



From house to home to wellbeing

Expanding the opportunities for action

Land Acknowledgement

Our work of exploring housing and home-ing is integrally tied to the land. The land is the foundation for place; places where we might encounter others in unexpected ways; places we might call home or not call home; places where we might find welcome, find witnessing, find story. The land is also where we build and make and decide. The practice of home-ing -- of making a home for an individual or family or community -- is not possible without the real, tangible, earthiness of the ground beneath us.

We respectfully acknowledge that this land of Amiskwaciwâskahikan in Treaty 6 Territory has been a gathering place for generations and we honour the Indigenous peoples who have walked on this soil in the past, and the many Indigenous peoples who live and make their home here now. Many of the stories shared here are theirs. We are grateful for the Indigenous ways and values that ground our work: reciprocity, honesty, listening, and the inherent worth of story.

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Please note:
Hearing the lived experiences of Edmonton residents is important for decision-making. The stories and analysis in this report contain the views of people living in housing need, and may not necessarily represent the views of the City of Edmonton.

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Introduction

Introduction

The night before we meet, Floyd takes shelter under the manicured bushes of the provincial courthouse. John falls asleep, gazing at the stars, in the back of his battered blue van. Neither are tethered to a house. Both are living closer to their sense of home than Cynthia, Puppy Rose and Grant Elder, who that same evening are housed, but very far from being home.

Home

noun

- the place in which one's domestic affections are centered;
- a person's native place or own country;
- a principal base of operations or activities;
- a place of refuge

adverb

- deep; to the heart

House

noun

- a building in which people live;
- a residence for human beings;
- a household



Over the last eight weeks, our team of story gatherers have spent time in campsites, motels, street corners, parking lots, gazebos, basements, condemned units, crowded apartments, libraries, diners, Tim Hortons, Dairy Queens, McDonalds, Cactus Clubs, and Boston Pizzas across Edmonton to document people's experience of house and home, and the ways in which dwelling places and living spaces enable and constrain the lives they value.

Being with, listening to, and learning from Floyd, John, Cynthia, Puppy Rose, Grant Elder, Ayana, Barbara, Bonnie, Bucky, Dafala, A, Graham, Jesse, Justin, Kelly, Mark, Marcoz Delmondo, Barento, Perk, Jared, Sanaa, Syd, Suad, Twilene, and William uncovers fresh ways to re-centre housing policy on human flourishing, and re-imagine the city as a vibrant network of relationships able to counterbalance the power of the state and market.

We -- Sarah, Natalie, Nina, Rochelle, Vale, and Hayley -- set out to meet 26 Edmontonians residing on or near the margins in order to inform, challenge, deepen, and widen the City of Edmonton's Housing Needs Assessment and Housing Affordability Strategy.

It is from the margins that we catch glimpses of different ways of living, surviving, thriving, caring, supporting, organizing, and governing. It is also from the margins that we can identify dominant norms and narratives, consider who they serve, and explore how the everyday people who make up a city can move towards a more just urban future, where rights and resources are turned into real capabilities and freedoms.



In collaboration with the City of Edmonton's Affordable Housing and Homelessness Section, and drawing on our long-term partnership with the City of Edmonton's RECOVER Urban Wellbeing Team, we began by asking:

- How do people labeled by systems as “vulnerable” experience house and home: what are their perceived needs, stressors, supports, and aspirations? What does a house have to do with a home have to do with wellbeing?
- How might we co-create home-making and place-making models that conceptualize housing as a means to human flourishing: to living a respected, connected, safe, and purposeful life? How might we bring housing and wellbeing strategies closer together?
- What could it look like to lay the groundwork for people with lived experience of exclusion and precarity to directly shape policy direction and self-manage solutions?

Our role is to be active listeners, story witnesses, reflective practitioners, bridge builders, and critical collaborators. We resist the label of consultant. We are equally accountable to the people whose stories we collect as we are to the policymakers with whom we share stories, with consent. Our goal isn't to validate or confirm an existing agenda. Our goal is to foster the conditions for mutual and meaningful engagement, which requires that we explicitly name and park uncontested logics, assumed truths, and predetermined solutions.

We recognize the intense pressure cities are under to find solutions to rising rates of homelessness and housing unaffordability. In Edmonton, since the start of the pandemic, the number of people living on the streets has doubled.¹ Over the past year, according to rental aggregator site Zumper the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Edmonton has increased by eight percent, from \$927 to \$999.² The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Association has only documented a 0.6 percent increase from 2020-2021.



Whether you walk the streets of Beverly, Jasper Place, West Edmonton, Strathcona, or Downtown, the distress is palpable, much harder to contain, and impossible to ignore. As Mayor Sohi puts it to *Edify* magazine, “The way our downtown is, I feel my heart break when I go out there. My heart breaks to see the pain out there, people struggling to make ends meet, and people sleeping on the street... and that sense of helplessness. I’m saddened by that.”³

Alongside the sadness are hopeful pockets of policy and practice. In the same July edition of *Edify*, readers learn about five modular housing developments soon to open across the city, built quickly and without the usual bureaucratic wrangling, clear progress against key housing policy metrics. More affordable housing units: check. More permanent supported housing: check. Better amenities: check.

These metrics are important policy tools driving much needed action. They also reflect a dominant way of thinking about housing policy, described by housing researcher Boram Kimhur on the right. >

“Housing policy discussions have been losing human and social dimensions in recent decades. Housing has increasingly become financialised And treated as a commodity, a means of accumulating wealth and often as security for financial instruments, and disconnected from its social function. Home ownership has been promoted in Western countries since the 1990s with a belief in its role in ensuring individuals’ economic security...The notions of welfare economics and utilitarianism have implicitly or explicitly formed the underpinning perspectives of housing policy discussions.

- Boram Kimhur

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/number-of-homeless-people-in-edmonton-expected-to-grow-city-report-says-1.6428680>

² <https://www.zumper.com/rent-research/edmonton-ab>

³ Eliza Barlow (2022) “My Heart Breaks to See the Pain Out There,” *Edify*, Summer 2022 issue

Kimhur offers another policy frame, one which could

expand the solution space by re-conceptualizing

outcomes and recasting roles. She writes:

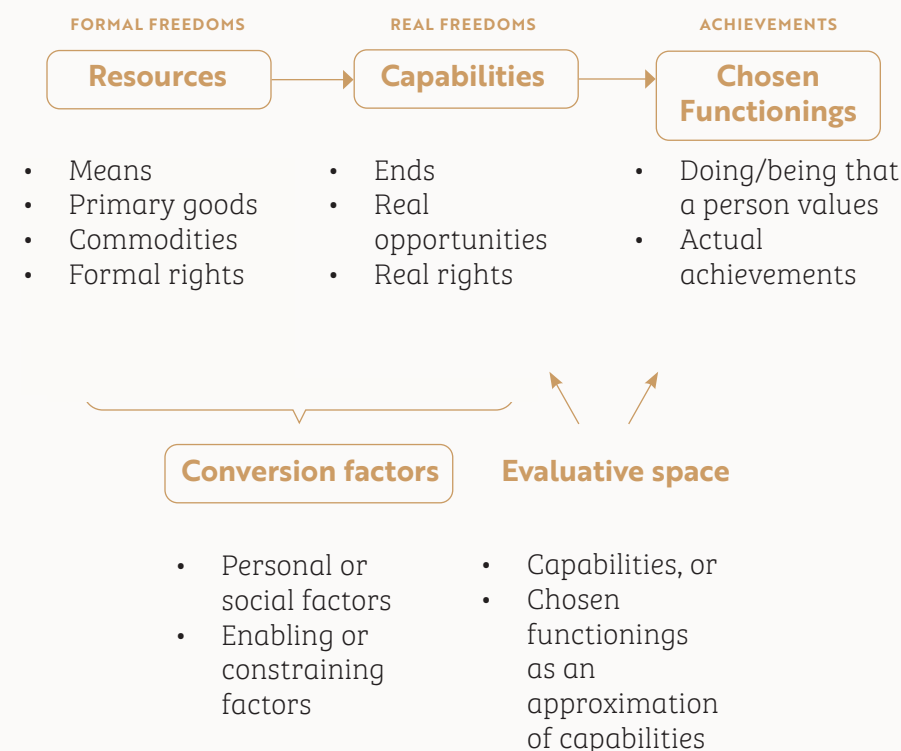
“A good starting point for housing researchers to respond to the calls for a new housing approach would be a critical re-examination of underpinning perspectives and taken for granted notions of housing policy discussions.

The capability approach ... proposes freedoms (or capabilities as proxies of the freedoms) as an appropriate evaluative space of well-being, social arrangements and social justice. For assessing well-being, the standard focus has been on opulence (real income, wealth, and commodities), and utility (satisfaction or desire-fulfillment). The capability approach criticizes these notions in welfare economics and its philosophical foundation of utilitarianism.⁴

⁴ Boram Kimhur (2020) “How to Apply the Capability Approach to Housing Policy? Concepts, Theories and Challenges,” *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37:3, 257-277.

What is the capability approach?

Rooted in the work of Nobel-prize winning economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the capability approach takes as its starting point human flourishing, or wellbeing. To flourish -- to be and do the things we have reason to value -- requires that we have real freedoms or capabilities to do so. Capabilities are individual, relational, and systemic. They are opportunities to convert rights and resources into our chosen functionings. In other words, capabilities enable us to actually live well and meaningfully. Here’s how Kimhur depicts this constellation of concepts:





Bucky's story offers another way to visualize these abstract concepts. Bucky recently turned forty, and has spent three-quarters of his life hustling to make ends meet.

When we run into each other, on the side of a busy road where he's selling pint for rent and daycare fees, he playfully asks one of us to be his baby's mamma. As we come to appreciate, it isn't a pick-up line so much as an earnest plea to help make his family whole again.

Over a steak sandwich, Bucky is clear about the doings and beings he most values: being an active father, speaking Cree, starting a meat drying business, living off the land, reconnecting with spirituality, and following traditions. Although Bucky is housed, he sees himself as homeless until he can reunite with the smiley two-year-old daughter who has recently been removed from his care.

While, under International Law, he has a right to housing (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Canada is a signatory to, but has not adopted in its constitution); a right to health care (Canada Health Act); a right to self-determination (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People); and the right for his daughter to grow up immersed in her culture (also UNDRIP), he can't actualize those rights without substantive opportunities for cultural healing, family treatment, relationship repair, and earning an income -- without leaving for extended period to the oil fields, where he finds his addictions worsen and his relationships suffer. In other words, while Bucky has access to formal freedoms (a range of individual rights) and resources (for now, a house and a range of goods), he can't yet translate those formal freedoms into the real freedoms or capabilities necessary to live the life he values.

Under a dominant housing policy frame, Bucky is pretty invisible. For the time being, he is holding onto the system's desired end point: a house. Were he to be evicted and end up on the street (which is a risk if he can't move \$800 bucks of vapes quickly), Bucky might come under the system's gaze as another person to rehouse and case manage. Only Bucky refuses to be counted or managed. Not being "a welfare bum" is a source of identity and pride. He'd rather hustle and "feed off of other's misery" than confirm racial stereotypes and be perceived as "useless."

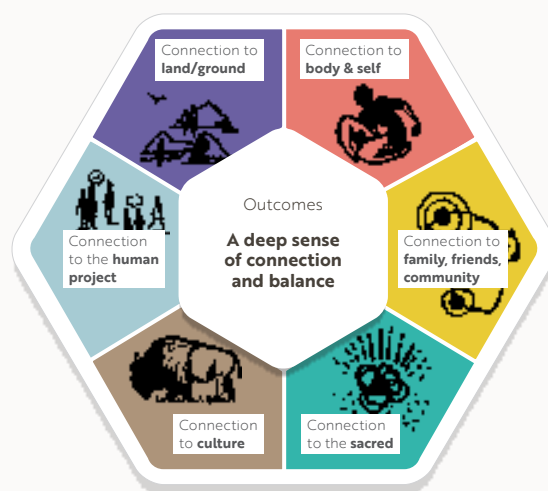
Chosen functionings

Bucky, like most of the 87 Edmontonians living on and off the streets we've gotten to know over the past five years, is clear-eyed about what he values most: respect, purpose, safety, and connection.

To be well is to be respected, have a sense of purpose, be safe from violence, and feel connected to oneself, family, friends, community, culture, lands, spirituality, and craft. This insight formed the inner ring of the RECOVER wellbeing framework we co-developed in 2020, which in the language of Sen and Nussbaum, can be understood as people's 'chosen functionings.'

While our story gathering work with people residing on the margins has surfaced a shared understanding of 'chosen functionings,' the kinds of opportunities people require to live the lives they value differ in size, shape, sequence, and substance. Bucky describes needing opportunities for place-based, non-clinical family repair work.

These outcomes are what Sen calls 'chosen functionings'



Puppy Rose, who bursts into tears the first time we meet in front of the Beverly No Frills, describes needing opportunities for personal growth, removed from exploitative family and friend relationships.

Although dominant policy frameworks tend to group people into large demographic categories by 'vulnerabilities' -- homeless people, single mothers, Indigenous and racialized people, folks living with disabilities, addictions or mental health challenges, etc. -- there is as much diversity within a demographic category as there is between categories. Bucky and Puppy Rose fall into some of the same demographic categories, and yet need different skills, relationships, and structures to be able to be respected, purposeful, safe, and connected. Therein lies even more space for

Our on-the-ground work with people does not reject the existing slate of solutions (e.g modular housing or permanent supported housing), nor does it assume these solutions are for everyone who has been marginalized and excluded. Instead of accepting the presumption that we need more of the same resources to achieve system-set outcomes (adequate housing), we entertain the question: what kinds of capabilities do people need to convert needed resources into their valued ends? In other words, the acquisition of resources isn't the end; it's a means to wellbeing.

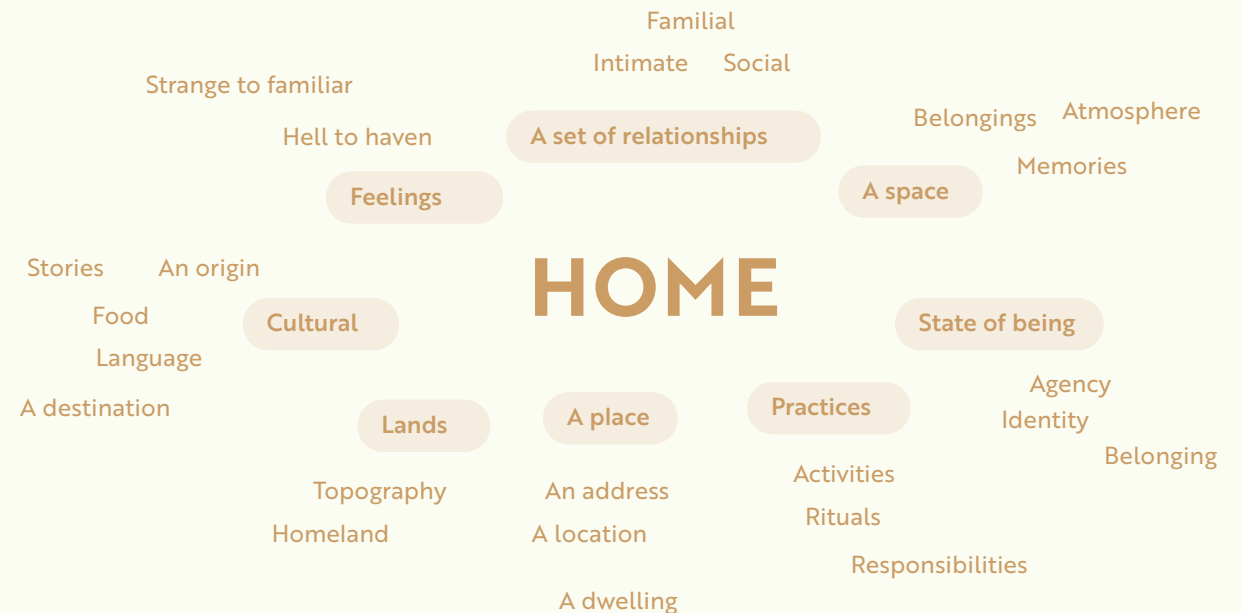
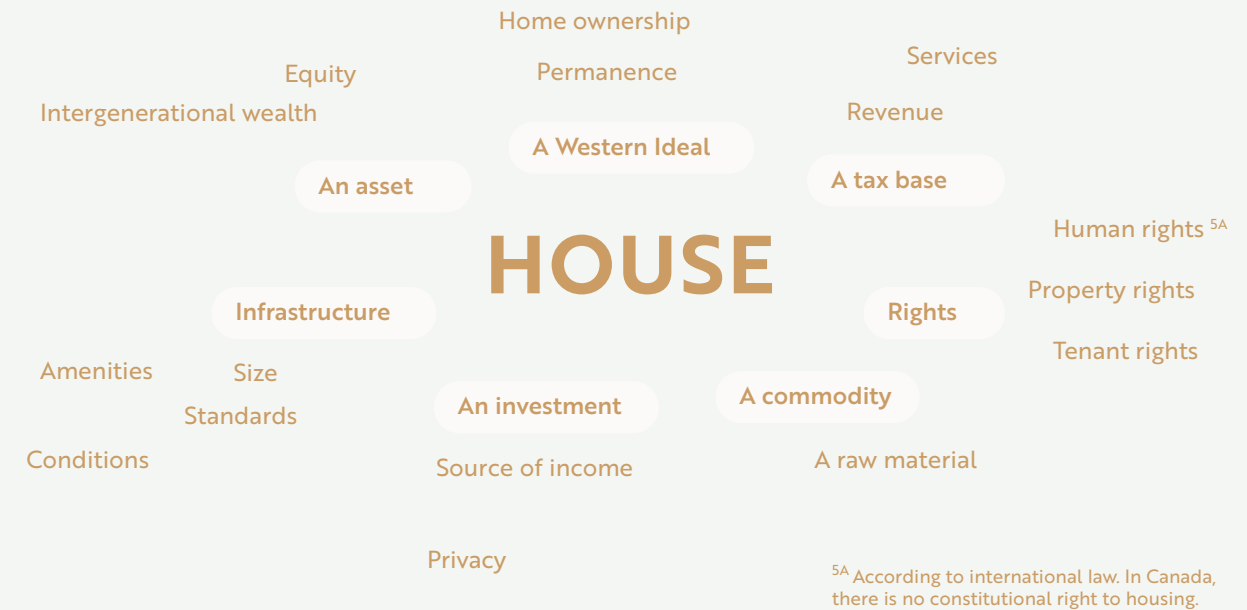
an expanded set of policy solutions!

Homing capabilities

What mix of resources people need to have the capability to live as they choose really depends on their cultural and historical contexts. Shelley Mallet in her Sociological Review article, “Understanding home: A critical review of the literature” notes that Anglo-European, Anglo-American, and more broadly white Western cultures privilege housing, and most especially permanent physical structures or dwellings, as core resources for home. Mallet takes a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary approach to widen our viewfinder. The people of Nuakata Island in Papua New Guinea, for instance, translate home as a matrilineal village, or the island itself, not as a private physical building.⁵

Shifting our frame from house to home again expands the solution space. Where a house denotes physical and financial infrastructure, home connotes a feeling, a set of relationships, a body of practices, a time, a space, even a state of being. Both can play important functions in living and being well.

⁵ Shelley Mallett (2004). “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature.” *The Sociological Review*, 52:1,62-89.





For Suad to be able to live the life she values, she needs better housing infrastructure -- starting with a unit that isn't damp and moldy, and doesn't make her feel sick. She also needs to live close to a church or a community of worship because that's where she feels most at home. Adequate housing is a critical resource and freedom of religion is a key right -- but, for Suad to be able to translate that resource and right into a life of conviviality, hope and faith (her top values), house and home must operate in unison, like two peas in a pod.

Indeed, when we detach house from home, conflate house and home, or universally assume one must come before the other, we can inadvertently deprive people of their capabilities -- of the opportunity to move closer to what they value.

Take Cynthia as a case study. A seasoned survivor of repeated systemic injustices (residential schools, foster care, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women), for the past eight months, she's been the only woman in an inaccessible rooming house sheltering men with active addictions and with a downstairs neighbour threatening to kill her. Yes, she is housed. No, she is unable to convert this resource (a room) into the life she values. Home, to Cynthia, is a space for her cat, Cher, and her standing piano; a set of relationships with her 14 grandkids and close friends; and a return home to her lands and to rituals like picking sweetgrass and sage.



"I think the government thinks I can survive on my own, independently. I can do a lot, if I was in a secure environment."

Cynthia is pretty in pink. Her gold painted nails, dangly earrings, and rose lipstick mask the exhaustion. Hyper-vigilance is taking a toll. To sleep, she secures her door with a chair. "I've been missing appointments because I am so, so tired." As the only woman in a rooming house full of residents facing active meth addictions, unpredictability hangs as heavy as the smoke in the air. Sirens drowned out a recent picnic of Chinese

have her creature comforts -- a piano and a cat named Cher -- close-by. The isolation that came from living on her own in a trailer outside Lacombe over the pandemic was one thing. The isolation that comes from not being able to control your environment, especially when it consumes 85% of your income and isn't even accessible, is quite another. "It feels so edgy."

It's not that Cynthia isn't well ac-
quainted with the edge. She grew up on
Boston's inner-city streets. It's that
she wonders why older adults should
have to bear the precariousness. "We
are poor people. We should be kept
safe, but it's not right. It's not right." So
she isn't right about what Cynthia
needs: residential school; a foster

Author Kuang Ming Wu beautifully captures
Cynthia's sentiment of home as homecoming:

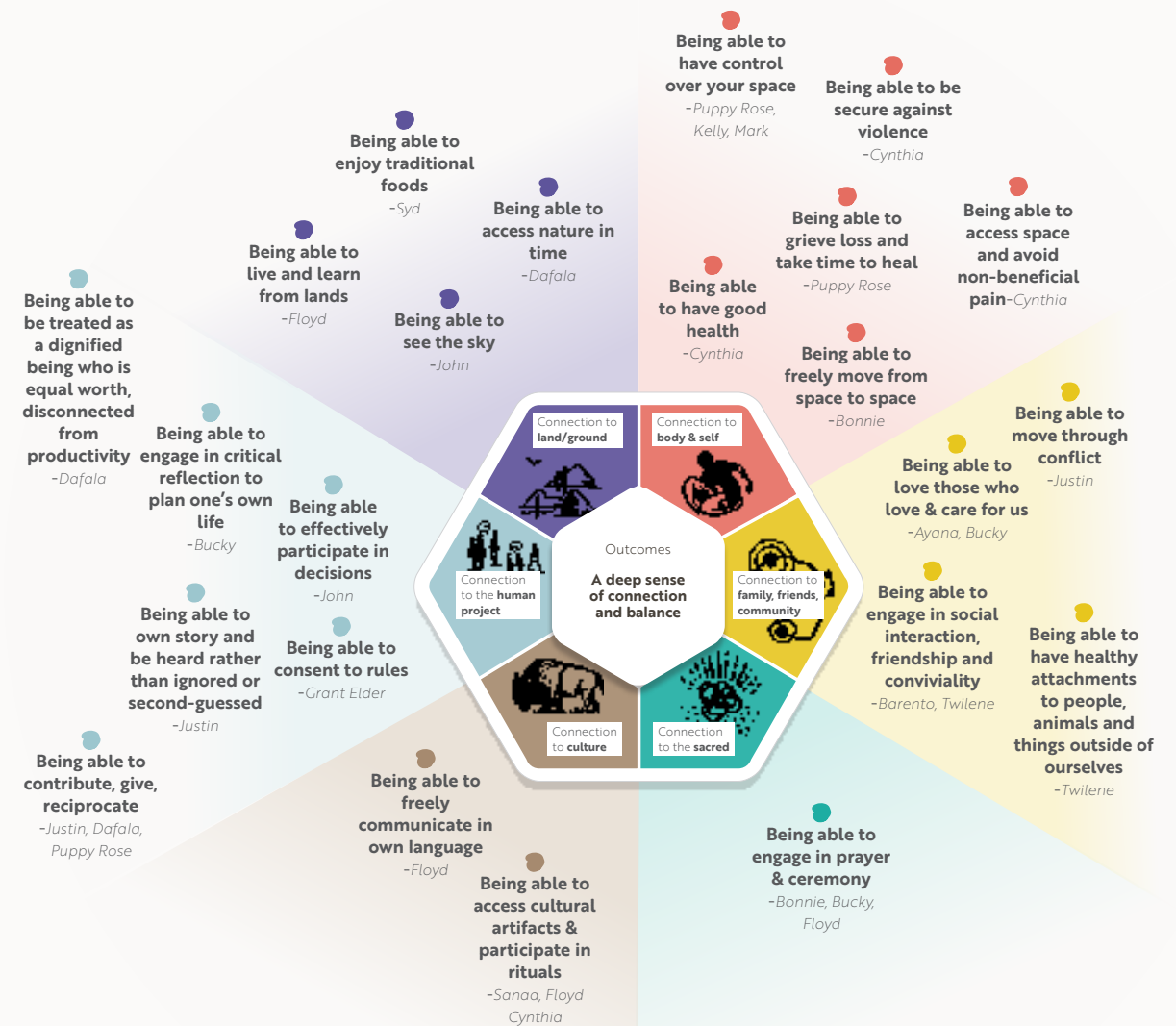
“When you accept me as I am, and I accept you accepting me then I am at home and I am born in this reciprocal acceptance. Home is where I both was born and am being continually born, within that womb called other people, in their being not me.”⁶

6 As cited in Shelley Mallett (2004). "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature." *The Sociological Review*, 52:1,62-89.

Indeed, home for Suad, Cynthia, and most of the 26 people we recently met, is an unfolding process -- not a fixed set of activities, people, or things. We can use the verb **home-ing** to encapsulate the ongoing journey of finding home: of making space, forging intimacy, building connections, feeling comfortable, and being 'at-home.'

Looking across the full set of stories, we can begin to surface the home-ing capabilities people articulate needing to be able to convert a desired resource (be it four walls and a roof, a van, or a tent) into being and doing well. These home-ing capabilities help to flesh out the second ring of the RECOVER wellbeing framework: for people to be connected to body & self; friends, family & community; the sacred; culture; land and ground; and a sense of purpose & craft, they require well-matched opportunities for both housing and home-ing.

Diagram: Home-ing capabilities for wellbeing



Conversion factors

The capability approach distinguishes between well-having and well-living or well-being.⁷ If resources -- whether infrastructure like apartments, legal rights, or services like permanent supported living -- are insufficient for (and, at times, incompatible with) people living the life they value, what does that mean for housing policy?

Kimhur offers up a suggestion:

“...The focus [could] be placed on the capabilities that are generated with resources, and the resources should not be an exclusive focus on assessing how well people are doing and being. This is because ... relevant personal and social circumstances influence the conversion of primary goods to the real enjoyment of the primary goods. The important concern should be what the person succeeds in doing with the commodities in assessing the well-being of a person...”

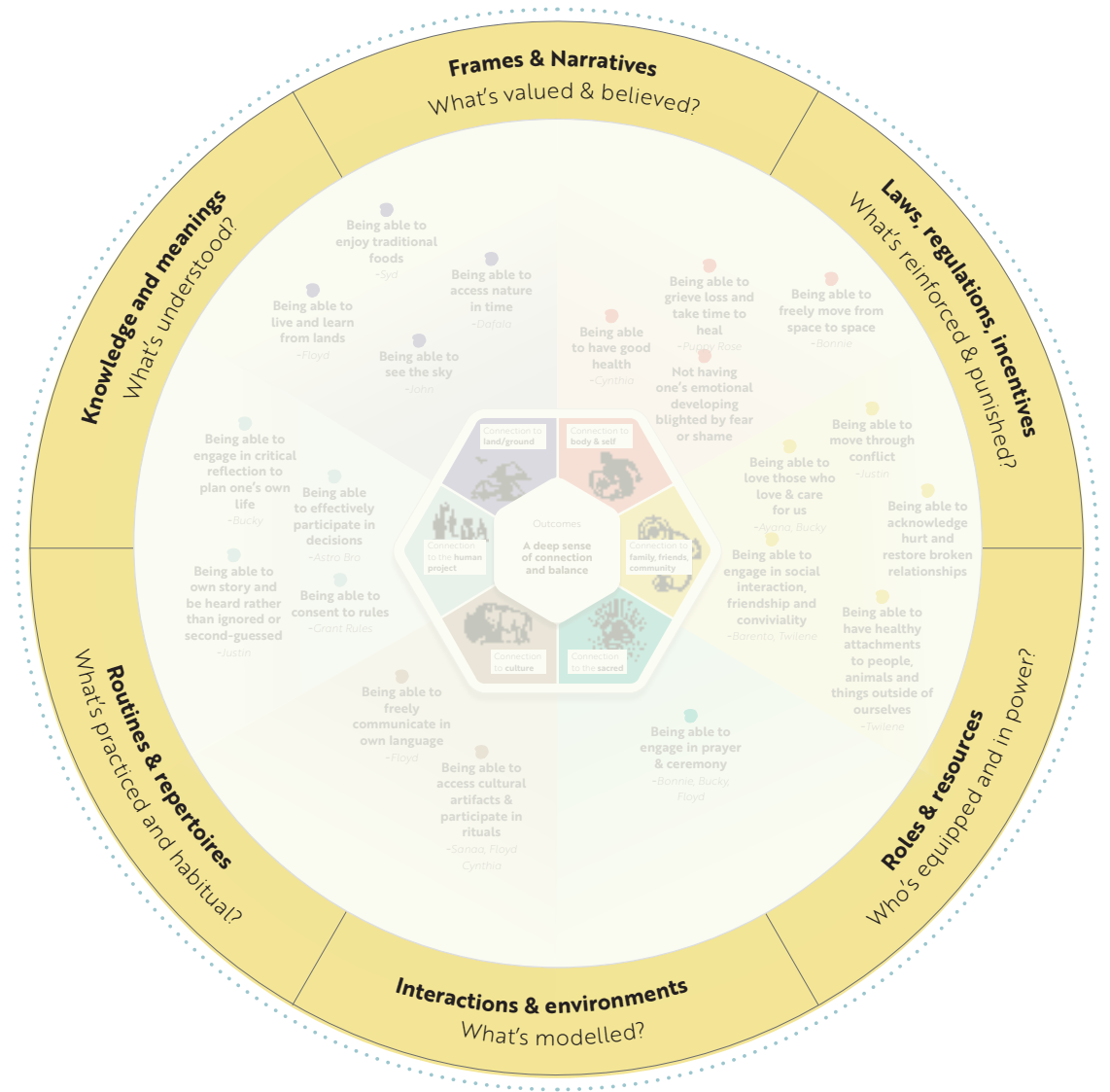
⁷ Des Gasper (2007). “Human Well-being: Concepts and Conceptualizations.” In: McGillivray, M. (eds) Human Well-Being. Studies in Development Economics and Policy. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

The key word here is conversion. Sen introduces the idea of conversion factors -- that there are factors that enable the translation of a resource, right, good or service into real opportunities, along with barriers that prevent opportunity creation and take-up. Enablers and barriers exist at multiple levels: individual mental models & beliefs, relationships, practices, and resource flows along with systemic mental models & beliefs, power dynamics, structures, and practices.

The object of capability-based housing policy, then, would be to strengthen enablers and reduce barriers with segments of people. Because broad demographic groupings like ‘homeless people’, ‘racialized people’ or [insert demographic grouping here] cannot meaningfully capture the heterogeneity of people’s experiences, we can instead cluster people who hold similar values and have similar capability requirements. These groupings are called segments, and they facilitate the co-design of more precise and focused interventions, based on people’s motivations, aspirations, and needed opportunities. In order to shift mental models & stories, relationships & power dynamics, structures, and practices with segments of people, policy has a few levers it can pull. This is reflected in the third ring of the RECOVER wellbeing framework, and summarized in the chart on the next page.

Enablers and barriers at an individual and systemic level	Policy levers
Mental models & beliefs	Knowledge & meanings > <i>who & what's understood?</i> Frames & narratives > <i>what's valued?</i>
Relationships & power	Roles & resources > <i>who's equipped & in power?</i>
Behaviors & practices	Interactions & environments > <i>what's modeled?</i> Routines & repertoires > <i>what's habitual?</i>
Resource flows & structures	Laws, regulations & incentives > <i>what's reinforced & punished?</i>

Diagram: Policy levers for wellbeing





"This seems to be the place I belong. I fit here. I got stuck here and now I know everybody. I'm here and that's the way it is."

"Well, the way I look at it, there is not much of a purpose anymore. Just live and love," Grant Elder tells us. We're sitting on a bench on the corner of 100 Street and 84th Ave, not far from Gazebo park where he spends most of his days hanging out with people. "Not now, I'm in an interview," Grant brushes off tells a woman passing by. In his spare time, he hustles to supplement the \$959/month income support. It was reduced from \$1300/month after the last provincial election.

The sun is hot, and Grant occasionally takes a sip of diluted vodka from his aquamarine YETI thermos. He pauses our conversation to take a call from his daughter, Angelica. "Love you too," he says before hanging up. In some ways

he's very content; he's got plenty of freedom to do what he wants, plenty of safety, and plenty of respect from street family. "The people down here are real." But they also irritate him to no end. "Fuck off!" he barks at crossing the street. That's the core drum," he puzzles. "I want to be isolated and I don't want to be isolated. Does that make sense?... I'm very honest if you want the truth."

Good quality relationships are hard to come by in Grant's life, and memories of childhood abandonment and violence tug on his emotions. In his dreams, he sees himself wrestling a pair of horns, plagued by memories of his time in the army and guilt of being a bad kid to his grandma. It

For Grant Elder, who we first encountered on a Sunday stroll through Strathcona, key barriers to his wellbeing include imposed structures and a history of broken relationships with services. He's part of a segment who highly prizes independence and control, and for whom one-size-fits all guest management policies dictating who can come and go from his unit have driven an eviction cycle. This is how he describes what is standing in the way of a resource (in this case, a Housing First placement) from enabling him to live out his core values of relationships, freedom, and respect:

"This is another fuckin' thing that fuckin' really pisses me off, fuckin'. You put your trust in somebody okay, and you hold onto that. And then all of a sudden, there's a change. And with that change you're treated different." The inconsistency and broken trust makes his blood boil. "Well, you left me? You left me too? Now go then, fuck off! Then I get a little bit discombluberated and get off the fucking left field."

- GRANT ELDER

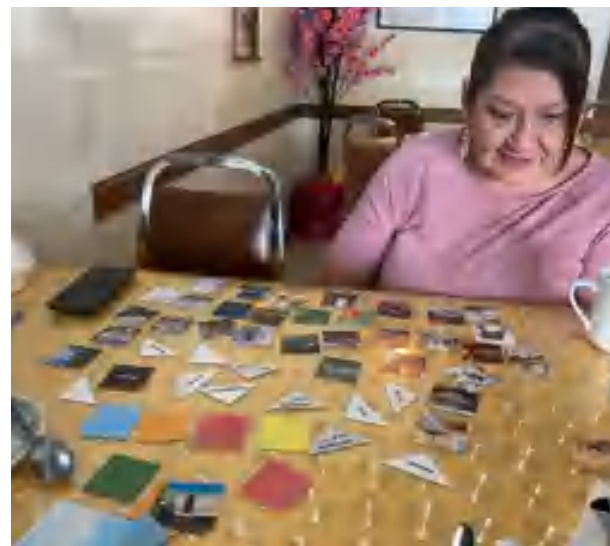
Centering Grant Elder's experience again

expands the opportunity space

What if instead of one-size-fits-all guest management policies there were principle-based policies, which residents co-created? And what if services and institutions were as accountable as individuals who have been evicted for broken relationships? What kinds of restorative rituals might rebuild trust between people & institutions, and foster a more respectful relational basis for future support?



These 'what ifs' are two of 70 very early ideas, brainstormed with Grant Elder and the 25 other people with whom we spent time. Early ideas appear on People Profile Cards, and are grouped in this report by segments, themes, and policy levers. These early ideas are designed as launchpads for further exploratory conversation and deeper co-design. They are not fleshed out solutions or recommendations, but rather an assemblage of transformative possibilities and creative experiments that recognize people like Grant Elder as active agents of change, rather than as passive clients, consumers, tenants, or welfare recipients.



Participation & Agency

Seeing and engaging people as active agents of change is foundational to a capability approach. Indeed, in this research, being treated as autonomous, capable, resourceful, caring, and contributing people were the most cited home-ing capabilities for achieving wellbeing. Asymmetries of power between people residing on the margins and landlords, services, institutions, and policymakers were also in the top cited barriers to achieving wellbeing.

Current urban housing and living policies are rooted in a liberal democratic tradition, which offer pretty weak mechanisms for democratic control, and afford greater protections to the property rights of owners than the rights of urban dwellers.⁸ Outside of formal elections, political parties, and institutional processes, everyday folks -- especially those who have been systematically marginalized -- have few ways to participate in collective decisions and self-manage solutions.

The French Philosopher Henri Lefebvre conceptualized “the right to the city” as a continuous struggle to augment the rights, opportunities, and freedoms of urban dwellers. As University of Washington Professor Mark Purcell explains, “it reorients the city away from its role as an engine of capital accumulation and toward its role as a constitutive element in the web of cooperative social relations among urban inhabitants.”⁸ Only by activating regular people directly -- not via organizational or institutional intermediaries, each with their own agendas -- can we live into the vision of the city as *oeuvre*: a collective production endowed with the individuality, spirit, and style of all of its residents.

Lefebvre (as translated by Purcell) writes:

⁸ Mark Purcell (2013) “Possible Words: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City,” *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 36:1, 141-154.

“

The transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and management of space founded on the permanent participation of the ‘interested parties’ with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests.

It’s pretty easy for cities to wave the banner of participation. As Purcell puts it, “often participation is involved in city politics but rarely practiced seriously” because “the ideology of participation allows those in power to obtain, at a small price, the acquiescence of concerned citizens.”

In the place of surface-level consultations, which keep norms of ‘expert power’ and citizen passivity largely intact, Lefebvre describes mobilizing people to experience an awakening, whereby they come into consciousness of themselves as inhabitants, embedded in a web of social connections and part of a complex whole, bustling with different experiences and drives that cannot be easily reduced to work, money or property.

It may all sound rather utopian, but, in just a few short weeks, we stumbled upon two organic communities, who had developed their own homegrown solutions and were self-managing collective resources.



Self-managed community #1

Maple Oak Ridge



On one cul de sac in the Maple Oak Ridge mobile home park, off 17th Street, neighbours take on informal caring roles and gather weekly for a shared meal. Ed is the local chef, cooking up sausages for the crowd, and keeping the potluck flowing. Perry grew up in Grand Prairie with a grandpa who taught him to warmly shake people's hands. He is the first person to greet folks to the cul de sac: he wants everyone to feel welcomed. After breaking his back, he's been unable to work in the formal economy, but he certainly creates value: he is the community flower pot maker, where his animal lawn ornaments dot yards, and the trusty key holder.

Then there's Inga, who walks the park every day, sometimes delivering treats, like slices of homemade banana bread. While Ed, Perry, Inga and their neighbours live on fixed incomes, and face rising costs which threaten their long-term stability, they conceptualize resources as more than money, choosing to collectively cultivate and share their time, passions, and compassion. Unlike the next example, they exist on more solid ground -- as vehicle owners and leaseholders, without experience of racial discrimination. How might cities support self-organizing constellations of residents -- versus seek to formalize, regulate, control, or otherwise manage them?



Self-managed community #2

Faded Gray House



At the faded gray house in downtown, Justin, Dafala, Deen, Ayana and a rotating cast of characters devised their own social support model as a response to near daily experiences of institutional discrimination, social stigma, and unmet need. As Justin explains it, “A friend of mine and I rented this place last year [during COVID]... Lots of people have situations. People facing mental problems, or people who are stuck, where other apartments won’t accept them. So I thought: we have a community who can understand, and ensure people are not turned away.”

While the house isn’t far away from a bevy of formal services, Justin and his housemates identified a critical missing ingredient: love. “The difference here from other services is love. We understand each other. We take care of each other. We are responsible for each other. We are multicultural - black, white, brown, yellow -- we all have a situation, but we feel comfortable here.”



Only “feeling comfortable” would not last long. Within a month of first encountering the residents of the faded grey house, they were evicted into homelessness, five days before the end of the month.



THE HOUSE THAT IS MORE THAN A HOUSE



In their long-form story, we document the series of fast-moving events that dumped them back on the streets from which they were seeking to be a safe haven. Yes, their home-grown solution -- a kind of micro shelter with rotating roles and house decision-making -- contravened the terms of their lease and no doubt a range of regulations on occupancy requirements and zoning. But, at every point of engagement with formal systems, Justin and his housemates were treated as the problem. No attempts were made to pause, to listen, to understand, and most of all, to collaborate on what could have been a common purpose: keeping people from the shelter system and fostering community wellbeing. Instead, their interaction with formal systems served to escalate conflict and, very nearly, criminalize them.

Rather than view the faded gray house through the lens of social disorder and deviancy, what if we could view the house through the lens of participation and positive deviance? By flipping our framing, and re-conceptualizing Justin, Dafala, Ayana, and Deen as potential partners in urban solution-making, we can again expand the opportunity space.



Indeed, that’s what a capability approach offers:

lots of space to expand...

- How we understand a good outcome -- from securing resources to converting resources into the lives people say matter.
- How we think about solutions -- from policy targeting broad demographic groups to catalyzing roles, interactions, narratives, incentives and rituals with segments of people clustered by values and capabilities.
- How we conceptualize people, power, and participation -- from ‘serving’ clients, consumers, home owners, and tenants to ‘co-producing’ alongside urban dwellers, stewards, and creators.

Summary Chart:
Expanding the opportunity space

	Current Approach	Expanded approach
Laws, structures, incentives	Housing First Housing as a Human Right (under International Law)	House & Home Together Home-ing Capabilities to actualize human rights and freedoms
Interactions & environments	Service driven Case management Infrastructure focused	Community driven Self management Relationship focused
Roles & resources	Professional-client Delivered according to ‘objective’ degrees of need and fixed categories of ‘vulnerability’	Person-person Co-designed & co-produced according to fluid segments based on capabilities & conversion factors
Narratives & knowledges	Maximizing utility & economic growth Managing scarce resources Solving disorder Protecting people Social contract predicated on giving up power for security	Expanding capabilities, freedoms & wellbeing Co-creating resources Addressing exclusion Enabling people Social contract predicated on sharing power for support

Methods

66

...Coming to know also requires complex, committed, consensual engagement. Relationships within Nishnaabewin are based upon the consent – the informed (honest) consent – of all beings involved.

- LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON

"Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation"⁹

Coming to know people placed on the margins, where they are and in the ways they wish to be known, is an emergent and evolving process that continually asks us to be fully present and self-aware, to practice humility and transparency, and to open-up clear lines of two-way communication. Unlike a survey, consultation, or structured engagement, ethnography unfolds in context and as part of a mutual relationship.

⁹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) "Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3:3, 1-25.

While our relationships are often time bounded -- we spend anywhere from an afternoon to several days with people in the places of their choosing -- they are not pre-scripted or fixed. We listen, observe, play back people's own insights, and explore ideas for what could be. As challenging as it often is, our job isn't to intervene in what is; it's not to sort things out, problem-solve, or act on their behalf. Crappy as it feels, we cannot change their present situation. What we can do is reflect back to people their own values, capabilities, and resources. We can co-imagine alternative futures, identify the roles they might like to play, and understand the terms of further engagements. What we can offer is not, understandably, what everyone needs or wants. And that is OK. We are open to rejection, to the revocation of consent, and to the renegotiation of our relationship.

Out of an ethnographic relationship, we hope comes a moment of authentic connection, of being seen, heard, and witnessed -- not being ignored, assessed, litigated, exploited, or criminalized. We try to return stories to their rightful authors & owners as a way to close the feedback loop, and enable a more informed consent. Our aim is to treat story gathering and return as a meaningful interaction in and of itself, and not to transactionalize it as a means of data collection or as another input into a pre-scripted policy process. We seek to flip the usual policy process on its head by starting with and honoring people, leaving them feeling worthy and understood.

Here’s how we might describe some of the key differences between an ethnographic and a more traditional consultative approach.

	Traditional Consultation	Ethnography
Who	Caters to usual suspects: people with time, resources, capacity to participate in surveys, focus groups, and consultations.	Actively seeks out unusual suspects: people marginalized by systems who are unlikely to show up to a scheduled event, fill out a survey, or may be disconnected from services.
What	Asks people to respond to structured questions and/or pre-set answer choices and categories.	Explores people’s environments, motivations and barriers; their interactions with formal and informal systems; their desires, aspirations & ideas for the future.
When	Happens at a scheduled time; often one-off engagement.	Unfolds flexibility, at different times of day, over multiple interactions.
Why	Designed to validate and confirm existing problem analysis and/or solutions.	Designed to help reframe problems from people’s perspective and open-up generative space.
Where	Takes place in meeting rooms and formal spaces.	Takes place in the person’s context where they live, play, work.

	Traditional Consultation	Ethnography
How	Starts with advertisements and coordinating with services; focus on sharing and pulling out information; often remunerated.	Starts with community pop-ups and activations; focus on relationship building and reciprocity; practice of information return and remuneration.
Roots	Positivist worldview: a belief there is one knowable truth to be discovered.	Constructivist and participatory worldview: a belief there are many truths constructed by human experience & engagement.
Risks	-Knowledge extraction -De-contextual knowledge -Confirmatory bias -Misinterpretation -Loss of agency over story	-Discomfort -Re-traumatization -Raising expectations -Misinterpretation
Addressing risks	-Legalistic consent -Structured process -De-personalizing data	-Plain language consent -Open, adaptable process -Check-ins & debriefs -Returning data -Giving control to change story

The Ethnographic Experience in Photos

No ethnography is exactly the same -- but each one starts in the place where the person is already spending their time, and ends with a written story that is returned and co-edited. Here's some snapshots from ethnography on Friday, July 15, 2022.



Meeting people where they are.

It's 8:30am, and we're in front of the Managed Alcohol Program to spend time with Floyd, who heads there most mornings.



Exploring what matters to people.

We use conversational prompts to surface people's values and desired outcomes, and talk about how close or far they are from living the lives they value. Floyd is sorting cards into piles, defining and adding to them, and ranking by most to least important.



Having a sing-along and identifying stressors, barriers, and enablers.

With the help of visual prompts, Floyd identifies his top stressor: discrimination. Far from the 'dumb' homeless person that White people assume him to be, Floyd sees himself as a teacher and guitar player. He shares his love for music with us, belting out a few tunes. We find the music on spotify and sing along.

Constructing a timeline, together.

As Floyd tries to piece together all the places he's lived, we take out some post-it notes and construct a timeline, trying to identify all the possible past points of intervention. Where and how could things have played out differently?



Talking through consent

Floyd wants to get going on his morning routine. We ask for permission to join, and walk through our plain language, written consent form. Floyd chooses how he wants to be known, whether photos can be used, and who we can share his story with.



Hitting the streets

We take a left out of the Managed Alcohol Program, as Floyd takes us on his daily walk to the HUB and liquor store.



Shadowing service interactions

We observe Floyd’s engagement with formal services. Everyone knows Floyd’s name. He leaves with his daily \$20 and a plastic bag with cups of noodles and a few tins of sardines.

