

*"We're sticking out a protest 'cause we don't want to be on the street."
A Solidarity Group with the RainCity Heat Shelter Workers*

Vikki Reynolds, Aaron Munro
(With Chainz, Junior, Rob & the Heat Shelter Workers)

RainCity Housing was contracted to open "Heat" shelters by the City of Vancouver and Province of British Columbia in 2009. "Heat" stands for Homeless Emergency Action Team. These shelters are empty warehouse spaces, with mats on the ground and staffed by two workers with access to a cell phone. There is no office, all space is shared including the washroom.

As part of preparing to operate these shelters as self-organizing communities (Munro, In press), based on an ethic of dignifying and honoring shelter folk, we had intensive staff trainings. Trainings involved Management, Staff, Peer Workers (Shelter Folk from the previous year) and Vikki Reynolds who facilitated. We spent time co-creating our



The retelling that follows took place as part of this training. Vikki facilitated a Solidarity Group (2010a, 2010b, 2011), in which she interviewed Chainz, a Peer Worker and Aaron a Program Manager in front of the entire Team. She then interviewed these witnesses about what they felt spoke to our collective ethics. Chainz and Aaron then responded to the witnesses.

Part I: Vikki interviews Chainz & Aaron

Vikki: Hey Chainz, Aaron, thanks for being willing to talk to me in front of this whole Team. What stands out for you guys in looking back on the work in the Heat Shelters last year?

Aaron: Well lots of stuff, but Chainz led this protest when the shelters were closing last year, and did some really amazing resistance work against the shelters being shut down. As a result, over 60 people ended up getting offered housing. They put just enough pressure on the government, in just the right, non-violent, awesome way that they went about it in that moment. And it worked.

Chainz: Well, when I first heard that they were closing our shelters down – Actually, the first day that they actually shut down the Granville Shelter, I was like, “Ok, I’m not gonna stand for this, ‘cause if everyone just leaves and does nothing, nothing’s going to happen. Everybody’s just...living in peoples’ parkades, wherever they’re going to find a place to sleep, right. So I decided to stay in the alleyway, right behind where the Granville shelter was and just ride it out. Like, the media kept coming through, asking us why we’re sitting there, and I’m like, “Yo, we’re just sitting here to prove a point, these shelters are closing down, we’re going to sleep in the alleyways.”

Vikki: And then what happened?

Chainz: Well, then eventually, I guess the government gave in and they finally opened up the Dunsmuir House and put everyone that was in the shelter into there.

Vikki: Wow.

Chainz: And they re-opened the Granville Shelter, and they opened up the other two shelters.

Vikki: How big a piece do you think that your role in that was?

Chainz: It wasn't just my role. Like, I had a lot of support from a lot of different people, but I think a big piece of it... a lot... yeah...

Vikki: Do you think it would have happened if you guys didn't go sleep in the alley?

Chainz: No. If, like I said, if we had just all dispersed and went our own separate ways and nobody actually tried anything, nothing would've happened. Everybody would've been still on the streets. And during Olympic times, there would have been a lot more bullshit. People would've been in jail, a lot of properties would've gotten damaged. But with the protest – we got through to the government, “Look, we need places to live.”

Vikki: And that, like you're saying, that's not just you. You didn't do this alone. That was, like, a group of folks.

Chainz: No, I had a lot of people help, backing me up, so, without that, I wouldn't have been able to do anything, get anything across. But I was on the media a lot. I put it on YouTube too, and radio. There was only – what, five people altogether that were actually sticking it out in the alleyway with me. But I was the main- guy, the ring-leader in all that, 'cause I was the only one going to do interviews. I went to CBC radio, live, so they couldn't cut no words out. It was just straight up what I said.

Vikki: Being interviewed live was part of the strategy, right? So they couldn't cut words out. That's pretty astute.

Chainz: Yeah, so I got my say across, and nobody cut nothin' out, no dubbing, no editing, no nothin'.

Vikki: Right, cool. And, y'know, when you say there were 5 people sticking it out, that stands out for me. What was the cost of sticking it out? What did it take, for you to stick it out?

Chainz: Just living through the rain, getting all wet. Dealing with the cops. I told them, “Look, we’re just here, we’re sticking out a protest ‘cause we don’t want to be on the street. We need places to live.” And the cops didn’t even really bother us.

Vikki: I’m just thinking – this protest, how hard a thing was this to do?

Chainz: (Silence). It was hard.

Vikki: It was hard.

Chainz: Like it was – yeah (Choked up).

