for a day, never-mind two weeks. Something was wrong.

Calls to his phones went unanswered. No one knew how to reach his family members or close friends. John was every reporter’s best friend, especially on the weekends when news was much harder to get. John always saved the day with a solid national story.

Back at the radio station, it was 15 minutes to evening news. We were rushing to put the final edits on our stories. The phones rang off their hooks but no one paid attention because it was too close to news time. It couldn’t have been correspondents calling because their stories should have been filed up to 30 minutes before.

What was so important? The caller ID showed that it was the operator’s desk calling. The phones kept ringing but everyone’s hands were tied. Major stories were coming up, the newsreaders were getting ready to set up in studio and the producer was already agitated under the pressure.

It was crunch time. It was a big news day. There were already several reported shootings and some fatalities. And, to intensify the already packed news agenda, there was the sitting of parliament earlier in the afternoon which adjourned 30 minutes before airtime. It was chaotic and overwhelming. The phones rang. The radios were turned on, mics flicked open and it was time for the 5:45 news.

At 6:15, after the news was complete, the phones rang again. It was John. His voice sounded weak. He had been admitted to hospital in serious but stable condition. He called to inform the newsroom that he would not be available to file stories over the next week.

Months before John fell ill, there were news reports that a virus called chikungunya was spreading through the Caribbean. The chikungunya virus—called ‘chik-v’ for short—is spread by mosquitoes and causes fever and severe joint pains. Some Jamaicans suspected the virus was on its way to the country. Then on July 17, 2014, the chik-v was confirmed in Jamaica. Every media house reported it.

In fact, the Pan American Health Organization had met with Caribbean officials two years prior in 2012 to inform Caribbean territories how to respond if the virus arrived on their shores. Mosquitoes were always prevalent in Jamaica. It’s the tropics. It is hot, humid and attracts a lot of mosquitoes. Nonetheless, locals were not prepared for this new virus.

Jamaica’s ministry of health announced that the virus had become endemic in September after 35 cases were confirmed and thousands of suspected cases had been reported at hospitals and medical centres across the island. Students got sick. Schools had shut down to carry out vector control clean-up activities, and several workers went on sick-leave.

Jamaica was under siege by the mosquito that carried the chik-v and also dengue, another mosquito-borne virus. The aedes aegypti mosquito was raging. A lot of people got bitten. At that point, it was almost impossible not to get bitten by the mosquito. It was everywhere and John was no exception.

John had been a journalist for 22 years. He worked full-time with RJR News while stringing for other news media outlets. During his career he worked at three other radio stations and nine newspapers across the country. Whenever he filed a story, you could always hear the exuberance in his voice. He loved working.

He travelled to deep rural parts of the country to uncover stories, especially local stories that highlighted challenges faced by the average Jamaican. John had an extensive list of contacts. He established great relationships and was the go-to person for news, especially within the constituency where he lived.

John spoke like the typical reporter chatting in the newsroom. The job was his pride and joy, for which he sacrificed a lot. His usually subtle voice quickly elevated with authority when he talked about work in the field, especially when he discussed Jamaican politics.

But on Saturday, Oct. 11, 2014, John realized he could hardly move freely. Sweating profusely, he decided not to write any stories that day. Until that moment, John had the same routine. He covered major stories during the week and on the weekends prepared reports for what the newsroom called ‘soft news days’. However,

that gloomy Saturday evening things changed. His regular routine immediately turned into pain and agony. Breathing heavily, feeling weakness and numbness in his joints was the beginning of a long battle for John. He began vomiting profusely.

For the first two days John took it upon himself to apply home remedies, believing it was a bad case of the flu. That didn’t work. *What’s happening to me?* he wondered. Two days turned into a week. The symptoms were not going away. They got worse. John’s neighbour stopped by his house after he called out for help through his window. “You look horrible!” his neighbour exclaimed. “It’s time to see your doctor—you can’t go another day like this.”

Unable to move easily, John dragged himself to the doctor’s office. On that first visit, he suspected it must be a stomach bug. The doctor agreed. “Take this dehydration salt and a few medications for the pain and you’ll be okay,” he told John.

A week turned into two weeks. Weeks turned into a month. After three visits to private doctors and thousands of Jamaican dollars in prescription medication and doctors’ bills, there were no signs of recovery. Finally, John went to the emergency room at the May Pen Hospital. As he lay helpless on the hospital bed, he overheard the doctors whispering among themselves.

“This looks like the chik-v. He shows all the symptoms,” said one in a hushed voice.

“This looks like a typical case, we should report it,” whispered another.

“No, let’s do more tests,” another said.

John wasn’t surprised. One of the three doctors he visited before coming to emergency had suggested the same. In a way, he was relieved to overhear the doctors. At least with a possible diagnosis, he would be treated so he could return home to his regular schedule.

But there were bigger problems ahead.

The symptoms of the chik-v are fever and severe joint pains in the hands, wrist and ankles. John showed all the symptoms and more. The ministry of health advised that if people with chronic problems like diabetes, hypertension and other severe illnesses contract the virus, it could worsen those illnesses. Other symptoms include headache, backache, muscle pain, nausea, fatigue and rash.

Laying on the hospital bed, sore from being bedridden for days and unable to help himself, John wondered about the seriousness of the virus. He did not realize that the virus could have such a great impact. He wasn’t worried nevertheless. The virus, he thought, would eventually go away.

Doctors, nurses and porters ran up and down the halls of the packed emergency room where John lay in his bed day after day. There was hardly any space left in the emergency room. Sirens blazed as one ambulance came in after the other.

As the room filled up with patients showing similar symptoms to John, other emergencies stormed in. Porters rushed through the halls with wheelchairs; registration lines stretched outside the hospital building and waiting rooms piled up. The scene was chaotic. Every day saw a new series of events.

Showing no signs of recovery, John was not about to leave the hospital any time soon. A man who was placed on a bed close to John was admitted for a couple of days. He later died. Two other men, placed on opposite sides to John were admitted and within a week also died. This terrified John.

Meanwhile, several reports were published warning Jamaicans

to eradicate mosquito breeding sites at their homes or work places. There was a lot of misinformation floating around, as Jamaicans were not fully aware of what the chik-v was. Some people were suspicious and had conspiracy theories of their own while others did not take the outbreak seriously.

Professor Michael Taylor, head of the climate studies group at the University of the West Indies, told the *Jamaica Gleaner* that climate change and health were closely linked and attributed the outbreak of the chik-v and other infectious disease outbreaks to climate change in the country.

In addition to the chik-v, there were other virus outbreaks like hand, foot and mouth disease and a bacteria outbreak that killed 19 babies at Jamaica’s major hospitals and infected over 40 others. Professor Taylor discerned a direct link to climate change. The climate had become unpredictable, prompting disease outbreaks.

Other reports suggest that the storage of water in containers at peoples’ homes also increased mosquito breeding sites, causing the chik-v to spread rapidly. Vector control eradication strategies were activated across the island.

At the hospital, every morning, routine blood samples were done. John was not improving. The doctors sought to test for everything they thought could be worsening John’s condition. Like many suspected cases of the chik-v, John’s blood samples were sent to Trinidad and Tobago. There was no lab available in Jamaica to conduct this type of testing.

At the time, ministry of health officials said the ministry could not afford to send every sample to Trinidad to be tested, as this would cost millions of dollars.

Journalists and citizens alike thought that this was a shortfall in the government’s response to tackle the virus head-on. There were no facilities available to test and measure the virus’s impact on the population. There was no accountability. Officially, there were 35 confirmed cases at the time, but there were thousands of suspected cases and hospitals were overrun with people showing symptoms of the virus.

John started to display other symptoms, outside that of the suspected chik-v. After several other routine tests, results revealed that he had developed chronic kidney failure. Stunned and not knowing what to do, say or think, he burst into tears. He was immediately placed on dialysis. At the time of his diagnosis, he had already spent 14 days at the hospital. He spent another 16 days undergoing dialysis for kidney failure.

Racking up thousands in health care bills, lying in the hospital undergoing emergency dialysis treatment, John decided it was time to make a decision. The bills kept piling up, his savings had run out and most of his closest family members lived in the United States. His news buddies and neighbours visited him from time to time, but as the days lengthened the visits started to trickle down. He was alone.

Finally, the day came when he was discharged. He tried returning to his regular routine. He quickly realized, though, that he could no longer chase stories in the field. He tried working from home, doing interviews by phone, but it wasn’t the same. He continued dialysis, twice a week, three hours a day.

John questioned whether he should give up his career and move to live in the U.S. Now with his chronic condition, he was unable to work and freelance the way he did prior to his illness. Frustrated,



Dunn's River Falls, Ocho Rios, St. Ann, Jamaica. The Jamaican government has declared war on the aedes aegypti mosquito, committing \$200 million to fight the spread of the chik-v and zika viruses.

he wondered how he was going to manage to pay for his dialysis. It was \$10,000 Jamaican dollars (about \$CD 100) per session. Treatment while he was at the hospital was one thing, but having chronic kidney failure meant a lifetime on dialysis.

What should I do? he agonized.

He was exhausted and going broke. His mother, who lived in the States, convinced John to emigrate so that he could receive the necessary treatment. In December 2014, John decided he was going to spend his last Christmas in Jamaica.

In December, John started to prepare everything to embark on the move to leave the country. He was a green card holder and was able to live and work in the States. Family members abroad had always been imploring John to leave Jamaica to join them, but he stayed because he loved his country and his job.

But he didn't trust the health system.

His mom, who had always been adamant that he should live in the U.S. with her, became upset when John got sick. She felt that if John hadn't ignored her pleas to leave, he wouldn't have fallen so

ill. Frustrated, she ended all communication with him.

John sold his car, gave up his house and gave friends and family any possession he had left. He even gave away his recorder. Journalism was no longer a priority. He was giving that part of his life up.

