

Stan: Passion Project

Stan Shaffer is a Zinester. That is to say that he volunteers to help produce the DTES Neighbourhood House *Right to Food Zine*, a publication focused on food security and food related issues in the DTES. Stan began volunteering with the Zine in 2011 at age seventy-one when he retired from a thirty year career as a college English, film, and communications instructor. He shared his story in an interview in January 2015 when he was seventy-five years old and beginning his fourth year with the Zine. Stan explained that he was introduced to the DTES NH when an ad for the neighbourhood house film program caught his attention as he was searching for volunteer opportunities. Given his extensive experience in writing and editing, in addition to ten years of teaching film studies, he decided to give it a try and attended a volunteer orientation meeting where he met the executive director of the DTES Neighbourhood House, Paul Taylor. Stan described how he ended up working on the Zine rather than on the film program: “We started talking and when Paul learned about my background teaching English, it triggered an idea he’d had for a publication that would come out of the neighbourhood house. He strongly encouraged me, and I met a couple of other people at the meeting who had artistic and literary backgrounds or who were keen on sharing their stories and revealing some of the disturbing issues that low income people face in the DTES.” Stan was hooked after reading an early issue of the Zine. He explained, “Reading the issue about the welfare food challenge [in which middle class people live on the standard welfare food allowance of twenty-one dollars for a week] was so powerful and gave me a much deeper perspective of what it’s like for people who are living on social welfare. It’s grim, and it’s dismal. Poverty is unhealthy in so many ways—physically, emotionally, mentally. I think that what I read in the Zine would dig into the conscience of anybody who has a heart and sense of social justice.”

He continued, “After that, other people came aboard, including our wonderful artist, Janice, whose covers are stunning. Meanwhile Paul was feeding me ideas and offered to pay for the publication. Paul’s encouragement while he was at DTES NH was always one hundred percent and the Zine wouldn’t have taken root without him. Although I had periodically published articles in small magazines, I’d never organized a publication, but I took on the challenge and it became a terrific learning experience for me, as well as an important part of my life—a ‘passion project.’”

Before joining the Zine, Stan had not given much thought to food security or food justice, knew nothing about neighbourhood houses, and had little experience on the DTES. His story demonstrates the power of engagement. He recalled, “I didn’t even know what a neighbourhood house was before I started. Also, I hadn’t had much contact with the Downtown Eastside because I live in Burnaby. Moreover, although I come from a left leaning perspective, I held a very middle class view of the DTES as a not-so-safe area. I’m ashamed of this, but when I went for the volunteer interview, I was fearful; I was worried about hygiene and safety. Thankfully, the fear quickly evaporated once I started meeting people. The second time I was there I thought, ‘What the hell is wrong with me? Is this the way the middle class comes to this area, with preconceptions and fears and doubts?’ That was a very positive learning experience for me.” He added, “I’d also never thought about food security or right to food, or food justice. I didn’t even know what the terms meant. Although I regularly give money to people on the street, knowledge of food security was not in my framework, so my association with the neighbourhood house and the Zine has been a big

learning experience for me. I even recently spoke to the NDP about food policy – something I would never have thought about in the past. Yet I feel I’ve gone only a small distance because there’s still so much I don’t know and haven’t experienced - such as the food challenge.”

For Stan, the most exciting part of working on the Zine is getting to know the other people who are involved. He has had the chance to meet and interact with others who are passionate about food security and social justice, including neighbourhood house staff, local activists, and professional writers. He mentioned a long list of people who have inspired him and made distinctive contributions to the Zine: “I met and worked with many people who really touched me— like Dan Moon who could make wonderful crow sounds. He was in constant pain from several workplace accidents, yet attended meetings and submitted poetry for publication. Two of the Zinesters are bipolar, which has been another aspect of my education in the DTES because I’ve been to the psych ward twice to visit them there. A temporary volunteer named James helped us with a computer program which I knew nothing about, InDesign. With James’s help, the Zine looked professional right from the start; he was able to produce a high quality product that made us feel really proud. There was also Peter, who was on staff at the neighbourhood house and passionate about social justice - I learned so much from him. And John Hughes who was involved with the food bank. John and Peter developed pod casts. A professional writer, Dana Gillis, built our Facebook and Twitter accounts which attracted 400 followers. Carol White, the new DTES NH ED, has been a big supporter, financially and otherwise. Another long-time Zinester who has been with us since the beginning is Hendrik Beune, who is deeply involved with permaculture. Bill Beauregard is another really talented guy who’s struggling financially but totally dedicated to his community. One of the women who used to work at the Neighbourhood House and is connected with Groundswell, Kim, writes for the Zine. She brought in another person from Groundswell, Brian, who’s a chef. He has really good ideas and is a fine writer. People like that really give me hope. Another fellow, Ludvik, has also taught me a lot; I call him my mentor. He doesn’t write for the Zine but he’s there as a presence, somebody who knows the history and has a big heart. He’s done so many different things and he has shown me how someone who is struggling to make ends meet can still have the heart and the good will to help other people. This has really inspired me.”

