

**NO STRAIGHT LINES:  
Local Leadership and the Path from  
Government to Governance in Small Cities**  
Edited by Terry Kading

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# “What a Difference a Shower Can Make”<sup>1</sup>

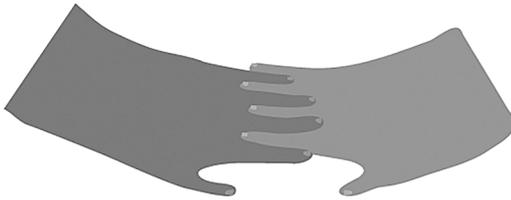
*Lisa Cooke*

## The Story

This is the story of a shower, the people who built it, and those who now use it. I am telling this story for several reasons. The first is that it is an incredible example of gift giving, volunteer involvement, and commitment. Upon learning that street-involved people in Kamloops did not have access to a safe, accessible, and free shower facility, a group from the United Steelworkers Local 7619 came together and built one. This tale offers a case study of the capacity of a group of tenacious and socially conscious individuals who identified a need in the community and did something about it. There are lessons to be learned on this matter alone about mobilizing sustained volunteer efforts to see a large-scale project through to completion, the local politics of getting it approved, and the poetic articulations of why those involved did what they did.

There is more to it than that, though. Throughout this collection we are reflecting on the role of researchers as embedded in the processes that we seek to examine and the kinds of collaborations that emerge around social issues to mobilize efforts aimed at addressing them. As we do, we are exploring the relationships between leadership, learning, and quality of life

the **Politics &**  
*Poetics*  
of **GIVING**  
& **RECEIVING**  
in the Small City



A CURA RESEARCH  
CABARET PRESENTED  
BY DRs. LISA COOKE &  
WILL GARRETT-PETTS

March 21  
11:30 @m

SMALL CITIES CURA  
CAMPUS ACTIVITY CENTRE RM 314  
THOMPSON RIVERS UNIVERSITY  
900 MCGILL RD, KAMLOOPS, BC

Please join the researchers for a discussion on giving and receiving in Kamloops. The story starts with one local union (United Steelworkers Local 7619 from Highland Valley Copper) that built a shower for ASK Wellness in Kamloops' North Shore area. What started as a good idea, one coming from a place of great tension, became, according to newspaper accounts, "a fulcrum for this whole basket of social issues." The business community initially opposed the project, citing the prospect of escalating insurance premiums and possible loss of local business, while social workers and street nurses saw in the shower project an opportunity for the marginalized to access a facility important for maintaining self-respect and basic hygiene. The project, which eventually received the North Shore Business Association's blessing, is now completed and open for public use.

This presentation invites you to explore a significant case study of small city gift-giving, one replete with expressions of positive and negative reciprocity: charitable donations of money and labour, good intentions, misunderstandings, media representations and misrepresentations, studies of perceived benefits and losses, and the political implications of giving and receiving—the politics and poetics of it all.

Please RSVP to Sherry Bennett [shbennett@tru.ca](mailto:shbennett@tru.ca) to reserve your place

FIGURE 2.1. "The Politics & Poetics of Giving & Receiving in the Small City."  
Courtesy of TRU Office of Research and Graduate Studies.

in small city settings *and* the value and contribution of our academic skill sets to this process. As an ethnographer observing the building, opening, and operation of this project, I was of no use to the steelworkers in the actual building of the showers. I have no plumbing or tile-laying skills, and if anything was in the way with my tape recorder and notepad more than I was helpful. Rather, the skills that I bring to this collaborative effort are academic. I can tell the story of the “Shower Project,” as it has come to be called by those involved, for the lessons to be learned about what it takes to pull a gift like this off. By examining how a group of steelworkers from a local mine joined forces with a non-profit social services agency to form what Dubinsky (2006) would call organic and self-interested collaborations, we can see that it is precisely because of these collaborations that the Shower Project was possible at all. By situating this effort in the specifics of this small city, Kamloops, we can see that proximity, existing relationships, and tight social networks created the space to nurture this project from conception to completion as an example of transformational leadership. Not only has this project changed the ecosystem of street life in Kamloops by providing a much-needed facility that previously did not exist, but the entire ecology upon which such efforts can occur is impacted by the collaborations and relationships that made it possible. This alone is worthy of investigation.

Additionally, and something that I can bring to this discussion as an academic, is a critical examination of the flip side of this beautiful gesture of social consciousness and awareness. What I lack in tile-laying skills I can (at least in part) make up for in critical engagement with the political contexts that left this public amenities gap in the first place. There is a lack of government support for street-involved and vulnerable populations not just in this city but all over the province and country (Gaetz et al. 2013). It was the shock that people in their own community did not have access to safe, dignified shower facilities that inspired this group of steelworkers to pick up the cause. They saw a gap and did something to fill it. While there is no way to be anything but impressed by the commitment of the steelworkers to do something about this glaring hole in social services, that they did let government institutions off the hook. Street-involved and vulnerable people in Kamloops now have a safe place to take a shower and wash their clothes. This matter never needed to hit the political radar

of the government institutions that should have been ensuring that there never was this gap in the first place. Thus we should take note of these showers, the people who built them, and those who now use them for what we can learn from the process of how they came to be, the kinds of collaborations and alliances needed to get this project started and finished, *and* for what researchers can contribute to the conversation aimed at ensuring that vulnerable populations in small-city settings like Kamloops are not left out of conversations about “quality of life.”

