The Fall 2011

CROW

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-30-

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On the Cover:
Journalism student Amanda Williams offers her heart on a platter.
Photo by Julie-Anne Johnston.
Welcome to The Crow, Fall 2011. Just like our much-loved annual Minifie lecture, this magazine is a free offering from the University of Regina School of Journalism to you, our supporting public. We hope the contents will engage, inspire and inform you.

In 2011 the Regina campus marks 100 years, a remarkable achievement due in no small part to the prairie spirit of ‘chipping in’ whenever help is needed. The School of Journalism has likewise benefited from the generosity of Saskatchewan people. Since 1980, the James M. Minifie Fund – a legacy of one of Canada’s greatest journalists – has helped shore up our education and public outreach activities. Now, after more than 30 years, the time has come to shore up the fund itself. If you enjoy this magazine and our public events, and want to promote top quality journalism in Canada, please consider donating to the fund during this special year of celebration and homecoming.

With your support, we will continue educating journalists capable of producing the high quality work you see in The Crow. One of the first lessons we teach is the importance of integrity and empathy in journalism. Our students don’t hack phone messages to get information; instead, they slow down and get to know people. They work at getting facts straight and gaining broad understanding. They approach people with the respect due to fellow humans.

It’s an approach that shines through in the pages of this magazine. After reading The Crow, you’re guaranteed to view the person standing next to you with new eyes, whether he or she is a long-haired biker, an uprooted fisherman or a small town business operator.

But good journalism doesn’t begin and end with empathy. There are tough questions to be asked. Do regulators turn a blind eye to conditions in the horse slaughter industry? What dilemmas do new medical choices present? Why do deaths by poverty go uncounted? Why shut down a successful northern training program? Why do people living in ‘the world’s bread basket’ eat so much imported food? These are just a few of the questions raised in this issue of The Crow. Our writers also touch on the human experience, from spiritual awakening to the achievement of personal goals by means both fair and foul. It is a heady mix of powerful, compelling storytelling, augmented by the work of our photojournalism students.

As always, The Crow endeavours to represent long-form journalism at its best – intriguing, thoughtful and a pleasure to read. Enjoy.

Patricia W. Elliott, Editor

Tax deductible donations to the James M. Minifie Fund are welcome. For details please contact the School of Journalism at journalism@uregina.ca or 585-4420.
Protest

Protestors urging Canada to take a stand against Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi gather outside City Hall in Regina, February 26, 2011.

PHOTO BY KIM ELASCHUK
Smythe’s Legacy: Thinking critically about communications and society

Long before the School of Journalism was established at the University of Regina in 1980, others were laying the foundations to take the craft more seriously at the academy. One of the leading architects of the emerging University of Regina in the sixties was the brilliant and irrepressible Dallas Smythe. Born in Regina, he became one of the world’s leading communications theorists and researchers. As an economist at the Federal Communications Commission from 1943 to 1948, Smythe pioneered the regulation of U.S. broadcasting. As a research director for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters from 1948 to 1953, he helped secure educational channels in the U.S. He worked with other ground-breaking critical communication theorists George Gerbner and Herbert Schiller at the University of Illinois from 1948 to 1963. In fact, Smythe taught the first class ever in the political economy of communications.

Smythe became an economic advisor to Canada’s Fowler Commission on Broadcasting, from 1956 to 1957, before being recruited to Regina by Graham Spry. (Spry was the legendary leader of the Canadian Radio League and the father, thereby, of Canadian public broadcasting.) Smythe spent a decade at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus from 1963 to 1973, co-authoring its famous Regina Beach Statement (1963), and involving himself in the highly contentious debates on the New World Information and Communications Order at UNESCO from 1969 to 1973. He wrote hundreds of articles, reports and monographs, including the influential book Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada. To this day, the Union for Democratic Communications awards the Dallas Smythe Award to a leading practitioner or academic who lives up to his lofty example.

Smythe was drawn back to his childhood home by the open spirit of social innovation that defined Saskatchewan in the Sixties. By 1980, a new journalism school would sink its roots into the fertile soil of a vibrant and critical campus culture. The Sixties played a formative role in that culture, and the student newspaper featured prominently. The distinct history and democratic vitality of this community would enfold the Journalism School.

Although Smythe retired from the University of Regina seven years before the School of Journalism was established, his imprint on the university’s institutional culture, and his path-breaking, critical communications studies left important legacies. He argued the mass media were not well understood due to their relative youth, historically speaking, but that they were central to the very structure of modern life, consciousness and democratic possibility. They were, in his pithy trademark phrase, a “blindspot.” Smythe helped pour the intellectual foundations for a different kind of journalism school, firmly grounded in the liberal arts and a critical conception of communications. It emerged long before any other journalism schools in the Canadian West.