Stan elaborated further on Ludvik’s inspiration: “Ludvik has a huge fund of knowledge and has been very generous about teaching me. I didn’t know anything about food lines - I’d seen the food line-ups - but I had no idea what that experience was really like, or the poor quality of the food, or how you might have to wait in line for an hour and then when you get close to the door, you find that they have no more meals – I didn’t know about any of that. And then you have to find another place, another line. How are people supposed to live their lives or look for work and they don’t even have reliable access to food? I learned and understood a lot more about this basic unmet need in the midst of our affluent society through Ludvik and the people who volunteer for the Zine.”

Stan explained that through the other Zinesters he has discovered how “somebody that maybe has cause to be angry and disillusioned with life can also be dedicated to helping others at a really grassroots level.” He continued, “I see this almost whenever I am talking to anybody there. I guess being middle class, bourgeois, I would give some guy two bucks on the street and that was usually as far as it went. So the big highlight for me is meeting and becoming involved in the personal lives

of people. For example, Lance Lim is one of the most dedicated and community-minded people I've ever met. He grew up poor in Strathcona with cockroaches falling into his food, and crunching into the porridge, as he wrote about in one of our past issues. Lance has devoted himself to the Strathcona Community Centre and he does a lot of projects there with families. He created the One Community Festival for community inclusion for people with developmental disabilities and families with disabled children. His son, Robert, is eleven years old and autistic. This appeals to me because my stepdaughter is developmentally delayed and so is my sister. I feel like it's karma coming back to me. Lance is so inspirational - he's one of these remarkable people who just give, give, give." Through these experiences, Stan has developed a new and profound understanding that "people who live on the fringe have ideas that are really pushing the envelope of what society considers to be possible, and of what makes a better world for everybody."

Describing some of the pressures that DTES NH is under and the effects of those pressures on the Zine, Stan noted, "The space is tiny, stressed, and over-crowded. When we have our meetings, we take one table, meanwhile people are crowded at other tables in the same room. DTES NH is always in a state of short funding; hours have been cut. But the people there are so passionate and caring, and they provide such an important function of creating opportunities for people to get involved and create a sense of community, and to feel part of something. We always meet at the neighbourhood house during the mid-day meal; it adds to the spirit of the group that we share a meal together. But something I didn't realize for a while was that some members of the group were coming to the meetings partly for the meal. Again, my middle-class values had blinded me to the food insecurity they faced. On the positive side, several times other people eating there have joined the meeting, and some of them stayed for a while and perhaps contributed an article."

Stan elaborated on some of the ups and downs of working on the Zine: "Two summers ago I became disillusioned about publishing the Zine because there were so many difficulties with funding and personnel. Then one of our writers, Jenna Drabble, who was a grad student from the University of Manitoba, and her boyfriend, took charge of an entire issue. It was totally inspiring. Jenna was a middle class person and took on the Raise the Rates food challenge. She and a number of other people kept a blog of their personal realizations of what it's like to be poor, disabled or marginalised in our city. At a low moment, when I was thinking of giving up the Zine, I saw her blog and felt revitalized. I thought, 'I am going forward with this.' Her experience really showed me that living on that tiny amount, you can't just go out for coffee, and you've got to really plan your meals, which is a challenge in itself. Every issue is a powerful learning experience and that's what keeps me there." He added thoughtfully, "I sometimes think maybe I should pass the torch on to somebody else. Then I think about what my life would be like if I wasn't doing this. It would be a huge personal loss, there'd be a real gap in my life. I'd be losing something, like a family member; it would be a death and I would experience grief, loss, and emptiness."

Despite – or perhaps because of – the challenges, Stan's involvements with DTES Neighbourhood House has resulted in a personal transformation. He explained, "I feel that doing this work - just as I was really passionate and dedicated to teaching - was the best thing I could do with my life, almost like a destiny. Basically, I stayed in school and university my whole life till I retired. I loved the atmosphere, the environment, the people, and the discussions. Now I am not in that environment

anymore, but working on the Zine has given me the opportunity to engage again in thinking and organising and collaborating with people. I never, absolutely never, envisioned that at this point in my life I would be doing something like this. It's kind of a godsend. I remember reading a statistic that when men retire at age sixty-five, a significant percentage die within five years. It's partly because their job was such an important part of their lives and identity that gave them meaning - all of a sudden that disappears, with potentially significant psychological and physical consequences. So working on the Zine is a really valuable part of my life. I would encourage any retired person of any background to be involved in some way and try to make society better - it's so rewarding. What has happened to me is very personal, a sort of a transformation, maybe a salvation - I mean psychological rather than religious - that's given my life more purpose and meaning. It's given me a focus, a purpose, a mission: my passion project. Although I have a full life with family and friends, being retired, my life is very quiet in a lot of ways. So this is something that every week I spend a number of hours doing. I am producing something and I am working with people; I am part of a meaningful collaborative effort."