

FEATURE

HOMELESSNESS

LIVING

WITH BY MARLENE
CAPLANNO reprinted from The Link
Canadian University Press

ADDRESS

WHEN IT SNOWS, they have to look for fresh cardboard to replace the soggy layers that serve as a bed in a secret place they won't disclose.

"We get up scared, tired. We hide our stuff so no one takes it. Then we walk, go into warm places, look for cigarettes, any alcohol we can find."

It's a long way from Baffin Island to the corner of Ste. Catherine and Atwater in downtown Montreal.

For Jeannie and Paulusie, an Inuit couple living on the street, the journey from the tundra to the sidewalk has been a blurred and boozy trip. Huddled around a cigarette, they speak quietly in Inuktitut.

"You're not a cop, eh?" he asks.

Paulusie asks the reporter for some ID and then agrees to be interviewed. "But you can't use our names, we're too ashamed."

But the couple says they want their story told to discourage other aboriginal people from making a break for the big city.

Jeannie is wearing a bright red parka, a copy of the traditional design of women's coats back home. She says she has a genuine atigi (parka). Her mother made it for her. But it's in her Baffin Island community, about 2,000 km north of Montreal.

And so are the couple's four children.

"Children's Aid sent the kids back up," says Jeannie. "We were in Ottawa, drinking, fighting a lot."

Jeannie and Paulusie are alcoholics. They've been heavy drinkers for about 15 years. Last fall, they joined the ranks of Montreal's homeless.

They have no identification and their clothing is supplied by local church groups. Their blanket was stolen by another street person.

"We're nobody right now," says Paulusie.

It's not exactly clear how they got to Montreal. It is clear that alcohol had something to do with it.

Canada's original peoples have an average life expectancy eight years less than the national average of 76.5 years. The major causes of death are accidents, poisoning and violence, often alcohol — and substance abuse-related.

But Mike Sandy, a Naskapi Indian who works for Native Para-Judicial Services of Quebec as a counsellor for native inmates, says alcoholism doesn't exist in a vacuum.

A former substance and alcohol abuser himself, Sandy has become a medicine man, a healer in his culture, learning the rituals and traditions from his elders.

In the prisons, he shares with native in-

mates the experiences of his recovery from alcoholism and his spiritual journey.

"My great-grandfathers had powers," he says. "Then the Europeans came to buy furs and set up the trading posts. They were well prepared. They had sugar, flour, shells, guns, a bible — and alcohol. They brought the word of God while they were robbing the people."

Now, Sandy is trying to help people like Jeannie and Paulusie recover the power they have lost.

"We've been drinking how many years?" Paulusie asks his wife.

Jeannie reminds him.

Paulusie is 38. He shuffles along the sidewalk in an old blue ski jacket. His grey polyester pants hang low and bag at the knees. They're splattered and dusty. His black hair is slicked back and most of his teeth are missing.

Paulusie says the family was together in Ottawa two years ago when he had a job with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, an organization founded to preserve Inuit culture while developing the northern environment.

"Then I got drunk."

The Tapirisat sent him to Harvest House, a detoxification and rehabilitation program, but he ran away.

"The solution is to go back home," Jeannie says.

Home is a community of just over 1,100, most of them family, on the rocky edge of Baffin Island. Getting there requires more than a \$1,200 plane ticket.

According to Ida Williams, director of Montreal's Native Friendship Centre, the couple will have to get in touch with Social Services of the Northwest Territories, who will then contact the social worker from their community to try to arrange for the couple's return.

"The community has to accept them back," says Williams, who explains that some communities banish individuals if their behavior is a danger to other members.

And that means Jeannie and Paulusie will have to sober up. Paulusie says he's "gone crazy a few times from drinking." The police have been involved. He had a court date, but he tore up the paper.

"I don't give a shit...this is Indian land. That's my theme."

The friendship centre can help them find a way back, but only if they go in and ask for help.

"Fuck the friendship centre," Paulusie mutters. "Too many rules."

He says that if someone showed up with tickets home and a ride to the airport, he'd go as long as he had a 40-ouncer. "I don't care."

Jeannie is sniffing and her eyes water. "I care."

She's afraid to call her kids.

"I'm scared to say I'm still here, don't have a plane ticket. If I talk to my kids, they'll cry, and I'll cry."

"We cry a lot," Paulusie says.

"Together," she echoes.

JEANNIE HAS WORKED up north as a teacher's aide and an interpreter. Her youngest child is 18 months, her eldest is 12. Her mother is now raising the children. She says her parents used to fight and drink, but now the situation has improved.

In Montreal, Jeannie and Paulusie scrape for survival and booze on a strip of Ste. Catherine between St. Mathieu and Bishop

Street. They spend the late afternoons hustling passersby for change.

"It's a good spot," Paulusie says.

"The other day someone gave me \$20. That was great. We had food, cigarettes, booze."

At lunchtime they go a downtown soup kitchen for a hot meal. At four o'clock, they go to St. James Church for supper.

"We get that kind of love, we accept help from people who care," Paulusie says. "And we still care, we still love."

Jeannie says they have faith they'll survive and stay together as a family. But if they don't seek help, their only chance will be getting arrested or ending up in a hospital.

Ida Williams says that is often how homeless and troubled urban aboriginal people finally connect with social services.

Alanis Obomsawin, an Abenaki who made a film on homeless natives titled *No Address*, says many natives leave their homes in search of a better life in the big city. What they often find is poverty, rejection and oppression. Obomsawin says the language barrier and racism often compound the problem of living on the street.

"We can't go back to the way it was before, but we can learn our languages, feel good about ourselves and be proud of our ancestors," says Obomsawin, who grew up on the Odenak reserve near Trois Rivieres.

"Some of us end up on the street. But I have great hopes for this generation. We come from a very rich culture."

Jeannie takes the reporter aside after the free hot dog lunch following services at St. Steven's on the corner of Atwater and Rene Levesque Boulevard. Bands are warming up for a parade and crowds line the sidewalk.

"He beats me every time he gets drunk,"

Jeannie says quietly.

Paulusie comes and tugs at her arm.

"Come on, beauty, let's see how they put on a parade."

He hooks his arm through hers and they shuffle off into the crowd.

