

**AN OVERVIEW OF VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE
FOR UBC LEARNING EXCHANGE TREK PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS**

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*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 "raise shit – a downtown eastside poem of resistance"
in Paul Taylor, (ed.), The Heart of the Community: The Best of the Carnegie Newsletter (2003)*

INTRODUCTION

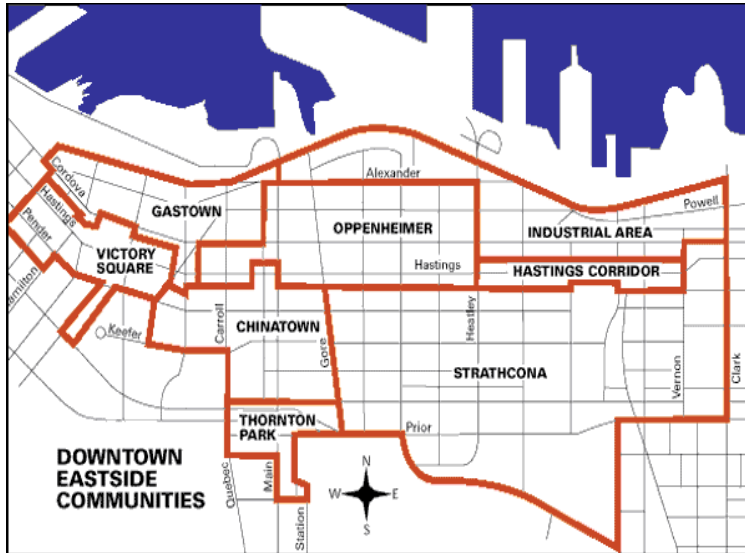
The University of British Columbia's Learning Exchange is an outreach initiative that aims to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with community organizations and schools in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and other inner city areas. The Learning Exchange Trek Program connects UBC students, staff, and alumni with community organizations where these members of the university community do volunteer community service. The types of community service vary: volunteers do one-on-one tutoring with children in classrooms; organize sports activities with teen-agers; spend time with hospice residents; help prepare meals in organizations that support women and their children; and undertake short-term projects that achieve specific goals.

To work within any community successfully, you need to understand the community. Participants in the Learning Exchange Trek Program have the opportunity to learn about the Downtown Eastside and other inner city communities from the people who live and work in these areas. The purpose of this article is to prepare you for your volunteer service in the community by giving you information about the Downtown Eastside community. Many of us have a limited understanding of this complex and dynamic community based on negative stereotypes or sensational stories we hear or read about in the local media. Some Learning Exchange Trek Program participants—or your family or friends—may have fears about working in the Downtown Eastside and other inner city communities because of these stereotypes. We hope that this article will enable you to become familiar with the history of the community, and lead you to

question some of your preconceptions about who lives and works in the Downtown Eastside and other inner city communities.¹

LOCATION: THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE²

The Downtown Eastside is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the heart of Vancouver, the third largest city in Canada. There are five very distinct areas that make up the Downtown Eastside:



Chinatown; Gastown; Victory Square; Strathcona; and Oppenheimer, plus a park and industrial area. Founded in the late 19th century, **Chinatown** expanded after the repealing of the Chinese Immigration Exclusion Act after World War II. It continues to be a vibrant part of the Downtown Eastside. **Gastown** was founded in 1867 when “Gassy Jack” Deighton built a saloon. In the late 1960s, features such as a cobble-stoned street and vintage lighting were restored as part of an effort to attract tourists. **Victory Square**, named for its war memorial cenotaph, contains

businesses, downtown campuses of post-secondary institutions, and a number of single room occupancy hotels that house approximately 1500 people. **Strathcona** is a diverse area with light industry and many forms of housing (apartments, public housing, converted housing, and rooming houses), with nearly sixty-one percent of residents speaking Chinese as a first language. **Oppenheimer** was initially home to many Japanese Canadians. In World War II, the area was devastated when Canada interned the Japanese and moved them to camps in the interior of BC. Today Oppenheimer includes a courthouse, a police station, retail businesses, restaurants, a Buddhist temple, a theatre, social services, and some light industrial facilities (City of Vancouver 2003b).

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 (Community Directions 2002).

