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Lead Editors ›
ALAINA SHIRT
ANDREA WONG

Photo Editors ›
FLOYD BLACK HORSE
RICARDO GARCIA

Design Editor › DANIEL GONZALEZ

Contributing Editors ›
KENDALL BISTRETZAN
LAURA BALANKO-DICKSON
SARAH GREEN
SOFIA GRUCHALLA-WESIERSKI
ISAIAH LINDO
JACKSON REED

Managing Editor ›
ARCHIE MCLEAN: damclean@mtroyal.ca

Faculty Editor ›
SEAN HOLMAN: sholman@mtroyal.ca

Production Supervisor/Sales ›
BRAD SIMM: bsimm@mtroyal.ca 403-829-7424
On my last day out in civilization before becoming a COVID-19 hermit, I went around Calgary to see what it looked like. I started by walking around my neighbourhood. I passed by a playground and I noticed that it was wrapped with “DO NOT ENTER” tape all around it. I wondered what else was closed to the public. As I left the playground, I saw a few people working out in the outdoor gym. I thought that wasn’t the safest form of distancing but at least they were not in an enclosed gym.

I made my way to the airport and saw that the majority of flights were cancelled. Some people were wearing masks but it was mostly empty. As I exited the airport, there was a sign warning the public about a global shortage of sanitizer and the importance of washing their hands. I immediately thought about how there probably is enough sanitizer for everyone but it is being hoarded in some basements. I felt panic and a sense of dirtiness.

I then headed to a grocery store to see if I could find any sanitizer for myself.

RICARDO A GARCIA
rgarcia@cjournal.ca

Grocery shopper wearing mask and gloves.
PHOTO: RICARDO A GARCIA

COVID-19
A local look at a global pandemic
As I walked up to the store I saw one entrance was closed off, the carts were all outside and the majority of people were wearing gloves and masks. I headed to the toiletries aisle and indeed there was no sanitizer. I walked around and could not find toilet paper nor canned foods. I kept imagining mobs in my head. I used the grocery store’s washroom to clean my hands and continued my field trip. I stopped by another grocery store and their inventory was just as sparse as the first one. I did, however, find some really nice signs on the floor to aid in the physical distancing.

The hospital was my next stop but I was not willing to go inside. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Next to the hospital is an elderly living facility. The home was closed off to all visitors, with signs placed around the parking lot to warn them off.

Playgrounds closed off to prevent the spread of the virus.

Man collects his baggage at airport while wearing mask and gloves.

ARRIVALS

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Major flight cancellations in YYC.
Global shortage of sanitary essentials leave many at risk.

While on the road, big signs warning people to wash their hands were lit up. Signs thanking public servants could also be seen. The traffic was light yet the sky was beautiful as the sun started to set.

My last stop was downtown Calgary. This was a Saturday night and normally downtown is lively. Instead, all the restaurants and bars were closed. The long lines outside the Commonwealth club were nowhere to be seen and the only people I saw were police and the residents of the streets. Even the busiest McDonalds on Stephen Ave. was closed. Some of the most trafficked weekend streets were also empty. So was the parking garage in front of National on 10th.

On this excursion I saw scenes which I never thought I would ever see. The world looks different now. I wonder how much this will affect the future of our civilization. And I wonder when will things go back to normal?
Road signs warn people of the importance of cleanliness.

Signs guide people to assist in physical distancing.

10 pm Saturday night in Calgary Downtown.

Calgary’s normally busy 10th Ave. is empty throughout the weekend.
JUST HANGING ON

CALGARIANS QUIETLY STRUGGLE TO MAKE ENDS MEET

PHOTO: JOACIM BOHLANDE/UNSPLASH.COM
Tyler Peacock looks like an average man you might pass walking in downtown Calgary. Well-dressed, well-groomed and always has something witty to say. You would never guess that Peacock and his family are struggling to make ends meet.

Peacock works at a local grocery store for $19 an hour - the maximum pay for his job. With a wife at home taking care of three children, his mounting responsibilities to be a family man battle with his ability to be economically stable.

“ar retail pays enough to make it difficult for you to leave and not enough to make a person comfortable until you hit upper levels of employment within the company,” said Peacock.

he lives in affordable housing with his family, waiting on the day when he can move them to a more stable living situation.

“We have three children and I make under the wage bracket that is the cut-off for government support per child. What I make is currently poor.

“Living in poverty is an issue that runs much deeper than the homeless population of Calgary as they are deprived of the resources, means and choices necessary to acquire and maintain the basic standards of living.”

Moreover, Vibrant Communities states, “Every four in 10 Calgarians are just a single missing paycheck away from poverty.” And that problem may get even worse thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has pushed many of the city’s residents into unemployment.

Those individuals come from all walks of life, according to Jordan Knapp, a former social worker/policy analyst for the Calgary Homeless Foundation.

Knapp says he regularly sees people who he knows “from their files that they are experiencing poverty or homelessness.” However, “they will always present themselves in a way that I wouldn’t assume they are experiencing homelessness.”

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“Paying for child care would use up all of what I would make if I were to work. From what I know about the economy and the current world state, it would suggest that things won’t get better for people in our current situation.”

> Carolyn Peacock

The Alberta provincial government raised the minimum wage to $15 an hour in 2018. This raise helped increase the quality of life for some Calgarians. But there is a distinct difference between a minimum wage and a living wage.

As the name would imply, the minimum wage is set by the provincial government to legally compel companies and employers to pay their workers a base income. By contrast, a living wage is a calculation of the cost of living in a community based on factors such as transportation, location and childcare. In 2017, Vibrant Communities concluded the living wage for Calgary was $18.15 per hour without benefits and $17.00 per hour with benefits.

The gap between the living wage and minimum wage could be where some Calgarians that suffer with poverty reside. Vibrant Communities hopes to break this cycle that keeps families in a constant state of worry by working to improve income support.

“Vibrant Communities is really looking to create a systems change to make sure people don’t fall through the cracks,” said Meaghan Reid, the executive director. But filling those cracks is hard because the social stigma surrounding poverty causes some Calgarians to not recognize that they might be struggling.

“The last thing you want to do is identify with a group that you have been taught that ‘they don’t work’ or whatever negative stereotype there is of people experiencing poverty,” Knapp said.

This stigma and lack of education makes creating change around poverty hard to accomplish.

“The lack of education is a roadblock. If I look at you and say, ‘Well, you just didn’t try hard enough,’ then I’m not going to be compelled to help you out. So we need to create this community that understands poverty,” said Reid.

The initial goal of the Enough For All 2.0 strategy is to “have something in place so that the City of Calgary can start to take ownership over poverty in their own city, which they hadn’t really on a scale like this before,” said Lee Stevens, Vibrant Communities’ community engagement specialist.

Ultimately, the end goal is to completely eradicate Calgary’s poverty rate, which Reid and Stevens believe is achievable.

“Absolutely, we have the means. We absolutely have enough, that’s why our vision is a community where there is enough for all, because we have enough.”
MODERN & MESSY

A workshop for ADHD women worth paying attention to

Claudia Barcelo felt there wasn’t enough representation and support available for women who suffer with ADHD, so she decided to begin a workshop to help empower women like herself.

