

Taking the Lead

Volume 2:

Working for Community

**A project of the Writer's Alliance of
Newfoundland and Labrador**

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Working for Community

An adult basic education project
of the Writers' Alliance
of Newfoundland and Labrador
2001

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Questions for Discussion

Introduction

Taking the Lead is a collection of essays and personal portraits that highlight the struggle and achievements of a diverse array of individuals, groups, and organizations. The common thread among these movers and shakers is the urge to bring about positive change - to refuse to accept an untenable or ineffective status quo. These are stories of hard-working people, many from the margins of society who have defied the odds in an effort to improve their own lot, and the lives of others.

But there is also a strong personal component to these stories. Mixed in with the practical, concrete goals of improving how we are governed, how our laws are written, interpreted, and enforced, there is always personal growth. Many of those profiled here undergo a marked change in their spirituality and sense of self-worth. They are not quite the same at the end of their journey as they were at the beginning.

The people in these essays are of all age groups, many races, and both genders. There is also a wide variety of subject matter. Many of the stories deal with women, native people, and children. Readers will meet, among others, an anti-poverty crusader, a native Peacekeeper, a Chinese doctor, and a gay rights activist. There is a story of police insensitivity and brutality a profile of a community-minded, unpretentious priest, and a look at the life work of someone who strives for the personal enrichment of the disabled.

Taking the Lead offers stories of people who, either on their own or with others, have fought against what they believe is fundamentally wrong. A catch phrase binding these essays might be: "We're not going to take it!" Or the even more positive: "We're going to make the effort to change it!" These stories, then, are life affirming in a broad way. They show that positive change, both on a personal and social level, can be brought about by "ordinary" people, that ultimately, we all have to "take the lead."

Acknowledgements

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Taking the Lead is the fifth in a series of literacy projects undertaken by the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador. Copies of our other projects, including the *Newfoundland and Labrador ABE Social History Series* and *Working Lives*, may be obtained by contacting our office:

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**Bev Brown:
Woman with an Attitude**
Agnes Walsh

Word List

Activist: A person who adopts a policy of action in politics, etc.

Oppress: To govern harshly; to weigh down with harshness.

Repress: To keep down by force.

Apartheid: Former policy of racial segregation in South Africa.

Kowtow: To behave with exaggerated respect, to fawn over.

Kurdish people: A people of Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean area.

Ethnic: Of a racial group; influenced by the culture of a particular people.

Racist: A person who believes in the superiority of a particular race.

Discrimination: Action or policies directed against a minority group.

Economist: An expert on money matters.

Recession: A temporary decline in economic activity in a country

Virtual: Not real, used a lot in computer language. Virtual reality.

Introduction: Seeking and Speaking the Truth



Photo: JoJo Holtby
Bev and friends.

After talking with Bev Brown you listen to the news differently. Bev has been international secretary for the National Anti-Poverty Organization, or NAPO, for three years. She was elected to this position. Her volunteer work with NAPO has given her the opportunity to find out about social and economic justice groups and their work in several countries around the world. She is then able to plan joint actions with them and the groups she works with here. At the local level Bev works with a group called The Social Policy Committee of Coalition for Equality This 11-year-old group is made up of unions, church groups, and community organizations in the province. The group also looks at provincial and federal government policy and has often suggested concrete improvements to policies. These suggestions could greatly improve the quality of life for people on low incomes.

The Beginnings of an Activist

Bev is a woman in her early fifties. She wears glasses and has a flurry of white hair. Her smile is wide and her laugh is big. She lives in a housing co-operative on LeMarchant Road with her cat, Kishka. Her house is filled with newspapers and pamphlets from all over the world. She likes to keep up on events. She reads newspapers that we don't commonly find in St. John's. These newspapers report on wars and poverty in countries all over the world.

When Bev finished university in the 1960s she became a social worker in a psychiatric hospital in Ontario. She began to see that people on welfare were always angry She wondered why. "I didn't know what was wrong with them," she says with a shake of her head. "I do now" Later she worked in Vancouver on an emergency hotline and crisis centre. She saw a lot of stress and poverty It was then that she started to think seriously about the inequalities in our society The rich always seemed to get richer. The poor always seemed to get poorer. Poor people see the inequality first hand.

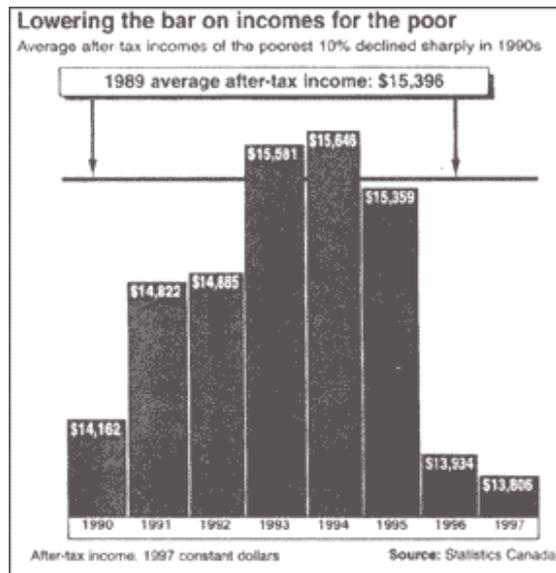
Bev's work with the El Salvador Support Committee here in St. John's was the beginning of a career that mixes international and local social justice work. She decided to get involved with local activism because it is more hands on. But local issues also tie into global matters. "I like to work on issues

globally too, and so I'm not going to stop that work" says Bev. "However, when I looked around me I saw that poverty was the biggest oppressor here. That and the way poor people are treated."

So the first thing Bev did locally was to go to a Group Against Poverty meeting. She saw the kind of work they were doing and she joined up. The group made a poster that compared the rich and poor in Newfoundland. They made a video called "Closing the Gap." It was a good video that was used in the schools and was sent all over Canada. This video has been a very successful tool in educating people about the discrimination against poor people. Along with the Group Against Poverty she joined up with the federal group The National Anti-Poverty Organization. It is her volunteer work as international secretary of this group that takes her around the world.

Why Bev Works for the Poor

"I work for the poor," Bev says, "because I am poor. I'm on welfare. And everyone who knows me or knows of me knows that I'm on welfare. I am in the newspapers a lot. I'm on T.V. a lot. Welfare is such a dirty word but I do not want to hide the fact that I am poor and that I need welfare. I would work if I could get a job. Meanwhile I work at a non- wage job trying to get equal human rights for people with low incomes who don't have access to any waged work."



Bev knows that people on welfare are sometimes sneered at and called lazy. She challenges the prejudiced statements of people who feel that way. She also challenges the government and the policy makers. Bev wants them to put their money where their mouths are. This is her life's work. She'll do it with or without wages. She is committed to helping end the prejudice against people on low incomes. She wants to end the effect of that prejudice Lowering the bar on incomes for the poor Average after tax incomes of the poorest 10% declined sharply in 1990s which is the shame that 1989 average after-tax income: \$15,396 people feel when they need income support.

Welfare Gets A Bad Rap

"I'm tired of poor people getting blamed for not having waged work," Bev says. "If there were enough jobs then you could blame people for not taking

them." She thinks the blame should be put on the government policies not on people. This attitude of blaming poor people for their situation starts at an early age.

Bev has done many anti-poor-bashing workshops. One workshop was in a university class of graduating teachers at the Department of Education. She found a lot of prejudice against people on welfare. She asked these graduating teachers to write down words about people on welfare.

"I never had one positive word said to me. It was all about buddy on welfare having six cars and a mansion, blah-blah-blah."

She was shocked at how extremely vicious these young graduating teachers were. "It is very upsetting to think that they will give the children they teach these messages," she says. "I told them that even if you do not say it out loud, the children will still get the message. I told them to base their opinions on evidence, not prejudice. There is not enough work here for everyone. Ten percent of the

people here in this province have no waged work and no chance to get it. That is higher than any other province."

Out of the Welfare Closet

Bev knows that people on welfare face discrimination every day. She knows that many people who are better off have the opinion that poor people are poor because it's their own fault. She has also known many people getting income support who feel bad about it. Most people do not want anyone to know.

"I just wish that people didn't have to feel so terrified that someone would know that they need income support," she says. "There are not enough jobs here, it's a fact."

Bev has decided to challenge the discrimination and she knows there are many others who are working on these human rights issues trying to make things more fair.

Government Policy

In December 1999 Bev made a submission to the Canadian Human Rights Act Review. She gathered information on which human rights you lose when you get income support. One thing that she discovered was that the Canada Health and Social Transfer, or the C.H.S.T., is unfair. This C.H.S.T. paved the way for work-fare in six provinces. Work-fare means you are forced to work at a job you do not choose in order to receive any income support.

"It is forced labour," says Bev. On work-fare the people are not allowed to get Workers' Compensation if they get injured. They are not allowed to join unions. In some provinces you have no right to minimum wage. "Those are big losses of human rights," says Bev. She wrote to the Human Rights Act Review and told them that all provinces discriminate against people who need government income to survive.

Musical Jobs

As part of her work with the Social Policy Committee group, Bev is currently involved in a project called Musical Jobs. The group received a small provincial grant from the Woman's Policy Office to go into schools and talk with children. They sit in a circle and ask the kids what jobs they know of in their community. They tell the children that the jobs can be for wages or without wages. They get the children to write down all the different jobs that can be done where they live. So the kids write down teacher, fish-plant worker, scientist, magician, baby-sitter, etc. Then they stick these jobs to the backs of chairs and play musical chairs. When the music stops the kids sit down. The helper pulls away the "waged" chairs and everyone talks about what it's like when a fish-plant closes down or a hospital closes. They talk about what it might feel like for them and their parents if they don't have work for wages. Eventually the talk gets around to the prejudice that kids whose parents don't have jobs experience and what problems they face. Bev feels this exercise works. She hopes to continue the work because she believes it is important to end the prejudice and discrimination against people who can't find work.

The Donation of Food Act

Several years ago the Community Food Sharing Association (an association of food banks) wanted to be able to put out-of-date food on their shelves. They were prevented from doing this by law because of the public health food standards. However, not long after, an act was introduced called the Donation of Food Act which ended liability for the donators for out-dated food products. Dieticians objected to this act. So did Bev.

A provincial hearing was called to look into the matter. At the hearing Bev brought up the fact that people going to a food bank would lose the right to good public health food inspection if the bill was passed. But nothing was ever done about Bev's comments at the hearing. The hearing also ignored the warnings of the Newfoundland Dieticians' Association. This bill lowered the legal public health standards for poor people. Despite having this hearing, the prejudiced law passed in December, 1999.

Us and Them

Newfoundland is often seen as a dependent province. Jim Stanford is an economist who doesn't see it that way. Bev heard him talk one evening. "He said that if Newfoundland separated from Canada then Canada would go into a recession. Boy, that made me perk up my ears." Perhaps it is more like we are funding them. It is our natural resources that are going to Canada. The whole Atlantic area is seen as dependent yet we, along with British Columbia, are the resource provinces.

Bev understands it this way: "If you work in a resource industry such as fishing or logging you are not going to be employed all year round. Unless you are in Catalina with a deep freeze plant," she says. Bev believes we need economists like Jim Stanford to point out how dependent Canada is on Newfoundland's resources.