More generally, Smythe laid the basis for a culture of innovation at the University of Regina. Long before it became commonplace, his emphasis was on inter-disciplinarity, and on the social context and consequences of education. This implied an independent and critical approach to journalism, rather than simply being captive to industry interests or conventional wisdom. Smythe argued forcefully against the cultural invasion of the university by a stripped-down, market-driven technical rationality that was unhinged from social ethics and social criticism. There was, therefore, a deep distrust of the notion that a Journalism School might simply churn out graduates, in an assembly-line fashion, to meet the narrow needs of profit-focused employers. The fact that the School was designed the way it was, and embodied the liberal arts mission and critical spirit which it did, largely reflects Smythe’s enduring influence.

The Dallas W. Smythe Chair in Journalism and the Public Interest is dedicated to Smythe’s independent and critical spirit. It is proudly sponsored by Regina’s prairie dog magazine.

Shovelling

Joe Goudy and his neighbours clear snow in their southeast Regina neighbourhood, March 15, 2011. Regina and many other parts of the Prairies experienced severe flooding this spring.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA GOUDY
Long may you run

There was never any question in Harley Kowalsky’s mind that he would ride again.

by Bryn Levy
Harley Kowalsky spends most of his time in a brown leather chair, with a cup of tea on the armrest. He’s often hunched over a six-string bass guitar; the chair’s too soft for sitting up straight. With the giant bass perched awkwardly on his knee, the music comes thumping out slowly at first, gradually accelerating. His hands look more accustomed to spinning wrenches. But years of playing music and creating art have given his fingers an economy of motion that belies their graceless appearance. There is a vertical scar on his left wrist. It looks like one you might expect from a suicide attempt, except it’s not positioned quite right. Sometimes, when he’s played the bass for a while, his left hand stiffens up. The tirade of notes drops off to a stutter. Then it stops altogether.

Past the scar, tattoos creep up his hands and merge with the full sleeves hidden under his sweater. Some of the work is sloppy, a testament to a man who cobbled his ink together as time and money allowed. He’s proud of the imperfections. They show the world he earned each and every piece.

It’s rare for him to be doing just one thing. Usually, he has the TV on, with his phone beeping and whirring away on the chair’s other arm, across from the cup of tea. When he’s not playing guitar, he works away on his laptop designing band posters and T-shirts.

Light-coloured skin points to mixed heritage, but he looks aboriginal. He wears red dog tags around his neck and usually sports T-shirts emblazoned with the words Support 81, or Support Big Red Machine. To the uninitiated, it might appear he simply has a favourite clothing brand. But his clothes are a study in biker iconography. Big Red Machine and the number 81 are code for the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club. Only members can wear the legendary Death Head patch; the Support gear is a way to wear the colours without breaking the rules. The clothes aren’t about a gang affiliation. They are the badges of someone who belongs to motorcycle culture, ahead of all else. They are the mark of someone who rides hard, a man who lives on his motorcycle.

Many people who see Harley on the street react with fear or contempt. A bearded, long-haired Indian biker must be either a criminal or a drunk.

But he doesn’t drink. Never has. He says he hasn’t seen drinking do much good for anyone.

Harley grew up in a biker household. The idea of some sort of iconic ‘first ride’ is puzzling to him. It would be like asking a farm kid to remember the first time he rode a horse.

When he was a kid he would scamper downstairs to watch cartoons and eat cereal just like any other child of the Eighties. He thought nothing of hopping between the people sleeping on the floor to get to the TV. He knew not to disturb whoever was passed out on the couch. He can recall four bearded bikers taking turns pulling him around the basement on his first set of wheels, a little red wagon.

He remembers his first motorcycle, a brown Honda dirtbike, about 50 cc’s. This was the first in a series of dirt-bikes that got progressively bigger as he did. His family lived outside the small city of Melfort, Saskatchewan. School was where he first learned the difference between rich and poor. When kids showed off their fancy new shoes and backpacks, he realized that he was part of a group of kids that, with the exception of maybe one new item a year, never had anything new to brag about.

When he was 10, the family moved to the Muskoday First Nation, a reserve about 20 kilometres southeast of Prince Albert. Muskoday was a better reserve than most. It didn’t suffer the same ills as more isolated communities, where it can be an eight hour drive just to reach a gas station. Being close to the city also meant troublemakers and drunks tended to go off-reserve.

As Harley got older, he began to understand that all the reserve kids at his school tended to hang out together. The reserve was a tight-knit community where neighbours would simply show up on each other’s doorstep to visit. A few years after moving to Muskoday, he started attending Carlton Comprehensive High School in Prince Albert. It is Saskatchewan’s biggest, with over 2,000 students.

In high school he wasn’t picked on for being an Indian. It was his weirdness that got him singled out. He was the overweight kid at the back of the room wearing black lipstick. Weirdness: the great unifier, bringing kids of all races, religions and creeds together, if only for a little while.

That’s not to say he never saw racism, though. Growing up, Harley had always loved music, and had started...
He threw his bike hard to the right, aiming for the ditch, but not in time.