Stopping in for bannock

Ethnography is full of impromptu moments. We stumble across TeePee Treats where owner Curtis knows Floyd. He worked at Ambrose Place when Floyd was evicted, but disagreed with the decision. Floyd adds some bannock to his plastic bag, and keeps moving. He’s on a mission.



Going on a tour

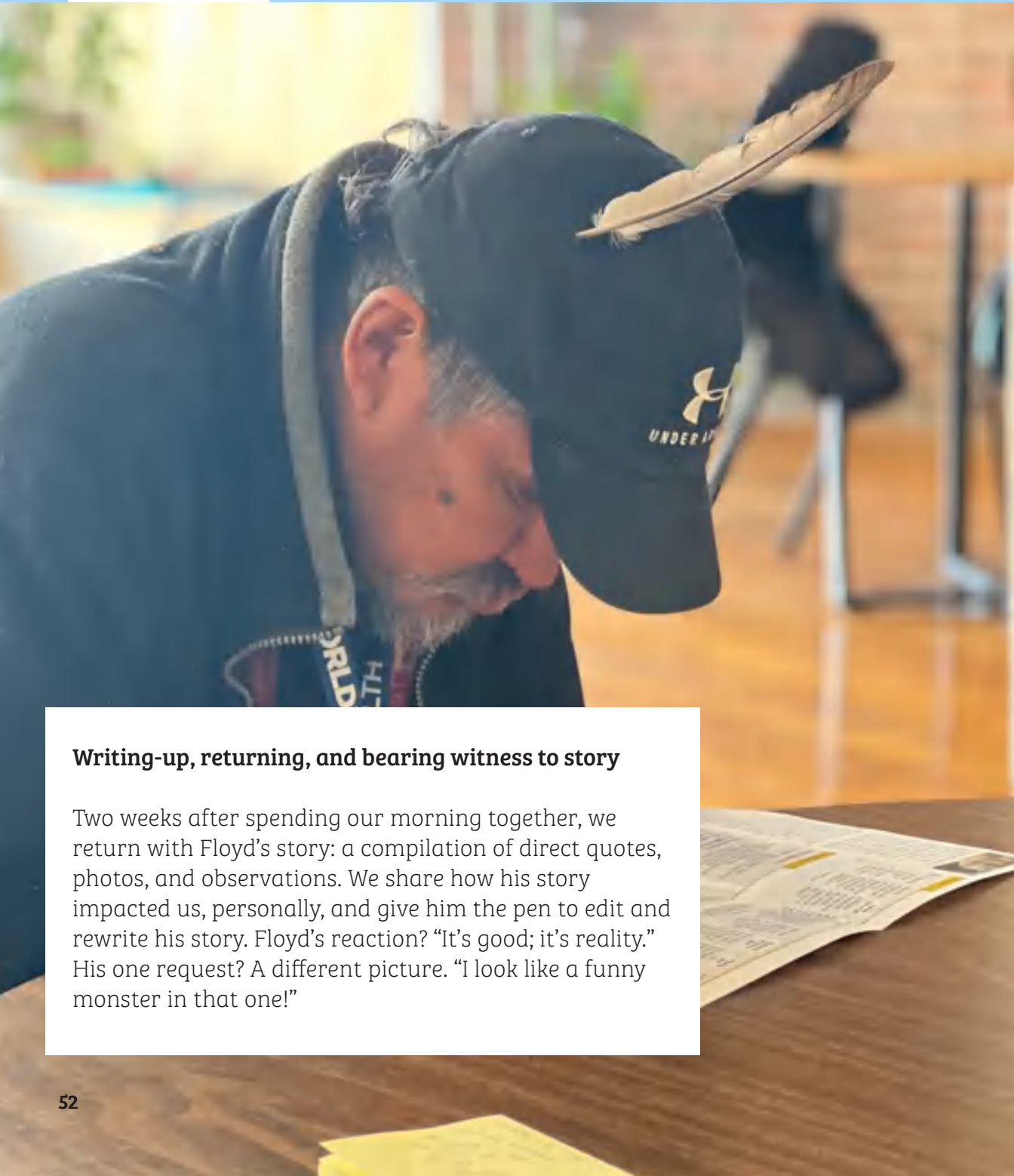
Floyd points out his favourite sleeping quarters across downtown. Doorways of abandoned buildings are prime spots.



Seeing informal interactions

We arrive at Floyd’s desired destination. He stops in for a couple of beers, opens one up, as we sing a few more country gospel tunes on our way back to the Managed Alcohol Program.





Writing-up, returning, and bearing witness to story

Two weeks after spending our morning together, we return with Floyd's story: a compilation of direct quotes, photos, and observations. We share how his story impacted us, personally, and give him the pen to edit and rewrite his story. Floyd's reaction? "It's good; it's reality." His one request? A different picture. "I look like a funny monster in that one!"

The Ethnographic Experience In Detail

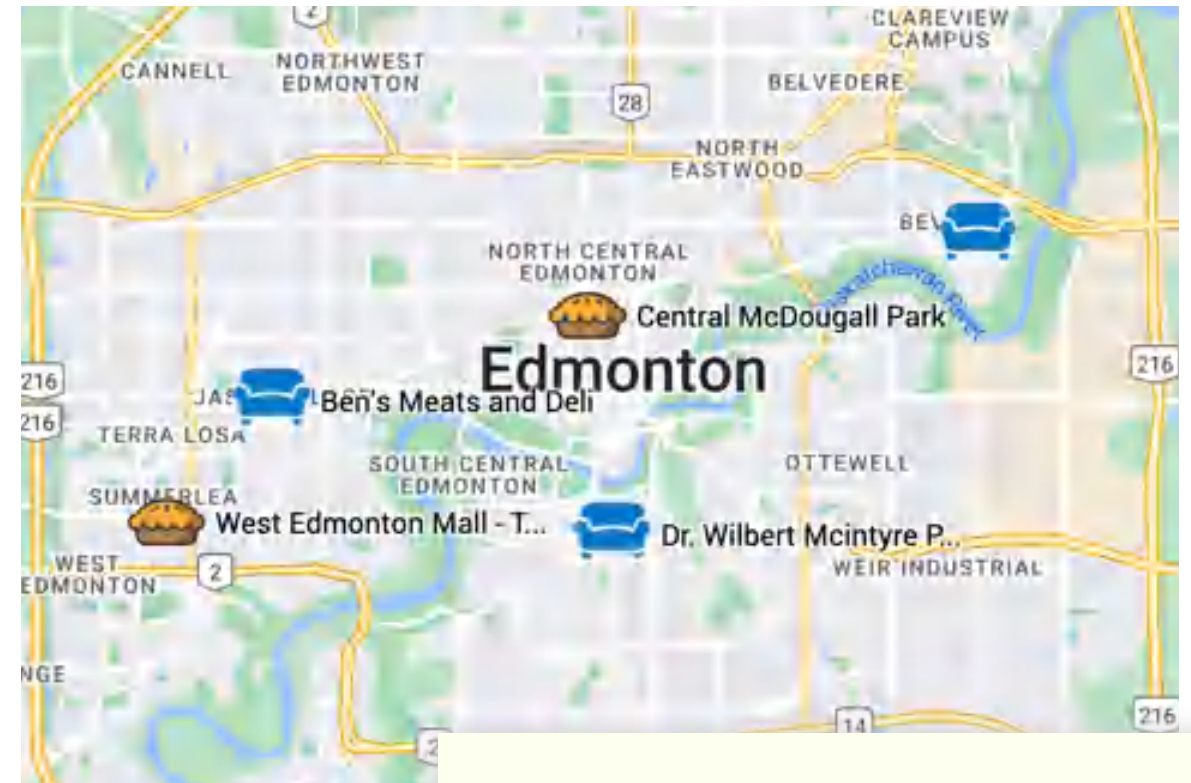
- 1 Recruiting people who wouldn't normally engage
- 2 Developing tools to test
- 3 Writing-up stories
- 4 Segmenting & sense-making
- 5 Returning stories
- 6 Sharing stories with reverence and care

Part 1: Recruitment

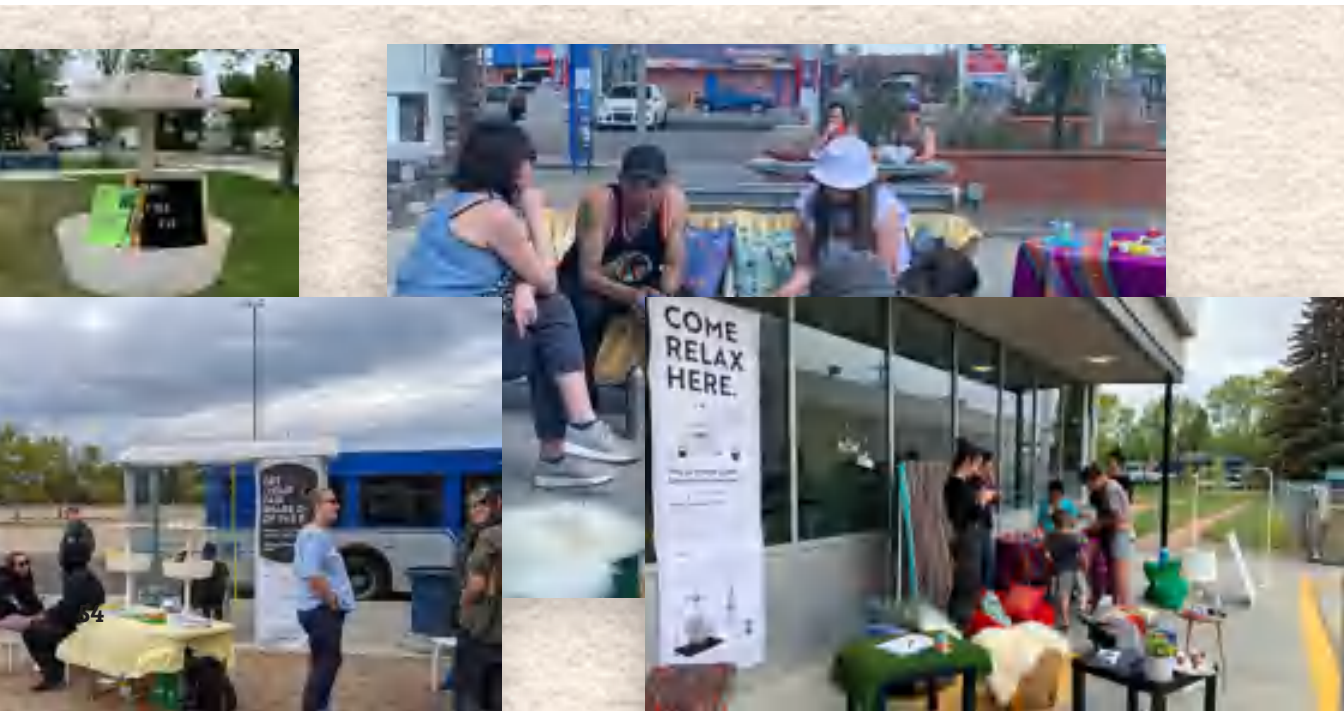
Round one

Community activations are our first introduction to most people we end up doing ethnography with. In our first round of recruitment, we set up outdoor living rooms (complete with comfy chairs, carpets, and fabrics) and mini-pie stands (complete with red-and-white checkered tablecloths) across the city, trying to spark conversations with people.

Our goal is to prompt a moment of surprise and delight; to cut through the normal malaise of the city, and foster a moment of connection. We sought out neighborhoods that are less well connected to services. Everyone we spoke to had a housing story and was invited to fill out a contact sheet. We followed up with folks with diverse living situations, especially those they described as unstable or precarious.



- Cozy station at Ben's Deli (Jasper Place)
- Cozy station in Wilbert McIntyre Park next to library (Strathcona)
- Pie stand at West Edmonton Mall bus station
- Cozy station at NoFrills in Abbotsfield (Beverly)
- Pie stand in Central MacDougall



Recruitment

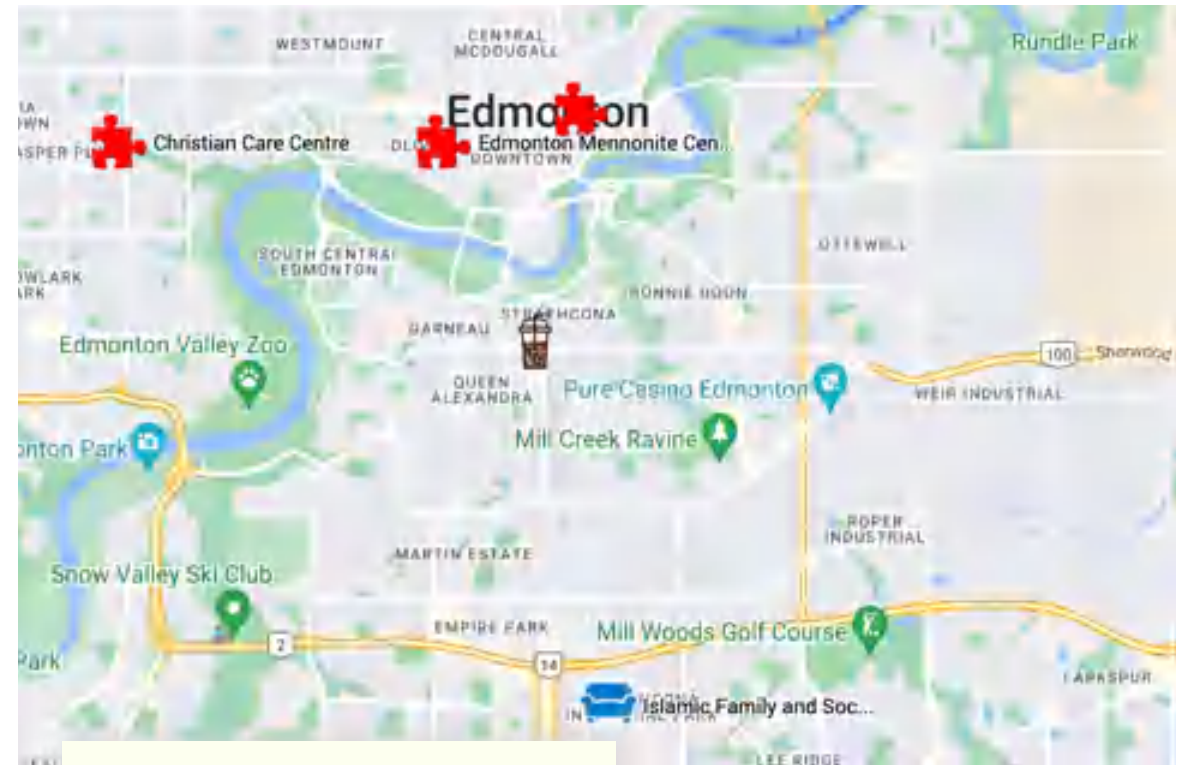
Round two

In our second round of recruitment, we were more discerning and tried to target people with distinct lived experiences who were missing from the bulk of stories we had collected up to that point.

We also reached out to a few organisations working with new immigrants and youth to broker introductions for us. Reaching out to these two demographics in particular

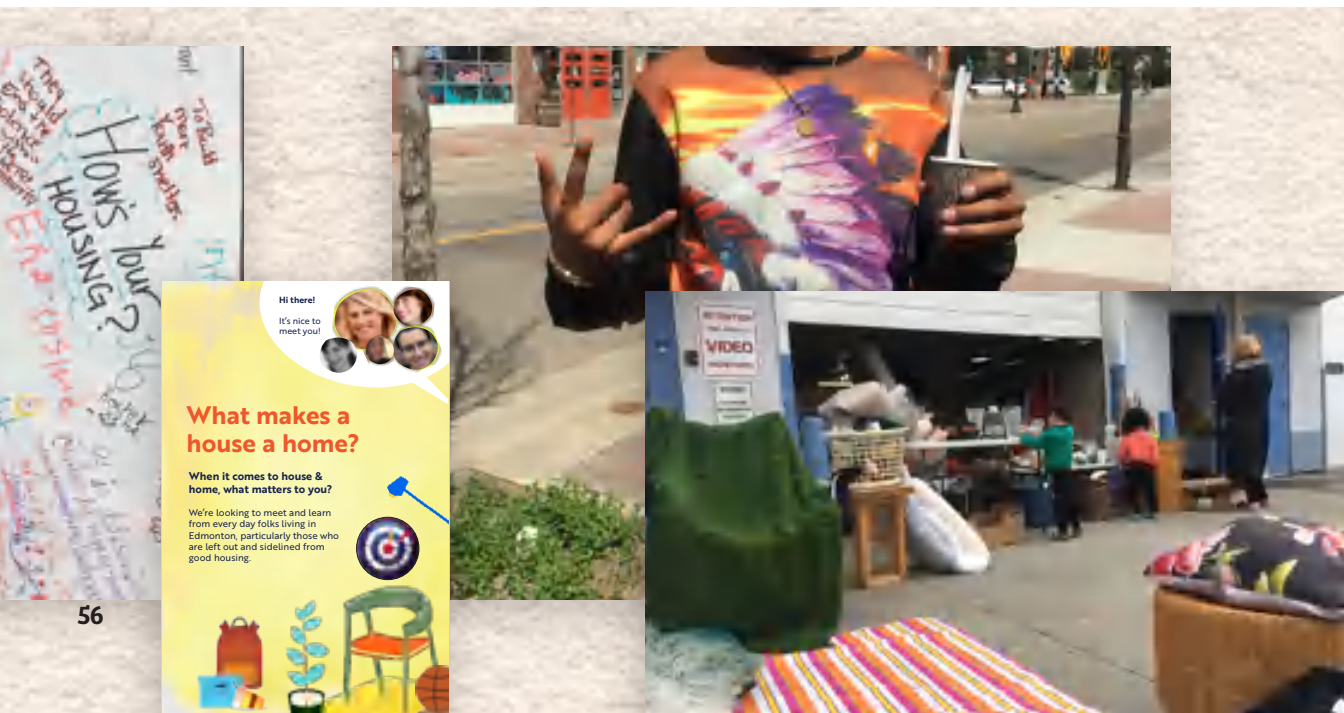
required longer standing relationships than a one-afternoon recruitment stand could build.

What stands out in the recruitment process for this project are the number of spontaneous and unplanned activations. We spent time at the Mustard Seed's Christian Care Centre, giving out coffee, chatting at tables, and hanging out in the grass outfront.



- Iced coffee pop-up stand at Old Strathcona Youth Service
- Living room pop-up at Islamic Friends and Family Association
- Spending time at Mustard Seed's Christian Care Centre
- Spending time at Boyle Street Managed Alcohol Program

A few times, we were stood up by someone with whom we had scheduled an ethnography only to strike up conversation with the people right around us. Those conversations quite often turned into instant ethnographies.



Part 2:

Making Tools

Tools are meant to guide our conversations and provoke new thoughts. They are not prescriptive, meaning they create a space for people to let their own thoughts emerge in and unfold. Unlike survey instruments, tools are inherently interpretative and iterative: we add to them as we go. In some cases, we have to adapt, abandon, or reimagine a tool completely. Tools help us to dig deeper, to understand people’s values, histories, and social networks. They can offer language to talk about a topic we may not have put much thought into up to the point of encounter. This can be especially helpful when we ask people to imagine something outside the logic and dynamics of existing systems.

Our tools draw on human-centered design methods. Design helps us surface needs and desires that may not be at the front of people’s conscious minds. Our tools offer provocations and prompts for people to react to and/or build on. They can spark moments of creativity and a shift in perspective.

They may activate what we call “system two thinking”¹⁰ and help us move away from regurgitating dominant narratives by looking deeper and wider. Indeed, human-centered design does not only ask “what is’ but also looks ahead to “what could be.” The goal isn’t to stay stuck in the past, but to project forward and co-imagine alternative pathways.

10 Kahneman, Daniel (2011). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. USA: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 499. Kahneman describes two distinct modes of thought which he calls “System one” and “System two.” The former is fast, instinctive, and driven by uninvestigated emotions. The latter is slower, more deliberative, and engages with logic.

To prompt conversation and imagination, we use three types of tools:

Conversational	Conversational tools invite people to share what matters to them most in life, how much they are able to live out that value, and what stands in the way of bringing those values to life. We ask what is stressful and whether or not that stressor is related to housing.
Projective	Projective prompts are future-oriented. They enable us to get generative and creative, think forward, and gain a sense of what solutions people are attracted to or motivated by. We try to spark imagination and play.
Observational	Observational tools help us understand people in their everyday environments, the net of relationships they interact with on a daily basis, and which particular factors appear to shape their decisions.

In this story gathering project, we adapted our conversational, projective, and observational prompts to be able to draw out concepts of house, home, and wellbeing. Building on literature from sociology, urban studies, and critical anthropology, along with our past ethnographic research, we identified a set of constructs, or core concepts, for each tool. While we find tools can help to guide story sharing and idea generation, where they are redundant, awkward or unhelpful, we drop or redesign them on the spot.

Here's a listing of the initial tools we used.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL Sensory Dice



How we used

Story listeners and storytellers take turns rolling the dice and sharing a short story about their respective associations of home with each sense: what do we each see, smell, taste, touch, and feel?

Purpose

To get to know each other, warm up, and do some mutual storytelling about what home means to us.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL Values



How we used

Hand or lay out a deck of value cards; storyteller chooses top three values; ask what each particular value means to them, how it shows up in their current life (or doesn't) and how it is connected to housing (if at all). Create new values as needed.

Purpose

To identify what matters to people, to what extent they may or may not be living out their values, and what role housing plays.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Stressors



How we used
Show the storyteller a sheet of visualised stressors. Ask them to add to the list, and then to identify their top three. For each stressor, explore what that means to them and the ways in which it impacts their life, along with their coping strategies and resources.

Purpose
To name what is creating the most stress for people, right now. Is it housing and if not, what issues are more pressing?

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Home Story



How we used
Draw a timeline of the storyteller's housing history and important life events; ask to colour in the level of agency and control in each place they lived in; ask about how much control they had when changing places.

Purpose
To understand people's level of agency and control throughout their lives; identify which events caused significant shifts; and, spot moments where systems could or should intervene.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Who's in your hood?

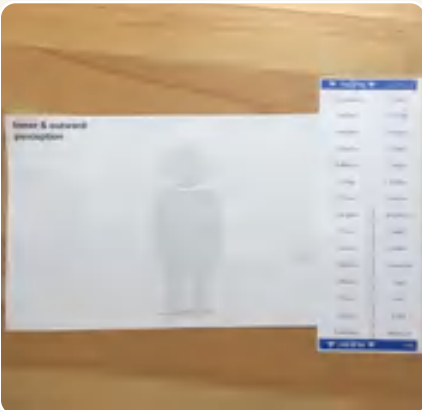


How we used
Two ice cube trays: one orange, one blue. Each mould has a sticker with a role or function that people could have in their life. Orange holds the supporters; blue the detractors. The storyteller deposits a skittle or smartie in a mould for each person they have in their life that fulfills a given function.

Purpose
To get a sense of people's social support systems -- formal and informal -- and gaps: what are barriers to people living the life they value?

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Inner and outward perception



How we used
Set of stickers with adjectives and blanks. The storyteller chooses stickers to describe how people perceive them versus how they perceive themselves. Used to inquire about gaps and overlaps.

Purpose
To surface how people want to be known and to helps us shift away from how systems see them (for example, as "vulnerable").

PROJECTIVE TOOL
Ideal Home



How we used
A set of images and words in the shape of puzzle pieces. Lay out on a table, and ask the storyteller to piece together the features of their ideal home. Create new puzzle pieces as we go along.

Purpose
To flesh out ideal futures, and continue to parcel out the difference between house and home. What kind of infrastructure is needed? What beyond infrastructure is needed?

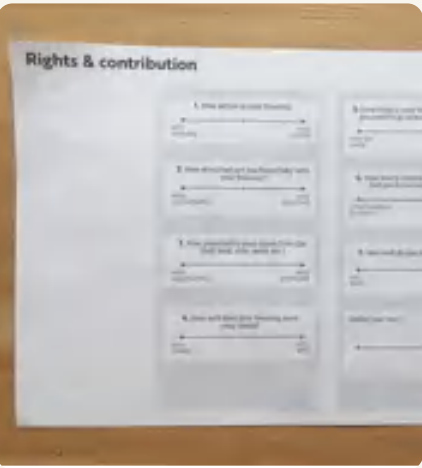
PROJECTIVE TOOL
Projective Prompt



How we used
A set of housing alternatives written up as imaginary service offers. The storyteller reads the cards, and groups them by ideas they find attractive and unattractive. We probe what about a concept resonates, or does not.

Purpose
To go broad and help us understand what people are attracted to or motivated by. Help understand preferences and latent needs, what solutions might work for folks; and, what could be some opportunity areas.

PROJECTIVE TOOL
Rights and Contribution



How we used
A set of spectrums listing the seven housing rights defined in the UN declaration. Ask the storyteller how much they actualize these rights, and what role they could play in actualizing them for self or others.

Purpose
To gain a sense of the gap between formal and actualized rights, and if and how people would like to contribute and play a part in shaping their housing situation.

OBSERVATIONAL TOOL
Photography and
journalling



How we used
Sitting with and shadowing people as they go about their day-to-day; recording interactions in writing, by audio, and with photos & film.

Purpose
To meet people in their familiar environments, walk them home, be invited into home, hang out in front of services they access or restaurants they frequent; track people down, tap into their relational networks; learn to contextualise their stories.

Part 3: Writing-up Stories

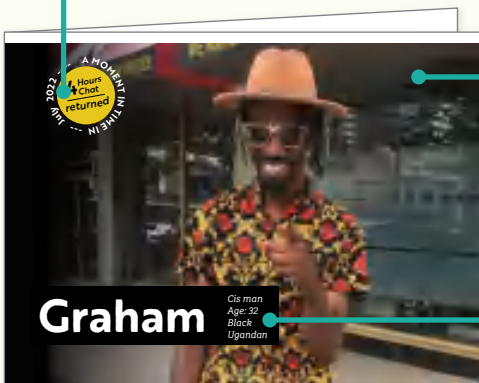
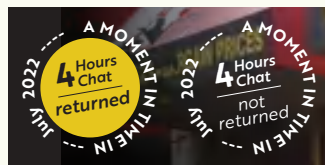
From our conversations, observations, and projective imaginings with people comes a written story. As story listeners, our challenge is to capture the spirit of our moment-in-time interaction with another human, and make visible their distinct perspective and voice -- in less than 500 words.

Of course, we can't divorce our own perspective and voice from another's story, and so we are explicit about our own positionality. Alongside a short narrative of the person and our 'how we met' story, we include key quotes, words, tags, and scales. We also interweave a past, present, and future orientation -- including a timeline, a section on their present situation, and a peak into the future including three ideas that resonated.



Front of the card

Time stamp. A reminder that this story is only a snapshot of someone at a moment in time and that this can change in the future. Includes the date and how long was the conversation. If the person could review the story and give feedback after it was written, the circle will be yellow and read 'returned.'



"Success means I become a contributing, functioning part of this society"

There are at least ten stories to be told about Graham: the story of a political science student coming to Canada with big ambitions to succeed; a fashion and music enthusiast who makes a \$100 outfit look like a million; a well-travelled nomad who secretly boils pasta in a kettle to survive; or the story of a thriving Afrobeats DJ who never expected homelessness to be part of his path.

like cosmetics, lingerie. She's the one person who still scares me shitless." When Graham got sick as a teenager, no priest or traditional witchcraft could help him. His mom connected him to an orthopedic surgeon in the UK who diagnosed him with scoliosis. When he returned, his mom sent him to a boarding school in Malaysia to catch up on school work. The travel opened up his mind: "I've seen many versions of the world... I'm grateful. I might never be able to pay my mom back."

"Being a nomad is second nature to me... I've always been in a place one foot in and one foot out. That's an immigrant problem. You're never fully planted." Graham was born and raised in Uganda. His mother is a business woman. She flies back and forth between Uganda and the UK to trade goods: "Mostly female stuff

Picture. To capture the person at the moment we meet, and give a glimpse of their context. People can choose the picture and whether to be anonymous or not.

Name & identity. To enable people to select their own identity markers. People choose which name to use, and the identity or demographics markers to the right of the name.

Hashtags. To give a high-level overview of the person's relationship to formal systems.

Narrative. To bring the human to life, what matters to them, what's shaped them, what they want, and the key gaps and rubs with systems. We seek to contextualize people within systems, rather than reduce people's lives to a narrow set of needs or choices. The narrative continues on the inside.

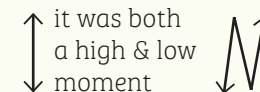
Inside of the card

Timeline. To give a sense of how people got to where they are now; to provide a for instability; give reference points for intergenerational trauma/cycles of precarity and/or abuse; to set decisions in time & place.



Moments are placed at the top if it was a high point in their life, at the bottom line if it was a low point and in the middle line if it was average.

Lines between moments show:



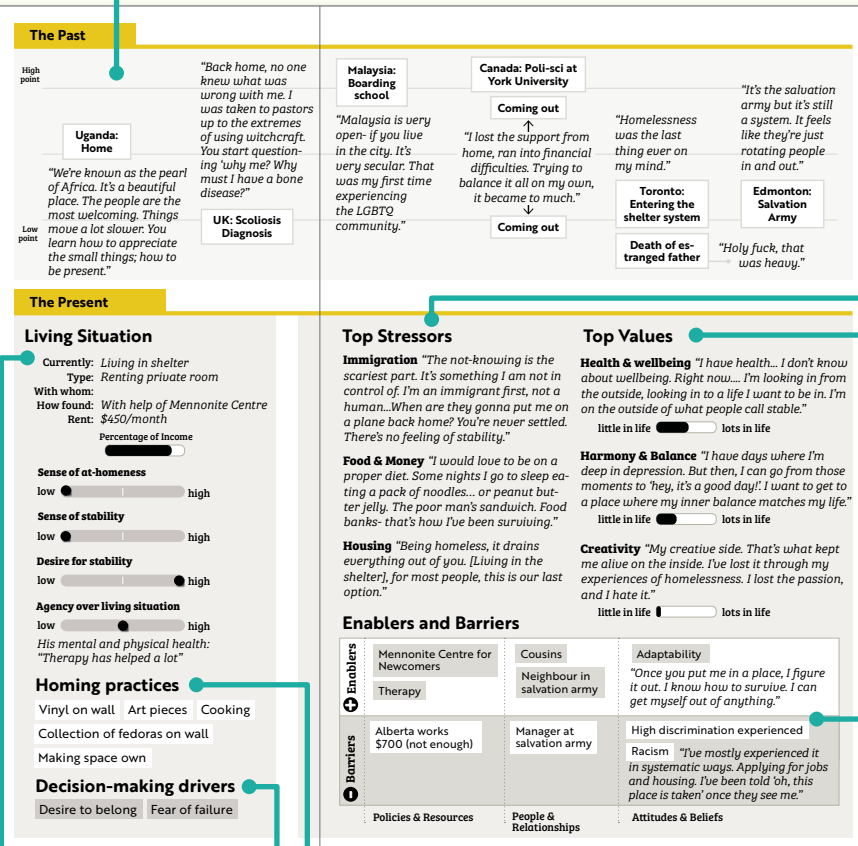
pursuing a more status-oriented degree, he lost the support from home when he came out. Unable to pay tuition, he was forced to leave York. "Once you drop out of school it's a domino effect." Without a study permit, he lost his legal right to work. "I've been stuck in this situation for four years now, and it gets to you."

Graham is well aware of the rough patch he's been going through, but growing up in Uganda gives him some perspective: "I'm struggling right now, but I know, where I come from, people are struggling way more. You guys don't know what survival of the fittest means."

Being dealt a difficult set of cards isn't news to him. "I always got that opportunity that I had to figure out. With my scoliosis, with immigration, I always had to struggle a little harder. That work ethic is what keeps me going." He knows how quickly things can spiral out of control: "I've gone from high to pure rock bottom." Still, he believes that he can turn things around if only his immigration papers go through: "there's still a chance for me to succeed."



Scan this QR code and listen to Graham telling his own story through music.



Stressors. To hear from people about their top sources of stress, and understand where unstable housing sits in their list.

Values. To make explicit what matters to people, and how they define a good outcome for themselves. Under each value a scale shows how much of that value they feel they have in their life at the moment.

little in life lots in life

Enablers and barriers. To name some of the conversion factors - the enablers and barriers - that either help or hinder people in living the lives they value.

Current living situation. To give the category of housed/unhoused more nuance; the fact that someone is "housed" doesn't mean they feel at-home or that their living situation is stable.

Decision-making drivers. To make visible what matters to people when they make decisions, and why some people may not choose traditional housing or shelters.

Home-ing practices. To describe what it means to make home. 'Home' is made through practices, it is a process, connected but distinct from housing infrastructure.

Back of the card

Roles. To give a fuller picture of the person; not defined by their housing situation or their needs.

Lived experience. To indicate some of the experiences that have shaped people's lives, stories they can tell, and visceral, embodied knowledge they hold.

Ideal Home. To get underneath what a 'good home' looks like for people, and list some of the elements -- both material and non-material -- that make-up their ideal home.

How they see themselves

"I'm introverted but very social. I talk a little too much"

Roles: International student, DJ, poli-sci major, social media content creator, fashion-lover, heir to the family, traveler, culture enthusiast

Lived experience

Immigration, transience, racism, discrimination, LGBTQ2S+

Graham

Motivation to share their story

Immigrants advocacy

"I'm tired of not having a plan, of not moving forward. I'm stuck in limbo."

Wants to be heard about

Immigration struggles

Homelessness

Desired Future State

Ideal Home	1 bedroom Simple	Nothing fancy Good kitchen
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Distance from current

Far Close

"Yes, I am having a hard time and I know that but there's still a chance for me to make it out of this"

Opportunity Areas

A musical ticket to PR

What if city representatives held listening sessions to meet locally residing immigrants and made recommendations to the IRCC based on personal talents and vision rather than an impersonal point system?

Dressed to stay

When Graham talks about fashion, his whole body lights up. What if local residents could pair up with people like Graham and exchange fashion advice for rent subsidies or a room to stay?

Art residencies

Graham hasn't yet found a place for him to fit. What if the city opened up housing where aspiring art folk can work and live together, find inspiration, regardless of cultural background or immigration status?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We met Graham through a connection at the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. One of the workers gave us a tour of the building and he reached out, wanting to show us his story.

Points of (un)familiarity

Like Graham, I came to Canada as an international student, full of curiosity and hope. Having moved and traveled a lot, I relate to his feeling of being always with one foot in-one out, never fully belonging anywhere. Because I am White and European I've faced less immigration struggles. I was also raised (family & country) with more openness towards LGBTQ folks than in large parts of Uganda.

Nina

Cis woman
White
European

Motivation to share story. To show the variety of intentions and motivations to share their story. Of note: we did not advertise in advance that we pay for people's time, in an attempt to reduce the risk of exploitation.

Opportunity areas. To offer up some early ideas for solutions that might work for people to move them closer to their values, and that are aligned with their capabilities.

Listener's perspective. To be transparent about and reflect on how we, as story listeners, enter the picture. Despite considerable gaps in class/education/housing situation/ level of precarity, there are points of familiarity and human connection that can bridge that gap -- at least for a moment in time.

Update to stories

Update flap. To share significant changes that happen within the period of the research and while stories are being returned. It shows up as an added flap in blue, on the back of the card, that folds inside the story card.

Update

12, 2022
3 weeks after 1st chat

Twilene

How they see themselves

"I'm a pretty goddamn good person. People trust me."

Roles: Mother, daughter, streetmother, waitress, college student, survivor, hustler, street socialite

Lived experience

Intimate partner violence, sexual violence as child, addiction, loss of children through CPS, homelessness, discrimination

Motivation to share their story

Visibility

Twilene understands the power of story writing. She points to her many journals: "Write it up, I'm going to write a book one day"

Wants to be heard about

Housing struggles

Desired Future State

Ideal Home	Community living space Consensus-based decision-making Designated chores	Shared ownership Counselors on site Pets "People want to contribute"
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Distance from current

Far Close

"It's amazing how fast life can change. Any second, we could be back on the streets."

Opportunity Areas

Self-defined Supports

What if the kind of housing a person needs and the conditions that would make housing sustainable were decided with the person as part of life coaching sessions?

Natural Networker

What if the system recognized natural networkers and social lynch pins and offered them a role in shared housing situations, to support group decision-making and community development?

Relationship Coach

Harm reduction is a frame for addiction, but not often relationships. What if there were harm reduction housing coaches for people enmeshed in tough relationships without the expectation they will sever all contact?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

Our colleague Sue introduced me to Twilene. The two of them met when Twilene was living in a tent and needed a place to store her belongings. Sue saw her pushing a heavy cart close to her house and started a conversation. Now, Twilene considers Sue an important friend.

Points of (un)familiarity

Twilene's experiences of drug addiction and her history of housing instability are not within my sphere of lived experiences. Despite our difference in struggle, I relate to her unpretentious sense of humour. I share her passion for writing journals, her struggle to regulate temper, and her desire to be free from controlling men.

Nina

Cis woman
White
European

Entrance to campsite: Taking a detour on her way to finding a stable home



The campsite

Part 4: Segmenting & Sense-making

We bring together individual stories into a story collection, not so we can “boil down” experiences to a lowest common denominator, or come up with a conclusive and generalizable account. Rather, we look across stories to honour the plurality of voices, and to see if we can locate patterns, narrative threads, common, and uncommon rubs with systems. It all starts with re-grouping people, not by demographics, but by shared experiences, chosen identities, motivations, and aspirations. We call this re-grouping process, “segmentation.” Where demographic groupings tell us something about how systems see people, segmentations can tell us more about what matters to people. Where demographic groupings can offer some clues about who is experiencing a problem, segmentations can offer clues about the nature of solutions.

To segment, we start by clustering people along different socio-cultural axes, intentionally trying different concepts (e.g. desire for change, independence, control, connection) to surface fresh insights and possibilities.



Our goal? To start to explore what might attract a group of people, and when, where, and how to intervene. In this way, we can start to build-up a picture of alternative futures, grounded in all that is messy, beautiful, and ultimately ephemeral, about the human experience.

Indeed, segmentations are not fixed or mutually exclusive categories. People can be in multiple segments, and move between segments. That’s because both stories and segments capture discrete moments in time. They present people, their perceptions of reality, and their desired future states in a particular context. Stories and segments, in

that sense, are not objective accounts of a single truth. They are snippets of experience filtered through the eyes, ears, hearts, and minds of story listeners.

Each of us holds many different versions of our story of self. The core function of telling stories about ourselves is to connect with others, and to grapple with who we are in the world at the moment of encounter. The core function of segmentation is to offer starting points for future engagement.

Part 5:
Returning Stories

Within about six weeks of spending time with a person, we return to show them a draft account of our moment-in-time together. We recognize that lives are simultaneously static and dynamic, and start by exploring what has shifted and what has stayed the same, handing them a pen so they feel in control of edits to their story. Some deeply engage with the text. Others prefer to listen to us read their story aloud. Still others seem more interested in our moment of reconnection than the artefact of the story itself.

Here are some of people’s reactions to receiving and reading their story:

“I really like how you put that into words. It works!”

- JESSE

“Look, it’s my book. It’s the first chapter!”

- TWILENE

“This classification of homeless people is really impacting us, it makes it really hard for integration.”

- DAFALA

“Thank you. It makes me think about stuff and what I want.”

- BUCKY

“It’s not half bad but I’m a big believer in family and family values. That needs to be in there.”

- WILLIAM

*“You actually put my words from when we were at the mall?”
(laughs) “You DID? You did not. Ok, now I’m speechless.”*

- AYANA

“Right on! It’s so true! Thank you so much! ...”I’m famous! ... Hey! (announcing to onlookers) You want my autograph?”

- PERK

“I’m pretty good at strategizing. Marginalize. Institutionalize.”

- GRANT ELDER

Part 6:

Sharing Stories

Floyd, John, Cynthia, Puppy Rose, Grant Elder, Ayana, Barbara, Bonnie, Bucky, Dafala, A, Graham, Jesse, Justin, Kelly, Mark, Marcoz Delmondo, Barento, Perk, Jared, Sanaa, Syd, Suad, Twilene, and William have each decided to share their story with policymakers, under their own terms and conditions. Some folks have anonymized themselves and elected for non-identifying photos. Other folks have carefully made the choice to use their first names and faces. They want their stories to be known.

With consent to write their stories comes a profound ethical responsibility.

Barbara doesn't trust most people. Perk feels misunderstood by her White worker. William complains his worker only meets him for coffee, but doesn't offer any actual support. A staff member at Jasper Place Wellness Centre shares confidential information about Twilene to us right after we

introduce ourselves as a new friend, not a worker. Bucky rejects the idea of depending on the welfare state. Jesse was sent home by a police officer when he tried to report an assault in his building. Another community member worries the stories will be used for racial profiling. As if to support his point, a police officer parks beside us, watching the interaction with a disciplinary gaze. Everyone we talk to has their own reason to distrust people in power.

How then might people in positions of power approach engaging with this collection of stories, glimpsing at what a fellow human hopes for, struggles with, regrets, grieves, laughs at, worries about, and seeks out? To honour the weight that each story carries for those who share them and for those who hold them, we invite you to take a moment to pause, put distractions aside, and open yourself up to a curious encounter.

An invitation to an encounter

When people who live on the margins share their stories with people who live within the bounds of civil society, a space of encounter opens. People who are strange to each other meet, not necessarily in an actual place, but in a relational space. Relational space emerges when we share stories. As we enter this space of encounter, we meet someone 'strange' to us, someone whose life may look very different from our own. We then make a choice about how we participate in the encounter: we can resist the strangeness and defend what we know as 'right', 'true', or 'normal'. Or, we can acknowledge our mutual strangeness and be touched by it.

If we choose to read stories from the viewpoint of mutual strangeness, we are given an opportunity to learn about someone 'other' to us and about who we are in relation to their otherness. In this space of mutual strangeness, we share life stories, connect them to our own, and can thereby counter processes of exclusion and marginalization. We have the chance to nourish relationships between ourselves and the people whose stories we read. If we allow strangeness to serve as a source of connection rather than disconnection, we can allow the story to just be, without feeling the need to fit it back within our own logics and mental models.





William helped us to do that. When we meet, first in front of Ben’s Deli and later at a downtown Boston Pizza, he openly talks about his learning disability. Without an ounce of self-doubt, he requests from his listener to recognize the way he makes sense of the world. It takes time to absorb William’s story. He doesn’t read or write easily. He doesn’t prioritise normative goals or achievements. He values being in relationship and contributing to community. Not surprisingly, our more text-heavy tools don’t work for him. It takes effort to abandon the tools we put so much thought into and reimagine them on the spot. But, William uses the objects right around him to express himself. The salt and pepper shakers on the table become useful explanatory devices. He tells us that when most people see pepper, he sees salt. When people disregard this difference in perception, it leaves him feeling misunderstood and cast aside. Encountering William in this relational space wherein he has the ability to show us what is pepper and what is salt grows our mutual understanding and imagination. And that’s ultimately what any solution for and with William would need to do.

What stands in the way of ethical story reading?

Seeing pepper as salt and salt as pepper requires us to bend our minds in ways that may feel silly, uncomfortable, or even wrong. That’s totally natural.

To suspend our disbelief and truly embrace our curiosity, it can be helpful to pay attention to the inner resistance that may arise when we approach stories with the mindset of strangers. After all, workplaces typically ask us to show up with the mindset of professionals or experts.

Here are four tendencies to try to spot and intentionally put aside:

The fact-checking urge:

People's perceptions of reality and their understanding of systems may not align with our own understanding. Rather than latching on to the veracity of details, we can get curious about the discrepancies and disconnects. What shapes someone's belief that is so different from our own?

The problem-fixer mode:

When we spend time with people, our aim is to listen to their needs, motivations, and aspirations. We hold the disconnects they experience and witness the losses that they may not know how to grieve. When we jump into problem-solving mode, we risk projecting our own agenda onto someone else. It takes practice to be able to sit with the discomfort that comes from bearing witness without intervening. How can we be present with a story and hold all its contradictions and problems without trying to solve them?

The bootstraps fallacy:

Given the meritocratic social norms in Canada and other Western societies, it can be tempting to fall into a mindset of self-made success, the notion that one's circumstances, material wealth, and lack thereof are a direct result of 'good' or 'bad' choices.

The underlying assumption is that people's personal determination and effort defines where they are at in life. The bootstraps fallacy ignores systemic discrimination and injustice as well as intergenerational trauma. Getting curious about context is key when we try to understand why people make decisions that may not make sense to us at first glance.

The search for a one-size-fits-all solution:

The stories we gather do not reveal universal truths. They are not meant to be factual information that can be extracted from its original context and translated into a one-size-fits all housing solution.

Rather, ethnography allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how people interact with systems, what their motivations are, and where there is opportunity for generating new ideas that may work for some folks, not all.

Who
We Met

26

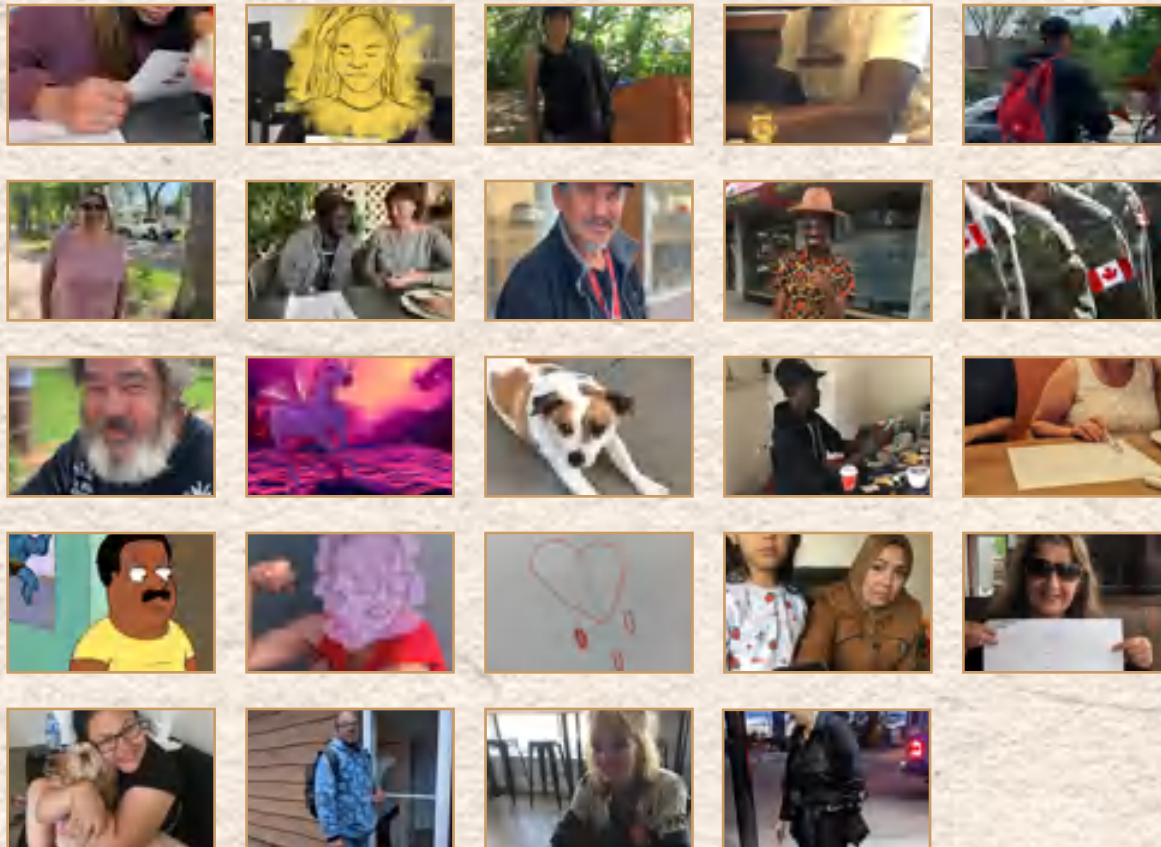
Edmontonians

23

Stories
returned!

