

DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

# right to food zine

"Charity sees the need, but not the cause."

INTERVIEW WITH HOMELESS DAVE  
**Hunger Strike for a Happier Planet**

INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA REIMER  
**A Tree Grows in the Downtown Eastside**

**From Charity to Choice:  
Social Justice and the Right to Food**

## MANDATE

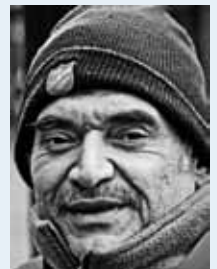
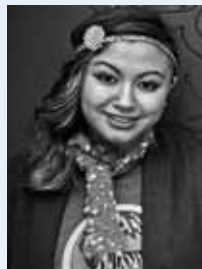
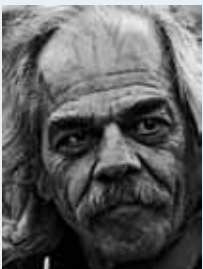
The *Right to Food (RTF) Zine*'s mission is to promote the human right to food that is healthy, nutritious, affordable, and presented with dignity. Our voices reflect the diversity that is the Downtown Eastside. Our articles, research, and recipes will speak to DTES residents, social justice groups, and beyond. Our readers will be kept informed, yet hungry to know more and to become more engaged. We are part of the local community and strive to act as a community-building tool.

## ZINE CONTRIBUTORS



*Above, left to right: Donna, Rory, Rebecca, Ricki, Ludvik, Stan, Kim, James, Peter.*

*Below, left to right: Hendrik, dm, John, Janice, Ludvik.*



*Missing: Mary Catharine. Front and back cover art: Janice Jacinto.*



# CONTENTS

Hunger Strike for a Happier Planet.....	2
A Tree Grows in the Downtown Eastside.....	4
The Right to Food Zine Wishes Its Readers a Happy May Day .....	7
From Charity to Choice: Social Justice and the Right to Food .....	8
A Legal Framework for a Right to Food .....	10
I Fight for Food: An Interview with a Single Mother in the Downtown Eastside .....	12
Investigating Food Security and Welfare Rates in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood .....	13
gaunt.....	15
Remembering Mom: The Right to Food Zine Honours International Women’s Day.....	16
Recipes .....	17
2013 BC Election: The Right to Vote .....	19

## DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the original authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House.

# INTERVIEW WITH HOMELESS DAVE

## Hunger Strike for a Happier Planet

*By dm gillis, based on an audio interview conducted by Peter Driftmier*

**O**n March 22, 2013, a 51 year old activist began his hunger strike to protest gentrification and the deepening housing crisis in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Called "the artist formerly known as Homeless Dave," he will consume nothing but sage tea and one 13-ounce bottle of Happy Planet juice a day until his demands are met.

"The city is not listening to our community," Homeless Dave told Peter Driftmier of Right to Food Zine on the twelfth day of his hunger strike. He cited Pidgin Restaurant and Save-On-Meats as examples of how Mayor Gregor Robertson and Vancouver City Council have ignored neighbourhood petitions and a Carnegie Community Action Project report pointing to the loss of 426 SRO rooms through increased rents in the past year.

He also sees new businesses like Pidgin Restaurant, situated across the street from Pigeon Park, as "colonizing" the neighbourhood. With its originally clear windows, it created opportunities for the well-off to observe the poor from a safe vantage.

"There are 850 homeless people in the DTES," Dave said. "That's up by 100 over last year." He said that number is an example of how gentrification creates market pressures that increase the price of rental space, and displaces residents who cannot afford to live anywhere else.

He quotes Vancouver City Councillor Kerry Jang as saying "not a single person is being displaced on the DTES"—evidence that Vancouver City Council

is ignoring the reality. Developments like Sequel 138 and others will create 1,600 future condos and an insignificant number of social housing units that will give residents no place to live and change the neighbourhood forever.

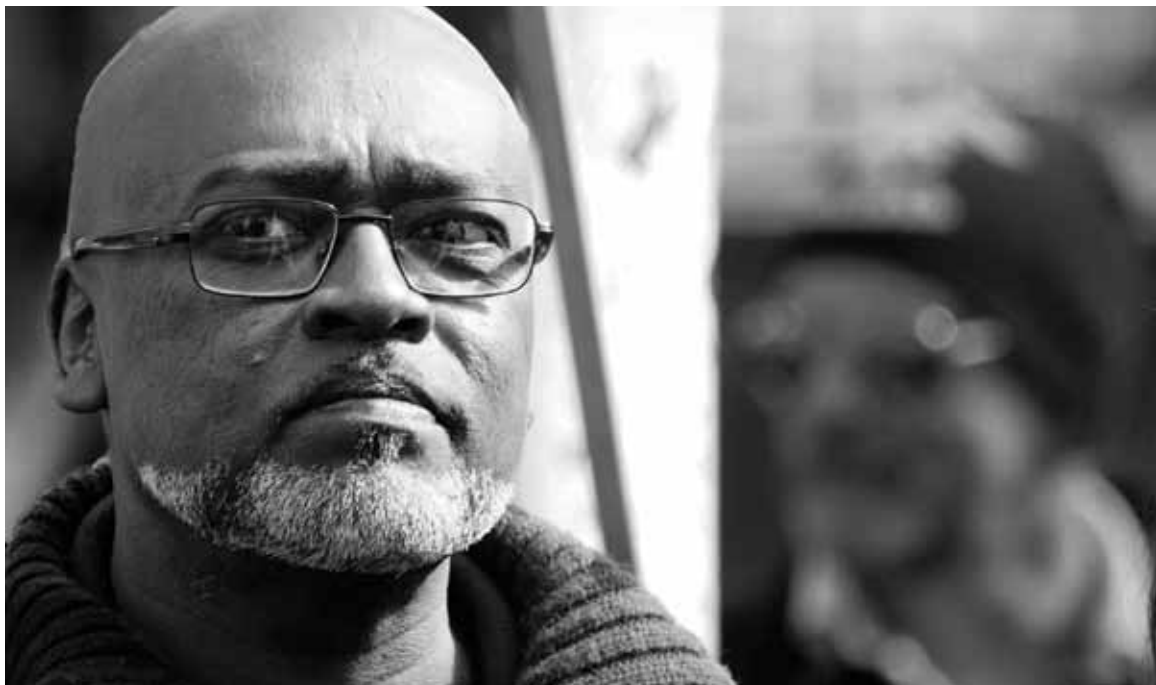
There are also new ventures being considered, such as the construction of a new longhouse along the Carrall Street Greenway, a plan supported by the Inner City Aboriginal Network and other groups. An idea for a "Totem Town" in the area has already been withdrawn thanks to objections by the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. One member, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, was present at the beginning of the hunger strike and has given Homeless Dave his full support.