By age 16, Harley was through with school. He was hopping off the school bus at work, putting in over 50 hours a week at the reserve gas station. Finally, he joined the ranks of the 70 per cent of aboriginal people in Saskatchewan who don’t finish high school.

Work bought independence. When he brought home his first car, he was itching to take it out and drive, like any teenage boy would be. His father looked at it and said, “It needs an oil change, new plugs, and new wires: and you’re going to do it.” He spent hours working on the old car. Growing up with a father who collected cars and motorbikes, he learned to fix them. But he admits that spinning wrenches is still frustrating. He just doesn’t have the patience.

At 17 he moved to Prince Albert and started a series of different jobs, from installing car stereos to delivering pizzas. He soon discovered most of the young people tended to move away at 19 to go to university in Saskatoon. It seemed like there was almost no one around his age. Prince Albert felt like a dead city, devoid of the optimism of booming towns like Regina and Saskatoon. To Harley, it was a sterile place that only existed to serve the prisons that dominated its economy.

He had long plotted a move to Regina, but for whatever reason, it just never seemed to work out. Either he would find himself with a job or a girlfriend that he couldn’t leave behind, or people he was supposed to move down with would pull out at the last minute.

The motorcycle was a source of comfort for him. He was someone who thought too much, who was always on the move. The saddle of his bike was the one place where he stopped thinking. He says everyone has something like this, a place they can go to or a thing they can do that makes the rest of the world melt away. For him, it happens when he pulls back on the throttle.

Then, on the Labour Day weekend in 2009, the accident happened. He went out to Muskoday to visit his mother and have a barbecue. On the way home, he rode past the gas station where he had worked back in high school. An older man behind the wheel of a grey Chevy Lumina was making a left turn to go into the gas station. He didn’t even see Harley coming.

Harley takes comfort from knowing the accident wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t speeding. He wasn’t doing anything wrong. He was just unlucky enough to be in the oncoming lane when someone wasn’t paying attention.

A lifetime spent riding is all that saved him from dying that day. If he’d...
hit the car straight on, he’s sure that all that would have been left of him was some vapour in the air. He threw his bike hard to the right, aiming for the ditch, but not in time. He smashed into the front of the car, jamming the footpeg of his bike through his leg. Then he went up the hood, over the windshield, sailing onto the highway. His custom one-inch thick steel handlebars bent forward to the point where the grips were almost touching.

His left hand was broken almost clean off. He woke up in a hospital room. His forearm was a mess of plates and screws. His bike was totaled.

He spent six weeks in a wheelchair, with months of physiotherapy afterwards. He felt lucky. Unlike some of the patients, he didn’t have to learn how to walk all over again; he was just rebuilding atrophied muscle.

His first ride after the accident came just a few months later, in November. He was still wearing casts and walking with a cane. He had picked up a bike from a friend in Assiniboia, and hauled it to his father’s house. When he got it off the truck, his father asked him, “Does it run?” Harley realized that winter was coming and, cane or no cane, it was the last chance he’d get for a ride before the cold set in. He handed his cane to his father, fired up the bike, and took it for a few laps around the yard. The casts made it impossible to shift out of first gear, but he was happy even for that brief chance to be back on a motorcycle.

Finally recovered, he realized that he had nothing tying him to Prince Albert. It was time to head to Regina. He moved in with a friend, and started looking for work. Waiting for his settlement cheque from Saskatchewan Government Insurance, he spent hours scouring the Internet, knowing that as soon as the money came he would be buying a new bike.

The cheque finally arrived in February. He bought a new bike in Saskatoon, a 2010 Harley-Davidson Street Bob, flat black, with only three kilometres on it. He went to get it on a bitterly cold day. Unable to ride the winter roads, he rented a small trailer and strapped the bike down as tight as he could.

The drive back to Regina was awful. The ratchet straps holding the bike in the trailer kept coming loose. He stopped to tighten them half a dozen times. Finally, the straps came loose one more time, and Harley’s brand new bike tipped over. He found himself on the side of the highway, with no gloves, his beard frozen almost solid in minus 35 degree weather, trying to pick up a 400-kilogram motorcycle and strap it down as the wind ripped across him. He cursed under his breath the whole time as he ratched down the straps so tight that the back tire reared up.

After he wrestled the bike into his garage back home, he positioned it so that he could see the right side mirror through the window of the garage as he looked out from the kitchen. For a few days, he would get up every few minutes to gaze at it.

Finally, spring arrived. He hates this time of year. All bikers do. It gets nice enough out that he could be riding, and then it snows. It’s like the weather is teasing him.

He has already put a new seat on his bike. It’s a simple thing to do, requiring only one bolt, but he feels better knowing his bike is no longer stock. He already has custom exhaust pipes ready to be put on, and he’s going to pinstripe the tank himself. He plans to cut the rear fender back as much as legally possible. He chuckles at the idea of taking a hacksaw to a bike with less than 10 kilometres on it. There was never any question in his mind that he would ride again. He knows his injuries are going to hurt worse as he gets older, so he needs to grab every minute he can. Even though he walks with a limp, and some days his left hand and arm feel like they are full of broken glass, he could never imagine living without a bike.

