

This Is Where I Live
Final Project Report

Background:

This project was awarded a \$5,000 small project grant by the Edmonton Arts Council in 2019.

The original project goals were as follows:

- Interviews with marginalized Edmontonians as research and development for a performance piece about homelessness in Edmonton.
- Transcription and editing of those interviews into scripts for professional actors.
- A small pilot performance piece to gauge community input and acceptance, and to test the piece on a small audience. This performance was to be comprised of live actors with one day rehearsal and a live performance to a small audience.

Final Report Executive Summary:

The project team completed the goals of the original project, and contributed their time, resources, and funding to deliver over and above the original project goals.

The project goals completed were:

- Interviews with marginalized Edmontonians and transcription of those interviews.
- Hiring of an Indigenous consultant and three non-Indigenous individuals to review the transcriptions and highlight sections which spoke to them about the identity and character of the interviewee.
- Creation of five-minute scripts.
- Validation of the completed scripts with the original interviewees.
- Hiring professional actors and director through CAEA DOT to rehearse on Zoom.
- Filming the performances through an ACTRA contract.
- Presenting the finished videos to an in-person audience of 250 at the Garneau in conjunction with a panel discussion, and to an online audience of approximately 60 people during Housing Month.

The final project timelines were:

- Winter 2019/2020: Pre-project planning, discussion of process and parameters with partners. Interviewees identified.
- March – June 2020: Project delay – health restrictions.
- Summer/Fall 2020: Interviewees conducted.
- Winter 2020/21: Review of interview materials.
- Spring/Summer 2021: Additional funding application unsuccessful. Partners decide to self-fund and move forward.
- Fall/Winter 2021: Script consultants hired, scripts validated with interviewees, actors hired.
- Winter/2022: Zoom rehearsals with actors/David Horak directing.

- March/April 2022: Filming with actors. Don Bouzek cinematography, David Horak dialogue coach.
- May/2022: Editing by Don Bouzek.
- June – October/2022: Planning for Garneau screening. Final video packaging, promotion.
- November 22, 2022: National Housing Day of Action – Screening at the Garneau.
- November 29, 2022: Online screening hosted by Homeward Trust as part of Housing Month activities.

This Is Where We Live – Process in Detail

The Project

This Is Where We Live is a video project featuring six local actors. Each actor delivers a monologue to camera, and each monologue is based on verbatim text from interviews with people in Edmonton who either were homeless or who have experienced homelessness. Beginning as a theatre pilot project in 2019, delays by COVID and the generous support of the project partners helped transform it into a video project. The process engaged individual members of Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ECOHH) and the Policy and Communications Committee (PACC).

Where It Came From

Originally the project was envisioned as a theatre project, interviewing people, transcribing their interviews, building monologues, and hiring actors to rehearse for a day and then deliver the monologues to a small live audience. The partners wanted to test the process and see how the audience reacted. Stories and shortening the distance between story and audience was the focus, because so many people living rough are waiting to tell their stories, but the people walking by or driving by won't take the time to hear them. ECOHH came on board as a project sponsor with funding, and the Edmonton Arts Council supported the project with a small project grant. As planning began, however, COVID hit and changed everything.

Designing and Conducting Interviews

Plans for a live event were quickly put on hold. To keep the project moving forward, Eric worked with PACC to develop interview strategies and build question lists. PACC members politely but firmly directed him away from asking a long list of informational questions and encouraged him instead to hold genuine conversations with interviewees. Jim Gurnett and Delmy Garcia-Hoyt of PACC and Linda Dumont of Alberta Street News sourced interview subjects. A friend Michael Tilleard introduced Eric to Corey Wyness, who runs the OUTpost on Jasper Ave. for LGBTQ2S+ homeless youth. Over the summer of 2020, as COVID restrictions came and went, Eric interviewed eight people on park benches, the Mission Hall on 96 St., at the Downtown OUTpost, and by the Rosedale encampment. Every individual interviewed was

compensated for their story and time with a one-hundred-dollar honorarium, and each was given the opportunity to use their name or not, to have their interview used for research or not, and to have their interview submitted to the Provincial Archives or not. Although all had valid questions, all except one were happy to use their name, and all were happy to contribute to a project that raised awareness of homelessness.

