

# Taking back the night: an insider's perspective

VANCOUVER (CUP) — On Saturday, September 25, one of the first really cold evenings of that month, a diverse group of women from all over Greater Vancouver gathered in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery to "Take Back the Night."

The apparent agenda of Take Back the Night is twofold: first, it is a symbol of women reclaiming the streets that, according to those in attendance, are currently unsafe.

Secondly, it confronts the issue of violence against women in general, and seeks to offer security and support for those women who suffer because of violence.

This annual rally is for women only and is publicized as a protest of male violence against females. Because of these two features, it has evoked ambivalence and sparked controversy among both men and women.

My own ambivalence towards the rally's agenda — specifically concerning the level of safety in the streets of Vancouver — placed me clearly on the political periphery.

I don't identify with a need to reclaim the night, and my lack of affinity with the cause made me feel like an impostor and an outsider. I have only occasionally felt afraid on the streets of Vancouver, and am not afraid of men or the night.

Perhaps my rose coloured glasses will be violently removed, perhaps not.

When a male acquaintance of mine walked through the budding rally and questioned me on its purpose, the woman beside me replied angrily, "So that a woman can walk the streets of Vancouver without an escort."

I silently wondered how it could be that two women's experiences in the same city could

be so disparate.

So, feeling more a spectator than a participant, I was genuinely curious to discover what life experiences bound these many women of all ages, classes and races together.

Many of the women present were organized in groups, while carrying placards and banners upon which indignant messages were written.

Among them were those one might expect: *Men must stop rape now, Rape is not sex, Equal pay now, Child Care, We are not afraid*, and a puzzling, *Nice men rape too*.

Still other declamations seemed to be fragments of arguments that were curiously out of place: *Censorship is not the answer, Censorship is non-consensual, and Strip-searching anywhere, anytime, is sexual assault*.

These various statements

exhibited the fact that many agendas and beliefs were being represented, connected only by the loosely knitted fabric that forms the women's rights movement.

40 minutes into the cold night, the speakers appeared and gave coherence and voice to this crowd.

When the final speaker, the feminist writer and activist Andrea Dworkin, addressed the crowd, I realized why men aren't invited and why they shouldn't be. This rally was a show of support for women in need on their own terms, which is the only form that true support can take.

Take Back the Night is about solidarity, support and self-determination for all women — especially those who are currently marginalized.

But unfortunately, Take Back the Night is not by all women or for all women.

Dworkin spoke of her experience

living on the street, how she was degraded and exploited by poverty and the system that promotes it.

She decried the chasm existing between women living on the street in poverty and those who live in relative privilege; I was a testament to that fact.

She complained that organizations supporting women in need are understaffed and underfunded, and encouraged women to support one another with volunteer hours and money.

"No women are free until all are free."

This must be true, and when poverty, race, and circumstance divide women to the point where the genuine struggles of some are misunderstood and belittled by others, then surely the women's movement has a long distance to travel.

Sarah Isaacs

## The plight of the First Nations

TORONTO (CUP) — Sherman Labelle, 17, of Stoney First Nation Reserve in Alberta, tied a belt around his neck and hung himself in May of last year.

A tragedy of our system, he entered a child welfare ward at 13 and was placed in six different foster homes over four years.

A teenage alcoholic, he attended regular alcohol treatment sessions but had to stop when the centre closed because of allegations of sexual abuse by staff members.

And when supplemental treatment programs were initiated, tribal chiefs claimed they did not have sufficient funds to sustain them.

Despite annual revenues of over \$50 million, not only do the residents of Stoney Reserve no longer have these treatment centres, but many are forced to live in sub-standard housing. Moreover, the community suffers a 90 percent unemployment rate, while only 55 out of the 3,300 on the reserve have acquired a high-school diploma.

The reserve's three chiefs, meanwhile, collected \$450,000 in tax-free income in 1997.

And to make matters worse, government representatives have been accused recently of turning a blind eye to the misappropriation and mishandling of money and services that should have been used to prevent the tragedy.

For example, in 1996, between royalties and government funding, approximately \$30,000 was made available for every resident on the reserve. But due to financial mismanagement the money was never allocated.

This type of mismanagement has left a legacy of hopelessness for young people, resulting in a suicide rate 10 times the national average.

The poorly funded educational programs have caused children to lack a sense of identity. In this chaotic space street gangs prey on kids that grow up in impoverished and dysfunctional situations. Inspiring native mentors and role models are

desperately needed to offset the false security and protection that gangs offer.

However, it is still an uphill battle.

The justice system in Canada is just beginning to take a hard look at the interaction between government leadership and Native Canadians.

In 1997, Alberta Provincial Judge John Reilly condemned tribal leaders and government officials by ordering a full-scale inquiry into reserve conditions.

The Alberta Justice Department responded by scaling back the scope of the investigation, while the federal Department of

Indian Affairs hired an accounting firm to manage band finances and investigate the accusations of corruptions.