## The Scene—Opening Day

It was early morning on September 9, 2011. A large trailer was unloaded in the back alley behind the ASK Wellness Centre in Kamloops. The sun was already warm as the crew started setting up grills and tables. Before long people were chopping onions and brewing coffee. More and more people arrived and got to work. There was a lot of talking and laughing, but not a lot of directions being given. People just seemed to know what to do. This crew had clearly done this before.

Before long the alley was filled with the smell of pancakes and bacon. By 8:00 a.m. people were emerging from the neighbourhood to check things out. By mid-morning word (and smell) had spread and a crowd was gathering. Plates of fresh fruit and hot food were being served up. There was no end to the number of pancakes or cups of coffee on offer. As long as people were there, food was served. The chatter and laughing among the cooking crew never dulled as people worked around each other all morning long.

Just as the breakfast crowd started to thin, new coolers and boxes emerged from the trailer. As quickly as the breakfast spread was packed up, a lunch meal was laid out. Pancakes were replaced by burgers and the prep carried on. Before long another round of people started to turn up and the flurry of activity continued. There was so much food that when people had eaten enough they were offered “to go” containers to take some with them for later. Even dogs were not denied a burger or a hot dog. Off to the side of the action there was a large box of unopened new toys. Every child who passed by that day got one. No one was left out of this event. Everyone was greeted with a smile and warmth that was contagious.

Several people spent the entire day socializing, eating, and hanging out. The spirit of generosity was matched only by the sounds of laughter and the smells of delicious food.

Hanging on the building behind the grill station was a banner with the words “United Steelworkers Local 7619.” This was a big day for members of the USW Local 7619. It marked the official opening of what has come to be called “The Shower Project.” For three years leading up to this event, members of the steelworkers local had been coming and going from the basement of the ASK Wellness Centre. They came on their days off from the local mine site where they work. They gathered materials, skilled trades workers, and labourers in a coordinated effort to transform the basement of the centre into a “first-rate shower and laundry facility for the less fortunate.”<sup>2</sup> The total estimated cost for material and labour for this project was upward of \$70,000.<sup>3</sup> These funds were paid in cash and donated time by the United Steelworkers Local 7619.<sup>4</sup> The result is the conversion of an unfinished garage space without a foundation into a high-quality, wheelchair-accessible laundry and shower facility, with a finished doctor’s office space as a bonus.

The first time I stood in the basement of the ASK Wellness Centre the construction of the project was nearing the final stretch. It was a cold late-fall morning and I was meeting one of the volunteers who was laying tile. The concrete room was chilly on this Saturday morning, the tile layers’ day off from the mine. That is how this project came to completion—on cold (or hot), early (or late) days off. People gave their time and expertise to transform a raw, unfinished space into this incredibly appointed facility. One of the volunteers recalls, “In the beginning someone had an idea of trying to return a little dignity to the homeless in the sense of proposing what they called a plastic corner shower. That’s all they said. We are going to build a plastic corner shower for the homeless so they can come and clean up and get some of that dignity returned to them. We sort of ran with it . . .” Indeed, they did. The facility that officially opened for business on September 9, 2011, is far more elaborate than a “corner shower stall.”

Reflecting back on the journey, Bob Hughes, the Executive Director at ASK Wellness says, “I think that everyone expected it would be done in six weeks. Little did they know that the building was totally incapable of withstanding this level of heating and water supply.” And yet somehow,

three years later, a fully accessible tile shower, full toilet and vanity, on-demand hot water system, and top of the line washer and gas dryer were installed, operational, and open for business. We will return to the question of “how” in a moment, but first let’s contemplate why. Why did this group of steelworkers from a local mine site decide to build a shower in Kamloops?

## Showers and Food

As people gathered on this September day, very few knew what all the fuss was about. It was the smell of food, not the sound of running water that brought people to the back alley that day. As people learned what we were celebrating they wandered inside to take a look. Listening to people chat about the new facility, I heard comments like “Oh, awesome” and “Really? For us? We can just use this?” One gentleman stood in the shower room for a long time looking around before he said anything. He was paying careful attention to the details of the workmanship and the specifics of the facility. Finally he said, “Those guys out there built this for people like me to use? Incredible. I worked construction a long time and I know good work when I see it. This is good work.” Pride in the workmanship of this facility is evident throughout the room. It is clearly stated on one wall of the shower where the USW logo has been carefully tiled onto the wall. This was important to the tile layer, who told me of how he designed the way that he cut and set the tiles so that people using the showers would know who the gift came from “long after we’re gone from here.”

As I toured the facility with a young woman she checked to see how the locks on the doors worked. After she was finished looking around she said, “So we can just go in there and lock the door? Alone?” Yes, you can. That was the whole point—dignity, privacy, safety, and quality. In the words of Bob Hughes:

It has the highest end washer and dryer that you could buy. It has hot water on demand. These guys did not skimp and they I think did that not to be grandiose, but to say, “These people deserve that type of quality.”

The matter of quality is a point of great pride for this group of steelworkers.

Members of the United Steelworkers Local 7619 have been actively putting on “cooks” since 2006. Around the time when copper prices were rising and profits were high at the mine, union members started looking for ways of “giving back” to the community.<sup>5</sup> A group started putting together cook events at various organizations throughout the community. Before long they had purchased a trailer and some equipment, and these events became regular fixtures in the area. Laura Drennan, an active participant in the ongoing regular cook events that the group puts on, says, “We only serve good food. If I wouldn’t serve it to my family, we wouldn’t serve it to anyone. Everyone deserves the best quality food. That’s the point. Not just to feed people, but to offer quality food.” This same sense of pride in quality is upheld in the shower facility. It is by way of these cooks that the Steelworkers and Bob Hughes and the ASK Wellness Centre first connected. Of these events Bob recalls:

You would not believe the spread of food these cats put together. . . .