You have to take something like an accident well, he tells people. Complaining won’t solve anything. In just a few short weeks, he knows he’ll be back out on the road.
ed-haired, freckled and stylishly dressed, Lyndsay Grado opened the doors and entered into the warmth of Regina’s Ramada Hotel from the frigid January cold. Tucked in her arms were her resume, cover letter, a list of references, her teaching profile, her degree certificate, academic transcripts, passport and a police check. She was ready. She crossed the lobby with confidence in her step. Then one foot slipped and she almost fell. Catching herself quickly, she saw the wet floor signs and a janitor mopping. Gathering herself, she continued on her way toward her final interview with Elite Education, an international teaching agency. Slightly shaken, she was glad to have taken the time to relax a bit in her car, parked out on the street, before coming into the meeting.

Grado’s journey to become a teacher started in 2002, in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.

“I was in grade eight. I had some pretty special teachers who inspired me and even told me I would make a great teacher. It remained my top career choice from then on,” she recalls.

She always loved school and some of the teachers encouraged her to pass it on. “I think my initial motivation to be a teacher was to one day make students feel as special as teachers had made me feel,” she says. As a high school student, she took a job as director of a local playground. Working with kids brought her joy.

In 2006, while still a senior in high school at A.E. Peacock Collegiate, Grado had her first experience in the United Kingdom. Along with a group of classmates and teacher Rick Schwabe, she set off on an adventure that took her through Toronto, New York, England and Scotland. The trip sealed her love of travel.

After high school Grado applied to the University of Regina’s faculty of education. Getting accepted was a huge relief – she had no Plan B. Starting in the fall of 2006, Grado was thrown into the atmosphere of teaching in the very first year with field work, then again in her third year with a pre-internship and, finally, a full semester internship in her last year.

After graduating in 2010, her love for travelling translated into another trip. This time, she explored not only the U.K., but also Holland, Germany and Italy. The trip locked in her dream to work overseas, combining her twin passions of travelling and teaching. Now, walking into the interview, her dream was about to be put to the test.

The U.K. is hungry for teachers, and there are several Canadian recruiting agencies. Shawna Hill’s hands are where every application to Protocol Education ends up. Based in Barrie, Ontario, Hill manages roughly 300 Canadian teaching recruits per year. Successful applicants are placed in one of the 10 areas that Protocol deals with in the U.K.

Recruitment strategies at Protocol are cyclical, starting in January and February when all the universities have their education career fairs. This is where Protocol consultants meet the possible recruits and answer their questions. The ones who are really interested will go on to submit applications via the agency’s website.

The essential requirement is previous teaching experience, including practicum teaching experience, says Hill. Experience with special needs students or with English-as-a-Second-Language students also helps land the all-important interview. During the interview, to complete the picture, recruiters try to get a sense of the candidate’s overall personality.

“We’re looking for candidates with a strong degree of enthusiasm, strong degree of confidence, competence in their teaching skills and we’re always looking for candidates who aren’t really afraid of taking on a new experience or challenge,” explains Hill.

Flexibility is important in the U.K., where classrooms are very mixed with different ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, learning levels and needs, she notes.

Steve Boutilier of Regina can attest to the challenges. Unlike Grado, who dreamed of teaching in the U.K., Boutilier went because it was his first job offer. He submitted his resume to the Smart Teachers agency in late April of 2009, got a call-back in May, and had a job in London, England by the beginning of June 2009.

“It’s almost impossible to get work over there without an agency, and the teaching climate is completely different,” he says. Teachers are under the microscope. Along with a focus
on standardized testing, the Office for Standards in Education evaluates teachers’ work. Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector watches over how students are marked and reports annually on every single school in the U.K. “I found the workload over there was so significantly bigger than the workload here. I was burning out,” Boutilier says.

Boutilier experienced some culture shock as well. “Life in London is good, but it’s also crazy, you’re always busy. Life in Saskatchewan is much more relaxed,” he says.

He found one way to help his homesickness: the Maple Leaf pub. “It was very cheesy Canadiana. It had fake log cabin walls, despite that it was in an 800-year-old building. There were Gretzky jerseys, and there was a Rider jersey behind the bar, and they served Moosehead and stuff.”

Boutilier taught in the U.K. for eight months, returning when Regina Public Schools offered him a position back home. He says he wouldn’t have chosen to stay longer, although the U.K. experience was positive overall. He met lifelong friends there, but is glad to be back to good coffee and the Prairies.

Grado floated out of the room knowing the adventure was finally underway. Elite Education would help her find a place to live, but it was up to her to have funds in place to get started. She decided to move back into her family home in Moose Jaw, where she could save up money working as a substitute teacher for the Prairie South School Division. Subbing also offered a chance to beef up her classroom experience, so that she could head off to England with confidence.

