

## STORIES

# 17

### How Being a Veggie Burger with Bacon Saved My Life

Stasha Huntingford

Whenever I am asked to ‘share my story,’ a bunch of red flags and alarm bells go off in my head about protecting myself from token participation, being made into a poster child for someone else’s cause and being defined by my trauma, loss and pathology. My own experience with homelessness, trauma and drug addiction when I was a teenager inspired me to work with youth who were homeless for 12 years. I approach my work from a strength-based perspective and I apply this theory to myself as well. Deciding whether to share traumatic experiences with others or not is made more difficult because of the effect that trauma has on one’s ability to trust other people. Having attachment issues and experiencing homelessness means that I have experience with over-sharing (because you have nothing to lose and you need reciprocity from someone), as well as under-sharing (by putting on my protective armour so as not to be vulnerable to further betrayal). Naturally, both of these extremes have negative consequences. On the street it is very dangerous to ‘have lonely in your eyes’ because you are broadcasting buttons that can be pushed. In the housed population, if you hug someone when you first meet them you might be rejected for a cultural misunderstanding.

Culture was very important in my transition process from ‘someone who is homeless’ to ‘someone who is housed,’ and it was very difficult to find a guide who had already made this transition, as many people are uncomfortable

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discussing their past on the street. I say ‘culture’ because this transition was full of conflict between what I had become used to in a more communal culture of people who depend on each other to survive, and a culture where you don’t know your neighbour’s name and you are on your own. At times, it was like moving to a different country. For example, one day when I was not homeless,

I was waiting for a bus and I was tired, but there was no bus bench, so I sat on the ground. People walking by thought I was panhandling. They would never sit on the sidewalk because it is not acceptable behaviour in their culture. My goal with this story is to build bridges of understanding between groups of people who do not usually get the chance to meet in person. I will do so by concentrating on my strengths and what I learned from my traumatic experiences, rather than describing the trauma itself.

## **Hidden stigma and sleeping with the enemy**

I first learned about this bridging role in my work with youth. I base my work on the idea that people need relationships with people the same as themselves and with people different from themselves. People need to feel like they belong and also be exposed to diverse views so that they can gain some perspective on their own. One example of needing bridging relationships is youth who are homeless and cut off from older generations and as a result miss out on opportunities to learn how to make a pie or learn about the Great Depression. Much of my work concentrates on destigmatization (taking away the judgement and shame) of experiences with addiction, homelessness, and poverty. When I presented at the Crystal Meth Task Force in Alberta I began by asking: “How many of you have ever said ‘I am so tired, I need a coffee?’” This led to a discussion where I pointed out that when you are tired you don’t need a coffee (or some meth), you need sleep! To me, this illustrates an important point about coping with symptoms instead of addressing root problems. To further illustrate this point I showed a picture of graffiti that read ‘speed is cheaper than food.’ I wanted the people around that table to understand that addiction is often a

symptom of trauma and that you cannot judge a person's choices until you look at what they are choosing between—for example 'pay the rent or feed the kids', where no one can make the 'ethical' choice. I tried to reduce the distance between people who view me as a 'filthy junkie' by highlighting the ways in which they use drugs in their own lives.

My experience with the bridging role was present in my professional as well as my personal life. My experience with the Crystal Meth Task Force showed me that most people label you 'junkie' or 'professional' and tend not to see the ways that someone can be both. In my personal life, I began to notice people's discomfort when you don't clearly fit in binary (only two options rather than a range) boxes when I came out as bisexual. (I now use the term pansexual to reflect my beliefs about the spectrum of sexuality.) I was surprised by the reaction of the lesbian community, where I had previously found acceptance, when I was dating a man. A lot of my former friends in this community framed this as a betrayal and felt that I could no longer understand their oppression as a community, because I now had heterosexual privilege. I was hurt because I felt that nothing had changed about me, but I lost my belonging in a community. I began to look at how community membership contributes to identity in my life. This is part of looking at what we have in common rather than what makes us different. For a long time I had this question gnawing at my brain: "why is society so afraid of people who don't fit in one box or another?"

## **Veggie burger with bacon**

I had a breakthrough on this issue when I noticed that my local pub puts pineapple on their veggie burgers. I started thinking, "what goes well with pineapple?" This led to me to thinking about ham, which led me to thinking about bacon, and I ordered a veggie burger with bacon. The reaction from the wait staff and the kitchen reminded me of my earlier experiences with binary thinking. I could not understand what people were afraid of and why they reacted so strongly. From my perspective I was ordering the best of both worlds, a veggie burger that was less heavy and better for me than beef and sweet bacon, my favourite food! This experience gave me a metaphor to explain my praxis work—the point where

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practice and theory overlap—of challenging thinking that only provides two options rather than taking a spectrum view that allows for diversity. Being a veggie burger with bacon enables you to bridge communities that are framed as the opposite of each other. This is a powerful and lonely position. I appreciate the diversity of perspectives that this position allows me. In order to deal with the rejection from communities you just have to find other veggie burgers with bacon. In order to find other veggie burgers with bacon you have to speak your story without shame and be the first to share what people are afraid to admit they have in common. This is a difficult and liberating process.