As much bacon as you could possibly eat. Sausage after sausage and fruit and pancakes. They literally will make a meal that—it will be shocking what they put together. We knew them in that capacity where they just show up, sometimes as part of the United Way and sometimes just independently and say, “We can contribute,” and they will show up with thirty guys and they will start cooking and they will do everything. They will bring coffee. They will bring tea. They will bring the juice and the water. Everything. They do this incredible meal. So we knew them in that capacity and we were always incredibly grateful.

There is something beautifully poetic about the relationship between this Shower Project and food. That it was the smell of bacon and burgers wafting through the neighbourhood that drew people to the shower facility brings this project fully back to where it started. Not only did this group first connect with ASK Wellness by way of cook events, but this shower started off with a meal. I will let Jim McCarthy explain:

How it got started was many years ago we were out cooking for the less fortunate. That's how we started the program.<sup>6</sup> . . . We did one at St. Vincent De Paul. We actually did it for women and children. Most of the time when you go to a lot of homeless events, a lot of women don't show up so we made it special. The day before Mother's Day in 2008. . . . Some women said that some women wouldn't show up because they believed they'd have to wash before they came here.

It had never occurred to Jim, despite his years of working with homeless people and organizations that serve them, that people in Kamloops would not have access to showers. More than that, he had no idea that this would be such a barrier for some to access the kinds of things that he and his colleagues were doing. In his words, "It never entered my head. So we thought, nowhere to wash in Kamloops? So I approached the union. Could we do a project to build showers and a washroom where people could have dignity?"

And so what began as an effort to provide good food and a special event for women and children turned into a three-year project to build a free, accessible shower facility in a community. In essence, the Shower Project started off as a "failed gift." Many of those for whom the Mother's Day brunch was intended did not attend because they felt self-conscious about not being able to get cleaned up before they came. The scare quotes around the word "failed" reflect the caution (and hesitation) with which I use the word here. I in no way mean to suggest that the efforts of the steelworkers to present the Mother's Day event failed. Great care was given to every detail. Laura Drennan recalls the special care packages that were prepared for the women. Others speak with pride about the flowers and tablecloths. Every effort was made to ensure that this event was a success, and for those who attended, it likely was. I have chosen the word "failed" to describe this gift not to suggest that the Mother's Day brunch was unwanted or unappreciated, as is sometimes the way the term is deployed in the literature on gifting.<sup>7</sup> Instead I am following Venkatesan's (2011) lead of tracking the social life and transformative quality of a gift that started out not having the intended outcome that it was hoped it would achieve.

In the case of the Mother's Day Brunch, not everyone for whom the event was intended felt comfortable attending. From this perspective, by tracking the transformation of this gift, from "failed" to successful (for lack of better words) we are able to trace just how complex the impact of this act of giving is. What is transformed is not just the gift itself, from a meal to a shower, but the very terrain upon which such a gift can be given, and received, in this community.

## The Ecosystem of Street-Life and the Ecology of Compassion

It is one thing to have an idea to build a shower facility for street-involved and vulnerable populations in a community. It is quite another to find a place to put it. You need an agency or facility willing to receive the gift, and its ongoing maintenance, cost, and logistical operations. You also need community support.

From the start, the steelworkers had the former. Executive Director Bob Hughes welcomed the idea and worked hard to ensure that ASK Wellness would be a willing partner in this project. From the inception of the idea to the completion of the project, Bob and his team welcomed the gift of the showers. Bob recalls some of the conversations he had at the time that the idea was proposed and some of the questions that were raised:

Do you realize what that entails? Do you have a contract? What is it going to cost to operate this? Who is going to manage it? These questions were quite frankly irrelevant to me because it was an idea that you couldn't say no to. Not only because it was valuable to our clients, but when you have that kind of level of interest in committing to a non-profit organization or charitable organization, heaven forbid that you would put obstacles up over things that I would argue are manageable.

Members of the broader community, however, were less enthusiastic. The local business community in particular was resistant to the idea. Since their arrival in the neighbourhood in 2005, ASK Wellness had worked

hard to nurture a working relationship with the North Shore Business Improvement Association. There had been some initial concern when ASK purchased the storefront facility in the heart of the neighbourhood. As they worked to change the demographic and economic composition of the area, the North Shore Business Improvement Association felt that ASK's mandate to provide harm reduction programming and services for street-involved and vulnerable populations was at odds with their goals of economic development and urban renewal. The reality was that ASK arrived in that particular neighbourhood when they did because there was an immediate need in that very spot. Bob Hughes describes the area in 2005 when they moved in:

This corridor was a kind of epicentre for social discord in Kamloops. Eighteen women working in the sex trade in one morning driving to work. Count them—boom, boom, boom. Our outreach worker walking down Tranquille Road, picking up over 50 discarded intravenous needles and turning around and picking up 30 more on the same path. People openly trafficking in drugs on the street. It was a social disaster in this corridor.

ASK Wellness moved into the neighbourhood because those who needed them most were already there. The political challenge for Bob Hughes and the team at ASK was to nurture working relationships with their new neighbours that were mutually beneficial.

ASK stands for the Aids Society of Kamloops, and their focus has always been on harm reduction programming for vulnerable populations, in particular intravenous drug users and sex trade workers. As the organization has grown since its inception in 1992, so too has the range of services they provide. Bob Hughes describes their philosophy as follows: "We work with whatever walks through the door. Not whoever, but whatever. That includes anybody and anyone." As a result they now have a network of low-barrier housing units that they own or manage. They have street outreach workers connecting with bylaw officers around homeless camps and providing needle exchanges. They offer free condoms and needle exchange facilities at the office. There is a computer in the lobby that people

can come in and use. They have a program specifically for women in the sex trade called the SHOP program. They offer transition skills and employment training programs. And now, thanks to the steelworkers from Local 7619, they have a free, accessible, safe shower and laundry facility.

