

In April 2007, a young woman named Bly Markis was brutally murdered near Toronto's Yonge and Bloor Streets. She was thirty three years old.

In November 2006, a woman I'll call Judith died in hospital of complications of AIDS. She was thirty five years old.

In March 2002, a woman called Claire burned to death in an abandoned, unheated shack near Toronto's lakeshore. Perversely, she was trying to keep from freezing to death. She was forty five years old.

This diverse trio of women, by turns vivacious, bright, funny, passionate, wry and generous to a fault, had this in common: they died prematurely, and they were homeless.

Toronto based research conducted by Doctors Stephen Hwang and Angela Cheung confirmed what those of us working in impoverished neighbourhoods have known for decades: that if you are poor and homeless, and especially if you are female, your risk of premature death is astonishingly high. The younger you are, the higher your risk of dying early. In fact, for the youngest age group, women aged 18 to 44, the risk of early death was ten times greater than women of the same age who were not homeless.

In early June 2007, I joined a lively, noisy, diverse and strong group of mainly women and children as they marched to the location where Bly Markis' short life was ended. While this could have been simply an opportunity to remember a tragic event, it was in fact very much more.

For after we left the site of this homeless woman's death, we marched to an empty former rooming house, which at one time housed up to twenty low income people but which has been boarded up for years. That is, until this day, when several courageous women were waiting inside, ready to unfurl a huge banner reading "Housing 4 women, by women" from the second story windows.

As the crowd of marchers gathered and cheered outside, undeterred by the dozens of police sternly holding a line around the boarded up house, it was abundantly clear to me that while we as a society have a seemingly high tolerance for the untimely deaths of homeless people in astonishing numbers, we do not tolerate the "unauthorized" use of rich people's property, even to provide affordable housing for those who need it. Never mind that it and thousands of properties like it sit empty, housing only pigeons and rats. If you are rich and own real estate, you can rest assured that the police will protect your investments. If you are poor and desperate, your teeth can rot out and you can develop any number of chronic health problems and you can die far before your time, and you'd better believe it, *there is no protection for you.*

Health Providers Against Poverty was proud to endorse the women's squat action. We are proud to work alongside anti-poverty groups like the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, who masterminded the two year old "special diet campaign," putting literally thousands of dollars into the hands of poor people across Ontario. The fight to end

poverty is enormous and daunting, but health providers of conscience have no choice but to stand up and join the fray. Reducing people's poverty is a high impact health intervention that will save lives and reduce illness. Consider joining Health Providers Against Poverty in this critical struggle. For more information, check out our new website or email us at hpagainstpoverty@gmail.ca.

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