But it is not in the best interest of government departments to publicize the underlying problems that have led to Labelle's untimely death.

As long as Indian Affairs are involved, the issues may never be resolved.

Reilly asserts that crimes against the natives should be prosecuted — including those committed by their own leaders.

He also believes there should be some assurance that proper education and health

programs are provided. Ultimately, he believes that Indian Affairs are an integral part of the problem and should be abolished.

Is the answer the abolishment of reserves? Since 62 percent of Canada's aboriginal population is under 29, a new generation is quickly coming into their own.

Many have left the reserves to compete in the white world and are coping with acquiring skills to exist in a larger society.

What does the future hold for them? Is there even time to assure them of one?

Only time will tell.

Lisa Gardner

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PHOTO OF THE WEEK

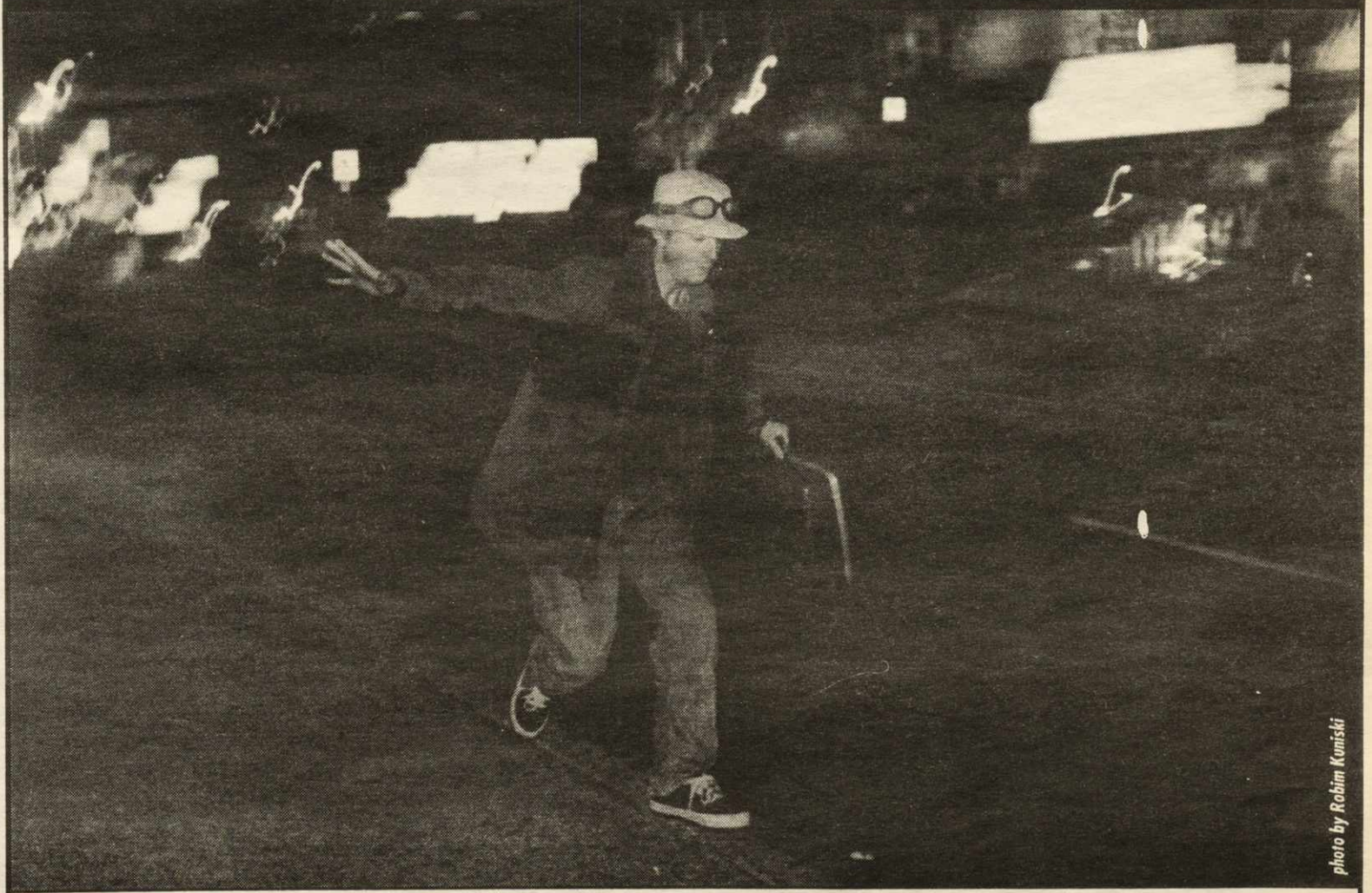


Snap happy!

Drop off photographs to room 312 SUB anytime (drop-off box on the door).

THE GAZETTE

## PHOTO OF THE WEEK



Spring Garden Road is a wacky place with a head full of chemicals. Stick to the sidewalk for your health and safety.

photo by Robin Kuniski