

Boyle Street

The knife shakes in her hand as she turns—angry and confused—on the people at the next table.

They were talking about her. She knew it. They said her name. Jane. They had no right.

Jane is a member of Edmonton's inner city community. At 51, the mentally ill woman has suffered from chronic depression for over 12 years. Jane lives in a land of pink elephants and strange voices that whisper through walls. The few people she actually sees are alcoholics or drug addicts—except for Steve.

Steve Natran is a visiting student on the University of Alberta campus while he completes his social work degree through the University of Calgary's Edmonton division. Natran met Jane in September when he began a field placement at the Boyle Street Community Services Co-op.

Jane is lonely, depressed and lives in a one room hole on Edmonton's skid row.

"The day of the knife incident was a bad day for Jane ... it was the paranoia presenting itself," Natran says.

He explains that Jane is lonely, depressed, lives in a one room hole on Edmonton's skid row, and still experiences extreme grief from her father's death eight years ago.

Coming from an upper-middle class background, Jane's problems began when she was in her teens, Natran has assessed. He believes sexual abuse was involved.

"All she ever does is complain about her delusions—she'll talk about things like seven-foot tall men, 30 or 40 of them, hovering around her. Trying to get at her ... Everyone is always trying to get at her. She doesn't like it. She's down on men, but she constantly seeks affection."

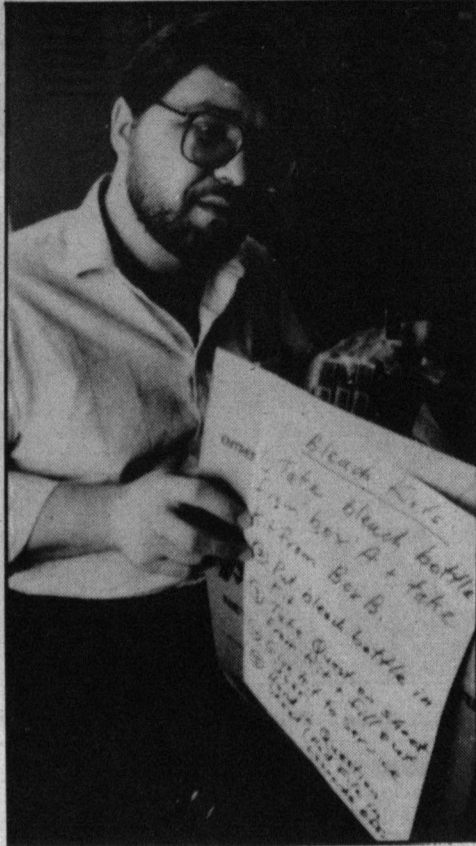
Natran's job is to be Jane's friend.

"My role at the Co-op is to help mental health clients, who have been discharged from the hospital learn to survive in the community.

"I help provide advice, counsel and support people in their day to day needs—in areas like housing, finances, employment, the justice system and social services.

"We do everything we can do to keep them out of the hospital," Natran says.

Natran works with the Boyle Street Co-op's mental health outreach worker, Frank Klemen. The mental health outreach program originated out of concern for the physical, social and mental well-being of psychiatric patients, who, once discharged, often find themselves alone and isolated in the inner city, Klemen says.



Homework: part of Natran's job includes distributing needle bleaching kits and condoms.

Between 0.1 and 0.2 per cent of Canada's population are homeless. This equates to between 785 and 1,579 absolutely homeless in Edmonton, Natran says. Approximately one-third of these people are mentally ill.

"The inner city is a unique place for these people to go when they leave the hospital. They can disappear through the cracks.

"They have no friends. People fear them. Stories circulate about the horrors of Edmonton's inner city, and people are afraid these people will turn on them and kill them.