According to the Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada, 1.1 million Canadians have ADHD. However, after seeing that men with ADHD often get more support, Calgarian Claudia Barcelo created a support group for women with ADHD in Calgary.

Barcelo was diagnosed with ADHD when she was 17 and is one of the 60 per cent of adolescents who has carried the symptoms over into their adult lives, according to the centre.

At the time of her diagnosis, she was living in India with her family, where she said there weren’t many options for support.

“I think in their minds they thought maybe by just not making a big deal about it I would kind of cope and not see it as a hindrance or feel like I was defective in some kind of way,” said Barcelo.

Nor did it help when her mom cried after finding out she had been diagnosed with ADHD.

“So I kind of struggled on my own and failed a lot,” said Barcelo, who felt both pride and shame when she thought of her situation.

It wasn’t until university that Barcelo realized she needed help with that struggle.

She went to see a counselor who said she should be prescribed medication, though she did not want to take it.

“I ended up flunking out of school, traveling the world, doing my thing. And then it wasn’t until my 30s that I actually started to realize a lot of the things I was struggling with in life were starting to actually have serious ramifications,” she said.

As a result, Barcelo said she “started seeing a psychologist and I got on medication and it’s kind of been life changing from there.”

She began doing some research into ADHD and the ways it affects women. She said she noticed there was far more extensive...
research when it came to men with ADHD versus women and that ADHD manifests differently in men than women.

According to Stats Canada, boys are three times more likely to develop ADHD than girls.

However, a study done by the National Center for Biotechnology Information on sex differences in ADHD explains that bias can affect those numbers. According to the study, the "association between the condition and conduct disorder/disruptive behaviour in males" lead to greater likelihood of parents or teachers referring boys to clinical services.

As a result, Calgary psychologist Marinda Venter, who specializes in ADHD, said there is more research on boys/men with the disorder than girls/women. Venter said that boys with ADHD are also more likely to fit the stereotypes of being disruptive, loud and chaotic in a classroom, because of the difference in sex chromosomes between males and females.

According to a different study by the NCBI, men have a Y chromosome whose main functions are "testis development and conferred male-typical physiological and behavioural traits," making ADHD associated traits more obvious in that gender.

Barcelo gave the class clown as an example. By comparison, girls tend to be quieter and more pulled back. Barcelo described herself as "a space cadet, a bit of a loner, head’s always in the clouds."

"It was really eye opening for me. I didn’t think it would have the impact that it did."

> Claudia Barcelo

Barcelo said teachers often described her in similar ways: "she's extremely bright, but she's just lazy or she's not applying herself." Venter said these descriptions are heard quite commonly in women with ADHD.

That means, according to Venter, "the little boy that's climbing a bookshelf in the classroom, they get more attention," resulting in women with ADHD usually being diagnosed a lot later in life.

As a result, by the time that diagnosis had been given, Barcelo said, "A lot of that damage has been done."

And that damage is compounded by the fact that "there’s mostly support groups for people who have an ADHD child or partner, you know? So it’s kind of like, a lot of the support groups out there are based around like how normal-brained person, how to deal with me, people like us."

That resulted in her beginning a "journey" to find out more about how her brain worked, as a woman with ADHD. She said it was a challenge finding information that was positive. It was then Barcelo began playing around with the idea of bringing women with ADHD together to "share ideas and explore creativity."

Barcelo stands next to the bus she plans on renovating, and turning into a space to host some of her workshops.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN

She ran the idea by one of her friends who was a personal chef and also has ADHD. Together they hosted an event for women with ADHD. Both girls posted about their event on their Facebook pages and got immediate responses.

That first gathering, which happened in Vancouver where Barcelo lived at the time, was a cooking class. Those who showed up were taught to make a tagine - a Moroccan dish. Together they discussed the importance of diet and health.

She explained it’s especially hard for people with ADHD to sit and consume information so adding an activity made the event more interactive, catering to their need for engagement.

"It was really eye opening for me. I didn’t think it would have the impact that it did. You know, we all left there just feeling our hearts full, that we were not alone."

Barcelo had one more gathering before moving back to Calgary, this time incorporating music and getting the attendees to write songs about their lives.

Barcelo wants to continue her gatherings for ADHD women, but this time with some restructuring.

In November 2019, she attended a workshop on how to build workshops hosted by her step-father Neville Chamberlain, the CEO of Britewrx, a boutique consulting company specialized in building high-performance businesses.

He had asked her to sit in and take photos of the event. But, on the day of the workshop, she was told she might not be allowed to take photos. That surprised him, even though he knew people with ADHD don’t look any different than anybody else.

Barcelo is currently refining her approach and restructuring it with the help of her step-father, to come up with what she hopes will be a monthly workshop. She would like each workshop to be focused on a different activity, stressing its emotional importance and impact.

She has also recently purchased an old school bus which she is converting.

She said that she “started pulling everything out of the bus” without “really knowing what I was doing or what the purpose was.” But then she realized she could turn it into “a moveable adult classroom slash workshop.”

When she isn’t working on her bus, Barcelo can be reached by email at claudia@modernandmessy.com, for anyone who is interested in attending or assisting with her workshop.
Albertans are less accepting of racial and cultural minority groups than other provinces, according to a recent survey. It’s against this backdrop that Calgary-based social enterprise Humainologie is trying to promote empathy by creating short films about minority groups that allow people to see the world through someone else’s eyes.

The hope is that such measures will make Albertans more accepting of diversity — a shift that may already be taking place.

Following the most recent Canadian federal election, the Environics Institute conducted research on Canadians’ opinions on the topics of immigration and refugees. In line with Canada’s multicultural reputation, the results of that research show the country as a whole being “more positive than negative about the number of immigrants arriving in Canada and the benefits they bring to the country’s economy.”

That said, the report states that while attitudes always differ across the country, negative views towards immigrants and refugees were most evident in Alberta.

When asked about the statement, “There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values,” 58 per cent of Albertan respondents agreed with it, compared to 50 per cent nationally.

Additionally, Albertans showed the strongest opinions in response to the statement, “Most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees,” with 47 per cent of respondents agreeing, compared to 39 per cent nationally.

While these numbers may seem high to some, they come as no surprise to anti-racism activist Iman Bukhari.

“There’s a lot of shocking data in there, and Alberta...not surprisingly is one of the higher provinces that experiences a lot of these things.”

While filming a documentary about racism in Calgary, YYC Colours, Bukhari was constantly met by the same reaction: “Well, it’s Alberta. What do you expect?”

With the belief that sharing stories is a way to “touch other people and sometimes open hearts and shift perspectives,” Salima Stanley-Bhanji created Humainologie, a division of the Calgary Centre for Global Community, in 2016.

Originally from Australia, Stanley-Bhanji has lived in Calgary for close to 20 years. Her mother is Australian and her father is South Asian.

Growing up, a lot of people asked her the same question: “Where are you from?”