Home and Abroad

"Twenty years ago I started looking at the issues behind the war in El Salvador," says Bev. "I was very concerned about the war the government was waging there with the help from the United States. I wanted to promote the end of military conflict." She felt that war costs money that should be spent on basic human rights such as clean water and access to education. So Bev started gathering information about human rights struggles going on around the world. She sees this as her start in working to promote non-military political and social solutions.

Turkey

The first country Bev went to when she became international secretary of the National Anti-Poverty Organization was Turkey. There was an international housing forum, "Habitat II," a United Nations event that took place in Turkey. While at the forum Bev volunteered to be a human rights observer for the Kurdish people. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without a homeland. They were prevented from participating in the United Nations summit. The local police arrested several Kurds because they do not want the Kurdish people to tell their stories of oppression. It was dangerous to be a human rights observer at the summit. A Kurdish witness at a human rights hearing was shot at the same hotel Bev went to. "Five of us agreed to be observers," says Bev. Their group was told to go to the hotel very early in the morning and to wait for the Kurdish people to arrive and tell their stories. If they didn't arrive the plan was to go get them. Bev and the other observers had to go through a metal detector at the hotel. They were watched closely. They were physically searched every day at the summit.

The stories that Bev heard from the Kurdish people were horrible. There were stories of torture and repression, bombing, arson, and robbery. The Kurds said they were constantly being bombed by Turkey. In fact, while Bev was there the government of Turkey bombed nine villages in three weeks. She learned that Canada sold Turkey F-16 planes that are being used in the war against the Kurds. When Bev returned to St. John's she spoke at the St. John's Peace Accord about what she saw and heard in Turkey.

Life in Africa

Bev went to Africa in 1999. She went with a network of labour unions and social justice groups from all over North and South America. Bev travelled around southern Africa to look at their government job strategies. She was sent by a network in Canada called Common Frontiers and her role was to

compare how job strategies worked in Africa, South America, and North America. One day her group drove for ten hours through very rural areas to a small village in order to meet with a group who wanted to develop their area. They met under a tree on a breezy afternoon. Four languages were spoken during the meeting, including one of Africa's "click languages." At this meeting Bev got a chance to see how repressed women there are. The women sat on the ground several feet behind the men. They did not speak. Later one of the women took Bev aside and told her how poorly women were treated in her area of the Republic of South Africa.

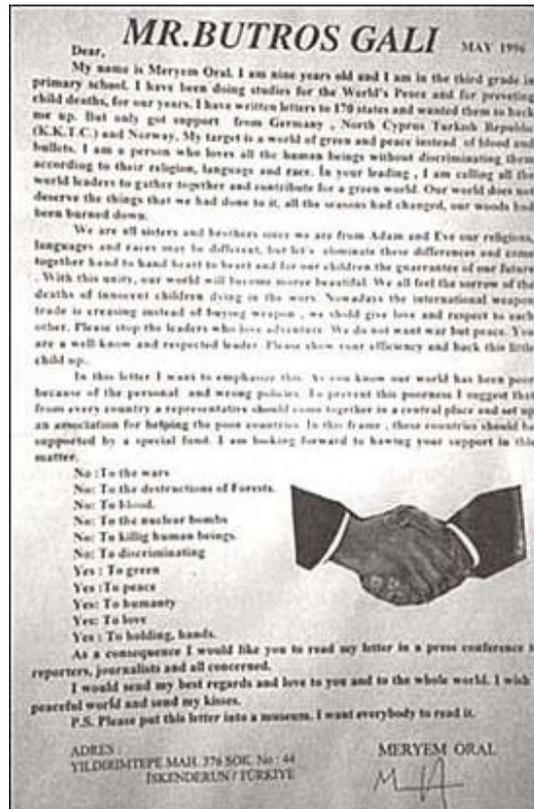


Photo: Bev Brown

Letter at the UN's Habitat II meeting in Istanbul, Turkey.

During her visit to southern Africa Bev got a chance to see that apartheid still exists there. Apartheid is a policy that was used for 46 years by the white government to keep black people from advancing in life. The housing situation is much worse for black people. Their houses are small and crowded together and often without electricity and run- fling water. She noticed that many blacks still lived separated from whites. The education blacks received was not as good as whites'. They had not been allowed to study math and science in the Republic of South Africa under apartheid, therefore many jobs have been out of their reach. But life is getting better since black leaders came to power. There is a huge effort to build good housing and they even have a universal school lunch program. Now all children can get a decent lunch regard- less of skin colour or their parents' income.

Chile

In 1998 Bev was asked to go to Chile for the People's Summit during a meeting of hemispheric leaders. They wanted to plan a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. This new agreement will be on stream around the year 2005. Bev went to Chile to talk about getting labour rights and human rights

into the trade agreement. Right now that isn't happening. Some of the world's worst sweatshops are in this hemisphere, and corporations make huge profits from this slave labour.



Later in 1999 her group met with 17 trade ministers from the countries affected. These ministers said that human rights have no place in trade. Bev's group wants human rights in trade agreements so that companies do not look for cheap labour.

Bev recognizes that many groups in Newfoundland and Labrador are also trying to put human and workers' rights into all the current and future Free Trade Agreements.

Is Bev Going to Retire?

Most of Bev's work is volunteer. She doesn't have much money but she wants some changes. "I want people to stop blaming themselves for not having work," she says. "Newfoundlanders work really hard at many things in order to stay alive. To be blamed for not having work is a total insult."

Bev doesn't believe that money makes a good person. She knows that if someone has a lot of money they are not better than she is. She isn't paid for a lot of her work but she doesn't see herself as a

sucker. She works for money when she can. When that work isn't there she plugs away for social justice.

"I'm on welfare. I don't have much money. My life isn't easy. Heck, I had to give up my chauffeur, my manicurist, my maids," she says with a loud laugh. You get the feeling Bev's humour keeps her going. That and the knowledge that the injustices are wrong. She wants to right the wrongs.

Retire?

"Hell no," she shouts. "I'll keep at this work. I'm hoping for a virtual Senate seat!"

Sources

The author conducted interviews with Bev Brown. Copies of the video *Closing the Gap* can be obtained by calling Oxfam at 709-753-2202

Bev Brown: Woman with an Attitude

Questions for Discussion

Introduction: Seeking and Speaking the Truth

1. How did Bev become international secretary for the National Anti-Poverty Organization?
2. Is Bev paid for this work?
3. Bev also works for a local group. Who are they and what do they do?

The Beginnings of an Activist

1. How did Bev get started as an activist?
2. What does Bev see as the biggest oppressor in Newfoundland?
3. Describe the two groups that Bev works with.

Why Bev Works for the Poor

1. Why does Bev work for the poor?
2. What does Bev want politicians to do?
3. Do you think Bev feels ashamed to be poor?

Welfare Gets a Bad Rap

1. Describe Bev's anti-poor-bashing workshop.
2. What is the common attitude about people on welfare?

Out of the Welfare Closet

1. How does Bev feel about being on welfare?
2. Why won't people hire Bev? Discuss this.

Government Policy

1. What was Bev's submission to the Canadian Human Rights Act Review?
2. What is "work-fare"?
3. What are the losses of human rights on "work-fare"?

Musical Jobs

1. What is Musical Jobs?
2. What did the students learn from this exercise?
3. What discussion came out of this exercise?

The Donation of Food Act

1. What is the Donation of Food Act?
2. Who, along with Bev, objected to this act?
3. What was the outcome of the provincial hearing?

Us and Them

1. Who is Jim Stanford? What did he say about Newfoundland?
2. What makes Canada dependent on the Atlantic Provinces?

Home and Abroad

1. What got Bev interested in working for oppressed people?
2. Discuss how Bev feels that poor people are treated as less than human.

Turkey

1. Why did Bev go to Turkey?
2. Why was Bev in danger in Turkey?
3. How are the Kurdish people treated in Turkey?

Life in Africa

1. Why did Bev go to Africa?
2. What is the situation with women in Africa?
3. What is apartheid? Does it still exist in Africa?

Chile

1. Why did Bev go to Chile?
2. How did Bev have problems with her work in Chile?
3. What response did Bev get from the ministers on human rights?
4. What does Bev see as the big anti-poverty struggle?

Is Bev Going to Retire?

1. What is Bev's mission?
2. What is Bev's political philosophy? Discuss this.

**Myrtle Blandford:
Pushed into the Lead**
Robin McGrath



Word List

Inuit: The Aboriginal people of Northern Canada and the circumpolar world.

Culture: The way of life of a group of people, including their religion, language, customs, traditions, art, dress, music, and literature.

Inuk: One person of the Inuit race.

Inuktitut: The language of the Inuit.

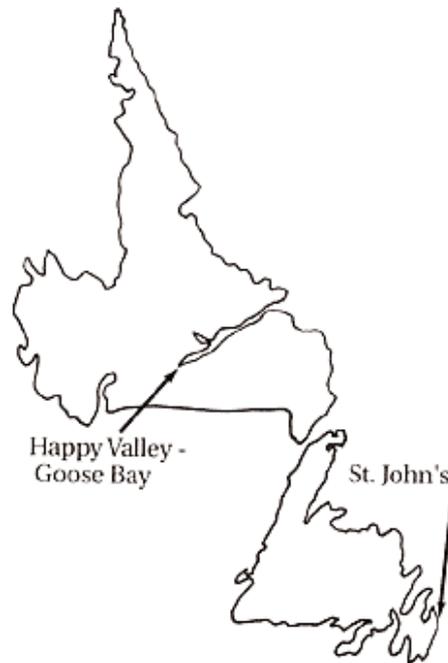
Urban: Living in or situated in a town or city.

Hostel: A residence or living quarters for students or other special group.

First Peoples: The Aboriginal or native people of a geographic area.

Feasibility study: An examination of a project to see if it is affordable, practical, and possible.

Stigma: A mark or sign of disgrace.



Introduction

When most people think about Aboriginals in Newfoundland, they think of the Innu and Inuit of Labrador and the Mi'kmaq of the south and west coast. However, many Aboriginal people now live in St. John's, and each year hundreds more come to the capital city to attend school, go to hospital, appear in court, or just to live. Sometimes these Newfoundlanders and Labradorians don't speak English. Sometimes they are elderly or very young. Sometimes they are sick or afraid or troubled or just plain lonely. When this is the case, they usually turn for help and support to the St. John's Native Friendship Centre. The person who runs the Native Friendship Centre is Myrtle Blandford. This is her story.

The Early Years

Myrtle Blandford is a true Labradorian, the daughter of Inuit parents from the Labrador Coast. Myrtle's mother came from Tessialuk, near Cape Harrison, and her father came from Big Brook, now called Michael's River, north of Rigolet. Most of Myrtle's 12 sisters and brothers were born on the coast. In 1940, the Tooktoshina family moved south into Hamilton Inlet. Myrtle was born on Birch Island, in Happy Valley. Myrtle's five youngest brothers were born in Happy Valley- Goose Bay also.

Myrtle's father worked for the town of Happy Valley. He was usually able to take time off in the summer, so he would go north to fish. The Tooktoshina family liked Happy Valley, but each summer they would still return home to the coast to fish, pick berries, visit family, and renew their relationship with the country. Myrtle's mother always took this opportunity to pick grass which she used to make baskets. It was a good life that combined the freedom of a fishing life with the security of a paid job.