Meanwhile, media focuses its coverage on distractions like broken windows and a stolen sandwich board at other high-profile gentrifying restaurants.

Before he will end his hunger strike, Dave wants three demands from DTES community organizations to be met: the city must refuse the development permit for the Sequel 138 condo development and instead build 100% social housing there; the Main Street police station should be converted to social housing; and the Downtown Eastside must be declared a "social justice zone."

When Peter spoke to him on the twelfth day of his hunger strike, a determined Dave said he was "tired, very tired." His diabetes might be a complicating factor, he said. "I feel foggy and light headed."

The city must refuse the development permit for the Sequel 138 condo development and instead build 100% social housing there; the Main Street police station should be converted to social housing; and the Downtown Eastside must be declared a "social justice zone."



Above: Homeless Dave on Day 1 of his hunger strike.



Photos by dm gillis

# INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA REIMER, CITY COUNCILLOR

## A Tree Grows in the Downtown Eastside

*By James Kim, based on an interview conducted by John Hughes and Mary Catharine Breadner*

Andrea Reimer was appointed in 2008 as the Chair of the City's Planning and Environment Committee and Council lead on the award-winning Greenest City Action Plan, overseeing Vancouver's efforts to become a global leader in environmental action.

She has volunteered with many community organizations including CCEC Credit Union, Canadian Women's Voters Congress, and a former co-Chair of the City of Vancouver's Food Policy Council. She currently sits on the Vancouver Foundation's Health and Social Development Advisory Committee.

(Excerpted from <http://vancouver.ca/your-government/andrea-reimer.aspx>, March 21, 2013.)

### ON COMMUNITY KITCHENS AND LIFE IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

**C**ity Councillor Andrea Reimer knows that it can be difficult to grow things—whether it's a chickpea plant or a food policy—but magical when it happens.

She left home as a teenager in the 1980s and witnessed firsthand the state of food security in cities across Canada, including Vancouver. During her travels, she stayed in many SROs, most of which lacked decent cooking facilities. As a result, her diet was extremely limited. “You can't eat potatoes without a kitchen. Maybe you eat raw ramen noodles, and that's it, the rest gets wasted.” Much of her food came from church-sponsored meals and handouts. She recalls: “It was doughnuts, powdered potatoes... and meat from some unidentifiable animal.”

Then, in an SRO on Hastings Street, she encountered a “magical locked door [which] led to this kitchen... It had two stoves, and a fridge, and no one had ever used it. All this counter space!”

Reimer was inspired to experiment and see what else was available in her neighbourhood. She went to a food bank for culinary basics. She also cites Sunrise Market as “a good source of interesting hot sauce and other on sale items.” She began to deconstruct her rations of potatoes and Kraft Dinner. “I would put the Kraft Dinner cheese into the potatoes, which made them taste much better... and then you can use

the macaroni and do something with vegetables, like carrots, and bake it together.”

Down the hall, her neighbours smelled the food and became interested in what was happening in the kitchen. Chinese elders in the building came by with suggestions: “Why don't you do stir fry instead of whatever it is you're doing? Or why don't you do a soup instead?”

Then she found a cookbook at the Carnegie Community Centre's library. The recipes inspired an interest in new ingredients. With limited access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs, Reimer began guerilla gardening in the alley around her residence.

This began with “some pots that we put on the windowsills.” She admits that now, as a city official, she would have some concerns about the potential dangers of this approach. The pots were several stories up and could have fallen off. But at the time, it was a necessary risk for the greater benefit of food. “We all got into it. There was an internal courtyard in that

“It really was like a rudimentary community kitchen. The community kitchens now take it to a level where it's not accidental.”

building, so we put some food growing down there. It was a light well, it never got direct sunlight. We didn't totally understand the relationship between direct sunlight and growing things, but things grew."

Comparing the kitchen in her SRO with community kitchens today, Reimer sees parallels in how people come together and solve problems. "It really was like a rudimentary community kitchen. Nobody would have called it that, but that's what we were doing. The community kitchens now take it to a level where it's not accidental." And the guerilla gardening she did at the time has now blossomed into community gardens around the city.

### ON URBAN AGRICULTURE IN BOGOTÁ

**A** civil war has been raging in Colombia since the 1960s. Catherine LeGrand, a Latin American historian, estimates that the fighting has killed some 250,000 individuals and displaced millions of others. Andrea Reimer notes that, according to the official count, "over 200 people a week... come into the city as refugees. The unofficial count is that it's probably closer to over a 1,000 a week. They have to find new housing, food, jobs for 1,000 people every single week."

These numbers meant that the Colombian government could not provide sufficient food to its citizens on an ongoing basis. Instead, it was necessary to create an infrastructure that enabled people to provide food for themselves.

It seemed to be an insurmountable task, but a group known as the RUAF (Resource Centres on

Urban Agriculture and Food Security) Foundation took up the challenge. RUAF came to Colombia in 2005 and worked closely with local government, producers and other businesses, NGOs, and universities.

Reimer visited Bogotá in 2009. She had been invited to present on food policy initiatives that were happening in Vancouver. However, when she saw the scale and dedication of what was happening in Bogotá, she was amazed. "That's what we should be doing in the DTES and low-income communities." As Reimer notes, "the city is much like ours, 22 neighbourhoods, we have 23."