After finalizing all his business transactions and getting rid of his possessions, John packed up and flew to Florida without any plan of returning to Jamaica. When he arrived, his mother, who lived in another state, was still so angry she refused to speak with him.

He now lives with one of his nieces in Florida, who has been instrumental in helping him recuperate. He has since been undergoing dialysis three times per week with the hope of one day getting on the list to undergo a kidney transplant.

With no history of kidney diseases in his family, John often wonders why he was diagnosed with such a life-threatening disease. His current family doctor cannot say what may have triggered John's kidney failure; he is focused on ensuring that the dialysis works and his patient's condition does not worsen.

Doctors in Jamaica suspected he contracted the chik-v before

his diagnosis was discovered. However, because there were no facilities available in the country to test for this virus, they could not say definitively that the chik-v triggered John's kidney failure.

Like many others, John showed all the symptoms of the virus but had no lab tests to confirm it. He remembers vividly overhearing the doctors' frustrations. They knew he presented symptoms, but their hands were tied.

With no labs available to test for this mosquito-borne virus, Jamaicans grew extremely fearful, especially after news broke that an even more deadly virus, Ebola, was killing hundreds of people in West Africa. As a tourist destination, Jamaica receives hundreds of visitors from around the world every day. The country went on high alert, with West Africa high on the watch-list.

Back at the newsroom, we received numerous calls each day from people who were frantic and worried that Ebola would hit Jamaica's shores. Part of the panic stemmed from the previous handling of the chik-v, which had so quickly spiraled out of control.

Questions were raised and speculation ran high. People were

afraid that if the chik-v could have spread so rapidly and caused such disruptions to normal life, Ebola would wipe out the nation. A sense of chaos mounted.

Citizens did not trust their government to manage such an epidemic. "If they couldn't control a mosquito infection, how could they contain Ebola should it hit Jamaica?" people asked themselves. Fear grew as the number of cases grew in West Africa. And then, to make matters worse, there was a confirmed case of the deadly virus in the U.S.

The U.S.? Hundreds of people travelled from the U.S. to Jamaica each day and vice-versa. The potential disaster terrified people.

Then, on Oct. 18, 2014, Dr. Bob Banjo, a Nigerian engineer and lecturer living in Jamaica, went to one of the country's regional hospitals for reported food poisoning. He was sweating and had vomited twice before arriving at the hospital.

When Banjo told nurses at the hospital he was originally from Nigeria and had travelled to that country in August, the nurses alerted other hospital staff. News that a man "from Africa" had just come in sick spread like wildfire.

Speaking to reporters later, Banjo said the alert caused patients, hospital personnel and everyone at the facility at the time to go haywire. They scattered and ran for protective gear, abandoning the patient. He was shocked by their behaviour. Afterwards, Banjo publicly blasted the hospital staff for how they responded. In a story that gained national attention, he charged that Jamaica's health care system was unprepared and not fully educated on disease outbreaks, causing panic.

At the newsroom, while we set out to gather the facts around Dr. Banjo's situation at the hospital, the ministry of health sought to reassure Jamaicans that they were prepared and ready to tackle any disease outbreak. But the public was not content with the statements.

The chik-v was still raging, Ebola mounted in West Africa, and alerts and advisories were issued to Jamaicans not to travel to affected countries. There was a lock-down on travellers from those countries. Additionally, reports surfaced in late 2015 that another mosquito-borne virus was on the horizon and was expected to swim upon Caribbean shores soon—the zika virus.

The zika virus did arrive in Jamaica the following year. On Jan. 30, 2016, a child was confirmed with the first case after travelling to Houston, where cases had already been confirmed. Of course, this caused further worry amongst Jamaicans.

Could we see a repeat of the chik-v saga? The Jamaican government immediately took precautions with zika. One case was confirmed and \$200 million was quickly made available to declare war on the aedes aegypti mosquito, which was identified as the culprit, also transmitting the zika virus.

A \$10 million virology lab was also established in Kingston within two weeks of the first confirmed case of the zika virus. Almost two years after the chik-v outbreak, Trinidad and Tobago no longer tests for the virus on behalf of Jamaica. The newly established lab tests for both zika and chik-v.

Like in Brazil, the fight against the aedes aegypti mosquito is now moving into a higher gear. Operation Mosquito: Search and Destroy, launched by Jamaica's ministry of health to eliminate breeding sites, is in full swing.

Meanwhile, John remains on dialysis in Florida, hoping for a kidney transplant. 🐼



PROPHECY

MORE THAN 100 YEARS AGO, A WOMAN NAMED WILLOW HEART WARNED OF A BLACK STONE THAT WOULD SICKEN THE PEOPLE AND THE LAND. THE DENE PEOPLE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN HER WORDS.

Story and photos
by
SHINDAH YOUNG

Northern Saskatchewan is home to an abundance of resources—including forests, fisheries and mining—and to Indigenous peoples who have been there for thousands of years.

It was a cold, dewy morning in northern Saskatchewan. Marius Paul, a young Dene boy, awoke to bird song, water and rock overlapping one another. The sounds, echoing out of the boreal forest and off the banks of the Churchill River, were etched into his spirit. They fed his soul.

He got dressed and stepped outside, breathing in the scent of ripened tree sap. The boy began walking slowly across the mossy,

forested ground, which still held onto clusters of tiny icicles, thousands of them twinkling underneath dawn's first rays of sunlight. At a jutting river bank he climbed down a shallow cliff, leaned into his axe and began to cut and gather pine and birch for his family's stockpile of daily firewood. He had four siblings asleep in their log cabin.

Marius knew how to navigate his way on the land and across

the water. Sometimes he would dream of the ancient rushing banks of river water where stream met forest and rock turned into land. He respected the rapids, and their immense, bountiful power. This water was a sacred source of energy, wisdom, and life. The land surrounding the rapids was an important part of his peoples' history and legacy.

He knew this area by heart, a map woven into his mind and

identity from an early age. He could trace his lineage to the land and not too far down from where he stood he thought about his grandfather's trapline. This is where Marius' grandfather taught his father their traditional Dene ways. Before that, his great-grandfather showed his grandfather those same teachings.

Marius knew there was something special about his people. They were gifted. Not only were they skilled hunters, trappers,

fishermen, artisans and storytellers, but certain Elders and community members held sacred, spiritual gifts. One Elder had many premonitions, dreams and spiritual intuitions about their land and their people. Her name was Willow Heart. “The ground,” she told Marius’ grandfather, “it’s holding something in.”

It was a long time ago, about 1956, when Marius’ grandfather explained to him about Willow Heart’s prophetic visions. “She could dream about lots,” he told Marius. She told Marius’ grandfather about a black stone that, once its power was unleashed, would sicken the land and the people. The vision stayed with Marius.

Marius Paul grew up on the banks of the Churchill River, in the English River First Nation in Patuanak, Sask. In 1959, at the age of seven, he was abruptly taken from his parents by a French missionary priest wearing a stiff-collared black robe. Along with several other Dene children, Marius was transported by boat 90 kilometres south and forced to attend the Beauval Indian Residential School. Marius doesn’t have many good memories of the next nine years. “Residential school tainted me so deeply,” he recalls years later. He describes it like being sent to prison for no reason. It was a profound scar that tore apart his soul.

“We were like stray dogs turned loose when we left from there,” he remembers. He went on to attend and graduate high school in North Battleford in 1972. He turned to alcohol for a short time during these years, still struggling with the haunting memories. He only wanted to let go of his stolen childhood. The confusion and the traumatic experiences still leached into every part of his existence.

As he struggled to survive the experience, Marius’ thoughts and actions shifted towards the land, his language and the idea of helping other Indigenous peoples live a good life. In Saskatoon there was a brand new program at the University of Saskatchewan called the Indian Teacher Education Program. He decided it was a place to start new. Although residential school had taught him otherwise, he remained proud of his own peoples, the Denesuline of the Athabaskan region in the North. “We were always a fierce nation,” he says.

Graduating from ITEP in 1974, he arrived back in the North as a teacher, just as the land was about to undergo great change. In 1975, the first of two massive deposits of uranium ore was discovered in the Key Lake area. In the rush of development that followed, his father’s trapline disappeared. That same year, a group of distinguished Elders from his home territory approached Marius and asked him to help protect the North. “Watch out for what they’re doing. They’re making giant bullets,” one of the Elders warned. And so, at the age of 22, the young graduate made his pledge to the Elders. He promised them he would do everything in his power to protect their traditional lands from the uranium industry.

Marius always had a recurring vision, even before he quit drinking. “I always dreamed of this beautiful girl, in a forest,” he remembers, still with a sense of wonder in his voice. Then he met Candyce. He felt the Creator gave him two gifts—the land, and a lifelong partner. “I couldn’t have resisted, nor be anywhere anymore, but with her,” he says.

It was 1978 and he was 26 years old. He had been teaching for four years and he was about to embark on a journey to protect the

land, now with Candyce at his side. The area where he grew up, known as Patuanak, was a fur trading post in the 1800s, operated by English and Scottish Hudson’s Bay Company fur traders. The Catholic French missionaries continued to colonize the Dene people after the fur trade era died down in the 1950s. Still, Marius managed to follow the old ways, sustaining his family by working as a teacher, hunting, fishing, gardening and medicine picking. He recalled how the Cree and Métis people frequented Dene territory for trading and medicine picking purposes, and the Denesuline ceremonies from long ago. “We were like the Jedi knights. We had some of the most powerful medicines in all of this land,” he says. In the years to come, he would draw on that history to fight against uranium expansion in the north.

In 2011, construction started on a bridge across the Churchill, connecting the forest with the townsite of Patuanak. It was named Willow Heart, in honour of the Elder who prophesied the future. One day a construction worker saw a woman standing on the banks of the Churchill. When he described her to the Dene people, they told him it was Willow Heart. She had been dead for more than 100 years by then. The construction worker quit working on the bridge the next day.