“That feeling of not belonging is something I can appreciate and empathize with,” she says. “Today, there are so many different groups of people...I think all humans suffer from that sense of not belonging in different arenas in different ways all the time, but I also think there are significant communities that face so much prejudice and discrimination.”

Looking at the LGBTQ2S+ community, for example, Stanley-Bhanji says, “It even surprises me that there’s still persisting discrimination against gay and lesbians,” adding that “certain religious communities and black people face so much discrimination.”

While Stanley-Bhanji remains optimistic that “things will evolve and our world will become more inclusive because it just has to be,” she acknowledges that racism and discrimination is very much still a problem in this population.

“Unfortunately, for a place like Calgary, or Alberta in general, [change is] just a little bit slower. A lot more people here align with conservative views that very often are views that might be less accepting of certain kinds of differences,” she says.

The goal with Humainologie is to expose viewers to more diversity by sharing personal stories — opening their eyes to life experiences that could differ immensely from their own, particularly if they grew up with little exposure to racial or cultural diversity.

“In order to overcome stuff like discrimination, education isn’t really enough,” says Stanley-Bhanji. “I think it’s when we get to know another person that those important shifts that we need to make as individuals and as a community start to happen.”

Creating that empathy is at the root of Humainologie’s mission to “increase inclusion” and “reduce discrimination.”

Humainologie hosts an annual seven-day festival, Empathy Week, at the beginning of June. The week’s events aim to “promote empathy, human connection, and the recognition of our shared humanity.”

PHOTO: JESSE TAMAYO PHOTOGRAPHY

ALAINA SHIRT
ashirt@cjournal.ca

WHERE IS THE EMPATHY?

Humainologie is fighting racism in Alberta with films about the experiences of minority groups.
**EMPATHY FOR CHANGE**

Stanley-Bhanji describes empathy as stepping into someone else’s shoes, an analogy many have been told to practice since childhood. She describes imagining what an experience might be like for someone else: How might they be thinking? How might they be feeling?

But of course, she says, it’s only ever an approximation. She believes that, while an individual can never fully understand someone else’s experiences, it’s the exercise of trying which strengthens relationships and brings people together.

“Empathy is like a sort of glue that brings humans together and, in the absence of it, there’s a lot of breakdown of understanding and relationships and intimacy,” she says.

Over the years, Humainologie has created close to 30 short films that aim to prevent these sorts of breakdowns. Stanley-Bhanji says it’s the visual element of film that allows people to get rid of their pre-existing misconceptions.

“It’s important with the work we’re doing, where we’re trying to shift people’s perspective on a certain type of person, that they have that visual as well. To think, ‘Oh, that just looks like the person that lives next door to me,’” she says.

Once the film is posted online, the stories are able to affect a wider audience for an indefinite amount of time.

“One of the amazing things about film is we have the ability to capture a story and preserve it and share it multiple times over in different contexts.”

**“As we get to know people from so many different walks of life, it just naturally has the effect of opening us up to the world a little more.”**

> Salima Stanley-Bhanji

Beyond being easily accessible, Bukhari says film can add an element of “fun” to an otherwise heavy or difficult topic. A medium like film presents these stories in a lighter, more digestible way.

She says it is “so important” to be able to make a “serious topic” into something “that people want to engage in, to learn from and be part of.” And that’s why she believes film can ultimately lead to change.

“I think almost every problem in this world, as you start addressing it, slowly does get better.”

While she believes positive change isn’t always linear — because certain trends can push racism back to the forefront — Calgary is slowly becoming more accepting.

Stanley-Bhanji agrees.

“Twenty years ago, I don’t think we would have had a brown, Muslim mayor and I think the fact that we do, and we have for consecutive terms, is an indication of the pulse,” she says.

While both women agree racism isn’t close to extinction in Alberta, Humainologie continues to advocate for greater empathy by allowing viewers — at least for a few minutes — to step inside someone else’s world.

“As we get to know people from so many different walks of life, it just naturally has an effect of opening us up to the world a little more,” she says. “I’ve seen that happen in this community and I think it’s an amazing thing.”
Alberta is the most wasteful province in Canada. But, even though rummaging through a back-alley dumpster can be seen as dirty or a last resort, some Calgarians are trying to solve that waste problem by finding something of value among those scraps.

According to Statistics Canada, Alberta produced over 4.2 million tonnes of waste in 2016, more than half of which came from non-residential sources. This places the province as the highest generator of waste per capita in Canada.

Jeff Ferrell, a sociology professor at Texas Christian University and author of Empire of Scrounge, a book which recounts his eight-month experience living off of dumpsters, says a major source of waste can be traced to large commercial stores.

"The larger the corporation you have and the less local the production, the more waste you get," says Ferrell. "They're inherently going to generate waste because it's going out in such mass quantities."

While diving at retail dumpsters, Ferrell was shocked to find the amount of brand new products and clothing items with tags still on them. In a consumer society where people are constantly encouraged to buy more, he says, it's often usable goods that are thrown away simply because they're out of style or out of fashion. Dumpster diving, though, offers a different approach.

"Through dumpster diving, you learn to value what you have and learn how to reuse it and recycle it and remake it," says Ferrell. "It will satisfy your needs, but not immediately … If you just slow down and accept what you find, you'll learn that you can find pretty much everything you need."

For his own part, Ferrell says he's actually "quite proud" of his own attempts at finding everything he needs in dumpsters.

"I think I'm doing something that matters, and I'm not particularly concerned at all about the sort of middle class delicacy. I think if you're going to dumpster dive, you have to get past the stigma and embrace it as a positive activity."

Adopting that attitude can be difficult, especially in places outside Canada where dumpster diving is illegal. But some Calgarians have chosen to do so, reducing their consumption while also serving others in need.
From the cedar walls of her 120-square-foot tiny house to the spent grains that feed her 1,500 goats, almost everything Jeannette Hall owns comes from diverted waste.

Hall’s resourcefulness, combined with a commitment to sustainability, also applies to her work as the owner of an environmental consulting firm. And that resourcefulness seems to run in the family. Her father was very handy with reusable materials, which is where Hall says she got her ability to see the value in discarded things.

Years ago though, dumpster diving was not so much a choice as a reluctant means of survival. Working three jobs in Canmore and still living under the poverty line, Hall resorted to picking out food from the garbage.

“I remember crying, being like, ‘I’m so poor, I actually have to eat out of the dumpster right now,’” says Hall. “Now I’m proud that I’m a dumpster diver but, at the time, it was really shameful.”

Hall was able to challenge her way of thinking with the growing popularity of Freeganism, a movement that believes in reducing consumerism by reusing discarded goods.

Stores had also become more open to giving away unsaleable products, which helped to combat the stigma of recovering discarded products.

Though Hall no longer needs to dumpster dive out of necessity, she proudly continues to reuse what she finds as a way to reduce her carbon footprint by minimizing her consumption.

“It’s too easy to forget about our garbage — and I think it’s really unfortunate to see us throw away as much as we do.”