Strict health guidelines returned in the fall of 2020, and the team took the time to have the interviews transcribed. One interview was dropped because the subject wasn't homeless, and although they had difficult experiences in their lives these experiences weren't due to homelessness. The other seven touched on so many issues relating to homelessness that the team applied for additional funding to create videos instead of a one-time theatre event. The application wasn't successful, but Don Bouzek committed his time, some funding, and substantial video production resources, and Eric committed time and rest of the funding needed to carry the project forward. The world was changing too and that changed the production process moving forward.

De-Centering the Artist

Eric worked in educational television for many years before this project, as well as in theatre. In both creative processes the producer or the playwright centers themselves in the creation of meaning. In television a subject is interviewed. The interview is edited, often interspersed with other interviews or with visual material, music is added, and the whole thing made to fit a frame created by the producer. The original interviewee's story might come out looking quite different than what they intended. Anyone who's ever been interviewed for radio or tv has likely experienced the dissonance between what they wanted to say and what came out in the final story. Similarly, a playwright may conduct interviews or research, but then that information is filtered through their imagination.

In the beginning Eric was following that artist-centric model, looking at these interviews as source material, to be manipulated. Then George Floyd was murdered, and the Black Lives Matter and Anti-Racism movements spread through society and theatre. Participating in online Anti-Racist Theatre classes helped him understand how systemic racism succeeds – that it becomes not only embedded in institutions and laws but wired into our own minds and the way we function. This movement also helped Canadians understand our own systemic prejudice against Indigenous peoples, and the uncovering across Canada of unmarked graves at Residential School sites made manifest the tragic loss of Indigenous life, agency, and identity our country caused. Don Bouzek recommended that they seriously examine the power relations that existed between them as white male producers and the interviewees. To open the project to this understanding, the team engaged Darlene Auger as an Indigenous Consultant. As an Indigenous healer, academic, speaker, and theatre practitioner, Darlene re-visioned the project and the interviews, focusing on their reality and the centrality of their lived experience. She also reviewed the transcripts of Indigenous interviewees, highlighting the parts of their stories that spoke particularly to her about their experience.

Another change for Eric's understanding came about through Postmarginal Edmonton, a three-day workshop and retreat on inclusive theatre and ethical relationality held on September 12-14, 2021. Forty diverse theatre artists, scholars, and cultural workers gathered to explore what inclusive theatre practice might look like by doing it. The circle of artists at the retreat was for him a new experience. Although he'd worked in groups of artists many times, this was the first time that everyone was equal, no one had an agenda, and no one was able to manipulate the attention or direction of the group. As simple as this seems, valuing each individual and valuing the process of collaboration more than the outcome was profoundly affecting. Prior to the workshop, Eric was re-arranging the interview text based on his own judgement of how best to represent the individuals. After the workshop, he realized that filtering others' experience through his lens did not even begin to approach the ideal of ethical relationality.

After reflection, the team changed the review process: they hired theatre artists of roughly the same age, gender, and background as the interviewees to review their interviews. Once they'd built draft monologues based on this feedback, Eric located the interviewees again, one year later, and read the text back to them, making changes to their own words wherever requested. The team lost contact with one interviewee, so her monologue was dropped. Everyone hopes that she is okay. They hired actors who rehearsed the scripts on Zoom, and once again Eric located the interviewees (except for two that couldn't be found in time) to show them Zoom versions of the video made from their monologue before recording them on camera. Through these checks and balances, the team hopes the stories legitimately reflect what the interviewees wish to say.

Interesting Sidebar

As part of the rehearsal process, four interviewees (the ones who could be found), indicated they would be willing to meet with the actors who were portraying them. The actors were provided contact information for the interviewees, but although all of them expressed an interest in meeting, none of the actors initiated contact. There could be many reasons for this, but one result was that the actors and the director were not imitating the characters of the interviewees. They were seeking to find meaning and character from the text of the scripts, much like in traditional theatre. This raises an interesting discussion point for future work in verbatim theatre: what is the best source for understanding character and story, the text of the story or the source of the story?