It was during a time of conflict between the northern uranium industry giants, Cameco and Areva, and the Indigenous peoples of northern Saskatchewan. One of the eldest women in the community, 104-year-old Sarazine Ratt, reminded her people—and Marius—of Willow Heart’s prophecies. The prophecy of the black stone was one that was about to come to light.

Later that year, Marius and Candyce helped form the Committee for Future Generations, a non-profit organization that has since grown into a worldwide support network of environmental responders. Their purpose was to protect Pine House, Creighton and English River First Nation from becoming the host of a nuclear waste repository proposed by the Nuclear Waste Management Organization, out of Toronto. The group members walked 773 kilometres from Pinehouse to the legislature in Regina in July 2011 to protest the decision. They won—all three communities in northern Saskatchewan were officially eliminated from the list by March of 2015. But Candyce is quick to remind people that nine other communities in northern Ontario are still facing this threat.

In October 2013 the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission hosted a hearing in La Ronge in an effort to renew mining licenses for the MacArthur River, Key Lake Mill and Rabbit Lake mining sites, all located on traditional Dene and Cree territory. The commissioners were met by much debate from the Committee for Future Generations. During the hearings, Marius spoke of the prophecies of Willow Heart. “There was a woman who was a seer amongst our people. She told some prophecies which warned us,” he told the panel. “The black stone, which they call uranium, will have powers that no one can control. Those powers, once released, will bring a lot of sickness, a lot of death and a lot of destruction. It has already impacted us as people.”

Many moons back Marius went on a moose hunt. A rifle shot was fired too close to his left side, making him mostly deaf in that ear. But the hunting accident hasn’t quelled him from making music. Every evening, Candyce serves him a home-cooked meal. Then he usually sits in his living room or art room and strums

Dene artist and activist Marius Paul, a member of the English River First Nation, near Lac Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan.



along to his own lyrics, with an acoustic guitar. He combines Denesuline and English words together to make unique melodies flow, much like the fur traders and trappers did in the same region 100 years before his time. The songs vibrate through their home and he leaves his worries and thoughts elsewhere. He has been sober for 36 years.

In the kitchen, Candyce hands him a large, steaming bowl of porridge sprinkled with blueberries, strawberries, cream and maple syrup. Then they both sit down right beside one another. He is now 64 years old, and the years together have been good. When he smiles at her, the corners of his eyes rise toward his ears and press against the rims of his glasses. He takes a big spoonful of porridge and keeps smiling. At his side, Candyce contentedly beads a pair of moose-hide moccasins, creating bright, tranquil patterns of blue butterflies and orange flowers. The beaded shapes represent the landscape of their life and their love of the land.

He takes another gulp of his porridge and wanders into his art room to sit and focus his energies on something else, a painting. He took up painting shortly after he met Candyce. In front of him sits a canvas he has been working on for more than a decade. It represents his great-grandfather’s long-lost trapline. “It’s all gone now,” he says, “but not from my heart.” He picks up a skinny brush and makes a swift stroke of clementine orange under a stream, then

adds a daub of green, and slowly blends the colours together. He continues to paint something that will forever live on in his soul, the land and its dwellers. Much like Willow Heart, Marius remains in the North, strong and proud. “We will continue to empower our people, to protect our lands and waters for the future generations,” he vows.

The journey isn’t over. Another potential mining site was found in 2013 underneath Patterson Lake, 130 kilometres north of La Loche. Two hundred million pounds of high grade uranium are being explored and may turn into a potential uranium mine within the next four to seven years. “We will keep fighting for the land,” Marius says. The Committee to Protect Future Generations will continue organizing rallies and information circles to inform people about how uranium mining is feeding the nuclear industry. He says it’s because this is what the Elders would want. Supporting the Dene people who are against uranium extraction is the most important thing in his life right now. He is certain that even with the passing of the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2015—which gave the government the power to treat Indigenous people as terrorists—people won’t stop standing up for the land. “We know what exploration brings and we don’t want it,” he says. “The uranium industry can’t replace what we have here. We value our hides. We’re fighting for our lives.”

RAISING CHANGE

A RECENT RULING ALLOWS ADULTS TO CHANGE THE GENDER ON THEIR BIRTH CERTIFICATE WITHOUT HAVING TO UNDERGO SEX REASSIGNMENT SURGERY. CHILDREN ARE A DIFFERENT STORY.

The gravel gave way beneath the Honda's tires as they rolled past their two trampolines toward a mammoth house. Dirt swirled. Two swings swayed in the breeze, hanging low from a faded blue set. Simba, a blue-collared pit bull, waited on the front deck, ready to follow the carload of humans inside. Fran Forsberg stepped through the door and headed into the kitchen, setting her purse on a counter. She smiled to herself as she adjusted an askew striped scarf. She had taken what she thought was a shortcut home. In hindsight, the highway would have been a faster way to ferry her kids to and from karate lessons in the city. Her cracked bare feet shuffled to and fro while she cut fruit for the hungry kids. Jax, the three-legged dog, clicked across the chocolate brown hardwood floor.

"What is that mommy?" Sienna pointed to the plate.

"It's dragon fruit. I'm not really sure that I like it—hey, can you guys turn that down?" Fran pointed to the speakers.

The instrumental music sank to a soft hum, barely audible over sniffing noses and sibling spats. Krista had washed the floors earlier, but fresh mud was already tracked throughout the home. Tana ran into the kitchen, wearing a pale pink ball gown. The youngster picked at the fruit on the high countertop, grinning.

"You're not wearing that outside, honey," Fran said, glancing at



Tana Forsberg, left, sister Grace and brother Nate play outside on their acreage south of Saskatoon.

the muddy floor. It wasn't a day for party clothes.

"Hey, Tana, don't eat that. That's a peel. Honey, don't eat the peel."

Like all typical days before, chaos echoed throughout the halls. *Busy, but it's happy noise*, Fran thought.

Fran prepared a plate for her husband. She checked her email

Story and photos
by
KENDALL LATIMER

on her phone. She checked her phone often these days, after receiving an update from the lawyer's office. After four long years, the children's case was moving forward.

Watching out for others was second nature to Fran, imprinted from childhood. When Fran was a little girl, her older sister

Candace was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Her family's world shook. Candace was only 15. The three years that followed were tumultuous. The quest for a cure brought the girl to the Mayo Clinic for surgeries and tests. Fran's parents, Trueman Smith and Margaret Murphy, had to repeatedly leave their home in Alberta and head to Minnesota.

Fran had lived in Alberta her whole life, but the rural roads near Radisson, Sask., soon became familiar for her and her two sisters, Cathryn and Char. The trio shared a bed whenever they were sent to stay with Aunt Myrtle. Her farm was just outside of Radisson. The apprehensive girls banded together in the foreign farm land while Candace fought for her life far away. During the ordeal, Fran became outgoing. She wasn't the oldest, but she still protected her sisters.

She was 11 when she first learned life was precarious. Candace succumbed to the illness, to the devastation of the family. Shortly after, her father, a farm equipment company manager, was transferred to Saskatoon. After that, Fran didn't stray far from the Saskatoon area.

More than a decade after the loss of her sister, 26-year-old Fran found herself in a unique position. Her niece's friend needed help. Fran had space in her home, so she reached out to the provincial department of social services and fostered a child for the first time.

Another decade passed and Fran married Lee. They conceived a boy, Adam, and then a girl, Shae. The two have long since flown the nest, but Fran's need to nurture remained strong. Compelled to help, she continued to accept foster children, taking in more than 150 over the years. Fran eventually became the legal guardian of eight foster children aged six to 15: Destiny, Krista, Grace, Tana, Sienna, Nate, Renn and Jacob. Some were even biological siblings, and eight was hardly the limit. Fran and Lee continued to welcome other children in need of a temporary home.

Life returned full circle. Fran found home again on the rural outskirts of Saskatoon, where she had lived decades ago with her sisters. Like her childhood, she was 60 kilometres away from the city, but this time she settled on land south of the city rather than north and this time it was by choice, not circumstance. The chil-

dren had room to run on the sprawling lot, and they could sail homemade boats on the pond.

Fran was well-versed in the art of raising children, but she was soon thrown a curve ball. Something was different with Renn.

Around the age of two, Renn's behavior was abnormally self-destructive. At the same time, Renn began to gravitate towards Gracie and Sienna's feminine clothing despite being born with male genitalia. It was Shae, Fran's eldest daughter, who suggested they let Renn choose how to be. As time passed, Renn became more vocal about choosing what toys to play with and wore items typically worn by girls. The self-destruction ended. Renn moved forward, presenting as female.

Now in her early 60s, Fran found she needed to educate herself. Despite her endless stream of foster children, this was her first exposure to the world of LGBTQI2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, or two-spirit). It was a community she would become forever immersed in because of her trans and two-spirit children. Then she was thrown a second curve ball. She had long suspected Renn's older brother Tana was gay, but instead Tana began to shift along the gender spectrum. Fran was in new territory with a lot to learn.

Fran channeled her inner mother bear, knowing she had to protect her children who were different. She read the literature and sought out mentors and allies. Attending a Rainbow Health conference in Montreal was a breakthrough moment. She learned gender dysphoria occurs when the body and the brain don't match. This causes psychological distress for people who don't feel their assigned-at-birth (sex) gender matches their felt gender. She began to gain a sense of her children's inner feelings.

The knowledge was empowering. Although she learned that life's risks are greater for transgender youth than for non-transgender youth, she was no longer fearful for Renn and Tana's futures.



Fran Forsberg looks on as her children play.