Housing the showers, as Bob suggests, just made sense for ASK Wellness. As an organization committed to broadening the resources available in the ecosystem of street-involved life in Kamloops, the showers and laundry offer one more node in a network of services aimed at meeting people where they are and having them “walk away with more hope than they came in with.”<sup>8</sup>

Local businesses did not all see it the same way. Despite the great strides made in collaborative relationship building between ASK and the North Shore Business Improvement Association, the Shower Project raised suspicion and concern. Interestingly, it was fears of sexual impropriety that were the initial concern. ASK’s roots as an outreach service provider for the prevention of HIV and AIDS, and a hazy link drawn between these showers and gay bathhouses, sounded homophobic alarms among some. Not only would the shower potentially attract undesirable people to the area, the fear was that it would also attract morally questionable sexual practices.

At the time, then general manager of the North Shore Business Improvement Association Peter Mutrie stated that the building and installing of showers at ASK Wellness was “a fulcrum for this whole basket of social issues.”<sup>9</sup> Much of the anthropological literature on gift giving and gift societies focuses on the holistic systems within which acts of giving and receiving are situated (Mauss 1967; Weinbren 2006).<sup>10</sup> Marcel Mauss (1967, 1) sums it up best when he writes:

Each phenomenon contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these total social phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religions, legal, moral and economic.

While his focus was on what he called “archaic” societies and the moral and social economies through which acts of giving and receiving were used to negotiate social contracts, what is interesting about Mauss’ conclusions for

our purposes is this foundational notion that acts of giving and receiving offer incredible insights into the whole social complexes from which they emerge. The Shower Project is one such instance. As Peter Mutrie notes above, the shower exposed a host of social issues, relations, and tensions.

Urban gentrification, economic diversification and renewal, and community rebranding efforts shape the ways that energy, resources, and compassion flow in a neighbourhood (Wasserman and Clair 2011, 73). They attempt to alter the social and material ecosystems of urban spaces. In the case of Kamloops' North Shore, much effort has been invested in economic and aesthetic revival of the area. Concerns about the Shower Project flowed largely from these efforts. Just as some were trying to "clean up" the area, others wanted to build something that would attract those less desirable elements that gentrification efforts were attempting to displace. (And by "elements," I mean people, street-involved individuals living in various states of precarious vulnerabilities.) Through hard work and mutually respectful dialogue, Bob Hughes had negotiated a good working relationship with the business community in the area. The idea of the showers, however, struck a nerve.

Once again, Bob and the team at ASK had to navigate these frictions. In addition to their seemingly limitless commitment to advocating for the needs to their clients while maintaining healthy community relations, what Bob Hughes also knew was that just below the surface of this tension was a fundamental compatibility. Once homophobic worries about bathhouse escapades were quelled, Bob was able to secure an incredible amount of community support for the Shower Project.

Bob did what Wasserman and Clair (2011, 73) suggest by paying attention to the nuanced patterns of community making of everyone in an area. In so doing, what becomes apparent is that everyone has a lot more in common than they might first think. Wasserman and Clair (2011) suggest that street-involved communities often have attitudes and practices similar to those of people engaged directly in gentrification and renewal projects. So as tensions manifest on the surface between those advocating for services for low-income and street-involved people and those interested in growing local economic development opportunities, at their core, both groups often want the same things—safe communities where people can thrive. To his credit, Bob Hughes navigated complicated political waters,

did not give up, and was able to reveal to the business community that everyone was on the same team, and that a free shower and laundry facility would serve everyone's collective goals.

By peeling each layer back, what becomes apparent is that the friction initially created by the Shower Project sparked only at the surface. Local business associations and owners were busy trying to "clean up" the area, and the idea of a facility that would attract homeless and street-involved people appeared to contradict this effort. This was the first point of contact. Goals hit, friction, spark.

The great thing about friction is that it is energy. Of this, anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005, 5) writes, "A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick." When things rub up against each other they produce heat, light, energy, friction, and out of this energy created, new configurations become possible. Tsing (2005, 4) continues, "Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions I call 'friction': The awkward, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference." These moments of encounter, unequal and heterogeneous as they may be, can lead to new arrangements of culture and power, new flows of energy and resources, new collaborations. This is what happened with the Shower Project. Not only did the ecosystem of street life change with the addition of this resource, but the ecology of compassion shifted in a way that opened up new terrain for new kinds of relationships between ASK Wellness and those they serve and their neighbours in the business community.<sup>11</sup>

With the surface tensions burned off, what were left were compatible goals. A shower facility would actually offer street-involved individuals a chance to get cleaned up, literally. From there, perhaps meeting prospective landlords or employers would be possible. The ASK Wellness Centre was already firmly established in the neighbourhood. Combined, these arguments not only made quick work of oppositional pushback but also revealed that everyone had the same goals. As Wasserman and Clair (2011) suggest, in the nuanced spaces in between these arguments, everyone wants the same thing, and building a shower facility in a space that is already there and already serving the community does not contradict the

efforts of those interested in neighbourhood gentrification and economic development.