Myrtle came from a strict and religious family. Myrtle's mother was a churchgoer and still is to this day. Myrtle's father was a very quiet man but he expected the children to obey him. Myrtle had her own opinions, and usually persuaded him to let her do what she wanted. Myrtle's father knew she was a strong person. He saw her pushing against authority when she was young, and he tried to channel that.



Photo: Tooktoshina family collection

As a girl, Myrtle enjoyed living in Happy Valley, but as soon as she was old enough to travel, she spent her summers with her aunt in St. John's.

As Myrtle got older, she became interested in travelling south. When she was in her early teens she began to spend her summers with her aunt who lived in St. John's. She quickly got used to the city and was never short of friends. She travelled all over the city with her five cousins. Myrtle did not feel out of place in St. John's even though there were not very many native people there. She liked living in the south. When Myrtle was 15, she dropped out of school and moved to St. John's for good. Almost all of Myrtle's brothers and sisters finished school, but she was bored by it. Her father was very unhappy about her decision. Even after she left school and moved away from Labrador, her father used to ask her when she was going to come home and do something for her people.

Life as a Single Parent

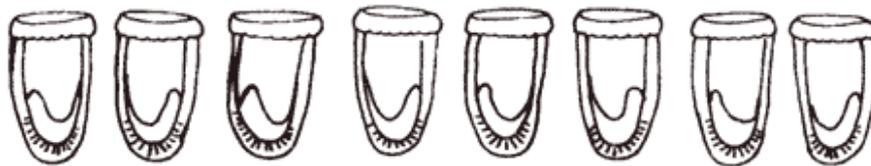
When Myrtle married she moved to Wabush. She stayed in Wabush for 11 years. During that time she had two children and worked for Dominion Stores. Myrtle didn't mind living in Labrador City but when her marriage ended, she moved back to St. John's. Myrtle liked living in the city. She was comfortable taking buses and going to mails and meeting new people. St. John's was home for her.

When Myrtle moved back to St. John's for good in 1980, she met a lot of friends from Labrador who had trouble adjusting to life in the city. She met a lot of people who were not used to city life the way she was. In St. John's, she knew she was Inuit but she did not feel different or lonely. However, Myrtle soon realized that this was not the way everyone experienced the city. Although Happy Valley might have seemed small and isolated to someone from Toronto, Myrtle had never lived in a really small community; and had no experience of isolation. Lots of Aboriginal people in St. John's came

from very tiny communities and found it hard to stay in the city to receive the medical treatment or education they came for. Unlike Myrtle, they experienced prejudice in St. John's.

Myrtle says it was her kids who made her aware of her native culture. When her daughter Lisa and her son Neil were very small, they began to go to Labrador in the summer to visit her parents. Myrtle struggled against this, just as her father had, because she missed them. Before long, Lisa and Neil knew more about the Inuit culture that Myrtle did. Myrtle had lived as an Inuk, but she hadn't thought about it. She didn't try to learn Inuktitut, the Inuit language, and she wasn't curious about the Inuit lifestyle. Myrtle's children were the ones who wanted to know more. They insisted on going to Labrador. Their grandmother in St. John's, Mrs. Blandford, encouraged them. She was the one who first took them to the North Coast of Labrador. Neil and Lisa visited Nain before Myrtle had even been there. Like their grandfather Tooktoshina, Neil and Lisa encouraged Myrtle to work with Aboriginal people.

At the age of 38, Myrtle realized it was time to go back to school. She was tired of moving boxes around all day, and without an education that was what her future held. It took her only three months to get her high school certificate. After that she went on to do an office management program. Myrtle attended school at Seal Cove, in Conception Bay South, and she and the children lived in Upper Gullies. She didn't like living outside of St. John's, but in Conception Bay South she could afford housing for her children and she was able to walk to school. She was willing to do whatever was necessary in order to get her qualifications. She wanted to work with Aboriginal people and to do that she trained in business management. When she was qualifying, she did a work term at the St. John's Native Friendship Centre. She decided then that this was where she wanted to work, so she applied for a job. It took time but eventually she got a job.



The Friendship Centre

The St. John's Native Friendship Centre was established in 1983. It is one of 114 Friendship Centres in Canada. The Friendship Centres work to help Aboriginal people in urban areas when they need housing or employment. When Aboriginal people come to St. John's to live or receive medical services, they go for help to the St. John's Native Friendship Centre. If they need interpreters, transportation, information, or emotional support, the people at the Friendship Centre do whatever they can to fill that need. A lot of the people who work at the Friendship Centre are volunteers, but a few core workers have full-time or part-time paid positions. By working as a volunteer, Myrtle was able to establish herself as a reliable, capable employee and eventually she applied for and won the top position.

As the head of the St. John's Native Friendship Centre, Myrtle has to do a lot of different jobs. She also has to organize other workers. If Aboriginal people come down from Labrador to go to hospital, she sees that they have a ride from the airport. If they don't speak English, she and her staff have to find someone to translate for them. When people are in jail or in a correctional facility; or if they have to go to court, Myrtle sees that they have visitors who understand their problems, who can talk to them and speak to court workers on their behalf. The staff at the Friendship Centre help arrange cultural programs such as healing circles, drum dances, and potlucks featuring traditional Aboriginal food. Myrtle sets up economic and educational development programs, and she is a founder of the Urban Aboriginal Women's Association.



Photo: J. Joy

Myrtle is never off the job, but no matter how busy she is she always finds time to interact with others

Sometimes the work is very personal and very hard. If an Aboriginal person dies in St. John's, Myrtle contacts the family, arranges for the remains to be brought home for burial, and calls on people in the community to help the grieving friends and relatives. She also has to train students and volunteers to do this work. She is never off the job. Myrtle says she has seen a lot of tragedy in her job — too much tragedy — but she still loves her work. In good times and bad, Myrtle had the support of her family. Through the St. John's Native Friendship Centre, Myrtle tries to offer the same kind of support to others. She loves the interaction with others, the supportive atmosphere, and the informality that drew her to the Centre in the first place. No matter how busy she is, she makes time to sit and talk to people, to get to know them.



An important goal of the St. John's Native friendship Centre is education. While doing presentations in schools, Myrtle realized that the majority of teachers didn't know anything about Aboriginal people in the province. Some were aware of Inuit in Labrador, but they had no idea about the other Aboriginal groups or the diversity of their cultures. Myrtle felt one way to educate people was to introduce them to Aboriginal people through Aboriginal art.

An important goal of the St. John's Native friendship Centre is education. While doing presentations in schools, Myrtle realized that the majority of teachers didn't know anything about Aboriginal people in the province. Some were aware of Inuit in Labrador, but they had no idea about the other Aboriginal groups or the diversity of their cultures. Myrtle felt one way to educate people was to introduce them to Aboriginal people through Aboriginal art.

Myrtle laughs when asked if she is an artist or craftsperson. She says she can't sew a button on a shirt. All Myrtle's relatives are craftspeople. They can make anything. When Myrtle's son Neil was a little boy, he used to draw pictures. He always had a pencil in his hand. Myrtle took him to painting classes and tried to encourage him. She was amazed by what he could do. Myrtle has never made anything in her life. Maybe that is why she admires people who can create things. She has great respect for people who can work with their hands and their eyes. She says art is a way for Aboriginal people to share and celebrate the most meaningful aspects of their culture. She believes Aboriginal art is a prayer of thanksgiving and hope.



Photo: J. Joy

Myrtle can't sew on a button, but she comes from a family of craftspersons and artists. Mrs. Tooktoshinas basketwork is featured in the FIRST exhibition catalogue

One of the many things Myrtle has to do at the Native Friendship Centre is raise money. There are always too many things that need doing and not enough money. For example, Myrtle thought a hostel for Aboriginal people in St. John's would be a good idea, but even to begin such a project would take money. Myrtle thought that a good way to raise some money would be to produce a little pamphlet on Newfoundland and Labrador's Aboriginal artists. Myrtle thought a book about art would help to promote understanding of Aboriginal cultures and understanding among Aboriginal groups. It was only going to be a little project. She thought there was only enough interest for a small book. Before long, Myrtle got a big surprise. It turned out that lots of people were as interested as Myrtle was in Aboriginal art. There were also more Aboriginal artists and craftspeople in Newfoundland and Labrador than anyone realized. Almost a hundred artists asked to be included in the book.

What began as a small project grew bigger and bigger. Myrtle started to raise money for the book by writing to big corporations like Hibernia and Voisey's Bay Nickel. She contacted art gallery owners, photographers, and editors. The artists were Metis, Inuit, Innu, Mi'Kmaq, and even Mohawk. They were carvers, doll makers, painters, jewellers, embroiderers, and mat makers. Myrtle's mother, Elizabeth Tooktoshina, was one of the basket makers chosen for the exhibit. Some of the artists didn't speak English, so their words had to be translated from different languages and dialects. It was a huge job.



Before long, Myrtle decided that the project should not just be a book, but it should be an exhibition as well. She had to raise more money and create a selection committee. All the work and all the artists had to be photographed. Work had to be chosen so that only the best would be included. Myrtle wanted to make sure that the exhibition travelled outside St. John's, so everything had to be crated for shipping and space had to be booked. Months went by and there was always more work to do. In the end, it took several years of work by amateurs and professionals, paid staff and volunteers, artists and craftspeople, before the exhibition was ready.

One of the last things Myrtle had to do before the work was ready for the public was to come up with a name. She lost a lot of sleep trying to think what to call the book and exhibition. In the end, it

turned out to be easy. FIRST! This was the first exhibition of work by all the different First Peoples in the province, so that is the name Myrtle used.

In partnership with the Christina Parker Gallery the Native Friendship Centre published a big, beautiful 150-page book with full colour on every page, and with artists' statements in English, Mi'Kmaq, Inuktitut, and Innu-aimun. The FIRST project helped to improve relations between all the different groups of Aboriginal people, and it also brought Labrador and the island of Newfoundland closer together. Even though Myrtle couldn't sew on a button, she was able to create one of the most important contributions to art in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Plans for the Future

Myrtle began the FIRST project because she felt there was a need for a hostel Aboriginal people could call their own. Although FIRST turned into a major project itself, she hasn't forgotten her initial goal. According to Myrtle, every year over 2,300 Aboriginal people from other parts of the province, especially Labrador, come to St. John's for medical services. For many Aboriginal people, St. John's seems isolated. St. John's seems like the outpost. When Aboriginal people visit the city they have to stay in hostels run by hospitals, churches, and businesses. The people who run the hostels do not speak the languages or understand the cultures of their clients. The food provided is not always agreeable. Visitors are often lonely and confused.

The need for a hostel for Aboriginal people was first identified in 1982, but at the time there were other priorities that also needed attention so nothing was done about it. In 1989, the Board of Directors of the Native Friendship Centre raised the issue again, and in 1991, Myrtle took the project on. Myrtle wants to establish a ten-bed hostel for Aboriginal people where they could have access to interpreters, country food, and familiar surroundings. A feasibility study has concluded that the hostel could pay for itself and employ seven to ten full-time and part-time people.

Recently Myrtle has moved closer to her goal of founding a hostel. When Myrtle's father was diagnosed with cancer and had to come to St. John's for treatment, Myrtle spent a lot of time at the hospital. Since then she has worked harder than ever. These days Myrtle is busy fundraising and the project is slowly moving ahead. She thinks that within a year, the Native Friendship Centre will be able to open the doors to the hostel so that people like her father will have somewhere to go when they come to the city .