1

Consent
withdrawn



Including

1

environment

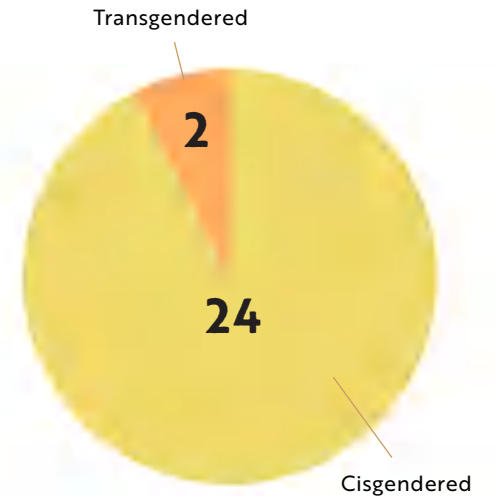


DEMOGRAPHICS

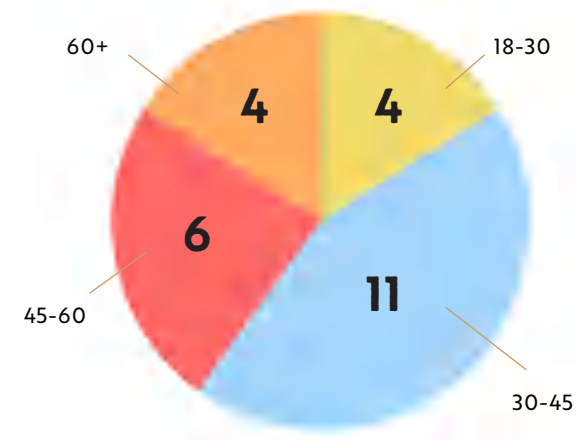
Pronouns of choice



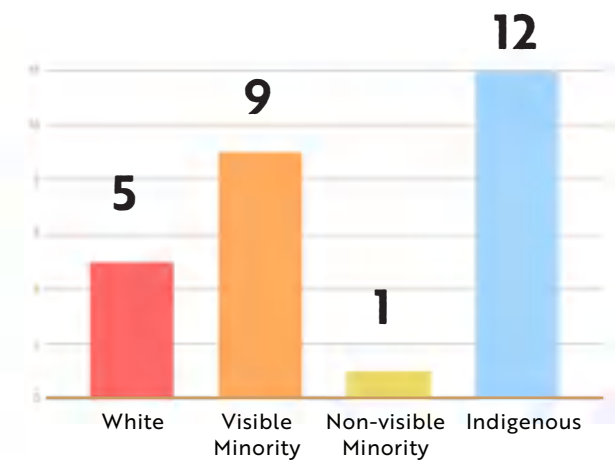
Gender Identification



Age

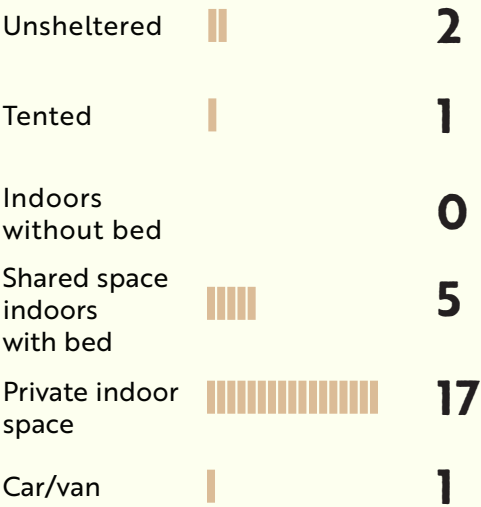


Ethnicity

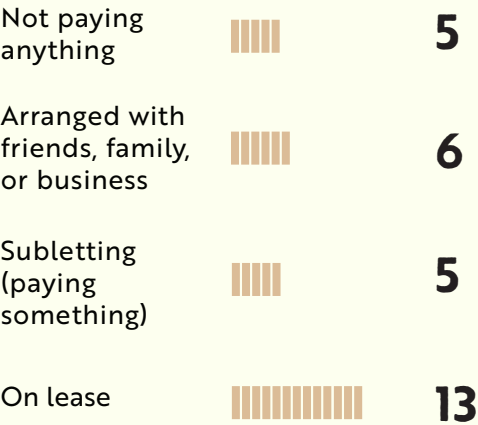


HOME AND HOUSING

Where they were sleeping the night before we met them



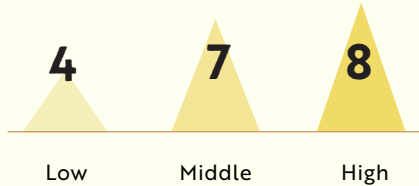
Relationship to the space



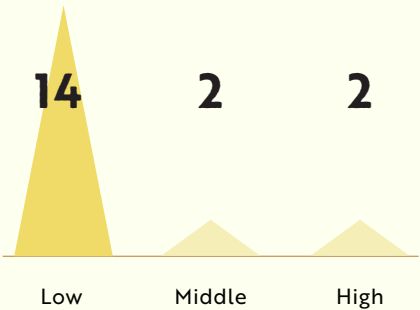
Sense at home-ness



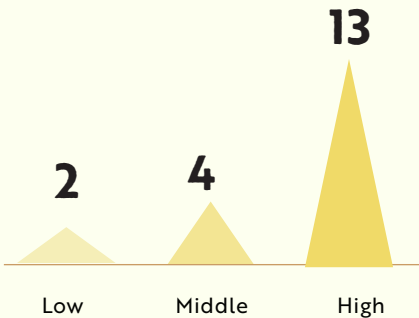
Agency over living situation



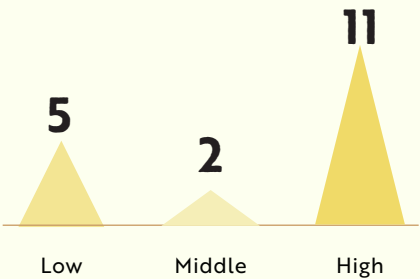
Sense of stability



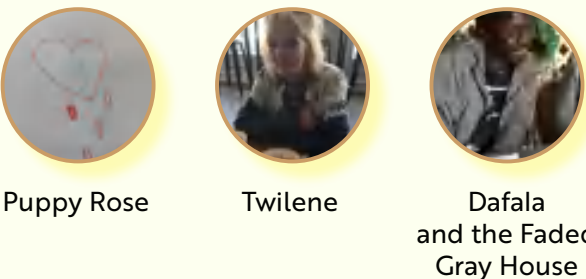
Distance from current home to ideal home



Desire for stability



3 Edmontonians moved from housed to unhoused since ethnography

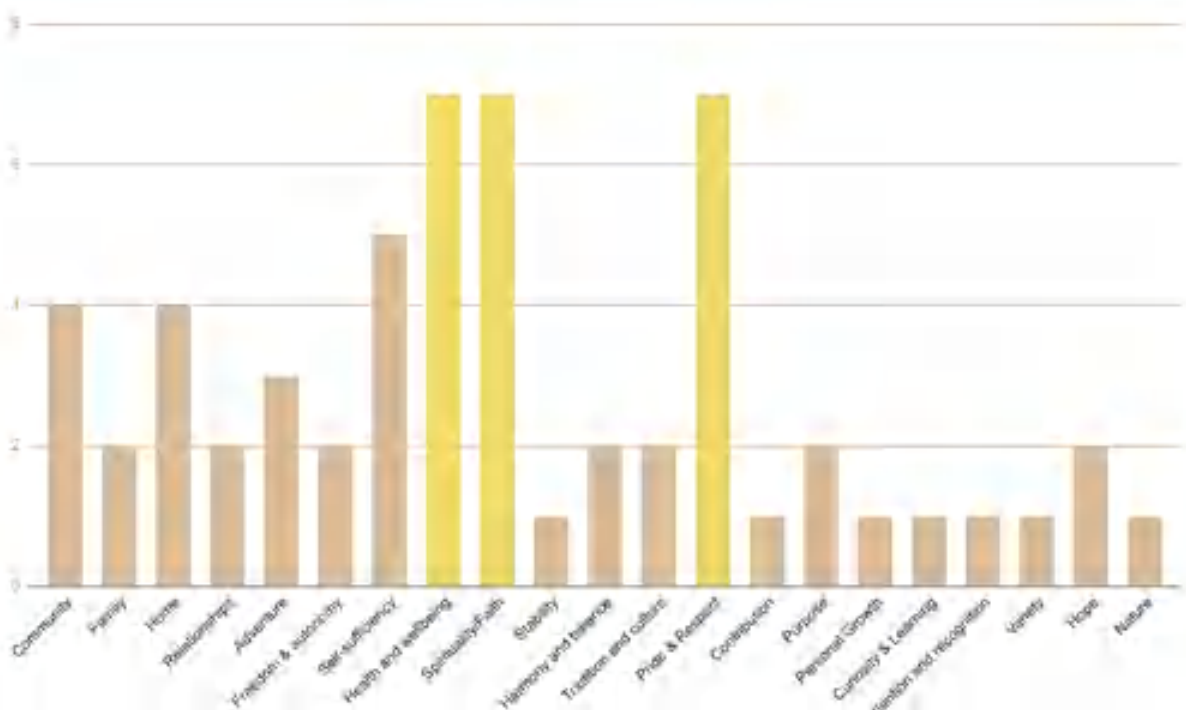


VALUES

Top Values

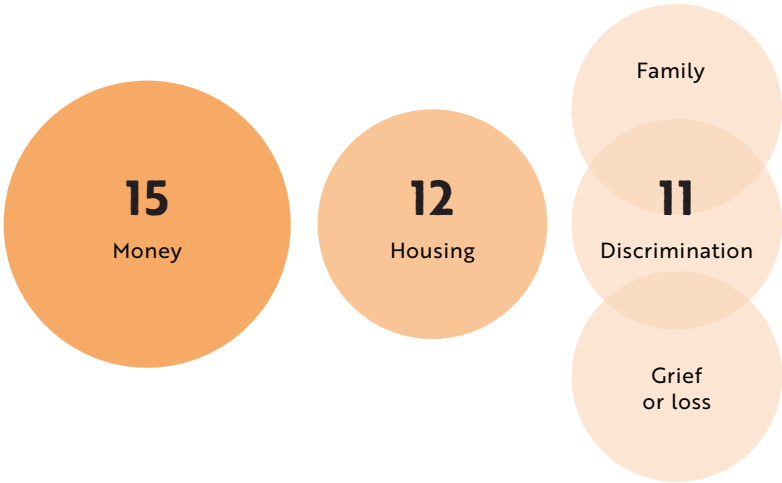


All Values

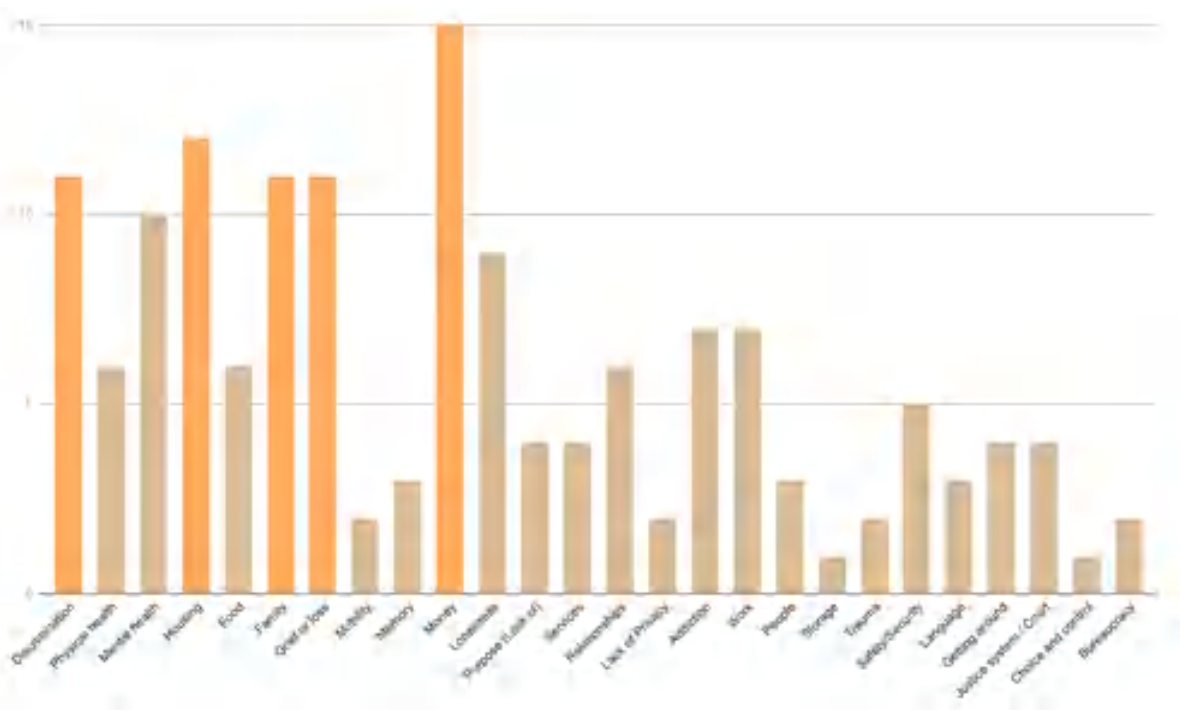


STRESSORS

Top Stressors



All Stressors



Segments

What is segmentation?

Segmentation is the process of re-organizing a group of people into clusters with similar values, desired outcomes, capabilities, and resources. By segmenting, we can identify subgroups that reveal something about how to attract and engage people. Demographic categories like newcomers, young people, and seniors are so broad and contain so much diversity that they tell us remarkably little about what people want or need.

While they can inform our understanding of a problem by identifying patterns of exclusion, demographic groupings have little value in helping to co-design meaningful solutions. Segments, on the other hand, serve a more generative function. They help us to pinpoint what enablers and barriers (aka conversion factors) a group of people experience in living out their preferred future, and the kinds of interactions and supports that just might work.

While he didn't use the language of segmentation, Henri Lefebvre hoped that centering people in context -- in "lived spaces" -- would help us avoid reducing our understanding of people to small fractions such as gender, race, income, marital status and so on. This too is our goal. We seek to surface the complex array of identities, experiences, motivations, and desires that shape humans.

Here are eight segments that emerged from looking across all 26 stories. These segments are neither fixed, nor mutually exclusive. People can be in multiple segments at once, and are always in flux.



**Power
Fugitives**



**Super
Agents**



**Deceptively
Settled**



**Spiritually
Homeless**



**Unhoused
Homers**



Makeshifters



**Resource
People**



**Story
Resisters**

Segment 1:
Power Fugitives

Those who’ve been controlled, hurt, and shamed by power abusers in their lives, and have a deep desire to get out from under all that.

DESCRIPTION

Power Fugitives want(ed) to have healthy, caring relationships but have few, if any, examples on record. In fact, their relationships have left them with so much shame and pain that they may give up the dream of connection and seek out a solitary life. Substance use is a common coping mechanism for the pain of disconnection, which can also serve to keep them stuck. While unsure how to form positive attachments, they instinctively recognize the unhealthy, destructive relationships they’re used to, both in and out of service environments, and are pained by them.

WHAT WE HEARD

“Relationships, I really know nothing about them.” or “This relationship is putting me right back. I could have been a lot farther ahead. I am not blaming her, but the relationship”

- BUCKY

“I really want to change my life and go to detox. I want to be a better person, less angry”

- PUPPY ROSE

“I want to be isolated and I don’t want to be isolated. How does that make sense?... I’m very lonely if you want the truth.”

- GRANT ELDER

PEOPLE LIKE

Mark

“This one I can’t deny, so this person is gone. I like not being around the person I love. Really, that’s a lonely life.”

Grant Elder

“This seems to be the place I belong. I fit here. I got stuck here and now I know everything. I’m here and that’s the way it is.”

Barbara

“I ain’t got no time to have disabilities; I have grandkids. I can’t be falling apart”

Marcoz Delmondo

“You feel like a kid but you’re an adult and you want to take responsibility.”

Puppy Rose

“I’d like to relax in my house, and put my feet up because right now, I do all the payments, the food, everything.”

Bucky

POINTS OF PAIN

Shame

over failed relationships with partners and children especially.

Anger and Resentment

at those people who (originally)exploited their trust, love, and vulnerability, causing lasting harm.

Addiction

that helps them cope with pain but at the price of learning how to have more satisfying and accountable relationships.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Unjudged

Feeling both seen and unjudged by others.

Affirmation

of the value of their unique abilities and contributions.

Self-celebration

Clarity and conviction of their own knowledge, beauty, or values.

Segment 2: Super Agents

People who have struggled and taken back some agency and autonomy in their lives.

DESCRIPTION

Super Agents reject the system's view of them as needy or somehow living in the wrong way. All survivors of one sort or another, they are focused on figuring out what works for them and building a life to suit, rather than just trying to fit in or please others. They are not about to hand over their sense of autonomy and control, even to a system that so often seems to demand it in exchange for resources.

WHAT WE HEARD

"I left a situation... I wasn't homeless forever... I had a job and I left it all, just to come over here. So that I didn't want to live in a place where I needed to learn how to live or to reintegrate or, you know what I mean?"

- KELLY

- KELLY

"[AISH is] more administrative. They don't sit down with you or work with you. There's no conversations and I think that's wrong!"

- WILLIAM

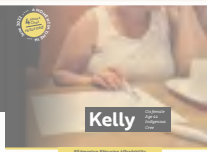
- WILLIAM

*"I just see myself as strong,
with a strong moral code"*

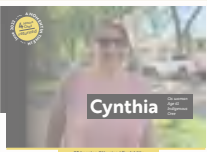
- BONNIE

- BONNIE

PEOPLE LIKE



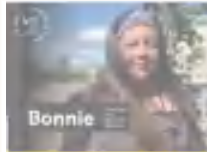
"I think I have a pretty good perspective on who I want... It's just hard to get there sometimes."



"I think the government thinks I can survive on my own, independently. I can do a lot, if I was in a secure environment."

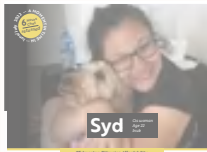


It is known that \mathcal{P} is a very powerful language



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Will further funding collection help us?



"I don't think anything could compare to the love and generosity we have up there. In Ulu, we share everything."

like road and homes. While striding in Friends and Neighbors and enjoying a drink, the 39-year-old native Texan seems to evaporate. There he bubbles open and seems to evaporate. There he bubbles open and seems to evaporate. There he bubbles open and seems to evaporate.

POINTS OF PAIN

Unheard

Feeling they have no voice in the systems and services they interact with, that they have no influence in an interaction.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Connection to land & spirituality

Nurturing a sense of connection to something larger than themselves that sustains them.

Controlled

Conditions and requirements for where and how they live or spend their time.

Community

Many Super Agents connect their personal agency to the collective agency of their community of supporters and loved ones.

Conformity

Being required to live according to someone else's worldview; to fit in with what others think is proper when it chafes against their own sense.

Segment 3: The Deceptively Settled

People facing high risk of interpersonal harm and relationship instability, which puts their housing on the line.

DESCRIPTION

The Deceptively Settled may appear to have physically adequate housing, but it could all change tomorrow because they do not have the resources or control to manage the sorts of relationships they have. These include relationships that come with housing, like predatory neighbours, or those that follow people into housing, such as a controlling (ex)partner or family member, or a web of violent relationships related to addiction or gang life, for example.

WHAT WE HEARD

"I'm the only one who pays the bills. My son is just out of jail, and he can't get on Alberta Works, so I'm the only one who does & pays everything...My other two sons were never like this."

- PUPPY ROSE

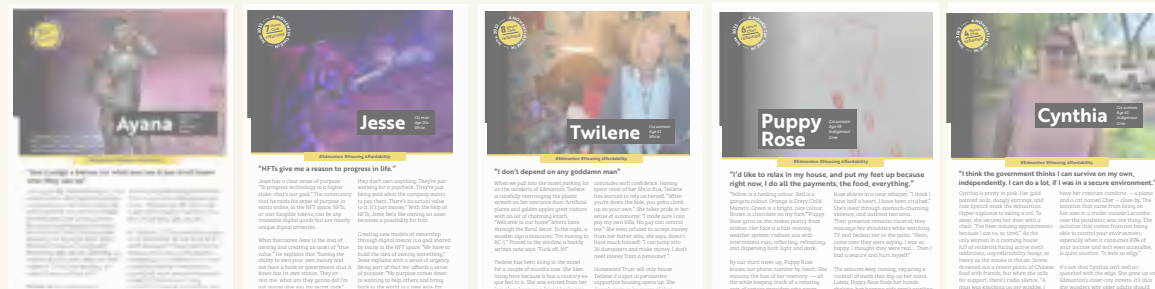
"It's getting worse. My neighbour is threatening to kill me, now....We are older people. We should be kept safe. It's not right. It's not right."

- CYNTHIA

"I wasn't prepared for this (eviction) ... They are all tied in ... I knew too much."

- TWILENE

PEOPLE LIKE



POINTS OF PAIN

Blamed

Feeling penalized or getting kicked out of one's housing because of the behaviour of people who visit you, the volume of interactions with an abusive partner, or the failure to live peacefully among neighbours with active mental health & addiction challenges, but also receiving little or no support to manage them.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Allyship

Freely choosing to cultivate positive relationships through volunteering, activism, online culture, etc.

Scared & Forgotten

Feeling deserted and left to fend for oneself in a building with others who have criminal patterns of behaviour, because you are poor or have a disability.

Control of Self Narrative

Others may see them as a victims, weak, or trouble, so they prize opportunities to show their strength and self-determination.

Segment 4:

The Spiritually Homeless

People with a deep longing for reconnection to something bigger than themselves, which housing too often overlooks or constrains.

DESCRIPTION

Those who are experiencing a loss of a broader sense of being in the world (not just loss of housing), characterized by rootlessness rather than rooflessness. This is an individual feeling that is connected to a collective experience caused by colonization, war, or other events that have disrupted the very concept of ‘home.’

WHAT WE HEARD

“I wish I had culture and traditions. I am a spiritual person, just not now... You go on the bus and you hear all these languages, but not my own.”

- BUCKY

“Stability is a total illusion. You have to accept change. Homes come and go.”

- DAFALA

What matters? “Me, myself; Getting my spirit back, my children, and housing.”

- PERK

PEOPLE LIKE



Bucky
Age 30
Gender Male
Ethnicity Black

“It’s not because I was lazy. It’s the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality: the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”



Dafala
Age 30
Gender Male
Ethnicity Arab

“It’s not because I was lazy. It’s the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality: the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”



Perk
Age 30
Gender Male
Ethnicity Black

“It’s not because I was lazy. It’s the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality: the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”



Jared
Age 30
Gender Male
Ethnicity Arab

“It’s not because I was lazy. It’s the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality: the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”



Sanaa
Age 30
Gender Female
Ethnicity Arab

“It’s not because I was lazy. It’s the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality: the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”



Floyd
Age 30
Gender Male
Ethnicity Black

“It’s not because I was lazy. It’s the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality: the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”

POINTS OF PAIN

Unsettled

Feeling unable to find comfort, safety, and belonging, often exacerbated by the gap between expectations and experiences of home.

Disconnected

Feeling separated from others, whether friends and family, or the experience of the broader community.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Conviviality

Feeling connected to others through joyful moments.

Tradition

Connecting to one’s ancestors and cultural values through rituals.

Language

Hearing, speaking, and knowing one’s own language, the language of one’s ancestors.

Segment 5: The Unhoused Homers

People with a sense of home in search of a better fit house.

DESCRIPTION

These are folks with an infrastructure problem on their hands. They have a set of home-ing practices, but they need a more fit-for-purpose house - whether that be an issue of quality, size, location, or costs. They have seen the kind of housing they want around -- it's not so unusual; just out of reach. Once they have access to this resource, they'll have the capability to live out their values.

WHAT WE HEARD

"I know this area perfect. I like walking everywhere...I do everything myself... I'm 65; I need clean place... If I move to nice place, then I want to see nephew."

- SUAD

"Being homeless, it drains everything out of you. [Living in shelter] for most people, this is the last option."

- GRAHAM

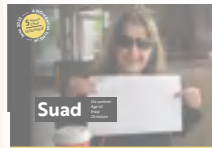
"Being homeless, it drains everything out of you. [Living in the shelter] for most people, this is our last option."

- GRAHAM

"I think the government thinks I can survive on my own... I can do a lot, if I was in a secure environment."

- CYNTHIA

PEOPLE LIKE



"I don't like control. I felt it with my family. I don't control anyone, and no one controls me."

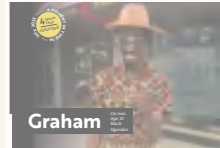


"I think the government thinks I can survive on my own, independently. I can do a lot, if I was in a secure environment."

Cynthia is pretty to pink. Her gold painted nails, deeply earring, and rose lipstick make the exhaustion. Hyper-vigilance is taking a toll. To sleep, she secures her door with a chair. "I've been making appointments because I can't sit in a rooming." As the only woman in a rooming, she has seen a lot of residents follow active meth addictions, unpredictability hangs as heavy as the smoke in the air. Stress drowned out a recent picnic of Chinese friends, and she was left alone with her last customer, Steve's mother. She

have her creature comforts – a piano and a cat named Cher – close-by. The isolation that comes from living on her own in a trailer outside Lacombe over the pandemic was one thing. The isolation that comes from not being able to control your environment and having no control over the flow of your income and isn't even accessible, is quite another. "It feels so edgy"

It's not that Cynthia isn't well acquainted with the edge. She grew up outdoors in city slums. It's the



"Success means I become a contributing, functioning part of this world."

There are at least ten starts to be told about Graham: the story of a political science student coming to terms with big ideas; the story of a fashion and music enthusiast who makes a \$500,000 surfing kiosk like a million; a well-travelled nomad who secretly buys pasta in a remote town; or the story of a thriving Alabama DJ who never expected himself to be part of his path.

POINTS OF PAIN

Waiting

People on a fixed income living in social or in subsidized housing with large property companies can apply for more suitable housing, but then they have to wait, not knowing for how long. In the meantime they contend, alone, with the problems that prompted their decision to move.

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POINTS OF DELIGHT

Information

Finding out where they are in a process, being able to picture the whole journey, see alternatives, and understand the factors that could shorten or lengthen their wait.

Information creates opportunities to strategize and prepare.

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Information creates opportunities to strategize and prepare.

Forgotten

The feeling that no one in the system is paying attention to or empathizing with what it's like to continue in their unsatisfactory, often unsafe, situation.

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The feeling that no one in the system is paying attention to or empathizing with what it's like to continue in their unsatisfactory, often unsafe, situation.

Joyful Interludes

Moments to share a delicious meal, engage in good conversation, play music, or take a bubble bath are appreciated and cherished.

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Moments to share a delicious meal, engage in good conversation, play music, or take a bubble bath are appreciated and cherished.

Segment 6: The Makeshifters

They've been solving their own problems for years now. What could the system do differently?

DESCRIPTION

System failure is a given, so The Makeshifters have cultivated their own network, their own place of belonging, and a ton of skepticism. None of their solutions are endorsed by the system, which would see them as “physically inadequate”, “unhygienic,” or in “contravention of bylaws.” So how to bridge the gulf? How could the system acknowledge what matters to people, recognize resilience and problem-solving, and create more longevity in their next housing situation?

WHAT WE HEARD

“Taking control back of my life and who I am, that's a big thing for me.”

- BARBARA

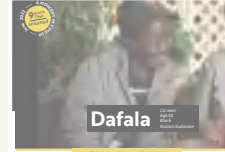
“I did it all by myself. I got a tent, moved around; I made sure I'm safe.”

- TWILENE

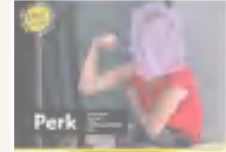
“[My] Caucasian [support worker]... didn't understand nothing... I could never get help.”

- PERK

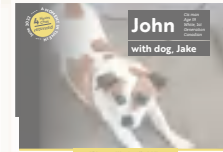
PEOPLE LIKE



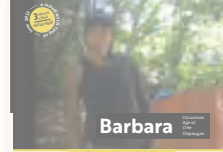
Dafala
#Homeless Housing Affordability
“It's not because I was lazy. It's the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality. The way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong.”



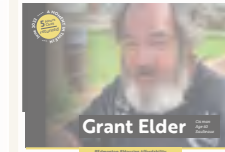
Perk
#Homeless Housing Affordability
“I don't get through a shift. There's a lot more to it.”



John
with dog, Jake
#Homeless Housing Affordability
“I'm kinda a free spirit. In my van, it gives me a lot of freedom from conventional expectations. Home is where you park it.”



Barbara
#Homeless Housing Affordability
“I ain't got no time to have disabilities; I have grandkids. I can't be failing apart.”



Grant Elder
#Homeless Housing Affordability
“This seems to be the place I belong. I fit here. I got stuck here and now I know everybody I'm here and that's the way it is.”

POINTS OF PAIN

Fragmentation

Different parts of the system offer solutions for discrete needs, but require either/or choices... there's no holistic approach better than their own.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Community Care

Cultivating strong community on the margins, and being seen as part of a collective.

Self-Sufficiency

Feeling able to take care of oneself, deal with discomfort, and solve problems on the fly with the resources at hand.

Freedom

Living by one's own values and timetable.

Segment 7: The Resource People

They thrive on contribution, but are un-recognised by the system.

DESCRIPTION

Kelly helps the elderly tenants in her building get much needed repairs where they are too timid; Floyd teaches Cree; Twilene keeps a pot of coffee outside her (open) door to cultivate community; John gives people rides to work; and Dafala lovingly helps to run a household of people who might well be on a waitlist for supportive housing. From the system's perspective, they're all people who need help, not people who give it.

WHAT WE HEARD

"You can share activities, love, and understanding. It gives you something to belong to this group of likeminded people. For me, it's mostly migrants and Natives."

- DAFALA

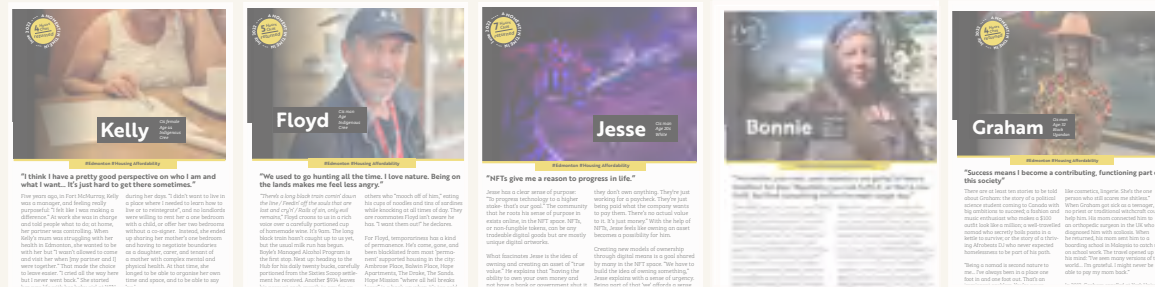
My purpose comes down to wanting to help others and bring back to the world in a new way- for example with my NFT venture."

- JESSE

"Success means I become a contributing, functioning part of this society."

- GRAHAM

PEOPLE LIKE



POINTS OF PAIN

Passivity

Despite being do-ers, contributors, and achievers, the system treats them as passive, needy, and maybe dishonest.

Discrimination

The Resource People treat others with love because they know what it feels like to move through spaces that are suspicious of and unresponsive to you.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Contribution

Giving back creates a sense of belonging and self worth.

Aspiration

Being able to imagine the kind of roles, relationships, and communities in which they and others might flourish.

Segment 8: The Story Resisters

They have an alternative story for who they are and how they came to be struggling – or at least the beginnings of one. But who hears it?

DESCRIPTION

Pride and respect are top values for this segment, and they understand that the dominant story about people like them is incompatible with that kind of dignity. They are attracted to stories that humanise and have greater resonance with their lived experience. All have faced discrimination and stigma, due to race, class, and/or immigration status. They experience varying degrees of success in defining their own narrative, depending on their own health & the audience. This segment may be as drawn, or more drawn, to opportunities to share stories of their experiences than to housing services & supports.

WHAT WE HEARD

"I'm a higher calibre person than that. They [gangs] tried to recruit me in jail but I turned them down. It's quite easy."

"Don't judge a person for what you see if you don't know what they can do."

- AYAN

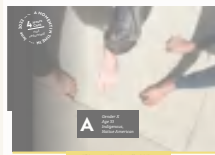
"No matter your race, your ancestors are going to have a tradition for you. Hopefully, you can fulfil it ..."

- BONNIE

"No matter your race, your ancestors are going to have a tradition for you. Hopefully, you can fulfil it ..."

- BONNIE

PEOPLE LIKE



"My entire life is a joke. I get something good going on and then boom, something happens and it's gone."

"Do you want some donuts?" We're walking beside the PetSmart in Unity Square when a stranger calls out to us. We keep that card and they can look into it," says the bank teller. "Would you like top enabled?" "No, never" replies A.



"Did I realize a business for which success is less than success was they can do?"



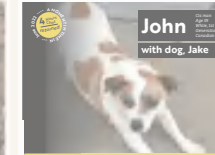
"I'd like to relax in my house, and put my feet up because right now, I do all the payments, the food, everything."

"Yellow is a healing colour. Red is a gangster colour. Orange is Every Child Mothers. Green is a bright, nice colour."

Rose shares in a near whisper: "I have half a heart. I have been cruel. She's lived through stomach-churns."



Thank you for your inquiry on 12/29/2017. I am sorry to hear that you are having trouble with your daughter's report.



"I'm kinda a free spirit, in my van. It gives me a lot of freedom from conventional expectations... Home is where you park."

POINTS OF PAIN

Discrimination

The sense, or direct experience of, other people not seeing their human qualities or aspirations.

Discrimination

The sense, or direct experience of, other people not seeing their human qualities or aspirations.

POINTS OF DELIGHT

Weaving Alternative Narratives

Ayana writes about strong women much like herself; Twilene repeats the refrain: “I don’t depend on any goddamn man.” Both are acts of resistance.

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Othering

Language and behaviour that stereotype people, especially in ways that imply failure or criminality.

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Active Listening

Because their chosen narratives are often sidelined or overlooked, the Story Resisters enjoy being in the company of active listeners, unencumbered by having to perform or 'prove' themselves.

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109

Opportunity Areas

What are opportunity areas?

We listen and learn from people on the margins, explore alternative frames for their experience, and re-group people into segments based on *their* values & capabilities -- all so that we may expand the opportunity space, and re-imagine future possibilities.

We can think of opportunity space as a field for transformative actions, big and small experiments, and collaborative learning. Unlike a set of recommendations, opportunity areas describe 'what could be' and offer some early, but concrete starting points for bringing people together to figure out what they look like in practice. We call these starting points 'What Ifs' to highlight their creative potential.

Underpinning each opportunity area is a theme -- a cross cutting idea or narrative thread -- that suggests something about what might be called for, and what might engage people. To be attractive, opportunity areas & 'What ifs' must start from where people are at, not where systems want them to be.

For policymakers used to reports that end with high-level, definitive actions to take, opportunity areas and 'What ifs' might feel under-developed and small-scale. They are both. They reflect a different way of conceptualizing the role of a city government and its policymakers: from making regulations and delivering services to catalyzing residents to self-organize and self-manage, and in this way, gain greater power and agency to turn their city into a more just urban home.

Opportunity area #1 helps us imagine when in somebody's trajectory we might intervene to offer resources and build capabilities.

1

Point-in-time interventions

Opportunity areas #2-7 help us imagine where & how we might intervene: what policy levers we might pull in order to create and distribute resources, and unlock individual and systemic opportunities.

2

Restorative rituals

3

Co-production

4

Nurturing mutual aid

5

Grounded know-how

6

Principle-led policy

7

Collective home-ing

Theme 1: Reframing vulnerability

Almost none of the 26 people we've met see themselves as vulnerable. They see themselves as caring, industrious, clever, perceptive, social, introverted, strong, sometimes weak, and at times, sad, stupid, ashamed, and not in control.

The language of vulnerability can become just another source of separation rather than mutual understanding. All humans are vulnerable. None of us know what will happen tomorrow. Risks, struggles, and precarity are products of our histories, events, and the opportunities & resources we have available. In other words, vulnerability isn't a fixed trait that defines a person so much as a point-in-time interaction to acknowledge, support, and where possible, predict.

Opportunity Area 1: Point-in-time interventions

FOR ALL SEGMENTS BUT ESPECIALLY



The
Spiritually
Homeless



The
Story
Resisters

Certain life events can disrupt one's fundamental sense of psychological safety, connection, and self-efficacy. For the 26 folks we met, these disruptions were predictors of future housing and home-ing instability. If a system can intervene at crucial moments to help people integrate unexpected life experiences, they may gain home-ing capabilities and housing resources, at the right time.

Amongst the people we met, disruptive events that preceded housing instability included divorce & relationship breakdown (especially for men), the

removal of children by Child Protective Services, involuntary hospitalizations, the loss of a parent/caregiver, and leaving the criminal justice system. There were also disruptive events linked to employment, especially jobs within the resource extraction industry. These included separation from family and boom & bust cycles.

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY

A shift **from** conceptualising vulnerability in terms of fixed demographic groups (e.g seniors, veterans, single moms, people living with disabilities, Indigenous and racialized peoples) **to** recognizing vulnerability to be an outgrowth of a disruptive event + missing resources & capabilities.

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 1: POINT IN TIME INTERVENTIONS

SOME WHAT IF’S

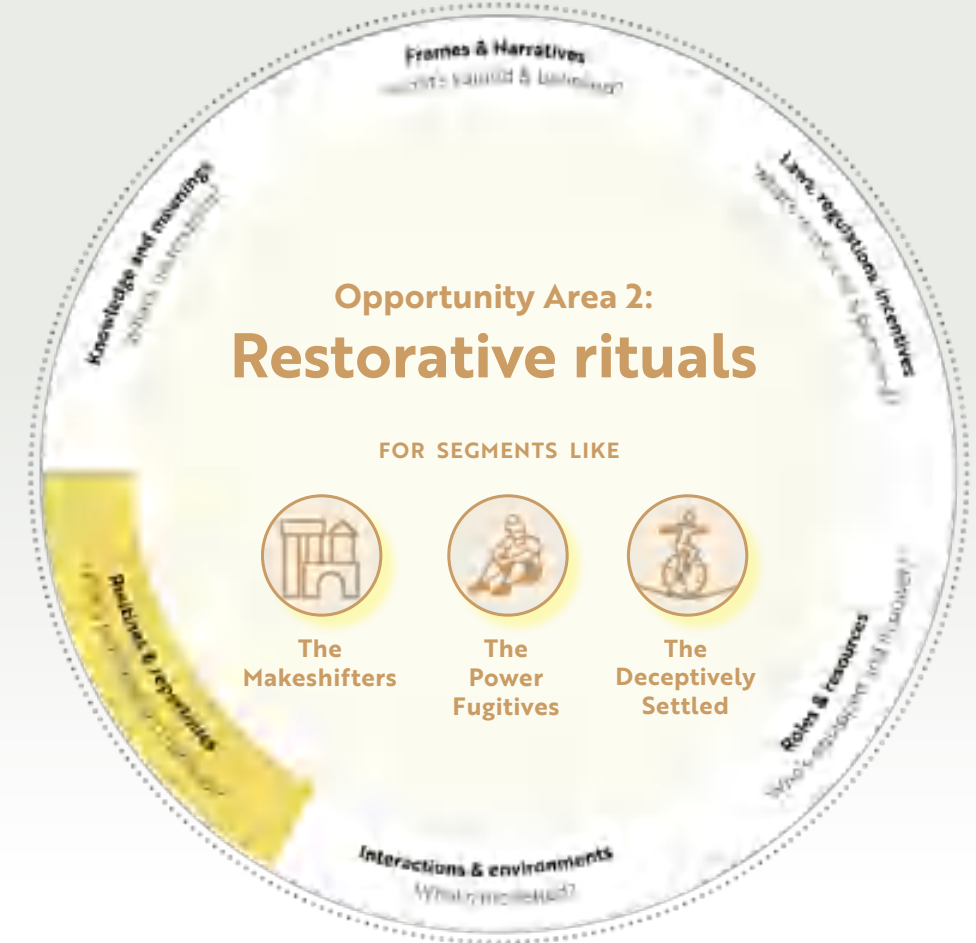
Disruptive events	Missing resources and capabilities	What ifs
The removal of children by Child Protective Services	Opportunity to grieve, process & shift narratives; to focus on self-healing & growth; to be supported and not shamed. Resources to address inadequate housing, income, food security.	Family loss retreat Mothers like Perk, whose children have recently been taken away, face so many practical & systemic barriers to their return. What if the day after children are removed, parents had access to a holistic retreat to process loss, forge informal connections, set their own goals, and gain access to family repair grants?
Divorce and relationship breakdown	Opportunity to grieve, process; to create new routine; and to find fresh sources of belonging. Resources to rebuild and start over.	Endings are beginnings rituals We celebrate marriages with weddings, but how do we mark divorces? What if folks going through a divorce could participate in a new kind of ritual to process what’s happened and gain access to a pool of resources to start over?

Disruptive events	Missing resources and capabilities	What ifs
Leaving prison	Opportunity to rebuild relationships with family; to have navigational (versus disciplinary) supports; to find legitimate work. Resources to get back on one’s feet.	Family restoration What if when people left jail, their family members received a range of restorative supports to repair relationships, open-up lines of communication, and prevent some of the stresses they often assume?
Leaving / returning from treatment	Opportunity to directly access treatment; to be able to keep housing even while away at treatment; to have informal support. Resources to transition jobs or environments that aren’t conducive to health.	Healing subsidy What if folks in addictions treatment could have their rent paid for the duration of their stay? For Tyler, whose income comes from hustling, going to treatment risks further loss and instability. How might we remove barriers to treatment?
Eviction	Opportunity for story to be fully heard; to engage in a conflict resolution process; to have full information; to rebuild credit & reputation. Bridge resources; storage; access to legal representation.	Solution circles What if eviction hearings operated more like sharing circles, where stories from tenants & landlords are exchanged? Where it is not possible to creatively problem-solve, the court is required to do a Displacement Analysis, with the tenant, akin to doing Gender Based Analysis (GBA+) where the effects of the eviction are recorded, and they are connected to informal/formal supports.

Theme 2:

One-way accountability

When housing breaks down, kids are removed, police are called, or systems step-in to intervene, individuals are the ones who accrue much of the blame and shame. Often, systems and services face few consequences for their role in the situation, and have few mechanisms to learn and do differently next time. This lopsided accountability can perpetuate mistrust, set-up repetitive cycles of failure, and cement unhelpful power divides.



Service journeys are made up of relationships. Healthy relationships rely on mutual accountability, commitment, space for communication, and joint reflection. When things don't go according to plan, what if system actors and the affected person came together in rituals designed to make sense of the situation, and take responsibility for

their actions? These rituals would lay the groundwork to chart new courses of action to begin to remedy what went wrong. The primary purpose would be to restore relationships and rebuild trust.

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 2: RESTORATIVE RITUALS

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA

A shift **from** an individual burden of responsibility to bear the harm attached to a failure **to** a collective responsibility to enable capabilities for housing & home-ing, plus share in the responsibility to learn and do better.

SOME WHAT IF'S

Housing Wake

When folks like Floyd get evicted, there is a black mark against their name, even when their landlords are social services. What if services who evict people had to be part of a 'housing funeral' to critically examine their role, rather than letting individuals take all the blame?

Trust Rebuilding Circles

For folks like Perk with long histories interfacing with multiple systems that have let them down (child protection, welfare, housing), how might they have an opportunity to testify to their losses by participating in a micro Truth & Reconciliation-like process? How might this be a step towards rebuilding trust, which is a necessary condition for housing interventions to work?

Exit Rituals

What if the relationship between a person and their support worker was honoured as sacred -- not interchangeable? There might be rituals for building trust like a road trip day, or learning a new skill together; rituals for relationship transfer when a worker left or changed roles; and rituals for repair when mistakes happen.

Rooming House Rituals

What if shared housing included an annual ritual in which tenants, property managers, landlords, and frequent guests, including workers, were asking to reflect together on the household dynamic as they experienced it, and how they were contributing to or detracting from residents' sense of home, community, and wellbeing? All to listen, do repair work, and set intentions for the year to come.

Theme 3:

Contribution for contentment

Those we met with the strongest sense of identity and positive affect were people who took on roles and were purposefully making contributions to their community. At the other end of the scale were people who struggled to actualize positive relationships and felt lost and without purpose. The latter often reported feeling very little control over their environment, greater transience, and less belonging.



For many, being well in housing means having a role in the production of ‘home.’ How could the system boost its never-enough resource base by recognizing and/or resourcing people to play the roles that bring them satisfaction and purpose? In doing so, there is an opportunity to engender more equal power dynamics between

systems, communities, households, and individuals. Roles and resources can support building connections to develop capabilities for individual and collective wellbeing.

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 3: CO-PRODUCTION OF HOUSING

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA

A shift **from** systems using resources to fulfill individuals’ needs directly **to** systems working alongside individuals and communities to develop and maintain the capabilities necessary to identify and pursue wellbeing.

SOME WHAT IF’S

Inuit-led Housing

What if some housing was designed with Inuit values, language, culture, and hospitality in mind? It could be open to Inuit people of all incomes and abilities, with residencies for traditional cooks, artists, and elders.

Anchor Community Builders

Bonnie is all about hospitality and bridging cultures. What if there was a way for people with a deep interest in community building to gain a designation, and join a pool, where they are invited as anchor tenants of new buildings and given a budget to spark natural support?

Reconciliation Ranger

What if conservation areas under government jurisdiction created reconciliation roles for Indigenous people with land-based skills to live on the land, have a voice in how it is managed, and share their skills with others?

Seniors’ Housing Doula

Cynthia defines herself as an advocate, and wants to be of service to others. What if Cynthia could be trained as a senior’s housing doula, learn about the system, and help other seniors meet each other and pool resources to find better housing? All in exchange for a rent subsidy.

Theme 4:
Off-grid communities

We witnessed lots of beautiful examples of informal support and organic community -- examples that would primarily be recognized by systems for the risks they create rather than the risks they reduce, and the capabilities they enable.



Unbeknownst to her, Twilene is on the waitlist for supportive housing... but it's hard to translate her open door policy at the motel, and dreams of self-organized communal living, to the locked doors and institutionally organized activities at the city's supportive housing facilities.

How could Twilene and the community she helps create be seen for the solutions they offer?