The RUAF approach "brings people together to talk about what a local food system feels like to be successful." It emphasizes the creation of a sustainable mechanism for both food and community to flourish. To do this, 10,000 people are trained in urban agriculture—and each of those 10,000 are required to train at least another four people. With 40,000 people armed with plowshares, an urban agriculture revolution is now underway.

The Jardín Botánico de Bogotá is the largest botanical garden in Colombia and acts as the focal point for the program. A model garden demonstrates traditional ground-based farming techniques, but also—given the dearth of agricultural land in Bogotá—non-ground-based techniques as well. Greenery can be found sprouting from balconies, rooftops, windowsill, and even walls and other vertical spaces. Reimer describes a low-cost watering system: "They take black plastic bags, they put a PVC pipe in the middle, they drill holes in it, and they put in a pop bottle [with] the top cut off... It goes perfectly on a windowsill."

Just as important is the need to organize communities to support urban agriculture. "Each block has an urban agriculture association. They meet every morning. They walk through what were their problems yesterday and what are their plans today. They really do this group problem-solving, so it's not just growing food, it's literally growing community."

Along with growing food and building a community, RUAF also helps its urban farmers learn how to cook their produce. Small booklets are distributed

"They take black plastic bags, they put a PVC pipe in the middle, they drill holes in it, and they put in a pop bottle [with] the top cut off. It goes perfectly on a windowsill."

with recipe ideas. “That kind of closes the circle. They’ve dealt with food production, they’ve dealt with food distribution, and they’re also sharing recipes... how can we not be doing this with all the resources that we have when they have all this figured out?”

Reimer has a picture of a bean plant that was growing three floors up, growing on a guide wire for an electrical pole. The community harvested 50 pounds from it. “Imagine that! You could be growing a lot of beans in the Downtown Eastside.”

## ON FOOD POLICY IN VANCOUVER

On January 30, 2013, City Council unanimously approved the Vancouver Food Strategy. It was a long time coming, but worth the wait. Like farming, making public policy is not a job for the impatient. It requires time, knowledge of local conditions, and a willingness to try new things.

Andrea Reimer notes that the City has already put funds into Sole Food Street Farms as well as into various BIAs (Business Improvement Associations). “We have a lot of pilots going on in the community,” she explained. “It’s enabled us to double farmers markets, to triple community garden plots, even as we’re developing the strategy for it.”

However, Reimer is well aware that pilot projects, no matter how popular, don’t always have the ongoing budget or political will necessary to sustain them. She describes pilots as “very easy to get off the ground, so they’re like plants with shallow roots. The next government comes along and rips them out.”

To help avoid this result, a public policy is needed to ensure that a long-term framework is in place. As she puts it: “I think of public policy as a kind of tree now, so you want to grow the roots as deep as possible... The challenge with growing trees is that it takes a while. I’m not patient by nature, so it’s been a learning process for me.”

When the City of Vancouver adopted a food policy mandate in 2003, no one knew it would take another ten years for a food strategy to be officially recognized. Along the way, Reimer contributed to the Food Policy Council (a citizen advisory group) and saw the adoption of the Vancouver Food Charter in 2007 and the Greenest City Action Plan in 2010. The new Food

Strategy, approved in January, is a “city-enabling document in relation to food.” It sets an ambitious target of increasing city-wide and neighbourhood food assets by at least 50% over 2010 levels.

“I think of public policy as a kind of tree now, so you want to grow the roots as deep as possible.”

The strategy is more than just numbers, however. In Reimer’s opinion, “it’s the first food policy that puts so much emphasis on meeting social goals, not just local food goals. It’s not about shared tonnage, it’s about who has access to that food, and what they have to do to get access to that food, and [whether] it’s culturally appropriate.”

She also sees the food strategy as the perfect enabling document for something similar to the community gardens she witnessed in Bogotá. Such a program would meet all five goals of the new food strategy, which are to:

1. Support food-friendly neighbourhoods;
2. Empower residents to take action;
3. Improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally diverse food for all residents;
4. Make food a centrepiece of Vancouver’s green economy; and
5. Advocate for a just and sustainable food system with partners and at all levels of government.

Reimer acknowledges that this is just the beginning. To create a program in the Downtown Eastside that is similar to the one in Bogotá, you’d have to find 10,000 volunteers. Given that many residents have additional housing, mental health, and addiction concerns, it will be important to “provide supports that stabilize people” during their participation in the program.

But she believes that it’s absolutely worth it. “We all eat, right? So it is the absolutely perfect medium to convene conversations that are very hard to convene.”



# The Right to Food Zine Wishes Its Readers a Happy May Day

By Peter Driftmier

**M**ay 1st is the annual International Workers Day. Celebrated around the world by millions of workers, this day commemorates the gains that working class people have made for their communities, including: improvements in working conditions, the eight-hour day, maternity leave, and the right to join a union. Additional benefits for the lives of all working people include increased social safety net measures like public health care, education, and income assistance to the unemployed.

While the *RTF Zine* has often discussed food security challenges that unemployed and no-wage workers in our neighbourhood face, many people in our communities are precariously employed, oftentimes working with food. These jobs range from agriculture to fast food, and even community volunteerism with the compensation of free food.

There is a growing movement for food justice from the perspective of labour. We'd like to take this opportunity to highlight two inspiring examples of grassroots organizing for workers' rights with food justice.

## FAST FOOD WORKERS IN NEW YORK CITY

Fast food workers launched a second wave of strikes across New York City this April. They are among the last-hired and first-fired, and stable work (if found) is rarely a pathway out of poverty. The workforce is disproportionately represented by women, immigrants, people of colour, people with disabilities, young adults and seniors. Many are themselves food insecure, relying heavily on food stamps, as are the low-income communities that disproportionately rely on the cheap and unhealthy meals they provide.

Their first wave of strikes occurred last November, when hundreds of workers in corporate fast food

chains across New York City held a one day strike. Their demands? To have their unions recognized, and to double their wages to a living wage—\$7.75 to \$15.00 per hour. MacDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Domino's and many other chains were put in the spotlight by these courageous workers and a broad base of supporting labour, religious, and community organizations.

Good paying jobs in low-income communities would then have the effect of increasing food security and lowering poverty.