Sitting in the airport terminal, she thought to herself, *I could put this plane on my back and run all the way back to Saskatoon.*

The numbers aren't foolproof when it comes to calculating the transgender population. Statistics are limited due to a lack of research, according to Maaya Kuri Hitomi, a University of Saskatchewan master's student in applied social psychology and board member of Trans*Sask. It was for this reason that Hitomi was tasked with the ambitious quest of solidifying data on the local transgender population. It is estimated one in 200 people identify as trans within the Western population, and trans youth are 14 times more at risk of suicide and substance abuse when compared to their cisgendered peers. Hitomi says this isn't because the youth are themselves problematic or mentally ill. Rather, they are reacting to society's negative perceptions and actions against them. Eighty per cent of trans youth experience verbal violence and 49 per cent have experienced sexual harassment.

The LGBTQI2S advocacy group Egale Canada completed the first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools in 2011. Egale's researchers found 14 per cent of students self-identified as LGBTQI2S and 64 per cent of those felt unsafe at school, with 90 per cent reporting they heard trans-phobic comments weekly. Fran knew the stats, but rather than succumb to anxiety she became confident.

There is so much I can do to change society, she realized.

Fran took Tana and Renn to a follow-up symposium at Toronto's Ryerson University. It was the children's first flight. Arriving at the symposium, they found themselves entering a room of nearly 40 gender variant kids. Tana and Renn's shoulders physically dropped in relief. Renn's smile widened before she became slightly overwhelmed with shyness.

"Renn! Some of those people—most of those people—are like us," Tana marveled.

"Really? No, they aren't," Renn said with disbelief.

"Yes, they are!"

The children could finally roam in a place beyond their home where others understood and judgment was absent.

Saskatchewan doesn't have much legal wiggle room for the transgender population. Up until Feb. 25, 2016, citizens had to be 18 and have undergone gender reassignment surgery before they could get their gender changed on legal documents. In February, a trailblazing legal case was successful against the provincial government. The ruling allowed adults to change gender on their birth certificates without having to undergo sex reassignment surgery. But the ruling did nothing for the youth.

Why does the government still get to label my kids' identities? Fran wondered. Initially, Fran wanted to be able to change gender on the birth certificate. *But that doesn't work for Tana,* she thought. Tana was two spirited, identifying neither exclusively as male or female; rather, Tana's gender was fluid, moving along a spectrum to suit shifting needs and soothe internal conflicts.

But there was no doubt in Fran's mind that Renn was female. In 2012, Fran sent a formal letter to Saskatchewan Vital Statistics requesting to change the gender on Renn's birth certificate. The bureaucracy refused. Fran then filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. More than one year passed, and nothing happened.

This process is too slow, I need to sue the government instead, Fran thought. She wanted change before she was buried in the ground, so she ditched the Human Rights Commission case and its lawyer, and then launched a search for her own lawyer. Following the advice of a friend, Fran gave human rights lawyer Larry Kowalchuk a call on Nov. 25, 2015. His interest piqued when she said she wanted to strip gender from the birth certificate. There is no province or state in the western world that has done so. Several telephone chats later, they arranged to meet. In March, Kowalchuk and legal assistant Cara Banks headed north from Regina to Saskatoon on Highway 11.

When Fran and the kids piled into Kowalchuk's Saskatoon law office on Airport Drive, Kowalchuk's sky blue eyes fell on 11-year-old Tana.

"If you could speak to the judge and court, what would you say?"

"I'm getting a little tired of having to explain it. Why do my human rights depend on what body parts I have?"

The lawyer furrowed well-established lines between his unruly brows. How could someone so young articulate so well what the political powers didn't understand? After discussing the case, he advised they had a good chance with the suit. Fran said she wanted the case to conclude before the provincial election in April. Kowalchuk agreed.

He texted Fran in mid-January. "Are you okay with more people, more families joining this suit?"

"Hell yeah," Fran answered. "The more people joining us the better."

He warned her that when they win the suit, the family's names would forever be in the books as case law. *That's fine with me,* Fran thought. *I don't care if our names are in there—somebody's got to take the first step.*

One year later, on March 9, 2016, Fran was sitting in her kitchen when she received a message from Filip Cupial, student-at-law for the Kowalchuk Law Office. Cupial informed her that their statement of claim had been filed in court and subsequently served to the government six days earlier, on March 3. Fran opened the document to see the final form: QBG 483/16. Fran, Tana and Renn's names were the first three plaintiffs on the document. Six other names followed. Fran read on. The defendants listed were Her Majesty the Queen, in right of the province of Saskatchewan, as well as the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission. *Finally,* she thought.

The days and weeks passed. The cold, saturated ground on the acreage emerged as the evidence of winter's last unanticipated snowfall disappeared. Spring surfaced. Inside the house, jubilant chatter bounced off the high ceilings as the kids worked on perfecting a dance routine. The whole Forsberg clan was preparing for a talent show that would be held for foster families on April 2. Fran sighed. She had received word that the government and the Human Rights Commission requested more time to cultivate a response to the suit. *Why? They've had four years.*

Fran turned on the gas fireplace and gazed out the front window. Enveloped by giggles and the occasional cry, she waited. Looking at her children in their safe space, she wondered whether or not the province would ever acknowledge their right to be themselves. She waited. 🐾

BOOZE CRUISE

DESPITE INCREASINGLY HARSHER
PENALTIES, SASKATCHEWAN REMAINS
THE LAND OF DRUNK DRIVERS.

Story by CREEDEN MARTELL

Almost everyone I know does it or has done it at one time or another. Hell, I've been a passenger on many a booze cruise. Growing up in rural Saskatchewan, booze cruising is common. Back roads are the less-traveled path, at least when it comes to the RCMP.

But if you do it enough times, odds are you're going to get caught. So, it should have been no surprise when it happened to me. It wasn't the first time or the second. It was the third that bit me in the ass, during the university reading week break of February 2015, when I was stopped by the Regina Police Service.

As a result, I found myself enrolled in a 16-hour Driving Without Impairment course nearly a year later. One of the first exercises was to recall the events of that night. The misadventure began in a house on the north end of Regina. I was tagged into a game of beer pong where whisky was substituted in the place of beer. The haziness began when a Ouija board came out. That haziness stayed with me until the harsh, sobering cold shot of adrenaline and the realization "I fucked up." I came to behind the wheel, during a traffic stop by Constable Douglas, at the intersection of Parliament and Spence.

I was arrested, my car was towed and hours later I was lying on a cold, hard slab of concrete in the police cells at RPS headquarters. The slab protruding from the wall was technically a bed though it felt nothing of the sort. I wasn't quite sleeping but I wasn't fully conscious either when the police put a man in the cell next to mine in the early hours of the morning.

Though my neighbour could not be seen, he made himself heard. Loud thuds echoed throughout the basement as the man attacked the glass of his cell door with impotent rage. He stripped

I was arrested, my car was towed and hours later I was lying on a cold, hard slab of concrete in the police cells at RPS headquarters.

off his clothes, jammed them deep into the u-bend of the stainless steel toilet, and then began to flush. Slurred words and water leaked under the cell doors

"What are you accomplishing?" an officer asked.

"Shut the fuck up," someone shouted from another cell.

The entire hallway and adjacent cells, including mine, were slowly flooded with water and the drunken man's ire. Deciding I was sober enough, a police officer dropped my boots in the puddle and told me I was free to go. With no vehicle, I ventured out into the cold and made the four-kilometre trek home in the still-dark February morning.

Students and faculty at the University of Saskatchewan have taken note of the drinking culture in the province. The group What's Your Cap? was formed to educate students on Low Risk Drinking Guidelines, created to promote moderation. Dr. Colleen Dell and Dr. Peter Butt are two faculty members involved. Dell is the research chair for substance abuse at the U of S and has

also taught courses in sociology. Butt is involved with the college of medicine and, among other things, specializes in substance use disorders and campus binge drinking prevention.

Dell says the drinking culture in the province is perpetuated by targeted advertisements. These ads normalize the idea that it's okay to drink, she says. Canadian alcohol companies spend some \$160 million annually on advertising, according to the tracking agency MediaSmarts. The investment pays off, big time. From April 2013 to March 2014, Canadians spent \$20.5 billion on booze, Health Canada reports. So far, the focus of public education has been on driving drunk, with less attention paid to a wider culture that promotes drinking. "The impacts of alcohol abuse need to go beyond just the crashes and jail time," Dell argues.

Butt poses a question: at what point does drinking interfere with the enjoyment of drinking? When do the hangovers and missed days from school and work become too much? When people start drinking alone, perhaps. He points out that other provinces have strategies to promote moderation. But not Saskatchewan.

"Resistance needs to happen at an industry level," he says, noting the inconsistency across the country is confusing.

During its run, What's Your Cap? teamed up with Lucky Bastard Distillers. Lucky Bastard did the unthinkable and unconventional: put the Low Risk Drinking Guidelines directly on their bottles. Distillery founder Michael Goldney was invited to a Let's Talk Alcohol meeting with the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute to talk about moderate drinking instead of bingeing. Lucky Bastard labeled the guidelines voluntarily and they're the first, and only, so far.

"I was a family physician before I gave up medicine to make booze," Goldney explains, adding he was aware of the damage ex-

cessive drinking does to the human body.

The chance of doing something stupid skyrockets under the influence, he says. I cringe at the all-too-familiar feeling of shame, thinking back on my past escapades.

"It would be nice for other doctors out there if they didn't have to get woken up at 3 a.m. to go suture somebody," he says wryly.

After the government upped the punishment on impaired drivers in June 2014, SGI had to increase the frequency of its courses from twice to three times a month. There were three groups of 10 that weekend; 30 impaired drivers all together, participating in the first of three required courses.

I thought of all the impaired drivers on the road who had evaded the law so far. The graduating class of each weekend could rival a small town's high school. Thirty impaired drivers every weekend, all year. There were 308 Saskatchewan drivers charged in December 2015 alone.