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 4: SUPPORTING AND MAINTAINING ORGANIC COMMUNITY

What would it look like for the city to launch small-scale experiments that recognize & support existing organic communities in all their messiness and beauty? Or bring together new communities over shared journeys or interests? Such experiments could help the City and its partners figure out how to value and enhance the ways in which people create conviviality and mutual support.

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA

A shift **from** a system focused on compliance with fixed standards that rationalize placing individuals in institutional housing environments **to** a system that can support real-life communities to help their members reduce unnecessary risks and maximize the good stuff.

SOME WHAT IF'S

Home-issary

Just like there are commissaries for food trucks, what if there were home-issaries for folks who live in vehicles, enabling them to access kitchen, sanitation, and storage services, plus troubleshooting, repairs, etc? How might cities offer subsidized membership rates?

Micro Spaces

Addiction and mental health creates volatility, which Dafala recognizes the shelter system too often exacerbates. What if groups of self-organizing community members could access micro-grants to run small-scale community healing spaces?

Multi-Generational Safe Houses

Safe houses & treatment centres haven't worked for Barbara because of the rigidity of their rules. What if Barbara, her daughter, and grandkids were matched to a house & supports where they could collectively go through a healing process, and co-create the rules for their treatment?

Welcome Wagon Re-Vamped

What if there were socially normed, informal relationship-building moments for tenants in the same building, including neighbours, and landlord tenant relationships? To lay some groundwork that might prevent high impact conflicts?

Theme 5:

Two solitudes

Many we spent time with experienced too few opportunities to be heard, understood, and valued. Most expressed an interest in being supported to share their stories directly with City Council. People talked about a sense of being misunderstood or misrepresented. They wanted direct, not mediated relationships with people in positions of power so that their knowledge and meaning would not get lost in translation.



The knowledge and meanings understood by the system are pervasive, shaping the lives of those who rely on formal help. There are few conduits for knowledge to flow the other way, be understood as intended, and have influence.

What if improving systems requires us to value the knowledge and experience of those who face the most barriers to flourishing?

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 5: LESSENING POWER DIFFERENTIALS

Having one's experience valued is often understood as a first step towards more responsive, transparent, and accessible systems. Extreme power differentials that people experience in their interactions with systems can lead to a feeling of helplessness and/or cynicism which may prevent people from working with systems to constructively seek solutions in the future.

How might we redesign current interactions and create new opportunities to disrupt power dynamics in a way that gives credence to the knowledge and experience of those who depend on systems?

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA

A shift **from** systems that are responsive to knowledge generated by professionals and those in positions of power **to** systems that are eager to learn from and cooperatively make sense of the experiences and knowledge of the most marginalized and excluded, for the purposes of growth, development, and greater accountability.

SOME WHAT IF'S

Day-in-the-life Guide

John believes that decision-makers don't know what it's like to live in poverty. What if people with lived experience of poverty could be paid to give people in power tours of shelters, etc.?

Service Tracker

Puppy Rose has no idea where she is on the housing waitlist, or the status of services, leaving her to leave voicemails that are rarely returned. What if there was a Fedex-like tracking system accessible by phone or text? What if there was a centralized way she could leave feedback?

Story Mediation

What if rather than Justin receiving a formal letter from the Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service, with almost no context for what's happening, a journalist or story collector met with him and the landlord, separately, to hear & playback their stories? How might the stories be artefacts that could be used in mediation, and as a last resort, court - but might also be useful for tenants to negotiate future housing?

Theme 6:

Unreasonable rules

The ways in which rules, regulations, and policies shaped the lives of some of the people we spent time with veered from tragic into dark comedy. The outcomes were often so estranged from the values that were likely behind the rules, and yet avenues for recourse tended to be inaccessible, unrealistic, or completely unknown to those affected.



Rigid rules and regulations perpetuate inequity, and foster the precariousness of people whose choices are constrained from every direction. What if systems moved away from hard and fast rules to comply with, and started working with principles under which practice could be co-created in accordance with the underlying values?

What if the City modelled this approach through a series of prototypes to learn how principles might be differently applied to achieve purpose-aligned outcomes in diverse contexts? What if we celebrated creativity in the pursuit of principled service?

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 6: PRINCIPLE-LED POLICY

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA

A shift **from** a conception of fairness as ensuring sameness **to** an appreciation of equity as embracing difference; **from** one-size-fits all policies and regulations **to** policies and regulations rooted in explicit values and processes for collaborating with people to develop aligned practices.

SOME WHAT IF'S

Co-Create Guest Plans

Grant was evicted three times for guests, but successfully couch-surfed and babysat for his friend. What if guest management policies were a co-created plan with each person, based on their own expertise, but subscribing to an underlying set of values & principles?

Mutual Accountability at the Inn

What if there were more options to rent rooms with supported processes and mechanisms for mutual accountability between homeowner and tenant, to rebalance the systemic vulnerability of room renters, while acknowledging the intimacy of sharing a home?

Neighbourhood Idea Jams

What if one of the mechanisms for addressing problems experienced by people in a neighbourhood was a facilitated gathering at which neighbours could understand the problem from those involved, and have space to brainstorm creative solutions that reflect the City's principles as well as their own?

Growing Capacity

Sumaya's generosity has been a lifeline for Sanaa and her family. Still, breaking occupancy standards could have cost them their lease. What if, when landlords observed too many people staying in a rental, they had both the resources and responsibility to facilitate good transitions?

Theme 7:

Relationship First

Across the board, relationships were a common denominator that influenced people’s experience of housing and home. Whether it was being evicted for having guests over, a spontaneous desire to fully welcome another family into the lives of one’s own family, or feeling isolated and disconnected from one’s neighbours, relationships shaped people’s housing status and their wellbeing.



Housing narratives these days are often focused on the individual, their risk factors and acuity, and their rights to adequate housing (under international law). For those who have been street-involved, guests are seen as a liability and something to be curtailed or prohibited. While many housing workers see their clients evicted for

situations and events that are rooted in difficulty managing relationships, there is little room to think about relational capabilities, as they relate to housing, or how to support them. People may be housed and re-housed using a formula that has few ways to understand and take into account relational factors.

> OPPORTUNITY AREA 7: COLLECTIVE HOME-ING

Instead, what if the system and the broader public conceptualized relationships as a crucial element of housing? What diversity of approaches might be possible if housing workers, landlords, tenants’ associations, building managers, and other community resource people started by learning about a person’s existing relationships, and those they aspire to?

What if there were lots of opportunities for people to talk about and indicate what works for them, what they would like to try, and what kind of relationships they are working towards? What if we understood home as a collective undertaking, rather than an individual responsibility?

THE SHIFT BEHIND THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA

A cultural shift **from** an individualistic narrative in which a good home is the work of individuals (perhaps monitored by housing workers and landlords) **to** a more collectivist narrative.

A collectivist approach appreciates home as the production of many community interactions that build people’s capabilities – whatever their starting point – to live well together and feel belonging. Successful housing might be measured in terms of whether people’s place-based relationships enable or create barriers to living the life they value, whether they have outlets for contribution, and a sense of belonging.

SOME WHAT IF’S

Community Match

What if we talked about matching people to communities instead of matching them to housing? What if tours of potential new homes included walks through the community, dropping into local meet-up groups, and helping people pursue activities of interest?

Harm Reduction Relationship Coach

Harm reduction is a frame for addiction, but not often relationships. What if there were harm reduction relationship campaigns and coaches that support people enmeshed in harmful relationships without the expectation they will sever all contact?

Friendly Housing

What if we created a new designation called “friendly housing,” akin to kid-friendly or pet-friendly. Friendly Housing would mean there’s a base assumption that people want to know their neighbours and are open to a knock on the door to offer a meal or ask for some salt, and an orientation towards community gatherings.



Appendix:

Profile Cards

Profile Cards are short narratives describing a moment-in-time with people.

Note: After we wrote, returned, and gained consent from individuals to share their Profile Cards, the City of Edmonton required that specific details in six Profile Cards be changed. Ayana and Perk wished to include photos as part of their stories, but we were prohibited from doing so under Alberta's Child, Youth, and Family Enhancement Act. We were also required to anonymize William's photos under provincial legislation. Important elements of Barbara, Bonnie, and Twilene's lived experiences **also had to be** redacted under provincial legislation.

Profile Cards

An invitation to an encounter

When people who live on the margins share their stories with people who live within the bounds of civil society, a space of encounter opens. Relational space emerges when we share stories. As we enter this space of encounter, we meet someone ‘strange’ to us, someone whose life may look very different from our own. We then make a choice about how we participate in the encounter: we can resist the strangeness and defend what we know as ‘right’, ‘true’, or ‘normal’. Or, we can acknowledge our mutual strangeness and be touched by it.

If we choose to read stories from the viewpoint of mutual strangeness, we are given an opportunity to learn about someone ‘other’ to us, someone we may define ourselves in opposition or demarcation to. We are given an opportunity to learn about who we are in relation to those whom we understand as different from ourselves. In this space of mutual strangeness, we share life stories, build connections, and can thereby counter processes of exclusion and marginalization. We have the chance to nourish relationships between ourselves and the people whose stories we read. If we allow strangeness to serve as a source of connection rather than disconnection, we can allow the story to just be, without feeling the need to fit it back within our own logics and mental models.

What stands in the way of ethical story reading?

To suspend our disbelief and truly embrace our inner curiosity, it can be helpful to pay attention to the inner resistance that may arise. Here are some to try to spot and intentionally put aside.

- **The fact-checking urge:** People’s perceptions and understanding of systems may not align with our own. Rather than latching on to the veracity of details, we can get curious. What shapes someone’s belief that is so different from our own?
- **The bootstraps fallacy:** Given the meritocratic social norms in Canada and other Western societies, the underlying assumption is that people’s personal determination and effort defines where they are at in life. The bootstraps fallacy ignores systemic discrimination and injustice as well as intergenerational trauma.
- **The search for a one-size-fits-all solution:** The stories we gather do not reveal universal truths. Rather, ethnography allows us to understand opportunity for generating new ideas that may work for some folks, not all.
- **The problem-fixer mode:** When we spend time with people, our aim is to listen. When we jump into problem-solving mode, we risk projecting our own agenda onto someone else. How can we be present with a story and hold all its contradictions and problems without trying to solve them?

How they see themselves

"I like the dark but the light is strong inside"

Roles: parent, friend

Lived experience

Death/grief, adoption, separation from kids, criminality, racism, discrimination, detained in mental hospital, mental breakdown, addiction, homelessness, child protection system

A

Motivation to share their story

Figure Out What is Happening

"I don't understand... I've been laying down on the floor trying to work things out in my mind."

Wants to be heard about

Being A Good Parent

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Family oriented Calm Not a lot of traffic

Quiet Not a lot of undesirable people

Safe and secure in your own place

Distance from current

Far Close
"I am a mile and a half away from the Canadian dream"

Opportunity Areas

Lease Swap

A functions well changing homes frequently, but breaking a lease is expensive and can increase precarity. What if we created a platform for people like A to swap apartments and leases? Might this be a win-win for landlords, free up housing supply, and help people get out of bad situations?

Walk-in

A is strikingly adept at services where you don't need an appointment, its day-of service. What if housing services worked like this? Getting income support, AISH application, or information on available housing in one visit.

Non-clinical support line

A no longer calls 911 when worried about having a nervous breakdown. What if there was a support line you could call that would bring people to you, but who would sit with you, listen, and hear you out?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

I noticed A outside of the Tutti Frutti on 104th Ave; they had just finished breakfast with an old friend they had run into from back in Grande Prairie. The two of them were exchanging stories of being harassed by police in shopping malls. It sounded interesting, so I asked if I could join and listen in.

Points of (un)familiarity

A and I are both detail oriented, conscientious about money, and enjoy walking barefoot. While we both were raised in Christian homes, I was not adopted. We also interpret patterns differently – A sees wall cracks and irregularities as signs that something strange is happening, I see them as signs of an older house. I've never been apprehended by the police when I call them.

Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Dutch descendant

And Sarah

A MOMENT IN TIME IN
4 Hours Chat
not returned
June 2022

A

Gender X
Age 33
Indigenous,
Native American

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"My entire life is a joke. I get something good going on and then boom, something happens and it's gone."

"Do you want some down?" We're walking beside the PetSmart in Unity Square when a stranger calls out to us. We keep walking, ignoring the caller. "I don't do drugs," shares A. "Sober is the way for me." A is sporting a maroon sweater, dark skinny jeans, and black nail polish to match the black suede ankle boots they bought at Value Village. They've always been a natural in heels. Their long black hair, dyed partly blonde, reaches halfway down their back.

A's first stop is the bank to get a new bank card, then the registry for a new ID. They threw their old ones out yesterday, concerned about a security threat. They visit these public services with familiarity and ease. "If you have security concerns, call the number on

that card and they can look into it," says the bank teller. "Would you like tap enabled?" "No, never" replies A.

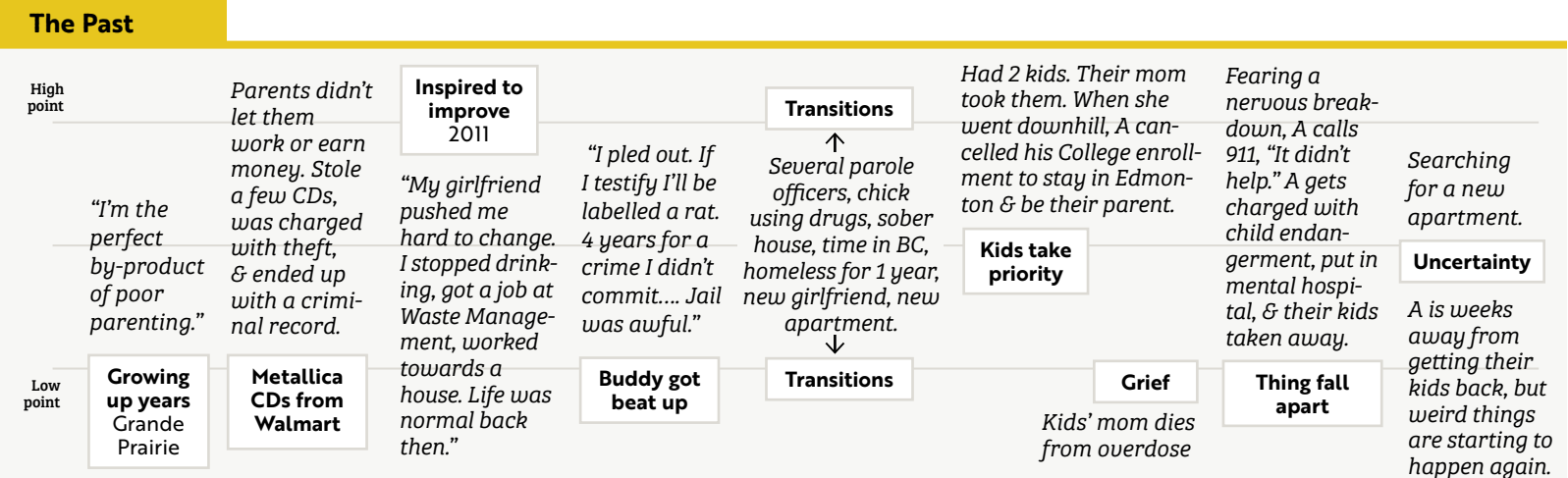
Finding a new apartment is next on their agenda for the weekend. This is their go-to strategy when things get strange: clear out and start fresh. Of the \$40K lump sum from their band, they've thrown out or given away \$30K worth of belongings over time. One time they tried calling the police for help, but never again. Their daughter was teething at the time and the two kids' mom had recently passed away. Wanting to be a good parent, they called 911 and implored, "I'm having a nervous breakdown because something's happening." Four police officers and a couple of social workers showed up, took the kids,



charged A with child endangerment, and put A in the mental hospital for 30 days. “It didn’t help... I don’t trust my social worker. I don’t trust anyone.”

They’re two weeks away from getting their kids back, but things have started to get weird again. The towel isn’t where they left it the night before. Stains have appeared on the knees of their unworn jeans. And there are streaks on the TV that they just wiped down. “I think someone or something is coming into my place.” Once we arrive at their apartment, they point out the small cracks in the wall, the ceiling panel that is hanging slightly lower, and the strange humming noise in their bedroom. “It’s just an old house,” counters a friend who has tagged along. “It’s just the neighbours.” A isn’t convinced.

The largest of the three bedrooms has two child-sized beds laid with fuzzy blankets and pillows. A string of Christmas lights are set up, and scattered across the floor are myriad toys including a pink unicorn and a superman figurine. “I want to be able to have my kids, go out, raise them, teach them to have a job. I’d say [to them], You can be whoever you want to be.”



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *renting*
Type: *3 bedroom apartment*
With whom: *lives alone*
How found: *found it themselves*
Rent: *\$1200/month*
Percentage of Income:
AISH is only source of income

Sense of at-homeness
low high

Sense of stability
low high

Desire for stability
low high

Agency over living situation
low high

Homing practices

Crayon scribbles Office space Wall hangings Popcorn

Window blocked in bedroom BC flag

Toys, pink unicorn, superman figurine

Decision-making drivers

Kids Safety Autonomy Privacy

Top Stressors

Safety/security "I think someone or something is coming into my place... I slept in a bush last night. I don't trust anyone."

Work "It's really hard to get a job." Their criminal record from stealing Metallica CDs has been a huge obstacle.

People around you "I don't have friends or family. Apparently I threaten them [my adopted parents], yell at them. Why would I do that?"

Top Values

Pride & Respect "I'm a higher caliber person than that. They [gangs] tried to recruit me in jail but I turned them down. It's quite easy."
little in life lots in life

Family "I'm so close to getting my kids back. Two weeks away. The last thing I want is to abandon them"
little in life lots in life

Self-sufficiency "Not being in debt is the best thing."
little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

	Enablers	Barriers
Enablers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Settlement money helped with stabilityLearning about smudging, sweats, pipe ceremonies in jail	<ul style="list-style-type: none">2 youth workers, "actually played with my kids"Past girlfriendOne parole officer
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Criminal record blocks employmentJustice system encourages innocent people to plead outYear leases make it expensive to change apartments regularlyUnhelpful 30 days at mental hospital	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"Chick I was with"2nd parole officerAdopted parentsSocial worker
	Policies & Resources	People & Relationships
		Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

"I'm always focused on others, not me"

Roles: mother, helper, writer, daughter

Lived experience
discrimination, racism, disability, mental health, grief/loss, addiction, divorce, immigration, child protection

Ayana

Motivation to share their story

Helping others

"Maybe it can help someone else down the road"

Wants to be heard about

Ableism

Discrimination

Meth as medication

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

A normal place Not too expensive Quiet

Easygoing Good for kids 2 bedrooms

TV, computer, living room stuff

Distance from current

Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Story writing services

Ayana thinks calling social services is a "waste of time." She feels best expressing herself in writing. What if social housing services would allow potential tenants like Ayana to submit a story about themselves as part of a housing application?

Family Circles

What if single parents like Ayana were invited to join a small group of other parents to set goals, save, and receive matching funds for hitting milestones?

Grief housing

When Ayana's father and best friend died, she went on a downward spiral. Soon after, her kids were taken. What if there was grief housing where single parents can stay with their children and receive support to grief?



Nina

Cis woman

White

European



And Rochelle

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We first met Ayana at Justin's house. Rochelle helped pack up her belongings on eviction day and started working through some of the tools as they were waiting for things to unfold. We asked Ayana to meet up again to dive deeper into her story.

Points of (un)familiarity

I have witnessed but never experienced the racism and degree of ableism Ayana faces because of her intersecting identity markers, being a black woman with a disability. Though I share Ayana's experience of immigrating to Canada, I suspect that my race, education, language proficiency, income, and able-bodied appearance would protect me from being seen as an unfit mother by social services.

A MOMENT IN TIME IN JULY 2022

5 Hours Chat returned



Ayana

Cis woman
Age 41
Sudanese
Black

**Illustration courtesy of Ayana. Ayana did not wish to be anonymized, but we were required to under Alberta's Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act.*

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

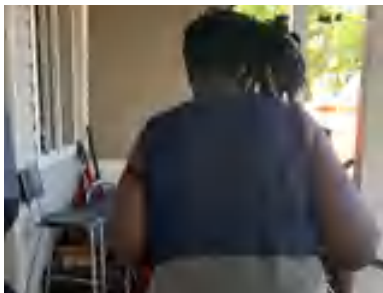
"Don't judge a person for what you see if you don't know what they can do"

Ayana says she "thinks too much." She worries about other people's problems to the point that she has no capacity left to deal with her own. She realizes, "I haven't been able to focus on me. I'm taking on everybody's stress and try to solve it." Often, she feels taken advantage of by people close to her. Whenever friends or family need something, they ask her. Especially, on the first of the month, when her AISH comes in: "I don't buy anything for myself. There's nothing left."

Marked by her experiences of discrimination as a Black woman with a visible disability, Ayana finds it difficult to trust others. "Because of my disability, people think that I am not worth anything... For some cultures, a

woman like me should not have kids." She tries not to let the judgment get to her: "It pisses me off! Don't judge a person for what you see when you don't know what they can do."

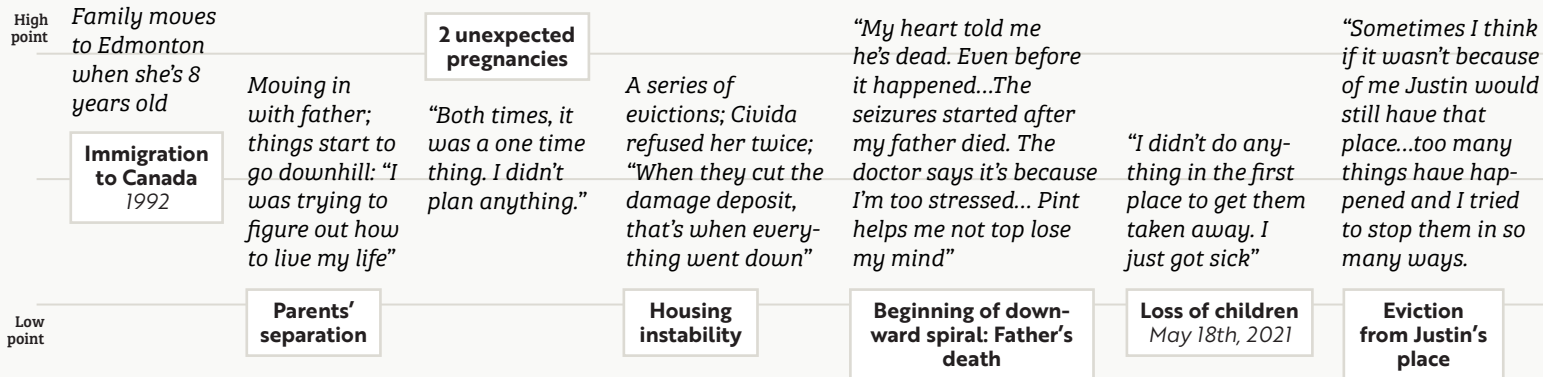
In May 2021, CPS removed Ayana's kids from their home. At that time, they were staying with their grandmother because Ayana was in the hospital, recovering from a seizure. One of her major stressors is a deep sense of injustice & anger towards whomever called CPS. Her file lists "drug addiction" as one of the reasons she is deemed unfit as a mother. Ayana doesn't think of herself as an addict and questions why some drugs are considered medication while others aren't. When her father died, she "was



punching walls.” Meth was the only thing that helped her calm down: “All stress, all emotions are going down.” One of the requirements to get her children back is to go to rehab. Ayana can’t picture herself in a treatment facility. To her, discrimination is the reason for her children’s removal, not a lack of competence as a mother: “I don’t look like a person who goes to rehab... I didn’t do anything to get my kids taken away in the first place. I just got sick.”

Two years ago, Ayana’s father died. He was her source of support and inspiration. She aims to continue his work as a writer: “If we don’t carry on the legacy of our loved ones, then what are we here for?” It was her father who first told her: “you have a good way of expressing your feelings. You should put it in a book.” Ayana has a hard time sharing her feelings with people directly. “I cannot express my feelings in front of people. When I write, my emotions come out.” I ask her what it means to be a writer: “it means you let people know who you are and what you think about life.”

The Past



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: housed (unstable)
Type: rental apartment
With whom: mother & niece
How found: moved in with mother
Rent: \$0 mother pays \$1325 but only receives about \$1240 through IA; sister tops up income

Sense of at-homeness

low high

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

Uses meth to regulate her emotions; to process grief and loss.

Homing practices

Putting up pictures of children

Decision-making drivers

Helping others

Avoiding judgement

Top Stressors

Mental & Physical Health "I basically get tired of living. I'm trying to solve my issues of kids, trying to solve my mother's issues, trying to solve Justin's issue, basically trying to solve everybody else's issues."

Grief/Loss After father died, "I was punching walls... I couldn't say goodbye to him." About kids being taken, "I didn't do anything in the first place to get them taken away. I just got sick..."

Money "Money is always an issue for everybody... AISH is not enough." Budgeting is a challenge and feel people around her only want her money.

Top Values

Respect & non-judgment "They judge you for what they can see, but they don't know what you can do."

little in life lots in life

Authenticity "Be yourself in every possible way... [to be a writer], it means you let people know who you are and what you think about life. I cannot express myself in front of people. When I write, my emotions come out."

little in life lots in life

Family legacy "If we don't carry on the legacy of our loved ones, then what are we here for?"

little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	Justin Uncle Father (deceased)		Non-judgement belief "Don't judge a person for what you see if you don't know what their life is"
	Meth = illegal drug CPS Rental credit check Alberta works cut damage deposit		High discrimination Self-doubt Ableism "Maybe if i wasn't living, then everybody else would be happy in their own way."
Barriers	Mother Sister Cousin Previous landlords Social workers		
Policies & Resources		People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

"I'm this big mama bear"

Independent, resilient, trapped, generous.

Roles: Mother, grandmother

Lived experience

Domestic violence, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, jail, homelessness, family breakdown, addiction, mental health, bullying

Barbara

Motivation to share their story

Testimony

Catharsis

Barbara wants to share her story about domestic violence to help other women.

Wants to be heard about

Family wholeness

Domestic violence

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Spacious

Away from downtown

Clean

With family

No needles

"I wanna have my own place where my grandkids and daughter can come visit."

Distance from current

Far



Close

Opportunity Areas

Women's Advocate

Barbara mistrusts services and is on the move. What if there was a network of women survivors in neighbourhoods, akin to AA, where she could drop-in to meetings & exchange stories?

Mobile Safe Home

What if there were designated safe camp spots across the city where people like Barbara could sleep anonymously and move between spots to feel safe?

Multi-gen Safe House

What if Barbara, her daughter, and grandkids were matched to a house & supports where they could go through a healing process, together, and co-create rules for their treatment?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We met Barbara in front of the Christian Care Centre at Jasper Place. As we were waiting for someone else who didn't show, she asked us what we were doing. When we said we collect stories, she readily offered to share hers.

Points of (un)familiarity

The amount of violence Barbara has experienced during childhood and her later life are far beyond what I have experienced. Likewise, I have never struggled with drug addiction or experienced homelessness. What feels familiar, however, is her desire to get better for the sake of her loved ones. I also understand and share her passion of working with other women and grounding that work in lived experiences.



Nina

Cis woman

White

European

And Rochelle

A MOMENT IN TIME IN
3 Hours Chat
returned
June 2022

Barbara

Cis woman
Age 42
Cree
Chipewyan

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I ain't got no time to have disabilities; I have grandkids. I can't be falling apart"

As we are waiting for someone who doesn't show in front of the Christian Care Centre, a tall, lean woman approaches us. Her skin is sun-tanned, her eyes alert. "I got a story to tell," she announces. We offer to take her to a coffee shop, but Barbara prefers to be outside. She takes us to her tent in the park behind the breakfast place. That's where she resides for the day. She likes to keep moving.

Barbara has been roaming through Edmonton for the past 2.5 years. She says it's been tough "having to learn things all over again. My parents didn't teach me how to live on the streets, you know? I'm doing it all on my own." She avoids shelters because she doesn't feel safe there: "I don't trust anyone."

Sleeping outside, she feels in control: "I can go anywhere I wanna walk; I talk to whoever I wanna talk to."

As she is wandering, Barbara seeks spiritual connection: "I wasn't brought up to go to church. My family didn't talk about God, or a higher power, or smudging." Growing up, home was a violent place. "My parents weren't like hugs. My mom used to beat us. There was a lot of abuse." Her younger brother died when their father lost his temper a few years ago. Barbara used to run away a lot.

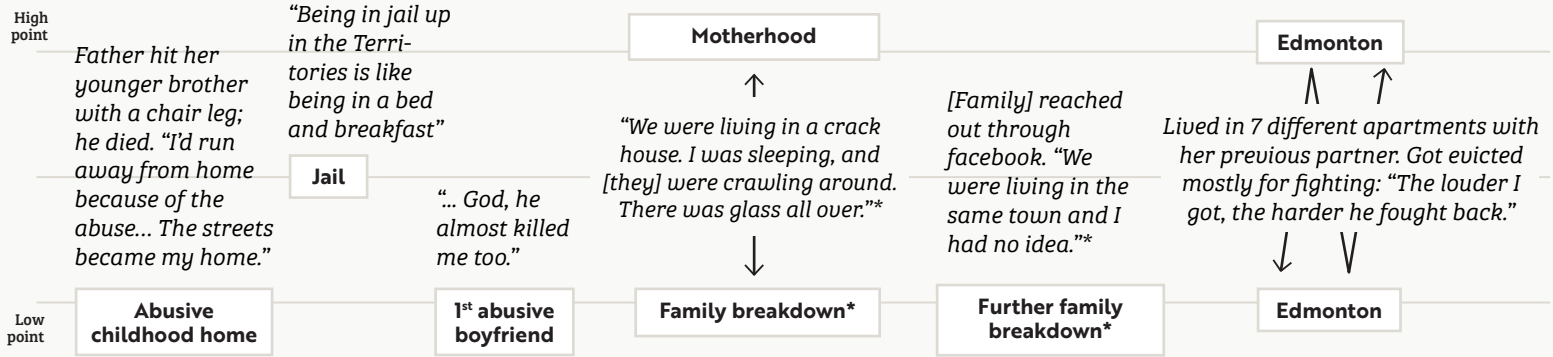
These days, she feels forgiving towards her mother: "Sometimes, I can get so angry. Why didn't you raise us better? Even though my mom was mean,

I think a lot of that anger was coming from what was happening to her. So I forgive her for that.”

Barbara has a psychiatrist who diagnosed her with a variety of mental illnesses. “Mentally, they say I got PTSD. I’m on like seven different medications. A lot of things I didn’t realize I have. What is PTSD?” The diagnosis doesn’t make much sense to her. Rather, what motivates Barbara is reuniting with her grandchildren. “They say I should’ve been on AISH when the doctor diagnosed me with all that stuff. I ain’t got no time to have disabilities. I have grandkids!”

Barbara has a clear vision of what she wants for herself. “I wanna have my own place where my grandkids and daughter can come visit.” She also has a vision for how she can transform her lived experience into a sense of purpose: “I wanna go back to school...to learn more about how my past experiences can help other women overcome and break that cycle of abuse. If I can do it, anybody can.” She envisions opening a women’s recovery centre in the old building next to the Aladdin bar. “I don’t wanna be on welfare. I don’t wanna be on AISH. I wanna feel like I’m contributing and giving back.”

The Past



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *Unhoused*
Type: *Tent (summer), lobbies (winter)*
With whom: *alone*
How found:
Rent: *\$0*

Sense of at-homeness



Sense of stability



Desire for stability



Agency over living situation



"I can go anywhere I wanna walk, talk to whoever I wanna talk to"

Decision-making drivers

Desire for independence

Safety Control

"Taking control back of my life and who I am, that's a big thing for me."

Top Stressors

Addiction "I used alcohol and drugs so I didn't have to feel anything... addictions took a lot of time away from being a mom."

Safety "I don't trust anyone... Usually, when I sleep outside, I sleep in front of a church. That's where I feel safe."

Grief & Loss "Right now, being away from [her] is the fucking hardest thing. I hate it so much." About friends: "A lot of my friends are dead. Sometimes, I think God forgot about me."

Top Values

Health & Wellbeing "I don't want to die. I always pray for more time so I can be healthy enough to see my great-grandkids."

little in life lots in life

Harmony & Balance "I just wanna be by myself. I wanna have my own place where my grandkids and daughter can come visit."

little in life lots in life

Tradition "I wasn't brought up to go to church. Nobody talked about God, about a higher power, or smudge. Everything I learnt about that was through going to shelters."

little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	\$10,000 settlement money		
	Mother Grandkids Daughter Psychiatrist Social worker Bobbie		
Barriers	Welfare System Bissell Centre		
	Wellspring Recovery Program (which requires being away from daughter) Women's shelters (no room)		
Policies & Resources		People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs
		Men in her past	Name calling on the streets: "I'm not a whore, that's not my name" High discrimination experienced

How they see themselves

"I don't want to search my job, I want to create my job. There's a difference between creating and searching."

Roles: Business owner, human being, not a stranger, neighbour

Lived experience

Immigration, racism

Barento

Motivation to share their story

Human connection

"In life of human being, communication and relationship is a must. Currently have 0.1%. That 0.1 is you."

Wants to be heard about

Social life in Canada

Training & credentials

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Basement for the kids to play

Build his own

"My number one aim is to have my own house. Then I'll feel at home. Then I'll have my Canada."

Distance from current

Far



Close

Opportunity Areas

City rotations

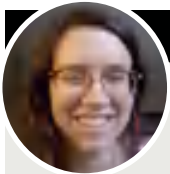
What if newcomers to Edmonton could join a cohort, and spend a quarter rotating through city departments, learning about how they function, the different roles & jobs, and build networks in their fields of interest (e.g. sanitation, gardening, events, business?)

Biz partner matching

What if there could be a relationship matching platform where newcomers starting small businesses were matched with community members, and could access start-up funding.

Bridge permits

Barento laments the lack of social life in Canada. What if every time the city issued a permit for a festival or public event, organizers were required to host an open networking event to bridge newcomers & old timers?



Listener's Perspective

Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Dutch descendant

How we met

I met Barento just as he was about to pull away in his dark teal minivan from the foodbank run by Islamic Family and Social Services Association. He parked the car and came over. "In Canada, the social life is zero," he told me. At the end of our conversation he double checked, "Are you ok? Did I offend you?"

Points of (un)familiarity

Barento is an ideas person; he loves to engage, discuss, share his perspective and ask for yours. I resonate! And we're both driven in life, although his business mindset is much stronger than mine. A big difference between us is that I'm living in an apartment by choice, whereas he lives in one by necessity. I also don't know what it feels like to uproot one's whole family and resettle in a new culture.



Barento

Cis man
Age 46
African

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

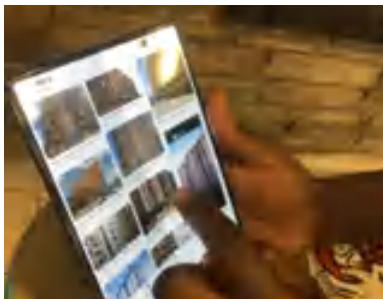
"I don't want to be a candle. You give light to the one sitting in the house, while you are melting yourself."

"Wow," Barento says in a quiet voice, with his head shaking from side to side. "Wow. I do not think I can adapt to this Canada." He's wearing dark shades, a sparkly gold watch, and insisted on paying for my Timmy's iced capp as we settled down to talk.

It's been 9 months since he arrived in Canada with his wife and three young children, but he still can't wrap his mind around the way that Canadians treat each other as strangers and eye each other with fear. Several residents in their northeast 2 bedroom apartment have lived there for 20 years and still don't know the names of their neighbours. Adjusting to Canada is like stepping into a cold shower, he tells me. But he has made his choice

and has no other options. In Canada there is peace and the opportunity for a passport of value. The only way forward is to accept it. "I did not come to Canada to just eat and sleep. But to change. From down to up, from lower to higher at least. I came to Canada because I know from which situation I came from. I prefer to work hard work, to make valuable money and pay tax to the government. Not only waiting for support from the government."

Barento has a clear vision for his future and his financial goals, having invested in properties, land, several projects, and cryptocurrencies in the past. "I would prefer to hit crisis than to let my money sit," he tells me. "If you put money in a bank, you are a goal keeper. No one

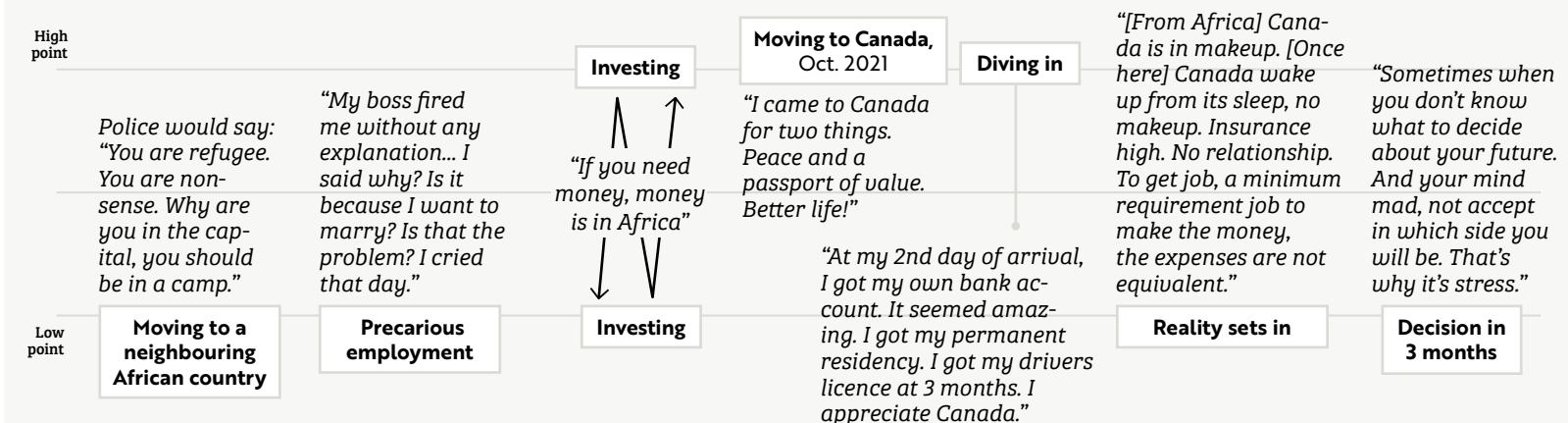


is playing the match. You are standing still.”

Despite this strong business sense, the odds feel stacked against him. He sees Canadians who were born here struggling to buy homes. His work experience isn’t accepted. And everything is so expensive. “In Canada it’s too tight. People work 24/7. They are working for their landlord. You’re running on a running machine. It doesn’t make sense...To get a job, a minimum requirement job to make the money, the expenses are not equivalent to your income.”

On top of all this, a deadline is looming. In three months, the federal government will stop sending refugee support money. Barento is uncertain about where he will go, worried about the possibility of homelessness, and wary of the conditions of Cvida houses. He’s trying to decide – does he go to school for ESL and barely scrape by, or try to find viable work? It’s hard to know what to do. A few weeks later, he has made up his mind: he’ll go to Norquest.

The Past



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *housed*
Type: *2 bedroom apartment*
With whom: *wife and 3 kids (aged 2, 4, 7)*
How found: *support worker*
Rent: *\$925/month*
Percentage of Income

Sense of at-homeness

low ☐ high

Sense of stability

low ☐ high

Desire for stability

low ☐ high

Agency over living situation

low ☐ high

Unable to buy a home, which is what he really wants.

Homing practices

Building/owning your own home

Decision-making drivers

Family Peace

Top Stressors

Home “At the end of the 3 months [when government support ends] what will happen? When you’re homeless, no one will respect you.”

Education & Learning “Sometimes when you don’t know what to decide about your future. And your mind is mad, not accepting what side you will be on, that’s the stress.”

People around you “...in Canada, there is fear... They depress. In Canada, the social life is zero. The more you have people to talk to, to say your mind, you leave your problems behind.”

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers +			Once he commits, it’s fully Positive outlook	
	Only minimum wage jobs available	Expensive land & homes	Wife’s expectations of how much money he’ll give her	Perception that’s also hard for canadian
Barriers -	High living cost, no saving or investing	Foreign work experience rejected	Family back home expecting him having lots of money	
	No money, no business opportunities			
Policies and Resources		People & Relationships		Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

"I just see myself as strong, with a strong moral code."

Roles: Parent, daughter, survivalist, roofer, entrepreneur

Lived experience

Addiction, criminal justice, single parenthood, survivor

Bonnie

Motivation to share their story

Sociality

"I just want to meet everyone in the world, just to say hello!"

Wants to be heard about

Band recognition

Housing on reserves

A MOMENT IN TIME IN
4 Hours Chat
not returned
June 2022

Bonnie

Cis woman
Cree
Chipewyan
Ukrainian

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Cabin

Clean

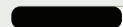
News always on

Everyone is loved

Distance from current

"Hospitality is a big thing for me"

Far



Close

Opportunity Areas

Anchor Builders

Bonnie is all about hospitality and bridging cultures. What if there was a way for people with a deep interest in community building to gain a designation, and join a pool, where they are invited as anchor tenants of new buildings and given a budget to spark natural support?

Visitor Housing

When Bonnie left the NWT for Edmonton, she used her social network to find a slum landlord who could rent to them. What if there was a guest house or network of houses for people coming from the North, where they could stay connected to culture, and find supports in the city?

Land Corps

Bonnie is a firefighter, a roofer, and has knowledge of living off the land. What if there was a program like the Peace Corp but for land, where in exchange for protecting the land, she was given housing and shared her know-how with others?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We met Bonnie's cousin at a park on a windy Sunday afternoon, and she brokered the connection. We knew little about Bonnie before meeting for a leisurely lunch -- only that she had recently returned to Edmonton and faced housing instability.

Points of (un)familiarity

As Bonnie described her healing journey as one of bringing secrets from her childhood out into the open, I felt deep kinship. I am also a survivor of childhood sexual assault. While we come from different cultural backgrounds, with distinct histories of addiction, Bonnie's fight to reclaim her confidence and put herself out there feels strikingly familiar.



Sarah

Cis woman

White

Jewish

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"No matter your race, your ancestors are going to have a tradition for you. Hopefully, you can fulfil it, or find a new faith, but find something to live for every single day."

Two duffle bags and winter boots. That's all Bonnie and her son had on them when they rolled back into Edmonton after a protracted fight to save the family home in Fort Smith. There's a Thelma and Louise quality to their past months. Only they aren't running away so much as running towards independence, if they can just keep family away from punitive systems, and cobble together enough cash to placate their slum landlord. So far, so good, even if money is tight. Bonnie is sanguine. "I think what's happening now is gonna help him. Like with being late on rent and me having to find cash jobs for food. Because normally, I'm the main provider."

Before the pandemic upended the construction industry, before Bonnie's mom was uprooted from her home, and before she decided to come clean about her 14-year under-the-table drug addiction, they had a pretty stable run. As a roofer with a business management diploma, Bonnie earned ~80K/year. But, living a double life gnawed at her. "It was so horrible. I didn't like the person I was being, the lying and deceiving... So I was like, I'm moving away and getting healthy."

Returning to the bush and traditional ways, fortified her. So did running. When we meet for lunch, Bonnie looks very much like a sprinter, with stretchy

shorts and a patterned head-band. For Bonnie, change is all about mind over matter. After one session with a therapist, she felt she had the tools to confront the secrets sickening her. Healing comes first. Money will sort itself out -- it always has. Eventually, Bonnie imagines using her business know-how to apply for grants to grow her cleaning company. "I used to have a fear of accomplishment because of the stuff that happened when I was a kid. I had to work through all that pain."

Bonnie co-exists between worlds. There's the stressy urban life of Edmonton, with all of its stuff and temptations. And there is the simple life 34 km out of Fort Smith where she has an off-grid cabin given to her mom by their band. Once her son is set-up, she will return to the peace and quiet. And even though they are currently living around meth addicts, she's managed to create a little oasis with a "good aurora." The slum landlord's been nice and lent her a black, Al-capone sectional along with a coffee table and toaster oven. A chance encounter with a woman in front of the Native Society led to two new beds. "I also called the Food Bank. I don't have any shame; it's there for when you need it." If you are struggling, Bonnie thinks Edmonton is a good city, provided you talk to the right people. "Come for a walk with me down the avenue!"

The Past

High point

From my mom, I learned respect of the land and food.

Growing up inter-culturally

My mom's family (Cree/Chipewyan) didn't care about money, whereas my dad's (Ukrainian) family was big on savings. I understood both.

Low point

I was molested when I was a kid ... When my kids were born, that's when it started really negatively affecting me...

Survivor of sexual abuse

Motherhood & adventure

Both my kids are Metis. I've been a single mother since my daughter was 6-months. When she was 8 and my son was 4, we travelled across Canada from Fort Smith to Tignish, PEI. The kids had a crazy experience.

Working & adventure

I was a certified firefighter... I was a roofer and they pushed me to get my biz management diploma... And then COVID screwed everything up.

Coming clean

I started my sobriety journey 3 yrs ago. You want to be normal, not so foggy brained...I couldn't keep up the double life.

Fighting a great wrong

We get through COVID isolation, and I find my brother and mom have no power, no heat... I stayed for 1.5 yrs... until we lost the house. My mom is still in the hole 130K.

Unplanned move

[My son] moved to High Level and was in [a situation]... [After] 3 days, I drove him here to get [support]. We had 2K on us.**

*Bonnie's quotes were edited because of provincial legislation

The Present

Living Situation

Currently: Housed

Type: Apartment (slum landlord)

With whom: Son

How found: Through friend of son

Rent:

Sense of at-homeness

high

Sense of stability

high

Desire for stability

high

Agency over living situation

high

It feels so nice in our apt. even though it's a bad place. Me and [my son] didn't have a home for so long that it feels good, and it has a good aura.

Homing practices

Hospitality

Decision-making drivers

Setting son up for success

Family

Personal integrity

Top Stressors

Addiction

I don't know if it's stress, really? ... Sometimes, you forget about yourself, I need to remind myself where I am. Don't go back on that track. As an addict, you do think about it once in a while.

Criminal Justice System

This is the shitty thing, getting ready, getting [family] set-up to live independently.

Money

I don't have money for rent right now, but it's strange, it's not really stressing me out. I just don't think about the basic daily needs... But I do sometimes think about the long-term...

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	Aboriginal small business grants	Daughter	Cousin Kelly	Strong connection to traditional ways
		Native Friendship Centre		
Barriers	Band policies on membership and land ownership	Friend/CBC reporter	Son's counsellor	
	Access to residential school settlements (for mom) dependent on telling strangers negative memories			
	Policies & Resources	People & Relationships		Attitudes & Beliefs

Top Values

Health & wellbeing

That is about my health and wellbeing, and my family's health and wellbeing. I'd say wellbeing is really my family.

little in life

lots in life

Pride & respect

That's about cleanliness and strength of mind: can you think clearly? Are you thinking about things before you do it?

little in life

lots in life

Harmony & balance

Being calm, collected, being able to step back. I used to be a fighter. I would protect people. I would kick their ass if I needed to. And I had to find harmony.

little in life

lots in life

How they see themselves

"I feel like a piece of shit for falling back into drugs and not being there for my kids."

Roles: Dad, brother, hustler, oil rigger, Crazy Indian

Lived experience

Family breakdown, criminal justice, child protection, addiction

Bucky

Motivation to share their story

Catharsis

Sharing his story is a "reminder of what matters" and going to treatment.