Vikki: Chainz, if I ask you anything that you don’t want to answer, don’t do that, right. I don’t mean to get everybody to break down. When you say its “hard”, you know I don’t know what you’re talking about, ‘cause I haven’t had a hard life, I haven’t had an easy ride, but I have not been homeless. So when you say “hard” I know that I don’t know what you mean, right. So, teach me what you mean by “It was hard”.

Chainz: Well, it was hard because doing the protesting, I had to try and keep people from doing stupid shit ‘cause the shelters were shut down. Like, keep people from doing their drugs and shit near my protest, and keep everything low key – at the same time, making it public, y’know?

Vikki: So we had to make it public and then make some things hidden?

Chainz: Yeah, definitely.

Vikki: But what was hard for you was trying to help other people not do stupid things. Why was that so hard?

Chainz: ‘Cause, like, I don’t want to be, like, a hypocrite. ‘Cause I do my own shit too, right? But, at the same time, when I’m trying to do something for the benefit of everybody else, I have to step up and say, like, “Yo, you can’t do this around here ‘cause we’re trying to do something beneficial.” It felt awkward.

Vikki: Safety is a word that I can throw around between us, but it probably doesn’t mean the same thing. My guess is, ‘cause I’ve never been un-housed, that when you and I talk about safety, we’re talking

about really different things. But I'm just wondering – do you think it was unsafe, this protest you had? Do you think it was risky for you?

Chainz: Mm, I never really felt like that. I've lived on the streets a long time. I felt like I could handle doing it 'cause I've had experience dealing with certain things like this before, so I know where I'm coming from. The only risky part about it is the worry about the cops coming in and taking everything that we own, 'cause they threatened to do that a couple of times. So there had to be somebody there at all times, which, basically means, I couldn't really leave at all to go anywhere. I had to stay right there the whole time and deal with this and make sure nothing went down. Like, no belongings got taken away. The city even tried to come through, and take all our shit away.

Vikki: Yeah. Wow. I'm just thinking you were saying that you didn't think it was risky, and then you talked about the cops taking everything you own. I'm just thinking about the cops coming to my house and taking everything I own. That probably wasn't even the greatest risk. I'm wondering if you found at any time there was any risk to your safety?

Chainz: As long as I had someone there with me, I was alright, but if I was alone the whole time, I would have been, like, yeah, this is kind of weird and scary, y'know?

Vikki: Ok, so the fact that there were other people with you – That helped it be a safe-enough thing to do. It might have not even been a good decision, otherwise, yeah?

Chainz: Yeah, yeah.

Vikki: I'm just thinking, everybody who lost their place to live – their home at the shelter – they didn't do this protest, right? Or didn't think of this? Right? What do you think it is about you? Where'd you learn to do this?

Chainz: No, I – Kind of, sort of, but I've been on the streets a lot and I been through a lot of shit, and the opportunity of being able to have somewhere to live is very... awesome. You know what I mean?

Vikki: I don't think I do know what you mean.

Chainz: Um, just let me see... (Silence).

Um, like, being able to stay in the shelter and the way that shelter was run was a very, like... um, I don't know what to say. It was very special 'cause this shelter – these shelters are not like other shelters. Other shelters are, like, there's rules, big rules, you can't do this, you can't do that, you have to be in at a certain time. I had a job at a bar, and I couldn't keep my place in another shelter because I work too late, I was locked out, you know? These shelters are more relaxed, which is good. And, I don't know, we just didn't want them to get shut down 'cause everyone would have been screwed and a lot of other shit would have gone down.

Vikki: It sounds like there was something special about this shelter and there's not even really words for how special that was, right?

Chainz: I can't – Yeah, I can't, just – (laughs)

Vikki: You can't even – Like I can give you words, but they're empty, 'cause there's no words for this.

Chainz: There's none.

Vikki: Yeah, sounded like it was something –

Chainz: Very unique. A very unique shelter.

Vikki: Unique, yeah. Is that the word you were looking for?

Chainz: Yeah, yeah.

Vikki: Yeah. And the people who knew you when you were younger – anyone in your life – would people be surprised that you did this, or would people say, “No, that's something that Chainz would be up for”?

Chainz: That's hard to say. But I guess that some people that have known me for a long time would probably say yeah, it's like him to do that. But new people that had just met me – they'd probably have been surprised.

Vikki: What is that people who knew you for a long time – what is it they know about you Chainz that have them saying you're up for doing that? (Silence, Chainz shaking his head.)

What do you think Aaron?

Aaron: Well, I witnessed a lot of commitment, for sure, in that moment. I also just think he really got it. They shut the Granville down first, and so he protested outside the Granville Shelter so that was also protecting the Howe from closing at that time. That put pressure on the government because they were worried about a larger protest if the Howe Shelter closed. So – He just, kind of, got how it was all going to work.