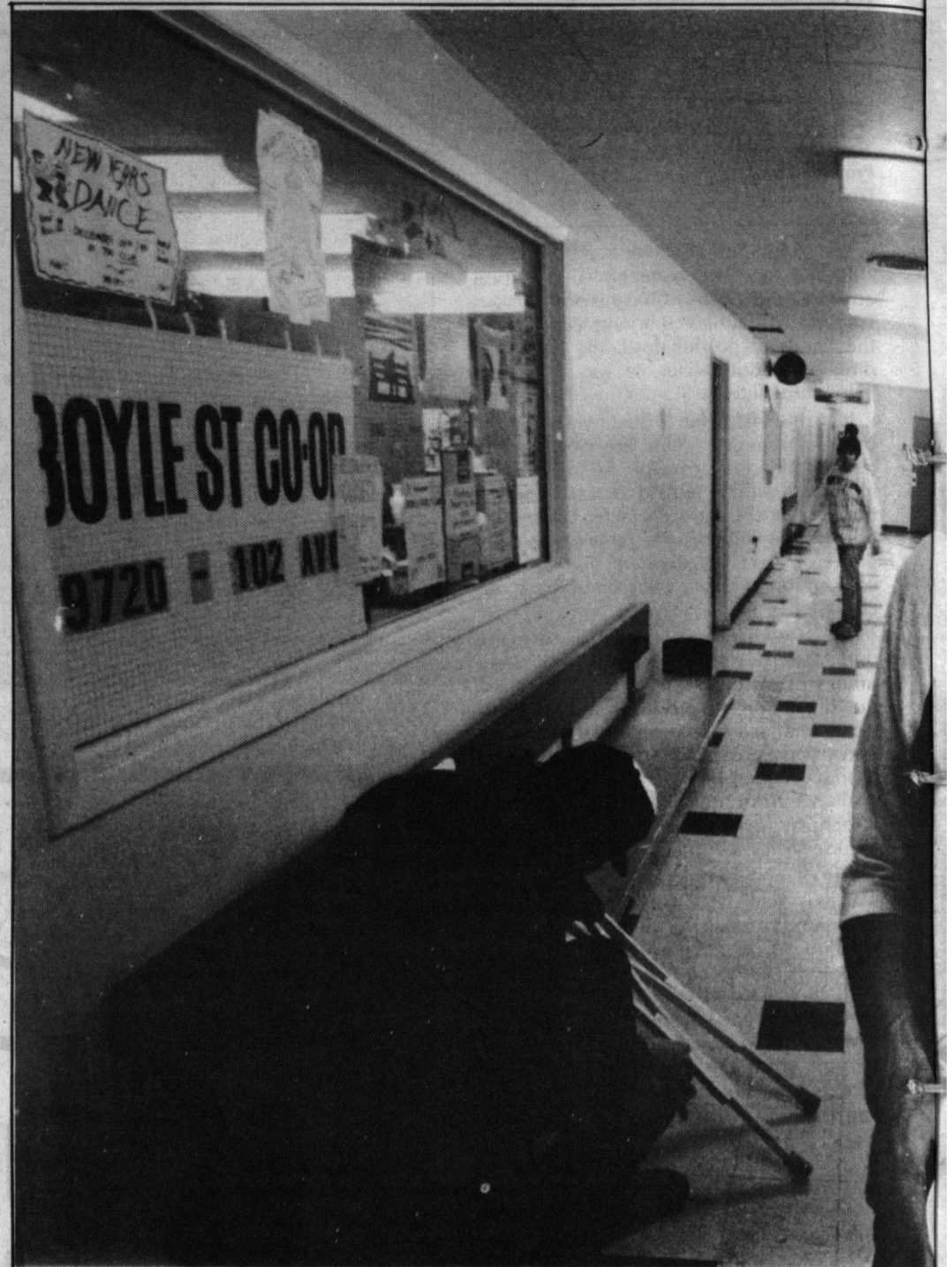
"They don't," Natran says.

The Co-op has space for 60 people in the mental outreach program. "The clients we see are, for the most part, an extremely intelligent, honest and witty group of men and women who, basically through no fault of their own, have been stuffed into the dark and troubled abyss of mental illness. Tortured by voices, handcuffed by the illness' unpredictability, and threatened by accusations and indifference, their constant struggle for survival is a lesson for us all," Klemen says.

The first thing Klemen and Natran try and do for a client is establish trust. "These people are alone in the world they need friends," Natran says.

Klemen agrees. "For over 70 per cent of my clients I am their significant other."

Natran has been working with two women clients since starting at the Co-op. Jane is one. The other is also middle-aged, and has a 15-year-old daughter.



Volunteer Joseph Loyle is familiar with life

"I pick them up and take them out for coffee. I try to support them through positive feedback—find out what their problems are and work them out. Of course it depends if they are ready to open up," Natran says.

Jane isn't. "She continually says 'Stop. You're analysing me.' But the other woman is becoming more receptive," he notes.

