

*a first nations man recently told me he had come to the downtown eastside to die he heard the propaganda that this is only a place of death, disease and despair and since his life has become a hopeless misery he came here specifically to die but he said since living in the downtown eastside what with the people he has met and the groups he has found he now wants very much to live and his words go directly to the heart of what makes for real community a new life out of apparent death and this is what we speak and live with our words our weapons*  
--Bud Osborn

## **HISTORY OF THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE**

Before Europeans settled on the south shore of the Burrard Inlet, First Nations such as the Stó:Lo hunted and fished in what was historically part of their Coast Salish territory. The Stó:Lo people call this area “s’olhtemexw”, meaning “our land” or “our world.” The descendents of many First Nations families continue to live in the Downtown Eastside.

In the mid-19th century, the Downtown Eastside became a residential area for many people associated with British Columbia’s resource economy, including loggers and fishermen. Many

would travel north along the coast for months at a time, returning to Vancouver for short periods of time to live in hotels concentrated in the Downtown Eastside. This resulted in a significant concentration of bars and other services in the neighbourhood designed to serve the resource- industry workers—who were in the city with money to spend. As early as 1888, Hastings Street was known as “Skid Road” because loggers skidded logs down greased corduroy log roads to the sea (Footprints Community Art Project 2003). Towards the end of the 19th century, many families who could afford to move away from the Downtown Eastside did so with the expansion of the streetcar system, resulting in the Downtown Eastside continuing as a working class neighbourhood.

During the Great Depression, there were a number of rallies, demonstrations, and strikes in the community. In 1935, following a May Day Rally of 15,000 at the Powell Street Grounds (today known as Oppenheimer Park), a number of unemployed men from the East End Ukrainian Hall occupied the Carnegie Library at Hastings and Main (Hasson and Ley 1994). Beginning in the late 1950s, a number of developments led to a decrease of 10,000 fewer visitors per day in the Downtown Eastside and the gradual marginalization of this community: the streetcars stopped running in the area; the main library moved to a location outside the Downtown Eastside; and, in the late 1960s, the City began building a new centre for Downtown Vancouver that enticed Eaton’s, one of the large department stores that had previously been in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, to relocate. The lack of affordable housing in other parts of Vancouver drove low-income people to the Downtown Eastside, as did the deinstitutionalization of thousands of psychiatric patients in the 1970s who found no other community willing to accept them.

From the community’s inception, alcohol and drug use were common. In 1965, the forty to fifty blocks of the Downtown Eastside included twenty-six beer parlours and two liquor stores. By the late 1980s, the drug situation in the Downtown Eastside became increasingly troublesome as more people started using cocaine—a

drug that is more addictive and less expensive than heroin—leading people to theft to pay for their drugs, resulting in an excess of second-hand stores, pawn shops, and illegitimate businesses. In 1992, the remaining established department store, Woodward's, went out of business, prompting many nearby stores and businesses to close their doors, and resulting in the area becoming less of a destination for people from outside the community. The Woodward's Building, having sat vacant for more than ten years, was the site of protests and squats in 2002 and 2003 by individuals and organizations frustrated by the lack of affordable and secure housing in the Downtown Eastside. Currently the City of Vancouver and others are planning to redevelop Woodward's for housing, retail, and other community services.

## **DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

The Downtown Eastside is a community whose diversity enriches the city. It is a culturally diverse community with 48 percent of its population representing visible minority groups, including residents of Chinatown, a large number of First Nations people from across the Americas, and many new immigrants to Canada. There is a higher proportion of seniors and men living in the community than in other parts of Vancouver. There are also a significant number of low-income families living in the area, as well as single people who are unemployed, many of whom have been unemployed for significant periods of time. The community is well-known for its political activism, and many community members are involved with community-based organizations in the neighbourhood. An inventory of assets in the community found that people living and working in the Downtown Eastside have considerable experience and knowledge, including: First Nations perspectives; creativity that can be expressed in music, art, writing, and performing arts; skills from furniture building to plant care to care-giving; diverse ideas and viewpoints; language skills and knowledge of diverse cultures; and a capacity to care about people less fortunate than themselves.

The Downtown Eastside is a community of communities that struggle with a high concentration of social problems: poverty, mental illness, open substance use and addiction, drug dealing, prostitution, crime, inadequate and insecure housing, high prevalence of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and tuberculosis, and lack of access to meaningful employment. While these are challenges that face other urban centres, the Downtown Eastside has become notorious for being the poorest postal code in Canada where these problems are highly visible.