Vikki: The smartness of being strategic and tactical about how this would work, not just for this shelter, yeah? That's a kind of intelligence, right?

Aaron: Yeah. Yeah, totally a kind of intelligence.

Vikki: Where did you learn that intelligence (referring back to Chainz)? Does "intelligence" fit for you? Like that was smart thinking, right?

Chainz: Yeah... Yeah.

Vikki: Where did you get that?

Chainz: I... It just – comes to me. I just have it. (Laughs)

Vikki: Is a story people have about you – being smart, being able to put stuff together?

Chainz: I've heard – some people, yes. I could come up with good solutions to situations.

Vikki: Good solutions to situations, yeah. What about commitment? Like Aaron talked about commitment. Did that fit?

Chainz: Yeah, well, I stayed – stuck it out.

Vikki: When you say that – sticking it out, maybe five people stuck it out the whole way – what do you think it took? What does it say about that five? What is it that group of people shared?

Chainz: That we all had the same goal in common. We wanted something to happen. To make sure – Like, we needed to put our point across, look, we need housing too, man.

Vikki: What kind of difference do you think these actions that you took made for other peoples' lives?

Chainz: Um, a big difference, 'cause now everyone that I know that was in these previous two shelters last year are actually happy with where they're living now.

Vikki: Wow.

Chainz: Like, all these folks here (gestures to peers) are all living in Dunsmuir House. Sixty or so people. At least...Now we're doing the peer program with Rain City and that's a big step too.

Vikki: Is that paid work?

Chainz: It's volunteer, honorarium.

Vikki: Is that a job?

Chainz: Yes. I consider it as a job.

Vikki: I'm just thinking, do you think that there might even be more people than you even know about that your actions made a huge difference for?

Chainz: Yes, because the shelters – The Granville Shelter re-opened, and there's new people in there now. And the Cordero and the Broadway one are both open, and there's always new people.

Vikki: If you were the Staff, what kind of difference would that protest make to you? That Shelter Folk actually think this is so important that they're going to stand up for it?

Chainz: Mmm, actually, yeah, 'cause a lot of Staff actually tried to support me through this too, so I think it affected them too because they would have lost their jobs, somewhat. A lot of them would've been screwed. And they helped me through the process too. Like Aaron and some other Staff came up and threw me a little advice, gave me some options, what could happen, what should happen.

Vikki: Yeah. I'm just thinking, in terms of, you know what, shelter work – people doing shelter work last year – them wanting to come back and work there again this year. Do you think this protest was something that had them saying, “That’s the place I work. I’m proud of my work. I’m coming back here”?

Chainz: I believe so. Definitely. Definitely.

Vikki: Yeah. And I was thinking, we were talking about resisting burnout today – In terms of people saying, “This is work I wanna do. I’m gonna be able to stay alive in this work,” I just wonder, Aaron, what do you think, how did these events, Chainz, and all the Shelter Folk who resisted – What difference does it make, in your work, to have this kind of action happen?

Aaron: Oh, it makes all the difference. Yeah, it spoke to us about the commitment that we made to make those shelters the way that they were, dignifying, self-organizing communities (Munro, In press). Even though the City closed us down, I think that this kind of stuff stopped us from feeling that that was a failure. You know? We had something that we were able to hold on to. It was pretty hard – how am I going to put this? It was very very difficult to keep Shelter Staff from joining you guys' protest (referring to Chainz and peers) (Laughs). (Silence). Yeah, but there was some spiritual pain (Reynolds, 2009) in not being able to do that.

Vikki: How hard was that?

Aaron: It was really difficult. It was really difficult.

Vikki: Why?

Aaron: Um, because I think that we thought that we, the Shelter Staff, we were losing something too. And we also felt some solidarity, and we felt it was unjust.

Vikki: Yeah. And then why did you guys, Shelter Workers, decide to stay out of the protest to the extent you did?

Aaron: (Silence). Because we were trying to keep the Howe Shelter open.

Vikki: We're trying to keep another shelter open. So that's a painful spot.

Aaron: A painful spot. And we have other contracts for other housing that was at risk. We have – Y’know, these are our funders. We have to make those choices in those moments. Not easy choices though.

Vikki: Right.

Chainz: That goes back to when I said – like, when I asked for options and stuff. Like Staff can’t do anything, really, to help protest, but they can give me advice on what to do, what not to do. Like how I can benefit and how I can, I don’t know –

Aaron: Like when you guys locked yourselves in the back of the Granville Shelter and I snuck around the other side and was throwing up packs of cigarettes (laughter).

