

activism

# Radical academy

Psych survivors get lesson in sound bites to make policy wonks listen up **By TIM MASTERSON**

IN THE BUSY PARKDALE ACTIVITY-Recreation Centre (PARC) on Queen West, where homeless people amble in for free coffee and lunch and you often have to step over desperate bodies to get up the front stairs, a small university of sorts makes its home on the top floor.

A group of psychiatric survivors, many of whom find just getting up in the morning a full-time job, have been enrolled in a 12-week course with an unusual curriculum. The goal of this radical academy, called Voices from the Street, is the honing of personal narrative so students can translate the experience of homelessness, addiction and poverty for the social service

agencies and policy orgs that are supposed to serve them.

"For too long we've been the passive recipients of other people's decisions about what we need, and clearly that approach has left us floundering," says activist, author and psychiatric survivor Pat Capponi, one of the project's teachers. "We're trying to help people overcome the shame and fear and get to the policy wonks."

Capponi's method is simple but stunningly effective: after enrollees have outlined their stories (these are usually rambling and full of hair-raising hurts), she helps them prioritize the details into compact speeches and sound bites for busy social service folk

and media reps who are generally averse to meandering.

This distilling of personal experience means personal torment can now be turned to the greater good.

When I compared the first raw recitations of the 12 participants in that fluorescent-lit room on PARC's top floor to the polished speeches on graduation day in mid-June, the change was astounding.

Capponi talks about the importance of making social service systems work the way they were intended to, "to help us achieve independence rather than keep us in thrall to procedures, rules and red tape. We don't need interpret-

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Pat Capponi teaches at Voices from the Street, a grassroots speakers bureau.

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ers; we need a place to join the discussion," she says of this grassroots speakers' bureau.

But now that the grads are out of school, the big question is, are there enough policy specialists and front-line workers with their ears open?

It's an issue that worries Emily Fox, once a Voices participant and now a leader in the project. "There just aren't enough forums for graduates," she says. Voices students get a jolt of self-confidence and learn to see the possibilities, she says, but the big, bad world may not be ready for them. "They have power in the group, but they don't really have power in the bigger pic-

ture. That's what I'd like to change."

But for some Voices enrollees, making a major societal impact isn't the whole deal. Says T., a tall, lanky recovering addict with five months sobriety, getting to speak to a board or a council "would be gravy." The real issue, he tells me, sitting on one of PARC's dusty floral couches, has to do with where he's travelled from.

"I see the people downstairs sleeping it off on street benches, a plate of half-finished food at their feet, worn out, drained from what they're doing out there. But I was just like them. I've been hopeless, broke, pretty much all my options used up."

This course, he says, "has made me accountable to someone other than myself. I show up here and am a part of

something. It's really different for someone like me. I can't think of anything I've ever begun and finished."

This same sense of wonderment is expressed by another former Voices student, Mark Dukes, now a member of the Toronto Drug Strategy implementation panel and of the Parkdale Drug Strategy Group. "People speak publicly each and every day of their lives, but around my circle, the filter between people's brains and mouths is dirty," he says, referring to the communication failure common to folks consumed with day-to-day survival.

"The main reason I'm here is Pat Capponi. I want some of that to rub off on me. She's showing me how to choose the moment, getting me to sharpen my words," says Duke.

Phil H., a former addict, is likewise impressed by his new skill set. "I was invited to speak to a Centre for Addiction and Mental Health housing forum about how important housing is to someone's recovery from addiction and how stability is critical. They took my suggestions to heart. What I went through does have a purpose."

At the Voices graduation ceremony at CAMH's Malcolmson Theatre, a man named Mike recounted a hospital emergency department nightmare to the roomful of Children's Aid workers, hospital staff, social workers, food bank staff and community workers.

T. spoke of the unmanageability of alcoholism, and Tammy, a medicine woman from an Aboriginal community, shared, in scattered style, a story

of grief felt thick in the bones.

The speeches were moving, but I couldn't help wondering how many policy specialists are wired to absorb these messages of despair.

Fox isn't sure either. Months after she left the course, she made a speech at City Hall on global perspectives. She explained that while developing countries admire Canada, the marginalized here are treated like Third World residents.

"People didn't make eye contact with me," says Fox. "It taught me that this Voices thing isn't about immediate gratification; it's like planting a field. You trust someone will water and harvest it, but you really don't know."

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