However, Natran knows he can't push for fear of violating the trust he has worked so hard to establish. "Our clients need to know they can trust us as this leads to their being able to trust the system and society.

Total Mental Health Budget

- Administration
- Regional Mental Hospitals
- Alberta Mental Health Services
- Grants to Community Agencies
- Purchases Services (ie: psychiatric)
- Extended Care Facilities

Co-op embraces

Christmas is a time when many students, exhausted from the pressures of final exams, fondly think of going home. Home to a warm circle of family and friends to celebrate the season.

Unfortunately, over 1,000 Edmontonians don't have a home. They sleep in abandoned buildings, all night cafes, city parks, under bridges or at over-crowded shelters.

Still more inner city residents rent one-room dwellings not fit to call home. They heat their food on hot plates and share a bathroom with six other people.

While these people don't have homes, they do have a place to go—The Boyle Street Community Services Co-op.

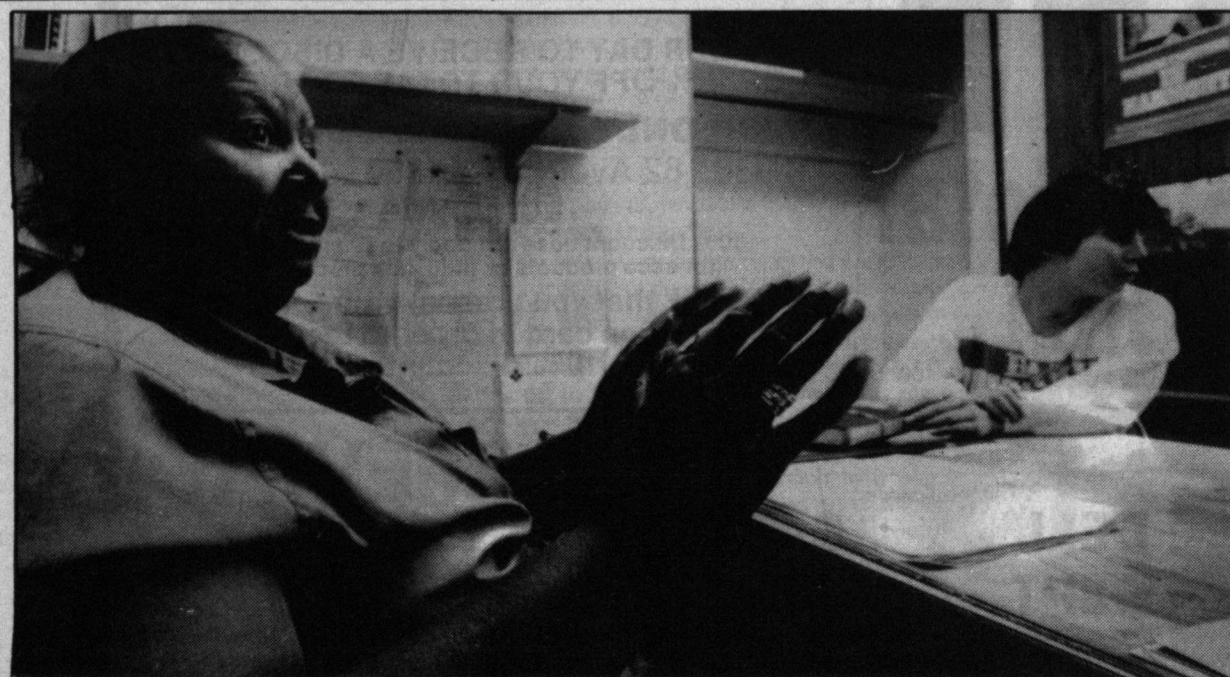
"We're the family for the people

of this community, and it is a community ... a warm and loving community," says Mary Burlie, who has worked at the Co-op for almost 19 years.

In the beginning, Boyle Street was the heart of Edmonton. When the University of Alberta first opened its doors, students and city residents would flock to the strip to shop for Christmas presents, attend theatre openings, and dine with friends in fine restaurants.

Today, it is Churchill Square that sparkles, like a scene from *It's A Wonderful Life*. Boyle street falls to the shadows ... no red or green lights shine amidst the dark alleys, boarded store fronts and crumbled sidewalks.

The Co-op was founded in 1971



Outreach worker Mary Burlie talks with Marilyn Majeau.