I had the opportunity in my Master's thesis research to explore the idea of the veggie burger with bacon in group discussion with my co-researchers and youth worker colleagues. We examined many examples of how we were veggie burgers with bacon including: being Métis, being raised

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middle class and then experiencing poverty and a range of examples across the sexuality and gender spectrum. The one example that came up the most was how one could cross the boundaries between social worker and 'client.' We founded an agency based on the peer model, because we felt that when we were teenagers and were

experiencing trauma, what we really needed was a veggie burger with bacon to share with us what they had learned from their journey to keep us from feeling like we were the only one and to give us hope that people do make it out. It is difficult to find role models when they are invisible because they are afraid to be judged by their past. It gives you the message that what you are experiencing is shameful and people will always see the shame first and never see you as a human.

Youth who are experiencing homelessness often have the experience of being labeled in the good/bad dichotomy. In our experience 'you can't be good without someone else being bad,' as we have experienced the 'golden child' (who can do no wrong)/'scapegoat' (who is blamed for everything that goes wrong) dichotomy. What is abusive about this dichotomy is that punishment is not based on your behaviour and there is no grey area to make mistakes and learn. Our community kitchen program had only one rule—no scapegoating. We discussed our individual experiences with scapegoating, in our families, our communities and our experiences with

institutions, and found that all of us had been assigned the black sheep role at some point in our lives. We recognized that this experience put us in danger of passing on that role to someone else so that we would not have to experience it again. We made the rule to protect our community integrity and the safety of the space.

This rule exposes ethical issues faced by people experiencing oppression in their lives. For example, if a young person has been recruited into prostitution, one way for them to avoid this abuse is to recruit someone else, because then they gain more power by not being the newest person in the hierarchy anymore. This is an example of the false choice between ‘pay the rent or feed the kids,’ and in this case between ‘me’ or ‘you.’ This decision can sometimes go the other way. For example, I know a young man who was dealing drugs to survive, until he sold to someone who reminded him of his niece. At this point he had a moral crisis about how his actions were affecting other people. He decided to make his money through prostitution (which injured only him), rather than engage in actions that hurt other people. I have learned that it is very important to distinguish *what people are choosing between* when you hold them individually responsible and judge without an understanding of context. You don’t know if you would drug deal or engage in prostitution to survive if you were in that context. The peer model of working with someone who understands this context helps to remove the shame so that we can identify what people were choosing between. Do you think a person experiencing homelessness would judge your life choices as ethical if yours were as visible as theirs?

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## **Practice with veggie burgers with bacon: Sign of the times**

The way we deliver services influences whether people feel judged and shameful about their experiences. It is very important to me that our services reflect our values. I believe that services should be shaped for (and by) the people that need them, not the other way around. I recently saw a sign in an agency that serves youth experiencing homelessness that read: “showers and laundry are for emergency use only.” This to me does not indicate an understanding

of how showers are connected to dignity and that having access to personal hygiene is a right, not a privilege. Apparently this sign was influenced by funders cutting funding for basic needs and pressuring the agency to prove that they do more than ‘manage’ homelessness. Currently many funders are shifting money from basic needs (such as showers, food, temporary shelters) to Housing First models. I see the Housing First philosophy as complementary to basic needs services, in that both are much needed services. It must be recognized, however, that the immediate need for basic services such as food will continue to rise due to government cuts, declining economies, low vacancy rates etc. In the sector that serves people who are homeless we have always needed prevention as well as intervention services. The aforementioned sign was also posted in response to youth vandalizing the showers. This punitive, rather than restorative justice approach resulted in the entire group of youth being punished for the actions of a few. I think it needs to be recognized that vandalism is a symptom of people not having anything to call their own and experiencing exclusion from having a voice in society. It breaks my heart to think about youth experiencing homelessness having to justify a ‘shower emergency.’

This shower ban is an example of how institutions re-traumatize and marginalize people who are already struggling. It demonstrates how scarce resources force front line workers into charity model thinking of deserving or non-deserving poor when we should recognize that every citizen ‘deserves’ access to basic needs, including showers. The concept of veggie burger

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with bacon challenges the charity dichotomy of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving,’ as well as ‘service provider’ and ‘service receiver.’ I think this helps to challenge blaming an individual rather than also looking at systemic issues. For me, homelessness presents issues of how we treat difference in our society. All people need to feel a sense of

belonging and have opportunities to contribute to their communities. We need reciprocity, not a dichotomy between deserving and undeserving. Reciprocity to me means a balance between giving and receiving, and a celebration of diversity because we can’t accomplish society’s goals without accounting for different ideas and perspectives.