## MIGRANT FARM WORKERS IN CANADA

Undocumented migrant farm workers and those employed under Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program are increasingly filling the ranks of the country's agricultural labour pool. Many sources have documented the trend towards this form of migration occurring at the same time as barriers grow to immigrants accessing Permanent Residency.

With many of these farm workers depending on good standing with their employers, it is dangerous to speak out and organize for working conditions that are on par with local labour laws. Employers can revoke a worker's contract and have them deported. In one recently documented case, a local union took legal action against the Mexican government, arguing that the government had blacklisted a Seasonal Agricultural Worker for having been involved in organizing at his farm.

Many inspiring stories of courageous migrant farm workers organizing with their community and labour organizations have made the news—from challenging the repeal of Employment Insurance benefits to filing class action law suits.

Happy International Workers Day, and let's create a just food system.

# From Charity to Choice: Social Justice and the Right to Food

By Paul M. Taylor, *Right to Food Activist*

**V**ancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) is often described as Canada's poorest postal code. Do a Google search for "Canada's poorest postal code," and nine out of ten articles on the first page of results are about the Downtown Eastside. The sources range from Maclean's to the New York Times to Wikipedia—all speaking to the challenges that are omnipresent in this area.

The overwhelming response to the ubiquitous poverty in the DTES is charity and the proliferation of charitable food sources. These sources are not financially sustainable, not always of the greatest nutritional benefit, are often undignified, create dependent relationships for food from those who donate food and allow the government to abdicate their right to food obligations. A more effective intervention is to focus on right to food obligations and systemic change that can more adequately support more universal access to food.

Areas such as the DTES—with a significant homeless population and where those who are materially poor outnumber those who are not—have largely been served by charity. Community members, usually from more affluent parts of a community, come together in attempts to mitigate the effects of material poverty, often hunger. There are a myriad of charitable food providers, often staffed by volunteers from outside of the Downtown Eastside.

Charitable food sources are not sustainable for a variety of reasons. They depend on volunteer labour for meal preparation and service. The source of the food is largely based on in-kind or food product donations from corporations or individuals. There is often a decrease of these donations during an economic downturn, yet the materially poor remain hungry during these times. Charitable food is clearly not the most sustainable way to combat hunger.

A significant amount of recent food discourse has been about limiting the amount of unhealthy food that is made available to children, particularly

in school cafeterias. As a society we rarely call into question the nutrients and the quality of the food that is made available to those accessing charitable food. A Huffington Post article, "Food Pantries Request Healthier Donations Over Bulk Junk Food This Christmas," speaks to the prevailing mindset of food donors. The article goes on to say that:

**"Many commonly donated foods are high in salt, sugar or calories, making them poor choices for people with high blood pressure, diabetes and other diet-related health problems... Those are the type of products that could kill Dorothy Jones, a 63-year-old diabetic who picks up food once a month at a Milwaukee food pantry to supplement her Social Security checks. Jones has to watch her sugar intake, and after a heart attack two months ago, her doctor also told her to reduce her intake of salt, fats and carbohydrates."**

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At a recent Costs of Poverty Panel, Ted Bruce (Vancouver Coastal Health's Executive Director, Population Health) stated that those in low income communities similar to the DTES are 2.4 times more likely to be hospitalized for diabetes than those in more affluent communities—and that reliance on charitable food is a likely part of the equation.

Another important non-nourishing aspect of charitable food is that it is often not presented in a dignified manner. Food lines are omnipresent in

communities such as the DTES, where low income individuals spend hours outside in what can be cold and rainy weather, waiting for salty soup and day-old bread. Unlike many restaurant menus, the ingredients are rarely listed and communicated to those accessing this food, and certainly doesn't take into account allergies or diet restrictions. It is also more than undignified to have to participate in prayer if you do not subscribe to the food provider's religious affiliation. In an interview, a DTES resident spoke to me about the response she got when she asked a volunteer if she could exchange her box of Kraft Dinner for some soap. The person handing out the products claimed that she "must not be that hungry"—not realizing the people accessing charitable sources often have to choose between eating and other personal needs.

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The continued growth of charitable food sources allows the government to negate their right to food obligations. A 2010 report, *Access and Affordability: Saskatchewan Food Banks Explore the Costs of Eating Healthy*, cites the right to food that Canada has agreed to as a basis for the conversation on food security for low income individuals and families.

The Canadian government signed an international declaration but has failed to enshrine this in any domestic law:

**"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food." (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights [1948], Article 25)**

There are policies from all levels of government that undermine this right. Canada is one of the only G8 countries without a federal housing strategy, while British Columbia is one of only two provinces without a poverty reduction plan. One key policy tool available to governments to increase access to food beyond charity is the increase of social assistance amounts. Saskatchewan food banks report that 70% of Regina's food bank clients list social assistance as their primary source of income.

Other key tools available to government include the development of more affordable housing stock and a commitment to support the development of more housing based on the shelter portion of welfare (\$375 in British Columbia).

Affordable child-care and transit are among the other policy related pieces that would certainly help to increase access to food for those who are dependent on charity. These systemic changes are necessary not only based on a social justice perspective, but also as good fiscal policy.

**"Those without housing or were marginally housed without access to an in-house meal program or cooking facilities were most reliant on charitable food providers. This reliance means that they are not necessarily able to access the food when they needed it. This is particularly true for individuals addicted to drugs who may not be able to stand in line-ups or attend meal programs at particular times. Having access to food where they live can improve overall nutrition, behaviour and well-being." (Vancouver Coastal Health, *Food Security and Housing in the DTES*, 2009).**

The Centre for Policy Alternatives BC published *The Cost of Poverty BC*, which calculated the health-care, justice, and productivity costs associated with poverty. It argued that "lack of action on poverty costs BC \$8–\$9 billion annually."

These are the primary changes that need to be led by government to create a paradigm shift from reliance and emphasis on charitable sources to one that allows people to make their own food choices.

# A Legal Framework for a Right to Food

By dm gillis

**D**oes a legal right to food exist in Canada? If the average Canadian answers “yes,” that answer will likely be informed by a full belly, and only a vague understanding that food insecurity truly exists within Canada’s borders.