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

¹ The issues confronting the Downtown Eastside are not constrained by specific geographic boundaries, and can be found throughout the city. The Learning Exchange uses the phrase “inner city” to describe communities that face issues related to poverty and marginalization. The concept of inner city communities helps us to focus on particular social and economic factors (poverty, instability, homelessness, etc.), rather than a geographical area. For the purposes of this article, however, we focus on the history of the Downtown Eastside specifically.

² Map of the Downtown Eastside from:
<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/neighbourhoods.htm>.

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 (Community Directions 2002).

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 (City of Vancouver 2003b). 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 (City of Vancouver 2003a).

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 (Hasson and Ley 1994). 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 (City of Vancouver 2004).

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 (Community Directions 2002). 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 (Community Directions 2002).

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.

The following table compares some aspects of the Downtown Eastside to the rest of Vancouver, based on the City of Vancouver's most recent *Downtown Eastside Community Monitoring Report* (2002).

	Downtown Eastside	Vancouver	Downtown Eastside %
Land Area (in hectares)	205	11,404	1.8%
Population (1996)	16,275	515,400	3.2%
# of Households (1996)	10,410	218,975	4.8%
# of Persons per Household (1996)	1.56	2.35	--
Median Household Income (1996)	\$11,029	\$35,583	--
Incidence of Low Income (1996)	68%	31%	--
# of Medical Emergency Responses (2001)	3,833	23,043	17%
# of Mental Health Cases per Month (2001)	981	5,181	19%
Single Room Occupancy Units (2001)	5,179	6,464	80%
Non-Market Housing Units (2001)	4,639	20,415	23.0%
# of Elementary Schools (2001)	2	90	2.2%
# of Community Centres (2001)	3	24	12.5%
# of Hectares of Park (2001)	14	1,277	1.1%

CHALLENGES FACING THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

Your participation in the Learning Exchange Trek Program will give you the opportunity to learn more about the health, social, and economic issues facing the Downtown Eastside from those who live and work in this area. The following is a brief introduction to some of the issues.

- **Housing**

Although there is a tradition of residents of the Downtown Eastside working together to ensure that low-income people can live in the community, a number of housing issues exist, including homelessness; unsafe and unhealthy living conditions; conversion and demolition of low-income housing; gentrification; and exploitation of residents by landlords (Community Directions 2002). In 2002, there were eight shelter facilities providing a total of 237 emergency beds/mats in the Downtown Eastside. Increasingly, shelters turn people away because of a lack of space. In Single-Room Occupancy Housing (SROs), tenants have a small room where they share bathroom facilities and occasionally cooking facilities. Closures and conversions of SROs to other uses have resulted in fewer SROs. While SROs are often described as “affordable housing” (at \$325 per month), the cost per square foot (\$3.25) is higher than most one bedroom apartments in other parts of the city (\$1.15), and frequently units in the Downtown Eastside are infested with cockroaches and rats (Community Directions 2002). In non-market housing, generally funded through the federal government, residents must satisfy an income test so that they pay no more than 30% of their income on rent. While there has been a gradual net gain in non-market housing

units, the waiting lists for these units suggest that need surpasses supply (City of Vancouver 2002).

- **Alcohol and Drug Abuse**

From the early part of the 20th century, workers in the resource economy have frequented the many hotels and bars in the Downtown Eastside. For much of the past decade, an open drug scene has been located in the centre of the community and heroin and cocaine are currently cheap and accessible. Alcohol and drug abuse is a problem in the Downtown Eastside, as illustrated by the number of deaths from drug overdose and the alarming rate of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C infection in the community. While there are still concerns that there are inadequate treatment facilities in the Downtown Eastside and elsewhere, there are many community members who are hopeful that recent harm reduction initiatives such as the safe injection site will be helpful (Community Directions 2002).

- **Community Economics**

Throughout the province, jobs in the resource-based sector (logging, mining, and millwork) have been disappearing. The number of people who are unemployed or not in the labour force in the Downtown Eastside is higher than in other parts of Vancouver. The number of people who have less than a Grade 9 education is also higher in the Downtown Eastside than in other parts of Vancouver. While a number of training programs exist, many lead to low-paying jobs (Community Directions 2002). Without meaningful and adequately-paid employment, many people continue to be dependent on the social service organizations located in the area for shelter, food, clothing, and other forms of assistance. The lack of local employment opportunities is especially problematic in a city with a high cost of living like Vancouver.

