

## RAE BRIDGMAN RECALLS INTERVIEWING

a 20-year-old who had already spent half his life on the street. He told her how, as a 12 year old, he once lived 10 days in a dog house. “The root of a situation can go far back into childhood,” says Bridgman, CityPlanning department, Faculty of Architecture. “Homeless people, are not bums. They come to the street by many routes that can include abuse, mental health issues, and addiction.”

‘She’s a sister, perhaps a mother, maybe a survivor of childhood abuse—most of all she’s a human being.’



Rae Bridgman

While pursuing doctoral studies at York University, she became interested in housing issues and has devoted her life to studying the problem of

# A VOICE FOR THE HOMELESS

homelessness. For periods of four to five years at a time, the mother of six has documented demonstration models aimed at alleviating homelessness for both men and women.

Bridgman describes her research as “long-term listening.” Her approach includes witnessing and participating in housing projects from conception to occupancy. In addition, she gathers perspectives from consultants, developers, staff and residents of the housing projects.

One of these experiences spawned the soon-to-be-released book, *The Crazy Quilt*, Bridgman’s story of a shelter for homeless women. “The quilt is a metaphor for stitching lives together and stitching funding together to make a project happen,” says the author who

has often been surprised by the depth of connection among the homeless. “People living on the street have a different sense of family than what we think about.”

However, the financial threads are often harder to tie and initiatives have traditionally targeted the inner city.

Recently, Bridgman has studied participatory planning and design of housing for street youth in suburbia, where youth can remain near their support network of family and friends. Those that did migrate to the downtown core often could no longer afford to return. Like much of Bridgman’s research, this study has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Last year, she also received an Rh

Award from the University of Manitoba.

The University courted Bridgman for her unique anthropological approach to homelessness. This holistic perspective aims to understand an individual life within the larger context of political intrigue and cultural values.

“There is no need for people to be homeless,” says Bridgman. “As anthropologists, we try to understand how other people think and cope in their daily lives and make sense of these things in as respectful a way as possible.” After all, the street person we dismiss when we walk by is someone’s daughter. She’s a sister, perhaps a mother, maybe a survivor of childhood abuse—most of all she’s a human being.

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