Provincial and federal courts in Canada interpret the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as ensuring food security. They also point to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948); the *UN Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* (1966), ratified by Canada in 1976; the *Rome Declaration on World Food Security* and the *World Food Summit Plan of Action* (1996).

But federal and provincial governments in Canada disagree with the courts’ interpretation of these documents.

Furthermore, *Canada’s Action Plan for Food Security* (1998) lacks an enforceable legal framework. And it’s because of this lack of any enforceable legal framework that the above mentioned Action Plans, Charters and Universal Declarations fail to have any impact.

Olivier De Schutter, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, urged Canada to remove its blinders and deal with a widespread problem of food insecurity. “Frankly, this sort of self-righteousness about the situation being good in Canada is not corresponding to what I saw on the ground, not at all.”

Stephen Harper refused to meet with Olivier De Schutter.

So, maybe the question of whether a right to food exists in Canada is moot, as long as we’re governed by the comfortably well off. Perhaps we should, therefore, take time to ask the question differently. For example, what might a legal right to food look like? And, would Canadians really benefit from a binding legal framework assuring each of us a legal right to food?

These are this writer’s questions. Readers will have their own. From our various points of view, an informed consensus may evolve. Politicians hate informed consensus.

So let’s begin with the first of our two questions.

## WHAT MIGHT A LEGAL RIGHT TO FOOD LOOK LIKE?

Bear with me; this is just a thumbnail sketch.

First, there’d be talk and backroom debate, and ultimately a Bill. The Bill would contain proposals and broad strokes. If it survived the Cabinet and Parliamentary stages and received Royal Assent, it would become an Act. The new Act might include items like Introductory Provisions, General Provisions, Transitional and Consequential Provisions—that sort of thing. And the Act would directly influence the creation of the Regulations. The Regulations, which are the pointy end of the stick, might include Interpretation, Eligibility, Income and Asset Restrictions, Amounts and Durations, Other Factors that Affect Eligibility, Definitions and Remedies, fun stuff like that.

Out of this would come a resulting bureaucracy developed to ensure the Act and Regulations are

“How will food benefits be delivered? Will people be subjected to a dehumanizing process only slightly better than going hungry?”

obeyed. There’d be quasi-judicial enforcement procedure. There’d be upper and middle management types. There’d be front-line case workers, assessors and adjudicators. There might even be Legal Advocates, like the ones who currently represent people at Appeals and Administrative Tribunals for benefits like CPP. And don’t forget the army of lawyers



required throughout the whole process. Perhaps there'd even be a whole new ministerial portfolio. In that case, there would be the Minister, Deputy, and Assistant Deputy Minister.

*More bureaucracy!* you scoff. Yes, but is bureaucracy always bad?

Now the second question.

### **WOULD CANADIANS REALLY BENEFIT FROM A BINDING LEGAL FRAMEWORK ASSURING EACH OF US A LEGAL RIGHT TO FOOD?**

This may depend wholly on whether government, working alone, can honestly and adequately define the fundamental terms of reference. For example, what is food and nutrition?

For some, Canada's Food Guide may be a good place to begin. But there are also religious and cultural considerations, and people with chronic health conditions. What if, despite all of the expert guidance available to them, the authors of the new legislation consider instant noodles three times a

day to be adequate nutrition? After all, isn't this sort of legislation meant to assist people over the short-term? Isn't having a job the best way ensure proper nutrition? Stephen Harper and Christy Clark sure want us to think so.

And how will food benefits be delivered? Will people be subjected to a dehumanizing process only slightly better than going hungry? Will dodgy non-profits appear out of nowhere to benefit from new government funding? Will the private sector be provided with a new government funded way to profit from redirecting its waste food stream onto the poor?

Are we really certain we know what we mean by a Right to Food?

A nation state will never bestow a right simply because it's the right thing to do. Lazy, ideological governments will delay and run interference, and an apathetic, uniformed citizenry will allow it to happen.

Only those directly affected can act as an effective catalyst. And only if they know exactly what they want will they know how to demand it.



Photo by dm gillis

# I Fight for Food: An Interview with a Single Mother in the Downtown Eastside

By Ricki Chen and Rebecca Ipe

**O**n a cold, blustery evening that makes me long for chicken noodle soup and a blanket, I walk into the Neighborhood House to investigate how families in the Downtown Eastside get food and to learn about their difficulties and adventures in accessing healthy, nutritious food in a neighborhood infamous for food lines and boxed meals.

In the kitchen I find Amy, a woman with dark eyes and four bright-eyed kids spilling with energy and good cheer. When asked about where she gets her food, she starts on a list of treasure spots, on which the Neighborhood House reigns supreme. Amy is a faithful volunteer at the Neighborhood House and lists its community kitchen as one of the main sources of food for her family. The Backpack program at Strathcona Community Centre is another favourite location, as they often get fresh produce from Sunrise Market for free. Amy also gets gift cards from various organisations, but these are not always

helpful because they are gift cards for Safeway, which is a more expensive grocery store than Sunrise Market—and she has to take a bus to get to the nearest Safeway location at Broadway and Commercial.

At the community kitchen, her kids get to help with food preparation and have learned how to cook, even at their tender ages.

“Last year they made me breakfast,” she says, keeping a watchful eye on her kids as they bound about the Neighborhood House. “Was it Mother’s Day?” she asks one of her children. After receiving confirmation, she turns back to me and says proudly, “They learned to cook from here. They’ve made French toast, dumplings, sushi.”