Wants to be heard about

Family treatment

Cultural revitalization

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Private Small town Away from drugs
Near kids' school

Distance from current

Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Healing Subsidy

What if folks in addictions treatment, regardless of whether they qualify for benefits, could have their rent paid for the duration of their stay? For Bucky, whose income comes from hustling, going to treatment risks further loss and instability. How might we remove barriers to treatment?

Live-work supports

Bucky has a big vision: to start a meat drying business. Ideally, he'd do it at home, and not have to rely on oil rigging jobs far away. What if there was a network of work-live spaces for new entrepreneurs, especially those transitioning out of the resource extraction industry or in recovery?

Family Circles

What if single parents like Bucky were invited to join a small group of other parents to set goals, save towards those goals, and receive matching funds for hitting milestones?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

When I first met Bucky on the street, near Jasper Place, he jokingly asks if I will be his baby's mamma. Beneath the jest is such affection & earnestness. Bucky is looking for a way to make his family whole again. He seems to sense that I might be able to help somehow.

Points of (un)familiarity

Bucky has big visions, and gets bogged down in patterns he describes as "unhealthy." So do I. Our unhealthy patterns are different. I do not have experience with family breakdown or drug addiction. I don't face racism. But I know what it's like to be saddled with external expectations, and I could relate to Bucky's need to define himself on his own terms.



Sarah

Cis woman

White

Jewish



Bucky

Cis man
Age 40
Indigenous
Cree

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"Home is where my baby is. I need a foundation to do good bonding with my daughter again."

I've known Bucky for two hours when he asks if I can write a letter to get him into treatment. He can't name a positive person in his life. Used to ups and downs, the past few months have felt especially upside-down. He lost custody of his two-year old girl. He hastily left his job on the oil patch. His relationship is strained. He's using and selling to make ends meet. "I feel like a piece of shit right now."

At his self-described lowest point, Bucky has some clarity on what he needs: structure. "My plan is to go to treatment. Hopefully, a place for families so I can take care of me and my daughter." Bucky repeatedly circles back to the gap between where he is now and

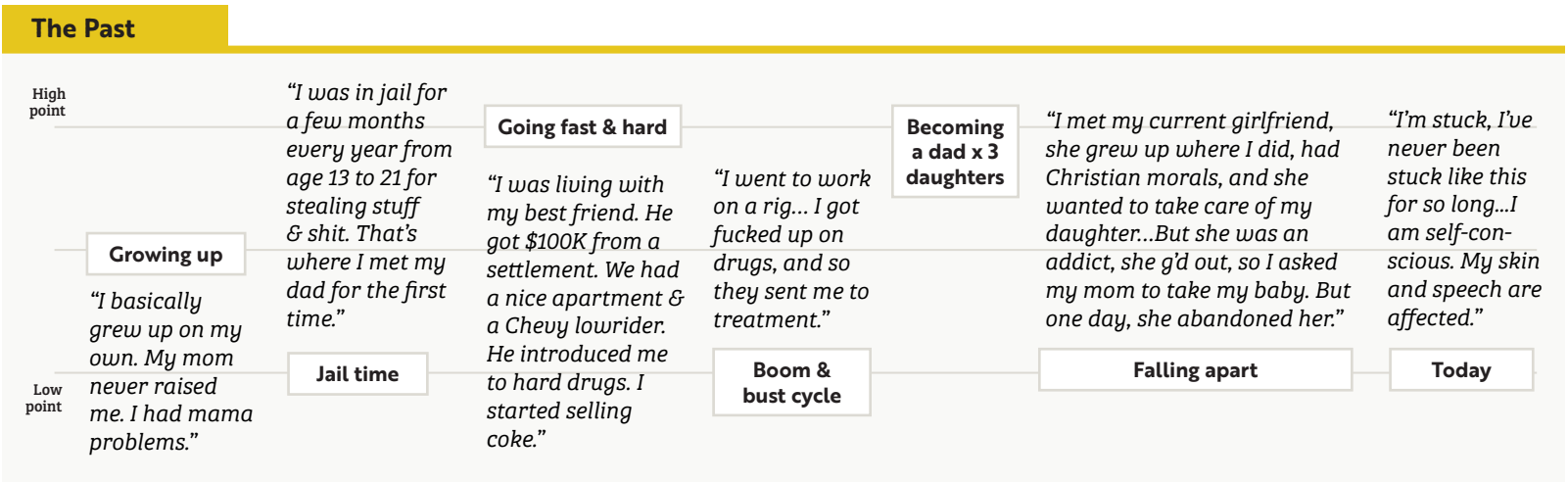
where he hopes to be: to this sense he's let his 3 daughters down; he's repeating his family history; and turning into a stereotype. Not being a welfare bum is a source of pride. Bucky would rather feed off of other's misery than be perceived as useless. He's never slept rough; that's what Tinder is for! Since he was a kid, growing up with his grandmother, he's hustled. "I learned to play dirty young." What he didn't learn was much about his culture. "I grew up White all my life."

For Bucky, reconnecting with spirituality feels essential to healing. "I wish I had culture and traditions. My stability is up in the air right now. I am losing my faith. Relationships, I really know nothing about them."



Bucky's house is a snug basement suite on a leafy street, removed from the hustle & bustle. That's intentional. He found the place in a newspaper, and appreciates his landlord, who didn't do a credit check and has been pretty reasonable, considering he's fallen behind on the \$1200/month rent & the upstairs neighbours are suspicious of him. There's also a \$900 outstanding daycare bill and a \$1200 fine to get his driver's license back. Until he's in better shape, he wants to lay low. He's let a few legit opportunities pass by, and he doesn't want to burn more bridges. The Crazy Indians Brotherhood was supposed to offer the mentorship he craves, but lately, it's been one more thing bringing him down.

Although the immediate term feels awfully messy -- he's not sure what will happen to his housing while in treatment -- Bucky can imagine a different future. "I got a big vision. There was some land that my grandfather passed to me. We will have buffaloes, a butchery, a dry meat business. I can even see what the logo looks like!"



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *housed*
Type: *basement*
With whom: *partner*
How found: *newspaper*
Rent: *\$1200/month*

Percentage of Income

More than half

Sense of at-homeness
low high

Sense of stability
low high

Desire for stability
low high

Agency over living situation
low high

Homing practices

Kids toys Comfy furniture Music

Decision-making drivers

Living with daughter
Independence

Top Stressors

Relationships "This relationship is putting me right back. I could have been a lot farther ahead. I am not blaming her, but the relationship."

Money "I'm not working at the moment. I'm selling, but I'm barely making rent... Last week I was stupid at the casino. Growing up, there were welfare bums. I don't want that."

Addiction "I feel like a piece of shit for falling back into drugs and not being there for my kids."

Top Values

Health & Wellbeing
"I'm at my lowest right right now. I'm skinny, not eating or sleeping properly. I need balance. I'm even slurring my words..."
little in life lots in life

Pride & Respect "I won't go on welfare. I will do my own thing and take care."
little in life lots in life

Spirituality & Culture "I wish I had culture and traditions. I am a spiritual person, just not now... You go on the bus and you hear all these languages, but not my own."
little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

	Policies and Resources	People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs
Enablers (+)	Access to family treatment	Private landlord has been flexible	Belief in change
Barriers (-)	Lack of housing after treatment Gatekeeping to get into treatment	Current relationship dragging him down Crazy Indians Brotherhood isn't helping	Does not want to succumb to negative narratives about "natives"

How they see themselves

Activist, poor, caring, trustworthy, helpful, funny, older - not old!

Roles: Activist, friend, kookum, camp cook, sister

Lived experience

Residential school survivor, death/grief, addiction recovery, poverty, racism, ageism

Cynthia

Motivation to share their story

Advocacy

"I would like to be able to speak out"

Wants to be heard about

Older people's housing

Reparations/Settlements

Murdered & Missing Indigenous Women



Cynthia

Cis woman
Age 61
Indigenous
Cree

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Safe Private Relaxing accessible
Pets Sunlight Garden Fresh flower aroma

Distance from current

Far Close

"I would like land in Hobbema if it was safe."

Opportunity Areas

Survivor status

What if residential school survivors had something more akin to 'diplomatic status' with access to a dedicated stream of housing and resources, especially within cities like Edmonton which have large urban Indigenous populations?

Private--public

Cynthia lives in a building with an absent landlord, and lots of residents with severe addictions. What if there was a city-run program that matched harm reduction & addictions support roles to these buildings, and which helped to catalyse more localised healing opportunities?

Housing doulas

Cynthia defines herself as an advocate, and wants to be of service to others. What if Cynthia could be trained as a senior's housing doula, learn about the system, and help other seniors meet each other and pool resources to find better housing? All in exchange for a rent subsidy.

Listener's Perspective

How we met

Cynthia was waiting for a cab in front of the Beverly No Frills when I stopped to offer a cupcake and chat about housing. She had multiple sets of wheels in front of her: a walker and a shopping cart filled to the brim with cat litter, fruit, veg, and meat she was delivering to a friend with less mobility than her.

Points of (un)familiarity

Cynthia has endured repeated systemic injustices, and survived more than any human should have to. I have no experience as an Indigenous woman. Still, I relate to Cynthia turning rage into activism. She says, "Nobody can control me." Ditto.



Sarah

Cis woman

White

Jewish

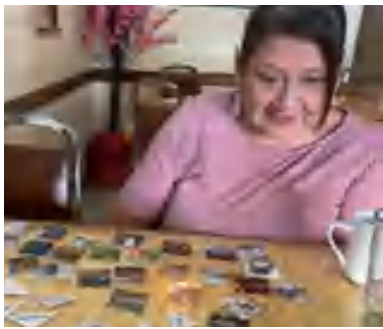
"I think the government thinks I can survive on my own, independently. I can do a lot, if I was in a secure environment."

Cynthia is pretty in pink. Her gold painted nails, dangly earrings, and rose lipstick mask the exhaustion. Hyper-vigilance is taking a toll. To sleep, she secures her door with a chair. "I've been missing appointments because I am so, so tired." As the only woman in a rooming house full of residents facing active meth addictions, unpredictability hangs as heavy as the smoke in the air. Sirens drowned out a recent picnic of Chinese food with friends, but when she calls for support, there's radio silence. "A man was knocking on my window. I called the police. They say, call 211, then 24-7. Nobody comes." So even though Cynthia's the kind of kookum with candy in her purse, she's not in a place to invite her 14 grandkids over, or to

have her creature comforts -- a piano and a cat named Cher -- close-by. The isolation that came from living on her own in a trailer outside Lacombe over the pandemic was one thing. The isolation that comes from not being able to control your environment, especially when it consumes 85% of your income and isn't even accessible, is quite another. "It feels so edgy."

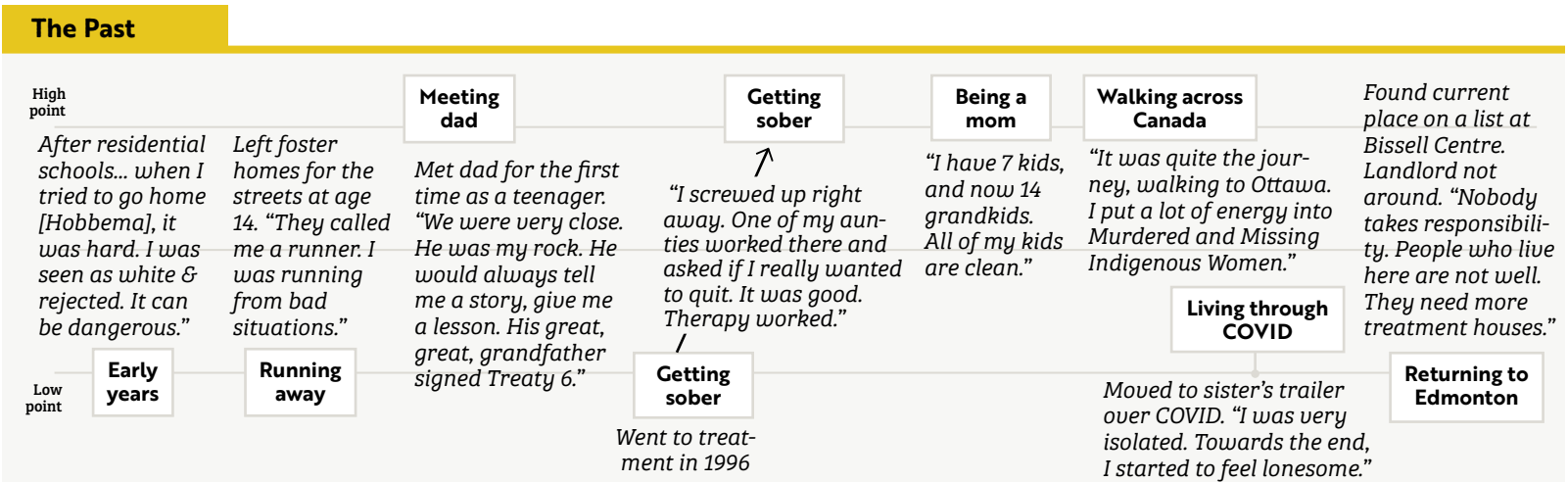
It's not that Cynthia isn't well acquainted with the edge. She grew up on Edmonton's inner-city streets. It's that she wonders why older adults should have to bear the precariousness. "We are older people. We should be kept safe. It's not right. It's not right." So much isn't right about what Cynthia has faced: residential school; a foster

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home that denied her Cree culture; a child welfare system that wrongly said her mother was dead; a sister murdered by serial killer Robert Pickton; a settlement process that has excluded her claim; a three-year wait for a new hip, impairing her mobility.

The events don't define Cynthia so much as fuel her advocacy. A 1996 stay at Poundmaker's Lodge helped her get sober and channel her anger. "I see myself as a strong activist. We walked across Canada for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in 2008, 2010, and 2011." Relationships with her sister, kids, and an Elder keep her grounded. "With all the work, I was starting to lose myself and my grandkids." She wishes she could reconnect with her lands. "I would like to be in Hobbema, if it was safe. I'd love to be picking sweetgrass and sage, so much to keep you busy, and teach the little ones." But, with money still a challenge, Cynthia isn't in a position to retire. "All I want is my new hip so I can go back to the camps. I was a cook. The money is good, and I enjoyed learning the new dishes."



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: housed
Type: rooming house
With whom: living on own
How found: housing list from Bissell
Rent: \$700/month
Percentage of income

Sense of at-homeness

low high

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

Homing practices

Gardening

Caring for cats

Hosting grandkids

Playing piano

Fresh flowers

Decision-making drivers

Having control over her environment

Feeling secure

Top Stressors

Getting around

"I need a new hip. I've been waiting for 3 years... I told the nurse that I'm Native and I don't think I'm getting good care..."

Loneliness, isolation, lack of privacy

"I don't really have control over loneliness and isolation; I'm always around the right people. I hope when I get better housing, my environment will improve."

Money

"They lost my 60s scoop application. I left residential school for foster care in 1968, and I'm not eligible for payments. I am going to keep trying... I also want to apply for AISH..."

Top Values

Service & contribution

"I would like to be able to speak out about women, safety, and seniors. We are a stuck in a place where we aren't considered seniors. Is it 55+ or 60+?"

little in life lots in life

Spirituality & nature

"I want to keep my faith. I wish there was more Indigenous community and education with Elders."

little in life lots in life

Health & Wellbeing

"I define that as close to spirituality; it's about community." Current housing is an obstacle.

little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	Regular contact with Elder, sister, daughter		High sense of control; externalizing versus internalizing pain
	Nurse who is trying to help		
Barriers	Insufficient benefits for cost of living	Different eligibility criteria for senior supports	Racism in police, health care, welfare systems
	Arbitrary residential school settlement process	Unresponsive landlord & no on-site supports for addiction	
	Lateral violence within community groups		High discrimination experience
Policies & Resources		People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

Hard worker,
spiritual, purposeful,
prideful

Roles: Human, father,
millwright, landscaper,
community member,
entrepreneur

Lived experience

Displacement,
unemployment,
poverty, addiction,
family breakdown,
racism, classism

Dafala

Motivation to share their story

Systemic change

Sharing his story to counter
dominant narratives about
homelessness

Wants to be heard about

Eviction, shelter, welfare
& policing systems

Migrant employment

Community healing

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Room for
daughter

Food grown
nearby

Space to run
business

Distance from current

Far Close

"My dream is to return to Africa, to Namibia. You feel the presence of God in Africa. It exists."

Opportunity Areas

Micro Healing Spaces

Addiction and mental health
creates volatility, which
Dafala recognizes the shelter
system too often exacer-
bates. What if groups of
self-organising community
members could access mi-
cro-grants to run small-scale
community healing spaces?

Cross-Cultural Homes

Dafala values deep multicul-
turalism, and laments the
lack of spaces for mutual
understanding. What if the
City brokered people across
cultures and immigration
statuses to each other, and
offered up empty spaces
(storefronts, light industrial, etc.)

Practical Apprenticeship

As a landscaper and mill-
wright, Dafala has loads
of unrecognised practical
skills. What if people like
Dafala helped restore prob-
lem properties, under the
apprenticeship of 'licensed'
builders, and earned points
to move-in to one.

Listener's Perspective

How we met

While at the main library handing out
flyers, Dafala observes our conversa-
tions and comes over to introduce him-
self. He quickly understands our role as
story collectors, and is eager to share
his experiences with the city. While we
learn he will soon be evicted, he's more
concerned with systems change than
fixing his personal situation.

Points of (un)familiarity

I am not a Black man living below
the poverty line, facing racism & har-
assment. I grew up in a middle class
family, far removed from the impos-
sibilities of war and the indignities of
refugee camps. And yet, the clarity of
Dafala's moral grounding, his vision
for community, and his philosophical
outlook profoundly resonate.



Sarah

Cis woman

White

Jewish



Dafala

Cis man
Age 50
Black
Nubian Sudanese

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"It's not because I was lazy. It's the exact opposite. I am not ashamed. This is the reality; the way it is in Canada. If you try to deny or hide it, it will weigh on you. You must be strong."

Born on the mighty Nile to a family of farmers, nearby Moses' storied start, Dafala exudes a soft-spoken sagacity. "I am Nubian. We have a lot of spiritual beliefs. While I'm not religious, when you pray, you feel released. Because the creation of God is perfect, there is nothing to add or take away." Human inventions, on the other hand, can be beautiful, banal, and brutish. When Dafala was a teenager, he left South Sudan to avoid war-time military service, working as a millwright in Libya. When US bombs struck, he escaped to the great pyramids of Egypt, leading groups of tourists and carving traditional art. Unable to return home, Dafala subsisted at a Kenyan refugee camp, using his multilingualism

(Arabic, English, Swahili) to rescue people trapped on the frontlines, until reaching Canada. "It was a harsh life, but a way to accomplish something."

Canada may have a "first world" distinction, but that comes at a price. "Here, you can work as much as you can, but you will still be poor due to the standard of living: they've made it this way...Modern life takes more from you than traditional life."

Since COVID decimated his landscaping business & he lost his driver's license in Brooks, Dafala has bounced between shelters and an unfinished basement in Edmonton. When his family splintered five years ago, the only affordable

place was two buses from the downtown temp agencies. “I first became homeless when I lived in the West. By the time the buses arrived, there were no jobs left. So I opted to sleep in the shelters to be close to the agencies.” The lack of sufficient shower & laundry facilities underscores the individualism he finds rampant in services. “We are all interconnected when we sleep near one another.”

Still, Dafala is unruffled by the instability. “Stability is a total illusion. You have to accept change. Homes come and go.” What you can hold onto is community. Even with eviction looming, he’s found a sense of belonging in a shared house filled mostly with “migrants and Natives” who’ve fallen a few checks behind in the rat race. As he watches roommates struggle with addictions, he sees a deep need for relational spaces. “The healing process for any society has to come by integration.”

Frequent discrimination stands in the way of his healing project. Dafala describes how three days prior, cops showed up to his backyard with guns drawn, handcuffing everyone in plain sight. They got the wrong house, offering only a weak apology. He hopes to lodge a formal complaint, but the frustration won’t deter him from trying to bridge cultures. Tonight, he hopes to make fried chicken and bannock.



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *unhoused, newly evicted*

Type: *in shelters*

With whom: *general public*

How found: *has used before*

Rent: *was contributing \$400 to sleep in unfinished basement with African community*

Sense of at-homeness

low high

at shelter

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

Not in control of eviction, but chooses to sleep close to temp work

Homing practices

“Getting back to self and going deep”

Space for daughter

Decision-making drivers

Proximity to temp agencies

Living with community

Sense of belonging

Top Stressors

Addiction & Mental Health “It’s not a personal stress, right now, but you can’t trust or rely on friends or others using. I am seeing the side effects of addiction and feeling the insecurity and volatility.”

Discrimination “It’s not about people not liking me, it’s about their actions towards me. That’s very stressful to live in that kind of society.”

Work / Housing “Alberta Works says we will teach you how to keep a job, to which I ask: where are the jobs? The jobs go up and down, related to oil/gas. The government should understand that.”

Enablers and Barriers

+ Enablers	Informal community supports		Rejects shame narrative
	Cross-cultural experiences		
- Barriers	Alberta Works frame unemployment as skills issue	Residential tenancy support weighted to landlords	No access to legal support / human rights advocacy
	Credentialing system prioritises academics over practicalities	Credit checks, fines & debt	
	Transit & temp work misaligned	Insufficient shelter facilities & hours	Police brutality
Policies & Resources		People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

"The white man thinks I am dumb. I am not...I've won 4 talent shows!"

Roles: Gang leader, teacher, father, bead worker, hunter, musician

Lived experience
Addiction, death/grief, transience, racism, classism, discrimination

Floyd

Motivation to share their story

Respect


Sharing his story might shift misperceptions

Wants to be heard about

Discrimination

Cree language

Traditional ways



Desired Future State

Ideal Home

A place to cook Camping Intergenerational

Cozy Relaxing See the stars Pets (monkey)

Distance from current

Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Musical Services


Floyd struggles with his memory, but when he's singing, the words flow. "My voice touches people," he says. What if there were services offered in song, where music & song-writing are used as therapeutic tools & memory aids?

Housing Wake

When folks like Floyd get evicted, there is a black mark against their name, even with social service landlords. What if services who evict people have to be part of a 'housing wake' to critically examine their role, rather than letting individuals take all the blame?

Community Fraternities

In college, social and residential life often go together. What if there was a version of fraternities for folks like Floyd for whom a social life is as important as a residential life? How might housing be organized around common interests, not just geography?




Sarah

Cis woman

White

Jewish



And Hayley


Listener's Perspective

How we met

We were looking to gather stories from folks sleeping rough who are, on paper, housed. My colleague Hayley introduced me to Floyd, with whom she has a longstanding relationship. We met Floyd at the Managed Alcohol Program he attends most days.

Points of (un)familiarity

Discrimination from white people is Floyd's number one stressor. This is outside the realm of my direct experience, as is the cycle of eviction and addiction. What is within the realm of my experience is feeling let down by institutions, and a desire to protect self and family.



Floyd

Cis man
Age
Indigenous
Cree

A MOMENT IN TIME IN JULY 2022 5 Hours Chat returned

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"We used to go hunting all the time. I love nature. Being on the lands makes me feel less angry."

"There's a long black train comin' down the line / Feedin' off the souls that are lost and cry'n' / Rails of sin, only evil remains,"¹ Floyd croons to us in a rich voice over a carefully portioned cup of homemade wine. It's 9am. The long black train hasn't caught up to us yet, but the usual milk run has begun. Boyle's Managed Alcohol Program is the first stop. Next up: heading to the Hub for his daily twenty bucks, carefully portioned from the Sixties Scoop settlement he received. Another \$934 leaves his account each month to pay for an apartment far from downtown ("The Lodge") that he only sometimes finds. Last night, he slept in the bushes near the courthouse. Home is a place "to live, eat, be safe, have peace" — but there's a guy who sleeps on the couch, and

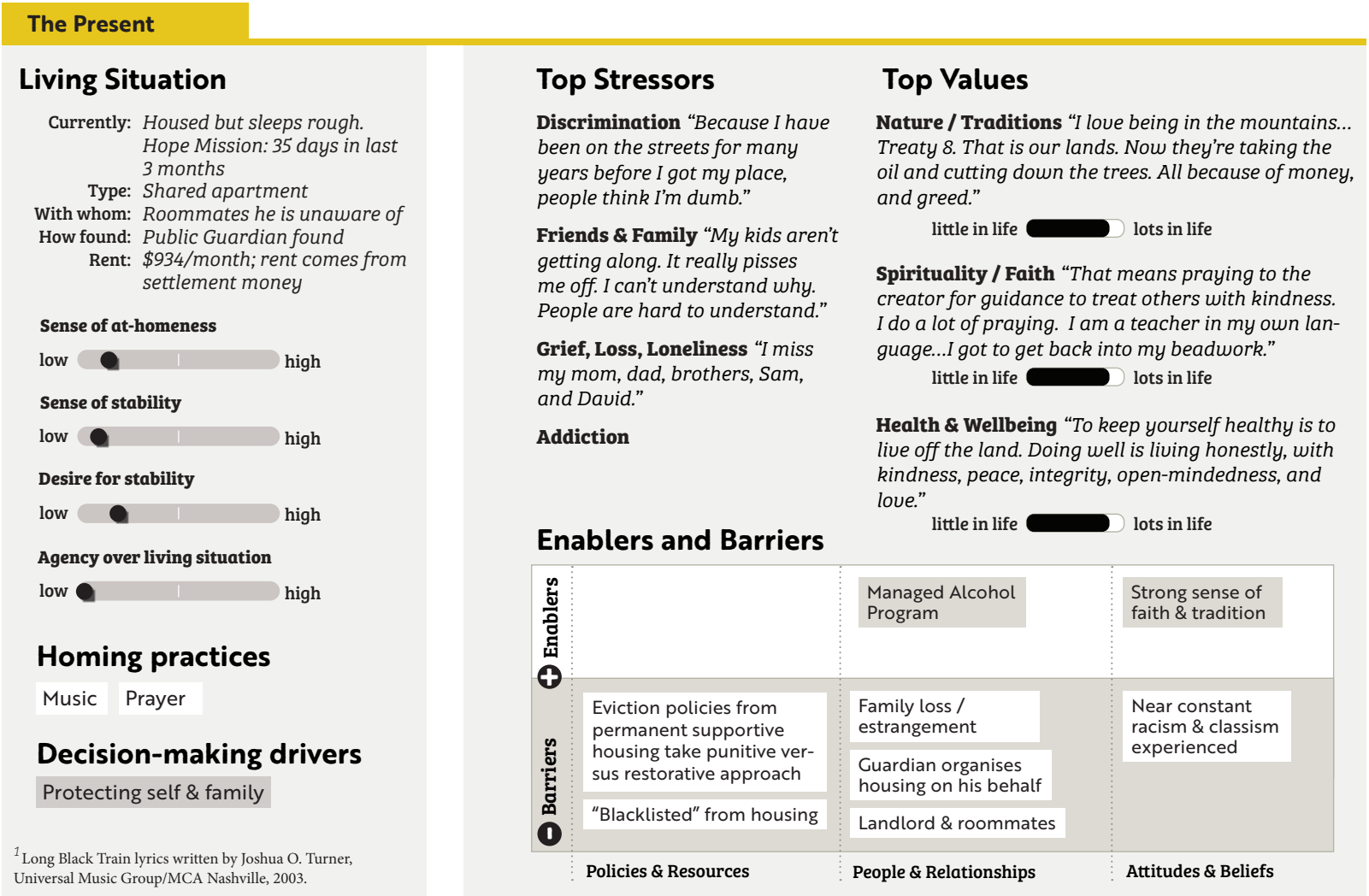
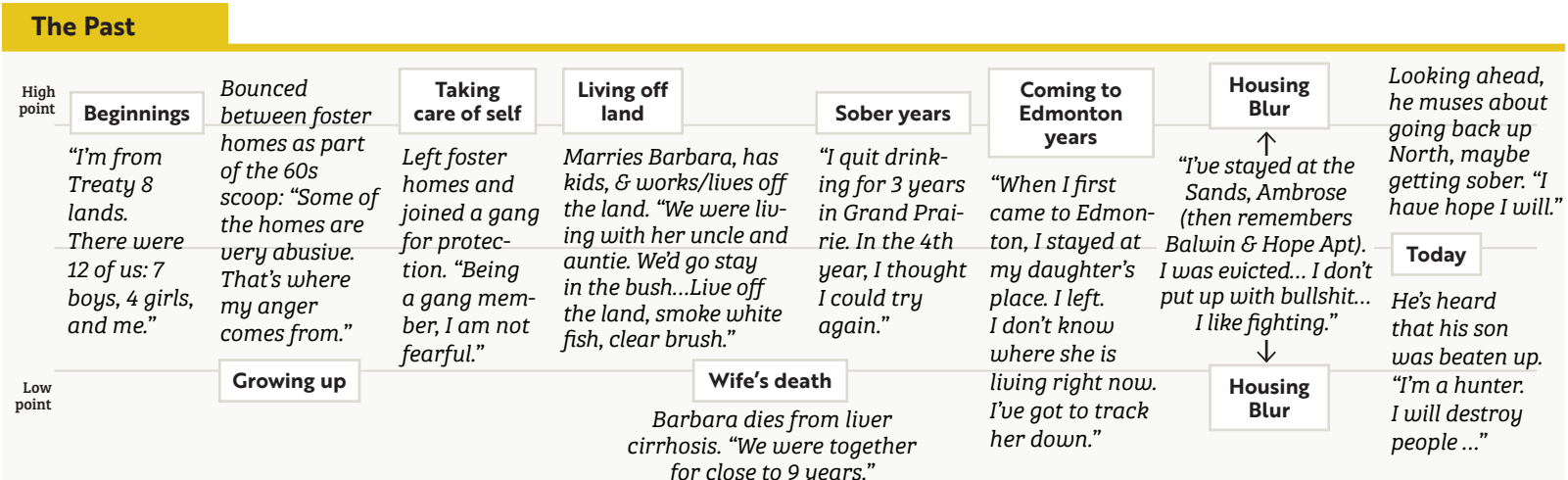
others who "mooch off of him," eating his cups of noodles and tins of sardines while knocking at all times of day. They are roommates Floyd isn't aware he has. "I want them out!" he declares.

For Floyd, temporariness has a kind of permanence. He's come, gone, and been blacklisted from most 'permanent' supported housing in the city: Ambrose Place, Balwin Place, Hope Apartments, The Drake, The Sands. Hope Mission "where all hell breaks loose" is a back-up when it's too cold to cozy up in a downtown doorway. All the places blur together. Besides, they seem to end the same: eviction & loneliness. "I get evicted because of my temper. Non-consumable alcohols do bad things to me," he says, describing the



source of his anger as, “I went through a lot of abuse being in foster homes. As I got older, I joined a gang for my own well-being.” Holding up a pen and proclaiming “I know how to use it,” Floyd vows to stand up for his son. He came to Edmonton to be with his kids, but laments that they don’t get along with each other.

Being a protector is a role Floyd relishes, as is being a hunter, guitar player, and teacher. “I teach people how to hunt, bead, and speak in our language.” While “a lot of mōniyāw (white) people think I am stupid,” Floyd knows that few of them could survive off the land. They probably wouldn’t know how to dig a hole for water or how to collect dandelions for food, or most of all, how to hold nature with the reverence it deserves and the redemption it offers. “I do a lot of praying to the creator,” Floyd shares, as he belts out the next stanza of Josh Turner’s song, the words flowing as quickly as the booze he heads to buy: “*Look to the heavens, you can look to the skies / You can find redemption strain’ back into your eyes / There is protection and there’s peace the same/ Burnin’ your ticket for that long black train.*”¹



How they see themselves

"I'm introverted but very social. I talk a little too much"

Roles: International student, DJ, poli-sci major, social media content creator, fashion-lover, heir to the family, traveler, culture enthusiast

Lived experience
Immigration, transience, racism, discrimination, LGBTQ2S+

Graham

Motivation to share their story

Immigrants advocacy

"I'm tired of not having a plan, of not moving forward. I'm stuck in limbo."

Wants to be heard about

Immigration struggles

Homelessness

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

1 bedroom Nothing fancy

Simple Good kitchen

Distance from current

Far Close

"Yes, I am having a hard time and I know that but there's still a chance for me to make it out of this"

Opportunity Areas

A musical ticket to PR

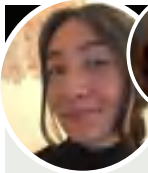
What if city representatives held listening sessions to meet locally residing immigrants and made recommendations to the IRCC based on personal talents and vision rather than an impersonal point system?

Dressed to stay

When Graham talks about fashion, his whole body lights up. What if local residents could pair up with people like Graham and exchange fashion advice for rent subsidies or a room to stay?

Art residencies

Graham hasn't yet found a place for him to fit. What if the city opened up housing where aspiring art folk can work and live together, find inspiration, regardless of cultural background or immigration status?




Nina

Cis woman

White

European



And Rochelle

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We met Graham through a connection at the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. One of the workers gave him Rochelle's number and he reached out, wanting to share his story.

Points of (un)familiarity

Like Graham, I came to Canada as an international student, full of curiosity and hope. Having moved and traveled a lot, I relate to his feeling of being always with one foot in-one out, never fully belonging anywhere. Because I am White and European I've faced less immigration struggles. I was also raised (family & country) with more openness towards LGBTQ folks than in large parts of Uganda.



Graham

Cis man
Age: 32
Black
Ugandan

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

A MOMENT IN TIME IN 4 Hours Chat returned JULY 2022

"Success means I become a contributing, functioning part of this society"

There are at least ten stories to be told about Graham: the story of a political science student coming to Canada with big ambitions to succeed; a fashion and music enthusiast who makes a \$100 outfit look like a million; a well-travelled nomad who secretly boils pasta in a kettle to survive; or the story of a thriving Afrobeats DJ who never expected homelessness to be part of his path.

"Being a nomad is second nature to me... I've always been in a place one foot in and one foot out. That's an immigrant problem. You're never fully planted." Graham was born and raised in Uganda. His mother is a business woman. She flies back and forth between Uganda and the UK to trade goods: "Mostly female stuff

like cosmetics, lingerie. She's the one person who still scares me shitless." When Graham got sick as a teenager, no priest or traditional witchcraft could help him. His mom connected him to an orthopedic surgeon in the UK who diagnosed him with scoliosis. When he returned, his mom sent him to a boarding school in Malaysia to catch up on school work. The travel opened up his mind: "I've seen many versions of the world... I'm grateful. I might never be able to pay my mom back."

In 2013, Graham enrolled at York University, Toronto, as an international student majoring in political science. "Why politics?", I ask. He smirks, "You're not gonna tell an African mom that you want to major in music or fashion." Despite

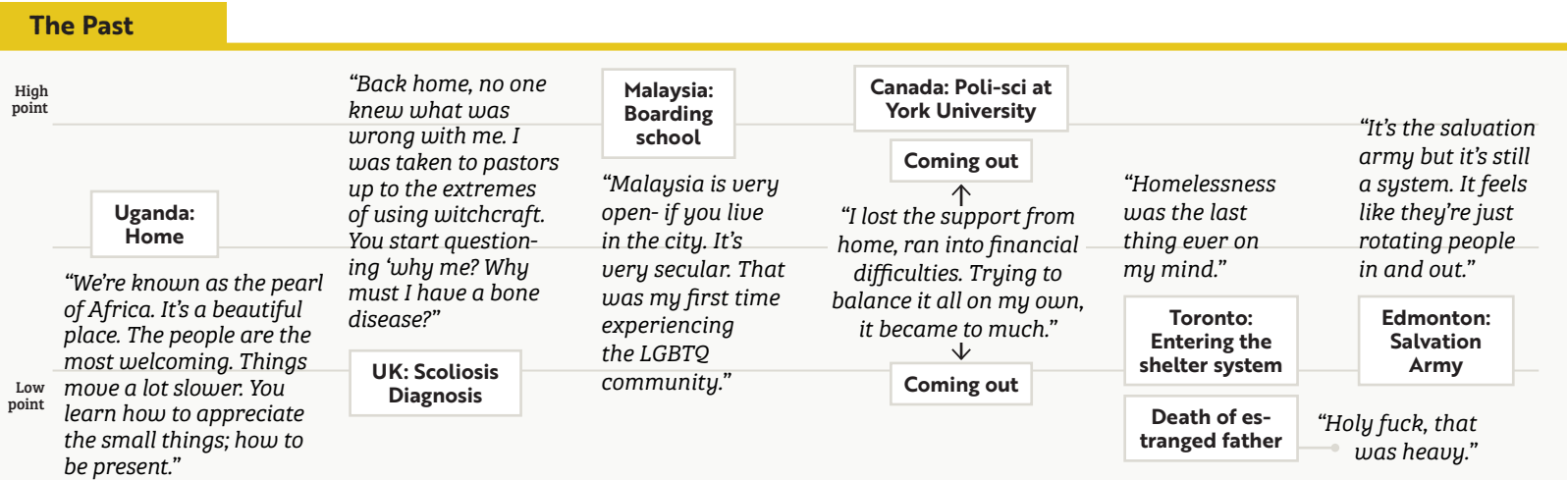
pursuing a more status-oriented degree, he lost the support from home when he came out. Unable to pay tuition, he was forced to leave York. “Once you drop out of school it’s a domino effect.” Without a study permit, he lost his legal right to work. “I’ve been stuck in this situation for four years now, and it gets to you.”

Graham is well aware of the rough patch he’s been going through, but growing up in Uganda gives him some perspective: “I’m struggling right now, but I know, where I come from, people are struggling way more. You guys don’t know what survival of the fittest means.”

Being dealt a difficult set of cards isn’t news to him. “I always got that opportunity that I had to figure out. With my scoliosis, with immigration, I always had to struggle a little harder. That work ethic is what keeps me going.” He knows how quickly things can spiral out of control: “I’ve gone from high to pure rock bottom.” Still, he believes that he can turn things around if only his immigration papers go through: “there’s still a chance for me to succeed.”



Scan this QR code and listen to Graham telling his own story through music.



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *Living in shelter*
Type: *Renting private room*
With whom:
How found: *With help of Mennonite Centre*
Rent: *\$450/month*

Percentage of Income

Sense of at-homeness
low high

Sense of stability
low high

Desire for stability
low high

Agency over living situation
low high

His mental and physical health: “Therapy has helped a lot”

Homing practices

Vinyl on wall Art pieces Cooking

Collection of fedoras on wall

Making space own

Decision-making drivers

Desire to belong Fear of failure

Top Stressors

Immigration “The not-knowing is the scariest part. It’s something I am not in control of. I’m an immigrant first, not a human...When are they gonna put me on a plane back home? You’re never settled. There’s no feeling of stability.”

Food & Money “I would love to be on a proper diet. Some nights I go to sleep eating a pack of noodles... or peanut butter jelly. The poor man’s sandwich. Food banks- that’s how I’ve been surviving.”

Housing “Being homeless, it drains everything out of you. [Living in the shelter], for most people, this is our last option.”

Top Values

Health & wellbeing “I have health... I don’t know about wellbeing. Right now.... I’m looking in from the outside, looking in to a life I want to be in. I’m on the outside of what people call stable.”
little in life lots in life

Harmony & Balance “I have days where I’m deep in depression. But then, I can go from those moments to ‘hey, it’s a good day!’. I want to get to a place where my inner balance matches my life.”
little in life lots in life

Creativity “My creative side. That’s what kept me alive on the inside. I’ve lost it through my experiences of homelessness. I lost the passion, and I hate it.”
little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers +	Mennonite Centre for Newcomers Therapy	Cousins Neighbour in salvation army	Adaptability “Once you put me in a place, I figure it out. I know how to survive. I can get myself out of anything.”
	Alberta works \$700 (not enough)	Manager at salvation army	High discrimination experienced Racism “I’ve mostly experienced it in systematic ways. Applying for jobs and housing. I’ve been told ‘oh, this place is taken’ once they see me.”
Barriers -	Policies & Resources	People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

I don't know what to do with myself sometimes. I have a few drinks and just talk to people so I don't have to spin that. It's not a computer no more neither. Rusty old Rolodex.

Roles: Mushum, uncle dad, wise owl, introducer, runner-awayer, veteran

Lived experience

Group home, criminality, homelessness, divorce, addiction, military service, poverty.

Grant Elder

Motivation to share their story

Contemplation Attention

"You guys brought up a lot of stuff that made me think."

Wants to be heard about

Being abandoned by workers
Hoops to jump through
Paperwork



Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Legit I'll create it myself

Away from everyone Nearby

Quiet In the country Relationships

Distance from current

Far Close

"I think I found where I belong." "Drinking numbs me so I can live the fucking life I have to live"

Opportunity Areas

Keep That Connection

What if we prioritized the longevity of support worker relationships? Organizations could support workers to negotiate "relationship maintenance time" in their contract, alongside holiday pay.

Co-Create Guest Plans

Grant got evicted 3 times for guests, but successfully couch-surfed and baby-sat for his friend. What if guest management policies were a co-created plan with each person, based on their own expertise.

Legitimize Roles

Grant has a place but often gets told to 'move on' when sitting at the gazebo, and feels lower class. What if people like Grant had official roles and tags such as "neighbourhood introducer" that helped other Edmontonians see him as legitimate?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We first met outside the public washrooms on Whyte Ave. When you heard what we were up to, you proudly announced, "They want to meet homeless people!" and stepped into the role of tour guide, bringing us to Gazebo Park around the corner to make introductions.

Points of (un)familiarity

Grant and I both have times of inner turmoil, can be unsure of our purpose, and feel mixed about how much we want to be around other people. I also know what it feels like to believe you are going to hell. I don't know what it's like to have spent time in the army. I don't know what it's like to move around constantly as a child or to have parents who drank all the time.



Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Dutch descendant



And Hayley

Grant Elder

Cis man
Age 60
Saulteaux

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"This seems to be the place I belong. I fit here. I got stuck here and now I know everybody. I'm here and that's the way it is."

"Well, the way I look at it, there is not much of a purpose anymore. Just live and love," Grant Elder tells us. We're sitting on a bench on the corner of 100 Street and 84th Ave, not far from Gazebo park where he spends most of his days hanging out with people. "Not now, I'm in an interview," Grant brushes off tells a woman passing by. In his spare time, he hustles to supplement the \$959/month income support. It was reduced from \$1300/month after the last provincial election.

The sun is hot, and Grant occasionally takes a sip of diluted vodka from his aquamarine YETI thermos. He pauses our conversation to take a call from his daughter, Angelica. "Love you too," he says before hanging up. In some ways

he's very content; he's got plenty of freedom to do what he wants, plenty of safety, and plenty of respect from his street family. "The people down here are real." But they also irritate him to no end. "Fuck off!" he barks at one crossing the street. That's the conundrum," he puzzles. "I want to be isolated and I don't want to be isolated. How does that make sense?... I'm very lonely if you want the truth."

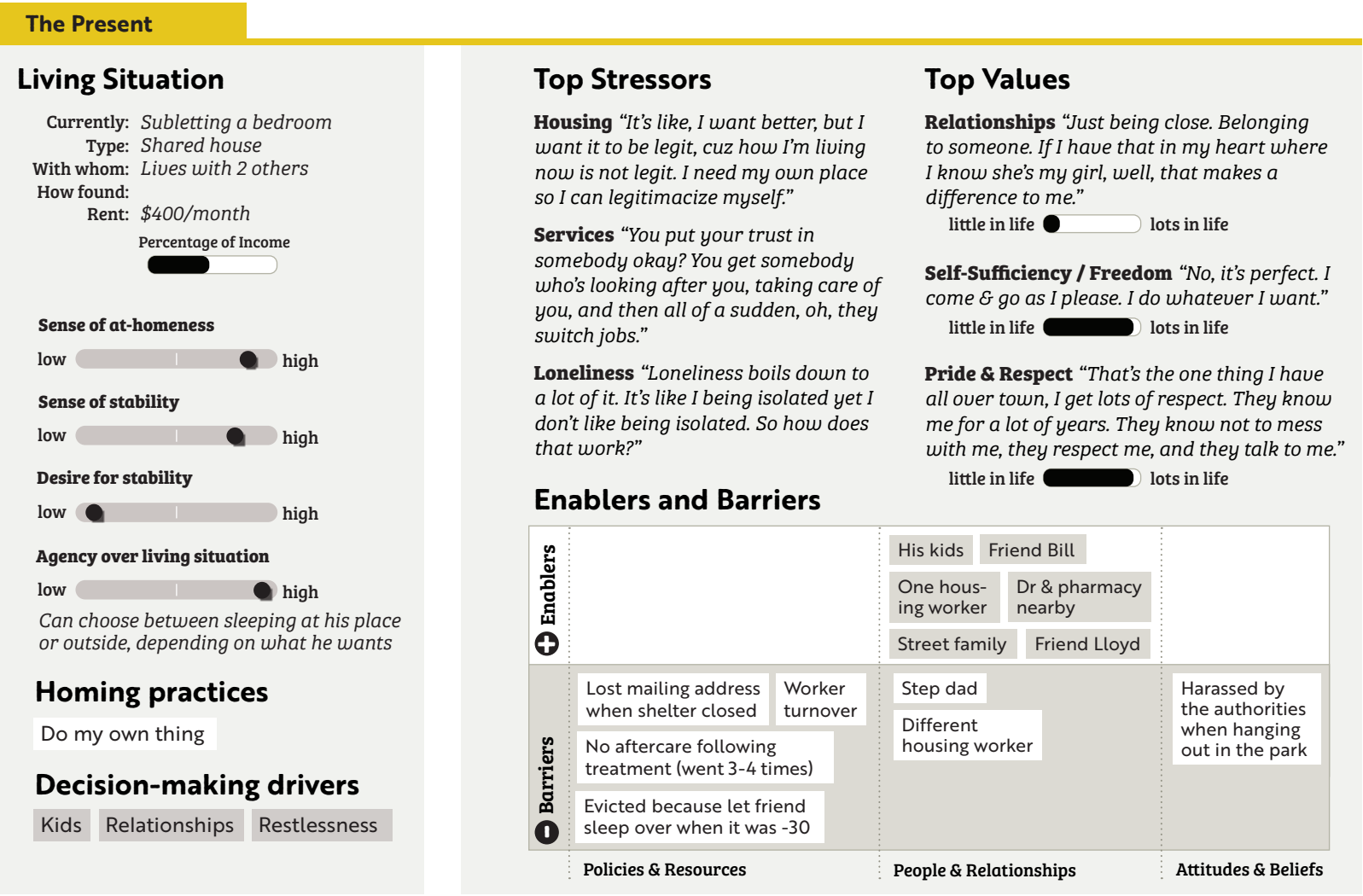
Good quality relationships are hard to come by in Grant's life, and memories of childhood abandonment and violence tug on his emotions. In his dreams, he sees himself wrestling with a pair of horns, plagued by memories of his time in the army and guilt over being a bad kid to his grandma. He has

felt restless for a long time. Even with his wife of 14 years, Mary, he never felt at home. “Still something clawed at me to get the fuck out. For what? I don’t know. It’s very hard for me to be settled.”