The Takeaway

No creative process is perfect, and throughout this process the team has felt challenged many times about the decisions they made as producers. They began with a very simple goal: to give some of the people experiencing homelessness the chance to tell their stories in a way that would help the passers-by and the drivers-by engage with them. Hundreds of people in Edmonton give their time and their hearts every day to help people suffering from lack of housing security, poverty, and homelessness. These videos will be a success for the team if a few others, those who usually walk by or drive by, come to see that everybody's story is central, everybody's life has ups and downs, and everybody deserves to have their story told and heard.

Outcomes to Date

On November 22, 2022, the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ECOHH) hosted the premiere of this short film at the Garneau Theatre in Edmonton. The event featured host David Horak, Artistic Director of Freewill Shakespeare Festival and rehearsal director for the monologues, live music, and a brief panel discussion with Edmonton housing advocates. The panelists were Nadine Chalifoux, Chairperson of ECOHH, Cam McDonald, the Executive Director of Right at Home Housing Society, and Don Iveson, former Mayor of Edmonton, and Co-Chair of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. His Worship Mayor Amarjeet Sohi also attended and proclaimed the day as National Housing Day. The videos were presented as part of a packaged short film, with reflection questions in between each video.

- Approximately two hundred fifty people attended the premiere at the Garneau.
- Another forty-four people attended a lunchtime online screening of the video on November 29, hosted by Homeward Trust as part of Housing Month presentations.
- The video is being used as classroom material by Patricia Darbasie for her Concordia University class in theatre.
- Further online uses of the videos will be determined in collaboration with the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness and through discussions with co-producer Don Bouzek.

Unsolicited Feedback to Date

From people who attended the screening:

Thank you so much for doing this project. I'm so glad I was able to attend last night's event. The film you and your team created is amazing, and the entire evening was well structured and informative. I especially liked the breaks between the monologues, which gave people time to absorb and think about what they'd just seen. I'm happy for you that all the work over the past three+ years has resulted in such an important film. There is so much valuable information brought out by those very personal monologues.

As I told you last night, the shift from a live theatre event to a film was a serendipitous choice. While begun in response to the Covid pandemic, it resulted in a product that can be shared with many, many more people.

Thank you again for the invite to the event last night. The production and stories were very impactful and brought up many thoughts and reflections around homelessness in our city.

Well done, Thank you again!

Hi Eric - I just wanted to thank you for the wonderful video narratives you produced for last night's premiere at the Garneau. --- had sent me links to the videos last summer and I wanted to contact you then, but various family dramas got in the way.

What I came away with was the power of the individual stories and their particularity. No one watching those videos could now think of the homeless in any stereotypical way. And the acting!! Brother. Those people were convincing.

Hearing the stories of Edmontonians without a home was eye opening, and often so sad. So many would like to have a normal life but are trapped on the streets. I really hope this important work will see wider distribution, to help shatter the myths about the people who find themselves in such a bad situation. It's very convenient to tell ourselves that they are all addicts, criminals, or somehow deserve their plight, but reality is much more complex than that.

From an interviewee:

Thank you! It was an Amazing Experience Participating in the Video Project with you Eric. May Creator Bless You on your Journey Helping Those who need Help in Every Way Possible!!

Summary

We wish to extend our thanks to the Edmonton Arts Council and Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness for providing partial funding for this project.

A copy of the flyer for the event follows.

THIS IS WHERE WE LIVE

PERSONAL STORIES OF EDMONTON COMMUNITY MEMBERS
WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

Presented by:
Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness

November 22, 2022

National Housing Day of Action

7 PM at The Garneau Theatre
8712 109 ST NW, Edmonton, AB

TICKETS: \$10 in advance, \$15 at the door

[This-Is-Where-We-Live.eventbrite.com](https://www.this-is-where-we-live.com)

A short film based on interviews with members of our Edmonton
community with a short panel discussion following.
Proceeds go to support ECOHH's ongoing work.

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Edmonton Arts Council and the City of Edmonton.



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ACTRA and the CFTPA.

ACTRA

PRODUCED by ERIC RICE and GROUND ZERO PRODUCTIONS