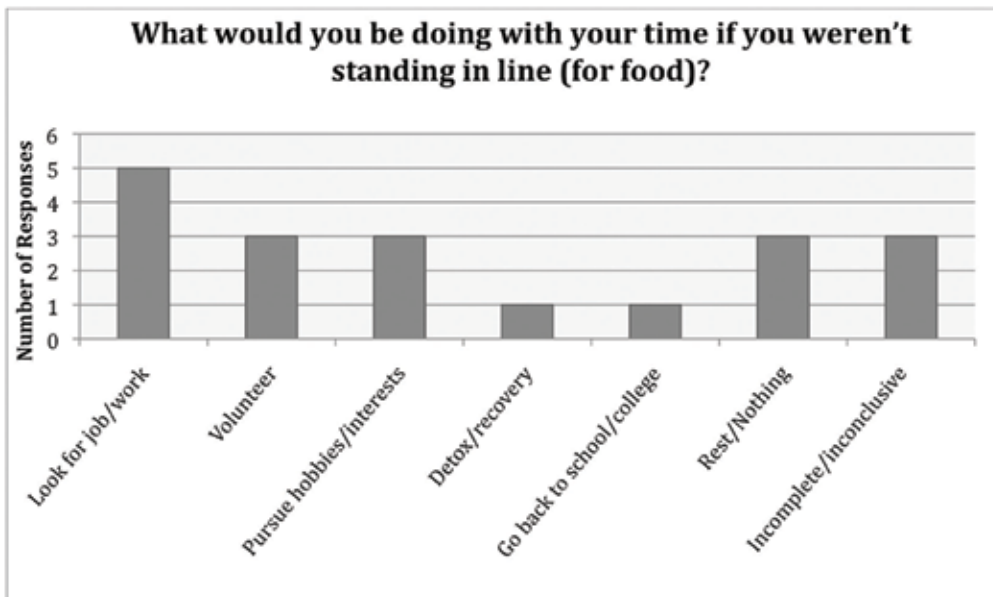
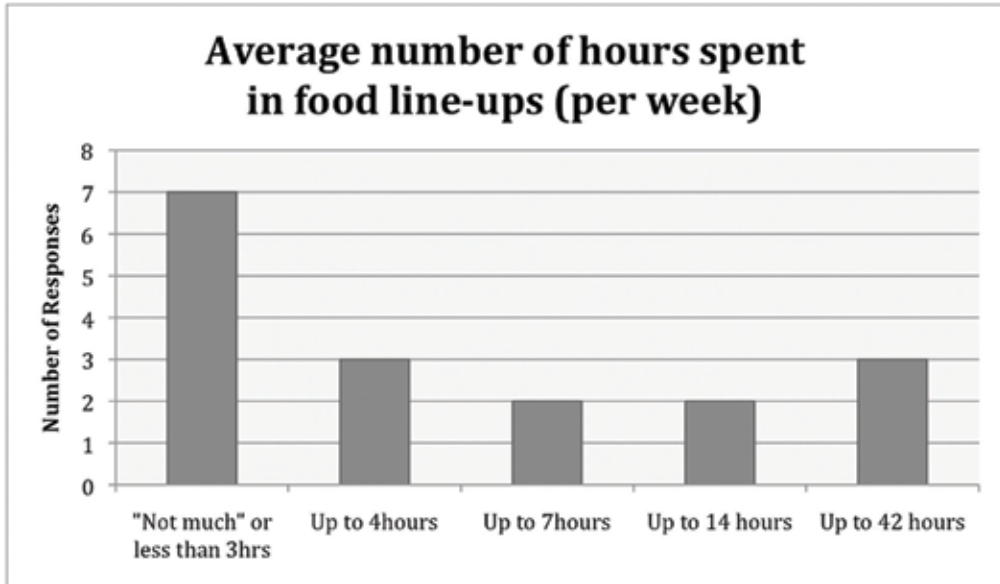
At my exclamation at the fact that her kids had made things I consider difficult (the sushi and dumplings, not toast), she continues, “They’ve made jam. Bliss balls.” She then recounts how she’d found a similar recipe for bliss balls in the Metro newspaper, and how she’d had a moment of joyous connection at recognizing something her kids had made.

Little moments of hope like these brighten the daily struggle to find food. Amy’s story hints at the amount of work she has to put in to find food for her family, and the variety of programs she has to access in order to nourish them. Perhaps we should question how we can increase these moments of joy so that food becomes an inspiration instead of a requisite for survival.

“Last year [my kids] made me breakfast. They learned to cook from here. They’ve made French toast, dumplings, sushi.”

# Investigating Food Security and Welfare Rates in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood

Excerpted from a report by UBC students Nicky Grunfeld, Navid Karimi, Molly Knox, Etienne Nemanishen, Kathleen Saxon, Radhika Sonagra, and Brett Trainor



# INTERVIEW WITH SHENG LEUNG

## Putting Community First

By Kim Del Valle Garcia

**I**t's a Wednesday Community Drop-in meal at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, and if you peek over the mountain of dirty dishes into the kitchen you can catch a glimpse of myriad hard working people buzzing around. It takes a lot of help to facilitate the Neighbourhood House's programs. To run the four-hour community drop-in requires a solid two hours of prepping, three hours of cooking, six hours of dishes, two hours of post-drop-in anxiety and another 40 hours of rehabilitation before doing it all again. Needless to say, the volunteers that put themselves through a shift at the Neighbourhood House are a special breed of people.

There are many amazing people who help keep things ticking during these drop-ins, but one long-time volunteer shines. Just barely reaching over the top of the counters, Sheng Leung is hard at work. "Sue" has been volunteering in the kitchen at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House for four and a half years, and I have been lucky enough to work with her. For those who have seen her at work, she is a relentless dishwasher who never tires of scrubbing, chopping, wiping, drying, sweeping and peeling. Trying to get Sue to take a break is usually met with, "Don't worry, I want to finish it first."

This is not the first kitchen that Sue has worked in. After moving from China to Canada in 1968 she took a job at a restaurant in Chinatown frying, washing dishes, chopping produce and doing other restaurant tasks. She was making \$0.50 an hour at this kitchen when the minimum wage was \$1.60 an hour, but making money is not of much concern to her. Growing up with a wealthy father who lost everything in one night has taught Sue to live simply. "All he had left was one pair of pants," she recalls.

Since learning that lesson first-hand, Sue has been saving up her honoraria from numerous volunteering gigs, including the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, where she works nights, and has been donating the money to those who need it more.

For someone living on a Canada Pension Plan, where the average monthly benefit is only \$534.65 before taxes, Sue puts her community ahead of herself.