The steelworker from Local 7619 did not intend to cause conflict. In Jim McCarthy's words, "We just build stuff. That's what we do." As Bob was negotiating the political terrain for the project, the steelworkers drew up plans and got to work building. Combined, these efforts were the momentum that kept the wheels turning. Each time the wheels came around, they hit the surface and sparked something. When they did, Bob Hughes was there to tend to the sparks. Eventually the surface tensions burned off, and what started to spark was community support and involvement. Momentum for the project grew and more people became involved. Word spread and local business donated materials. As the need for specific tradespeople came up, they were recruited from the mine site.<sup>12</sup> A new configuration emerged out of the friction.

When the Shower Project opened on September 9, 2011, it did so with unified support from the North Shore Business Improvement Association and the community. The transformative quality of the gift of the Showers Project is tremendous. The steelworkers did not give up. They just built it. Bob Hughes and the team at ASK were able to pave the way for that. The material change to the space in the basement of ASK, stripping the structure to its raw core and then building it up again, is a fitting metaphor for the way this project was able to pull back the surface layers of privilege and prejudices to reveal a common desire. It turns out that both sides were never that far apart, and it took a group of steelworkers building a shower to unravel and ease existing tensions.

Marcel Mauss (1967) suggests that we could look at acts of giving for what they reveal about an entire social complex, for each act holds in and through it every thread of social fabric. This means that they can, at times, also change that fabric. The showers are that kind of gift. Bob Hughes writes in a letter of thanks to the United Steelworkers, "The impact of these facilities has been profound. . . . On behalf of the ASK Wellness Centre and the community as a whole, thank you for being part of the transformation of the entire social fabric of Kamloops."

There is a safe place to shower and do laundry. There is a place where men and women can have privacy and dignity. The value of this alone cannot be overstated. Bob Hughes continues:

The impact of these facilities has been profound. Women and men who haven't bathed in several days and who are wearing dirty clothes enter our facility having heard from agencies and businesses throughout the community that this service exists, leave in clean clothes, freshly shaven and groomed, and for once in a long period of time, a sense of dignity that only clean clothes and shower can provide.

Carman, the coordinator of the SHOP Program at ASK that offers support for sex-trade workers in the community recalls:

During the winter season I had a young lady who came in every few days; I know she was living in someone's basement with no running water. It was cold and she would take these long showers, so long that we would be knocking on the door to make sure she was ok. All she wanted was to sit down under the warmth of the water and be out of the cold for a while . . . The donation and time given by the steelworkers is more than just a washer and drying or a shower. It's about restoring dignity in a person's life . . . The shower built by the steelworkers has been an incredible blessing to our SHOP program participants.

One of the users of the showers states:

I am homeless and looking for a place to rent. I have been using the shower and laundry at the ASK Wellness in the North Shore until I find shelter and it has been totally awesome.

Another says:

I think that it is very nice of people to help the homeless so they can be clean and have clean clothes too. I have used the laundry facility and I was so grateful they had everything I needed. I again I would like to say thank you.

Everyone involved in the Shower Project should be very proud of the contribution that this gift makes to peoples' lives. The showers and laundry provide a much-needed resource in the ecosystem of urban street life in Kamloops. But the transformative power of the Shower Project is more than that. As Bob Hughes suggests above, it has changed the social fabric, the ecology, of giving and compassion in Kamloops. This project came up against community pushback and logistical complications that could have ended it. Instead, together ASK Wellness and the steelworkers persistently moved forward, and in so doing changed the terrain upon which giving and compassion can occur in this community. This is the difference a shower can make.

## How Did They Do It?

It is one thing to have a great idea. It is another still to find a host organization willing to accept a gift of this magnitude. It is quite another to actually get the job done, especially by volunteers. So how does a group pull something like this off? I have asked this question many times. "What does it take to get a culture of giving like this going and then keep it going?" I have asked people flipping burgers at cooks, members of the Union Executive, those involved in the construction of the showers, and union members at other events. Without fail, every one of them has said "leadership." It takes strong, committed leadership. Given this resounding response, and that leadership is one the focus points of this collection, it is worth fleshing this out a bit. To that end, I'll change my question: "What does strong leadership in this context look like?" The Shower Project offers a fascinating glimpse at the complexity of the question of leadership, and the levels of leadership and networks of relations needed to inspire, sustain, and manage large-scale giving practices.

As mentioned earlier, the Shower Project was not the first act of giving that the steelworkers from Local 7619 had engaged in. Rather, it flowed out of an existing culture of giving within the local. They had already been engaging in the cooks for a few years and were well known in the non-profit organization world for these impressive spreads. They were also well known within the United Steelworkers as a local setting with an impressive standard for collective giving. Members of the local tell with pride

the story of when they took their trailer and grills to a district meeting in Saskatoon and put on a cook event at the Métis Friendship Centre there. They served 500 meals that day and demonstrated through the practice of giving what other locals could do in their own communities. It is reported that as a result of this cook in Saskatoon, several locals returned home and purchased the needed equipment to start their own cook programs. As a tribute to their reputation as leaders-by-example of community-based generosity, several district managers in the United Steelworkers turned up to applaud Local 7619's efforts at Shower Project's opening event.

Getting and keeping this kind of culture of giving within any group or organization requires internal leadership that inspires active participation from members. When asked, "What does it take to start and keep doing this?" one of the research participants responded, "It helps when you have someone that's really hard to say no to." A core group of individuals has congealed around these cook events to create a kind of central hub for giving activities, and the energy around the practices of giving is so contagious that it really is hard to say no to participating. This core group that attends to the logistics and organizes the events welcomes participation from anyone wanting to chip in.

The energy and commitment of this group cannot be overstated. Having spoken with each of them on several occasions I can say that their dedication is uncompromised. One member of group, Laura Drennan, recalls that when she walks down the street in Kamloops now people do not ask her for spare change but rather ask when the next cook will be. Just like the showers, these meals are part of the ecosystem of street life in Kamloops.