When the conversation turns to housing workers, his voice quickens. “This is another fuckin’ thing that fuckin’ really pisses me off, fuckin’. You put your trust in somebody okay, and you hold onto that. And then all of a sudden, there’s a change. And with that change you’re treated different.” It makes his blood boil. “Well, you left me? You left me too? Now go then, fuck off!” Then I get a little bit discombluberated and get off the fucking left field.” After everything he’s tried - all the shelters, workers, evictions, paperwork and appointments - sometimes he just doesn’t give a shit anymore. Thinking and mulling over life gets his head spinning. “So I just drink a beer and sit around with my friends. Try to block it out, I guess.” As we sit on the bench in the sunshine, he sings us the Eagles’ song *The Last Resort*: “Who will provide the grand design? What is yours and what is mine? ‘Cause there is no more new frontier We have got to make it here

*We satisfy our endless needs
And justify our bloody deeds
In the name of destiny
And in the name of God”*¹

¹Lyrics by Don Henley & Glenn Lewis Frey; Cass County Music/Red Cloud Music, 1976.



How they see themselves

"I'm a really big fixer...
I'm a very resourceful
guy. I'm well connected."

Roles: Combat medic, son,
husband, father, CSAR
officer, veteran, community
leader, decision-maker,
counselor, problem solver

Lived experience

War, mental health, divorce,
separation, alcoholism,
death/grief, violence, racism,
discrimination, disability

Jared

Motivation to share their story

Advocacy for veterans: "I
don't like talking about my
military experience but it's
just that I wanna tell you
my story."

Wants to be heard about

Lack of support
for veterans

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Remote Peaceful Family Friends Private
Safe Tipi Community

Distance from current

Far Close

"We wanna have our own place ... with my friends and family around.
Everyone would have camps all around me and we'd just be together."

Opportunity Areas

Post-combat Roles

What if there was a way to re-
integrate veterans into civilian
life by co-creating meaningful
roles for them in community
outreach services? For example,
Jared might be a medic for 24-7.
Function: sense of purpose,
structure, income, clear task

Whole Family Support

What if the families of
returning veterans received
a package of grief & loss
supports, including access
to spiritual retreat sites to
process memories & getting
matched to families trained
to support re-integration?

Land Grants

What if veterans had
access to land grants
where unused land
could be offered by
cities & land owners
and awarded to veteran
families like Jared's who
want to live off the land?



Listener's Perspective

Nina

Cis woman
White
European

How we met

When I passed Jared and Jane, I was
crossing the street, looking for some-
one in Abbotsfield. Our eyes met briefly
and Jared called out to me: "You have a
very nice day!" I looked at him and said,
"Thanks! You too." I walked around
the block, decided to circle back and
abandon my search. Instead, I asked if I
could take both of them out for a meal.

Points of (un)familiarity

I have never lived in a conflict zone
and only grew up with stories about
war, not its reality. Jared's lived expe-
rience of war, death, and violence are
far from the peaceful reality I live in.
I was drawn to his close relationship
with his mom and I could relate to
his deep sense of loyalty towards the
people that matter most to him.

Image by Jeff McIntosh/The Canadian Press, CBC article, May 25, 2018.

A MOMENT IN TIME IN
June 2022
2 Hours
Chat
not
returned

Jared

Cis man
Age 27
Indigenous
Cree, Dene

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

**"We got a high standard for veterans in our family. Whoever
fights a war, they have to be taken care of because we come
back with a lot of problems."**

Jared's voice is deep; his tone confident.
There is something in how he engages
with the world that conveys he is
unafraid. "I am Jared, 27 years old, and
I'm a combat medic. I spent seven years
in Afghanistan and Iraq." He doesn't
hesitate to jump into his story. It's
pouring outside. "I was running CSAR,
that's Children Search and Rescue." As
a combat medic, Jared's mission was to
retrieve and treat abducted children.
"I brought back multiple children to
their families. These are lowly grape
farmers that don't have anything. I
did a lot for those people." The look in
his eyes shows pride and a sense of
determination. It's a heroic tale, tainted
by the gut-wrenching reality of war.

"They used children against us. They
used to kidnap children, cut'em open,
place a bomb inside them, and leave
them on the side of the road for us to
render aid." They're called body bombs.
"I had to remove about 170 of them."
Sometimes, they would explode.

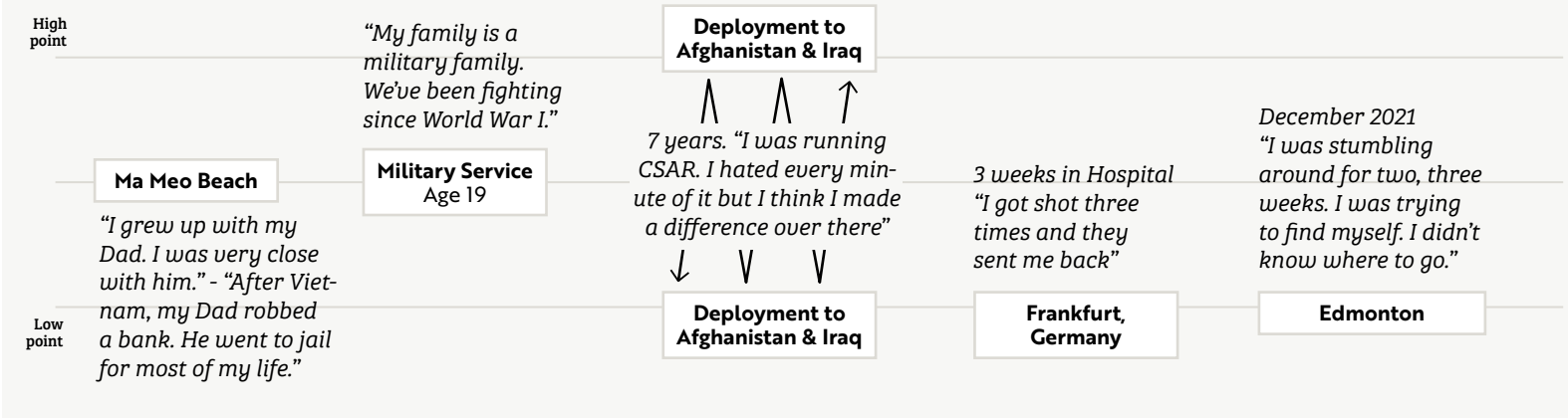
When Jared returned last year, he
wandered aimlessly for a few weeks. "I
didn't have anywhere to go because I
felt disconnected from the world." His
family didn't know where he had been
for the past seven years. Now, he is
living with his sister Shauna, her kids,
his father, and his mother Jane in an
apartment. "My family is a military
family. We've been fighting since World

War I.” Jared’s father fought in Vietnam. His siblings are part of the navy and army. Jane, who is quietly eating poutine next to me, is a veteran too. She says, “Taking another human’s life; it’s not right. It’s not what the Creator intended. Indigenous people, we got some spirit watching us.” There is no wavering in her voice.

Jared has doubts. “Honestly, I don’t feel proud of my service. I always have doubts and it blocks my mind. Doubts about what I did when I pulled the trigger- if it’s wrong or right.” These days, he describes himself as a community leader. “People look to me for advice; they ask me for right or wrong. People depend on me and it’s hard. It puts so much stress on me that I don’t know what to do.”

The pressure and the memories are what lead him to drink. He cannot shake the heavy weight of making life and death decisions. The push and pull of pride and doubt, of being a leader for others and feeling helpless in his own skin echoes through our conversation. He is struggling to make sense of his past and of who he is: “I’m a calm person. I’m not a violent man, but I have killed 17 people.” Most of the time, he can’t even go outside because memories of war and death trap him inside his mind. He recognizes with a note of despair, “I’m stuck on broke.”

The Past



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: housed
Type: shared apartment
With whom: with sister & family members
How found: family
Rent: \$0

Sense of at-homeness

low high

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

"I just live off my sister, my mom, my dad"

Homing practices

Spending time with family

Decision-making drivers

- Duty to serve
- Sense of purpose

Top Stressors

Mental & Physical Health "I got shot 3 times." "I've tried to kill myself over the past year 7 times, and all times I failed."

Friends & Family "I don't see my daughters enough. I feel like a dead-beat dad because I don't see my daughters enough."

Money & Food "I don't have enough of it [money]. I don't have enough to support myself or do the things that I want." "[Food] It's hard to come by these days" - What kind of food? - "Wild meat."

Top Values

Relationships "My circle is so small. It's only me, my sister, my mom, my dad, my wife - the people I would move mountains for."

little in life lots in life

Service & Contribution "When I put on my military uniform and I put my barrett on, I feel strong and proud that I've done something for this country. People recognize that."

little in life lots in life

Purpose "Purpose means that I got something to do. I'm not a man without orders." Mom and isster order him around. "Without orders, I don't know what to do. It's very important."

little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	+ Policies & Resources	Shauna, sister Jane, mother
		Military "I got 2400 brothers and sisters on the line. I'm very well connected."
Barriers	- People & Relationships	Lack of support for veterans
		Veteran friend "I had to jump off a 3rd story balcony because my buddy pulled a shotgun on me"
	Attitudes & Beliefs	Surrounded by drug addicts & disrespectful people
		High discrmination experienced
		"It's hard being Indigenous and also in the service where people don't respect you because they're mostly just White-based."

How they see themselves

Creative, caring, self-sufficient, helpful, trustworthy, generous, young, talented, reliable, smart, friendly, loving.

Roles: NFT community member, digital artist, entrepreneur, visionary, stepson, son

Lived experience

Transience, disability, loss, discrimination, sexual violence, mental health

Jesse

Motivation to share their story

Share his art Sociality

"Human interaction helps people adapt and change as a person"

Wants to be heard about

NFTs Celiac
Disability Art

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Apartment Mixed-income neighbourhood
Area with shared vision Internet access

Distance from current

Far Close

"My community is in the NFT space. All I need is a power plug."

Opportunity Areas

Onsite Tech Roles

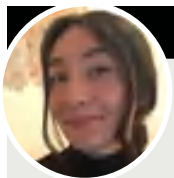
Jesse knows lots about technology and security. What if he could join a pool of tech savvy folks willing to provide on-site support to seniors or others who are digitally excluded, in exchange for housing or a housing subsidy?

Crypto coin Rent

Jesse valued transparency and ownership. What if rental companies offered tenants to pay their rent in crypto currency? More specific, each apartment building would have its own crypto coin. By buying the coin, tenants would automatically share ownership as long as they pay rent.

Meal Standards

Being celiac is a source of income instability. Food banks & community meals also do not accommodate people with celiac disease. What if food banks & meal programs subscribed to inclusive meal standards?



Listener's Perspective

Nina

Cis woman
White
European

How we met

We met Jesse in front of Rogers Place on the night of an Oilers game when he stopped to watch an interaction we were having with a street artist. He had just come from the police station where he tried to file a sexual assault report, without success. He was considered a 'non-emergency' and sent home.

Points of (un)familiarity

When I first talked to Jesse, his ideas about decentralizing power, governance, and resource redistribution immediately sparked my interest. We were able to connect on an intellectual level pretty quickly and dove into discussing big ideas quite naturally. Not being very tech savvy, the biggest point of unfamiliarity for me was Jesse's connection to the NFT world.



Jesse

Cis man
Age 20s
White

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"NFTs give me a reason to progress in life."

Jesse has a clear sense of purpose: "To progress technology to a higher stake- that's our goal." The community that he roots his sense of purpose in exists online, in the NFT space. NFTs, or non-fungible tokens, can be any tradeable digital goods but are mostly unique digital artworks.

What fascinates Jesse is the idea of owning and creating an asset of "true value." He explains that "having the ability to own your own money and not have a bank or government shut it down has its own stance. They arrest me- what are they gonna do? I'm not gonna give you my secret code." His passion for NFTs is grounded in a sound critique of capitalist wage labour: "no one owns anything in this world. Anybody working somewhere,

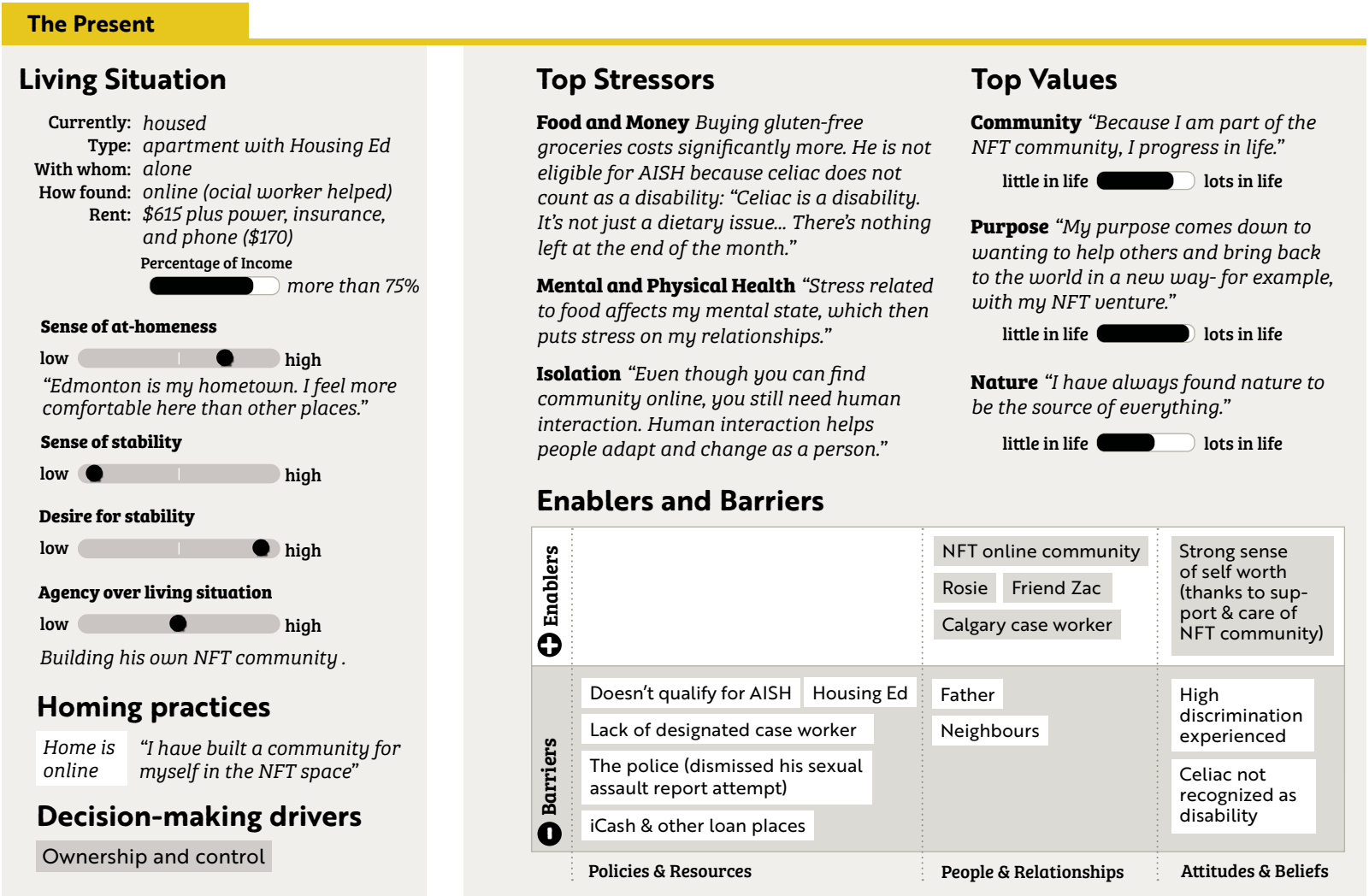
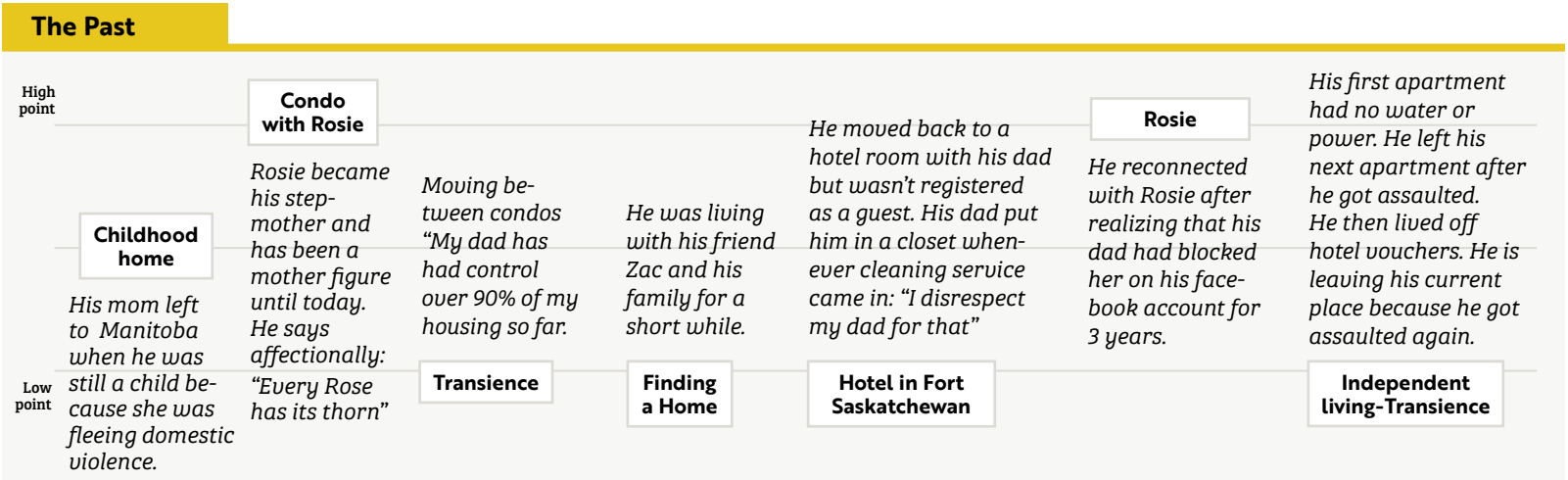
they don't own anything. They're just working for a paycheck. They're just being paid what the company wants to pay them. There's no actual value to it. It's just money." With the help of NFTs, Jesse feels like owning an asset becomes a possibility for him.

Creating new models of ownership through digital means is a goal shared by many in the NFT space. "We have to build the idea of owning something," Jesse explains with a sense of urgency. Being part of that 'we' affords a sense of purpose: "My purpose comes down to wanting to help others and bring back to the world in a new way- for example with my NFT venture." He has ambitions to become an entrepreneur and feels supported by other NFT community members. He describes the



culture as kind and supportive: “everybody brings everybody up. The NFT community has love and affection for the world.” This love and affection is reflected in a shared vision which reimagines current social and political order with the help of blockchains: “It’s imagining decentralization”, which means “taking the power away from the powerful and giving it to everybody.” Being part of the NFT community motivates Jesse to work towards achieving financial stability and gain recognition for his artwork. “If I’m not in that community, I don’t progress my life.” Feeling accountable to other community members helps him stay on track.

When it comes to stability in his housing situation, Jesse’s experience has mostly been one of transience and uncertainty. He feels unsafe in his current apartment building after being sexually assaulted by a neighbour. Home, however, has little to do with housing. “Housing isn’t really much a barrier because [I] get community anyway.” Jesse has learnt to build a home online. “All I needs is a power plug.”



How they see themselves

"I like to call myself a gypsy!"

Roles: Builder, Problem-solver, Book collector, Dog owner

Lived experience

Divorce, weight discrimination, unemployment.

John

Motivation to share their story

Being heard

Enjoys sharing his story to people who listen without judgment.

Wants to be heard about

Regulation

Infrastructure

Enforcement

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Self built

Conveniences

Lots of books

Windows that take advantage of view

Fireplace

Distance from current

Far

Close

Opportunity Areas

Home-issary

Just like there are commissaries for food trucks, what if there were home-issaries for folks who live in vehicles, enabling them to access kitchen, sanitation, and storage services, plus trouble-shooting, repairs, etc? How might cities offer subsidized membership rates?

Officer Training

John experiences regular harassment from peace officers, and wishes they were better educated. What if people with experience interacting with cops, peace officers, and security guards were paid to help train and support?

For & Of the People

John laments that politicians and civil servants are far removed from the poverty line and muses about new salary benchmarks & training. What if public servant salaries were the average of ALL of their constituents? And what if they had to live below the poverty line at least a week a year?

Listener's Perspective

with
Rochelle
&
Hayley

How we met

We meet John over breakfast at the Christian Care Centre, where he's a regular, and often picks up small jobs.

Points of (un)familiarity

John's desire for adventure, love of books, need for autonomy, and embrace of the nomadic life certainly feels familiar. What is less familiar is living in a van, and being regularly hassled by authorities.

Sarah

White

Cis woman

Jewish



John

Cis man
Age 59
White, 1st
Generation
Canadian

with dog, Jake

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I'm kinda a free spirit, in my van. It gives me a lot of freedom from conventional expectations... Home is where you park it."

"I like to wake up and see the moon," John says over a plate of sausage & eggs, as he motions to the van outside. Inside, he's repurposed the front bucket seat as a living room chair, built a bed and a kitchen bench where he stir fries veggies and consumes history books. Ancient Rome is a favorite subject.

"I came to a point where I couldn't afford a house and a car, so I chose the car. Even when I had a home, I couldn't stand being home for 24 hours at a time...I am afflicted (I would not say suffer) by wanderlust." Adventure scratches a deep-seated itch to explore. Independence is core to his identity. "I take pride in paying for things, living anywhere... I can buy my own break-fast. I can buy a vehicle outright. That's

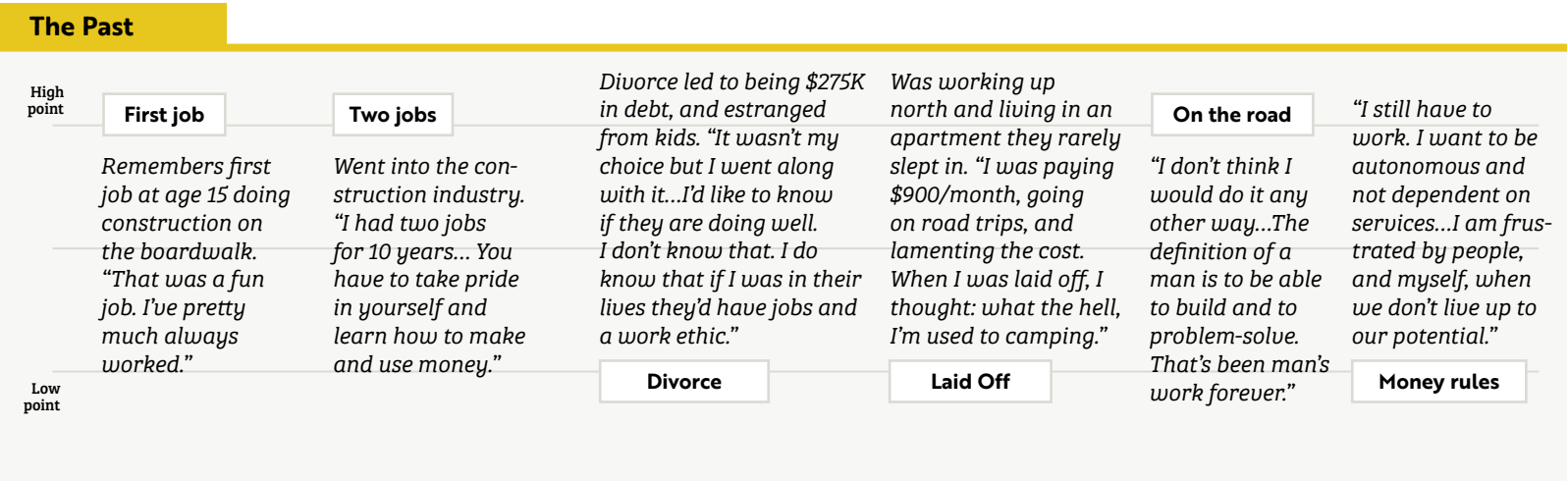
the freedom that comes from having your own money." He bought his current van for a thousand bucks. It's the latest in a series of homes that's taken him to the Okanagan for 9 winters, up and down logging roads. John has uncharacteristically stayed put for 8 months, watching an industrial yard every evening in exchange for permission to park & sleep unperturbed.

For all the romance of the open road, van life has plenty of banalities too. "Living in a van is like living in an apartment, you have chores. You just have to find an inventive way to problem-solve." There are plenty of problems to solve — some pragmatic, where John can use his construction skills, and others political, stemming

from mis-perception. “People think that a man who lives in his van is a loser or a bum. I get a lot of hassles.” Hassles include being ticketed, having ambulances called on him, and enduring flak from peace officers.

“Why are babies in strollers allowed to sleep in parks, but grandpas taking naps on park benches asked to leave?” John wants to know. “I say to [peace officers]: you bring me something on the queen’s printer saying it’s illegal. They are uneducated morons.”

Sleeping outside of a building doesn’t make you a problem. John does not identify as homeless or needy. “I have never been desperate. I still work. I don’t leave a mess. I have autonomy. Not everyone who is poor is desperate!” He uses community services mostly for conviviality. “Free meals are nothing but carbs,” he laments, as he describes the weight discrimination he’s experienced. Recently, he dropped ~90 pounds by changing his diet, and cutting back on his usual 30 beers/ day. Caring for Jake, his dog, helps. As long as he can hit the road, John intends to, though sometimes he’s lonely and he does wish to retire. “I would only live in a house that I’ve built and that’s probably not going to happen. I’ve come to the understanding that I will never own land in Canada.”



How they see themselves

Invisible, dangerous, trustworthy, witty, perceptive, industrious. "I'm a mother, but it's bad because I overprotect her and myself, which makes me crazy"

Roles: Parent, worker, daughter/carer, helper

Lived experience

Domestic violence, poverty, mental health

Kelly

Motivation to share their story

Give insight into barriers Kelly's faced.

Wants to be heard about

Regaining autonomy after leaving an abusive relationship

Finding housing as a single mother

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Alone Quiet Close to daughter's school

View

"The apartment is perfect - it stretches my finances and is very far from everything... but I feel well there compared to other places."

Distance from current

Far



Close

Opportunity Areas

For/by single parents

What if there were buildings for single parents, including survivors, managed by single parents? Designed to enable parents' autonomy and family life on a budget?

Streamlined school

What if post-secondary, Aboriginal funding sources and housing all worked together to offer a customizable package to support single mothers to pursue school?

Carers care

What if there were more diverse supports to sustain carers for parents with complex mental health, and help them establish healthy boundaries and attachment?

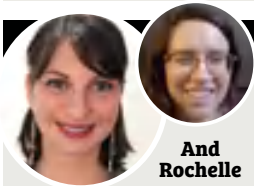
Listener's Perspective

How we met

My teammates met Kelly and a friend at Central McDougall Park. Kelly was more reserved that day but eventually got in touch after her friend spent time with us and had a good experience. We met at Boston Pizza and talked for hours.

Points of (un)familiarity

Kelly and I value our autonomy and don't like to report to anyone. Our greatest motivation for self-development comes from wanting to parent better. Less familiar: growing up in the North, caring for a parent with bipolar disorder, chronic pain, surviving a controlling relationship, and living as an Indigenous person on this land.



And Rochelle

Natalie

Cis woman

White

Euro-Canadian



Kelly

Cis female
Age 44
Indigenous
Cree

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I think I have a pretty good perspective on who I am and what I want... It's just hard to get there sometimes."

Five years ago, in Fort McMurray, Kelly was a manager, and feeling really purposeful: "I felt like I was making a difference." At work she was in charge and told people what to do; at home, her partner was controlling. When Kelly's mum was struggling with her health in Edmonton, she wanted to be with her but "I wasn't allowed to come and visit her when [my partner and I] were together." That made the choice to leave easier. "I cried all the way here but I never went back." She started her new life with her baby girl at WIN House, a shelter for women fleeing abuse.

Kelly turned down the option to be housed by WIN because of their requirements to take life skills courses

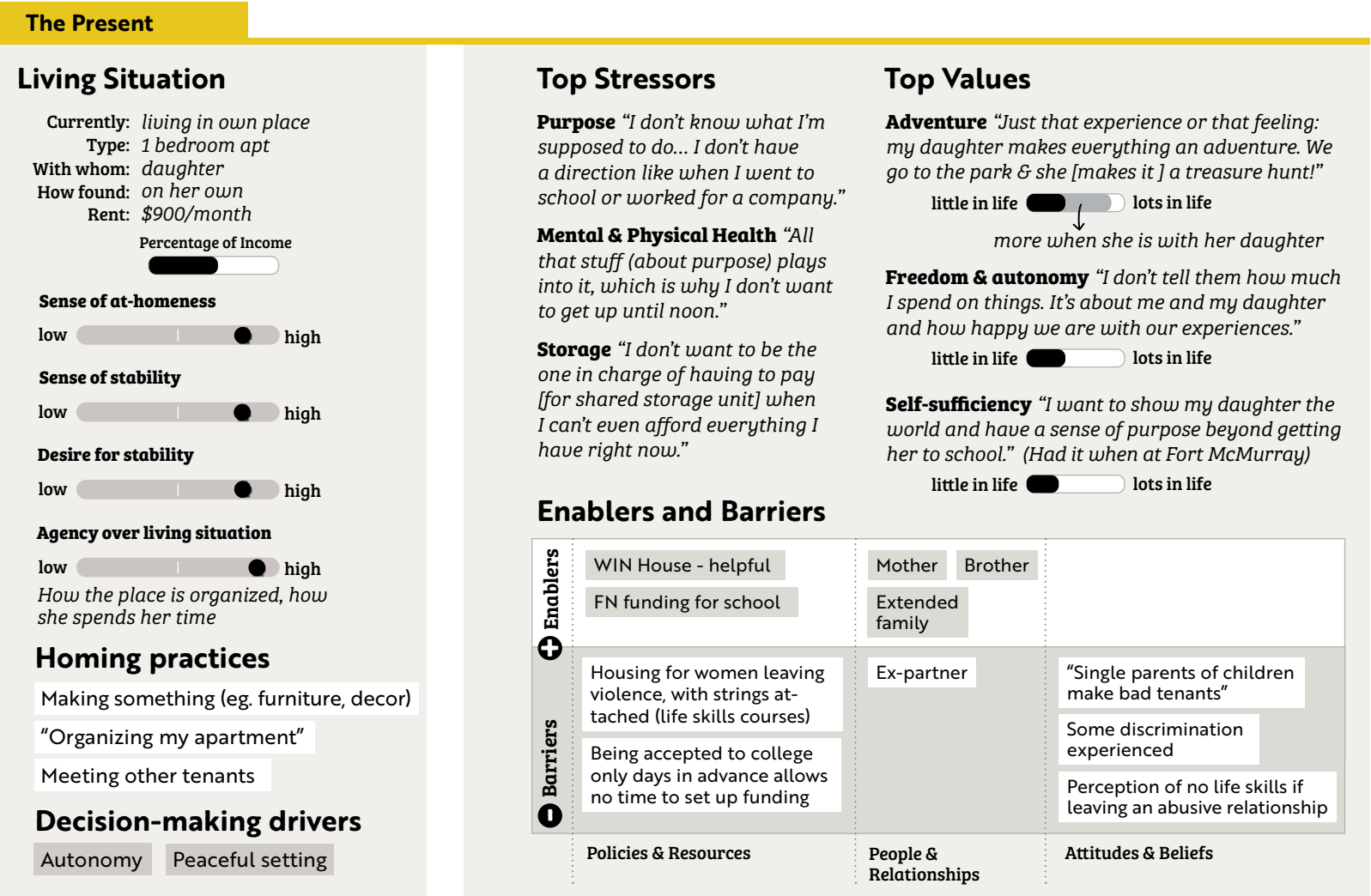
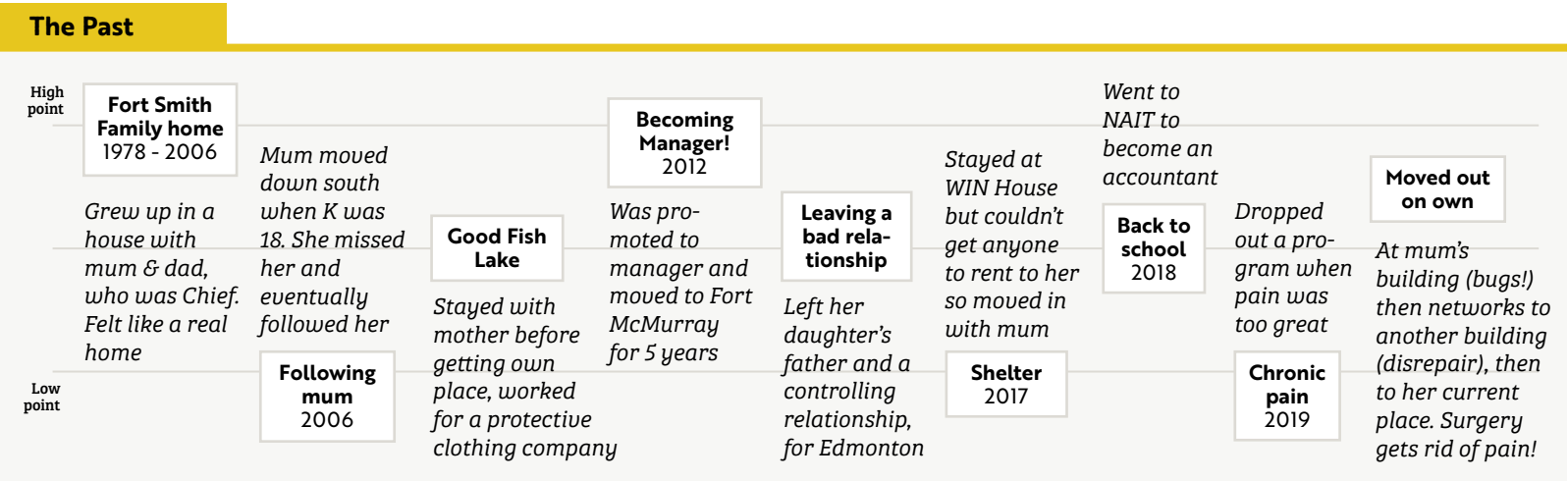
during her days. "I didn't want to live in a place where I needed to learn how to live or to reintegrate", and no landlords were willing to rent her a one bedroom with a child, or offer her two bedrooms without a co-signer. Instead, she ended up sharing her mother's one bedroom and having to negotiate boundaries as a daughter, carer, and tenant of a mother with complex mental and physical health. At that time, she longed to be able to organise her own time and space, and to be able to say 'no.'

From there, Kelly rented an apartment in her mum's building, and then a former tenant helped her get a spot in a building without bugs. There, she advocated for the old people who

“never complained about anything.” Kelly called for them: “the washing machine isn’t working,’ ‘the sewage is backing up,’ ‘the pipe burst!’ It can feel like the tenants’ fault but I always made sure to tell [them] it wasn’t.” It cost her a reference when she moved out.

When Kelly returned to school to study accounting she felt less bold. A simple trip to the cafeteria had her “freaking out.” The episode helped her realize that “how he treated me, affected me.” She sought therapy and challenged herself, but still takes comfort in invisibility because “if people don’t look at me, they won’t be attracted to me, and I won’t end up in a bad relationship.”

A condition causing chronic pain forced Kelly to drop out of school just before COVID, making her world uncomfortably small. She has since had successful surgery and moved into a new apartment with a calming view on a quiet street. She is learning from, and for, her daughter. “She brings out the brave in me.” Though she spends most days across the



Marcoz Delmondo

How they see themselves

"You see me as, like, some poor kid, like a funny guy, really got nothing to show. I see myself like that."

He resonates with the character Cleveland Brown Sr. on *Family Guy*

Roles: Brother, friend

Lived experience

Immigration, criminal justice, homelessness

Motivation to share their story

Seeking help

"So will you guys be able to help me with housing?"

Wants to be heard about

Employment insurance process

Service delivery via video calls

Unexpected hospitalization

Image HD/6A from Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Dog (American Bully) Backyard BBQ Fish tank

Doing what you want My own home

"Nobody telling you 'you can't smoke'."

Distance from current

Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Night time owls

Night time can be a hard time for people; it can be too quiet, or feel too lonely. What if there was a night-time bus and night time animators who opened-up space for conviviality, reverie, and connection to prevent boredom & isolation?

Community fraternities

What if there was a version of fraternities for folks like Marcoz who love to have fun. How might housing be organized around moments of joy & fun, not just routine living?

Pre-eviction mediation

What if, before an eviction, cities offered a list of peacemakers & mediators to facilitate conversation and broker creative ways for tenants, landlords & condo boards to have their needs understood & met?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

We met at the Christian Care Centre in the West End where Marcoz was grabbing a plate of scrambled eggs, yogurt, and pancakes with syrup for breakfast.

Points of (un)familiarity

Marcoz and I have a deep connection with our siblings. We're also both unmarried and without kids – sometimes this can feel like being left behind by other relatives – and we both have a tendency to be hard on ourselves. Unlike Marcoz, I haven't experienced hearing voices, and I haven't had to apply for medical EI.

Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Dutch descendant

And Vale

June 2022 4 Hours Chat returned A MOMENT IN TIME

Marcoz Delmondo

Cis man
Age 38
Canadian

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"You feel like a kid but you're an adult and you want to take responsibility."

The family home in Mayfield was Marcoz' favourite. "Just the area itself," he explains over a bowl of vermicelli noodles and spring rolls. "When a spirit try to conquer your mind, another spirit would take it away. That's why I like that area. You get to live your life without going crazy."

He loves places that have "good vibes." Places like Toronto where "you can hear laughter, see fireworks, see people, like when they have a birthday party outside and people are dancing." Hanging out with friends and his brothers was a big part of his life. Now, they are all married with kids and adult responsibilities. At age 36, Marcoz longs to feel like an adult. "I feel like a kid. You know, like a funny guy

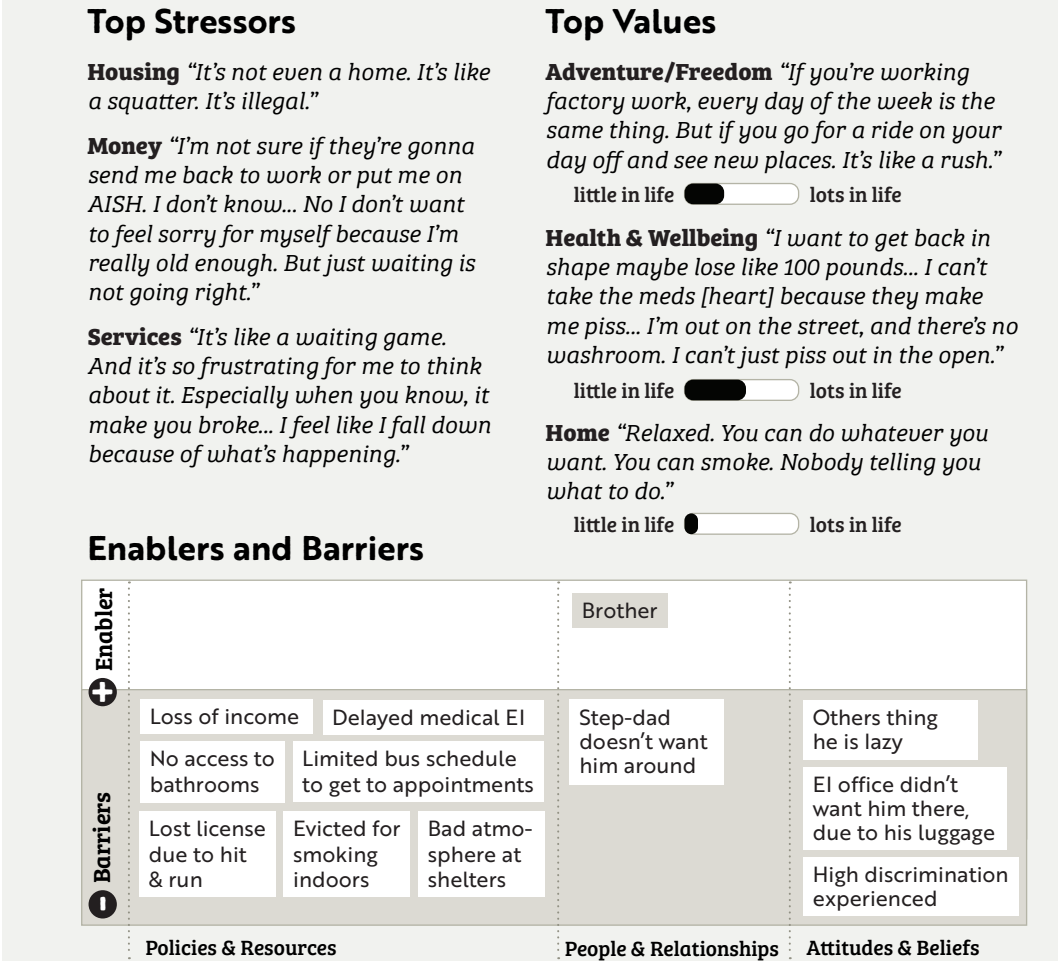
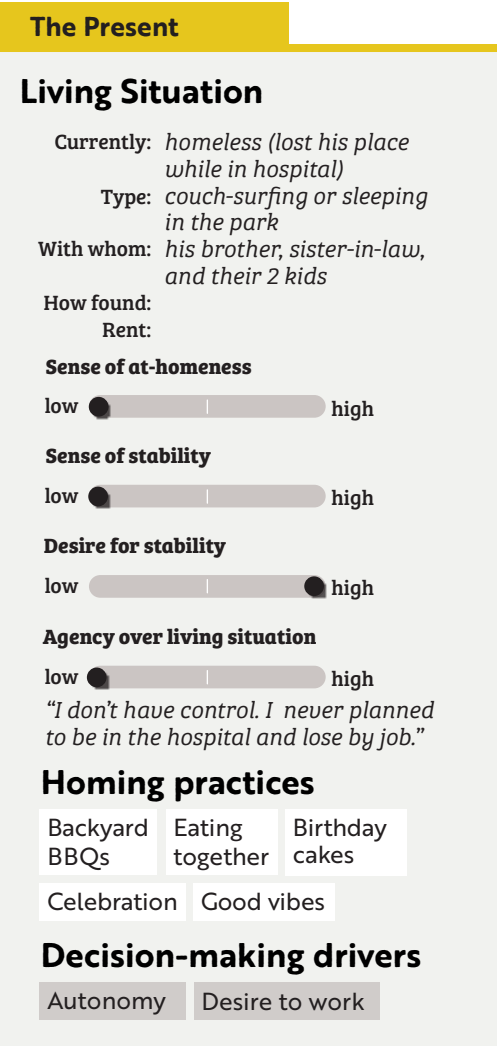
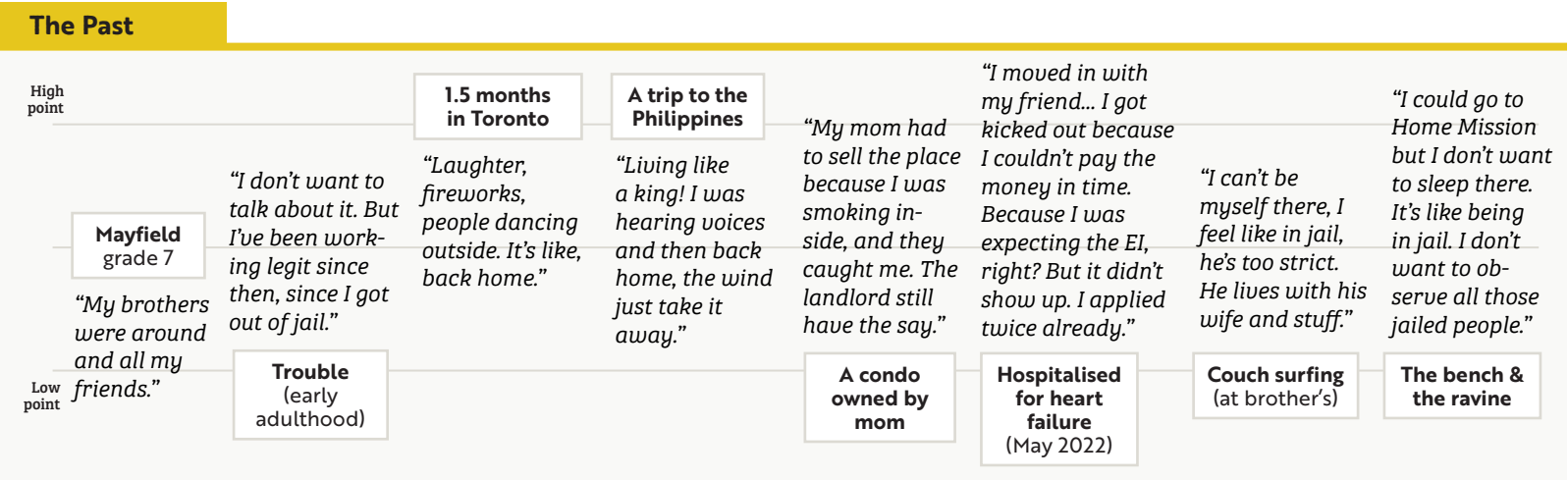
that has nothing to show for himself." He'd like to be financially independent, have a girlfriend, and a home with bbqs in the back. "I don't want to feel sorry for myself, because I'm really old enough." He describes his mind as strong: "It's all choices. I don't blame myself because I don't have control. Even if I plan something it doesn't work out. I never planned to be in hospital and lose my job."

When his medical EI didn't come through as expected, he couldn't pay rent and now sleeps in the ravine or on a park bench. His future is uncertain. In three month's time, his doctor will decide whether he'll be able to return to work or be on AISH permanently. The uncertainty is hard

to take. “I don’t want to think about that. It stress me out; it’ll be my downfall.” He copes by going to the park, meeting new people, and thinking about happy places. Couch surfing at his brother’s was OK for a time, but Marcoz finds the rules too strict. “I can’t have friends around. I can’t smoke inside.” Freedom to do what he wants - including smoking inside - is a big deal for Marcoz. Earlier, he was living in a condo owned by his mom, but she had to sell it when he was caught smoking inside. “The landlord still has the say I guess.”

He’s got lots of ideas for how he might obtain freedom and become financially stable: if he had a truck he could do junk removal, landscaping, tree cutting. He just needs to do his taxes, pay the remaining \$180 of his fine – “I was involved in a hit and run” he says in a quiet voice - and reapply for his class 5 license. Work is also connected to his self-image and how others perceive him. While he sees himself a little like Cleveland Brown Sr. on the *Family Guy*, he worries others might be thinking: “For like a big guy? Oh, he’s just lazy. He’s so big, like why can’t he go to work? They don’t know I have a medical thing.”

I ask Marcoz if there’s anything he does feel he has control over. “My mind,” he replies with a laugh. “I used to get stressed out but I learned how to control my mind.”



How they see themselves

"I make very bad choices!" (laughs)
"No self control"

Roles: Father,
renter, cook

Lived experience

Domestic violence,
addiction, death/grief
(vicarious), criminality,
discrimination
poverty, transience,
classism, disability

Mark

Motivation to share their story

To help decision-makers understand what it is like for someone like Mark to make a home, and contemplate old age, on AISH income.

Wants to be heard about

Renting rooms /
innkeepers act

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Affection Love Family interaction

Name on lease Affordable Alone

Protected under Landlord-Tenant Act

Distance from current

Far Close

Close the first 2 weeks of the month,
far after the money runs out

Opportunity Areas

Room renter protection

What if there were more options to rent rooms that fall under the Landlord Tenant Act to reduce the vulnerability of low-income tenants?