> Jeannette Hall

While dumpster diving adds an extra step in a product’s life cycle, Hall says it’s important for consumers to understand that waste also intersects with where products come from, how they’re manufactured and how they’re distributed and sold.

“It’s too easy to forget about our garbage, and I think it’s really unfortunate to see us throw away as much as we do.”

Hall’s experiences also provide helpful tips for those who are looking to give dumpster diving a try. Hall recommends reaching out to businesses to arrange waste pick-ups rather than covertly digging through their garbage. In many cases, smaller stores, especially in strip malls, are happy to cooperate since they benefit from the alleviated costs of waste disposal.

Waste recovery groups that choose this collaborative route play a large role in redistributing food to those who need it. Loop, for example, is one of the programs Hall participates in to share unsaleable produce that is still good for consumption.

“My car’s always loaded with clothes or food and so there are a lot of times I’m exchanging and giving people stuff just because they are in need of it,” says Hall. “It’s really hard to be starving and it’s really hard to barely pay your bills. The more kindness we can give those people, I think that that’s going to have more impact on the state of the world than anything.”

Hall is part of Loop, a local program called Loop, which collects unsaleable food from grocery stores and redistributes it to farmers and charities. Hall gives the excess to anyone who needs it or feeds the leftover food to her dogs.

Hall raises goats as part of her weed control business Baah’d Plant Management and Reclamation. She reuses thrown out fencing and pumpkin boxes for the goat pens and pallets to create houses for the goats.

PHOTO: ANDREA WONG

PHOTO: ANDREA WONG
Since January, Tanya has gone from a skeptic to an enthusiastic regular in the dumpster diving community. Initially, she was not overly pleased when her husband began bringing “junk” home but, after looking up dumpster diving online, Tanya’s thought changed to “I gotta try that!”

On her first dive at a Jysk dumpster, Tanya was surprised to discover a scratching post for their cat and three throw pillows, all perfectly new.

“There was nothing wrong with them,” says Tanya. “They didn’t even look used. No damage or anything.”

Since then, Tanya’s living room has: collected lamps, speakers, candles, packaged chocolate, a paper shredder and even 35 baking pans. Tanya recalls an instance where she found a sewing machine still in its box and the only thing wrong with it, according to the accompanying note, was that the needle threader was broken.

“I find myself saying every single time we go, ‘Why would they throw this out? I just don’t get it.”

Prior to dumpster diving, Tanya says she had a general idea of how wasteful society is. She couldn’t imagine just how much was being thrown away, though, until seeing it firsthand.

“Why should people not have enough food to eat? There’s tons of it going into the bin?” says Tanya. “I’ve been able to go most of the times that I wanted to go. Every time I leave the house is scary to me but it’s fun! Like a treasure hunt.”

Dumpster diving has also helped Tanya deal with her agoraphobia, an anxiety disorder linked to a fear of leaving one’s home or being in spaces that feel difficult to escape from.

“The only way to get over agoraphobia is to face your fear and go and get out there,” says Tanya. “I’ve been able to go most of the times that I wanted to go. Every time I leave the house is scary to me but it’s fun! Like a treasure hunt.”

Prior to dumpster diving, Tanya says she had a general idea of how wasteful society is. She couldn’t imagine just how much was being thrown away, though, until seeing it firsthand.

“Why should people not have enough food to eat? There’s tons of it going into the bin?” says Tanya. “I’ve been able to go most of the times that I wanted to go. Every time I leave the house is scary to me but it’s fun! Like a treasure hunt.”

Kateri hasn’t purchased food in over three months. But that doesn’t mean her plate is empty. Rather than browse through grocery aisles, she opts for what she finds in the bins out back.

“I have places I go that I can literally make a shopping list and just pick everything I’ll need for any recipe because that’s how much waste there is,” says Kateri.

Prior to moving to Calgary six years ago, Kateri lived in Montreal where a friend first introduced her to dumpster diving. It was only this past year though that she began incorporating dumpster diving into her zero waste lifestyle — in part, because a lot of products that claim to be sustainable aren’t.

“I think that the entire zero waste movement is kind of ridiculous if you don’t look at the underlying structures behind our waste management system,” says Kateri.

“It seems that people get caught up in what little gadgets or devices they need in order to be zero waste, while not holding the stores accountable for what they throw away, Kateri believes there needs to be better regulation for stores to donate unwanted goods to those who need it.

Why should people not have enough food to eat especially when there’s tons of it going into the bin?” says Kateri. “Aside from foraging for food in dumpsters, Kateri has also come across things such as the AirPods she carries with her. The AirPods, along with four other pairs, were found in good condition. But they had been coated with paint. Painting or slashing is something many stores do to returned products in order to deter people from taking them out of the dumpster. Kateri has even seen some stores go as far as bleaching products or putting broken glass in dumpsters.

“Moreover, as more conversations continue to take place, she hopes people will not only look at their individual impact but also push for change and think about waste in the bigger picture.”

“As you start looking into the systems that are in place with waste management and where stuff goes, you naturally want to figure out what your part is in that story.”
CAKES COME TO LIFE
Lesi Lambert’s career path didn’t always mean using molding chocolate and sculpting tools to design life-like cakes. Until a few years ago, it was more likely you’d find an iodine drip or retracting tool in her hand as an ophthalmologist technician. But, as she allowed her creative passion to flourish, she traded in her medical career for cake maker’s school.

Lambert’s own schooling happened at the then Mount Royal College, where she hoped to go into nursing. “I was going to college to get my nursing degree when my student loans ran out. I had six months before the next opportunity to apply for my student loans,” Lambert said. “I got a job. Ironically, it was in the medical industry, and that particular surgeon asked if I wanted to specialize in ophthalmology. I said ‘certainly,’ and he sponsored me. It changed my path completely.”

That change was out of necessity. As a single mother of three, the needs of her family were more important to her than her career goals. “I saw the opportunity to better the life that we had, because I was working my butt off. I had three little boys that I was raising on my own. I think that when you’re a single mom and you’re on a very limited income and someone offers you a job and offers you free education, you can’t say no to that.”

After more than two decades as an ophthalmologist technician, Lambert said her boss was about to retire at the age of 70. He ultimately decided not to. But Lambert decided she didn’t want another boss and dedicated her semi-retirement to her business, the Lambert Academy of SugarCraft.

Lambert’s interest in creating the kind of artistic cake sculptures she now teaches others to make began in 1989. That’s when she made a guitar cake for her son. Lambert said she attempted the cake because she felt confident that she could make a realistic sculpture. From that moment on, she was hooked. Largely self-taught, Lambert also sought out mentors to hone her craft. After years of work she was able to create her academy where she could teach others what she had learned.

Lambert led a double life for more than a decade as she struggled to maintain her medical career and be the owner and teacher at Lambert Academy of SugarCraft. “I would work all day. I would be sitting at my desk at around six in the morning, then come home and have to prep because I would try and throw in a Wednesday evening class,” Lambert said. “I would finish work at about 3:30–4:30 pm. I would get home by five and then the class would start at about six on the weekdays. On [Fridays], I would come home from work and set the room up for Saturday and Sunday, which would go all day.”