All this philanthropy and good will has made Sue a well-respected person in the hood; she's earned the nickname "mother" from men and woman of all backgrounds, which is quite the feat in a community where Chinese elders are often verbally and physically threatened. It is common for Chinese elders to be refused service, disrespected, or told to "go back to China"—discrimination caused by cultural differences and a tricky language barrier.

When approached with hate or anger, Sue just smiles and exudes happiness. Her advice: "Work hard and be happy."

Many elderly Chinese immigrants in the Downtown Eastside speak little English, making it difficult for them to communicate with their neighbours. This language barrier is not always met with tolerance and understanding. I am told that some Chinese elders *can* speak English, but feign ignorance so as to avoid following the house rules and the neighbourhood's social norms.

After having had two tumours removed from her throat, it is difficult for Sue to speak. However, she often acts as an English translator for those Cantonese or Mandarin speakers hoping for a haircut or looking for the bathroom. Although Sue still experiences her fair share of prejudice, years of living in the neighbourhood have left her with an amazing tolerance. When approached with hate or anger, Sue just smiles and exudes happiness. Her advice: "Work hard and be happy."





## gaunt

*By dm gillis*

there was a pale watercolour hurt to it  
the desert of her empty belly a  
razor blade pain

the day ahead of  
sidewalks and disarray wanting to  
burn alive in an intersection a  
headline of lack dull and wide-eyed

every room I enter is empty, Hunger says  
in spite of my presence I'm  
clever that way a  
puzzle solved with bread as though  
it were diamonds

# Remembering Mom: The *Right to Food Zine* Honours International Women's Day

*International Women's Day (March 8) is a global day celebrating the economic, political and social achievements of women past, present and future. In honour of this day, some members of the Right to Food Zine team have contributed their recollections of food experiences and important women in their lives.*

*By James Kim*

**M**y mother grew up in the shadow of the Korean War. Like many women and men of her generation, she left a broken country in search of better opportunities. In the 1960s, she spent time in Germany, training to be a nurse. One of her fondest memories from that period was stopping by a bakery on the way to school, where she would pick up a loaf of bread that was still warm from the oven. After the deprivation she had known in Korea, it was a small but miraculous luxury.

When she moved to Canada, she kept her appreciation for good food. Although my mother is now gone, the joy and respect for food that she taught me remains. This was something that she communicated by word and by deed: that the best food was fresh, it was local, and it was made with love. She filled large earthenware jars with kimchi, which then fermented outdoors over the long Ontario winter. She went to nearby parks to pick fernbrake fiddleheads (which we later discovered was illegal, but that's another story). And she found a small bakery that sold Portuguese buns by the dozen. We would pick them up and enjoy shattering through the crust to get to the steaming interior, still warm from the oven.

*By Huan Ricki Chen*

**M**ost of my fondest memories from childhood involve my mother's cooking. I can still remember the sweet feeling of anticipation as I sat fidgeting at the dinner table while mom prepared breakfast in the kitchen. My all-time favourite were the melt-in-your-mouth "made from scratch" peach yogurt pancakes and crepes drizzled with maple syrup that I'd stack up—as many layers as she'd allow. Breakfast was always prepared for me before heading off for school, but as I remembered it, I was

required to be in the kitchen "helping" while supper was being prepared.

Though I may not have been of much help at first, I've come to understand that most of what I know of cooking, as a form of art and a medium of expressing one's love, I learned as I observed her at work. I also recall all conflicts in our house coming to a ceasefire whenever the meal was ready and our family shared the food we prepared together. The food was that good. Some of life's most important lessons were taught to me by my mom—the importance of family and community, forgiveness, patience, love, prayer, celebration, hospitality—all involving food in some manner. I will always remember. Happy International Women's Day!

*By John Hughes*

**I** don't remember my mom ever mentioning International Women's Day. Growing up in suburban Vancouver in the 1970s lent itself more to driving my sister and me to swimming lessons, Cub Scout meetings and soccer games than a celebration of women's achievements. My mom grew up on a farm in Richmond in the 1950s. My grandma looked after the farm while my grandpa skippered a gillnetter out of Steveston.

To hear my mom tell it, my grandmother farmed without any expectation of recognition; she just worked hard all the time. My mom picked up the work ethic; along with taking care of two little kids, she tilled a massive vegetable garden in our backyard. Corn, peas, carrots and Swiss chard are just a few of the things she grew. At the height of summer, when the veggies were ripe, she'd harvest them. That was also salmon fishing season; an uncle of mine ran a fishing-boat out of Steveston at the time, and he'd

*Continued on page 19*

# recipes

## Apple Cinnamon Granola

*Recipe selected by Donna, tested by the DTES NH Community Kitchen, and written by Kim Del Valle Garcia.*

This recipe is seasonal, healthy, and vegan; all ingredients can be found at Sunrise Market, 300 Powell St.

Cost: \$10

### Ingredients

- 4 cups rolled oats—a whole bag is \$2.70 (non-organic) or \$4 (organic)
- 1 cup of nuts (I like to use almond slivers)—\$2.40 for a bag of almonds (nuts can be found cheaper at stores with bulk sections)
- 1/2 cup sesame seeds—\$1.20
- 1 cup dehydrated apple, finely chopped—\$1.40
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- 3/4 tsp salt
- 1/2 cup syrup can be agave, maple, or even honey—\$2.30
- 1/3 cup oil (olive or grapeseed works well)
- 1/2 tsp vanilla extract

### Directions

- Preheat oven to 350°F.
- In a large bowl, combine oats, nuts, sesame seeds, cinnamon, and salt. Add syrup, oil, and vanilla. Stir until well mixed.
- Spread evenly on one or two baking pans and bake for 20-25 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes.
- Let granola cool before stirring in apples.

Makes about 8 cups.



Photo by Kim del Valle Garcia

# recipes

## Leftover Taco Salad

*Recipe selected by Donna, tested by the DTES NH Community Kitchen, written by Kim Del Valle Garcia.*

This recipe is seasonal, healthy, and vegan; all ingredients can be found at Sunrise Market, 300 Powell St.

As chilli season gives way to salad season here is a cheap way to get your veggie intake and use up all your leftover chilli. You can also avoid buying a bag of taco chips and salad dressing by making your own.