Welcome wagon

What if there were socially normed, informal relationship-building supports for tenants in the same building, neighbours, and landlord tenant relationships? To prevent high impact conflicts?

Timely meals

What if neighbourhood associations were supported to put on regular, participatory community meals, in the last week of the month when some people are stretched?

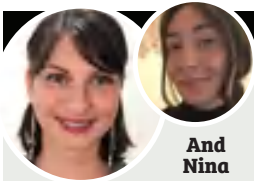
Listener's Perspective

How we met

A teammate spoke to Mark while we were holding a pop-up event across from West Edmonton Mall, and I called him up to see about meeting up for dinner. He suggested a McDonald's near him, and followed up by text with the address and a gif in which one guy says to another "the key to success? Hard work."

Points of (un)familiarity

I identified with Mark's impulsive decision-making, escapism, and valuing independence. However, Mark's experiences of family violence, and renting rooms with few rights, are beyond my own.



Natalie

Cis woman

White

Euro-Canadian

And Nina



Mark

Cis-male
Age 61
White
Canadian

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"You see, I don't dwell on the past a lot. Like my upbringing was not the greatest. I never really had a family life."

Mark has found a solution which works half the time - better than before. He pays 56% of his income for a 1-bedroom basement apartment, outside of 'the drag' (his name for an inner city neighbourhood where his old addictions are on tempting display). Another 12% of his income goes to a mail-order 1/4lb of budget weed from B.C. He's never bothered with antidepressants since he started smoking weed. "It takes all the ugly out of the situation." With these two big outlays, the first 2 weeks of every month are pretty good. It's the second 2 weeks that "are hell. As he puts it, "I have an addiction... I'm what's known as obsessive compulsive," which looks like smoking his monthly

allowance of weed until it's gone, mid-month, and having no money left for more... or food.

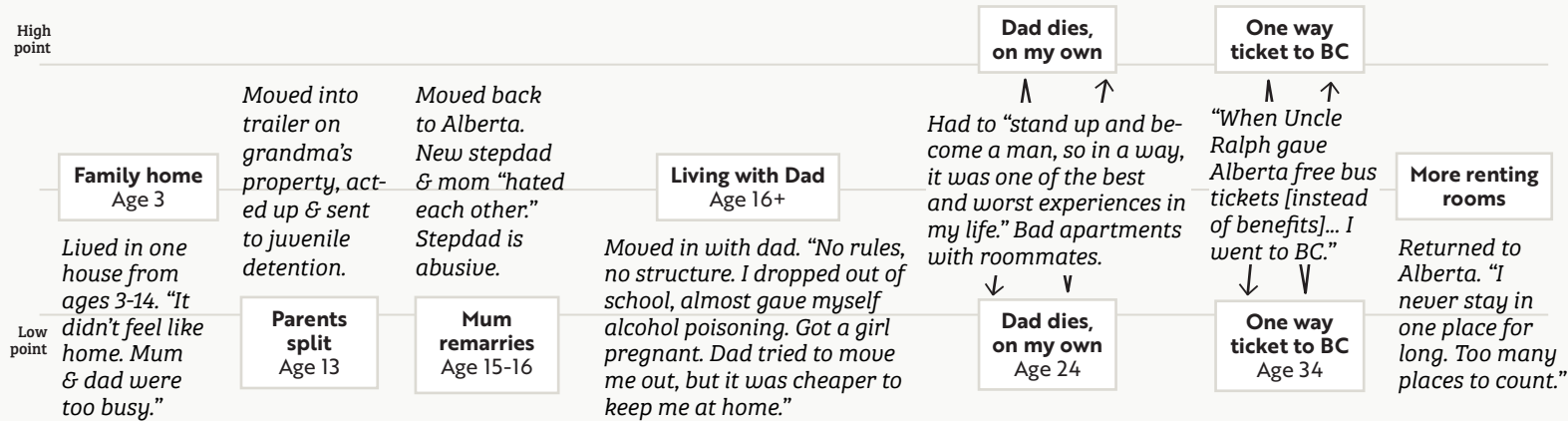
Mark is disgruntled with his quality of life but seems to make an effort to keep his expectations low. He is a survivor: from a difficult birth that left him with brain damage to parental neglect and domestic abuse, and placement in a detention home when his mother couldn't cope after the divorce. His reference points for 'home' are poor: "It's been more or less a place to sleep, a place to eat. When I think of a [proper] home I think warmth, I think of love... you know, interaction: so I can't tell you I've really ever had a home."



The times that Mark has reached out for help have been disappointing. When he first qualified for AISH, he received a support worker. But the worker’s narrow scope didn’t fit with Mark’s perceived needs, so he cancelled it. A life-long itinerant, when facing challenges in a relationship, he tends to take flight. He vacillates between blaming himself - “Mark makes bad decisions!” he says, laughing ruefully - and frustration with a system that offers few options.

Currently, Mark is weighing his options for the advent of winter in an apartment that is kept too cold. At first he is firm that he’ll be out by October. Upon prompting, he considers another option: talking to his landlord, who lives above. “We’re starting to kind of form a friendship. So I’m hoping by September that I can say “hey, look at: I can pay a maximum of 950 a month, but I’m not going to be cold downstairs.’ I want to live there!”

The Past



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: 3 months into a lease
Type: 1 bdrm basement apartment
With whom: alone, landlord lives above
How found:
Rent: \$950/month
Percentage of Income
Income from AISH

Sense of at-homeness

low high

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

Protected by lease, no control over the heat

Homing practices

Making a meal Cleaning

Decision-making drivers

Living alone Landlord Tenant Act

Being on lease Out of downtown

Top Stressors

Addiction “[The weed] just takes all the evil, all the ugly out of the situation. I don’t lose my temper as easy; it’s more calm.”

Loneliness & isolation “It’s just me. I don’t have a circle of friends.”

Money & food Used to go to Operation Friendship meals but “they’ve cut quality and quantity. I don’t go anymore.”

Choice & control: “I’ve chosen to not put myself in a situation where I am under somebody else’s control.... When I’m in control, I make very bad choices: impulsive, no planning... as I get older I can’t really do that anymore.”

Enablers and Barriers

	Enablers	Barriers	
Policies & Resources	Landlord Tenant Act		Friendship with Jesus and God
	Innkeepers Act	Support worker (AISH, in past)	“I have decided, unless I can see a future, 65 I won’t be [here.]”
	Unlimited increases in rent		
People & Relationships	Cuts to community meal budgets		
Attitudes & Beliefs			

How they see themselves

"I'm a troublemaker. I like to bug people" Her friend Germaine says, "She's good people, crazy, trouble. She helps everyone."

Roles: Mother, athlete, comedy-lover, entertainer

Lived experience

Sexual violence, intimate partner violence, racism, CPS, homelessness, addiction, loss/grief

Perk

Motivation to share their story

Reclaiming control

Perk wants to be heard, seen, and believed. Telling her story is her way of reclaiming control which she repeatedly loses in her relationship with James.

Wants to be heard about

Intimate partner violence

Housing

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Apartment Family Nice Furniture
Abbotsfield Gym Swimming pool

Distance from current

Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Family loss retreats

Mothers like Perk, whose children have been taken away by CPS, face many barriers to reconciliation. What if the day after children are removed, parents accessed a holistic retreat to process loss & connect with informal & formal supports?

Trust rebuilding circles

How might folks like Perk, with long history interfacing systems that have let them down, go through a Truth & Reconciliation process? Could this be a step towards rebuilding trust? A necessary condition for housing interventions to work.

Gym perks

Perk loves to work out and stay fit. What if recreation centres paired people with similar goals or interests, and helped kickstart relationships by offering a few perks: equipment, trainers?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

"Today is a good day. I had a good night's rest." I met Perk behind a Tim Horton's in Abbotsfield. "It's good to see you," she greets me. We were supposed to meet two other folks at the Tim Horton's but got stood up. I noticed the bruises on Perk's arm and face. It was my third time back in Abbotsfield. Every time, I ran into Perk. This time, she told me her story.

Points of (un)familiarity

"You know 'silence of the lambs'?" Another movie reference I don't get. Although I don't always get the punch line, we both find laughter in the darkest of places. The two wisdoms my grandma held on to, even in the midst of dementia, were: "men are dirty" and "don't ever lose your sense of humour". I don't know the pain of having my children taken away, and I haven't lived on the streets. What I can relate to, is a desire to be free from men's control.

Nina

Cis woman

White

European

A MOMENT IN TIME IN
2.5 Hours Chat
returned
June 2022

Perk

Cis woman
Age 38
Paskwāwiyiniwak
Cree

Perk consented to photos, but we were required to anonymize under Alberta's Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act.

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I like to laugh a lot. That's the best medicine."

Perk calls herself a troublemaker. "I like to bug people." As if trying to make a point, she calls out to a random stranger we pass by: "Hey! She wants to fight you", pointing at me. The man looks confused, me too. Perk laughs. We repeat the scene a few more times. The second time, she doesn't catch me off guard, and I join in the joke: "I know I don't look like it but I'm a good fighter".

Perk once had an apartment in Abbotsfield: "I used to have a nice home with nice furniture. I started with nothing. I was proud of myself." Back then, she worked on the Yellowhead Highway, taking on double shifts to provide for her kids. When she got home from work one day, her youngest

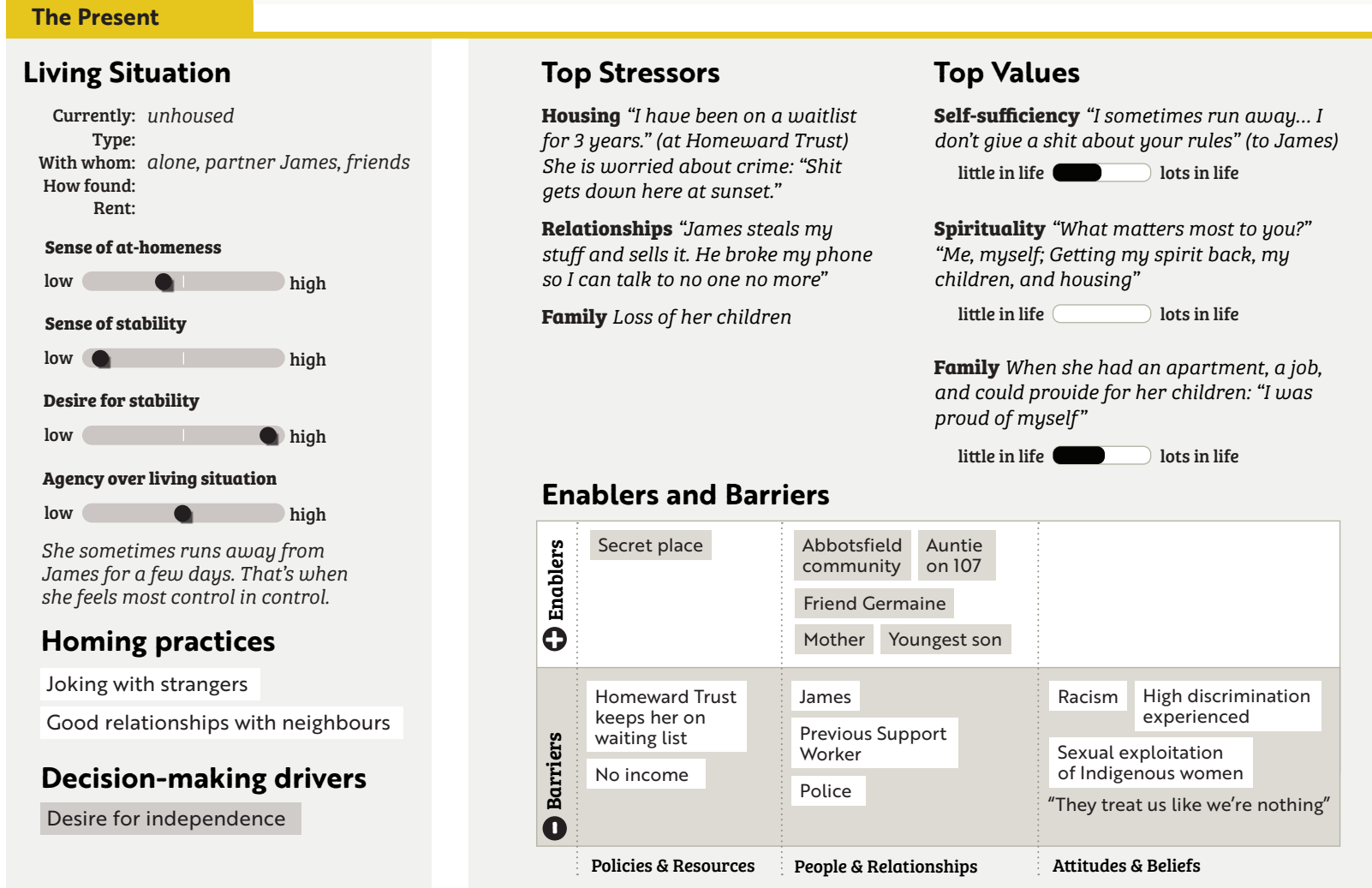
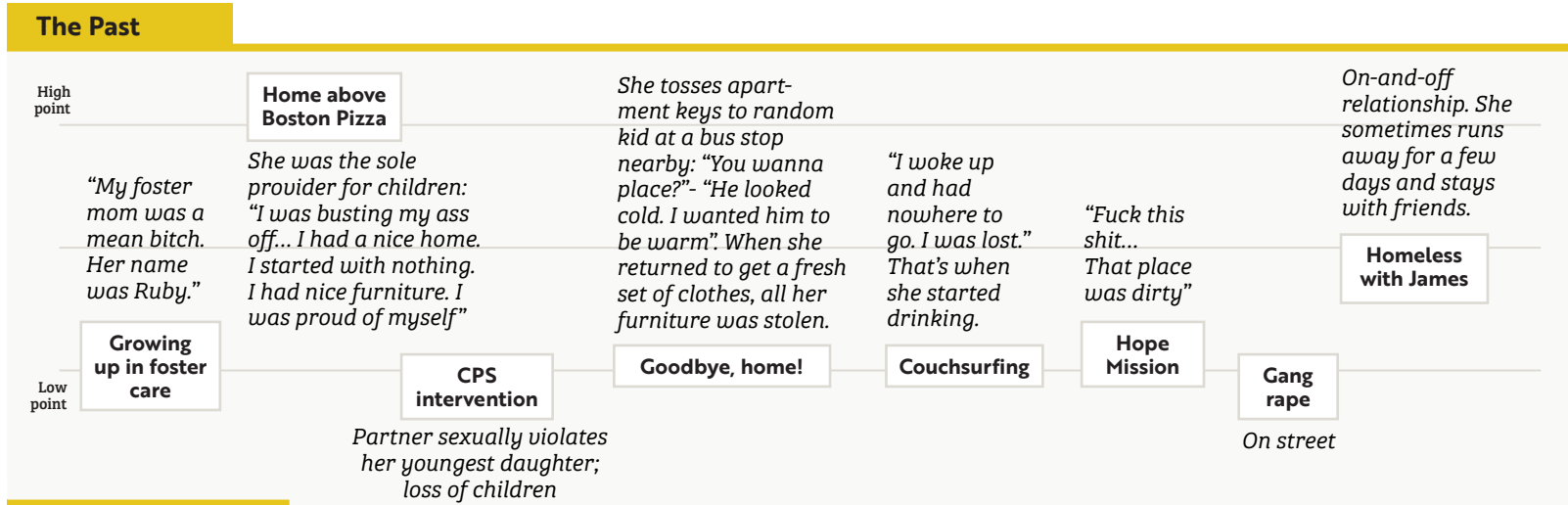
daughter implored: "Mama, don't go to work no more". Her daughter's dad had molested her so Perk called the police. Shortly after, CPS took her daughters away. Perk says she doesn't understand why she was deemed an unfit mother when the kids' father sexually abused their youngest one.

That same day, Perk left her apartment. She tossed the keys to a random kid at a bus stop. "You need a place?" She shrugs at my incredulous face, "He looked cold." For a while, she stayed with friends until one of them had a police incident. She ended up in someone's laundry room. "I was lost. I had nowhere to go." She turned to Hope Mission for shelter but found the conditions intolerable. "That place was dirty."



Perk has been homeless for 3 ½ years. She says she’s been on a wait list at Homeward Trust for 3 years, without success. She had a support worker once who was “Caucasian” and “didn’t understand nothing”. Frustrated, she insists “I could never get help”.

James, her on-and-off again partner, tells me they are trying to find a place together. I ask Perk where she got the bruises on her arm and face that weren’t there the last time I saw her. “I don’t like it when you break the rules”, James responds in her place. “I don’t give a shit about your rules”, Perk fires back. As she is sharing her story with me, I ask if she’ll get in trouble for talking to me: “No.” People in Abbotsfield have her back. Everyone we run into is her “buddy”. James keeps following us with some distance. Perk interrupts her storytelling to observe him, to utter a few angry remarks, and then, without skipping a beat, she picks up exactly where she trailed off. Holding control over her story seems to be worth the risk.





Puppy Rose collecting her bag of belongings as she heads out to make phone calls and do errands.



Puppy Rose catching-up with a friend she met volunteering, who has offered to call her landlord and inquire about openings.

How they see themselves

“Like a fucking dummy because I can’t read or write or remember anything.”

Roles: Survivor, mother, helper, cook, volunteer

Lived experience
Death/grief, addiction, violence, racism, chronic health, disability

Puppy Rose

Motivation to share their story

Desire for social/emotional support

Sharing story because “wants life to change”

Wants to be heard about

Housing waitlist Access to services Emotional support

Desired Future State

Ideal Home	Private space	Peaceful	Free of bad memories
	Working appliances	Laundry included	

Distance from current
Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Service Tracker


Puppy Rose has no idea where she is on the waitlist, or the status of services. What if there was a fedex-like tracking system that Puppy Rose could check by calling a number or going online with the latest updates? What if there was a centralized way she could leave feedback?


Family Restoration

What if when people left jail, their family members got access to special supports to both repair the relationship and prevent some of the stresses and burden of care they now assume?

Healing Swap

What if people like Puppy Rose who have endured a significant grief & loss event in their apartment could swap apartments with others on benefits so they could get a fresh start? What if swapping apartments came with a range of other healing offers?

**Sarah**
Cis woman
White
Jewish

**And Rochelle**

Listener’s Perspective

How we met

We intercept Puppy Rose as she is leaving the Beverly No Frills. “How’s your housing situation?” we ask. She opens up, tearfully explaining how unsafe she feels since her son moved back in. She’s fed up. Debts are piling up. The day we meet, laundry is on her mind. Her laundry card has gone missing and she’s been banned from the local laundromat.


Points of (un)familiarity

I am not yet a mother, and I do not know the pain of losing children. I am not an Indigenous woman, facing ongoing violence and hostility. I am a survivor of childhood trauma, and I very much relate to Puppy Rose’s desire to keep busy and have a purpose.

June 2022

6 Hours Chat returned

A MOMENT IN TIME IN



Puppy Rose

Cis woman
Age 59
Indigenous Cree

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

“I’d like to relax in my house, and put my feet up because right now, I do all the payments, the food, everything.”

“Yellow is a healing colour. Red is a gangsta colour. Orange is Every Child Matters. Green is a bright, nice colour. Brown is chocolate on my face.” Puppy Rose grins as she makes poetry from skittles. Her face is a fast-moving weather system: radiant sun with intermittent rain, reflecting, refracting, and dispersing both light and dark.

By our third meet-up, Puppy Rose knows our phone number by heart. She mourns the loss of her memory — all the while keeping track of a rotating cast of service providers who never seem to answer. “1000 voicemails. I just get dead ends. I’m trying to be busy and get me back on track.”

The track has careened through almost unspeakable tragedy, which Puppy

Rose shares in a near whisper. “I think I have half a heart. I have been crushed.” She’s lived through stomach-churning violence, and outlived two sons. Their presence remains visceral; they massage her shoulders while watching TV and beckon her to the patio. “Mom, come over they were saying. I was so happy. I thought they were real... Then I had a seizure and hurt myself.”

The seizures keep coming, requiring a cocktail of meds that fog-up her mind. Lately, Puppy Rose finds her hands shaking, her hearing aids aren’t working so well, and she’s losing weight. “I think a lot about heaven...I have lost a lot of family. I keep it inside, that’s where the stress and sickness come from.” Maybe a return visit to detox could help, Puppy Rose wonders. “I’d really like to change

How they see themselves

Weak and sad.

Roles: Mother, sister, daughter, friend, seamstress

Lived experience

Immigration, family separation

Sanaa

Motivation to share their story

Seeking support

"Can you bring my parents to this country?"

Wants to be heard about

Friendship importance

Separation from parents

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Parents live nearby

Children happy, not bullied

Cooking

Have a cat

Distance from current

Far



Close

Canada brought closer her dreams of a good future for her kids, but made her ideal of being close to parents and extended family very far away.

Opportunity Areas

Humane Standards

Sumayya's generosity is a lifeline for Sanaa and her family. But breaking occupancy standards could have cost them their lease. What if, when landlords find too many people in a rental, they had the resources and responsibility to facilitate good transitions?

Unexpected Connections

Connected by... your dentist? What if we made this our city's theme and identity... a city of unexpected connection. Could we hire artists to create public art, poetry, and murals with stories of chosen families?

Informal Supportive Housing (ISH)

Informal supports like Sumayya made all the difference. What if we incentivized new builds to design features that foster informal supports between neighbours?

Listener's Perspective

How we met

I was introduced to Sanaa by Sumayya. I met Sumayya when the two of them and their husbands had driven to the food bank together. While the others were collecting their items, Sumayya and I had a delightful conversation. I was amazed by their home-sharing situation and wanted to learn more.

Points of (un)familiarity

When we met, Sanaa was feeling deep sorrow and I have felt this at times in my life too. We both delight in kittens, houses filled with kids, and being in nature. I've never had to leave my home country, live in a 1 room place with 5 others, try to help my kid being bullied, or learn a new language while being a parent.

Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Dutch descendant

And Hayley

A MOMENT IN TIME IN
4 Hours Chat
June 2022 returned

Sanaa

Cis woman
Age 33
Syrian

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

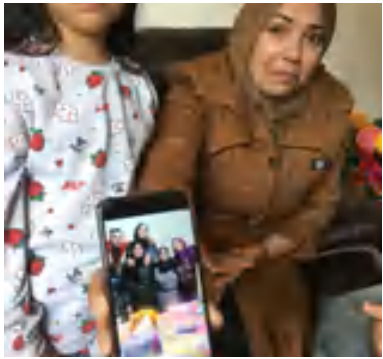
"The important thing is her children. My mom said, if not for us, [we would] not come here, we would be staying with her family."

"The doctor, he told me, 'Just help this family. No have any friends, anything.'" - Sumayya describes the day she met Sanaa. Now they are 14 people living together, 4 adults and 10 kids.

Two Syrian women, from different regions, and suddenly their lives become intertwined from this chance encounter. Their families each took very different journeys to get here - Sumayya's family stayed in a refugee camp in Turkey before arriving 5 years ago, while Sanaa's family lived in Lebanon for the past 10 years next to her mom. Now they go everywhere together; the doctor, food bank, etc.. Sumayya has opened her home and welcomed the whole family in. They'll stay here for 10 days until they can move into a neighbouring

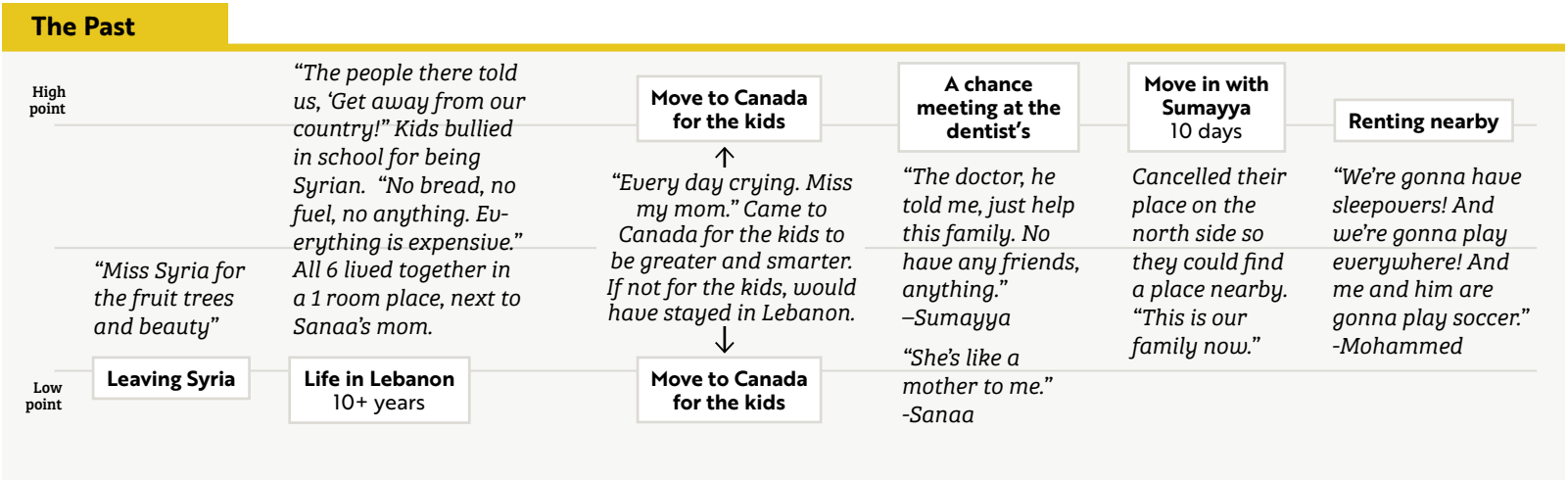
townhouse that Sumayya found for them on Facebook marketplace.

With 14 people in one townhouse, it's a bustling place. Laham Bajine and coffee get passed around. Three boys emerge from the basement and join us on the couches. Everyone pitches in to help translate. Mohammed, who just turned 13, is our key helper. A little girl in strawberry print pjs cuddles up. The husbands pull up chairs, and an older daughter brings up an armful of four meowing newborn kittens. The room bounces with energy, and there's cascading bursts of laughter. Sanaa's family had a rental place arranged in north Edmonton, but cancelled it to be close to Sumayya. It's easy to tell why. "We're gonna have sleepovers! And



we're gonna play everywhere!" We ask if it's difficult having 14 people in one home. "No," replies Sanaa. They're used to it – in Lebanon their whole family was in one room.

The kids race upstairs to show us their rooms. 4 boys in one room, 2 teenage girls in another room painted pink, 1 room for parents, more kids in the last bedroom. Others are sleeping on the couch and in the basement. Despite all the smiles and giggles, Sanaa grows quiet partway through our conversation. Mohammed translates: "Missing the family. Missing her mom." Sanaa pulls up a video on her phone – it's a party on their last day in Lebanon. There's a birthday cake, and the room is filled with sisters, brothers, cousins, and her mom. Sanaa's forehead is taught. She's been crying every day since they arrived. If it wasn't for her kids, she wouldn't have left Lebanon. Her kids are everything. But as our time draws to an end, Sanaa turns to me and asks if I can help bring her parents to Canada too.



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: At friend’s place

Type: 4 bedroom townhouse

With whom: The 2 families, 14 people total

How found: Dentist introduction

Rent: \$0

*Moving to a 3 bedroom townhouse nearby, for \$1500/month (65% of income), found on facebook marketplace.

Sense of at-homeness

low high

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

Homing practices

Photos of family

Qu’ran verses

Cat

Furniture

Decorations

Cooking

Kids’ school projects

Decision-making drivers

Kids’ wellbeing

Close to friends

Close to doctor, school

Top Stressors

Memories of the past

“And in Lebanon, every Syrian people is bullied. Her kids being bullied.”

Loneliness & Isolation

“[Mom] doesn’t love the loneliness. She doesn’t like to be loneliness.”

Getting around

“Yesterday [Sanaa] had sugar, do you know, diabetes, and she’s falling on the ground, and Auntie Sumayya come to scream. We want a car to go to doctor if mom being again like this. “

Top Values

Faith

“We are Muslim. It’s very important. Very important. My mom teach me how to pray for like 10 years.”

little in life lots in life

Hope

Wants to have healthy children, family to be freer, feel safe, healthy. Go to school, learn English, get job, hear nature again. Sponsor her parents.

little in life lots in life

Family

“The kids are number one.” And: “Home sick so much”

little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	Food bank	Sumayya and family	Excited
		Kids	
Barriers	Punitive occupancy regulations	Had no one in Canada	Sumayya’s kids discrimination in school (at first when they didn’t know English)
		So few supports – only 1 worker who helped with paperwork	
	Policies & Resources	People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

Strong, neighbourly, smart, independent, generous, helpful, caring, trustworthy, fancy.

Roles: Christian, churchgoer, sister, cook, neighbour

Lived experience

Immigration, divorce

Suad

Motivation to share their story

Social connection

"I like this. This is nice. Is nice talking"

Wants to be heard about

Negligent landlords

Pests

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Simple Clean Familiar Neighbourhood

Sunlight Proximity to church Safe

Distance from current

Far Close

"I'm 65; I need clean place... If I move to nice place, then I want to see nephew."

Opportunity Areas

Text Message Updates

Suad has her belongings boxed-up, waiting for the call to move. But, she's not sure when the call will come. What if social housing providers offered weekly text check-ins & waitlist updates in order to enable people to not feel forgotten?

Local Greeters

Suad loves to meet people, and get out of her house. What if each neighbourhood had ambassadors that welcomed new residents, and helped folks get situated and feel more connected?

Paired Meals

Suad's not in a position to invite people over, but loves sharing space. What if there was a telephone-based platform where people who eat alone could be matched to each other as meal companions?

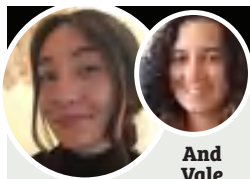
Listener's Perspective

How we met

We met Suad in front of Ben's Deli at our first recruitment station. We set-up an outdoor living room and invited people to sit and chat with us. Suad sat down and stayed the whole day. She made two candles and spread joy.

Points of (un)familiarity

Neither Suad nor I were born in Canada but our immigration stories are quite different: She came to Canada in 1997 at 40 years old; I arrived in 2019, having just turned 26. She fled war; I came for school. She was with family; I by myself. She knew no English; I did. Despite these significant differences, I share the experience of being separated from a place, a culture, and a language that feel like home.



Nina

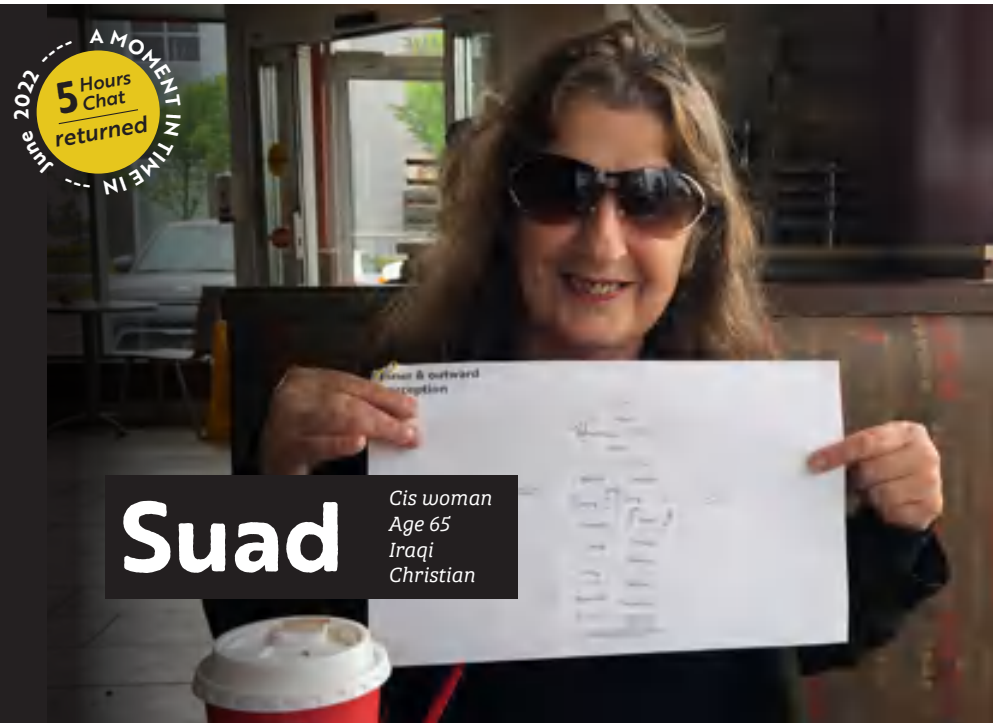
Cis woman

White

European



And Vale



Suad

Cis woman
Age 65
Iraqi
Christian

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I don't like control. I felt it with my family. I don't control anyone, and no one controls me."

Suad is relentlessly optimistic. Her smile is infectious. "I feel hopeful all the time!" Her optimism is grounded in her deep faith. Whenever she faces hardship or struggles in life, she seeks prayer: "I pray and problem go away." Besides helping her navigate difficult times, Suad's faith connects her to community. She goes to church at least three times a week. Sometimes, she brings coffee or juice to start a conversation with, and build good relationships. When she brought that same convivial spirit to her apartment building, the gesture wasn't always appreciated. She misses the tight net of neighbourly relationships she knew back home in Iraq. "In Canada, it's different," she explains with a hint of regret.

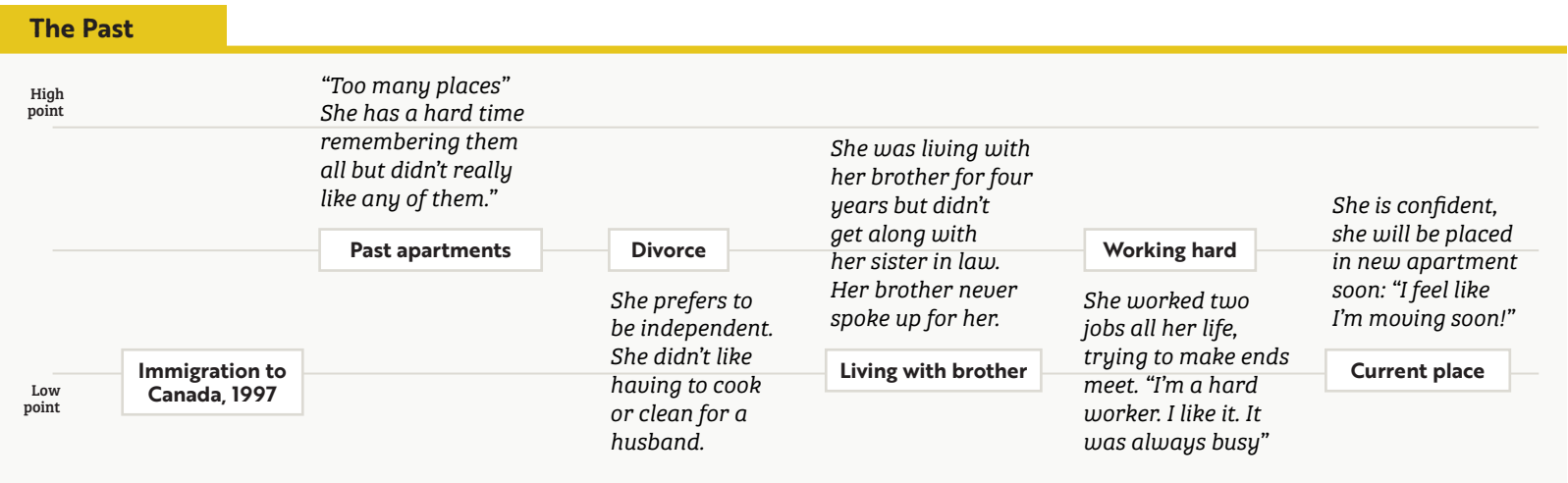
Despite feeling disconnected from neighbours, Suad is at ease in her area. She has been living in the West Jasper Place neighbourhood for 18 years. Everything she needs is close-by. "I know this area perfect. I like walking everywhere...I do everything myself." Suad takes pride in her self-sufficiency, and defends her independence fervently: "I don't like control. I felt it with my family. I don't control anyone and no one controls me." Whenever any of her brothers try to question her life, she fights back: "Why I live like this? It's for me, not for you."

Suad prefers to live by herself. She thought about moving in with her sister, but decided it wouldn't work out. "My sister is old; I can't care for her."



I'm simple, she's complicated." Simplicity is a reoccurring theme when it comes to her housing. "When I have what I have, I am happy. I don't need dining room. I am just one person." She wants a simple, clean one-bedroom apartment where she can invite people over. In her current place, a basement apartment, mice force her to double-package all food and to store everything in the fridge. The walls are moldy. There is no air flow and a lot of dust. She cleans her apartment four times a day. At 65, she says, "it's too much work."

When we first meet, Suad is hopeful that she will be placed in a new apartment. "I feel like I'm moving soon." Her sister in law gave her the number of a senior housing agency. She sent in her application a year ago and calls once a week to check. Two days after I return her story, Suad calls me, ecstatic. A spot opened in a senior home close to where she lives now. "It's a nice place! And oh, the kitchen! So big and clean."



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: housed

Type: basement apartment, on lease

With whom: alone

How found: with help of sister in law

Rent: \$1100/month + \$150 utilities

Percentage of Income

140%

"It's too much", her brother helps

Sense of at-homeness

lowhigh

Sense of stability

lowhigh

Desire for stability

lowhigh

Agency over living situation

lowhigh

Homing practices

Cleaning "When I clean, I am happy"

Listening to Christian music on the radio

Decision-making drivers

Desire for independence

Top Stressors

Housing & Cleanliness

The apartment is very dusty. She cleans four times a day. It is a lot of work to keep the apartment clean.

Food

She would like to cook at home again. She cannot prepare food in her kitchen right now.

Safety

Do you feel safe at home? "I make it safe. Before, no." She blocks off the windows because someone broke in.

Top Values

Faith

She attends church three times a week and says praying makes problems go away. "I go all week to church."

little in lifelots in life

Community

She likes having community in her church and neighbourhood. Seeing her family more often would require her to travel. She doesn't want that. "I don't have a big community, just my family. I like friends more than family. They are more fun."

little in lifelots in life

Hope

"I feel hopeful all the time... Jesus makes heart feel good"

little in lifelots in life

Enablers and Barriers

+ Enablers		<div>Church friends</div> <div>Brothers</div> <div>Sister in law</div>	<div>Relentless optimism is grounded in Christian faith</div>
	<div>\$900 pension doesn't cover rent</div>	<div>Landlord</div> <div>Brothers</div> <div>Neighbours</div>	<div>Brothers' attempts to control her life because she is a woman</div>
- Barriers			

Policies & Resources

People & Relationships

Attitudes & Beliefs

How they see themselves

"I enjoy life, I'm a loving person"
Independent, smart, outgoing, bubbly, fun.

Roles: Leader, daughter, sister, aunty (it's the best part), volunteer

Lived experience

Disability, mental health, grief and loss, isolation, racism, ableism, adoption, suicide, sexual violence.

Syd

Motivation to share their story

Human Connection/
Relationships

"I just love talking to you guys."

Wants to be heard about

Loneliness

Mental wellbeing

Beauty of Inuit culture

Safe space for Inuit

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Family & friends around

Traditional food

Welcoming

Her language being spoken

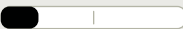
Safe

Access to traditional food

Accessibility

Distance from current

Far



Close

"Like nobody, I don't get invited to friends' houses."

Opportunity Areas

Inuit-led housing

What if some housing was designed with Inuit values, language, culture, and hospitality in mind. It could be open to Inuit people of all incomes and abilities.

Home Fire

What if we created housing with the intention of having companionship. Designed for people who are looking to meet a long-term partner and want to share their life with someone. People could stay as long or little as they want.

Sharing-Friendly Units

What if there were "sharing-friendly" housing complexes, similar to kid or pet-friendly apartments. A simple messaging change could shift the interest of potential renters, and create a space for people seeking community or facing loneliness.

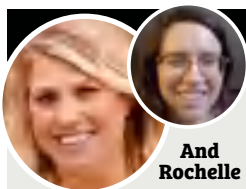
Listener's Perspective

How we met

We're passing out iced coffees when Syd walks up to OSYS with a slight limp. It takes her time to formulate words and we listen in. She is filled with surprises. She has travelled to Hawaii as a youth ambassador, works online for an IT company, and speaks with love of her home in Ulukhaktok. Who is this amazing woman?

Points of (un)familiarity

We're both independent women, have a great sense of humour, and love a good cuss at times. We both left small welcoming communities for urban settings that better met our individual needs, despite the isolation, lack of community, and loneliness. What is less familiar is life with a disability, ableism, and racism.



Hayley

Cis woman

White



And Rochelle

6 Hours Chat returned
-- June/July 2022 -- A MOMENT IN TIME

Syd

Cis woman
Age 22
Inuk

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I don't think anything could compare to the love and generosity we have up there. In Ulu, we share everything like food and homes."

While sitting in Friends and Neighbours Cafe enjoying omelettes, Syd becomes noticeably quiet and less engaged. Her bubbly spirit seems to evaporate. Tears turn to sobs. Was the catalyst our chat, or unrelated? We decide to end our breakfast early and jump in the car. Syd shares the song she has been playing on repeat. We blast through the river valley, singing our hearts out, with the windows down, giggling.

Syd is no stranger to heartache. She left her cherished home community in Ulukhaktok where she felt belonging and ease. "I had it all growing up." Her reasons for leaving are complex, or explanations too painful to share. She

is fierce, with a make-it-happen spirit. When the world fell apart, she relocated to Edmonton and found an Airbnb before arranging place with a roommate on fb, only for that to turn south.

Syd works online for a tech company. It's a bit precarious at the moment; she may be unemployed by September unless the funding resolves. She has been here before: the anxiety won't fade until then. "There is always E.I., but that won't be enough."

Adventure-loving, she started her catching-flights-life in her teens, staying with host families all over Canada and in Hawaii as an Internet Society

youth ambassador. Some flights were more personal; she lost count of MediVacs to Yellowknife or Inuvik due to cerebral palsy and what she describes as a genetic mental illness.

Being a daughter, sister, aunt, and pet lover keep her grounded, but are faraway or out of reach. “I’m really lonely.” The lack of meaningful connection is hard. She copes by attending an AHS mental health program, supports through OSYS, and by sleeping it away. “When I cry, I feel better. It also makes me tired, which is good. When I’m hurting I like sleeping the pain away. You don’t feel anything when you’re sleeping, right? I don’t know if that’s helping or not, but I’ve always done that.”

At the moment, she lives in a 3rd floor walk up, furnished with a tiny sofa and one picture her uncle gave her. Material things don’t seem to be a source of comfort. She shares how the living room feels peaceful, and she spends hours in the stillness. The balcony has a view of a giant tree, but goes unused because it’s connected to neighbours and she doesn’t want to disturb anyone.

To Syd, home is where she hears her language, smells fish drying, and feels seal skin, all the while sewing the moccasins she never quite finished.

The Past



The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *Housed*
Type: *1 bedroom apartment*
With whom: *Alone*
How found: *Online*
Rent: *\$1,200/month*
Percentage of Income:

Sense of at-homeness
low high

Sense of stability
low high

Desire for stability
low high

Agency over living situation
low high

Forced to live away from her home community that she loves

Homing practices

Sitting in the quiet living room
Brother bringing arctic char
Fresh sheets
Comfy furniture

Decision-making drivers

Getting away from awful people
Access to healthcare, public transit
Safety
Mental wellbeing

Top Stressors

Money “I’m scared its gonna end, my contract might be done in September. There’s always EI but that won’t be enough.”
Loneliness/isolation “I don’t have family around so it does get lonely, when I go to group programing at OSYS that’s when I feel ok, but when I get home, it’s hard.”
Grief & loss / death & dying “I just lost a cousin a couple of weeks ago.”

Top Values

(Romantic) Relationships “I’d like to have a family of my own like how I grew up.”
little in life lots in life
Personal Growth “I’m still working on my mental health, I want to be happy and [be in] a place when I don’t have to go to mental health activities.”
little in life lots in life
Stability “I have a home, that’s a sign I have it right?” “I’ve never really had anything that worked out all at the same time.”
little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers	Airbnb, facebook marketplace Mental health activities	Friends from back home Best friend from Yellowknife Mental health workers OSYS staff Uncle in Edmonton Nieces & nephews Mom & Dad	Self-reliance & confidence Radical self acceptance of her circumstances
	Inherent unbridgeable gap between here and her home, family, and culture Lack of healthcare supports in home community	Friend Chloe Ex-boyfriend Bob Awful/toxic roommate situation that led to mental health spiral	Racism in malls, city buses Ablesim for her physical disability High discrimination experienced
Barriers	Policies & Resources	People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs



Entrance to campsite: Taking a detour on her way to finding a stable home



The campsite

How they see themselves

"I'm a pretty goddamn good person. People trust me."

Roles: Mother, daughter, streetmother, waitress, college student, survivor, hustler, street socialite

Lived experience

Intimate partner violence, sexual violence as child, addiction, family breakdown, homelessness, discrimination

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

- Community living space
- Shared ownership
- Consensus-based decision-making
- Counselors on site
- Designated chores
- Garden
- Pets
- "People want to contribute"

Distance from current

Far Close

"It's amazing how fast life can change. Any second, we could be back on the streets."

Twilene

Motivation to share their story

Visibility

Twilene understands the power of story writing. She points to her many journals: "Write it up. I'm going to write a book one day"

Wants to be heard about

Housing struggles



Twilene

Cis woman
Age 61
White

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I don't depend on any goddamn man."

When we pull into the motel parking lot on the outskirts of Edmonton, Twilene is carefully rearranging the plastic wreath on her entrance door. Artificial plants and golden apples greet visitors with an air of charming kitsch. "Welcome to our home" letters loom through the floral decor. To the right, a wooden sign announces: "I'm moving to BC :)." Pinned to the window, a hastily written note says: "Fuck off, M!"

Twilene has been living in the motel for a couple of months now. She likes living here because it has a country-es-que feel to it. She was evicted from her last place because a friend broke into her apartment when she was hospital-ized. In between the eviction and the motel, she spent six weeks camping out in tent city. "I'm a survivor", she

concludes with confidence. Having spent most of her life in flux, Twilene has learned to rely on herself. "When you're down the hole, you gotta climb up on your own." She takes pride in her sense of autonomy: "I made sure I can pay my own bills. No guy can control me." She even refused to accept money from her father who, she says, doesn't have much himself: "I can jump into 20 dumpsters and make money. I don't need money from a pensioner."

Homeward Trust will only house Twilene if a spot in permanent supportive housing opens up. She doesn't seem to be aware of that stipulation. I ask a worker at Jasper Wellness Centre if anyone has consulted Twilene about her needs. In the past, both her social nature and

Opportunity Areas

Self-defined Supports

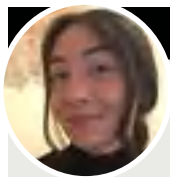
What if the kind of housing a person needs and the conditions that would make housing sustainable were decided with the person as part of life coaching sessions?

Natural Networker

What if the system recog-nized natural networkers and social lynch pins and offered them a role in shared hous-ing situations, to support group decision-making and community development?

Relationship Coach

Harm reduction is a frame for addiction, but not often relation-ships. What if there were harm reduction housing coaches for people enmeshed in tough rela-tionships without the expecta-tion they will sever all contact?