In 2007, with the launch of her academy, Lambert transformed the basement suite in her Calgary home into an industrial-sized kitchen where she could hold her classes and create her cake sculptures.

Lambert poured all her time and energy into her academy after leaving her medical practice. She expanded her teaching by creating master, beginner and kids classes. She also developed a professional cake designer certificate course for her students.

The Lambert Academy of SugarCraft website is full of comments from previous students that rave about her teachings.

“I will definitely be taking more classes. With this course I found out a few great tips that will help me immensely with my caking.”

— Jody Neufeld Sharman

Lambert says some of her students from her master class go on to graduate from her program and become bakers and designers in their own right. “There’s a girl that was in our program in December of last year. She now has three bakeries. — one in Lethbridge and two in Calgary.”

Lambert has big dreams to expand her academy in the near future. “I’d love to have a building where I could live in the loft above and have my kitchen downstairs — with kitchens that I can rent out to up and coming bakers that maybe don’t have commercial kitchens in their house … I would like to have little cubical kitchens and places for classes, enough room to maybe have a couple classes going on at the same time,” Lambert said.

Lambert hopes to show people that cake decorating isn’t as daunting as it might seem and anyone can do it. “I just love it when people find something like this [sugar craft] that they can just dive into because, in the past, we have had limited resources which are built on kits, built on selling tools. I don’t want to sell kits. I don’t want to sell tools. I want people to experience this from the ground up.”
LESI LAMBERT’S CAKE DECORATING STEPS

1. Laying down the cake
2. Applying the chocolate
3. Sculpting the details

The final product
BEATS IN THE STUDIO AND THE HEART

Dr. Dre has nothing on this rapper and future cardiologist

Dr. Dre has nothing on this rapper and future cardiologist

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Twenty-one-year-old Peter “Doneze” Robinson is a hit-making Nigerian-born rap artist who performs in the United States and has been listened to millions of times online. But Robinson plans to finish his university degree at Mount Royal University in order to attend medical school and become a cardiologist.

Robinson was born in Delta State, Nigeria. His mother, originally from Lagos, is a Yoruba and his father, born in Delta, is an Igbo. Because of his mixed heritage and his father being unable to teach him the traditional dialect, he was taught English instead.

His life in Nigeria consisted of him seeing inequality and dangers early on. When a local governor claimed doctors were embezzling money, criminals ended up targeting his father, who works as a member of that profession.

“They tried kidnapping my parents once and tried killing them a second time,” says Robinson.

At the age of 13, Robinson’s family moved to Halifax, N.S. to find safety and further develop his academic skills.

He fondly remembers the people he met when he arrived as “the stereotypical Canadian nice.” Soon after, with the help of other family members in Halifax, he quickly adjusted to his new life and excelled academically.

Initially, he was put in Grade 6. But, three weeks later, the school pushed him forward three grades. That’s when he realized his academic potential.

“I was just killing it. And the only reason they didn’t put me back in Grade 10 was because they were like ‘It’s going to mess with your social life,’” says Robinson.

In 2013, Robinson moved to Calgary. He started rapping after graduating high school in 2018. It was at this time that he wrote and produced his first song called Dab Fashion.

Robinson never considered himself interested in rap.

“I was just the book-smart kid up until two or three years ago,” he says. “I never really practiced rapping or anything.”

However, the American rapper Migos became a major creative inspiration for Robinson’s work and sparked his interest in rapping.

Nigerian-born Peter “Doneze” Robinson manages to balance his life as a student and a rap artist.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DONEZE ROBINSON
Using Migos’s /f_low as a model, Robinson recorded his own song. And the moment he published it, it “took off.”

After posting his music on the website WorldStarHipHop, Robinson garnered over three million views.

One of his most popular songs How has over 100,000 streams and is popular locally across the state of Georgia.

“It was something like a hobby and the more feedback I got, the more I loved it.”

With the support of his friends and family, Robinson’s interest in rap grew. In addition to getting engagement and feedback from his followers on social media, he attracted the attention of popular American artists including Lil Yachty, 21 Savage and his inspiration Migos.

Robinson applies his book smarts to his rap style to stand out. “You have to say things that have a deeper meaning to it,” says Robinson.

He believes this is reflected in his newest song Caviar. Although the song mentions popular aspects of hip-hop culture such as gangs, drugs and crime, he is also trying to inspire others through his verses.

“Just trust that you’re gonna make it. No matter what it is, you’re never going to be homeless if you put your mind to something.”

Making rhymes that flow well and never ramble is a standard Robinson maintains in all of his songs.

“If you don’t know how to articulate words, you’re basically just a mainstream rapper.”

Robinson’s first performance was an opening act for American rap artist Rich Homie Quan at the Marquee in early March of 2019.

His friend, Calgary-based rapper YXNG BLVCK, was also opening for Quan. Since the two of them were working on a song together, YXNG BLVCK contacted Robinson about the opportunity.

“I was at school at the time,” says Robinson. “They called me and said I was gonna perform a song with him and I was like, ‘Okay.’”

Shortly after his performance, he caught the attention of the Atlanta and Arizona-based music label Days of Noah and Jordanikus Music Group.

By the end of March 2019, Robinson was flown down to Atlanta by the company to have him sign on as one of their artists.

“I came back, and I was joking with my friends about how I have a show in Atlanta,” says Robinson. “And then two weeks later my manager called me and was like, ‘You got a show in Atlanta.’

This was the third professional performance of his music career and his biggest yet, performing at the Masquerade Theater in Atlanta, Ga., to a crowd of over 350 attendees.

Robinson continues to grow in popularity, touring in the U.S. and garnering over 250,000 streams on Spotify.

Even though Robinson acknowledges he could make a living off his music career, he still attends university and is currently in his third year studying physical literacy.

The primary reason he continues to pursue an education stems from his parents’ desire for him to get a degree.

“Regardless of whatever it is, I still manage to get in the studio, and I do my homework. I’m organized that way.”

Over the summer, Robinson is going to head down to a recording studio in Arizona where he hopes to record new music and arrange a concert with the help of his producer.

Robinson is also planning to release a five-track EP this year called Flight Mode while he continues to attend Mount Royal University. When he graduates in two years, Robinson would like to hone his musical career for a year before deciding his next move.

“I know they’re not telling me to get it for them. They’re telling me to get it for me,” says Robinson. “I have faith that my music career will take off; he says. “But I’m not going to rely on that. So, I want to have a plan B. Wherever school leads me to, I’ll keep going with it.”
Josh Reaume has taken an unusual path to have a career in racing, but that has led him to run his own NASCAR team.

Reaume, pictured above at Homestead-Miami Speedway in 2017, has worked hard to start his own NASCAR team.
Even when he was a kid, he would try to phone Penske — a famous auto racing team — and try to talk to its owner Roger Penske.

“I never got a hold of anybody,” says Reaume. Nevertheless, he also “went to racetracks and introduced myself to team owners, and told them, ‘I know I’m a nobody to you now, but one day I hope you know who I am and I hope to drive for you.’”