The number of drivers taking the course has increased each

year, according to Kelley Brinkworth, manager of media relations and communications for SGI. There were 2,993 drivers enrolled in 2011. Attendance increased incrementally each year: 3,037 in 2012; 3,128 in 2013; 3,565 in 2014; 3,708 in 2015. The actual number of drivers charged was roughly around 4,000 in that time frame. There were 3,975 drivers charged with impaired driving in 2010; 3,878 in 2011; 4,088 in 2012; 4,261 in 2013; 4,001 in 2014; 4,089 in 2015. Saskatchewan had the highest impaired driving violations in 2014—619 per 100,000, well above the national average of 210.

The punishment for impaired driving in Saskatchewan can best be measured in dollars. Before June 27, 2014, the consequences were costly but manageable for most people. I had been caught before and after the increased penalties, the last time being on Feb. 2, 2014, after celebrating the Seahawks winning Superbowl XLVIII.

“Listen, we know you’ve had a lot to drink tonight. What we’re going to do is rather than breathalyze you, because we know you’re going to fail, is give you a roadside suspension,” the officer says as we sit in the police cruiser at the McDonald Street exit of Regina’s Ring Road.

The cop explains that my SGI safety rating will suffer. My license will be suspended for 24 hours and my car impounded for the same amount of time. SGI will fine me and the police ticket me \$575 for driving unregistered. Then I go on my way. No criminal record. No time spent in the jail cells. SGI would later fine me \$375. The impound costs for the night totalled less than \$100.

Almost a year to the day later I am caught again, post-increased penalization. The courts fine me \$1,560 and issue a year-long ban from driving, while SGI hits me with a penalty of \$2,250. Had I blown less than 0.16, SGI would have been happy with \$1,250.

The Driving Without Impairment course is mandatory at the cost of \$150. A breathalyzer must be installed in a vehicle for one year, as part of the program. It costs \$145 to have the device installed. There’s a monthly fee of anywhere from \$80 to \$96, depending on the extra “features.” If the device is faulty, or shoddily installed, the corrective measures are at my expense. SGI also charges a one-time, non-refundable \$30 fee.

Those who blow less than 0.16 can apply for an exemption if they do not have a vehicle, but their suspension then increases to 18 months. Despite no longer having a car, I don’t qualify, which means I had to first get a car to have the instrument installed. The vehicle, if it falls under SGI’s “special vehicles list,” incurs yet another one-time, non-refundable \$99 fee.

The man on the phone breaks these fees down. He adds that if I need to cancel the installation to do so at least 24 hours before the scheduled appointment. If I missed that window, there would be a \$100 rescheduling fee. It was starting to feel more like a cash-grab than a prevention program.

The guest speaker is missing. The instructor of my group, Janine, is pacing back and forth around the room. Ron, another instructor and reformed alcoholic, pokes his head through the doorway.

“He’s on his way,” Ron says. “He’s just running a bit late!”

“Probably getting donuts,” one of the others in the class quips.

He laughs to himself while doodling in the booklet Janine had handed to us the previous night. Several minutes pass until a uniformed police officer walks in carrying a bag. No donuts. Ron and Janine breathe a sigh of relief. His uniform’s clean and neat. His badge is displayed prominently over his heart. His pistol is holstered above his taser, to avoid any confusion between the two weapons.

“Sorry I’m late,” he says, setting the bag down in front of the class and removing a laptop and his own projector.

Until an hour ago, he was unaware he had a course to lecture.

“It’s my last day in traffic. Tomorrow, I’m going into homicide,” he explains.

It had been eight years in the traffic unit for him. He had been a presenter for the courses for five of those years. Most times, his partner would join him but not today. He sets up his projector and begins to say the words he has memorized through speaking them hundreds of times before to hundreds of drivers before me.

The officer exposes us to crime scene photos. He talks nonchalantly about cases which had a particularly profound effect on him. During his presentation, we learn that when people are pinned between the asphalt and vehicle during a collision, their flesh is grated off of their bodies like cheese.

“The thicker the blood, the worse the crash,” he says, staring around the room at each of us and pausing for effect.

He shows us pictures from an accident that happened a few years ago near the intersection of Broad Street and Victoria Avenue. A woman drove her van into the front ends of a row of parked semi-trailers. It was presumed she fell asleep at the wheel, but this could not be confirmed due to her death. In the picture, the roof of the van is ripped away. Her body is discoloured and blue. There is little blood. The driver seat is reclined and she lies almost horizontal. I wondered, if she hit the back end of the trailers instead, would their Mansfield crash bars have given some protection?

Ron smiles and cheerily moves onto the next slide before I’m able to contemplate it further. It is the first and most jarring tone switch of the day. By the second, I am prepared. The last video of the presentation, from the Transport Accident Commission, is edited to the tune of R.E.M.’s *Everybody Hurts*. Special effects reminiscent of Tom Savini’s best work are showcased, as the bodies of innocent children get mangled in heaps of twisted metal. The intoxicated drivers emerge unscathed from the wreckages, dramatically observing the carnage they’ve caused. The people in the montage cry, the music swells and each vehicle crashes with more intensity and impact.

Back at the U of S, researchers Dell and Butt must wonder how one video shown to a select group, after the fact, can compete with an industry and culture bent on stoking our collective thirst on a daily basis. The video ends with a voiceover urging us not to drink and drive. The cop repeats the message in his own words.

“Just don’t do it, guys. The cost of drinking and driving is just too high. One life lost is too much.”

With that said and done, the officer packs his equipment and leaves. 🐦

FOG ON THE MOUNTAIN

A JOURNEY FROM CERTAINTY TO MYSTERY.

Story by JOSH CAMPBELL
Photos by BRANDON HARDER

In the summer of 2005 I had an experience that profoundly changed my life. A young man of 25, much of my confidence lay in the shadow of fundamentalist religious beliefs that stuffed issues into airtight black and white boxes. I took pride in the fact that I was someone who knew the truth and had to share it. Don’t get me wrong; I wasn’t cocky about it. I truly believed that I was just “a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread.” If I was to do my job as a soldier for Christ, then I needed to share the good news with others. What I didn’t realize was all the ‘good news’ that I had yet to discover.

My moral crusade compelled me to travel to our nation’s capital. I remember it well. There was a heat wave in Ottawa that first week of June. Temperatures above 30 C wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t for the dreaded humidity, the kind that feels like an equatorial fog when you step out of an air-conditioned building, when just standing elicits heavy beads of sweat down your brow and the small of your back. It was on such a day that I was thrilled to step into the West Block of Parliament Hill to meet with Conservative MP Jim Prentice. The reason: Prentice was one of a handful of Tory MPs to support the same-sex marriage bill and I was determined



to confront him about it. Only weeks before our meeting I had written letters to MPs and attempted to speak at a Liberal Party of Canada convention in Calgary about my misgivings with Bill C-38. By travelling to Ottawa and speaking to Prentice, I was fulfilling my Christian duty.

Of the conversation with Prentice that sweltering day in Ottawa, I don't recall much. As one of his Calgary North constituents, he heard me out respectfully, but did not budge on his point of view. The most perplexing thing to me was that he claimed to be a Christian! That a person of faith could hold a viewpoint that marriage should be accessible for same-sex couples was completely beyond me.

Later that evening, my good deed done, I asked myself a very simple yet profound question: Did I even know how a gay person would feel about this issue? The answer: No. Up to that point, all of my research supported my conclusion that same-sex marriage was wrong. That night, before bed, I said a simple prayer that I could meet a gay person and hear his or her perspective.

The next day, having previously decided to learn French while working on an organic farm—not the best place for language acquisition, I might add—I found one name that had a phone contact rather than an e-mail address. A male voice with a thick Québécois accent answered:

“Bonjour!” said Roger (pronounced Roh-jay).

“Uhhhh, Bon-jour. Je m'appelle Josh. Uhhh, parlez-vous Anglais?” I stutter.

“(Laughter) Oui!”

“I'm calling about the ad to work on your farm?”

“Yes, yes. Please come! I really need the help!”

We traded some more details, and then, “Der is one more ting I should tell you: I am homosexual. But don't worry, I have a boyfriend, and I won't be hitting on you!” Roger said, followed by a laugh.

I laughed, too, agreed to come, said good-bye and then offered an inward, hesitant word of thanksgiving.

Meeting Roger for the first time shattered most of my stereotypes about gay men. Getting out of his truck to greet me was a mature man, with unshaven grey stubble and a flannel shirt. With him was his best friend Sylvie.

Arriving at his farm near Joliette, I was greeted by five husky sled dogs and one very intimidating African goose.

“He's my guard dog,” joked Roger.

The inside of Roger's house was the definition of a farmer's bachelor pad: old antique stove, cluttered counters, wood-paneled walls, small TV, and a grimy bathroom. It smelt like a mixture of dill pickle B.O. and old wood. This would be my home for the next two weeks.

Roger was a great language teacher. He forced me to speak French at all times, except during the news. Every evening we watched the debate swirling around the same-sex marriage issue in parliament. Eventually I opened up and shared my convictions with Roger. He shared his. For the first time in my life, I questioned whether homosexual orientation is sinful.

During my stay, same-sex marriage was far from the only thing that Roger and I discussed. In a period of two weeks, Roger educated me on Quebec sovereignty, explained why he's not physically attracted to beautiful Sylvie, and lectured me on settling down and getting married before it's too late.

Robert Kitchen preaches during a Sunday service at Knox-Metropolitan United Church in Regina. Previous page: Mount Brandon County Dingle Ireland, climax of the Saint Brendan's Way pilgrimage. Photo by Josh Campbell.



Roger was no longer just a gay man to me, but my friend.

In retrospect, meeting Roger wasn't a sudden revelation. It was the final step in a series of events had begun to unravel the fundamentalist ropes entangling me.