Listener's Perspective

How we met

Our colleague Sue introduced me to Twilene. The two of them met when Twilene was living in a tent and needed a place to store her belongings. Sue saw her pushing a heavy cart close to her house and started a conversation. Now, Twilene considers Sue an important friend.

Points of (un)familiarity

Twilene's experiences of drug addiction and her history of housing instability are not within my sphere of lived experiences. Despite our difference in struggle, I relate to her unpretentious sense of humour. I share her passion for writing journals, her struggle to regulate temper, and her desire to be free from controlling men.

Nina

Cis woman
White
European

her abusive ex-partner M have gotten her into trouble with landlords. Twilene likes to keep busy, to move around, and to spend time with friends. Wherever we go, people know her. She winks at me: “I used to be a wild one; I have calmed down a lot.”

Inside her room, the walls are covered in decorative artwork and paintings. Outside, two of her neighbours start fixing Twilene’s bike. Her friend Eddie is pacing back and forth to report on the progress. Last night, all the neighbours had a barbeque together; Twilene wants to make it a tradition. She has a plan to buy the other half of the motel and turn it into a community living space. “Everyone will have a percentage”. Shared ownership and consent-based decision-making are the principles underlying her idea. “People want to contribute. They need tasks.” Eddie comes back in: the bike is fixed.



How they see themselves

Hands-on learner,
LGBTQ, polyamorous,
high maintenance,
family person

Roles: Parent, partner,
tenant, citizen, crafter,
aspiring advocate

Lived experience

LGBTQ2S+, disability,
homelessness, poverty,
discrimination, AISH,
child protection system

William

Motivation to share their story

"What I really want to do in life is become an advocate: no one really knows my story, what a person like myself goes through."

Wants to be heard about

Learning disabilities

Supports

Group homes

Discrimination

Desired Future State

Ideal Home

Where you belong LGBTQ community

Have your closest friends come Connect to people

Access properly funded programs Have your dinners

Distance from current

Far Close

Opportunity Areas

Life certificate

What if people's lived experiences counted as credentials and allowed them to co-create training? William wants to teach workers how to encounter people with disabilities like full humans.

Accessible citizenship

What if independent recruiters at drop-in and service centres supported people to share their experience with elected representatives and service designers in ways that work for them?

Intersectional ally

What if the city hired folks with intersectional identities to connect across boundaries? William has a learning disability and is queer, and wants to build bridging relationships.

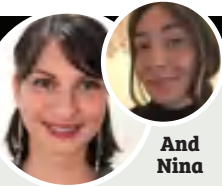
Listener's Perspective

How we met

William approached our pop-up in Jasper Place with his partner, Wayne, and talked intensely with my teammate for over an hour. William expressed a lot of passion for self-advocacy and wanted to share his story of homelessness, group home living, and discrimination he experiences as a trans man with a learning disability. We met up for dinner.

Points of (un)familiarity

William has experienced his life as an uphill battle for respect, love, and autonomy. I know what it feels like to want people to see and appreciate the person that you feel you are, but I have not faced the risks, consequences, and constraints that William has.



Natalie

Cis woman

White

Euro-Canadian



And Nina



William

Trans Male
Age 42
White

William consented to photos, but we were required to anonymize under provincial legislation.

#Edmonton #Housing Affordability

"I know, I'm a very powerful person!"

William describes himself as a family man: "I'm a big believer in family values." His daughter, son, hubby Wayne, and street family are what's most important to him. He sees relationships as the key to living a good life. The notion of family extends beyond relatives. "It goes out to community." The lack of supports for community directly affects the net of relationships that he considers family: "Everytime they cut a program, we get more disconnected from each other."

Throughout William's life, he has had episodes where he bolts: "I get to a place and my mind is just gone, fight or flight response, no point in talking to me: I want to run!" Starting when he was a teenager, he used to take to the streets. People who fill him with a sense of safe-

ty and acceptance can ground him.

When dealing with systems, William is regularly frustrated by inflexible processes and interactions. He finds money management very hard and doesn't always understand what AISH administers versus what he needs to do. That resulted in his damage deposit going unpaid when he moved into his apartment. He had to hastily find a solution (his husband's brother paid it) because AISH "would just tell me to go to a public guardian or get a trustee." Giving up control isn't a good solution from William's perspective.

He has lots of knowledge about what works for him. We are unable to name a craft that William hasn't done - from wreath-making to crochet, scrapbook-



ing to painting. “I’ve done it all on my own.I just pick it up, easily. I see a piece of art... I picture it in my mind, and I’ll figure it out. No instructions, no nothing.” Doctors have told him he has a photographic memory. “And that’s how I pick up a lot of things, or learn, because I really can’t read that well.”

He feels misunderstood and unappreciated by his landlord. “She puts way too much pressure on me.” They had trouble with bedbugs and William reached out for help. He felt blamed when the landlord suggested the cause was his street-involved guests, or his bottle picking. The landlord has been “crossing boundaries,” asking William about what he is doing and where he is going: “I’m a tenant! I’m not your child!” William exclaims in frustration.

When William gets into a topic, his passion and volume ramp up; he locks eyes with his audience. ‘Would you want to tell your story directly to Council?’ I ask. Before the words are out of my mouth, he grins: “I would love to! That would make a really big difference with me!”

The Past

High point

Calgary as a kid

Apartments with mum: 3 bedroom with patio then “normal” 2 bedroom that was a little inaccessible for mum.

Mum’s place “she got someone from the Council to help her find where she lives now”

“I lived in 3 different group homes” (5 yrs, 2 yrs, 6 yrs). Kicked out of 2nd and 3rd home because of becoming pregnant.

Periods of homelessness.

Out on my own

Got an “Independence Report”. Took 5 years to find a lawyer. He found the process was very inaccessible: “I couldn’t stand the services”

Low point

Edmonton 1997

Group homes Ages 16 - late 20s

On the streets

The Present

Living Situation

Currently: *Housed*

Type: *Private apartment*

With whom: *Wayne*

How found: *Himself; knew the landlord*

Rent: *\$850/month?*

Percentage of Income



AISH is source of income

Sense of at-homeness

low high

Sense of stability

low high

Desire for stability

low high

Agency over living situation

low high

Has guests over but the landlord complains

Homing practices

Hosting friends & family

Top Stressors

Purpose “It’s just to be able to really get them to hear my story. Someone... who sees how [this society] is actually crumbling. And I can see how a lot of things can be fixed.”

Loneliness “It’s very hard for me to make friends... if I ever have anyone stay over or visit my landlord complains and says they’re doing something wrong.”

Services Lack of funding and under-trained volunteers means programs don’t “support different individuals because each individual is different.”

Top Values

Community “When we first [lived] there, and Mustard Seed was open, I used to go there a lot, play cards, watch a movie. Now it’s closed and there’s nothing else like it.”

little in life lots in life

Home “It’s been such a long time since any place has been home. I never did totally accept Edmonton as my home - just that feeling that I haven’t yet found my place in it.”

little in life lots in life

Relationships Good relationships “make me feel I’m okay, and safe.” They “ground me.”

little in life lots in life

Enablers and Barriers

+ Enablers	Pride Centre (but not much programming now)	Sherry (lives in Calgary)	
	Mustard Seed (before they closed community meals)	Daddy Bill (deceased)	
- Barriers	AISH	Husband	
	“It’s more administrative. They don’t sit down with you or work with you. There’s no conversations and I think that’s wrong!”	Landlord	High discrimination experienced
		“I say ‘stay a week but then you have to go’...because that’s as long as you can stay in a place. But every time I do that she gets mad.”	Group homes (past)
	Policies & Resources	People & Relationships	Attitudes & Beliefs

Appendix:

Long-form Story

This long-form story shares an unfolding eviction, offers a deep-dive into the limitations of current institutional responses, and opens-up possibilities for shifting policy frames and housing solutions.



THE HOUSE THAT IS MORE THAN A HOUSE

June 2022



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Prologue



"Really what matters is we just need to be heard. I am focused on that. I am surviving. Money has no value for me, really, but it's just a reality."

- Justin

When we gather on an early summer evening, hope dances with reality. Maybe the Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service (RTDRS) made a mistake. Maybe the livid landlord will calm down. Maybe a different truth will prevail. Maybe a new house can be found. For fifteen more days, there is space to imagine saving the house that is more than just a house.

The setting



A metal rooster greets visitors to the faded gray house on the corner with his signature strength, bravery, and enthusiasm. Visitors, residents, and friends blend seamlessly in this fluid meeting and living space, where the front door functions less like a divider than a uniter. Justin is perched on the couch, gently guiding traffic. “We’re having a house meeting,” he patiently announces to a near constant parade of characters: a roller-skater in a hot pink mini-skirt who glides in and out with a hot box of pizza; a track-suit clad man lost in thought; a woman with long braids and a bottle of pop. “Why don’t you go downstairs?” Justin suggests to those who do not wish to constructively participate.

Downstairs is an unfinished basement, bathed in fairy lights, and set-up with makeshift sitting and sleeping quarters, hosting anywhere from two to twelve people on any given day and night. Upstairs is a kitchen, a couple of bedrooms, bathroom, and living area lit by a single bulb, which is rotated between fixtures where needed. Fewer light bulbs give way to lower electricity bills, which is one of a litany of complaints from the increasingly irate landlord. A large Canadian flag covers a cracked window, also on the unagreed-upon complaint list. A second maple-leaf flag adorns a wall near the TV alongside an Oilers poster, across from a gold-framed print of ceramic pots and a South Sudanese flag. It’s

both perfect symbolism for the intermingling of cultures happening here, and an imperfect mask for the volatile, too often hostile, in-betweenness that people coming and going from here face.

“This is a source of community for everyone,” Justin explains. “Everyone has their different situations... Since COVID so many people couldn’t find a way out. Social assistance is not a welcoming place. A lot of people have been cut off from assistance, and can’t communicate because everything is over the phone and it’s been going on for so long.”

COVID added a fresh coat of precariousness to lives marked by events out of their control. Justin and Dafala left war to come to Canada a couple of decades ago only to find an economic system tied to the ups-and-downs of resource extraction and rigged against newcomers. Ayana migrated to Edmonton as an eight-year old child, but doesn’t yet have Canadian citizenship. Deen sought safety in Canada from Sierra Leone but faces near constant police harassment.

“Many people who come to this house have English as a second language,” Justin says. “These are people who can’t express themselves sometimes, or they might not have much self-esteem and they just don’t know who to trust.”

Some of the many

The house holds many voices and intersecting stories. Here are four:



Justin



Ayana



Deen



Dafala



Justin

After years spent waiting in refugee camps, Justin found himself back on campsites. This time at logging camps in Northern BC, not refugee camps, and as a Canadian citizen and cook, not as a Sudanese child soldier. But being away for long stretches became less and less tenable. Every time Justin took an extended job, there was chaos at the faded gray house he'd rented and opened-up: broken windows, damaged property, unexpected bills. So he came back to town, forgoing an income to look after the house and its co-inhabitants.

"A friend of mine and I rented this place last year [during COVID]. She has her own situation and is in jail. So it was just me. I needed roommates. I can't stay here myself. Lots of people have situations. People facing mental problems, or people who are stuck, where other apartments won't accept them. So I thought: we have a community who can understand, and ensure people are not turned away."

Shared understanding can be in awfully short supply. While the house isn't far from a bevy of downtown services and community centres, Justin identifies a critical missing ingredient: love. *"The difference here from other services is love. We understand each other. We take care of each other. We are responsible for each other. We are multicultural - black, white, brown, yellow -- we all have a situation, but we feel comfortable here."*

For Justin, the house represents more than a place. It's a calling. He's reserved a name and website -- Bill-Koui Community Services -- and started a business plan. *"Bill-Koui Community Services is an organization established by the views of life. Everyone's view of life is*

different from others, but together we achieve things... As a community, we are often working with people who live in lifestyles that mainstream society views as being different, or unacceptable from other communities, and Bill-Koui provides a service that meets their needs and helps them to feel empowered."

Over the two decades that Justin has been in Canada, he's felt what it's like to be consistently othered and pushed to the outskirts of the economy, services, and community life. *"I've been here since 2002, so it's almost 20 years of struggling to get enough support. You go to work, but it's not enough money. You go to government, it's difficult to get benefits. So all that can lead to some selling drugs for easier money, running away from family, and then not having community... Many people who do come here, nobody listens to them. Nobody just lets them sit and talk. Many people come to my room to talk, to express their emotions."*

“

The difference here from other services is love. We understand each other. We take care of each other. We are responsible for each other.



Ayana

"Why am I fucking here?" Ayana piercingly asks. She lists a succession of recent events: the death of her father, the death of her best friend, stress-induced seizures that landed her in hospital, eviction, the removal of her kids, and now, quite possibly, the taking away of her parental rights. Last year, as things slid downhill, she reached out to her cousin, Justin. There was room at the faded gray house on the corner.

"The reason I'm here, my father died in November 2020 in Australia. I was having seizures, but I didn't even know. While I was in the hospital, my kids were in the custody of my mother, but then she lost her house, and they took them. I don't know where they are. Visitations are for one hour. I took care of them from the moment they were born to age five and six. They want to take away my parenting rights. They are discriminating me as an African woman, with a disability, and because I am not a citizen, even though I've been here since I was eight."

Every couple of years, Ayana needs a new pair of expensive orthopedic shoes to help walk. Major surgery when she was 13 enabled more mobility, but didn't stop the stigma. *"People keep saying things about me and what I can do."* Her recent stay in hospital only compounded this limiting narrative. *"In May 2020, I went to court for my kids. The lawyer of the office said in court, 'How can she take care of her children when she can't take care of herself?' They also said that I don't love my son!?"* Ayana incredulously scoffs at the suggestion. In her recently published book, the dedication page says, *"First and foremost I would like to dedicate this book to my daughter and my son, I love you guys with all my heart and soul forever."*

Writing has long been an outlet and source of purpose for Ayana. She fills dollar store notebooks with thoughts and story fragments, and has three books available for sale. Her author biography reads:

"Ayana ... loves to write and projects her creativity using pen and paper. It is in that she's able to truly release her heart and soul. The stories of Ayana are certainly worth the read for you will be truly inspired and moved. Ayana is a firm believer that, no matter who you are, you're able to achieve the things you have set your heart and mind into."

Ayana has set her heart and mind to being an advocate and writer like her dad, who helped start the English language monthly *Sudanow*. In a book chapter about his refugee experience, her dad writes, “Unless you have traveled around the world and gone to refugee camps, you can’t understand what it means to be a refugee. I am the only kind of refugee you know. I speak English. I am educated. Most of the world’s refugees are not like me and they will never know the freedom I am enjoying... One of the first articles of the Declaration of Human Rights is that men and women are born free. The refugee does not have this right. We live in a world full of contradictions.”

Although Ayana has lived in Canada for over three decades, she still feels mired in the contradictions. “When I gave birth, I wanted my kids’ lives to be better than mine. I didn’t want them to be discriminated against for me being their mother.” Discrimination is an ever-present reality. “It’s the biggest issue in Alberta. All my life since the moment I came to Canada, when they tested me, and put me back a grade, and said I had issues with my brain. Then my father moves us from Red Deer to Edmonton, and I go to Norquest, and they put me into English as a second language!”

Her dad, her uncle, her best friend -- they all believed in her. Now they are gone, and Ayana feels especially unmoored. Not much helps relieve the pain -- except pint. “For me, I kinda started doing pint after the death of my father. I asked: can I try it? When I took it for the first time, it made me sit down, calm myself, all my anger and sadness just disappeared. It’s like I wasn’t even thinking of it. It made me sleep. Usually, I would just write, write, write. I would stay up really late. Now, when my emotions are high, I take it and it makes me calmer. The crystal meth makes the pain and stress slide away. It’s kind of a medicine.”

Ayana’s use of meth as a pain reliever is just one more cause for discrimination. “It makes me wonder why so many people discriminate against those of us for using meth. They can’t see it as medicine, as a medical issue.”

“

When I gave birth, I wanted my kids’ lives to be better than mine. I didn’t want them to be discriminated against for me being their mother.

“

It makes me wonder why so many people discriminate against those of us for using meth. They can’t see it as medicine, as a medical issue.



Deen

Deen reconnected with Justin on a city bus. “I have known Justin for 10 or 15 years,” Deen says quietly as he recounts how he came to be riding a bus with no place to go. “I ended up losing my place, and then the police arrested me, and then they dropped me in a bush. I called Legal Aide, but I don’t proceed to court. I was in hospital for three months, and from there a shelter.”

The shelter made everything worse. “There are a lot of people in the shelter. So many of my friends after being there are not sober anymore. At the shelter, people don’t sleep, it’s such a powerful odor. When you are there, it makes you worse off. They are not treating you good in the shelter, it is preferable to sleep outside.”

With regular injections for his mental health, Deen feels he can be more like himself. “God made me strong,” he says confidently under a gray fedora, with pressed pants and white sneakers. Still, for all the progress, Deen feels, “The police don’t like me.” Justin nods along. “If you are with a group of Black men, chances are the police will come up to you, or arrest you.”

“

At the shelter, people don’t sleep, it’s such a powerful odor. When you are there, it makes you worse off.

“

If you are with a group of Black men, chances are the police will come up to you, or arrest you.



Dafala

Addiction is a top stressor for Dafala -- but not necessarily his own. *"You can't trust or rely on friends or others using... I am seeing the side effects of addiction and feeling all of the insecurity and volatility that comes from it."*

Dafala understands trying to fill holes with drugs, alcohol, and money. *"I used to have an addiction to gambling after leaving my family. I felt very lonely. Being up in a small town, I would go to the casino and blow my check. So I got myself to rehab for a month, and my counselor told me the truth about gambling... I went and got myself banned from casinos for five years."*

Community is critical to healing, and one of Dafala's core values. *"The healing process for any society has to come by integration. It takes all of us to get to that. This part of the world, or this country, is so new. In Sudan, we've had 2000+ years. It will take a long while for this nation."*

Dafala hopes to quicken the pace a bit. Community, belonging, and love are what the faded gray house on the corner represents. When he can, Dafala contributes about \$400 a month and sleeps in one of the cubbies in the basement. Since returning to Edmonton from Fort Mac due to the economic instability COVID inflicted on his landscaping business, Dafala's preferred to be close to the downtown temp agencies. He learned how critical proximity is to downtown during his first bout of homelessness about five years back. *"I first became homeless when I lived in the West. By the time the buses got there in the morning, there were no jobs left. So I opted to sleep in the shelters to be close to the agencies."*

Dafala experiences no shame using shelters and services. *"I am not ashamed. This is the reality. This is the way it is in Canada."* The way it is includes an extractive economic system, employment gatekeeping, and discrimination. Last week, his unemployment benefits were abruptly cut off because he did not attend a resume writing workshop, and rather than walk into an office to talk to a human, he was told to phone a number. *"They [Alberta Works] say, 'We will teach you how to get and keep a job!' I say to them: 'So where are the jobs?' I have skills. The issue is the jobs!"*

Twenty years ago, when he first arrived in Saskatoon after years spent translating at a UN refugee camp, tour guiding in Egypt, and working as a millwright in Libya, he was told he needed to pass a written exam to find a job. *His life experience didn't matter* -- until he found an employer who recognized his skillset, and offered a practical workaround. For nine years, he worked for a meat processing company while raising his daughter near the reserve of his partner's family. He embraced Indigenous and Nubian spiritual traditions. As his daughter grew up, Dafala found his relationship had run its course. And so he left. Pride, respect, community, and spirituality are his top values. Not stability. Besides, stability is a grand illusion. *"You have to accept change. Houses will come and go. They are not something you can hold onto."*

“

The healing process for any society has to come by integration. It takes all of us to get to that.

“

I first became homeless when I lived in the West. By the time the buses got there in the morning, there were no jobs left. So I opted to sleep in the shelters to be close to the agencies.

“

'So where are the jobs?' I have skills. The issue is the jobs!

The build-up

Justin, Ayana, Deen, and Dafala are unsure how much longer they will be able to hold onto the faded gray house on the corner. A few days before we meet Dafala and his housemates, a letter arrives in the mail from Alberta's Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service giving notice of an upcoming telephone hearing. They are hopeful this can be a space for sharing their story, negotiating with the landlord, and correcting some of what they believe to be his fabricated claims.

The paperwork doesn't fully make sense to them. There's a lot of words on a page; many of which are bold and underlined, with directives and threats (e.g. "If you do not attend, an Order may be issued against you"). None of it shows how the process works, who makes decisions, what might happen after the hearing, or where to go to ask questions or find additional support. Besides, how can the landlord say they haven't paid rent for three months when they've handed the cash to the landlord's worker? And how come there is no mention of the landlord's menacing behavior?

A couple of weeks back, the landlord arrived at the house unannounced. "It was 10am, and I was watching the news on Ukraine," Dafala recounts. "I remember it was Mother's Day. I hear a knock at the door. I opened it. The landlord is literally pushing me, and demanding, yelling, that everyone get the fuck out. I try to contain him. At that point, I actually don't know who he is, so I'm trying to keep him from coming in. The problem is about the electricity bill. That is very expensive. Water is also leaking in the basement and so the hydro bill too. Then he calls 911. The police come, and he runs out to explain his story first. The police say that the court will decide."

But, the court feels unlike any other they've seen. In fact, there is nothing to see. It's completely over the phone -- just like social assistance these days, where without human interaction, Dafala feels they are at a decided disadvantage. When the hearing day arrives, on June 9, it all goes so quickly. It's a 'he said' / 'he said' tussle. The only witness called is the landlord's worker who says he doesn't remember picking up any rent money (later, he texts Justin to apologize and explain that he was in an impossible position). When Justin says there is only one broken window, not the four the landlord claims, there is no independent evidence gathering. A ruling is immediately delivered: Justin must vacate the property in 15 days. Although Justin is adamant that they've paid rent until the end of the month, they will be evicted five days early, and five days before any new rental (assuming they could find one) might start. They are being evicted into homelessness.

And still, they hold onto hope. A lot can happen in 15 days. Maybe there is still time to clear things up with the landlord? Maybe the city will see what's going on?

"I want the city to know it's not just a house," Justin firmly asserts. "I wish the city would understand our situation -- that if we get kicked out, they are aware of the homeless situation. Right now, there is a lot of showing off by the city. They try to clean up downtown, but they ignore people. We have a problem with care."



The conflict

The faded gray house on the corner might just look like any other residential building -- but, to Justin, Deen, Dafala, Ayana and the community members who come and go, it's a solution to homelessness. It's preventing people from being on the streets, using shelters, spiraling downward, and adding to the 'social disorder' Edmonton Police Service speak of addressing (Anne Junker, "Edmonton Police Chief Commits to Addressing Crime, Social Disorder in City's Downtown," *Edmonton Journal*, October 6, 2021).

Only on the day of eviction will Justin learn that the Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service ruling cannot be overturned. What he knows today is that no one is listening -- and that is taking a toll.

"Here, in Canada, you get tired mentally and emotionally," Justin reports. "Even when you go to bed, your mind is thinking, it's thinking non-stop. The mind is so tired. Yes, Canada is safe compared to Africa, but here you need direction. You need community."

"Everyone has their own situation in this house. Together we can solve our problems. We are brothers and sisters, and we can help each other out. But, the city doesn't listen... What I see missing are African ways. People need to be taken care of in a community. Plus, there are people born and raised here, not just African, but they have different cultures. Every community has to be acknowledged and organized, including Native communities. It's too hard here in the city; people have to go to the reserve just to be listened to."

9-10am



1. Coffee & conversation

Emotional sentiment: hope, denial

10am - 12:28pm



2. Light packing

Emotional sentiment: distress, nonchalance

12:28-1pm



3. The landlord arrives

Emotional sentiment: anger, tension

1-1:28pm



4. The police arrive

Emotional sentiment: confusion, agitation, rapid escalation

1:28-2:10pm



5. Justin is detained

Emotional sentiment: Injustice, confusion

230pm



6. Rainfall

Emotional sentiment: Shaken, worried

The conflict

Time is also needed, and it is not on their side. “We need at least three months if we want to find something else, and they are kicking us out before the end of the month,” Justin matter-of-factly states. Instead, the 15-day window to be out of the faded gray house on the corner has narrowed to just three hours. We arrive at 9am on eviction day. Uncertainty hangs in the air.

1. Coffee & conversation

Emotional sentiment: hope, denial

9:00am

With Dafala’s help, we go buy coffee and Timbits for the house and chat about where folks envision going next.

Dafala reckons he’ll head to the Herb Jamieson shelter so he stays close to Western Labour for temp jobs, while saving up to pay for insurance on the truck he hopes will restart his gardening business. The future is out of scope right now. As he puts it, *“There is no long-term right now. There is no room for that. We live by the day for now. It’s life. There is no choice. We can’t get the solution for the situation. There is no option to sit down and explain our story.”*

Justin has been putting some things in storage and looking at places all week, but the security deposit and reference checks are proving to be a barrier. Not wanting to leave his car behind, he’s trying to scrape together some money for a tow truck.


Deen has found a one bedroom place for \$1200/month, but needs a co-signer to make ends meet. *“If I pay all that rent, there’s nothing left to eat.”*

Ayana isn’t sure where she will go, and hasn’t started packing the belongings scattered across her bedroom: kids books & movies, multi-coloured pens and journals, several suitcases with clothes, and family photos on the wall.

None of the other residents of the house have packed either. Maybe they won’t be kicked out? A friend of the house, Kuaac, has dropped by to lend a hand.

9:15am

Ayana asks for a ride to court, where she is expected at a child custody hearing scheduled for 9am. She phones her lawyer, who informs her that the hearing has been postponed, but that Child and Family Services is pursuing a Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO). This news comes as a surprise, and triggers palpable distress. She brings out photo albums of her kids, eager to counter the official narrative of neglect.



2. Light packing

Emotional sentiment: distress, nonchalance

10:00am

Justin has sprung into action mode: making phone calls and moving items into boxes. A resident hanging out in the front bedroom asks why we are there. Justin, Dafala and Ayana explain our role. We introduce ourselves, but he remains suspicious and protective of the group.

10:49am


We return to discussing Ayana’s court case, as she shows us documents from Child and Family Services.

11:07am

Justin is loading extra tires into his car, and calling a tow company to bring his car to the shop, hoping they can both repair and store it for the next month. He doesn’t yet have a way to pay for the towing service.

11:10am

A few more items are being stacked outside of the house. Justin gives us a tour of the exterior, showing the windows that he’s repaired using plastic, instead of glass, to ensure they aren’t broken again. He points to an assortment of spare doors that he’s found to use for repairs and home improvements.




11:12am

Ayana is in the kitchen having a coffee and muffin.

11:13am

Justin shows us the back entrance boot room that doubles as his office. There’s a mattress and a desk filled with odds & ends. He asks us to snap a photo of him. *“One day I’ll look back at this moment as the start of something amazing,”* he says.



11:15am

We head downstairs to the basement. Justin shows us the furnace room decorated with twinkle lights. This is Dafala's bedroom.



There are a handful of people gathered on two black leather couches in the makeshift living room including Deen; Wyoma, an Indigenous woman from Maskwacis; and Gogo, an older Black man. Wyoma tells me she has quite the story that she's willing to share.



11:20am

The tow truck arrives for Justin's car, but he still doesn't have the money to pay. He heads downstairs to ask Deen for help. Deen offers \$100. Wyoma notes that Deen is generous with his money, and after a series of bad experiences with banks, chooses not to use them. But, as a result, he's often ripped off.



11:40am

Ayana's brother shows up on his skateboard as the level of activity inside and outside the house picks up. His van has been parked out in front of the house for some time, and is already filled with belongings. Like Justin's car, his tires are flat.

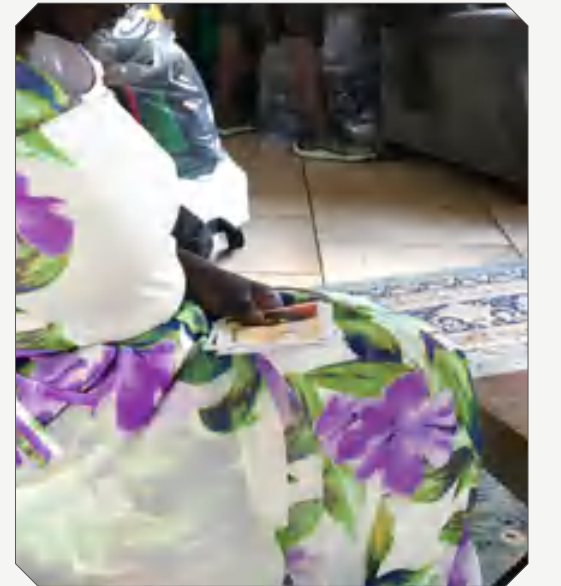
11:22am

A group of residents are jacking up Ayana's brother's car, trying to fix the flat tires.



11:24am

Ayana is sitting on the couch chatting. The eviction still doesn't feel real.



Light packing



3. The landlord arrives

Emotional sentiment: anger, tension

12:28pm

The landlord's worker who collects rent every month shows up. He speaks in a firm but even voice telling Justin and Dafala they will need to leave.

The landlord pulls up behind his worker in a black truck. He rolls down the window, yelling "GET THE FUCK OUT! DON'T YOU WORRY, SOMEONE IS COMING!"

Justin replies, calmly, "We don't want no problems. We are on our way out. We just need a little more time. We are packing up."

Deen is agitated by the landlord. "Why are you going to say 'hi' to the landlord? The one who is going to kick you outside from your house?" Ayana tries to sooth him.

The landlord, worker, and a handyman start boarding up the windows on the northeast corner of the house. The landlord yells at Ayana's brother about the car he is trying to repair. Residents of the house start springing into action. We help Ayana start packing up her bedroom.



12:36pm

The tension increases as the landlord, worker, and handyman board up another window.



4. The police arrive

Emotional sentiment: confusion, agitation, rapid escalation

1-1:20pm

Two police officers show up to the house, unsure of what's happening. They speak to Justin, who explains that he's on the lease and has paid rent until the end of the month. The landlord repeatedly tells the police that Justin is being evicted; the police ask to see the eviction notice. They pull up the documentation from the RTDRS on their phone. One of them heads to the curbside to make a phone call outside of earshot.

Justin reiterates to the other police officer that they don't want problems; they seek to leave peacefully, but that it's hard to leave when they cannot move into a new place until the first of the month. The police officer explains that it's too late to appeal the eviction. He tells everyone that no one is going to be arrested, but they do need to quickly retrieve their belongings. Justin replies that they were not informed of how to appeal the eviction decision.



Here’s an exact transcription of Justin’s interaction with the police. His tone stays composed even as the landlord’s anger rises. The first police officer speaks authoritatively, in such a way that starts to rile Deen up. The second police officer keeps a steady demeanor.

Police officer “If you had until the first of the month, you’d be able to get everything out?”

Justin “Yes, I want that to happen. My cousin here [Ayana] is handicapped; she has nowhere to go.”

Police officer “Ok I’ll go talk to him [the landlord].”

Police officer to landlord “You guys went to court?”

Landlord “Oh yeah, oh yeah. They’re not supposed to be on the property right now.”

Police officer “Where is the actual order?”

<< **Police officer calls the sheriff on the phone. 5 minutes pass.** >>

2nd Police officer to Justin, Dafala, Deen, Ayana “How’s it going? I just spoke with the sheriff, okay? I just spoke with the sheriff. They’ll be here in 15 minutes. The place will be boarded, the locks will be changed, and everybody will be out. You’ll be able to facilitate a standby through them to come back and collect your items. But in 15 minutes the locks are being changed, and everyone legally has to get out of here.”

<< **Lots of people talking** >>

“What...”

“Bro Bro”

“Where am I going to go?”

“I need to talk here”

2nd Police officer “So listen, since I’ve been here, like I’m being filmed and you guys are yelling and there are all kinds of stuff going on here, you have to be out now!”

Justin “Who is yelling?” (said in an even voice)

2nd Police officer “Well not right now but I got a call about people being aggressive.

Police officer “This here says you went to court, the evidence was unclear about rent owing, but the court ordered on June 9th that the last day here is on June 24th. I understand that you paid a month’s rent okay, and...”

Justin “The judge didn’t even mention that in court” (said in quiet voice)

Landlord “Oh he was well aware of the judge, and he was served the paper from the queen’s bench, it was all served properly.”

Police officer “You deliver up possession of the rental premises no later than June 24th ok? So you had from June 9th to June 24th at noon to leave, so because of that, that’s granted by the judge right, that’s why the sheriff will come, and basically if you don’t leave you’ll be within breach of this court order and you’ll be trespassing and face being arrested, does that make sense?”

Justin “It makes sense.”

Police officer “The only other thing you can do is you could contact a judge or maybe just talk to the landlord about scheduling a day to come back and get everything right, you could come back in a week >> Turns to landlord: could you agree to that?”

Landlord “No no, this is it. This is it. Everything is going to be in the garbage. He pays me his money, then he can have his stuff.”

Justin “Ok, here is the thing here sir. We understand this situation; what’s going on now. Now even though we’ve paid for

a month, for a month, and then he comes to court after. He didn’t tell us ‘I’m going to kick you guys out.’ He sent somebody to collect the money... and then three days later, he says, ‘I want you guys to be out.’”

Police officer “When did this happen?”

Justin “It happened last month.”

Police officer “What you’d have to do, you would have had to contact the courts to dispute this further. And since that hasn’t happened, you’re just late now, you’re already past the eviction time that the judge has ordered. So there’s nothing I can do to prevent this from happening ok? And you’re going to have to cooperate with it, or you’re going to face legal action. Does that make sense?”

Justin “Makes sense. What I’m trying to do here. I didn’t call you guys. There was not any problem. He’s the one who...”

Landlord [Interrupting in loud voice] “He threatened to damage the property. You’re legally not allowed to be here!”

2nd Police officer “[Landlord], do you want to just wait outside? We’ll just come out and chat with you.”

Justin “So he’s the one who called you guys? Nobody said that I threatened the house. And I let you guys in here to show what did I break?”

Police officer “Exactly and there’s nothing. And we’re not investigating you for any criminal action or anything like that, right now. What would be best for you? Like what would help get you out of here?”

Justin “Everything at the front here, this is what we want now. And we still have the property inside, but we’re going to leave it.

This window I fix it on my own. Everything is out of here.”

Police officer “Okay, so if you guys don’t need anything from here, let’s collect everything and move it outside.”

Justin “Yeah that’s what we do. Actually I don’t know why he called you guys.”

Police officer “Fair enough, and we’ll get out of here then.”

Deen “We’re not causing no problems”

2nd Police officer “No you guys have been fine with us, no issues.”

Justin “He’s even fixing the car so we can take our stuff.”

Police officer “That makes sense.”

2nd Police officer “I will let you know, you don’t have time to do any of that. You did have until 12 noon today to do everything that you wanted to do right. So right now you guys are trespassing. So let’s just try to get out of here right away, cause the sheriffs are coming. Just don’t call me bro, and just hold on a second. Hold on a second.”

Deen “I don’t say bro, I say but. Don’t touch me!! I know my rights!!! You think I’m dumb! I not call you bro. I not call you bro.”

2nd Police officer “Well sir right now you’re trespassing right now. So let’s get everybody out of here because the sheriff is coming.”

[10 minutes later]

Police officer Let’s get Ayana a chair. [They learn she has nowhere to go, and call the HELP team].

1:20pm

The sheriff shows up and firmly announces that everyone needs to leave, explaining the timelines and the urgency. *“Ok you’ve got five minutes to grab your belongings. Take what you want. Everything else is getting boarded up.”*

1:23pm

The landlord is pacing and loudly heckling folks inside the house. He walks to the front porch. The police tell him they are handling things and ask him not to get involved.

Two women arrive outside to collect their bags from the van belonging to Ayana’s brother. They express sadness for everyone: *“This is such a welcoming home!”*

1:23pm

The landlord enters the house and shouts at Justin.

We are in Ayana’s room helping her quickly stuff boxes. The sheriff is looking into the room, monitoring our progress, when we watch the landlord take a swing at Justin.

Justin yells. The sheriff turns around just in time to see Justin hit the landlord back. *“POLICE”* she yells.

The police run in from the back of the house as the sheriff tells them, *“All I saw was Justin hit the landlord.”*

We try to correct the story explaining to the police that the landlord struck Justin first.

Justin walks with the police out back, without raising his voice, while the landlord remains in the house, shouting, *“But he spit in my face first!”* The police reply, *“I told you not to come inside. I told you to stay out of it.”*

Everyone continues to pack up, moving suitcases, boxes, and furniture to the front porch. The police clearly tell us, *“No one is going to get arrested.”* We ask: *“Are you sure?”* Someone says *“The landlord hit Justin first.”* The police say *“For sure, yeah, no one is going to get arrested.”*

5. Justin is detained

Emotional sentiment: Injustice, confusion

1:28pm

We follow the police to the back of the house where Justin is, only to see him being handcuffed by the first police officer, and led to the back of the police car. Dafala has started recording a video from his cell phone. Deen is observing, and his agitation is rising. The police officer tells Deen to *“smarten up or you will end up in handcuffs too”* and then turns to the crowd of people now forming, announcing: *“I could arrest all of you, you are all trespassers at this point.”*

Two more police arrive at the house. There are now four in total; most look confused, stating they are unsure what is happening.

The landlord spots us and asks who we are. We share that we are a witness to the eviction. He retorts: *“Witness to what? Do you care about me? There are 15 people in this house! Why are you here to support them? What about me?”*



1:45pm

The HELP team arrives to talk to Ayana.



1:48pm

Justin remains handcuffed in the back of the police car. The landlord wants to board up the front porch. He grabs a side table perched at the top of the stairs and throws it to the ground. Ayana’s writing and her papers scatter in the wind. Dafala runs to collect them.

A police officer tells the landlord to cut it out or face consequences. He could be charged with mischief.

We are asked to write a witness statement. A police officer (not the detaining officer) explains that the charges against Justin have been dropped, but it’s good to have the statement for evidence.

2:01pm

We share the video we have taken of Justin being detained.

6. Rainfall

Emotional sentiment: Shaken, worried

2:10-2:30pm

It's raining outside. We sit in our car to take a breath and debrief, feeling shaken.

Ayana leaves with the HELP Team and is on her way to Hope Mission where a friend is supposed to pick her up (though, as we later learn, no one comes and she spends the weekend at the shelter). The guys at the back of the house are continuing to pack the van. They thank us for being present. The landlord is sitting in his truck across the street, carefully watching us. He shouts at us, *"Do you like black cock?"*

The landlord and handyman come around to the front porch where the sheriff is telling folks that all of the stuff on the porch must go, contradicting guidance given to the group earlier by the police.

People begin to scatter as the rain falls.



The irresolution



By 2:40pm, the faded gray house on the corner is a fading reality. Justin, Deen, Dafala and Ayana are in limbo, displaced from their home and separated from each other. In the process, Justin was handcuffed and put in the back of a police car. Deen was accused of calling a cop 'bro' and threatened with arrest.

While the police offered stern words to the landlord, they did not react to his behaviors -- instigating violence, destroying a piece of furniture, verbally harassing people -- with the same force as they applied to Justin and Deen.

As for the parade of community members who felt a sense of acceptance in and attachment to the faded gray house on the corner, Justin hopes to reconvene them at some indeterminate point in the future. Maybe he'll start a soccer club to bring folks together? Indeterminacy is a familiar state of being. They've spent so much of their lives waiting -- waiting in refugee camps, waiting for visas, waiting for jobs, waiting for justice. They are not waiting for belonging.

Alternative endings

As the final window is boarded up and the locks are changed, history is repeating itself. The last Sudanese Community Centre also shut its doors prematurely. In 2002, Ayana's father was at the helm. *"Justin is like my father. He would take care of everyone. My father was trying to protect families from totally falling apart, boys from going to jail, girls getting pregnant, all the stuff you see today,"* Ayana says. Back then, internal politics and inter-tribal disputes got in the way. Today, as Justin, Dafala, Deen, and Ayana experience it, external politics and racial discrimination are getting in the way. *"In the house, we don't see factions. We accept everyone. What's the point in splitting ourselves up? We're one."*

What if instead of viewing the faded gray house on the corner through the lens of social disorder, we could view the house through the lens of social innovation and positive deviance? While the city faces a housing crisis, with a doubling of the houseless population over COVID, Justin and his housemates crafted their own scrappy solution. They responded to the gaping holes in service delivery, to the confusing labyrinth of welfare benefits, to near daily discrimination, and perhaps most of all, to their community's existential need to be listened to, respected, accepted, and loved.

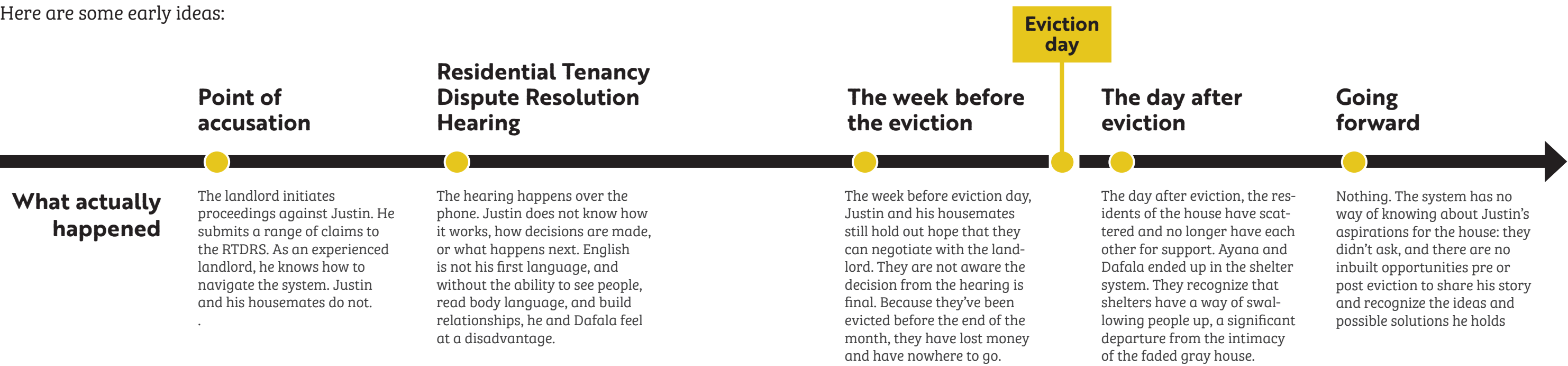
Yes, their solution contravened the terms of their lease and no doubt a range of regulation on occupancy requirements and zoning. At every point of engagement with formal systems -- be it the Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service (RTDRS), the police, the sheriff -- Justin and his housemates were treated as the problem. No attempts were made to pause, to listen, to understand, and most of all, to collaborate on what could have been a common purpose:

keeping people from the streets and fostering community wellbeing. Instead, their engagement with formal systems escalated conflict and, very nearly, criminalized them.

The prevailing narrative of Justin and the house has been constructed by the landlord. This story of their lawlessness and aggression is taken as the starting point by the RTDRS, the police, and the sheriff. That starting point story shapes how officials show up, interpret behavior, and frame a successful outcome. Rather than take this single story as a given, what if systems recognized the multiplicity of stories at play? How could that open up a range of alternative actions? How else might systems understand, engage, and build relationships with the people they systematically marginalize?

What if instead of viewing the faded gray house on the corner through the lens of social disorder, we could view the house through the lens of social innovation and positive deviance?

Here are some early ideas:



What could of happened	<p>What if rather than receiving a formal letter in the mail, in legalese, with almost no context for what's happening, a journalist or story collector met with Justin and the landlord, separately, to hear & playback their stories? How might the stories be artifacts that could be used in mediation, and as a last resort, court - but might also be useful for tenants to negotiate future housing.</p> <p><u>Lever for change:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge & Meanings• Interaction & Environment	<p>What if the hearings operated more like a sharing circle, where stories are exchanged, and there is space to hear both the landlord and the tenants' needs. Where it is not possible to creatively problem-solve, the court is required to do a Displacement Analysis, with the tenant, akin to doing Gender Based Analysis (GBA) where the effects of the eviction are recorded, and they are connected to informal/formal supports.</p> <p><u>Lever for change:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Routines & Repertoires• Knowledge & Meanings	<p>What if folks who have received a negative judgment from the RTDRH are offered a debriefing session where they can walk through the decision, hear about their options, and receive moving support? What if there were movers who specialized in eviction who could help pack up the house and store belongings for up to one transitional month? Just like a barn raising, where a community rallies around a family, how might eviction spark a rallying of some informal resources -- a mechanic to fix a broken car, a search for other properties, etc.</p> <p><u>Lever for change:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interaction & Environment• Roles & Resources	<p>The social science literature on windows for change is pretty clear: strike when the iron is hot, when there is high motivation, before people feel disillusioned and stuck. How might we create a network of everyday Edmontonians who have faced eviction themselves, and match them with folks newly evicted for a meal, a chat, and a supportive conversation?</p> <p>At the same time, how might we work upstream, to create a network of landlords open to accepting the stories of people rather than reference checks?</p> <p><u>Lever for change:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roles & Resources• Rules & Incentives	<p>As Justin sees it, <i>"The city has all sorts of empty spaces and vacant land. What are they doing with them? Or maybe I could have gotten support to buy the house!"</i></p> <p>What if Justin was seen as part of the solution, rather than a problem to manage, and invited to collaborate with a city prototyping team to turn his vision of a micro-shelter & community center into reality? How might the city function more as a platform for everyday citizens to try small-scale models of housing, care, and support? How might natural leaders be enabled to form self-governing housing solutions?</p> <p><u>Lever for change:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stories & Narratives
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Our point of view

This story has been compiled and written by five middle-class White women: Sarah, Natalie, Hayley, Nina, and Rochelle. Our role is to listen to people’s everyday experiences, and observe their interactions with formal and informal systems to identify opportunities for change. We are not social workers, housing workers, settlement workers, or any other officially designated ‘worker.’ It is not our job to intervene; rather, it is to bear witness. And yet, at several points in this story, we felt ethically compelled to intervene.

Had our team not been present to document what transpired between Justin and the landlord, would the charges against Justin have been dropped? Far from seeing Justin as a liability to manage, we encountered Justin as a soft-spoken leader who, against many odds, had come up with some clever workarounds to keep racialized people, living far below the poverty line and actively harmed by dominant systems, looked after and cared for. We travel across Canada looking to find local solutions to complex social problems -- and here, in the faded gray house on the corner, we saw and viscerally felt a natural solution unfolding -- with not only zero system support, but active system interference. Watching formal systems undermine this fledgling community space has felt gut wrenching.

In response, our team has offered some exceedingly small gestures: offering a few hundred dollars to help Justin offset the costs of moving, looking over Justin’s business plan, and where possible, brokering them to decision-makers to directly tell their story. If systems were committed to walking the talk around racial justice and decolonization, Justin, Dafala and their housemates would be treated as the leaders and beautiful, complex and messy humans they are.



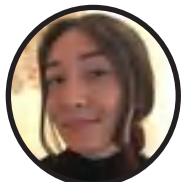
Sarah



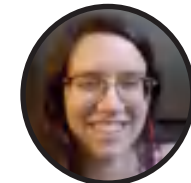
Natalie



Hayley



Nina



Rochelle

If systems were truly committed to walking the talk around racial justice and decolonization, Justin, Dafala and their housemates would be treated as the leaders and beautiful, complex humans they are.



Thanks for reading
Get in touch!

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