Vikki: You know, it’s interesting ‘cause you both did the same thing, it seems to me. Chainz, you knew exactly how much to push, how much pressure to put on, when to back off, what we had to do and what we couldn’t. And Aaron, you were doing the same thing. I could support it, but not this much, but not that much. It’s like; we have to be so smart in these things, hey? This is, like, a kind of intelligence that doesn’t get measured a whole lot. You know? It’s kind of like – where did you guys think that you learned this kind of stuff? ‘Cause that’s tactical. It’s strategic. It’s brilliant. Especially in a city that made a commitment to homelessness by voting for an Olympic bid, right? People told us that the Olympics would triple homelessness, and it did (Johal, 2007; Keller, 2010). And I’m just thinking, how did you win against these odds?

Chainz: The most challenging part about the process, that I found, was when the city, when the government told us that they’d come in and try and get us to move and take all our shit away. And they threatened to take everything away, like everything. So what I did is I packed everything tightly around where my bed was, and it was all neatly done up, so they couldn’t take nothin. Nothing was blocking the alleyway, so they couldn’t say nothin. But they threatened us anyway, ‘cause we had a tent up a couple times. They said, “Oh, no structures allowed, no nothin.” So I took ‘em down. I just had a couple mats out. Blankets on it, that’s it. And everything’s piled nicely and neatly around it, under the bed. So there’s no way they could touch anything.

Vikki: Wow – your resistance – just knowing exactly where the line is, and resisting right up to that line, and knowing at what point crossing the line’s not gonna to work for us. That’s brilliant.

Aaron: I think, for me, that the way that the shelters were run actually aided in making this protest successful. When we, sort of, got attacked, that community was able to stay intact and we were able to negotiate and work with each other in ways to make avenues for some change to happen, whether it’s that we got some more housing for folks or we got to keep the Howe Shelter open an extra 30 days or whatever that was. I think that the fact that we were already working alongside each other made those interactions – there’s trust there, right? We were trusting each other.

Vikki: Mm – We were just talking about collective ethics in making community (Reynolds, 2009). That community existed even when they closed the building down. Like, the community is not the building, right?

Chainz: Yep. And Like Junior says, we were already a street community, and RainCity built a shelter over us.

Vikki: That kind of protest and the success of that and the building of that community –Will this make a difference in your life, having done this?

Chainz: Well, it will always be in my heart and mind that I actually did something to benefit a lot of people. And I was happy to do it.

Vikki: And I just wonder how far that’s gonna take you. Like, how’re you gonna hold onto that?

Chainz: Well, hopefully it will take me far. One step at a time, right?

Part II: Vikki interviews the RainCity Peer Workers & Shelter Workers

Vikki: What difference does it make to your work, to witness Chainz and Aaron?

Junior (Peer Worker): A world of difference. I’m very happy. When I first went to the shelter, I was really skeptical. I didn’t know anybody. I didn’t think I did, anyway. And, when I first got there, I started noticing I

knew a lot more people there than I thought. So I was like, alright, alright, let's try this. And then before I knew it, I never wanted to leave. I was like, wow, I love this place. Everybody here rocks. The Staff here rocks. I'm out of the cold. And when they shut the place down, it was pretty heavy. And I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for these people. And I love these people. Y'know? They gave me a roof over my head, twenty-four seven, and the chance to step back into society. Instead of being where I was last year. And for that, I love you guys.

Vikki: Yeah. Were you a part of this resistance?

Junior: Little bit.

Vikki: Little bit. Everybody had a different role to play, right? What difference does it make for your life and your work that you were a part of this?

Junior: All the difference 'cause, like, I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for the things that RainCity gave me and that Chainz did.

Vikki: Yeah. What kind of difference do you think it makes for Chainz' life to have this kind of respect from you?

Junior: (Silence, nodding his head, smiling, quiet.)

Ann: I would hope our respect makes a huge difference for Chainz, because for one person to stand up and rally everyone... What's it like to have everything you have taken away from you? I've been taught and the story was passed down. What I'd like to see is him just shine in the glory. Really. Stand up and be counted on and counted for, and don't minimize that it took a lot of intelligence and a lot of creativity. Just the instinct to know when to push, when to pull back. And sometimes all you have in this work is your gut feeling, and what's your gut telling you to do in this moment, because when things are really heated up, you have to think in the moment, and I see those qualities in, him standing up. Let's fight for what we have. And it may not be much to the whole world, but hey, you know what, it's everything to these folks.