For salad greens, use any salad green that is in season. Right now you can forage for mustard greens, which are popping up in gardens, or you can use romaine or green leaf lettuce from Sunrise Market.

Cost: \$6.20 to \$7.20

### Ingredients

- 2 cups of leftover chilli (canned chilli could be used as well)—a can of chilli costs \$1.50
- 4 cups salad greens, finely chopped—free to \$1
- 1 large tomato—\$1 deals are always available at Sunrise Market
- 4 green onions, minced—\$1

### Taco chips:

- bag of corn tortillas—\$2.70
- vegetable oil

### Dressing:

- 1/4 cup oil
- 1/4 cup vinegar (apple cider is best)

### Directions

- In a saucepan on medium heat, warm up the chili.
- Taco chips: Chop corn tortillas into strips about 1 inch thick. In a medium frying pan add enough oil to cover the pan with about 1/4 inch oil. Once hot, place the tortillas in a single layer and fry until brown and crispy, turning once. Sprinkle with salt and let cool on paper towel.
- Dressing: Combine oil and vinegar; mix well.
- Salad: In a large bowl, combine salad greens, tomato, green onions, warm chili, taco chips, and dressing. Toss and enjoy.

Serves: 2–3



*Continued from page 16*

regularly bring over Sockeye for our table. Sounds great, right? An endless supply of fresh salmon and Swiss chard would grace our kitchen what seemed like every night. But growing up as future Generation Xers, my sister and I howled against being served just-picked chard and newly caught Sockeye; we wanted all the deep fried fast food that we saw on TV. My mom rarely gave in to our puerile rants—McDonald's was out, food from the garden was in. Both my sister and I have enjoyed robust health into our 40s; no doubt a big reason for this is that she cared enough to make sure we ate proper food. Thanks, Mom—Happy International Women's Day!

*By Hendrik Beune*

### **H**ats off and hugs for all the hard working moms in the world who try to raise a good family!

I also have the good fortune of coming from a caring family, and my brothers and I feel very closely connected with each other and with our parents as well. Since not all of us are so fortunate, I'm also thinking of all the kids from broken families and those reared by single mums or dads. We all have a great need for a family bond, which is very nurturing for the soul, so appreciate your mum and dad's efforts to do the best they can as much as you can!

Show a sign of appreciation towards your street-sisters, your partner, wife, girlfriend, your daughter, mom, grandma or caregiver this Women's Day!

## 2013 BC Election: The Right to Vote

**T**here are people in British Columbia who don't get enough to eat. This lack of ample fresh and nutritious food severely impacts the residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. People living in poverty in the neighbourhood exist on unhealthy, inadequate daily diets, eating food that is provided without dignity or choice.

The Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House's Right to Food Philosophy upholds the human rights of all residents of British Columbia, to abundant, local, fresh and nutritious food that is available across the province and delivered in a dignified manner. Food is a key determinant of individual and community health—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

During the 2013 BC election, we ask that you contact the candidates in your riding and ask them how they will address the real issue of hunger in the Province of British Columbia. How will the candidates in your riding fulfill their responsibility to provide for those in the province who go to bed hungry every night?

# About the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House

**T**he secular, grassroots Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (DTES NH) embraces people of all ancestries, genders, ages and descriptions, annually welcoming almost 9,000 DTES residents in a community where 70% of our neighbours have low incomes, 700 are homeless and 5,000 are under-housed.

Those who built the DTES NH put the right to food at the heart of our work, as nutritional vulnerability is a theme familiar to all. Our goal around the right to food is to reform the nutritional impact, quality, abundance and delivery of food in the DTES in consultation with residents, community food providers, non-food community organizations, healthcare professionals, policy makers, growers/suppliers, food/beverage industry professionals and researchers.

Visit our website for more information about the Neighbourhood House: <http://dtesnhouse.ca>

## The Right to Food Commons

**A**re you interested in gardening and growing some lovely vegetables? The Right to Food Commons is looking for you! We are a group of food security-minded gardeners looking to set up a farm in the DTES in partnership with the Neighbourhood House. Our aim is to keep the food and labour within the community.

We need more hands and voices! If you are interested in learning more, helping out, or giving us some suggestions, we encourage you to join our farm bund. We meet weekly at the Neighbourhood House. For more information contact Kim at [kimdvg@dtesnhouse.ca](mailto:kimdvg@dtesnhouse.ca) or swing by the house and say hello.

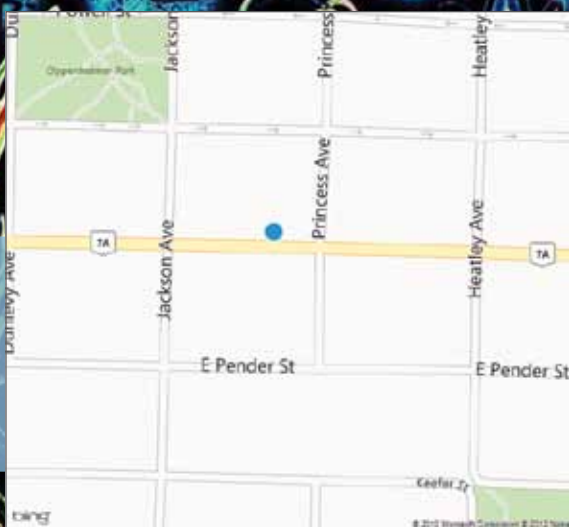
*Visit the RTF Zine website for more stories, references, and the podcast: <http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine>*





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## LOCATION

Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House  
573 East Hastings Street  
Vancouver, BC V6A 1P9  
604.215.2090  
<http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine>

## CONTRIBUTING TO THE ZINE

Interested in contributing to the *RTF Zine*? We're always looking for articles, artwork, or ideas that reflect the right to food. Find us online at <http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine> or let us know who you are at [zine@dtesnhouse.ca](mailto:zine@dtesnhouse.ca).

Interested in donating to the *RTF Zine*? We welcome amounts of any size. Since the *Zine* is produced by volunteers, all donations go directly to printing and marketing. Donate online at <http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine>.