The other thing people who participate in these events talk about eloquently and without hesitation is the sense of personal satisfaction that comes from active giving practices. Of what she gets out of her involvement in the cooks, Laura Drennan says:

For me it's a recharge of my battery. Recharge. I'm a much better mother, parent, friend after I've experienced doing the cook . . . When we don't have a cook for a month or two, I'm calling the Jims and saying "where are we going next."

I really need to get out there and do it again. I need to recharge the battery, it's getting low.

One of the "Jims" Laura is referring to is Jim McCarthy, whom we have heard from throughout this story. The other is Jim McLean. McLean's involvement in the cooks is key. He has experience working as a caterer and is often the architect behind coordinating the volumes of quality food that the crew produces. Of why he does this on his time off, McLean says:

I feel compelled to. I've recognized how fortunate I've been and I also know how close I've been to being where these people are . . . It would be a shame if we didn't do something to give back. And do it in a way that lets people know that they are respected. To give them a little bit of dignity. When we feed people we don't just feed them, we treat them with respect and that's every bit as important as the food as far as I'm concerned.

As momentum around the cook events grows, the group has an eye on succession planning. They realize that it is important to get and keep younger members of the local involved in these events if the culture of giving is to continue over the long term. To this end they are sure to advertise events and openly share tales from the front lines of cooks. One of the members is always present with his camera documenting the events and creating beautiful slideshows to share with members at the job site. In Laura's words at the Shower Project opening, "We are just collecting people along the way as well, to give. As can see behind me, there's about 20 individuals here we've exponentially collected. Started out with I think six of us and every time it gets bigger."

But a core of individuals willing to continuously beat the drums of giving projects is not enough to sustain large-scale giving practices from an organization the size of an entire union local. Local 7619 of the United Steelworkers represents approximately 1,100 members. Not all participate in every event, but everyone's dues go to paying for them. That means that there is a key need for bureaucratic leadership from within the local to ensure that there is collective support for the projects. This requires a delicate

negotiation between the needs of the entire membership as a formal social network, the energy and enthusiasm of those wanting to participate in giving projects, and the management of community requests for help.

On the matter of the responsibility of the local to represent the needs of all members, Local 7619 President Richard Boyce says that with every proposed giving project the group asks, “Will this grow the union, make it stronger?” Projects cannot distract from the needs of the membership or the executive’s responsibility for those needs, and they need to be in keeping with the ideological value base of the union itself. Boyce also suggests that the leadership style needed from a bureaucratic end needs to be informal and open. When you are asking people to give their own time and money, it cannot come as a directive. Instead, the leadership role is to nurture a culture of giving whereby people feel included and inspired to give.

Jim McCarthy, a member of both the core group of active givers and the local executive, says of the spirit behind the culture of giving in the local:

It was a real group effort, but the big one is the funding from our local 7619. This is our money. This is our money that we spend on dues. That we have now spent on a project in the community. Sometimes you get bad press for being a union member . . . but all we do is if you are on a mine site or a job site, your goal is to make sure people are looked after. That’s our goal and it goes right back down to the base. That’s what you are trying to do. That’s no different than what we are doing here. Our goal is to extend caring for people within the job site as well as off the job site within our communities.

Jim is hitting on a very important aspect of leadership here. It is by way of the careful negotiation between the needs and responsibilities to members and those of the broader community that the specific culture of giving, nurtured and thriving among the steelworkers, works. I would also argue that this fundamental ideological compatibility gives this delicate relationship a solid foundation upon which to stand. By growing a culture of

giving out of the same principles of the labour movement that insist that the collective needs to look out for each individual, a climate of support is nurtured.<sup>13</sup> Without this support, this vibrant culture of giving would dissolve. At the opening of the Shower Project, Jim McCarthy suggested as he pointed toward the crews serving food and laughing, “This is an actual union meeting you know, whichever way you want to look at it.”

The steelworkers from Local 7619 have the well-earned reputation now for being a crew that gets things done. As a result, they field requests from organizations for contributions. Managing this aspect of the culture of giving within the local requires another level of leadership. Each request needs to be vetted through the membership and the executive. Questions need to be asked of it. Can the group commit to it? Will it grow the union? Is it compatible with the ideological principles that guide that practice of giving? And is there a group willing to take the lead on it? Once the group decides on a project, as we have seen with the Shower Project, there is little that can stop them. The following diagram attempts to capture the reciprocal relationships between formal, informal, and hybrid networks of relations required to usher a project such as this one from idea to completion. There is a need for formalized structural networks. At the same time, these showers would never have been built were it not for the sustained efforts of individuals within the steelworkers and ASK Wellness who kept the project going. I have included municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government as formal networks not because of any direct contribution made in the building of the shower facility but rather because of how the efforts of the United Steelworkers and ASK Wellness to address the need in the community serve, in many ways, to let these formal structures off the hook. The Formal/Informal Hybrid networks identified here reflect the ways that participants in the project offer their time, resources, and effort as both members of formal groups/networks and as individual community members. Informal networks circulate throughout this project—from those who happen into ASK Wellness and use the shower to members of the broader community of Kamloops.