Because her grandfather was born and raised in Scotland, Grado is eligible for an ancestry visa, available to all Commonwealth citizens who have a grandparent born in the U.K. This will allow her to work in Britain for up to five years, after which time she can apply for ‘Indefinite Leave to Remain’ and, later, full U.K. citizenship.

But five years is a long way off, and getting the paperwork organized isn’t the hardest part about leaving Canada.

“I come from a very close family, so it’s hard for them to see me moving,” says Grado. “The closer the date comes that I leave, the sadder my family will get, but I know they’re supportive and excited for me to do this.”

“I’m not sure how long I will stay there… I am just really excited for what lies ahead.” Over the years, she’s taken many steps to get this far. Now the real journey is about to begin.

Cultural shock is something Lyndsay Grado is ready and waiting for. She made sure she did her research before telling her family that she wanted to be an overseas teacher. Her family was excited for her when she told them, especially family members in Scotland.

But first she had to get through the interview. Entering a private meeting room at the hotel, she took a slow step forward and grasped the hand of recruiter Jenny Beattie. The next hour went by in a steady stream of questions. The topics ranged from information about Elite, to Grado as a person and teacher, to what kind of opportunities she was looking for. Grado opened up, trying to prove she was what the agency wanted. Then, at the moment she felt she’d talked and explained her heart out, she realized the interview had turned into a job offer. Beattie told her there was a placement available in Newcastle, England, just south of the Scottish border. It seemed a perfect match.
Accident

The driver of this car walked away without serious injury – and without his sneaker – following a rollover just south of Regina on Highway 6, February 5, 2011.

PHOTO BY JOSH CAMPBELL
Brad is the kind of guy people notice. Like in a restaurant for instance. When he and his wife Denise are waiting to be seated, people stare, especially kids. “Yeah, kids are the worst.” And in a crowd, people make room for the pair. It’s almost like they think if they get close they may catch it. Or maybe it’s just easier to take it all in from a distance. They are quite the pair. But at work, that’s where everybody knows Brad. Even people he’s never met know who he is. Hundreds of people work at SaskTel, Saskatchewan’s Crown-operated phone company, but still people know him, and in detail. There’s that woman with brown hair. She seems to know a lot about Brad. Things like where his office is, and that he’s married. No big deal, but what does he know about her? Well, she’s got brown hair, that’s about it. But these people aren’t familiar with Brad because he talks loud, or commands attention. No. Brad’s actually a pretty quiet guy. He’s not shy, but who really wants all the attention, right? Brad knows full well why everyone at work knows who he is: “It’s because I’m fat. That’s the only reason these people pay any attention to me.”

On October 13, 2009 Brad Bantle underwent life-altering surgery in Curitiba, Brazil. That day, his stomach was transformed from a fully functioning organ the size of a football, to an altered version no bigger than a hard-boiled egg. The doctors warn depression can be a side effect, but not for Brad. It was too late. In 2009, Brad was already depressed.

See, in Brad’s downtown Regina office, the fact that he weighed more than 500 pounds seemingly gave people the right to stare and whisper, and they weren’t even discreet. Their words burned deep. And their eyes, people couldn’t keep their eyes off his sagging belly. And the tough part is there was no place left to tuck it all away. It was just too big. So, people stared. It was like being on the playground again, only now the taunts

Brad Bantle underwent life-altering surgery in Brazil. One battle ended and another began.

by Alana Bergstrom
He’s even more angry because his mom won’t drop the fact that he’s fat, and the worst part is the only thing that will make this feeling go away is a piece of chocolate cake. All he can think about is the icing, “God, the icing, when it melts in your mouth.” His eyes light up and his taste buds throb. His mouth immediately fills with saliva. His doctor has said, repeatedly, that his weight will kill him. His heart is working overtime and his liver is inflamed. His blood sugar is through the roof, and it’s likely he won’t make it to forty. But still he wants cake. He can’t put his shoes on without his face turning purple, and his back is always sore. Still he wants pizza, a whole pizza. But his favorites are those tiny little perogies they have at the fowl supper in Prince Albert every year. That’s where he grew up. And he’d drive the four hours north from Regina, just for the perogies. “They just melt down your throat.” He calls them the ‘little melters’. “Most people eat about three or four, but not me and my Dad.” It’s nothing for Brad to sit with a dozen of the ‘little melters’ on his plate, and seconds are no problem. He’ll even go back for thirds. After 36 perogies, sometimes Brad keeps going. “You only get them once a year,” he reasons.

Everybody tells him to stop. Everybody tells him he’s going to reach 600 pounds, but it doesn’t matter. Food is his crutch. He eats when he’s happy; he eats when he’s sad. Everything revolves around food, and there are times Brad has thought that letting go of life would be easier than letting go of food. But he keeps going.

