

**Toronto Public Library's
fifth annual June
Callwood Lecture:
Kitchen is the Heart of
Home – May 19, 2011**

Thank you for inviting me to give the fifth annual June Callwood Lecture. It's also a special honour for me to be introduced by Adam Vaughan, and I know we all appreciate the musical inspiration by Common Thread.

***Meeting June in Nellie's
kitchen***

June Callwood has a legendary history of work on social justice. I am truly honoured to be here giving this lecture in her name. I think June would want me to tell you how we first met. It's why I'm locating the theme of my speech today, about home and social programs, in ***the kitchen***.

I met June when I was a fairly new community health nurse, working at a community health centre. True to the health centre's commitment to the community there was a tradition of staff volunteering with various organizations in the community. I was given the opportunity for my first board of directors' experience, at Nellie's, a well known emergency shelter and safe haven for women and children.

Apart from the usual board duties, members of the board were expected to share in the cooking of Sunday dinner for the 30 plus women and children expected. I arrived for my first shift quite terrified, and that's where I first met June. It was an intimidating experience. I felt like an intruder in someone else's kitchen.

I was preoccupied and distracted by the thought of what led these women and children to leave their very own kitchens. Then there was



June Callwood, a famous writer and activist I had long admired. I was to be her 'sous-chef' and I had absolutely no experience cooking for more than 3 or 4 people let alone 35. However, as you all may know, June was a 'do-er' and she quickly delegated jobs to me and before I knew it pasta and salad was prepared and served. Cooking, as you know, was only one of June's many talents.

I would now like to tell you about some of the other kitchens I have visited. These kitchens will further help tell the story of why we need a national housing program, why we must continue to fight for all of our social programs and why the right to housing is about more than just four walls.

Wilfred's kitchen

I think perhaps the roughest kitchen I ever saw on a home visit was when I was working as a public health nurse. I was visiting an old man I'll call Wilfred. He lived on the third, although it might have been the fourth floor in a Cabbagetown rooming house. Wilfred was a retired bartender from across the street. He actually ***did not*** have a kitchen, and not unlike many rooming house residents, his bedroom, his only room, doubled as his kitchen. He had a can opener, a fork, knife and spoon. His bedroom also doubled as his bathroom with a pail in the middle of the room.

Wilfred made it clear that he had a plan for me. Unable to get out anymore, he directed me to shop for him once a week. His grocery list was canned salmon and strawberries. That was it – canned salmon and strawberries.

I tried hard to be more than just his grocery delivery nurse. I arranged for a doctor to make house calls, I got him on Ensure, I tried to have him relocated to a ground floor unit and tried to convince him to accept Meals on Wheels and other services. But Wilfred was really only happiest when I was delivering his canned salmon and strawberries. Toronto Public Health was not happy with Wilfred's arrangement or with me. My supervisor told me that Wilfred was ***not 'meeting his goals'*** and I was forced to discharge him.

That's what happens when programs get restructured.

All across this city, there remain many Wilfreds, and Winnifreds, living in substandard housing, in rooms that don't meet proper housing standards. Those living conditions have been worsened today, by the twin plagues of extreme heat and bedbugs.

Boarding House kitchens

Several years later I had the opportunity with another nurse to put together a cookbook of recipes by some rooming house residents who happened to be known for their great cooking. They shared a communal kitchen in their house.

Many of the recipes in the book say a lot more than listing the ingredients you throw in the pot. Take Ted's 'Poor Man's Potatoe Soup' recipe, or Art's 'Northern Bushwacker Tea'.

Here is the recipe for John and Buford's 'Boarding House Stew'.

Chicken soup (chicken noodle or instant)

Potatoes

Rice

Barley

Egg noodles

Start with the chicken soup.

Add each of the remaining ingredients.

Simmer for several hours, stirring occasionally.

With leftover stew, you can add tomato soup, carrots (canned or fresh) and/or peas (canned).

Put in a cool spot like a window ledge. Don't leave on the stove.

Note there is no actual chicken added to this recipe. However it does show creativity – one meal morphing into another with the addition of new ingredients like the canned soup or vegetables on day 2 or 3 or 4. There is also the creative use of the window ledge for rooms without a fridge. The 'don't leave on the stove' instruction was about proper food storage, to prevent or at least limit bacteria growth.