Vikki: Yeah. When I asked that question: "What is it about you?" Chainz really struggled with that. And yet, I was just thinking, everybody over

here was saying, “I know exactly what qualities Chainz holds” – Right? So, creativity, we didn’t mention, right? Creativity. What else?

Luisa: I just think it took a lot of courage to stand up to the police, to speak to the media. To have, even, five people – and all it took was five people – to stand their ground – It takes one person to create that group, to motivate everyone to rally ‘round.

Vikki: What kind of difference did Chainz' protest make to you?

New woman shelter worker: Huge. As someone who’s really new here in the city, I’m just taking so much pride in being a part of this. Y’know, even hearing this story firsthand, from the heart, y’know, not being in it last year– I’m super stoked to be here.

Megan: I just wanted to speak to the question of what impact that made to the Staff and I think that, y’know, Aaron and Amanda and I and a few other people around here can really speak, personally, to that. And, I mean, honestly it’s – these guys that you’re looking at right now, along with, y’know, another group of people – I mean, that’s what brings me back to the work. And that’s what makes me want to be here. Recognizing, y’know, how hard they’ve worked and how hard they’ve struggled to create this community. And, just, the humility that I feel every day and the pride that I feel in being – in them allowing me to be a part of that struggle. And I’m really thankful for that.

Rob (Peer Worker): And we also showed you you guys weren’t just Staff. You’re people.

Amanda: I can go to work for five years on Chainz story...

Part III Back to Vikki, Chainz, & Aaron

Vikki: I’m wondering, for you guys (referring to Aaron and Chainz), what stood out in what you heard the witnesses talk about?

Chainz: Well, to hear everyone – what they had to say about it – was really – got me right here (touches his heart). Makes me feel awesome. Yeah.

(**Megan** whispers: “Because you are”.)

Vikki: Was this a surprise to you?

Chainz: Yeah. Like it really touched me. (Choked up). A lot. I'm happy I did it. And I'll do it again if I have to. I swear to that today.

Vikki: I'm just moved that this surprised you so much. How could this surprise you? (Choked up) You didn't know that there was this much admiration for you out there? You didn't know this?

Chainz: (Choked up) I just – try to – do what I can do to help people. I'm glad that it helped a lot of people out there.

(Silence)

Chainz: I'm happy! (Chainz and others laugh.) Everything – everything you guys said really touched me. Thank-you. (Choked up).

Vikki: Yeah. And what was this like for you? (Referring to Aaron)

Aaron: It's emotional. I have so much admiration for these guys. A large group of them, but particularly the guys who are in this room right now – like so much admiration for them. And, yeah, I mean it's cool we all have jobs, but it also allowed me to create some jobs for them too. I was pretty exhausted at the thought of running the shelters again this year. I said to Sean (my boss), I want the Peer Program up, y'know (Laughs). That was a big part of me wanting to do it again, – making jobs for Shelter Folks, right? It's really exciting.

Vikki: Yeah. I just want to give you guys some of the words everyone gave us. When I asked you what it was about you (referring to Chainz) you couldn't come up with it. When I asked you what it meant to the Staff Team that you did this, you really didn't know. So, people talked about your intelligence; the creativity of your protest. You know, the courage. Courage wasn't a word that we used. And bravery. Devotion to the community. Right? Danielle said she's working in part of a legacy, of doing something different, that she loves her job. And, um – Talking about feeling loved; the sense of pride that folks had – and Amanda said our conversation can keep her in the work for years!

Chainz: (Silence) I just thought I had to do what had to be done – to make something happen.

Vikki: Yeah. Something has to be done a lot of times. People don't always step up and do it, right?... I think we should just kind of end here. ...I want to thank you guys for this day.

Junior: Thank you RainCity!

Reflection; Mark Smith, RainCity Executive Director

(After Aaron shared the transcript with him)

"Wow. I'm speechless, not a state I find myself in very often.

When I read stuff like this I don't feel like we took a beating last year when they shut us down. There is a legacy of community and inspiration that will live on in the stories of people like Chainz.

Thanks for sending me this Aaron. It connects me to the work.

Mark"

Acknowledgments

Big thanks to Chainz and Junior in particular for allowing us to share this story. Appreciation and respect to the Heat Shelter Teams and Shelter Folk and Peer Workers, who participated so willingly and generatively in all of the trainings and particularly in this Solidarity Group, and for allowing us to make this transcript and re-telling public. Thea Green, our practicum student from the Adler Institute, transcribed this interview and contributed to the usefulness of this writing. Finally, we would like to acknowledge RainCity Housing leadership team for their vision, commitment and work for social justice; and for their willingness to continually dialogue around how imperfectly we are all doing this work.

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