When Brad’s friend Brenda told him to meet her and her friend for Karaoke one night, he agreed. In the summer of 1999, they all went to a north end bar. After a few drinks, a few laughs and a few songs, Brad and Brenda’s friend Denise started hitting it off. There were a few more Karaoke nights much the same and, eventually, Brad and Denise became a couple. It was nice. At the time, Denise’s weight was hovering around 350 pounds. She’d been big her whole life, and boyfriends were few and far between. But things with Brad were different, and in June of 2001 the two were married. Denise was the bigger of the two. But that was nothing new. She was used to being the ‘big one.’ She’d
been like that for 30 years. It started in her early teens. She’d gotten used to being referred to not as the pretty one, but the one with a great personality. That’s the way it was. She was big and she knew it. People stared, people taunted, and at the bar people blatantly made fun of her. “At least I can get rid of my fat,” she’d think. “They can’t get rid of their ugly.” That’s a comeback she used regularly. But deep down it bothered her. Everything revolved around her weight. Denise couldn’t go to the bathroom at a friend’s house without wondering if she’d be able to fit. If the toilet was snuggled close to a wall, backing in was Denise’s only option. When the two married, Brad weighed around 300 pounds. By the time he made the decision to go for surgery, Brad had put on another 200 pounds. “Yeah, after we married, he just piled on the weight,” Denise says. He was tired and winded so often that he didn’t even realize it. It was painful to watch him walk. It got so bad that on Saturdays, Denise would evaluate how many errands they had to run and how much walking would be involved before she would ask Brad to come. He just couldn’t handle a lot of walking. One lap around the outside aisle at Costco and Brad would need a nap. He would walk a few steps, and then look for a place to sit down. He would always push the cart. That way he would have something to lean on. And when leaning on the cart wasn’t working, he would try to use the store shelves for support. Every time he did, Denise’s mind would race. “One of these days he’s going to knock down the shelf,” she’d think to herself.

It’s not like he wants to live like this; it’s just the way it is. It’s not like life is easy this way. Being morbidly obese makes everything tougher. Travelling is a perfect example. When Brad and Denise went to Jamaica last year, the two had to stop eating and drinking hours before their flight took off. And while on the plane, they refused the complimentary beverage and the bag of peanuts everyone is offered. Yeah, it seems strange, two morbidly obese people abstaining from eating, but the alternative is frightening. See, what people don’t realize is that when you are more than 300 pounds, fitting into an airplane bathroom is impossible, and the thought of using one is horrifying. “It would be embarrassing if you got stuck in one of those,” Denise says with frustration in her voice. And eating out is another headache. If friends invite the two to Patients who undergo the surgery can’t eat more than a few ounces of food at a time. If they do, they get sick.
Every day is a struggle. He wants more than just a taste. “I wish someone had told me it would be like this.”

a restaurant, they need to evaluate the seating. Chairs with arms are a nightmare for fat people. If all the chairs have arms, the restaurant is off limits.

They’ve tried everything, cabbage soup diets, regular diets, even the Atkins diet, every fad diet there was, but at that weight you’ll try anything. Nothing works. Something always comes up, a family problem or trouble at work and food once again becomes the crutch.

And then you shovel it in, and you’re right back where you started. Four years ago, Denise was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. At first she was scared, but then the addiction took over again, and the food became number one. If a deadly disease brought on by obesity isn’t enough to force a change, what is?

I 2009 Brad was told one last time by his doctor that he was going to die. He made a decision. He wanted to live, and he decided bariatric surgery was the only way. But when Brad tried to get the surgery in Canada, he was turned down. At around 5’10” and more than 500 pounds, Brad has a Body Mass Index (BMI) of approximately 71. Candidates for surgery in Canada need a BMI between 35 and 60. Brad was too heavy.

That’s when his friend stepped in. She’d had the surgery a few years before in Brazil, and was on her way back for an update procedure. She offered to find Brad a spot with her surgeon. Two months later, without really knowing what he was getting himself into, Brad flew to Brazil.

Gastric bypass surgery, used to help morbidly and severely obese people lose weight, was invented by Dr. Edward Mason at the University of Iowa in the mid-Sixties. Mason realized patients who’d undergone his ulcer surgery were losing significant amounts of weight. He’d been removing the portions of his patient’s stomach that had been affected by the ulcers, essentially forming a smaller stomach pouch. Mason wondered if this could be used as a form of weight loss surgery. Bariatric surgery was born.

Since then, bariatric surgeries have adapted and there are a few different...
methods. The Rou-En-Y gastric bypass is the most common surgery performed today. It consists of cutting the stomach just below the esophagus and attaching it to the larger intestine, making a significantly smaller stomach pouch. The remainder of the stomach is left in the body to help contain stomach acids. Patients who undergo the surgery can’t eat more than a few ounces of food at a time. If they do, they get sick. Also, because the stomach is attached directly to the small intestine, food passes through the body quicker, so fewer calories are absorbed. All this leads to significant weight loss.