Note - we made this cookbook before the 21.6% Harris' cuts to people's welfare and food budgets.

A Kitchen for thousands

If I thought cooking for 35 people at Nellie's was a gigantic effort, nothing prepared me for the heroic feat of the day shelters, also known as drop-in centres, where volunteers and staff routinely prepare hot meals for hundreds each day.

Sistering, a women's drop-in, served 131,000 meals last year. They have reported a profound increase in women needing food. On Christmas Day 2009 they served 100 women dinner. On Christmas Day 2010 they served 300 women dinner.

Most of the drop-ins try to make the best of donations, gratefully receiving supplies from food banks and FoodShare. These centres have it down to a science, stretching ingredients, applying for grants for necessities like freezers, developing catering capabilities for their clients as community economic development endeavours.

Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and other anti-poverty groups have always been able to count on some of these centres to cater our events, sometimes 500 servings and at a price we could afford. ***By the way, that's been my organizing rule Number 1 – provide a meal at your event.***

We used to say there was always enough food provided in the drop-ins or soup kitchens and people did not have to go hungry, but that has not been the case for quite a while. To make matters worse, people with medical conditions or cultural food needs have many of their food necessities unmet.

When I worked at Street Health we integrated information about food and nutrition into our first survey in 1992. A young homeless man in his 20s told us "It is hard to control my diabetes by diet because if you're going to the drop-ins you just eat what they have." In fact two-

thirds of those we asked who required a special diet for health reasons were not able to afford the foods required or had no place to store food – i.e. no kitchen.

Today, in the midst of a hunger crisis, drop-ins fear new funding cuts as the city proceeds to evaluate its core services.
Out of the Cold kitchens

The natural outcome from the cancellation of federal and provincial housing programs was most profoundly seen in Ontario and Alberta. Premiers Mike Harris and Ralph Klein jumped on the cut social spending bandwagon and cancelled affordable housing programs and the numbers of homeless people skyrocketed.

In 1998, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) declared homelessness a national disaster calling for a national housing program and funding for emergency relief.

Without adequate government response, the charitable sector was forced to come to the rescue, as best they could.

The first Out of the Cold program was started in 1987, by Sister Susan Moran and students at St. Michael's school, in response to the death of a homeless man near their school. In Ontario, similar programs popped up everywhere – Barrie, Hamilton, Kitchener, Niagara Falls, Kingston.

Church kitchens are famous for the terrific home cooking by their members. Faith groups across the country, came together over the years to offer a hot, wholesome dinner, shelter and refuge overnight, to people who were homeless – in the winter months. They opened their doors for one night each, leading to what I have called a 'forced migration', people moving night after night to eat and sleep at a different church facility. Unfortunately, church spaces have also become a recipe for overcrowding and disease spread.

But everyone will tell you how good the food is at these programs! Turkey with all the trimmings, chicken curry with rice and veggies, meat lasagne, and chicken legs with pasta, shepherds' pie, – nearly always served with a side of soup or salad and a desert fitting a

traditional Sunday dinner. In most cases a breakfast is provided for the 'guests' before they leave in the morning. Saint Andrew's in Toronto used to even make Eggs Benedict.

The list of ingredients for Shepherd's Pie at Blythwood Road Baptist Church which will feed 160 people is staggering:

55 pounds of ground beef

44 lbs of onions

3 litres of vegetable oil

10 litres of tomatoe sauce

110 pounds of potatoes

33 lbs of frozen corn, peas, carrots

1 pound of parmesan cheese

44 pounds of green beans

4 - 1.5 litre bottles of ketchup

22 lbs of salad

2 litres of salad dressing

5 - 600 gram blocks of cheese

16 litres of milk

That is just the list of main ingredients. The list carries on with spices, condiments, desert, fresh fruit, etc.

The Out of the Cold program grew in every aspect: the number of sites, the number of people wanting to help. The average number of volunteers cooking, serving and ensuring shelter at each site is now estimated to be about 120.

The number of people needing the service also grew, so much in fact, that people needing shelter or food could be turned away.

Here we are 24 years later and our city, the City of Toronto, continues to rely on a primarily volunteer based program to provide basic necessities for people – food and shelter.