It seems as if Myrtle never thinks about anything but the Native Friendship Centre, but when Myrtle is asked if she has any personal goals, she is quick to answer. She wants to write a book for single parents. Even though her children are grown up, Myrtle has never forgotten the stigma attached to being a single mother. She says she quickly learned that doctors and teachers and other people have no respect for single parents. Working as a volunteer in her children's school, she saw that the children of single parents are treated differently. She always bought her children's school textbooks because children who had their books paid for by social assistance were treated as inferiors by teachers and other students. She feels that many single parents are abused by the system, by society and even by their own children. They are made to feel guilty and helpless. Myrtle believes that if she wrote a book about her experiences and those of other single parents, it might remove some of this stigma.

Life Today

Now that her children are grown up, Myrtle is able to look back and see how they changed her. When her children were small, they were her first and only priority. She did not have time for relationships or for anything but raising them. Bit by bit they led her into other areas. Lisa and Neil taught Myrtle a lot about her own Aboriginal culture, and led her to explore other Aboriginal cultures as well. Myrtle has spent more time in Labrador since she went to work for the St. John's Native Friendship Centre than she did in the previous 20 years. She has developed a knowledge of art. She has learned a little



Photo: Tooktoshina family collection

Lisa and Neil pushed their mother into learning about her culture. One day, Myrtle hopes to write a book about being a single parent.

Inuktitut. She has gotten more involved in her culture. Today, Lisa is following her mother for once. Like Myrtle, Lisa finished a business management program and is now working part-time at the Native Friendship Centre. It is hard to know which one of them is more proud of the other. One thing seems sure: Myrtle finally showed her father that she didn't have to come home to do something for her people.



Sources

The writer first met Myrtle Blandford when a student from Labrador died suddenly in St. John's. Myrtle arranged for an informal service at a funeral home before the girl was taken back to Labrador. It was a very emotional time for everyone. Then, when the FIRST exhibition opened, Robin went to see the art and bought the book. Through these two events, Robin saw the importance of the work that Myrtle does, so she went to interview Myrtle at the Friendship Centre. It took quite a while to get an appointment as Myrtle is always busy. During the interview, they had to close the doors and turn the phone off because so many people wanted to see Myrtle. If you would like to see *FIRST*, the book about Myrtle's Aboriginal art exhibit, there is a copy in almost every school and library in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Myrtle Blandford: Pushed into the Lead

Questions for Discussion

Introduction

1. What Aboriginal groups live in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador?
2. Why do some Aboriginal people come to St. John's?
3. What problems do Aboriginal people encounter when they visit St. John's?
4. What is Myrtle Blandford's job?

The Early Years

1. Where do Myrtle's parents come from?
2. When did Myrtle's family move to the Happy Valley-Goose Bay area?
3. What did Myrtle's family do when they visited coastal Labrador?
4. How did Myrtle feel about visiting St. John's when she was a teenager?
5. Why did Myrtle drop out of school?

Life as a Single Parent

1. What job did Myrtle have in Wabush?
2. Why do people from Aboriginal communities find it hard to live in St. John's?
3. Who got Myrtle interested in the Inuit culture?
4. Why did Myrtle go back to school?

The Friendship Centre

1. What services does the Native Friendship Centre provide?
2. What are three things Myrtle does in her job?
3. What part of her job does Myrtle find hard?

The FIRST Art Exhibit

1. Why did Myrtle begin the FIRST project?
2. How many artists applied to be included in the FIRST art exhibit?
3. What Aboriginal groups were included in the FIRST art exhibit?
4. What were three things that had to be done to prepare for the FIRST art exhibit?
5. Do you think the FIRST art exhibit was a success? In what ways?

Plans for the Future

1. How many Aboriginal people visit St. John's every year?
2. Why does Myrtle think a hostel is necessary for Aboriginal people in St. John's?
3. What personal event affected Myrtle's attitude towards the building of a hostel?
4. What would Myrtle like to write a book about?

Life Today

1. Who does Myrtle credit with educating her about Aboriginal culture?
2. What is the name of the Inuit language?
3. In what way has Myrtle satisfied her father's ambition for her?

Brother Jim McSheffrey 1945-1999: A Modest Leader Paul Butler

Word List

Jesuits: A group of religious people; a religious order also known as "The Society of Jesus."

Jesuit brother: A man who is a member of the Jesuits but not a priest.

Community: A neighbourhood, a group of streets where the people have something in common like a community centre, a shop, or a sense of belonging.

MacMorran Community: A neighbourhood in St. John's which includes Brophy Place, Hunts Lane, and Kelly Street.

Capitalism: A system based on money and profit-making.

Introduction: A Vocation

Some people have a vocation, or a "calling in life." For these people, work is not separate from pleasure. You could say someone with a vocation lives for their work.

A vocation is more than a nine-to-five job. It means that your life is devoted to something. A vocation does not have to be a certain type of job. It could be teaching, playing music, writing, carpentry pottery painting; there is almost no limit to the kinds of things it could be. Brother Jim McSheffrey's vocation was to live among people on low income and help them create a sense of community.

A Crowded Funeral Service

At a Funeral Mass on October 27, 1999, St. Pius X Church in St. John's was packed with 1,200 people. No one had ever seen the place so crowded. The church parking lot was full. The roads around the church were lined with more parked cars. Inside, extra seats had to be found. But still there was not enough room for everybody. In the end, many people had to stand at the back and crowd around the entrances to watch the service.

The man who had died was not a politician or a wealthy businessperson as you might expect from the crowds. This was the funeral of a modest, hardworking Jesuit brother, Jim McSheffrey.

At the funeral, I remember thinking, "How could someone know so many people?" Some of Jim's friends were Christian, like him. But some were not Christian. Jim McSheffrey had friends who were Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, and Jewish. He also had friends who were not religious at all, and did not even believe in God. And yet they got on fine with Brother Jim. People felt relaxed with Jim because he did not judge other people. He did not try to convert them either. Brother Jim respected the fact that people had different views about religion. Jim was happy to talk about his faith, but only if you asked him.

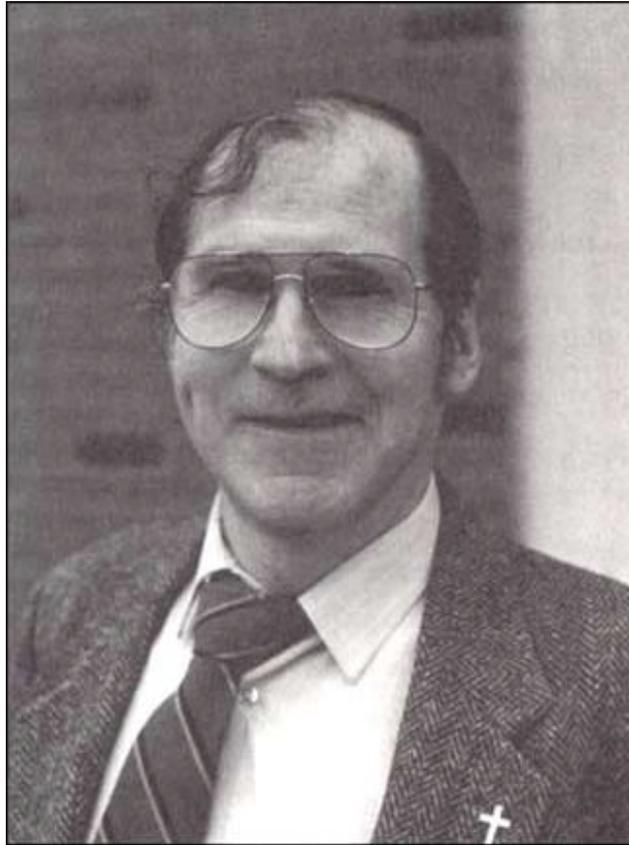


Photo: Mike Reid

Brother Jim McSheffrey

A Working Week

After the funeral, everyone crowded into the church hall. They wanted to talk about Brother Jim over tea and coffee. People marvelled at how much work he did. No one knew how he managed to fit it all in. Most people start work at nine in the morning and end at five in the evening. With Jim, life was more complicated than that. He lived on Brophy Place in the middle of the MacMorran Community. This is a low-income neighbourhood. Unemployment and poverty are very high. Jim believed his duty was to live among the people who needed him most. Only then could he really help.

His house in Brophy Place was open for visitors at all times. If someone had a problem, they could visit Brother Jim. Often this would be late at night. If a person needed to get to hospital, Brother Jim would give them a ride. Working hours never really stopped for Jim.

He called his home an "outreach house" for the whole community. It was always very busy in his house. Meetings were held there. The food bank and second-hand clothing space were in his basement. Children would often come and ask for doughnuts which Jim kept in his freezer. Jim would always give the children doughnuts. But first he would get them to work for it. He would ask them to fill a shopping bag with the litter from the streets. Jim hoped this would help young people build a better life for themselves and their community. He liked to help people. But he realized they also needed to learn independence.

The Two Feet of Christianity: Charity and Justice

Jim often said that to walk the road of Christianity you need two feet. One is charity The other is justice.

Jim was a charitable man himself. He worked hard collecting clothing, beds, tables, and chairs for the poor. Sometimes Jim's friends would keep things they didn't need and call him to pick them up. Within days, Jim would visit with his car and trailer. He would take the old furniture, clothes, or whatever else away. He would already know someone who needed these things.

Jim believed that many useful items are thrown out: clothes, furniture, televisions, and radios. He felt nothing that could be repaired should ever be thrown out. He knew there would be someone who needed it.

This was not just charity. Brother Jim saw poverty as a great injustice in the world. That is why he tried to find ways for people to live well without money.

Jim did not believe in capitalism. Capitalism is a system in which money is the most important thing. Canada is a capitalist society Businesses like shops, banks, and manufacturers in Canada sell goods and services at the highest price they can. They hire people to work for them often paying the least amount in wages they can get away with. It is all about making the largest profit, the greatest amount of money for the business. People, particularly poor people, are often left out in the cold. Jim saw this whole system as unjust. He looked for ways of getting around it.

Sharing things like clothes and furniture was a way of not buying into this system. It was a way of getting justice for poor people.

And Jim himself always wore second-hand clothes and never bought new furniture for his own house. He set a good example for the lifestyle he believed in. This was a type of political action. He opted out of the capitalist system and he encouraged other people to do the same. He believed it gave people power and independence.

So Jim's charity work was linked with justice. And he worked for justice in other ways as well. For instance, he often criticized decision-makers, the Government, and politicians. If someone was hungry Jim would gladly feed him or her. But, at the same time, he would be angry that our Government allowed that person to be hungry in the first place.

There are many groups of people in St. John's protesting against poverty For instance, there is the Coalition for Equality. The Coalition for Equality meets every month or so. They work out how to protest against Government decisions that hurt poor people. Brother Jim was a member of the Coalition for Equality He went to these meetings. This group would often write to the newspaper about an issue affecting poor people. Sometimes they would write to the Government. They hoped the Government would do more to help poor people.

Brother Jim felt that Canada was a rich country. He believed there was no need for anyone to be at the mercy of charity.

The Power of Sharing: Community Garden

One of Jim's most important goals each year was the community garden. This is something he organized with friends and neighbours in the MacMorran Community.