- **Development Pressures**

Redevelopment along the Port of Vancouver to the north, the gentrification associated with housing developments in Gastown, Yaletown and other areas adjacent to the Downtown Eastside, the expansion of downtown offices and services, and the Winter Olympics in 2010 present increasing pressures on the Downtown Eastside. For example, as more middle class people purchase or rent Gastown lofts or character homes in Strathcona, they generally seek access to coffee shops, restaurants, and other retail services. When the available land is limited as it is in the Downtown Eastside, services geared to middle class budgets replace land usages with lower returns (e.g., affordable housing). There is also more pressure to “clean-up the streets” as can be seen in recent provincial legislation such as the Safe Streets Act.³

RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES

Following the post-war boom, a number of churches in the area (First United Church, Saint James Anglican Church, the Salvation Army, and Saint Paul’s Catholic Church) began providing food, shelter, and clothing to the increasingly large numbers of low-income people in the Downtown Eastside. Later, frustrated community members formed a number of community organizations, beginning with the Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association (DERA), founded in 1973. DERA’s work in the community built on the community’s historical connections to labour organizing to attract interest in neighbourhood rights. Shortly after the founding of DERA, community members formed the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre to protect women’s rights. To stop redevelopment, other residents created the Strathcona Property Owners’ and Tenants Association (SPOTA). These groups, and others, began to make the public argument that the Downtown Eastside was more than “skid road”; it was a residential community (Hasson and Ley 1994).

³ Please see http://apc.resist.ca/safe_streets_act for more information.

Today, a number of initiatives and organizations continue to respond to the challenges facing the Downtown Eastside. While you will learn about many of them first-hand in your engagement with one of the Learning Exchange community partner organizations, the following is a partial list of recent developments:

- The City of Vancouver's **Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program** is a multi-faceted approach toward long-term health, safety, housing, and economic development involving a number of partners and initiatives working in the Downtown Eastside.
<[http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/Downtown Eastside/index.htm](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/Downtown%20Eastside/index.htm)>
- In 1997 the City of Vancouver created the **Mayor's Coalition on Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment** (now called the **Four Pillars Coalition**) with 20 founding partners, including businesses, government, non-profit organizations, universities, and advocacy groups. In May 2001, Vancouver adopted the Four Pillars approach to drug addiction (the Four Pillars are: harm reduction, prevention, treatment, and enforcement). More than 60 community partners are working together to create a safer, healthier community using a framework that has been successfully implemented in Europe and Australia where outcomes have included: decreased numbers of drug users consuming on the street; decreased overdose deaths; and decreased HIV and hepatitis infection rates.
<<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/fourpillars/coalition.htm>>
- The governments of Canada, British Columbia, and Vancouver signed the **Vancouver Agreement** in March 2000, pledging to work together and coordinate resources to promote and support sustainable economic, social, and community development in the city. The first focus of the agreement is Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.
<<http://www.vancouveragreement.ca>>
- The **Vancouver Coastal Health Authority** is involved in the Downtown Eastside in many ways, including working with Portland Hotel Community Services to open Insite, Canada's first legal supervised safe injection site in March 2003.
<<http://www.vch.ca/sis/>>
- Many community-based groups—**nonprofits, charities, religious organizations, and schools**—are working closely with community members to address the issues facing the community and promote a livable, safe, and viable community for all.

CONCLUSION

A word of caution—please do not feel that you now know everything there is to know about the Downtown Eastside and inner city communities after reading this article. One of the benefits of participating in the Learning Exchange Trek Program is the opportunity to interact with people who live and work in the community and learn from them. Some people may be more willing than others to engage in conversations about their communities. You may hear conflicting stories. You may be pleasantly surprised to hear stories of success; or upset to learn about the seemingly intractable problems. Consider this article a starting point in your quest to work with and understand community. We encourage you to reflect deeply, with curiosity and integrity, on your experiences with our community partner organizations—this will bring you closer to what Bud Osborn's poem at the beginning of this article calls "the heart of what makes real community."

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