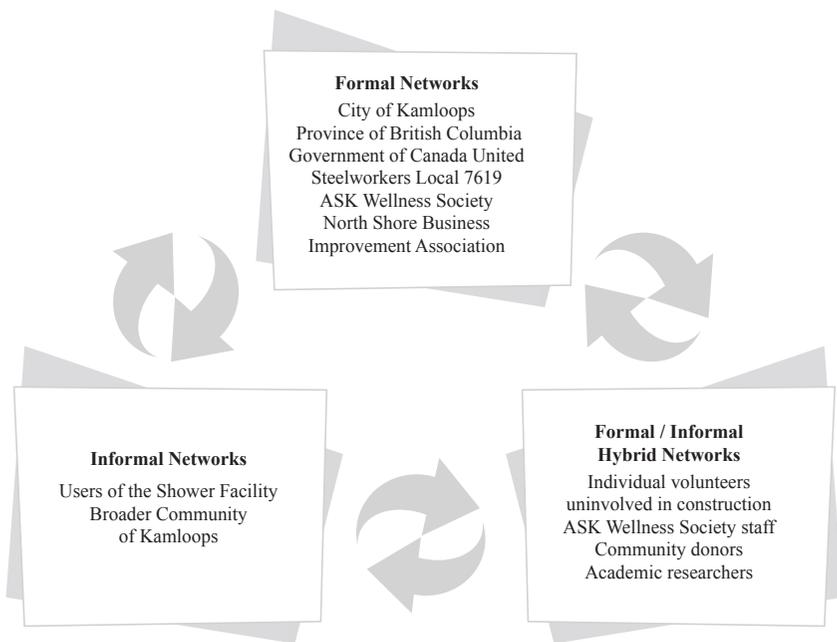


FIGURE 2.2. Shower Project Network by Lisa Cooke. Design by Moneca Jantzen, Daily Designz.

## On to the Next Project . . .

A colleague and I hosted a “research cabaret” event at our university in honour of the Shower Project. We invited all those involved in the project to attend. After an inspiring conversation about this project, the crew started talking about their next appointment. They were heading down to another non-profit organization in Kamloops to take some measurements and make a work plan. When asked what they were talking about, one replied, “We thought that we’d take advantage of this opportunity that we’re all together in town to go check out our next project. We’re installing an industrial dishwasher at a non-profit downtown.” And just like that, they were off. They did not bask too long in the successes of the Shower Project (even as my colleague and I were trying hard to honour them) before they

were off and at it again with the next one. Jim McCarthy had foreshadowed this at the opening of the Showers when he said:

Now for me and the Steelworkers all I see is to look for the next project. How can we enhance people's lives? I don't know what that will be but I know we will be looking for one. As well as doing the monthly meals that we do. We will be doing other things and I don't know where that's going to go from here.

What is unique about this kind of giving practice is that there is a notable distance between the giving and the receiving. Once the project is completed, the steelworkers move on. The gift is given. That leaves the receiver of the gift to accept, manage, operate, and maintain it. This requires another level of leadership—one open to taking on the front-line operational end of things once the gift has been given.

It also requires an openness to the organic ebbs and flows that come from having a project like this constructed by volunteers on volunteer time. Coordinating the efforts of specific tradespeople with work schedules at the mine site meant that there were stretches of time when little was happening in the basement at ASK. Bob knew that the door needed to be open to having people come and go when they could and that patience was key. So in addition to the political prowess needed to negotiate complicated political terrains and convince reluctant stakeholders that this project was both a good idea and feasible, Bob and the team at ASK Wellness needed gracious patience. Of this Bob says:

You never put the squeeze on volunteers. You can't. It's unethical and it's not fair. You really don't have a level of accountability on volunteers where you can say, "Where were you? You didn't show up?" I said to Jim, "Finish it whenever you can. No pressure on our end."

Just as the steelworkers are guided by an ideological mooring that grounds the culture of giving within the local, the leadership at ASK Wellness demonstrates the same philosophical consistency that allows for a culture

of giving to occur organically. This philosophical anchor in his style of leadership meant that Bob Hughes was never preoccupied with measurable outcomes. As a researcher, I've found this project so ethnographically rich and full of promise that I must confess to a persistent wish to glean glowing success stories from it. I have been looking for the magical story of an individual who as a result of being able to wash his or her clothes and take a shower was able to secure permanent housing and get a job. The reality is that these outcomes are not measurable. This kind of outcome is impossible to track in real (or ethnographic) time. There is no direct cause-and-effect line between any two points on the spectrum of street-involved life. Bob Hughes knows this much better than I and reminds me of it when he says (in response to my pressing for "the magical story"):

In my experience, and my opinion—is to never look for an outcome. In the same way that we can't take responsibility for people's mistakes and failures, we don't get to take credit for their successes.

Just as the steelworkers did not stick around to bask in the glow of their success and praise for their efforts, Bob reminds me that some things are not measurable, nor are they ours to measure. What matters is that anyone who needs or wants one can take a hot shower in a safe space. They can wash their clothes if they want. What they do with that is neither ours to own nor to claim. This is such a well-placed caution and reminder, particularly for those of us concerned with conclusions and tidy "findings." It is also a powerful ideological current that shapes the very leadership style that made this project possible at all. Had Bob been overly focused on outcomes and measurable deliverables, the showers would likely never have been built. There were too many sound arguments made against it. By shifting the focus away from the impacts of the showers and instead placing his faith in the spirit of the thing, Bob nurtured a space (political, logistical, and physical) that allowed for the steelworkers to create and give this beautiful gift.