Previous to my Quebec farming experience, I was a kinesiology student at the University of Calgary. During that time, I played football for the university team and was the leader of a Christian campus ministry called Athletes in Action. On the outside I was a student-athlete who had all the advantages that came with such a status. On the inside I was pretty sure that I held the truths that everyone else needed to know. After finishing my degree, and tak-

ing a job as a personal fitness trainer and health and wellness counselor, an interest in my Irish and Scottish heritage began to well up within me. This interest led me to take a week-long course on Celtic Christianity at Regent College in Vancouver. It was there, in the summer of 2003, that I dreamed of going to the land of my ancestors. Little did I know that the physical journey would pale in comparison to the inward journey.

My trip began with a two-week stay with a dear friend in London. All throughout university, I had a huge crush on her. I figured going to London to visit her would seal the deal. Wrong! Her desire to stay friends grieved my unrequited heart. But all was not lost. During this time, she told me about a book called *A New Kind of*

Christian by author Brian McLaren. I quickly got my hands on it and began reading. I found it dangerously liberating. It was the first time I had seen a Christian seek to understand postmodernity rather than reject it. From the acceptance of evolution to non-literal biblical interpretation, it was like the author knew some of the exact issues I had with the Christianity I had been taught. His writing gave me the sense that the interaction between Christianity and modern Western culture was not a war, as I had been taught by many leaders but, rather, a dance.

From London, I traveled to Ireland—the first descendant to return in seven generations. McLaren's book in hand, I crisscrossed the Emerald Isle from Belfast to Dublin and on to the Ring of

Rev. Deacon Joel Fulton prays over a young member of his congregation at St. Matthew's church in Regina.



Kerry. It was during my stay in Kerry that I decided to visit a place I will never forget—Skellig Michael.

On Oct. 13, 2003 I and my Irish hosts Earl, Joshua, Hannah and Pauline pulled up to a small fishing dock off Ireland's west coast. For years now, Joe Roddy has been subsidizing his fishing income by offering tours to the isolated rock island known as Skellig Michael. It took us about a half an hour before our small boatload reached the base. I was spellbound. The only frame of reference I had was the Rocky Mountains back home. It was as if the Creator poured an ocean over top of all of the Rockies, with only the two tallest peaks pushing through the water's surface—the larger of the two being Skellig Michael. At its peak lay the remains of the Western world's oldest intact monastery. If you've seen the final scene from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, then you know what I'm talking about—the whole sequence was shot on Skellig Michael.

Between the seventh and 12th centuries, Irish monks abandoned society to live out their best years on this very island. Keeping with the number 12, groups of these men would embark on a one-way ticket aboard small seafaring canoes called currachs. While there, they built over 600 stone stairs and clusters of beehive stone huts that still brave Atlantic winds to this day. Their diets consisted of vegetables from a little patch of arable land (only in Ireland can you find green atop a rocky island peak), and bird eggs collected from nearby nesting grounds. Despite surviving multiple Viking raids throughout the community's existence, the monks decided to abandon Skellig Michael in the 12th century for a monastery on the Irish mainland.

After exploring the manmade dwellings, including a humble cemetery, I asked myself: Why? Why would people give their best years to abandon society and live on a rock-island peak? What about the importance of interacting with society and changing it for God? What good is prayer if it isn't making the world a better place? These questions lingered in my mind.

“What is your dream?” I said to a young boy seated in a rehabilitation camp known as Gulu Support the Children. It was January 2006. On one of my first weekends in Uganda, I decided to visit its war-torn northern region, territory of the now-infamous Joseph Kony—a man who had been abducting children and forcing them to fight to overthrow the Ugandan government for 20 years.

The boy, named Dicken Okello, was one of 40,000 children who had been captured by Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and turned into killing machines through brutal brainwashing techniques. During a battle with government forces, clouds of tear gas separated Okello from his platoon. When the dust settled he was alone with his gun and the group's food supply that he had slung over his shoulder in the barren desert of southern Sudan. He knew his time to escape had come.

Fleeing southward for three days, Okello soon came across a small village. His cries for help were received with scorn and rebuke. Nobody trusted a LRA rebel. It was only when he broke down and sobbed, crying “Help me! I want to escape!” that community members decided to trust the 12-year-old boy. Three weeks later he was sitting in front of me in a psycho-social rehabilitation camp in Gulu, the largest city in northern Uganda.

“My dream is to go to school and finish my education.”

“Whoa!” I thought. How do I even relate to this boy? How can

I begin to understand the life of someone who had lived through war and likely been forced to do terrible, unimaginable things? I left Gulu the next morning perplexed. Is dreaming of a future career only for a privileged few in the world? How is it that young children in parts of the world like Okello beg to go to school, while others take it for granted? What led to such social inequalities across the world? What can I do about it? During this time, I began to see the emptiness of a faith that only promises relief upon death. It was also the first time in my life that I was a racial minority. But rather than being the object of discrimination, as many minorities are, people were drawn to me—not because of my character, but because many assumed my white skin meant I could help them out of desperate circumstances. I can remember some days not even wanting to leave my apartment. My wish was to be anonymous again, like I was back home. And again, such experiences evoked questions: Why do I feel this sense of isolation from Africans—fellow beings in the human family? How did it happen? Why does aid and development seem to increase the disparity between peoples rather than deplete it? Why weren't these types of questions being addressed in the churches I was attending?

It's mid-afternoon on Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2016. I pull into the University of Saskatchewan parking lot just south of the main campus bus stop. Getting out I realize I could've parked a lot closer. I'm going to be late. I know everyone's time is valuable, but it's not every day that you get to sit down with the principal of a theological college.

“Ahhh, hello,” I stammer, as I enter his doorway. It's a simple office. Not that I've been in a lot of college president's offices. There is a large west-facing window with late January sunlight piercing through partially drawn blinds. In front of the window is a large wooden desk with small stacks of neatly piled paper. To the left of the desk are three comfortable chairs. Before he takes my jacket, I note an open Bible lying on a small table between the chairs.

“Welcome,” he says with a warm, friendly voice. His average frame fills out a grey collared dress shirt and dark suit jacket with matching slacks. On his lapel is a pin bearing the St. Andrew's College emblem. Facial lines reveal a person who has spent his life smiling more than frowning. Whatever nervous tension I had coming in is now rapidly dissipating. Sitting on a plush chair I quickly note the books and mementos filling steel grey shelves. In one corner, a classic pole lamp illuminates pictures of a church and a legislative building, symbols of a bi-vocational life. Just above these is a door plate which reads, “Premier of Saskatchewan.”

Lorne Calvert first entered politics in 1986, becoming an MLA for the Moose Jaw South constituency. He retained this post for three terms. Then, following the resignation of Roy Romanow in 2001, Calvert won the NDP leadership election, becoming Saskatchewan's 13th premier, a post he held from 2001 to 2007. His public life has been book-ended by the United of Canada. Before entering office, Calvert served both Gravelbourg and Moose Jaw communities as a United Church minister. After stepping down as NDP leader in 2008, Calvert moved into his current role as principal of St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon.

I ask about the open Bible on his table.

“Have you heard of this before? It's called *The Poverty and Justice Bible*,” says Calvert. “The editors have taken every verse, every scripture, which refers to poverty or justice and highlighted those

verses in orange.”

He picks an orange highlighted passage from Nehemiah, a fifth-century B.C. exiled Jew who returned to his homeland as a governor, appointed by Persian King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah describes the complaints of poor farmers, who have mortgaged their fields and homes to pay the government’s agricultural taxes.

Then others said, “We had to borrow money from those in power to pay the government tax on our fields and vineyards. We are Jews just as they are, and our children are as good as theirs. But we still have to sell our children as slaves, and some of our daughters have already been raped. We are completely helpless; our fields and vineyards have even been taken from us.”

When I heard their complaints and their charges, I became very angry. So I thought it over and said to the leaders and officials, “How can you charge your own people interest?”

Then I called a public meeting and accused the leaders by saying, “We have tried to buy back all of our people who were sold into exile. But here you are, selling more of them for us to buy back!” The officials and leaders did not say a word, because they knew this was true. (Nehemiah 5)

Calvert sets the Bible down. “While we didn’t sell children into slavery, we took them out of their homes and put them into residential schools! Holy Smokes!” he exclaims. While I appreciate his fresh interpretation of the passage, I wonder how many churches I’ve attended would miss its cultural and prophetic relevance. “One cannot come from (the Christian) tradition and not recognize the role we have to sometimes speak truth to society or to power,” says Calvert. “In the biblical tradition (being prophetic) is part of who we are.”

Really? Well then how do you explain the many contemporary churches that seem to be more concerned with maintaining the status quo, than with being a prophetic voice against social injustice?

Moving onto the New Testament he speaks to Jesus’ fit of rage in the temple, turning over the tables of the moneychangers. “This was a very political act. This is taking on the economic structures of his community,” he says.

He pauses to gather his thoughts. I find myself elated to speak with a man who seems to understand the connection between Christianity and social activism, between faith and politics.

“But what about the Harper government’s pro-Israel stance?” I ask. “Some Christians support this because they believe the restoration of Israel is a condition for the Second Coming of Jesus and the End Times.”

Calvert’s reply reveals the diplomatic savvy of a former politician and the pastoral care of a minister: “I think God must smile when He looks down on us and sees how much we think we really know it all.” And to this he adds with a smile, “I think God tends to love Palestinians too.”

In Calvert’s mind, the divergence of Christian political views owes much to a big word called hermeneutics, a.k.a. biblical interpretation. Put simply, how Christians interpret scripture will shape their political/societal viewpoints.