I want to live in a world where we view access to housing, basic needs, privacy and dignity as human rights (rather than as privileges). Then the question

will not be, “Do they deserve a shower?” but will shift to, “Why are there people in our society who don’t have access to showers?” The veggie-burger-with-bacon-inspired peer model provides an opportunity for this reciprocity, and it is my hope that by reducing the distance between us it will make it easier to see dignity as a human right, not a privilege to be earned. If you have ever needed a shower it becomes much harder to tell someone else that they can’t have one. I don’t think that people have to experience trauma in order to empathise with another human being in need. The charity model and this idea of deserving or non-deserving needs to be addressed in society or the stigma, social exclusion and shame associated with being assigned the ‘non-deserving’ category will keep people traumatized, in pain and alone.

### **Policy for veggie burgers with bacon: Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee**

The ‘us’ and ‘them’ presentation of people as ‘homeless’ or ‘taxpayer’ is fake; we are all both dependent on, as well as contributors to, the social safety net—we are all in this together! We are interconnected and all of us are affected when our systems and policies fail. Systems and policies are created by people and this is what gives me hope that we can make a more equal society. I understand why people want to distance themselves from homelessness. Homelessness is a kind of poverty that we should be ashamed to accept in our society. I have learned that you cannot avoid or push down or turn away from shame. Instead you must ask yourself what you are responsible for and what is external to you. The things that are external to you are possible to change, but you have to start with awareness of yourself. If our society attaches shame to the experience of homelessness, I fear that we are never going to talk about what homelessness is a symptom of. I view homelessness as a symptom of many systemic issues such as government supports and minimum wages not being enough to live on. Homelessness is a symptom of holes in our social safety and social support nets. I think it is interesting how the phrase ‘the homeless’ distracts from the fact that homelessness is a symptom of policy failure. I don’t accept the position of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ I don’t accept blaming individuals for giant holes in our safety nets and communities.

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We need to look at what we have in common, not what makes us different, so we can reduce the distance between us. Examining some examples of the safety nets that are meant to prevent homelessness helps challenge this 'us' and 'them' thinking. A woman who is 70 years old and loses her housing because her fixed income from the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) is not enough for her to pay her property tax is an example of a policy failure resulting in homelessness for an individual. A more detailed examination of why her pension is so low (she was doing unpaid work in the home raising children) and why her family is not an option for housing (they moved to Quebec for that province's childcare policies) sheds additional light on the problem. Another example was when some affluent condos burned down in Calgary. The youth I was working with assumed that this meant that the 'rich people' would be in the homeless shelter that night and would experience the trauma of homelessness that the youth had experienced. I had to explain to them assets that the 'rich people' had that the youth did not, for example insurance and social capital (such as staying with a non-abusive relative).

I think everyone should examine the safety nets in their lives that prevent them from experiencing homelessness and try to be these nets for other people. Friends and family are a strong net to catch us when we fall but more and more strain is being put on this net as governments and minimum

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wage jobs provide less and less help to citizens. Examples of this include caring for older relatives and young children while going to school or working. All of these activities (retirement, health care, child care, education and working) used to be better supported by the federal and provincial/territorial governments. The responsibility for supporting people in these activities (which I think we all agree are productive activities that contribute to our communities) has been passed

to non-profit organizations and families. The media, some of the existing research, and society as a whole reinforce the framing of homelessness as an individual issue. This allows people to distance themselves in believing that it could never happen to them. I think debt loads of Canadians say otherwise.

People who are homeless right now (and have been in the past) need to know that there are people who have found belonging in communities and are now able to live instead of survive, choose instead of be told. This means that everyone who has any experience with being homeless needs to stand up and speak their story without shame. If the responsibility for the most vulnerable citizens has been passed to communities, we have a lot of work to do remembering what community means. The idea of community is important because in addition to creating shame, I feel that binary thinking has led us to a fragmented world where we are lonely and isolated from each other. My goal is to put the world back into a coherent whole where we concentrate on how things are interrelated, and brave negotiating the grey instead of falsely compartmentalizing into black/white. The peer model allows us all to be integrated, dynamic and interrelated in our identities rather than being defined by one aspect of ourselves. We should all order a nice veggie burger with bacon—which we can share with someone who is different from us!

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Stasha has twelve years' experience working directly with the street youth community. She gives presentations on different topics related to street youth culture, frontline ethical dilemmas, and drug recovery. She co-founded and served as the Executive Director of the Youth Recovery Coalition, a non-profit organization that gave support to street youth in the areas of addictions, homelessness and trauma, for five years. As a Sessional Instructor at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, she teaches graduate courses. She has completed her candidacy exams in the doctoral program with the Faculty of Social Work and is researching with front line youth workers analyzing the Calgary Plan to End Youth Homelessness.