In Calgary, while doing research for the documentary film series ***Home Safe***, I visited an 'Inn from the Cold' program, in one of those western evangelical monolith churches that seats 2,000 people on any given Sunday. The kitchen here was spanking new, modern and

the size of a hotel kitchen. This church even had an expresso machine and cafe in its main floor lobby.

The June night I was there, the volunteers served a hot turkey dinner with all the trimmings and pie. I sat at a table with a family. The food was good but something was wrong. Filmmaker Laura Sky and I wondered: 'why were there children here? Why were there children as young as 5 with moms and dads, expected to sleep in the gymnasium with other single adults who were homeless?

Why weren't they 'Home Safe?'

At the curb side: kitchens in a van

Another outcome of cuts to housing, social assistance and supports was the dramatic increase in people living outdoors, almost 24/7. At one point we estimated 1,000 people to be sleeping outdoors in Toronto, in parks, ravines, under the Gardiner expressway and bridges or in empty buildings.

That led to life-saving outreach programs, many of them using vans to deliver survival supplies including blankets, sleeping bags and hot food to people living 'curbside'. I'm sure you have seen those media clips on cold winter nights that show the back doors of a van opening with outreach workers ladling chilli or soup into bowls for people. You likely have not seen those images in recent years.

Today there are rules that prohibit city funded agencies from providing life-saving outreach supplies such as hot food and sleeping bags. In the ultimate insult to basic human rights, the provision of survival supplies is now deemed to be a practice that enables homeless people to stay living outside. The irony being that most shelters are essentially full, or bedbug infested, and people simply need respite from the conditions of shelter living.

Sometimes the City's Streets to Homes program provides a 'home', a kitchen, but sadly many still cannot afford food, or find a nearby foodbank to help sustain them when their cheque runs out by the 10th of every month.

The Tent City 'kitchen'

Outreach to homeless people reached a new level when Tent City developed on a stretch of the Toronto waterfront. A core group of homeless men and women began this squatter camp using tarps and tents. The community grew to 140 within three years with over 50 shacks and pre-fab houses.

Multiple outreach vans, community organizations, church groups and advocacy groups worked to ensure the community stayed safe and would remain sustainable. Food was obviously a key to their survival. Supplies were delivered, meals brought in. Toronto Disaster Relief Committee brought in disaster relief in the form of pre-fab housing, portable toilets, camping showers and woodstoves. On work party days we brought in volunteer labour to install roofing and insulation or do clean-ups. On some of those days we were fortunate to have EnVille Catering provide the most amazing meals on site, for the residents and the volunteers. When TDRC held working meetings there, the dinner of choice by the residents was Kentucky Fried Chicken. When none of us were there I'm told by Dri that wieners and beans were cooked over an open fire. Wieners were often on sale up the street at No Frills. Others cooked full meals over a fire in a barrel, often leaving stews simmer all day for anyone hungry to help themselves.

In the height of absurdity, one media outlet reported that residents were eating animals like groundhogs, ducks, geese and squirrel. It was simply not true, and several Tent City residents wrote letters to that particular newspaper.

The public protest at the brutal Tent City eviction, of well over 100 people in 2002, which was dramatically told in the documentary film 'Shelter from the Storm', won the residents a rent supplement program. People like Dri now have a kitchen of their very own.

Al Gosling's kitchen

What happens when we put people in housing but we don't provide the health and social supports they need? Al Gosling, the elderly

man who had been a tenant of Toronto Community Housing for 21 years, was evicted over a misunderstanding about paperwork. He was 81 years old. He ended up sleeping in the building's stairwell, was eventually picked up by police and ended up in the hospital where he was discharged to a shelter. He told Toronto Star columnist Joe Fiorito: "They have two dorms at Good Shepherd. I found myself eating less and less and I was sleeping less and less, because of the racket. I picked up a bug in the shelter. I'm 93 pounds." He spent some time recuperating in the homeless infirmary at Sherbourne Health Centre.

Al Gosling never got back home to his kitchen. He was transferred from Sherbourne to Toronto General Hospital where he died.

I wonder what he had in his kitchen before he was evicted. Did he like Wilfred, survive on canned salmon and berries? Did he receive Meals on Wheels? Like so many other poor seniors today, did he rely on drop-ins for his one real meal of the day? Was he one of the growing numbers of seniors needing to obtain food from a foodbank?

Will privatizing Toronto Community Housing bring any help at all to the Al Goslings? I don't think so.

