

**On receiving the Atkinson Economic Justice Award  
Church of the Holy Trinity  
January 22, 2004**

Thanks to Betsy Atkinson Murray and the Board of Directors of the Atkinson Foundation for giving me this fantastic honour and for creating an opportunity that will change and open up, in new and exciting ways, my life's work.

It's an incredible honour to be in the company of previous Economic Justice Award winners, Armine Yalnizyan and Roy Romanow.

My special appreciation to Christine, Elizabeth and Lynn at the Foundation for all the hard work you do and in particular for your work organizing this reception.

It's fitting that we're here today in the Church of the Holy Trinity. This church provides compassion, space, comfort and support for homeless people and housing and anti-poverty events in this city.

I'd like to ask you when you leave today to stop and reflect at the Homeless Memorial outside. There are over 300 names of homeless men, women and children who have died homeless in Toronto on the memorial. This is a memorial project that began thanks to Bonnie Briggs and this Church. Sometimes I see a homeless man go up to it and touch a certain name on it and say – "I knew him." Only last week, we added the names of 10 homeless people to the memorial. On that same day, 3 funerals were held for 3 different individuals, one was here, one at Seaton House and one for a PARC member in the west end.

But we're here today for this extremely unusual happening!

What can I say about this award! Well, I was astounded and happy, very happy, to learn I was to receive this award.

Normally, I'm happy when someone I know that's homeless gets housing, although that's not too often. I'm happy when we win the opening of the armouries, or the quarantine sites during SARS, or the inquest into the tuberculosis deaths, or the Tent City rent supplement program, or a meeting with the Mayor! (that made me very happy) Or, some of the recent federal money for housing.

But, it has been hard to keep working as I do as a nurse to work on those issues, so receiving this award was like a gift that is not measurable – a gift of support, confidence and hope.

Because I'm a nurse, it was important for me to be connected to a health organization that demonstrated a cutting edge and progressive attitude towards homeless health care, and that embraced housing and adequate shelter as a social determinant of health – not just in theory but in practice.

I am very excited about being “housed” at the Sherbourne Health Centre. When this opportunity arose, I can only say that Suzanne Boggild grabbed my arm and showed an exuberance and welcome that was unprecedented. Thank you Suzanne.

I look forward to collaborating with the amazing Sherbourne staff, many of whom I’ve worked with before and I look forward to getting to know your volunteers and Board members. I also really look forward to being in the east end again. It’s at the corner of Sherbourne and Dundas that I “cut my teeth” as a street nurse. This corner is, of course, what I call the epi-centre of the homeless disaster.

For several years, a number of my friends and colleagues said – “You’ve got to meet Charles Pascal”. One day I got up the nerve to call Charles and when Elizabeth answered the phone she said “Oh, are you the Street Nurse?” Well, I thought that was a good sign, maybe I’ll get a meeting. Well, one thing led to another including the Foundation’s support for the 1% Project.

That meeting also led me to meet the Board where I participated in a presentation on housing and homelessness. At the end of the presentation Betsy Atkinson Murray asked me a very pointed but insightful question. “What will be the hardest thing about your work this winter?” Well, my problem, highlighted repeatedly by outreach worker Calvin Henschell, was the desperate need for sleeping bags and within days a partnership sprung between Atkinson, the Sherbourne, TDRC and the Rotary club that facilitated a massive sleeping bag relief project. I believe that project saved lives last winter and says a lot about the Foundation’s responsiveness.

So Charles, thanks for giving me that first appointment with you and especially for your valuable mentorship in recent times.

To those of you here today – thank you. Many are family, friends, co-workers. Today my mother, also a nurse is here, Jean Crowe from Kingston. My daughter Idella Sturino and her partner and fiancé Kevin Siu, my niece Leslie Crowe who is a Ryerson student and my cousin Nicole MacInnes, a public health nurse with the City.

Some of you are what I call my “normal friends” who care a lot about social justice and are driven in your own way, in your own area of specialty to make a huge difference in the life of this city.

Some of you are front-line workers or work on the political level fighting homelessness and fighting for a national housing program. Some of you have been or still are homeless, sharing your experiences and fighting side by side with TDRC for an end to the homeless disaster. You are very brave and make a difference and I especially thank you for coming today.

Two of my main soul mates in this work are not here today because they’re out slugging away – street nurse Kathy Hardill and of course Beric German who has been my primary

mentor or as I like to call him my executive producer, and of course he calls me his “mother”. Michael Shapcott is of course here and has been a significant mentor in my life, especially in the philosophy of the “glass is half full” (translate as “the rest of the 1% money we want for housing will be coming”).

To the rest of the TDRC Steering Committee members who were brave enough in 1998 to stick their necks out and declare homelessness a national disaster – wow! You made history but we’re not done yet!

I want to end with the hopeful and wise words of Ursula Franklin. In 1998, in this very space, at the launch of TDRC’s State of Emergency declaration when we declared homelessness to be a national disaster, she declared:

“We have the legal and technical means to end this.”

Well, guess what? We do and we’ve got a lot of work ahead of us.

- We can end the deaths on the street, (and the deaths of homeless people in shelters and hospitals – they too are homeless deaths)!
- We can open more emergency shelters like the Fort York armoury and give people in this city the shelter that they need and have a right to!
- We can end the conditions in shelters that lead to bedbug infestations and tuberculosis and emotional withering and deterioration!
- We can immediately move people out of crowded and unhealthy shelters and into housing with rent supplements like we did at Tent City!
- We can shorten the waiting lists for affordable housing by building housing!
- We can inspire hope and light a flame for a national housing program that will go down in history and be considered as valuable and precious as Medicare, to the health of our people!

We can and we will. Public opinion and conscience demands it. That’s what I’ll be working on as the Atkinson Economic Justice Award winner - with your help!

Cathy Crowe  
January 22, 2004  
Toronto