

VANCOUVER'S FOUR PILLARS OF PROPAGANDA

June 21, 2006

ONE syringe on a playground is too many.

On June 14 the Vancouver Sun published a guest column by Jonathon Narvey captioned Neighbourhood Decay Angers Homeowners. Narvey's expression of thought-provoking dismay followed a community meeting the week before at the 10th Avenue Alliance Church in Mount Pleasant. On that night he listened to fury directed at the church over its programs to provide meals for the homeless.

"Is my new neighbourhood the latest casualty of Vancouver's drug-fuelled homeless problem?"

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"Had we just gotten up to our eyeballs in debt only to move into a slum? Walking down our street with its pastel heritage homes, beautiful trees and smiling neighbours, we found it hard to believe.

"But some long-term residents have noticed an upsurge in the sort of activity Vancouver locals associate with the Downtown Eastside: Fence railings ripped out, syringes littering the grounds of a daycare, break-ins and homeless people camped out in backyards."

Narvey's closing words:

"What is an acceptable level of decay in a neighbourhood?"

"For some residents of Mount Pleasant who have worked hard so that their community will live up to its name, one syringe on a playground is too many.

"Who could blame them?"

The communities of Dunbar, Commercial Drive and Fraser Street are experiencing similar problems caused by the growing fluidity of Vancouver's drug addicts.

You, dear reader, may shrug your indifference as if to say, "that's typical of Vancouver – but it's not like that over here." Then I ask you: How do discarded syringes turn up on the sands of Ambleside beach – where little children play – just a stone's throw away from the West Vancouver police station?

I hope you will join me in confronting our local politicians, police and judges: "Enough! Do your duty! One syringe and one junkie on Ambleside beach is one too many."

The last thing the North Shore should do is to follow Vancouver's lemming-like headlong rush over the four-pillars cliff. Instead of leading the way by shutting down their Skid-Road drug mecca, the last three mayors of Vancouver – Philip Owen, Larry Campbell and Sam Sullivan – in conjunction with the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, have kept up a steady refrain over the worth and success of harm reduction.

In preparing my thoughts for this column I called upon Al Arsenault, recently retired constable of the Vancouver Police Department.

Arsenault: "I was a long-term Skid Road beat cop in one of this continent's worst drug areas. It was my choice to work most of my career on the streets of the Downtown

Eastside. I have considerable experience in dealing with drug-related policing issues and I have a good understanding of the mindset of drug addicts, the nature of drug addiction, and the tremendous harm that drugs do to society. Drug abuse, as you surely must know, affects more than the addict.”

On needle exchange: “Our needle exchange opened in 1989, the first in North America, with some 128,000 needles given away. The junkie industry has flourished while our addicts have not fared so well. The program has handed out over three million needles since 2000.

“Our highly tolerant city has attracted addicts and created addicts because of the prevalence and acceptance of needle use, which has lately been eclipsed by crack cocaine use. The needle exchange program now wants to shore up their waning industry to include crack cocaine giveaway kits. What a boon this will be to our ‘safe’ injection site. The site was built with a ‘safe’ inhalation room already roughed in and ready to go. Do you see the pattern here? And with the North American Opiate Medications Initiative trial underway then free heroin will soon follow. The proponents of legalization have hijacked harm reduction – the dominoes are falling.

“Needle exchange programs do not steer addicts away from drug use, nor does the program serve promote abstinence. “Here’s your needle, now don’t do drugs” is a lousy way to persuade addicts to begin recovery. Furthermore, the safe injection site is a modern, comfortable and sexy place to be, while treatment houses are poorly staffed and often badly run due to a lack of funding. What is the motivation for an addict to quit using drugs? Simply put, addicts need the cure, not the poison. As a long-term beat officer I have come to know life and death in our infamous Skid Road, home to 6,000 hardcore drug users. It is Canada’s poorest neighbourhood. We need real solutions: treatment, prevention and enforcement, not band-aids that allow the infection of drug abuse to grow.

“To those paving the way to addiction, I would ask them what does this prospect of using a drug injection site look like to a person who is on the fourth day of a coke binge? What about the looming disaster behind crystal meth? In opening one site and proclaiming it a success, just how many more sites and booths will it take to satisfy all addicts in the Lower Mainland alone?

“Harm reduction, not integrated into a treatment model is a doomed policy. These drug injection sites are like throwing lifesavers made out of bloody meat to ship wreck survivors in shark-infested waters. The thought is idealistic, but the process is tragically flawed. And are we to open up these drug consumption sites to cater to people who have chosen their illness, while we close down hospitals and shut out those who had no choice at all over what might afflict them?

“My focus in this drug problem is not law enforcement. It has been education and treatment. Contrary to what some people think through the media, I am not a one-pillar man. Odd Squad’s compassion for people is very evident in our films Through a Blue Lens and Flipping the World.

“The needle and the crack pipe are not for recovery. They are tools for enabling and condoning drug use. This money should be spent on recovery houses like John Volken’s Welcome Home Centre and Bill Weselowski’s Inner Visions. As Vancouver doctor Stan DeVlaming so wisely states: harm reduction without a treatment component is a failed policy.”

At this point in my column I took a break and found the Sunday June 18 edition of the North Shore News on my doorstep. My casual appraisal of it changed to intensity when I came to the report of a rally by members of the Squamish First Nation aimed at driving drug dealers out of their community. Under the headlines “Marchers confront dealers” and “Zero Tolerance urged, along with support,” the News reported that members of the Caring For Our Youth committee, led by its founder Doris Paul – supported by councilors, citizens and their kids, West Vancouver police, Squamish peacekeepers, and the RCMP – marched to the homes of drug dealers and confronted them. The message: “We love you very much, but there will be zero tolerance for your behaviour.” Councillor Carla George said “Let’s make the young ones aware that it’s OK not to drink or use drugs. Let’s make some real changes.”

The courage and determination of Squamish members sets a new standard of citizenry-in-action on the North Shore. First, we must support them. Then we ought to muster up the courage to follow their lead. If we choose to continue as an inert citizenry, our North Shore will become a haven for an ever increasing number of chronic drug addicts and traffickers and fertile ground for the health authority’s Vancouver-solution.

The Squamish First Nation has produced a tipping point in our collective struggle against addiction. In a grassroots movement against drug traffickers, they have proven the truism – “The police are the public and the public are the police.”

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