## Research, Leadership, and Learning

While Bob Hughes may have reminded me that my ethnographic gaze intent on finding clear outcomes was misplaced, there is an important role for research in this story. Each of the chapters in this collection reflects on how our specific research projects and processes are embedded in unique ways to the very things that we seek to examine. Taking this question further, we need to ask what academic research specifically contributes to the initiatives we are examining. My tape recorder and notepad did little to help the steelworker build the showers. But if we as researchers are to explore and write about the kinds of things that we are examining here—theatre productions with street-involved populations, volunteer-run adult learning programs, community gardens and free produce, student engagement and service learning, community action against homelessness, and building showers—our doing so needs to accomplish something more than bolstering individual academic careers. The research process needs to be part of a collaborative dialogue that seeks to do something about the things that we write about. Dubinsky (2006) notes that several factors come together in Kamloops as a small city to create the social and geographical proximities needed to nurture a strong culture of participation (see Chapter 7: Conclusion for a cumulative assessment of these features). Based on Dubinsky's (2006) framework for types of collaborations, the central relationship in this story is the one between the steelworkers and ASK Wellness. This collaboration is at once organic and self-interested. Emergent conditions around the steelworkers cook events forged a relationship with ASK that evolved to one that allowed them to work together toward a specific self-interested goal. But what kind of collaborative relationship does research have with this project? It is self-interested in that my career will be served by this study and any presentations or publications that emerge from it. That does little for anyone else. In the spirit of the very thing I examine, the culture of giving out of which these showers were built, there needs to be more to my contribution than my making tenure and promotion.

This goes for all of us presenting our work in this collection. As representatives of the university working to nurture productive and mutually beneficial relationships between our institution and the community in

which we live and work, we need to be accountable for what we do. The kinds of questions we ask, the ways we seek out answers, and what we do with what we find needs to contribute something to the wider conversation about life in our city. Montgomery's (2013) assertion that what is needed in "city life" is attention to "systems of building, planning, and thinking" (62) that work either against or toward nurturing urban experiences of joy and belonging offers good counsel here. We cannot just study hardship and misery. Rather, we need to pay attention to experiences and relationships, in all of their complexities, for what they say about the lived realities of "quality of life" in our cities.

To that end, what I lack in tile laying skills I can make up for in critically engaged scholarship that takes up the matter of why there was no accessible, free, safe shower facility in Kamloops until the steelworkers built one. I can also insist that the gift of this facility by the steelworkers should not let government institutions off the hook for not identifying or doing anything about this gap. The flip side of the incredible efforts of the steelworkers is that governments and public sector institutions are granted a pass on this particular issue. Not only did they never need to identify the gap in the first place, but now that it is filled, they can continue to ignore the conditions that created it. The steelworkers did not take on this project as a political stance. They "just build stuff," as McCartney says. I don't build stuff, and I can make this political. The steelworkers had the social capital to pull this project off. I have the cultural capital to ensure that their efforts are acknowledged while still shedding light on the magnitude of the neglect on the part of government institutions such that people in this city did not have access to a safe, clean, free, accessible shower facility; and so I must. If we strive for a "happy city" and take Montgomery's (2013) goals to heart, the baseline needs to be that every citizen's basic needs for safety and well-being are met. The steelworkers saw this and did something about it. ASK Wellness works at this every day. Both offer examples of leadership through which I have learned much about my role and responsibility as a researcher to this conversation.

## NOTES

I would like to thank all those who shared their time with me over the past four years that I have been involved in this project. I have learned much from each of you. I would also like to thank Dr. Will Garrett-Petts for first telling me the story of the showers and for his continued support of this research. This work has been financially supported in part through a SSHRC CURA grant and by Thompson Rivers University research funds.

- 1 Credit for this title belongs to Laura Drennan, a member of United Steelworkers Local 7619.
- 2 Interview with the author, November 2010.
- 3 General consensus among those interviewed have the total cost of the project around \$70,000.
- 4 In addition to the investment made by steelworkers, ASK Wellness Centre invested approximately \$15,000 in the construction costs of the project (Personal communication, Bob Hughes, Executive Director of ASK Wellness Centre).
- 5 Interview with the author, September 9, 2011.
- 6 The “program” that Jim is referring to here is the same one described above.
- 7 Margaret Rucker et al. (1992) use the term “failed gift” when discussing unwanted gifts given and how people dispose of them. While in the context of their study this use of the term is fitting, I am not using the term the same way here.
- 8 Bob Hughes, personal communication.
- 9 Peter Mutrie is cited in Bass (2008).
- 10 Others have critiqued Mauss’ theory of the gift as being fundamentally reciprocal. Jacques Derrida (1992), for example, suggests that once a social contract of reciprocity is engaged by way of a gift it is no longer a gift at all. Rather, a gift must be free of all social obligations. In the case of the Shower Project, as will be explored throughout this chapter, I argue with Mauss that in this case there is a degree of reciprocity involved, as the steelworkers all talk about how much they get out of participating in these giving events. So while they think of them as “gifts” they also appreciate what they receive in return. Erica Bornstein (2009) offers a lovely reflection on the notion of Derrida’s “free gift” in India for those looking for an ethnographic example of the opposite of what I am saying here.
- 11 Borrowing from several sources, I am conceptualizing ecosystems here as networks of relations that form communities that interact in the same environment. Ecology encompasses the systems and dynamics of the relationships between and within these networks (Snyder 1995; Salen 2008; Wasserman and Clair 2011).
- 12 The only trades work that the steelworkers needed to contract out in this project was the electrical work. Everyone else, from gas fitters, tile layers, plumbers, and labourers, were recruited from the mine site.

- 13 Weinbren (2006) offers an interesting social history of the relationship between friendly societies, the Good Samaritan, and the labour movement in the UK. Many of the narratives of giving collecting throughout this research reflect many of the same kinds of ideological threads as Weinbren explores, namely an acute awareness of the importance of the rights of the collective and the responsibilities of the individual to that collective.

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