Eventually you meet the right people that show you the right path.

His engineering degree helped clear him that path too, giving him opportunities to work behind the scenes in NASCAR.

“I was Ryan Sieg’s race engineer for two years, and we made the Chase in the Xfinity Series the inaugural year. Finished second a couple of times. I’ve also crew chiefed at a number of different places along the way.”

As a driver, Reaume began to move up the NASCAR ladder in 2013 and 2014, making his first starts in the NASCAR Xfinity Series and Gander RV & Outdoor Truck Series, two of the highest levels of NASCAR racing. Moving up to bigger races was not something that made Reaume nervous.

“As far as being in the garage area, and being to the racetracks, I think I had pretty much gone to every racetrack almost on a daily basis. The smallest part of what we do as racecar drivers is actually getting in the racecar and driving it. That’s the fun part of it. But, really, it’s the smallest part of it.

Going into the 2020 season, the team now fields two full-time entries: the number 00 truck driven by Angela Ruch and the number 33, which is driven by many throughout the season, including Reaume. The team also has a part-time truck, the number 34, which competes in select races.

Before NASCAR suspended operations due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the start of the season was going well for the team, with another strong showing at Daytona. Reaume had fellow Canadian Jason White in the 33 truck for that race.

“The plan was to do the same thing I did the year before. With Jason, I was on his radio, and he was anxious wanting to go forward. I told him, ‘Just trust me and stay where you’re at.’ I think he was about 25th, with six laps to go. Sure enough, they wadded everything up and he restarted eighth with three laps to go. He ended up finishing tenth without a scratch on the truck.”

To change those losses into wins, the race team is dependent on finding sponsorship to keep their operation running.
“It’s a very dynamic thing and it’s a difficult process,” says Reaume. “You’ve got to find the right company that has the capacity to spend, has the need to spend, has the infrastructure to support their growth in business that you can create for them. Then you have to be able to sell to all the hierarchy in that business on a program that ultimately costs money but is designed to generate sales or whatnot for them.”

Being an owner responsible for multiple trucks makes finding sponsorship the number-one priority for Reaume, something he says is a “very time-intensive process.” As a result, Reaume is “more in sales than anything with the business.”

“We’re essentially a marketing platform. It just so happens that what we do is something that’s really cool. I’m not passionate about billboards but I could sell a billboard. It’s just my billboard goes 200 mph.”

Closing deals with sponsors is one of the many skills Reaume has used in his racing career. His experience as a driver/owner/mechanic harkens back to the old days of NASCAR, when many competitors wore all those hats. Doing that in this day and age is a rare sight, but it was a necessary move for Reaume.

He realized that, as a driver, he ended up having to bring his own sponsorship to the table to get opportunities.

“I looked at it from a business perspective and was like, ‘Well I’m providing quite a bit of financial backing for this team but I’m looking for a job every winter. What more can I do to help guarantee myself a ride and put myself in better equipment?’ The answer to that is to be in control of more things.”

Many drivers often drop out of racing due to a lack of sponsorship. Reaume has worked hard to make sure he doesn’t fall into that category, and believes that’s why he’s still on the NASCAR circuit.

“I think that mentality [of not looking hard enough for sponsors] is why drivers don’t have longevity in this sport, and that’s why I’ve stayed around longer. There’s nobody calling our race team saying, ‘We want to sponsor you.’ Those days are gone. That’s just the brutal reality of it.” As someone who started racing in Canada, Reaume believes that seizing the moment is important for Canadians that want to get into competitive driving.

“I think for Canadians, they need to be there, and they need to compete. In order to compete, you need to convince somebody to help fund the initial stages of your career. I used to think of the sport in a way that it was a negative aspect of it. I didn’t have a ton of money behind me, and I’ve made it. If you’re passionate about it, you really care about it, nobody’s going to work harder for yourself than you are. So go get it, go chase it.”

Reaume rounds turn four and heads for the start/finish line at Atlanta Motor Speedway in early 2018. Reaume’s team is now in its third season of racing.

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

Cross-promotional advertisement featuring Reaume attending a hockey game in Leigh Valley, PA.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE AHL

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JOSH REAUME

RACING NIGHT
HUNTER ATHENA IS Beautiful

How the non-binary, disabled, plus-size model is changing the industry
“ Allies should hold up the ladder for you to climb up, and yell if they see the cops.”

Hunter Athena

A as a child, Hunter Athena wanted to be a performer - or, more specifically, a model or actor for Disney. “That was one of my biggest dreams growing up because I wanted to be famous. But there was no such thing as plus-sized models. Those people existed, they just weren’t allowed to model,” Athena says.

Athena also had very little experience with plus-sized clothes. It wasn’t until they moved to the States at the age of 18 that they were truly able to get a taste of fashion beyond the “granny clothes” at Penningtons.

“I remember walking into Forever 21 and finding this whole plus-size section,” Athena recalls. “I swear I dropped $200 that day.”

Playing with makeup and fashion was something that gave Athena the confidence they needed to get in front of the camera when they moved back to Calgary four years later.

“I see all these other people that break out into the plus-size modelling world. And, I still don’t see disabled bodies that are fat and doing that. I see disabled trans activists and they’re models, and they’re breaking down those barriers. But they’re all thin and they’re all white. And there’s no diversity in that.”

Determined to change that, Athena started their Instagram account @prairie.queer in January 2018.

Armed with their cellphone and a portable tripod purchased from Amazon, Athena set out to the nearest bus stop and took what would be their first Instagram post. But it wouldn’t be their last.

Since then, the non-binary, disabled, plus-sized 23-year-old has pursued their dream of becoming a model while advocating for fat acceptance along the way.

A key stepping-stone in Athena’s modelling journey was coming to terms with their gender identity.

At the age of 14, Athena attended Camp fyrefly, a leadership retreat for youth who are queer or trans or who have parents that are queer or trans.

Athena had recently come out as bisexual and has a transgender father. But there had been little talk of what lay between cis and trans on the gender spectrum in their family.

Athena came home after that summer and immediately got a “queer haircut” and performed in their first drag number. It wasn’t long after that Athena began to identify as a trans man.

“I was like, ‘I really don’t feel like a girl. But the only other option is being a boy.’”

After two years though, even that didn’t sit quite right with Athena.

“I kind of went back and forth between either displaying as a boy or a girl.”

It wasn’t until Athena moved to the States that they learned about what it means to be non-binary. At this time, Athena was still constantly being referred to as a girl, something they put up with, despite their discomfort.

“I didn’t really say anything because I didn’t know how to say anything” they admit.

But, upon returning to Canada four years ago, Athena had had enough.

“It’s they/them or death,” they say with a laugh. “That’s when I started saying, ‘No, I’m non-binary.’ I started asserting myself, I came out officially and I stopped waffling so much.”

No longer suffocated by unfit labels, Athena began to explore their newfound confidence in the world of makeup and fashion. It was a change from their life as a trans man when Athena was constantly trying to cover-up.

“I like a masculine aesthetic but I don’t like it when I'm trying to hide.”