This surgery has come under criticism by doctors. A surgeon performing bariatric surgery is taking a fully functioning organ, and altering it so it arguably works less effectively then it should. Some argue that it is a doctor’s duty, by oath, to help people, not perform surgeries that could potentially harm patients. Post surgery, patients are at risk of malnutrition and even death.

As well, depression is common after the surgery. Bariatric patients have higher suicide rates than the general population. Why? Many consider obesity a disease of addiction. Surgery doesn’t take care of the addiction; it just stops people from ‘using.’

For Brad, everything has been different since his surgery. When he goes out with friends, he can’t eat more than a few bites of steak, a few forkfuls of potatoes and a maybe a few vegetables. If he wants dessert, he has to budget space in his stomach and, when he does, he can usually only fit a bite. That’s a far cry from what he was eating before: appetizer, then soup, then a meal and dessert. “You gotta always have dessert,” was his motto. Now it bothers him that he can’t eat a full meal. His brain says yes but his body says no. He wants to eat all the time, and he wants to eat a lot. He can’t shut it off. Every day is a struggle. He wants more than just a taste. “I wish someone had told me it would be like this,” he says.

Around the time Brad had his surgery, Saskatchewan launched a bariatric program. It included an extensive required evaluation process. The program’s creators wanted to reduce the risk that someone would slowly re-stretch their stomach by continually overeating, or that someone would have one last binge and their stomach would fatally burst. The pre-surgery program is six months long. Patients meet with psychologists and dieticians. They are taught about how they will need to live once they’ve had the surgery. Their psychological state is evaluated to ensure they are stable enough to handle how different life will become. They confront the fact that they will never again be able to turn to food in a dark time. The program is set up to prepare patients for a different life.

Brad had none of this.

From the time he agreed to go to Brazil to the time he was on the hospital bed, mere weeks had passed. His psychological evaluation was a 300-question test. His doctor spent very little time browsing the answers and Brad was given the green light. “I guess they figured I wouldn’t have a mental breakdown,” he shrugs. It was like a wand was waved and he was going to be fine. “I guess I didn’t fully know what I was getting into,” he says now.

Post surgery, patients are at risk of malnutrition and even death.

Brad wasn’t ready for how bariatric surgery would change his life. He wasn’t ready to have the most important thing in his life ripped away – food. After the surgery, as the pounds melted away, everyone said it was amazing, everyone told him it would give him his life back. But after almost two years and 190 pounds lost, Brad still isn’t sure he made the right decision. He gets sick now when he eats something bad. If he eats too much he pukes, and it’s painful. He just imagined how happy it made everyone around him; he didn’t see the work he would have to put into it. Food moves through his system so quickly now that his body can’t absorb his epilepsy pills. He had no idea that would be the case. If he eats sugar now he’ll get diarrhea, the shakes and cold sweats. It’s called dumping syndrome. “Nobody told me about all this,” he says, frustrated. And all the extra skin, Brad can’t hide it anymore. It hangs down, brushing against his thighs and he can’t tuck it away. That will need to be taken care of later.

It hasn’t been easy. It definitely is a last resort. Everything is different after bariatric surgery and Brad is still trying to wrap his head around that. He tells Denise about it, and she sees what he’s going through. It’s been tough, but Denise thinks it’ll be different for her.

Yes, after all this, Denise is going to get the surgery herself. She’s seen Brad struggle, she’s comforted Brad when he cries. She’s seen him throw up and rush to the toilet, but still she wants the surgery. “It’ll be different for me,” she insists. She says she will be satisfied with just a taste, with just a bite of what she loves. It will be enough. It has to be, because she’s tired of the way things are. Her guiding thought: “I just can’t wait for someone to finally tell me I look good.”

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It's a warm night – about as warm as a winter night in Regina, Saskatchewan, can get. It would be a nice time to get outside for a walk or a skate on an outdoor rink, but tonight is a Tuesday night and all the action is inside.

Besides the faint sound of music coming from Tumblers Bar and Grill, the Grant Road strip mall is quiet. The neon lights from the Mac's convenience store pierce the calm dark sky. The smell of tobacco wafts through the air as two men, both dressed in blue jeans and winter coats, stand outside Tumblers having a smoke. To an idle passerby, the two are just average Joes, and in many ways, they are. However, on Tuesday nights, being average won't do.

At about 7:30 p.m. the two smokers join nine others inside Tumblers. The bar and restaurant are empty, but the side room is crowded. Two foosball tables sit in the middle of the room. Between them, a smaller table holds the necessities for the night's tournament – handle wraps and an empty cup. The wraps look like bubble gum tape; the strips will be carefully rolled on to each handle for grip. The empty cup will hold the entry fee money, which will become the night's winnings to the top three teams of competitors. Each player puts in their $6 entry. Tonight there is a cool $66 up for grabs: $36 to the winning team, $20 for the runner-up and $10 for third.