The idea of the community garden was this: People would give their time and work, perhaps a few hours a week. They would help with the digging, planting, and weeding. They would do this work through spring and summer. Then, when the harvest came, the vegetables would be shared out among everyone who had helped.

Jim felt that growing food really helped people on low income. It didn't cost very much, only the price of the seeds. And it gave people a sense of power and independence. They could eat well without buying food. And they could feel the earth was taking care of them. It was also another way of opting out of the capitalist system. People were working, but not for a boss. They were working for themselves and each other.

There were other good things about the community garden as well. Working together, people often became closer to each other. They would work out how to solve problems and differences. They would enjoy the sharing of work.

He was also proud they never used chemicals to kill insects. This kind of farming is called organic farming. Brother Jim was convinced organic farming is better for the environment.

Leadership and Protest

In May 1996, the Department of Education — the part of Government that looks after schooling — made a decision that made Brother Jim angry. Up until this time, the Department had provided free school buses for the children of the MacMorran community to their school, Pius X, two miles away. (Most families living in this community did not own cars.) Now the Department of Education decided to stop free school buses in areas served by Metrobus. As a Metrobus ran close to the MacMorran community, the MacMorran community's free school bus was to be stopped. From now on, the parents had two choices. They could either put their children on the Metrobus, or the children could walk the two miles to school.

A Metrobus pass for one child is \$25 per month. Since some of the parents in the MacMorran community had three or four children, very few parents could afford to send their children to school by Metrobus.

Brother Jim thought the parents should try to stop the Government from taking their free buses away. He spent a lot of the summer organizing meetings. He knocked on a lot of doors, rounding up people in the neighbourhood. Brother Jim wanted to get everyone in the community together so they could plan what they were going to do. Jim did not tell anyone what to do. His style at meetings was to ask questions, not to make suggestions. He wanted people to think of solutions themselves.

This is what his close friend and next door neighbour, Keith Davis, says about Brother Jim's way of helping people: "Brother Jim worked hard getting people to attend the meetings about the school buses. But he didn't want to be front and centre. He wanted the parents to do that. He wanted the parents themselves to take leadership. He believed in empowering people. "

To "empower" means to help people feel a sense of independence. Jim tried to encourage people to fight their own battles. If people can work a problem out for themselves, Jim believed, they can make their community stronger.

The Final Day of Protest: Direct Action

All through that summer, meetings took place in the community. Parents sent letters to politicians. They protested at Confederation Building too. They marched and chanted, trying to get the Government to change its mind. Some parents said they would keep their children away from school

as a protest if their free school buses were stopped. Feelings were running very high and people were very upset.

In July 1996, 200 people marched on Confederation Building. All of these angry parents got inside the lobby of Confederation Building. A line of police and security guards stood on the stairs that led up to the Government offices. The protestors wanted to talk to Roger Grimes, the Minister of Education. Minister Grimes had the power to give them their school busing back. But he refused to come and talk to the protestors.

But then one of the protestors managed to get past the police and guards. He made his way upstairs to the office of Roger Grimes. Some of the other parents followed, finding a way up. Some used the elevator. Others found different routes. Before long there were enough people to force a meeting with Minister Grimes.

At last, Roger Grimes agreed that the parents could keep their buses. But they would no longer be free. The parents would have to pay a monthly fee. Roger Grimes promised the fee would be less than the price of the Metro bus.

Meanwhile, radio and newspaper reporters were downstairs in the lobby. They sensed there was a story. Brother Jim told a radio interviewer that the government was "trying to save money on the backs of poor people." He said that the government should look elsewhere if it wanted to save money. It should let Brophy Place keep its school buses.

The Result of the Protest

The parents of the MacMorran Community did not get everything they wanted. They still had to pay for their children to get to school.

These are the fees they had to pay:

- For one child — \$10 per month
- For two children — \$20 per month
- For three or more children — \$25 per month

But this was better for the parents than the Government's original plan. These fees were only a third of what it would have cost them to send their children to school by Metrobus. Jim knew the parents had done the right thing by speaking out.

Jim's Work as an Activist

An activist is someone who feels so strongly about a cause, they will take political action. An example of political action is what happened on the last day of the protest at Confederation Building. It means defying rules that are laid down by authority. It might mean refusing to move away from a Government office. The authority can be political leaders, church leaders, or the police. The cause can be many things. In Brother Jim's case, the cause was most often the rights of poor people. Not all Jesuits are activists. But Brother Jim was an activist. He believed in breaking the rules if he felt the rules were wrong.

Jim knew that authority was very often in the wrong. He had a poster on his kitchen wall. There was a picture of Jesus and a list of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter. These eight people were murdered in El Salvador, Central America, in 1989. They were murdered by their own Government because they wanted justice for the poor people of their country. Jim wanted to remember the bravery of these people.

There is a quote on the poster too. It is from one of the priests who was murdered. This is what it says: "Christians and all those who hate injustice must fight it with every ounce of their strength. They must work for a new world in which greed and selfishness will finally be overcome."

To Jim, this was a lesson. It told him that Christians must be brave and speak out whatever the cost. The cost in Newfoundland is not as great as it is in El Salvador, of course. But there still is a cost. Jim often disagreed with his own church leaders. He wanted them to speak out against injustice more than they did. When a person disagrees with their bosses, as Jim did, they are taking quite a risk. They are making life harder for themselves.

The Politics of Faith: Prayer and Action

Brother Jim had a very deep faith. He once said he was not working alone. He believed he was working with God.

Once a year, Jim would go on a retreat. He would go away from the city and stay in a cabin in the woods for ten days. He said that being in nature helped him to keep in touch with God. During his retreat he would chop wood, walk and read. Jim loved doing this in the winter when snow and frost was on the ground. At this time of year, everything is very still. He found it easy to read and pray. When he came back to St. John's after one of these retreats, Jim always looked refreshed and happy. It seemed like he was ten years younger.

Some people think that prayer is a private thing, locked away from other aspects of life. They believe that their spiritual life is separate from work, politics or relationships with other people. Jim did not feel like this. In fact, he often said that "prayer" and "action" could be the same thing.

Jim believed that a prayer was inviting a person into your home or giving a person a gift. These things are prayers, Jim said, because God is within everybody. A kind act to a person is a prayer to God. A political protest can also be a prayer. A person protests because they care for other people, for the injustice they suffer.

Jim was always bringing people gifts. He would often bring his friends potatoes, turnips, and cabbage from his community garden. And it didn't matter whether they lived in his community or not. Vegetables from the community garden were his favourite kind of gift. He loved to share the harvest. It had great meaning for him.

This is one of my own personal favourite memories of Brother Jim. During fall, I would sometimes come home to find a turnip in a plastic bag tied to the mailbox. I would know straightaway this was from Jim.

Being in nature was a prayer for Brother Jim too, especially working on his community garden. He liked to take care of the earth. This is why he believed so much in organic farming. Fruit and vegetables in shops are usually non-organic. That means chemicals have been used on them. This is bad for the soil and rivers. Jim was proud that he never used chemicals on the soil.

Jim died in October 1999 when he fell from a cliff while picking berries. Picking berries was one of his favourite things. For many, it seemed right that he had died doing something he loved. Not that it made people any less sad or shocked that he was dead. It didn't. But it did make them think about how he spent his last hours on earth.

Many of his friends could remember times when Jim gave them berries he had picked as a gift. They remembered that picking berries was another way of harvesting food that was friendly to the earth. To Jim, picking berries was a prayer. It was an act of caring for other people and for nature. This is why it seemed right. People knew that when Jim was picking berries, he felt very close to God.



Photo: Mike Reid

Brother Jim after a hard day's berry picking.

Sources

The sources of this essay include my own memories of Brother Jim and the many conversations I have had with his friends during and after his life. Keith Davis helped me with details about the school bus protests and Brother Jim's role in the community.

Brother Jim McSheffrey 1945-1999: A Modest Leader

Questions for Discussion

Introduction: A vocation

1. What is a vocation?

A Crowded Funeral Service

1. How many people were in the church at Brother Jim's funeral service?
2. Can you think of one reason why there were so many people?

A Working Week

1. What did Jim call his home?
2. What kind of things did he do for people?

The Two Feet of Christianity: Charity and Justice

1. Why did Jim not like to throw things out that could be repaired?
2. How did Jim set a good example?

The Power of Sharing: Community Garden

1. What were people more dependent on before the community garden, and how did the community garden give them some sense of independence?
2. What is organic farming?

Leadership and Protest

1. What Government decision made Jim angry?
2. Why did he not want to be "front and centre" at the protests?

The Final Day of Protest: Direct Action

1. How did the protestors get to talk to Roger Grimes?

The Result of the Protest

1. Do you think the protest was completely successful?

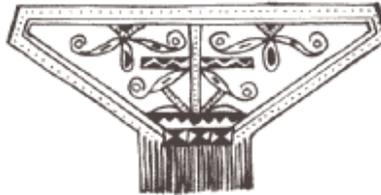
Jim's Work as an Activist

1. Why is it hard being an activist?

The Politics of Faith: Prayer and Action

1. What did Brother Jim mean when he said he was not working alone?
2. What did Jim do on his retreats?
3. Why did he like picking berries?

**Christine Poker:
Finding Her Voice**
Robin McGrath



Word List

Mushua Innu: The Aboriginal people who live at Davis Inlet, Labrador.

Sweat lodge: A ritual steam bath used by some cultures for physical and emotional healing.

Innu Aimun: The language of the Mushua Innu people.

Natuashish: The new community at Shango Bay where the Davis Inlet people are relocating.



Photo: R. McGrath

Christine is a strong advocate for sobriety and traditional values. Life in Davis Inlet is often a struggle but she is hopeful for the future.

Introduction

When most people think of Davis Inlet, they think of tragedy, poverty and violence. International human rights groups have called Davis Inlet a national shame. Nobody thinks of poetry when they think of Davis Inlet. Nobody except Christine Poker. Christine Poker is a poet and video artist who lives and works in Davis Inlet. The first poem she ever published was called "Struggle for Freedom." This is the story of Christine Poker's own struggle for freedom. It is also the story of how that poem came to the attention of the world.

The Early Years

If you were to look at the serenity in Christine Poker's face after she has been to the sweat lodge, you would never guess that she had a troubled past. She looks beautiful. She looks sure of herself. She looks strong. Today, she is all of those things, but this was not always the case. When Christine was a little girl, she hated the way she looked. She hated being Innu. She wanted to be white because white people had everything. She used to visit the teachers at her school. She admired their clean houses and their beautiful clothes. She wanted to look like the teachers, and sometimes she would scrub her face and cut her hair to try to resemble them. This behaviour seems silly to her now, but when she was a child, she was deadly serious.

Christine was born in Northwest River, the second of eight children of Cecile and Tommy Rich. When she was little, Christine's family moved to Davis Inlet. Christine remembers living in a tent on the beach. She went to school, and was taught by nuns of the Presentation order. Sometimes she went into the country with her parents and missed a lot of school. She finished grade eight, but dropped out of school the following year without finishing grade nine. Life in her home was often difficult as her parents had begun drinking and her father often beat her mother. At 16, Christine began drinking also. Like many young people in Davis, sometimes she also sniffed gasoline to get high.

Today, Christine shakes her head in disbelief when she describes those years. Heavy drinking and physical abuse between men and women were what she saw at home, so she thought it was normal. She thought that if a woman stayed with a man who beat her, it was because she loved him. When Christine married and had children herself, the pattern repeated itself. Christine's husband Prote had his own pain to deal with. Both his parents had drowned when he was only 14. When Christine and Prote drank there was a lot of violence in their marriage.