One of their favourite looks today is a chest binder with a button-down shirt and a skirt.

“I’m excited to start playing with some gender fuckery for my content.”

Another thing Athena hopes to utilize in their modelling is their mobility aids.

Athena has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which means their body doesn’t produce collagen or even know what it is. While that disorder allows Athena to bend their joints at impressive angles, they also become hyper-extended, which can lead to dislocations and breaks. That means they have to take...
extreme care when navigating icy Calgary winters.

“I’ve crossed the street and had my ankle just hyperextend and sprain randomly. I have no control over my body a lot, which is really weird and foreign. It’s really scary when you have no idea what your body can do next.”

To combat hyperextension, Athena is equipped with a pair of leg braces. When they participated in a 2019 fashion show, designer Jason Way came up with the idea to make those braces into art.

He wove a fake vine through them, garnishing each with red roses. Athena walked down the runway in a moment they described as “beautiful.”

However, Athena hasn’t repeated that moment because no shoe properly fits their braces. And, while Athena could switch to knee braces, those would require a referral from an orthopedic surgeon or cost a flat rate of roughly $5,000 apiece. A referral would be simple enough. But there is something standing in the way:

“My family doctor is worried about the orthotics surgeon wanting to prescribe weight loss.”

Whether Athena loses weight or not, the fact of the matter is that their body still won’t produce collagen. Moreover, such a prescription is something of a double-edged sword: Athena needs knee braces in order to physically be able to work-out.

Unfortunately, these types of medical barriers aren’t rare for fat people. In fact, Athena is hesitant to talk about the specificities of their disability due to the possibility of backlash and unsolicited observations.

“As a fat person I experience a lot of hate. Everyone wants to play doctor.”

By referring to themselves as simply “disabled” rather than as someone who has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, Athena is able to cut back on a lot of hurtful comments.

But, even offline, Athena still has to deal with the ramifications of their weight.

“The world is not made for fat people,” as Athena puts it. They require a seatbelt extender. They do not sit comfortably on airplanes or busses. They even have to go all the way to Sunridge Mall to find a movie theatre with large enough seats. And it is for these reasons that Athena advocates for fat liberation rather than just body positivity.

“You need to learn body positivity to reach out and love yourself,” they explain. “But I think you need to push that envelope even further. I want you to fight for other people. I think that you should use your privileges, if you have them, to help pave the way for bodies that don’t have the same privileges.”

“You might hate your body or dislike it. But you have medical access. You can sit on a plane, train, bus, car just fine.”

All people, regardless of weight, have the power to be allies for others, they add.

“Allies should hold up the ladder for you to climb up and yell if they see the cops. They’re not supposed to speak for you. They’re going to stand up to oppression when they see it. And that’s really huge.”

While continuing to be an advocate for fat acceptance, Athena is also promoting the change they wish to see by planning to produce their own “all-fats, femmes and thems” drag and burlesque performance later this year.

“We want to show off our sexy bodies to perform. Fat bodies deserve to be on stage just as much as everyone else.”

And these shows aren’t the only big changes on the horizon for Athena. They’ve recently been signed to Zebedee Management, an agency that specifically seeks out models with disabilities and has photographed advertisements for major businesses such as Target and Disney.

Moreover, Athena’s presence in the industry is already opening doors for more diversity.

Last March, Athena was shooting some pictures in Kensington on a beautiful spring day. A professional photographer, Rosie Lee, was also in the area shooting another model.

Athena had just ordered an Uber when they were approached by the photographer.

“She was like, ‘Can you wait?’ I need to shoot you.”

Athena recalls that the photographer hadn’t had any experience shooting non-binary or disabled people up until then.

“She was like, ‘I want to shoot more disabled bodies and gender non-conforming bodies. Do you know any that would be interested in modelling?’”

Athena was able to get several of their non-conforming friends in front of the camera and will be shooting with Lee later this year in a “glam mermaid” and a “sea witch” look.

Athena is hopeful those shots will wind up in a magazine, along with any shoots they get from their agency.

Though Athena has faced many obstacles on the journey of following their dreams, they remain hopeful about the future of modelling and for others like them.

“We are on the tip of an iceberg. We are changing the face of couture. We are changing the world right now, and it’s huge.”

TOP: Strikes a pose in spring wear. BOTTOM LEFT: Athena’s leg braces at the fashion show
PHOTOS: HUNTER ATHENA
“People’s biggest misconception about the sex industry is that people never choose it.”

> Jelena Vermilion
**SURVIVING THE STIGMA**
**INSIDE THE LIFE OF A TRANS SEX WORKER**

**SARAH GREEN**
sgreen@cjournal.ca

Transgender individuals are three times more likely to be unemployed due to discrimination in the mainstream job market. As a result, many transgender women look to sex work as a source of income.

However, in addition to being stigmatized for that work, trans women who sell sex are subject to intensified violence, transphobia and institutional discrimination on the basis of their gender and the nature of their work.

The Canadian government has tried to address this discrimination by passing Bill C-16, which strengthens protections for the transgender community. However, recent research by the Trans PULSE Project, which focuses on members of the trans community in Ontario, shows trans individuals earn less than $15,000 annually and one-in-five report being unemployed or are on disability.

Jelena Vermilion, an Ontario-based transgender sex worker, has firsthand experience with this unfortunate reality.

“I definitely experienced barriers to obtaining and maintaining secular employment because of my trans identity and because of my lived experience,” says Vermilion.

At the beginning of her transition, when she was 17, Vermilion worked at a local grocery store. She continually faced harassment from her manager, a factor she says may have contributed to her termination.

“There was some sort of complaint filed against me and I was fired. While I can’t necessarily say that I have any explicit proof that it was transphobia, I definitely feel as though the complaint my manager read out to me was completely fabricated,” Vermilion explains.

In the following months, Vermilion says she struggled to find another source of income, in part because of her gender identity. With each passing day, Vermilion’s mental health declined.

Things took a turn for the worse after she had a run-in with the police as a result of a domestic dispute. After serving her sentence in a male prison, Vermilion had no home to return to. Eventually, in 2013, she turned to sex work as a means of survival.

“At first, I worked alongside someone that I knew from the homeless shelter I was in. She helped me with the learning curves in terms of what acronyms and websites are used,” Vermilion explains.

“After that, I started working independently and eventually turned it into a business. In the beginning, it was a means of survival but as I became more financially stable, I was able to gain empowerment from it.”

Vermilion, who has now been a full-service sex worker for seven years, says she finds empowerment in her work because her business is “something that I have control over.”

“I may have been relegated to a wage labour job where a lot of labour exploitation takes place. Sex work, in comparison, was such a better choice for me.”

**DECONSTRUCTING THE DISCRIMINATION**

Despite this empowerment, Vermilion also experiences the deep-rooted stigma that is associated with sex work in Canadian society. She believes there is a dominant narrative that states that sex workers are victims, that sex workers are all street-based and that no one would choose this line of work.

“People feel emboldened to talk about sex workers negatively. Society has been fooled into believing that the oppression of sex workers doesn’t exist anymore, or that it is less prevalent,” Vermilion explains.

