

The Dugout a refuge for angels in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Opinion: The 'community living room' provides a chance to regroup during the battle for life

BY LIISA ATVA, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 3, 2014



The front door of the morning soup line at The Dugout. The bleary-eyed line has been known to stretch a half way down the block.

"Angels serving angel food," said one of the men waiting patiently for a slice of the day-old cake that Rachel Whitfield, a kind young volunteer from England, and I were serving that afternoon at The Dugout in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES).

My day there started at 7 a.m. While car traffic on the main streets was steady — early birds passing through to offices further west — the sidewalks were almost empty, until you turned onto Alexander Street, a block east of Main. There, alongside an old brick building, a line of men stretched from the unmarked back door of The Dugout to halfway down the block. It was a sombre group, many bleary-eyed and unshaven, a few clutching sleeping bags, and one young man wearing pyjama pants.

The building, once a hotel for loggers and sailors, is now one of the many single room occupancy units (SROs) that the area's low-income residents call home. On the ground floor, in a storefront-sized space, is The Dugout. When the door opens the line moves quickly. Already inside are those with front door privileges, anyone in a wheelchair or on crutches. Dave Flaherty, the manager on duty, and three volunteers are dishing up beef vegetable soup, buns and coffee.

Although I volunteer at The Dugout on a regular basis, this was the first times I'd been there that early. It's a different clientele than later in the day — hungrier, more serious. That morning the soup is more watery than usual and there is some grumbling. Still, some ask for seconds. "To take to work for lunch," says one man. During the half-hour that the soup line is open, up to 200 people will be fed.

But The Dugout is more than a soup kitchen. It's a drop-in centre, a "living room" for people living in tiny one-room SROs. There are no comfy couches, but there is a big TV and a dozen small tables and chairs. The decor is humble and as clean as can be expected when up to 400 people pass through daily. It's a place to watch the news on TV, use the recently donated computers, play cards, chat with friends, or sit quietly alone. For the homeless, it's a refuge for part of the day. The centre's name comes from the wartime trenches or "dugouts" to which soldiers retreated to for rest, nourishment and encouragement. Given The Dugout's purpose, a befitting name.

Beyond the living room is the kitchen and pantry. In addition to soup in the morning, snacks are served throughout the day, and loaves of bread are free for the taking. The bread is donated by local bakeries, and either delivered by the bakeries themselves, or by a fleet of volunteers. Although day old, the bread is appealing with every variety imaginable including: focaccia, cranberry pistachio, Italian cheese and Turkish flatbread. Despite the gourmet selections the most popular breads are white-sliced — the easiest to eat for those with sore or few teeth — and raisin bread, a natural remedy to counteract an unpleasant side-effect of methadone.

The snacks, also donated, are mainly baked goods; cakes, pastries, pie, cookies and muffins. Whether its "for the energy," as some customers say, or to satisfy the sugar cravings that crack and meth addictions can bring on, the sweetest snacks go first. Flaherty voices his concern when someone tries to dump half a cup of sugar in their coffee.

"Too much of that will kill you," he says. Occasionally there are sandwiches, sushi, yogurt or fruit. Colin Stansfield, the chairman of The Dugout's board of directors, says, "One consequence of working with so small a budget, and having to rely on the kindness of others for donated food, is that the provided snacks are often less nutritious than what many of us might choose to eat ourselves."

Some donated food we've puzzled over. "Poultry meat loaf?" But we figure out a way to serve it. I'm astonished at how fast word spreads on the street when we have something particularly appetizing. Within minutes there can be a lineup out the door. And the closer in the month it is to "Welfare Wednesday," payday for those on income assistance or disability, the busier The Dugout gets. If we start to run low on snacks and there is still a lineup, I cut things into smaller pieces. Once when the brownies I was serving were already down to one inch by two, there was some confusion as to who was next in line as I served up the last one. Generosity prevailed when one of the men said, "Let's share it." I proceeded to cut it in half.

According to Stansfield, "the focus of The Dugout is to be a 'community living room' with snacks rather than a major food distributor. We are in conversation with folks in the community to find better ways to address food distribution."

The Dugout visitors are an interesting group. There are regulars, like Allen Anderson, who drop in almost every day. He brings his guitar and when he isn't strumming softly in the corner, helps bag bread and talks about when he used to visit New York and San Francisco to play with bands. Lyle Thomson, a 75-year-old writer, director and film producer, who has difficulty walking and talking,

spends much of his day at The Dugout. When I ask a tall, shaggy-haired man his name he says, "XYZ." I can't resist, "And I'm 123." He stops, looks puzzled and then laughs. I've run into people I know — my sister's neighbour and someone I went to high school with. And some visitors are heartbreakingly young.

Although many in the DTES are dealing with alcohol or other addiction issues, not all are. Some have ended up there through a chain of unfortunate events that could happen to any of us: a car accident, losing a job and then a home. The Dugout is a "low barrier" place welcoming almost everyone. Some of the clientele are in rough shape. Sick, unkempt or agitated. Yet, I have never felt uncomfortable or afraid there.

At 12:30 the "Out to Lunch Bunch," one of the longest running Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the province, holds its hour-long meeting at The Dugout. Some Dugout regulars, as well as many people who work in the neighbourhood but don't otherwise use The Dugout's services, attend. Sharen B, who is 84 years old, has been attending for 39 years. "It's a good place to come and sit and just take time out. I like to help and meet people in our (AA) fellowship. It also helps me out because I get a bite to eat," she said. After the meeting there is a noticeable feel-good vibe that lingers throughout the afternoon.

With low overhead and only a few paid staff, The Dugout depends on volunteers. They come from near and far and all walks of life. Whitfield is spending her time in Canada volunteering with a number of DTES organizations. A young man from the Northwest Territories, supporting himself as a busboy, dips into his own pocket to pay for coffee — one item that isn't free after breakfast — for anyone that doesn't have the 50 cents. A stockbroker helps with the soup line in the morning, a retired lawyer and teacher in the afternoons, and a reverend picks up the bread. The Dugout customers also pitch in as needed — when deliveries arrive a shout out for help unloading vehicles brings many to their feet.

Other helpers at The Dugout are completing court-ordered community service hours, including one young woman charged with dangerous driving when her car caught fire as she tried to drive with a flat tire. Most of the community service crew aren't nearly as forthcoming as to why they're there, and it's an environment where you don't ask too many personal questions.

Sorting and stacking bread, or wiping down the tables, gives me a chance to chat with the visitors. Most appreciate a friendly word or two and almost all say "Thank you." Given many people's circumstances, emotions can run high and occasionally someone shares a heartbreaking story. All I can think of at the time to say to a man in a wheelchair when he tells me of his latest housing woe is, "Would you like another muffin to take with you?"

On a personal basis, volunteering at The Dugout has given me a fresh perspective of the people in the DTES. My father lived in an SRO around the corner from The Dugout. As a teenager I couldn't handle his being an alcoholic and cut off contact. He died not long after. Through people I've met at the Dugout, I have a better understanding of what his life may have been like, and an empathy for others that I didn't have back then.

The Dugout is funded by the City of Vancouver, the Central City Foundation and private donations. Local bakeries and other businesses offer in-kind contributions of leftover food. Yet sometimes the food runs out. Financial donations and volunteers are always welcome. Also on the wish list is a donor of deli meats or cheese so sandwiches can be offered on a regular basis, industrial quality tables and chairs and trades services.

Liisa Atva is a freelance writer based in Richmond. The Dugout (thedugoutvancouver.com) is located at 59 Powell St. in Vancouver.

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