Becoming a Writer

Christine is very blunt and direct about when she began writing. "When I sobered up," she says. She is equally direct when asked why she chooses to stay sober. "My kids," is her answer. One day, a friend who babysat her children confronted Christine. The friend told her that she was neglecting her children because she was drinking. Christine loved her children so much that, when she realized this was true, she stopped drinking. "It was hard," she admits. "I thought when I stopped drinking, everything would be okay." It wasn't.

A month after she stopped drinking, Christine still couldn't sleep. She cried a lot. She also thought about suicide. When she was drinking she was able to forget about things like the loss of her parents. Once she was sober, these memories all came back to her. Late one night, she was thinking about her father and she wrote her first poem. The poem was called "Sorrow." In the poem, Christine described her grief at her father's death, her loneliness, and her loss of faith. The poem ended with the hope she feels when she looks at her children. Writing the poem gave Christine some relief from the pain of her memories.

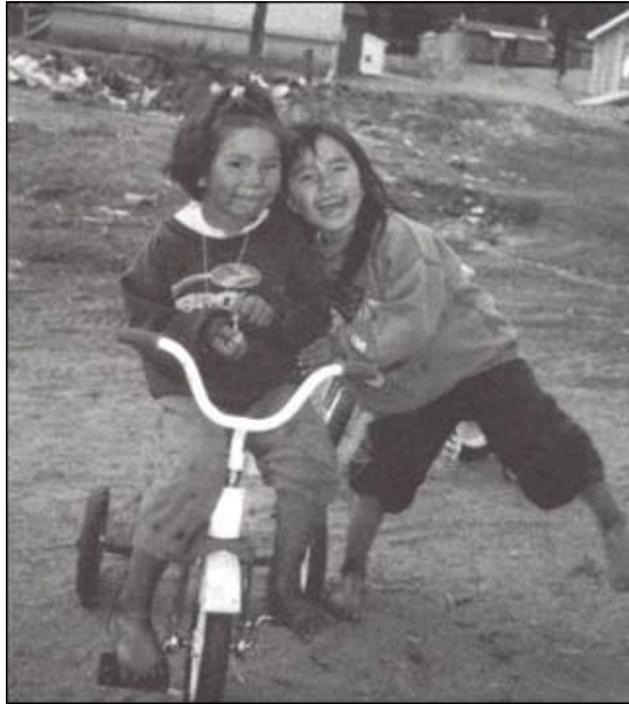


Photo: R. McGrath

*People in Davis Inlet love their children.
Social problems sometimes prevent them from caring for them,
but do not stop them loving them.*

Christine says that when she wrote this poem, it was the first time she had ever really prayed. That night, when she finally fell asleep, she dreamed that her father was in a safe, peaceful place. That was the last time she ever felt alone. "I hurt a lot of people when I was drinking," Christine says, "but I denied it. Then I realized that I was not going to heal if I didn't talk." Eventually, Christine's husband Prote stopped drinking also.

Finding a Career

Once Christine and Prote's six children were all in school, Christine and Prote decided it was time to go back to school also. They took the family to Goose Bay where they could do upgrading. When Prote decided to run for chief of the Band Council they returned to Davis Inlet, and Christine continued with Adult Basic Education. Shortly after their return, Christine's husband showed her an advertisement in the paper. The Innu Nation was looking for someone to interview elders. Christine says that she didn't even notice the salary; just that it was a chance to work with elders. She says it was an easy job because she loved doing it. Christine likes to sketch and paint and has a good eye for visual composition. She would go to visit old people in their houses and record them on videotape. They spoke to her in the Innu language and told her stories. They described how things were in the old days. They taught her about her culture.

Christine loved her job and began making videos of her own. Her first solo video, called "Innu Rock," was about Voisey's Bay. Her second video, "I'm Telling the Truth," was about the social situation in Davis Inlet. Her third video, which she is currently working on, is about youth. Christine found interviewing elders easy, but she finds interviewing youth hard. The new video is a profile of a young girl who sniffs gas. Christine finds it very painful to listen to this girl talk. "People don't see a child suffering," she explains. "They only see a child sniffing. It breaks my heart to listen to her."

Christine remembers her own youth as a gas sniffer, and she worries about the children in Davis Inlet. As Christine wrote in a poem, her parents had their "friend" in liquor, so she made gasoline her friend, but both these friends were very destructive. One time her son, who was ten years old, tried sniffing gas. She says she was so angry she was afraid to confront him about it. Instead she shared the problem with her husband, Prote. To her surprise, Prote didn't get angry. He just took the boy on his knees and kissed him. Christine watched and listened as Prote talked to the child. She learned from her husband how to help their child, and was soon able to trust her son again.

The People's Inquiry

On February 14th, 1992, people all over Canada were shocked to hear about the death of five children in a house fire in Davis Inlet, Labrador. When the Newfoundland government refused to hold an inquiry into the deaths of the children, the Mushua Innu people of Davis Inlet decided to hold their own inquiry. They looked at how problems such as alcohol and solvent abuse, poor housing, lack of self-government, and racism all contributed to the deaths of the children. After the inquiry was over, they decided to publish a book about it, titled *Gathering Voices*. Included in the book were artwork and testimony from Christine.

Christine's poetry was included in the book by accident. One day, Christine's sister asked her for a story she could read to a group of children who were visiting from Nain. Christine offered her a legend she had collected. She forgot about a poem that she had written in the same workbook. Christine's sister found the poem and showed it to the people who were working on *Gathering Voices*. They liked the poem and asked if they could include it. Christine says now that it was a real shock. She had never shared her poems with anyone before.

Christine's Poem

"Struggle For Freedom" is the first poem Christine Poker ever published. She wrote it about her husband, Prote, and his attempts to provide sober leadership for the Mushua Innu people. She thinks about the subject matter of her poems in her own language, Innu Aimun, but she writes them down in English. "English is less complicated," she says. Poems in English are usually much shorter than the same poems in Innu Aimun.



Taking The Lead

Working for Community

Struggle for Freedom

He sang and he cried,
the drum beating in his mind.
Yes, he cried...
for the things he had tried.
He knew it was a struggle,
to help his people when they are in trouble.
He knew he had to argue
with the person he hardly knew.
For freedom, he struggled.
With government, it was trouble.
The government men were sent.
He smiled at them and asked for land.
These people knew how to gamble.
They thought they could make him tremble.
He showed them a new sight,
while they only gave a sigh.
For he knew the time the time had come
for his people's freedom.

Christine Poker

Mashisheu shetshi Minuapanits

*Nikumu kie mau
Uteuenikea uetamauat umitinenishikinist
ehe, menat.
Eshi uitutak tshakuanu
shenitan tsheustapit
eshi uiuishat uitshinua eka minupinitshi
shenitam tshika eanikaeu
aenua eka shuka ssenima
Tshetshi minupit, tshika matshisheu
tsheutshimau, kakaminupinitat
tsheutshimau utinima petishaeu
ushinueu eku, etuenitamauat asinu
shenitamuts tapue eshi metuets
inenimeuts tshetshi shetshaats
uapatineu nete uaitutet
eku muk tshiam apissish petakushut
tshissentam shash ututshipinu utipeiken
tshetshi ui-unuitishinat utinim*

Kisitinis



Photo: R. McGrath

*There is almost no water on the island of Davis Inlet.
This small water tank is used to deliver a limited amount
to the sick and elderly.*

After *Gathering Voices* came out, people talked to Christine about her poem. They said how much they liked it. Christine says she felt good about this. She began to share her writing with others who had experienced problems similar to her own.

Like Christine's videos and artwork, her writing explores subjects such as leadership, self-government, and sobriety. She does not see herself as a political person, but in a community as small as Davis Inlet, everything becomes personal, even politics. She doesn't think this is always useful.

"If people don't agree with the way the chief runs things, they should say so," she explains. "The chief shouldn't think people hate him because they don't agree with him."

Life Today

Life today in Davis Inlet is still a daily struggle, but Christine is hopeful. Her marriage is good, she and her husband are sober, and they have five fine sons and a daughter. Recently, Christine and Prote adopted a seventh child, a baby whose mother is a gas sniffer. Christine does not get angry at this young woman. She remembers the pain that drove her towards the same "friend" many years ago.



Photo: R. McGrath

Christine has five fine sons and a daughter. She often cares for her granddaughter and has adopted a baby whose mother is a gas sniffer.

Christine is hoping things will be easier when the Mushua Innu move to the new community of Natuashish. Unlike most people in Davis Inlet who have to fetch water in buckets, Christine has running water in her house. Prote hooked it up around 1995. But they are still a family of nine people, living in three rooms. Christine and Prote sleep on the floor so that the children can have beds.

As Christine works on her new video, she plans what she will do next. She knows that problems with gas sniffing, alcohol, and family violence are universal. She hopes to produce an English language

version of her new video so that others can learn the lessons of Davis Inlet. She also hopes to make a full-length documentary film about the Mushua Innu, their She past, present and future. She wants to write a book of Innu legends, the wonderful stories she tells her children when they are in the country. She wants to document the relocation of the community to Natuashish in Shango Bay.

Today, after ten years of sobriety, Christine keeps a journal and writes poems as part of her ongoing process of healing. She doesn't try to hide the past. She tries to learn from it.

Despite her dreams, Christine is cautious about what she hopes for. She knows that the people of Davis Inlet won't solve all their problems by moving to Natuashish. As Christine testified in *Gathering Voices*, "We have already started a process of recovery and we should continue. But there is no guarantee that those problems will be eliminated." Until then, Christine Poker will keep writing.



Sources

The writer first met Christine Poker at a traditional Innu Gathering camp near Shango Bay. Christine was videotaping some of the meetings where people were planning the Davis Inlet community relocation. Later, Robin read Christine's poem "Struggle For Freedom," in *Gathering Voices*, the book about the People's Inquiry into the deaths of five children in a Davis Inlet fire. Some of the quotations in this profile come from *Gathering Voices*. Finally, Robin went to Davis Inlet and interviewed Christine and read more of her poems.

Christine Poker: Finding Her Voice

Questions for Discussion

Introduction

1. What do the people of Davis Inlet call themselves?
2. What kinds of things do you hear about Davis Inlet on the news?

The Early Years

1. What did Christine do to look like her non-aboriginal teachers?
2. Why did Christine miss a lot of school?
3. What happened to her husband Prote's parents?

Becoming a Writer

1. Why did Christine write her first poem?
2. What was the title of Christine's first poem?
3. How long has Christine been sober?

Finding a Career

1. What was Christine's first job?
2. What do you think the effects of gasoline sniffing are?
3. How did Christine feel about her son sniffing gas?
4. What did Prote do when their son tried sniffing gas?

The People's Inquiry

1. How did Christine's poem get included in a book?
2. What was the subject of the book that included her poem?
3. How many children died in the 1992 house fire in Davis Inlet?
4. What problems may have contributed to the children's deaths?

Christine's Poem

1. In what languages does Christine's poem appear?
2. What is the poem "Struggle for Freedom" about?
3. What kinds of things does Christine write about?

Life Today

1. What is Christine's new video project about?
2. What does Christine think about the community moving to a new site?
3. What are Christine's hopes for the future?