“People consider sex workers as vectors of disease, which isn’t the truth. In reality, sex workers are generally more educated about the risks of contracting a sexually transmitted or blood born infection and they’re more interested in using protection and other profilactics.”

Additionally, Vermilion believes the stigma associated with sex work is rooted in a patriarchal double-standard.

“The policing of sexuality is definitely a part of [the stigma]. There is a double-standard power dynamic where men are allowed and expected to have a lot of sex but women are shamed and considered less-than for having the same amount of sex,” she says.

“The policing of sexuality is definitely a part of [the stigma]. There is a double-standard power dynamic where men are allowed and expected to have a lot of sex but women are shamed and considered less-than for having the same amount of sex,” she says.

“Sex workers are the epitome of an independent woman who can provide for herself and that represents a threat to the patriarchy. But we don’t look at these power dynamics and we just blame the sex worker and consider them a victim as opposed to seeing people being resilient to capitalism.”

As a trans sex worker, Vermilion believes she is portrayed as a victim to an even greater extent.

“Transgender women face an additional stigma within the sex industry because of those power dynamics. While sex workers are generally not high risk, transgender sex workers are considered at a higher vulnerability because of those intersecting factors of oppression.”

**NAVIGATING NON-NORMATIVE DESIRE**

On the other hand, growing bodies of academic research demonstrate the increasing demand for trans women within the sex industry.

In the book Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada, Tor Fletcher explains that men hire trans sex workers because they are curious about what it would be like to have sex with a woman who has a penis. Fletcher argues that having sex with a trans woman feels safer for many clients because their non-normative desires aren’t questioned. Vermilion sees this as a positive part of her job.

“I get to facilitate space for men who are impacted emotionally by the society we live in that says, ‘Men who desire trans women are gay.’ There are men who have desires that they feel guilty and shameful for and they seek me out to safely explore those desires. I feel so honoured to be able to facilitate that space,” she explains.

At the same time, however, Vermilion recognizes that transgender women are often relegated to sex work because they are fetishized and they represent transgressive pleasure for heterosexual men. Yet, she sees this as something she can capitalize on.

“It’s one of the ways that we can actually pay our rent and keep ourselves fed. It’s affirming in that we can have sex with men for money because it affirms our gender. We are beautiful and desirable and it affirms our womanhood. It feels powerful to have power over a man with my body.”

**THE PERVASIVE PRESSURE**

However, in his thesis Playing Two People: Exploring Trans Women’s Experiences in Sex Work, sociology and anthropology graduate student Leon Laidlaw explains that within this growing demand for trans bodies, trans women have experienced an immense pressure to express conventional femininity. Transphobic responses can arise when a trans woman is unexpectedly discovered as ‘male-bodied,’ resulting in frequent safety concerns, including physical and sexual assault.

A 2006 study conducted in San Francisco shows that the risk of harassment and physical violence is heightened for transgender sex workers when compared to cisgender men and women sex workers. Over half of trans sex workers report domestic violence and 36 per cent report sex work-related violence. Even though Vermilion has experienced bad clients who have made her feel uncomfortable, she cannot recall a time where she ever felt unsafe.

“Personally, I have experienced very little violence because I am excellent at asserting my boundaries, communicating and being a bitch when I need to be,” she explains.

**TACKING THE TRANSPHOBIA**

Instead, Vermilion says the transphobia and discrimination outside the sex industry is a bigger problem for her, specifically within the healthcare industry. For example, she remembers a time when she called her doctor’s office to renew her prescription for pre-exposure prophylaxis — a drug she takes to prevent her from acquiring HIV.

“Over the phone, I was told by the secretary that I wasn’t special because I’m trans and that I needed to call the pharmacy like every other patient. I felt completely alienated as a patient by her discrimination and stigma.”

Vermilion is not alone in facing this type of institutional discrimination.

Transphobia has been documented in a wide range of health services, including doctor’s offices and mental health institutions. In his thesis, Laidlaw explains that approximately 25 per cent of trans people have been denied medical service because of their gender identity and some trans Ontarians have even been refused examinations when accessing emergency health care.
As a result, trans people are starting to avoid medical centres, including those offering HIV testing, for fear of discrimination. For example, 45 per cent of trans people who took part in the Trans Pulse Canada Project say they’ve had one or more unmet health care needs in the past year.

Additionally, a 2011 study conducted by Frances Shaver, Jacqueline Lewis and Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale documents health providers denying trans sex workers injectable hormones because they assumed they would use the needles to inject illicit substances. Some of the study’s participants being treated for HIV were also forced to discontinue hormone replacement therapy by their doctors, who did not want to manage the effects of both medications.

Vermilion sees these statistics as incredibly concerning. She explains that trans sex workers, in addition to racialized, immigrant and undocumented sex workers, have “specific healthcare needs that are specific to their population, as compared to the overall population” because of the increased oppression they face.

A MIRAGE OF MISCONCEPTION

Despite this reality, trans sex workers face continual institutional discrimination — something Vermilion believes is rooted in people’s general misconceptions about being a sex worker.

“People’s biggest misconception about the sex industry is that people never choose it. But I don’t think there is anything wrong with sucking dick for money,” says Vermilion.

“Another big misconception is that sex work is the same as sex trafficking. There is labour exploitation in almost every labour industry. Yes, sometimes sex workers have bad clients. Yes, sometimes sex work can be hard. But we should be able to have grievances about our work without being infantilized and being told that we shouldn’t make that choice.”

Hailey Heartless, a Vancouver-based fetish service provider, agrees.

“There’s a massive conflation with sex work and commercial sexual exploitation. It’s an issue that is so foreign to so many people that they don’t have to educate themselves so they go on with these incorrect narratives,” Heartless explains.

“A lot of people like to push it away because they’ve heard of people who have been involved with commercial sexual exploitation and they think that sex work can’t happen without this happening.”

A PATHWAY OF PROGRESS

However, Heartless believes that sex workers across the country are overcoming this stigma.

“We are coming up to a point now where [sex work] is less of a social or legal issue and more workers are organizing themselves. We’re never going to get equality or fight for our rights if we are treated like a social issue instead of equal workers.”

Trans advocacy groups, like the Calgary-based Skipping Stone Foundation, are playing a major role in this initiative. Billie Schultz is a group facilitator at Skipping Stone and is dedicated to connecting trans individuals to the low-barrier support they need and deserve.

“If sex workers are experiencing stigma, Skipping Stone is a place where we don’t ask if you’re a sex worker. We don’t ask people for their job history. Whatever they choose to tell us is what we take. We meet them where they are at,” Schultz explains.

“If they are doing sex work, then we try to make them as safe as possible. We help them get access to tests and birth control. And if they are trying to get out of sex work, we also help them with that too.”

As someone who has been in the sex industry for almost a decade, Vermilion sees these various initiatives as a positive thing. Despite what others may think, she sees her sex work as a core part of her identity — one that won’t change with time.

“I think I’ll be doing sex work for as long as I’m having sex.”
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