One example he offers is the current church debate regarding sexual orientation. While one side says it is utterly sinful and must be condemned, the other equates it with biology, claiming that such people deserve greater love and acceptance. Calvert believes it’s vital for modern readers of scripture to understand the cultural context in which it was written. “We cannot separate our under-

standings from scripture, because this wasn’t the case when it was written.” This means that current understandings of sexual orientation are far different than those of ancient Israel, or Rome for that matter.

These diverse understandings affect the way we read and interpret scripture. As an example, Calvert cites the story of Zacchaeus, a Jewish tax-collector working on behalf of the Roman government. Most other Jewish people of the time would have considered tax-collectors as traitorous collaborators who profited from the occupation of their own people. That Jesus sought to eat with Zacchaeus would have been considered extremely inappropriate at best. Having table fellowship with someone was a sign of acceptance and community for ancient Jews. That Jesus understood all of these cultural *faux pas* and still chose to dine with Zacchaeus was nothing less than revolutionary. Calvert believes that, in the Jesus paradigm, there are some commandments that rate higher than others, with the most important being to love God and love one’s neighbour—even if he’s a tax collector.

Taxes are something any provincial premier knows well. Calvert’s leadership legacy has been harder to place than other Saskatchewan leaders. Mostly he is known as a kind man whose prudent leadership, during low-energy price years, helped balance books and trim taxes. While Calvert has been described as a left-leaning leader, he regrets that he didn’t do more spending on social programming. “We should have done more for First Nations and Indigenous peoples, particularly around education,” he says today. With a school shooting in the northern community of La Loche fresh on his mind, Calvert talks of a blown opportunity for its people during his government. “I hassled the Klein government for a long time,” he says, referring to a proposal to build a road which would have linked the economically isolated village to booming Fort McMurray, Alta. Shortly after both provinces agreed to build it, Alberta backed out, shelving the project and obliterating any hopes of increased economic development in La Loche, according to Calvert. The other area where Calvert wishes his government could have been more prophetic was on climate change. “We didn’t make the progress that we could have and should have made,” he says.

Given the relatively low energy prices during Calvert’s time in office, I can understand the tension he must have felt between “balancing the books” and spending more on social programming. It reminds me of the pull in each generation between progressiveness and conservatism; optimistic vision and pessimistic realism. Perhaps this is a creative tension Calvert feels is part of his vocation, given that he holds two degrees, one in economics and the other in divinity.

It makes me wonder just how “practical” many of Jesus’ teachings really are. I mean, was he only exaggerating when he told people to sell all their possessions and follow him? Really? And how about when he said that we shouldn’t worry about what we will eat or what clothes we will wear? “Look at the birds in the sky! They don’t plant or harvest. They don’t even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them. Aren’t you worth more than the birds? (Matthew 6)” Such a person would be laughed out of today’s board rooms and business colleges. In his book *The Third Jesus: The Christ We Cannot Ignore*, author Deepak Chopra references the pull that Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard felt between living in “the real world” and the new world vision of Jesus:

It’s easy to see why the new world Christ envisioned was so quickly abandoned after he died. It had to be modified by the realists. No one could carry out the divine plan as articulated by Jesus, because everyone else was too deeply enmeshed in the old world. Its entanglements seemed inescapable. This enormous gap between the real and the ideal never closed. In the early nineteenth century, the great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard tormented himself over the question of how to live as Jesus wished. Kierkegaard concluded, after years of suffering, that being a Christian was incompatible with ordinary middle-class life.

Following my year in Uganda I returned to Canada where I taught Christian Ethics at my alma mater, Athol Murray College of Notre Dame, located in Wilcox, Sask. I absolutely loved trying to make the Christian faith relevant to young people. More and more, I began to see how much Jesus’ words spoke to not only personal morality, but social and economic systems of society. And contrary to the popular opinion of the Church only caring about issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, I found a whole storehouse of information on economic justice in Catholic social teaching and papal encyclicals. Documents such as Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (On the condition of labour), Pope Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo anno* (After forty years), and Pope Francis’ *Evangelii gaudium* (The joy of the Gospel) all speak to the importance of an economics that serves the “common good” of all humanity. The only problem was that this social teaching didn’t seem to be trickling down to the people sitting in the pews. You were only a die-hard Catholic if you stood on the side of a street once a year holding a sign saying “Abortion Kills.” But where are the signs saying “Capitalism Kills?” How many abortions have taken place, not because they were a first choice, but rather a last choice given the economic pressures of society? Why is it that, as soon as I start saying such things, I am labelled, not a caring follower of Jesus, but rather as a Communist?

The answers to such questions took me back to books such as theologian David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*, which I started reading in 2006 during my teaching year in Uganda. Bosch writes, “The status quo orientation of much of Christianity and the conventional interpretation of Christian social involvement as not going beyond charity and relief has been eloquently expressed in Dom Helder Camara’s oft-quoted words: ‘When I build houses for the poor, they call me a saint. But when I try to help the poor by calling by name the injustices which have made them poor, they call me subversive, a Marxist.’” Through such reading I began to see that, “The gospel cannot be good news if the witnesses are incapable of discerning the real issues and concerns that matter to the marginalized.”

Such an understanding of the Christian’s call is something that I have been looking for in a church. One person who seems to be committed to the social implications of the gospel is Cam Fraser, minister of Knox Metropolitan Church in Regina. Fraser is a young 30-something man with two kids. Originally from Ontario, Fraser spent the majority of his 20s involved with an evangelical conservative church. Like me, it was the rejection of homosexuals that began “fracturing” his fundamentalist views.

Now a full-time United Church minister, Fraser says that many of his friends from his evangelical days would say he has “lost his way” by joining a church that “bows down to an evil, secular culture,” rather than standing up for God’s truths. Examples of this

bowing down would be the United Church’s acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals and multi-faith perspectives. Rather than arguing, Fraser agrees that all Christian churches, including the United Church of Canada, have bowed down to secular culture, but for very different reasons.

“The church was instrumental in creating the status quo,” says Fraser. “It provided the framework that allowed economic and social hierarchies that allowed colonialism and environmental exploitation. How does the church begin to question something which it helped bring into existence?” One of the things Fraser finds really intriguing is how Christianity can point out how nice church-going people can be the cause of big systemic injustice. He cites St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: “I don’t understand why I act the way I do. I don’t do what I know is right, I do the things I hate.” Some church leaders relate this passage to foibles like watching Internet pornography or drinking too much coffee. But Fraser wonders if St. Paul could be referring to his unquestionable participation in a system that exploits and destroys others.

Fraser points to the “pyro-theology” of Peter Rollins, an Irish theologian who uses contemporary culture to help explain biblical truths. Using Batman, Rollins explains how, like the church, Bruce Wayne does for Gotham City that which makes him feel good and brave. All of the money he spends on sophisticated equipment to fight crime could have easily gone into setting up free health care, public education and campaigning for radically different socio-political structures. Such alternative actions may not have stopped the Joker, but might have stopped his henchmen, who were just looking for means to feed their families and send their kids to college (a *Batman* sequel perhaps?).

Adjusting my backpack, I looked up to one of Ireland’s tallest peaks, Mount Brandon, or Noc Breinnan. Named after St. Brendan the Navigator, the peak of Mount Brandon is the climax of an ancient pilgrimage. After climbing some smaller hills I arrived at the base, which is marked by a Marian Grotto. Ascending the lush green pathway I saw a low lying cloud had begun to descend and blanket the mountain.

Slowly I entered the heavy Irish fog, my only guides being white post markers. After climbing for what seemed like hours, I came to a point where I knew I had to turn back. It would soon be dark and I didn’t have a flashlight. While disappointed that I didn’t make it to the top, a subsequent reflection on my pilgrimage brought about a powerful truth.

If we are really honest with ourselves, most of the answers to life’s biggest questions are shrouded in a dense fog. Instead of scrambling for clarity to find the “right path,” there can be such a beauty found in embracing the mystery that is our lives. This embrace doesn’t mean that one doesn’t seek answers, but rather that one accepts that right and wrong answers may not always be there. Accepting this truth has brought much freedom to my life and my faith. It has also impacted me as a learner. Instead of closing my mind to different perspectives, mystery has encouraged me to consider many different possibilities and viewpoints.

It kind of reminds me of a small section from the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi: “May I not so much seek to be understood as to understand.” Think of how much better our world, our churches, and, even Batman would be, if we really sought to understand each other’s perspectives as much as we want our own understood. 🐱

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

NO ONE TALKS ABOUT METHADONE IN REGINA — FEW CAN. AS A RESULT, CRITICISM OF THE WIDELY PRESCRIBED OPIATE IS SELDOM HEARD.

Story and photo
by
ALEC SALLOUM

The basement of the First Presbyterian Church in Regina, meeting place for Narcotics Anonymous.

Oh shit. I'm wearing a Coors beer hat. Every moment of planning, months of being stonewalled, ignored, digging holes in water and now this glaring oversight. I'm sure an addictions counsellor—who has agreed to speak to me only on the condition of anonymity—wouldn't exactly appreciate this gesture. It's alright; I toss it on the coffee shop floor and pretend it isn't mine.

It's 2:03 p.m. He's a few minutes late. I got in touch with him through a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, but we'll get to that later. He's from Vancouver originally, came to Regina to get away from needles and found alcohol instead. I told him I'd be wearing a red hat. Shit. Hat at my feet, I wave to someone who I suspect is him. The man walks over. It's him. A stylized "Coexist" shirt, the one where each letter is written as a major religion's symbol, can be seen peeking out from his dark-grey cardigan. You can see an unobstructed Star of David. In his 15 years working as an addictions counsellor, I'm sure he's been tempted, offended, and shocked by worse things than a hat I got from an off-sale. His gold Narcotics Anonymous ring is proof of that. Before he was a counsellor, he was an addict.

His years of first-hand exposure to this world have led him to an opinion: Canada's go-to treatment for drug addictions—methadone—doesn't work.