**Food Politics:
The Food Security Network**
Paul Butler

Word List

Security: Safety

Network: Web; organization with many linking parts.

Economic: Relating to money.

Diet: The kind of food you eat.

Personal Empowerment: A feeling of being in control; the ability to make decisions and follow a plan.

Mission Statement: What the people in an organization want to achieve.

Parish: Small area of a town, or countryside, served by a priest and a church.

Entitlement: Right; something that is due to and deserved by a person.

Social Services: The government department that decides how much money to give people on welfare and social assistance.

Advocacy: The supporting of someone else's right or entitlement.

Introduction: What is Food Security?

Here is one definition (meaning) of the term food security:

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

- *World Food Summit, Rome, 1996.*

A simpler definition would be this: food security is when everybody has easy access to all the food that makes a good, healthy diet. Food security is about more than just keeping people alive, and making sure they don't starve. It is about empowerment over food. It is about people being confident enough to plan healthy meals, to take control of what they eat. And it is about all the improvements in the quality of life that comes from this; it is about the freedom from worry, the health and wellbeing a person experiences when they have easy access to good food.

But this kind of security is often beyond the reach of low -income people. When people are poor they cannot always afford healthy meals. The quality of the food often takes second place to hunger. Eating well is a luxury

So food security demands many changes in society It demands that the situation of low -income people improve.

This essay is about a group of people who got together in St. John's in late 1997 to start the Food Security Network. A "network" is an organization with many connections to other organizations and people. These people may come from many different walks of life.

Joanne Cag works for the Food Security Network. She says that when everyone got together in 1997, they were "a mixed bag." Some worked in the health care profession and worried about the effect poor diet had upon people's health. Some were farmers and wanted a chance to sell good, healthy food in their own community And some were volunteers who worked with food charities like the Community Food Sharing Association. The Community Food Sharing Association is the organization that oversees the food banks in Newfoundland.

Beyond Charity: Searching for Solution

The Food Security Network is quite different from the Food Sharing Association and the food banks. It is not a charity To explain, here is part of its Mission Statement:

"[To work for]...community based solutions to ensure access to adequate and healthy food for all."

This statement speaks of "solutions." This is different from the aims of food banks. Food banks exist to meet an immediate need, to ward off hunger for another day or another week. But the members of the Food Security Network wanted to do more than this. They wanted a more long- term goal, something that would lead to permanent change. When the answer to a problem is long -term, rather than short-term, people often use the word "sustainable." The Food Security Network wants sustainable ways of dealing with hunger.

This essay will show how the people in the Food Security Network are taking the lead in trying to create solutions to hunger. But first, we will look at the growth of hunger and of food banks in Newfoundland.

The Community Food Sharing Association

Food banks are really quite a recent thing in Newfoundland and in Canada. It is only in the last 20 years that they have started to appear. In 1982, there were no food banks at all in the whole of Canada. Slowly, through the 1980s, poverty and hunger became growing problems across the country. By 1987, the churches in Newfoundland were involved in food drives. A food drive is when a charity organization asks the public to donate food. The organization collects the food from the public and then gives it to poor people. Individual church parishes organized food drives in the 1980s. Food was collected for poor people within a parish. There was no Food Sharing Association to oversee either food collection or food giving. That came later.

In February 1987, the provincial government hired four people to ask questions about hunger door to door. Their job was to find out how bad the situation was and then to report back with recommendations — ideas for how people could be helped.

They wrote up their findings in a book called, *Poverty — The Only Thing Money Can't Buy*. They made several suggestions. One of these was a "school lunch program" - free school lunches for children at school. This was one way of preventing child hunger at school. By 1989, Bishop Field, a school in St. John's, successfully started up a school lunch program.

Joanne Cag was the editor of *Poverty — The Only Thing Money Can't Buy*. She remembers this as a time of great change. "The need was escalating [growing very quickly] ," according to Joanne. The Community Food Sharing Association was started. "The Association was an attempt to regulate things," Joanne remembers.

This meant that rather than doing things separately — parish by parish — the Community Food Sharing Association could connect the food drives together. It could advertise. It could make radio announcements, informing people where to drop off food donations.

The Association could tell the public what kind of food to donate. It could act as a centre for food charity, storing the food donations. The Community Food Sharing Association also began to regulate the giving of food. The Association wanted to make things equal among food bank users. It started an "ideal hamper." The ideal hamper was a set amount of food each family would be given.

The Cod Moratorium and the Food Bank Explosion

Things were about to get very much worse in Newfoundland. 1992 was a disastrous year. This was the year of the cod moratorium. It was the start of a very bad time. Joblessness grew rapidly and so did poverty and hunger.

At first TAGS — the special benefits paid to fisher-people who could not work — made things easier. But soon even the TAGS money ran out. By 1992, there were 25 food banks across the province. By 1996 this number had more than doubled to 60. In fact, the number of people using food banks had increased more than this number suggests. This was because each food bank was growing in size.

John Greene was a member of the Food Sharing Association at the time. He travelled to Toronto every year to meet food bank volunteers from other provinces. This was a national organization called the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB).

"The numbers [of Newfoundland food banks] were so astounding," remembers John Greene, "that colleagues on the mainland would not believe them."

People outside Newfoundland were amazed at how rapidly poverty had risen here.



Photo: Mike Reid

Part of the Community Food Sharing Association's food drive -food donation boxes in supermarkets.

John Greene: Food Banks No Longer Enough

John Greene came to believe that something else was needed, that food banks were no longer enough. There were two incidents that convinced him of this.

The first of these was that food banks were beginning to do the work of the Government. As charity grew, the Social Services Department — the Government department that looks after people on welfare — began to pull out of its responsibility to help poor people. It seemed that the Government thought that charity was the answer.

The second incident was that the national food bank organization was thinking of going into partnership with a large food producing company. It was as though the food banks were being taken over by big business.

1. Food Banks and Social Services

Around 1995, John says, the Social Services Department began to "refer" people to food banks. People began to arrive at food banks with letters from their social worker. This was not what food banks were for, according to John Greene. They were supposed to be extra help, a safety net as well as welfare. Food banks were never supposed to take the place of Government services for the poor.

This situation had come about because social workers just had too much to do. There were already many poor people. And the numbers were growing. In 1989, 20,000 people were claiming social assistance in Newfoundland. Just six years later in 1995, the number had risen to 35,000. More and more people were going to Social Services for help. The people working in Social Services could not

deal with the needs of the hungry. Also, their budget was not large enough. The budget is the amount of money the Government gives to Social Services to spend each year. It had not risen enough to meet the new demands.

So when staff at the Social Services Department sent people to food banks, this put a great deal of strain on the food bank system. Food banks began running out of food.

And it created a new worry for people like John Greene. Did this mean that Social Services no longer took responsibility for hungry people? Did it mean that food was no longer a right, that it was now up to charity to feed people?

2. Partnerships with Large Business

In 1995, the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) got together with one very large food producing company. This company wanted to go "into partnership" with the CAFB. It was going to let the food banks take damaged, out-of-date, and excess food. In return, the company wanted its name to be linked with the CAFB. It wanted to advertise its good work through the Canadian Association of Food Banks.

This scheme was good for the business in two ways. It would help the food company's "corporate image": what the public thinks of them. If a large and powerful business does charity work this is good for its corporate image. It makes the public like the company more.

The plan would also increase the company's profits. The food company would no longer have to pay to have damaged and out-of-date food taken away and dumped. The food bank organization would do this for them. This is why the arrangement would increase the company's profits. John Greene did not agree with the idea of this partnership. Giving out-of-date or damaged food to poor people seemed wrong. It was treating poor people as though they were second-class citizens — not as good as other people. And it was all on the food company's own terms. But John Greene lost the argument with the other members of the CAFB and the Association did go into partnership with the food company.

But in 1996 the whole thing went too far for John Greene. The other members of the CAFB wanted to give the partner company a plaque of thanks. A plaque is a special wooden board that can be hung on a wall, showing appreciation. John decided to speak against the idea. "I told the other members that they [the partner company] should give *us* the plaque!"

To John Greene this was "like the straw that breaks the camel's back." He remembers thinking, "We need a national anti-hunger movement. One that would not be looking for charity but for solutions." In the end, he had come to believe that — in his words — "The food bank phenomenon is a cop-out... The public prefers to hide behind the food banks and fool themselves into thinking that food banks are the answer."

John Greene wanted to work for solutions that are long-term not short-term. They had to be "sustainable." Food banks fill an immediate need. But once that need is filled you are back at square one. People will be hungry again tomorrow, and the food banks will be looking for more donations. It is a problem without end.

The Problem with Food Banks

Food banks help many families on low income get through a bad week or a bad month. A visit to a food bank can certainly keep hunger away at times. But here are some of the problems with food banks:

- Food is limited. Food banks rely on donations. These are not guaranteed. Food banks often run out of food.
- There is little variety or kinds, of food in food banks. There may be a lot of tins of beans but no canned fruit like pears or peaches.
- Fresh food, like oranges and apples, fresh fish and vegetables, are not found in food banks at all. Food banks have mainly "dried" food, like "Kraft Dinner," or canned food. This can be stored for a long time without going off.
- The food is often not nutritious. Fresh food has more vitamins and minerals than canned or dried food. Vitamins and minerals help people stay healthy. So it is difficult to get a good diet from the food in a food bank.

Here is a real example of an "Ideal Hamper." (Remember this is about the best a family can expect — food banks often run out of much of this food.)

Staples:	Other foods:
Tea bags	A package of cereal
Sugar	A can of juice
Can of milk	A jar of peanut butter
Butter	A can of ham or tuna
	A can of luncheon meat
Additional foods:	A package of weiners or bologna
A can of formula (baby food, if there is a baby in the family).	A package of macaroni and cheese
	A can of soup
	A package of frozen vegetables
	A can of beans

- As you can see, an "ideal food hamper" is about a two or three day's supply of food for a family.
- Most food banks allow only one visit per family per month (30 days).
- Sometimes people get turned away from food banks. Some food banks will only serve someone from the area where the food bank is. Some food banks will only serve a person of the right religion.
- Some areas of Newfoundland do not have food banks at all. It is quite possible that there may be no food bank within walking distance even if a person lives in a town.
- Food banks often give the public the idea that the problem of hunger is taken care of. Sometimes the government can think this too. Our politicians can say to themselves, "Hunger is no longer a problem in Newfoundland. We have food banks." This already started to happen in Newfoundland, as in the case of Social Services referring people to food banks.