The Holy Trinity kitchen

Al Gosling died homeless. It used to be that someone dying homeless was an extreme event such as a freezing death. When someone died homeless Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and other groups would always organize a press conference and visit City Hall to appeal for more shelter beds, or more help. The Mayor's door always remained locked to us when we arrived.

We eventually reached a point when we could no longer keep up with responding to the deaths – there were simply too many. That's when the Church of the Holy Trinity stepped forward and offered to co-host a monthly memorial for those in Toronto who died homeless, and they would serve a lunch to all those in attendance.

In February of this year we added 13 more names to the monthly memorial. Those are only the names we know about, that we in the

community were able to track. Public Health doesn't track homeless deaths. The Coroner's office doesn't track homeless deaths.

Holy Trinity has a very tiny kitchen on the west end of the church. After each memorial the lunch is lovingly served by Holy Trinity's members. Macaroni and cheese with coleslaw is my favourite.

This same church, that not only deals with the 'downstream' but looks 'upstream' for solutions, is today at the heart of community organizing on issues such as hunger. People who feel hunger in the pit of their stomach came there in November to testify at the Recession Relief Coalition's 'Hunger Inquiry'.

Perhaps this comment by Curtis Bishop of Houselink says it all: "Is there any part of human experience that is not sustained and enhanced by food?"

Another participant Shamanda said:

"Life is very hard when you have no food in your cupboards and live with bedbugs and cockroaches...I want to quit going to drop-ins to get bites to eat. I want to go to a place where I live and cook the food I want to eat."

St. Clare's Kitchen

There is some hope on the horizon, small, and not so small. Affordable housing projects continue to be developed through innovative patchwork funding, loans and fundraisers. I am a board member of St. Clare's Multifaith Housing Society, a non-profit housing provider which has developed and continues to manage a number of successful projects in the city. Our latest project is 180 Sudbury Street - 190 units with a strong focus on housing families.

I recently saw photos of the kitchens at 180 Sudbury Street.

I wrote Emma, our community development worker, and asked her to tell me about them. What she wrote back is simple and matter of fact but full of hope.

“They have a fridge and a stove/oven which are both Energy Star, cupboard space and sinks. The range hoods exhaust outside. Some of the kitchens have double sinks and some have single. Diatomaceous earth (DE), which is an all-natural, mineral-based pest control treatment, has been sprayed under all of the kitchen cabinets as a preventative measure against pests”.

In terms of the rest of the building, it's worth noting that DE has been sprayed in the walls to prevent bed bugs. We also have offices in the building for agencies to provide support on site. 180 Sudbury has five fully accessible apartments which will be occupied by tenants who use wheelchairs. There are three elevators; an outdoor patio on the 8th floor; balconies in all but one of the apartments; 27 artists' units; an amenity room for community activities; a tri-sorter for recycle, organics, and garbage; and a lot of bicycle parking. The security in the building is quite a bit better than the surrounding condos as we have fob access to the building, a network of cameras, and an overnight security person who can get to know the tenants instead of intimidating them.

Can you imagine what housing providers like St. Clare's, churches, unions or municipalities could do if we once again had a national housing program? Or a provincial housing program?

Our most recent federal budget was **silent** on housing. During this recent federal campaign, housing, poverty and hunger were barely addressed.

Our most recent provincial budget offered significant **cuts** in both operating and capital funding for affordable housing.

We, meaning all of you, your friends, family, co-workers, all of us have to help put this issue back on the political agenda.

The Right to a Kitchen

I'll end by talking about the next stage in the fight for housing which will surely go down in history. It is the campaign for ***the right to a home*** which also means ***a right to a kitchen***.

Several years ago in a different kitchen, the restaurant called Kensington Kitchen, TDRRC members met with some legal experts to look at filing a court challenge on the right to housing. Today the campaign has come to fruition. In partnership with numerous other agencies we have developed the argument that housing is a basic right and we have filed a Constitutional Charter Challenge on the right to housing.

Today, we continue to need kitchens of relief, the kitchens where loving hands stir soups and chilli to serve those in need, in shelters, in drop-ins, or out of vans. But we also need those same hands to stir the political pot, to make sure we get off this path, where so many people are left without shelter, without adequate income and food, without justice or any kind of access to a real kitchen.

Thank you

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