Administered as a controlled alternative to street drugs, the theory behind methadone is that it can curtail harmful lifestyles and

Beyond methadone's physical constraints, there's no social expansion to the addict's world, the counsellor points out. "We get a group of people who are like-minded individuals. We keep them together in a group. Everyone goes there at 8:00 a.m. to get their (methadone) drink. They all hang out and talk. It's kind of like a meeting place now. The strategy to begin with is flawed," he says.

The methadone is administered at a pharmacy or clinic each and every day. It's known as a daily witness, which bears an overt Christian overtone. You walk up to the counter, receive your methadone, a clear and bitter substance mixed with orange juice, lemonade, Tang or any other citrus-heavy drink—as long as it isn't grapefruit juice, which can increase levels of the drug in your blood stream. The juice is used to cut down on the bitterness of the substance. It's also used to insure that addicts don't spike their veins with the mix, seeking a more intense high. If injected, the juice's acidity ups your blood PH level to the point where your blood feels like it's on fire.

Imagine heartburn in your veins, from the crook of your elbow to your finger tips, creeping up your bicep. The hardest, most addicted IV drug users will only try it once.

The repeat business, and net profit afforded by these state-funded junkies, is a figure kept out of sight. Inquiring results in a stone wall. Dissent is seldom heard. Pharmacists who administer the drug sign an agreement to not openly discuss or disclose pre-

“It took a really long time for me to get fucked up, and it takes a really long time to get unfucked.”

ease people out of their addictions.

“Our public line is: ‘Harm reduction works,’ he says, pausing for a moment. “Well that's ridiculous. I'm a recovering addict, I can be clear as to what works ...I've never seen methadone work.”

Harm reduction, he explains, means windows aren't getting broken. Stereos aren't being stolen. But addicts are still dying, and addicts are still living. Their lives now orbit around a different, even more addictive, drug.

Methadone has a long half-life. It stays in your system, working at half its initial dose for 36 to 48 hours. Addicts won't feel the need to use during that time. By comparison, heroin has a half-life of just two to six minutes. This also means the withdrawals from methadone are harder and more gruelling than heroin—something the counsellor believes keeps people using the drug indefinitely, rather than as a stepping stone to a better life.

In his new life as an addictions counsellor, though, methadone is a boon. Federal money comes to provincial organizations, like the centre where he works; methadone has to be administered as a condition of the funding. For the addicted, nothing really changes. Their opiate is now administered by way of the government. The addiction persists.

An online FAQ posted by an Ontario walk-in clinic asks: “Do I have to quit methadone eventually?”

The answer given is, “No. Some people have been on it for over 20 years. If you don't want to stop you don't have to.”

cise facts about methadone, or the money associated with it. Some pharmacists sign non-disclosure agreements when they work for large pharmacy chains, preventing them from criticizing the drug and its administration. It also makes gathering information, data, statistics, costs and profits equally difficult. Though methadone clinics receive federal funding, they are private entities that are not required to open their books.

I learn this while speaking to a pharmacist who falls under non-disclosure restrictions. Over a beer, he is able to speak candidly—though strictly off the record. Methadone can be bought bulk in several dozen grams. Prescriptions range from 30 to 200 milligrams at a time, he explains.

“I'd have to check, but let's say you're billing \$5 for 50 to 100 mgs of methadone,” he says, emphasizing this is based on observed experience working in a rural Saskatchewan methadone clinic and pharmacy. “You (the clinic owner) paid, like, pennies for that methadone. So you can see 99 per cent gross profit. It's extremely profitable.”

Amazed, I ask how long a person will be on methadone.

“As long as it takes,” he replies, without missing a beat.

This repeat business is too good for many legal drug dealers to pass up, and the industry is growing. A 2011 study found that “informants consistently described the increase in demand for MMT as ‘dramatic.’” But with no central registry, verifiable numbers are in short supply, the report cautioned.

Take Saskatchewan's figures: from 1997 to 2010, the number of monitored methadone users across the province reportedly spiked from 200 to 2,136. Back at the coffee shop, the Regina counselor dismisses the official numbers, estimating that in Regina alone there are 2,000 methadone users. He goes as far as saying close to one per cent of the province is on methadone, admitting this is purely speculation in the face of minimal statistics.

Instead, his guess is based on what he has observed first-hand. "I'm old and I'm fat," he describes himself, with a belly laugh. "The fat I could do without, the old I'm happy with." Quitting cold turkey was the only method that worked for him. Just as addiction is a selfish thing, he explained, so, too, is recovery.

"When I was 11 months clean and sober, my best thinking at the time, I said out loud to a couple of friends, 'I think I should just get loaded, I don't want to waste a year in recovery.'"

He pauses. "Waste a whole year in recovery," he repeats, sounding incredulous of his past state of mind.

Sickness and addiction stick with you for a long time, he told me. I can only relate through my nicotine habit. The last time I tried to kick cigarettes, I experienced depression and mood swings like I'd never felt before. Leaving the sofa felt like climbing out of a hole. I've quit before, and will quit again. Quitting is easy, I joke, I do it all the time. He laughs at that.

"It took a really long time for me to get fucked up, and it takes a really long time to get unfucked," he says. "If we have longer term treatment centres we could do some really good things. I think methadone is a short cut that's not working ...It's failing miserably."

It seems treatment is a divided road, swinging from methadone to cold turkey with few connectors. To see the other side of the coin, I head to the First Presbyterian Church on 14th Avenue and Albert Street in Regina. The door to the side entrance sticks a bit; you need to rip it open.

Once inside the 90-year-old church, you have two options: walk up the stairs on your left, to church, or down the old carpeted stairs on your right, to tonight's Narcotics Anonymous meeting. The basement meeting doesn't start until 7:30, but by 7:15 there are already 16 people milling about. Three more arrive, and at 7:30 precisely the opening prayer begins.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

All the while, more feet descend the staircase. There are 36 people in the room by the time the serenity prayer finishes and the opening routine begins.

This is an abstinence-only program; methadone use is not condoned. You must be completely clean. A moment of silence is held for all addicts unable to attend, still trapped in addiction. Still more people arrive.

There are now roughly 40 people in the basement, seated around a square of wooden tables. A few opt to sit along the wall, where I'm sitting. I don't belong and I'm trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. In the middle of the tables there's an empty wooden chair. Why it's there is not addressed or explained.

As things get started a man walks down the stairs and passes in front of me. He has just finished rehab. The meeting pauses so people can come over and give hugs, say hello, and ask how he's doing. The empathetic questions and his responses seem gen-

uine—no bullshit.

The man with the oxygen tank continues his metronome gasps.

According to Narcotics Anonymous doctrine, there are 12 steps to dealing with addiction. Tonight, we're on Step 8—Forgiveness. Some never complete this stage. The white-walled basement, with grey floors, flickering fluorescent lights and barred windows, could be a transplant from a prison or rehab centre. It's warm, but uncomfortable. When the participants speak, they introduce themselves by saying they're an addict. In chorus, the room says "hello" and the person's name.

Then a floodgate opens.

One person announces that a member will be having a party to celebrate one year of sobriety. This warrants applause from the crowd. A woman is called upon to speak. It's her first meeting, and she's 20 days sober—another round of applause.

A male participant is next. "If I stop coming to meetings, I will be fuckin' using again," he says.

Though the focus is on Step 8, this meeting isn't exclusively about forgiveness. In fact, very few people bring it up at all. Mental fog, needing to anesthetize the self, fear of being alone, and crushing boredom are the major topics of discussion.

"The worst thing for a junkie is to be alone with their thoughts."

"Enough bad coffee and enough of these meetings and you'll be craving something else, like, 'Let's go to a dance club.' Fuck, even when I was using I hated going to clubs."

"I'm so bored. Today was the first time I went out with friends and actually had fun in ...I don't know how long."

The discussion is frank but almost lighthearted, like sharing an inside joke. It continues like this until it's a woman's turn to speak. She's wearing black pants, a black coat, and a black toque.

She speaks about her journey seeking forgiveness.

"My biggest fear when I quit, was that my children wouldn't recognize me."

She had only ever been around them high. The clarity she feels looking back into the fog of her addiction brings her to tears.

"But they did. And they still loved me. And I'm a fucking awesome mother."

I shrink against the wall. I don't belong here. I feel like the narrator from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, sampling tragedy, vacationing in misery. These meetings form a social calendar for their members, an escape from the minutiae and boredom of sobriety. What's one gawking, dumbfounded tourist?

Up the stairs and out the door the group gathers for a smoke break. It seems like everyone has one vice in common—nicotine. I light a smoke and join them, standing on the fringes of their tenebrous human circles.

The conversation turns to what meetings people go to and where they are. For those recovering—and trying to cut off contact with dealers, co-dependent relations, using friends, and people from their past—the meetings serve as their sole positive outings to look forward to. For some, it's the only time they've left the house in a few days.

Neither methadone nor abstinence offers a normalized human experience. Yet in the absence of other options, there's nowhere else to turn. One member was followed on her way to the meeting. The man trailing her was her ex-dealer, who remembered her drug of choice. He had some on him. She didn't look back as her demons followed her to church. 🐾

A Message From Prairie Dog

To The Students And Graduates Of The University Of Regina School Of Journalism

Congratulations on choosing journalism! It's a very important career. In a democracy, reporters are the public's representatives. It will be your job to find out what politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders and other public figures – and the institutions and companies they work for – are up to. Canadians need you. They need you to get them the facts, untangle the spin, catch the lies and expose the secrets. When you do your job well, you're giving ordinary citizens the information they need to make informed decisions on politicians and policies. And that helps make Canada a better country for all of us.

We just wanted to let you know that your work really matters and we salute you. Good luck, heroes!

The logo for Prairie Dog features the words "prairie dog" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is centered between two thick, curved yellow lines that form a partial oval shape around the text.

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