The Indignity of Hunger

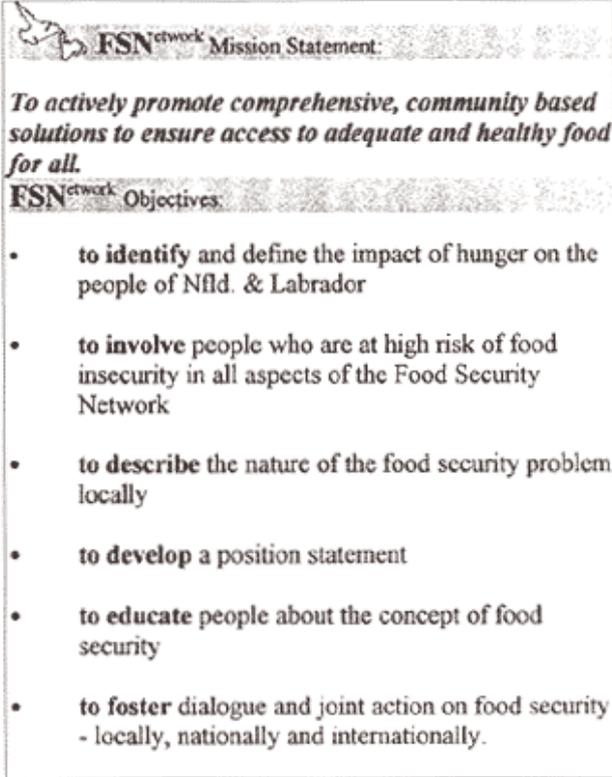
Many people in the Food Security Network feel that the experience of going to a food bank is bad for people. People often feel small and embarrassed, having to take charity. And because food is always limited, food bank volunteers check up on the families who use them. The names of food bank users

are typed into a computer each time they visit. This makes sure people cannot visit more than one food bank at a time and that they cannot visit the same food bank too often.

This process — going to a food bank and having your name typed into a computer — robs people of their dignity according to members of the Food Security Network. Dignity is a feeling of worth. It is the ability to feel good about yourself. It is difficult to feel good about yourself when you are waiting in line in a food bank. Being "checked up on" makes it worse. John Greene puts it like this: "people who are forced to stand in line at a food bank to receive some "scraps" to keep their family alive is a great scandal in this affluent [rich] world of ours."

Annette Stapenhorst is a nutritionist with the Food Security Network. A nutritionist is a person who has been trained to understand how food affects a person's health. She believes that food banks are not the best solution for hunger at all. She says that the supply of food is unreliable, the range of choices limited, and the process humiliating for food bank users. "How does one explain to a child that they have to go hungry at certain times of the month?" asks Annette.

The health concerns are also great. Poor nutrition is very bad for growing children. It can stop them from learning at school. Children cannot study when they are hungry. And if their diet is not a good one, this can slow them down as well. A person's diet — how well they eat — is one of the most important aspects of their health. And, even more important, the constant stress and humiliation of having to go to a food bank is very damaging to a person's health.



FSN^{network} Mission Statement:

To actively promote comprehensive, community based solutions to ensure access to adequate and healthy food for all.

FSN^{network} Objectives:

- **to identify** and define the impact of hunger on the people of Nfld. & Labrador
- **to involve** people who are at high risk of food insecurity in all aspects of the Food Security Network
- **to describe** the nature of the food security problem locally
- **to develop** a position statement
- **to educate** people about the concept of food security
- **to foster** dialogue and joint action on food security - locally, nationally and internationally.

Advocacy: Keeping Government Involved

The members of the Food Security Network believe that food is a basic right. They say that food should be available to everyone "without a loss of dignity." So one of the goals of the Food Security Network is to advocate for hungry people. This means telling everyone — the public, the media (newspapers, radio) — about things which threaten the dignity of hungry people.

An example of one of these threats is Social Services leaving the job of welfare to food banks. The Food Security Network wants our government to stay *in* the business of welfare, and to put more effort into stopping hunger. Government could do this in many ways. It can create more jobs. It can increase the amount of money it gives people on welfare. It can create a school lunch program in every school. The Food Security Network calls this last idea a "universal school lunch program."

Joanne Cag puts it like this: "The Food Security Network looks at entitlement, not need." "Entitlement" is the idea that everyone deserves enough good, healthy food. It is theirs by right. They should not have to stand in line or beg for it.

While the Food Security Network advocates the rights of hungry people, it also works at sustainable projects of its own that will help people to avoid hunger and poor nutrition.

Food Security Network: Solutions Not Hunger

"We're not talking about hunger. We're talking about solutions," says Joanne Cag. Joanne, like John Greene, has been trying to find solutions to hunger for a long time, long before the Food Security Network started. As Development Coordinator for the Network, she is trying to get sustainable projects up and running.

1. Good Food Box

The Food Security Network believes in community based solutions. So, rather than partnering with a big national business, the Network seeks agreements with companies that are rooted in the community.

In the winter of 1999, John Greene and Joanne Cag met with the Board of the City Consumer's Co-op. A Board is a small group of people who are in charge of an organization.

The City Consumer's Co-op is a different kind of business from the big food producer that the CAFB partnered with. For one, it represents the community. A co-op is an organization or business that is owned by ordinary people. Many people in St. John's own shares (a very small part of the Co-op). Because it is owned by ordinary people, it tends to reflect their wishes and values. It is not out to make huge profits.

John and Joanne were there to pitch an idea. The idea is this: the Food Security Network in partnership with the City Consumers' Co-op will set up what it will call a "Good Food Box."

The Co-op will provide the food at wholesale prices. The wholesale price is the amount of money it cost the Co-op to buy it, so the Co-op will not make a profit. Volunteers will transport the Good Food Box to people who need good, nutritious food at low prices. The Good Food Box will include fresh fruit and vegetables.

Human Resources Development (HRD), a part of the government, has also offered help. If the Good Food Box gets up and running, HRD will create a job for someone to help with the organizing.

Joanne hopes to get the Good Food Box started in September 2000. But she is realistic. She knows the Good Food Box is a challenge.

"We can't operate on goodwill," she says, "we need a budget." So, at the moment — in May 2000 — she is doing the "market research." Market research means finding out how many people will buy the Good Food Box. She does this by going to the various community centres. She talks to community leaders who then find out how many buyers there will be in their community for the Good Food Box. The community leaders will report back to Joanne.

2. Farmer's Market

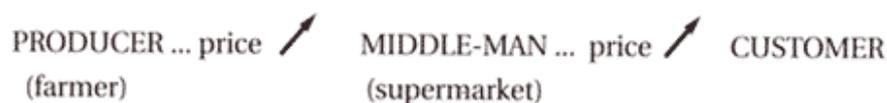
The Farmer's Market is at an earlier stage of development than the Good Food Box. A "market" here is merely a number of people who will buy a product. It is not a place with stalls and vans.

This is the general idea: local farmers make a deal with low-income people. They agree to regularly provide vegetables to low income families. They also agree to transport it to their homes at no extra cost.

It sounds too good to be true. People wonder how the farmer gains anything by this. But the farmer does gain:

1. First the farmers gain because they have a *certain* market — a number of people they can *besure* will buy their vegetables. Even if the price is low, this certainty is very important. It means nothing goes to waste. Because the farmer does not have to plan for waste, the price is low.

2. There is no middleman. A middleman in any business stands between the producer and the customer.



Normally, the farmer would sell vegetables to a supermarket and that supermarket would then sell vegetables to a customer. Since the supermarket must make a profit, this drives up the price. With the farmer's market, the producer just sells straight to the customer.



3. There are very low transport costs. The farmers are local, so the farmer and the customer are close together. If you go into a supermarket — Dominion or Sobeys — and look at where the vegetables come from you will usually find they are not even from this province. Potatoes are often from Prince Edward Island. Carrots are often from Ontario or the United States. Transport is expensive and this is bad for both the producer and the customer.

All these savings — a certain market, no middleman, low transport costs — help the low-income customers too. It means they get cheap, nutritious food and they do not need transport to take them to a supermarket to get it. This idea has been started in areas of the United States, particularly in Connecticut. John Greene recently went to Connecticut to talk with people about farmers' markets and to see how it might be done here. Already Newfoundland has a good basis for this idea. There is already a vegetable co-operative. There are 50 farmers in Portugal Cove who grow vegetables for local use. They are organic farmers, which means they do not use harmful chemicals on the soil.

3. Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture is another scheme that helps farmers, low-income people and the general public. The idea is that members of the public should buy shares in a new farming venture. Perhaps they might spend \$100 for a share for one season — one year's harvest. People would hand over their money to the farmer in the spring. This is before the farmer plants the vegetables.

For low income people it might work differently. They might not be able to pay \$100 for a share. But they could pay what they could afford, and donate some of their work to the farm instead. Labour is just as important to a farm as money. At harvest time everybody involved would get vegetables.

This is a boost to local farming. It provides financial help to the farmer and helps the farmer get more land "into production." This means that soil is tilled [dug up and turned] and treated with leaves and lime — things which make it ready to be planted. There is a great deal of land in this province that is not used. About 250,000 acres of land in Newfoundland is suitable for farming. But only 1,804 acres are presently used for growing vegetables with another 2,270 acres used for growing fruit and berries. It costs money and labour to bring land into production. Community Supported Agriculture is a way of sharing those costs.

Field to Table: a Natural Solution for Newfoundland

Joanne Cag comments that, in Newfoundland, some of these solutions come quite easily. "After all," she says, "in the past, in the outports, all the food on your plate was caught, shot, hooked or grown."

The solutions of the Food Security Network are all local ones. The organization believes in using resources like the land and labour rather than money. This is why making use of land is such an important part of the Food Security Network's long-term plans. Many people in the anti-hunger movements around the world believe that food should never be bought or sold for money. It should be common property like air or water.

Joanne calls this way of living a "field to table plan." This means that food is not bought or sold. It is grown or caught by the people who will eat it.

This is part of Newfoundland's history. People used to fish and farm their own vegetables and, in many places, did not use money to buy food. This is also the way that Third World Countries cope with the threat of hunger. There is safety and independence in growing food, especially when there is no social safety net [social assistance and government help] to fall back on.

Food Banks and Food Security: The Differences in Brief

Food Banks

- Short-term help
- Charity
- Usually no advocacy
- Hungry people only involved as "clients" or customers
- Will take damaged and out-of-date food
- Will go into partnership with large businesses

Food Security

- Long-term, sustainable solutions
- Hungry people should be actively involved (for example: community supported agriculture)
- Advocates for hungry people
- Defends dignity of hungry people.
- Food should be a right, not a charity
- Partners with local, co-operative businesses
- Works towards ensuring easy access to nutritious food for everyone

Sources

This essay is based upon an interview with John Greene in his home May 1, 2000; an interview with Joanne Cag in her home office on May 16; a telephone conversation with Annette Stapenhorst May 24; and related documents sent or e-mailed to me.

Food Politics: The Food Security Network

Questions for Discussion

Introduction: What is Food Security?

1. When was the Food Security Network formed?
2. What does Joanne Cag mean when she says the people who formed the Food Security Network were "a mixed bag?"

Beyond Charity: Searching for Solutions

1. How are the Food Security Network's aims different from those of a charity?

The Community Food Sharing Association

1. Which suggestion from the book, *Poverty- The Only Thing Money Can't Buy*, was acted on in 1989?
2. How did the Community Food Sharing Association regulate the giving of food?

The Cod Moratorium and the Food Bank Explosion

1. Why was there an increase in the number of food banks in Newfoundland in the 1990s?

John Greene: Food Banks No Longer Enough

1. How many people were claiming social assistance in Newfoundland by 1995?

The Problem with Food Banks

1. How long will an "ideal hamper" feed a family?
2. Why is the experience of going to a food bank hard on people?
3. What especially in the process can cause people to feel humiliated?

The Indignity of Hunger

1. How would you define dignity?

Food Security Network: Solutions Not Hunger

1. What is a Co-op?
2. Why are transportation costs so high on the produce in some large supermarkets?
3. How can people without money buy a share in the harvest in a community supported agriculture project?

Field to Table: A Natural Solution for Newfoundland

1. What does "field to table" mean?