Tonight's contest is DYP – Draw Your Partner. Among the hopefuls stands Brian Burgess. His styled short hair, collared shirt and pointy black dress shoes are...
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The butt of jokes from other players, who are sporting sneakers and toques. “Fuck-
ing Brian – I’m going home,” exclaims his newly picked partner. It’s good-
natured ribbing; they know Burgess is a skilled player. Burgess has an athletic build, and looks like he would have been one of the first kids picked in elementary school gym class. Now 29, the prime age to excel at sports like hockey or football has passed. However, when it comes to foosball, he is still a student and his future in the game is wide open.

The history of foosball can be traced back to the beginning of soccer, which started roughly in the 1860s. It’s assumed the table-top versions of the game started somewhere in the late 19th century in Europe. The first foosball table patent in the United States was registered in 1901. However, foosball didn’t become a widespread game in the United States until after World War Two. A popular story is that foosball was used to help rehabilitate war veterans because it helped rebuild eye-hand coordination. Today, foosball enthusiasts like Paul Gee play for entirely different reasons.

Gee started playing foosball when he was in grade school. After school he would head over to Regina’s Great Skate Roller Rink to play. He found inspiration to excel after suffering countless losses to his grade five teacher. As time progressed, so did his involvement in the game. In university, he bought a table of his own. He played in small tournaments with his friends at the Guys and Dolls Arcade and at the campus bar, the Lazy Owl. In the early Nineties, the game took him to Vancouver. He and friend Jack Hood struggled to learn the tournament style of foosball. It was different from the bar game, they discovered. “When you go to a bar and see guys play, the ball is always mov-
ing around, it’s flying all over the place, not really a whole lot of controls,” Gee says. The two friends mastered the art of passing from the five bar to the three bar and performing a rollover shot for a goal. Gee started going to tournaments in 2002 and since then has placed in the top three at a number of amateur and semipro tournaments throughout Canada and the United States.

In July 2002, Gee and Hood founded Regina’s Foosball Club, which ran out of The Break Bar and Grill. The tournaments moved to Tumblers in 2003. According to restaurant owner Reid Baiton, he first connected with Gee and Hood through a pizza customer. Baiton welcomed the foosball club with open arms, providing the club with free pizza, beer and pop every Tuesday. “We only had a regu-
lar foosball table…and Paul and Jack brought in these really nice Tornado tournament tables,” Baiton recalls. “So I thought, hey, why not get the best foosball tables in town?”

The club began meeting at Tumblers three times a week, on Tuesday and Thursday nights and Sunday afternoons. At first, they would get around 20 players per day, but the numbers soon began dropping off. About three years ago, Gee and Hood were forced to shut down the Thursday night and Sunday afternoon tournaments. They don’t get 20 guys showing up anymore, but they do see 10 or 12 players on a consistent basis.

Gee and Hood have since set up tables in three other locations across Regina, including Tumblers, O’Hanlon’s and Gabbos. They only set up Tornado tables, the tables used in tournaments across Canada and the United States. Tornados are the best tables in the game, Gee says. They cater to the North American style of play, defined by the rollover, also commonly known as the snake shot or the wrist rocket. The roll over is a three-bar shot executed from a

Photo by Danny Kresnyak
taught my 12 guys how to play foosball; the ball is moved horizontally, then the arm executes a reverse-crank so that the rods spin backwards so the same plastic man strikes the ball.

Brian Burgess is not a household name when it comes to Regina sports figures. You won’t see his picture on a trading card or on a large sign outside the city. You don’t have to fork out a small fortune to get a front row seat to watch him play. He’s no sports superstar; he’s simply a server at the Cathedral Village Free House with a passion for foosball.

Burgess was working as manager of SoHo when he first met Gee. He contacted Gee with the intention of putting a Tornado Table in the bar. Once the table was put in, Burgess would play with his friends and usually win. But when Gee stopped by, it was no contest. Gee assured Burgess that he could get better if he came out at played in the foosball club. Burgess declined the offer. “I just didn’t think I was good enough to come out,” he says. Instead, he kept practicing with his friends on the SoHo table, hoping to get good enough to play with the league players. When Burgess finally went to play with the club in 2009, he was overwhelmed but he was eager to learn. And learn he did. In October 2010 he played in his first national tournament in Edmonton, placing second in both amateur singles and amateur doubles.

Tumblers became the breeding ground for great foosball players in Regina and, for many of the players, Gee was the father of foosball. At 43, he’s noticeably older than the rest of the club members. “I don’t have any kids,” he says. Instead, he has a gang of foosballers to mentor. “I feel proud that I taught my 12 guys how to play foosball better and they are...now going to tournaments in Edmonton and Calgary and they are doing very well,” he says. Burgess calls Gee his Mr. Miyagi, after the wise teacher in the Karate Kid movies. Gee wasn’t there when Burgess played the Edmonton nationals warm-up tournament but he was still helping him. “Paul was sending me text messages and stuff and telling me to make sure to slow down and focus,” recalls Burgess.

Brian Burgess is not a household name when it comes to Regina sports figures. Although foosball enthusiasts such as Burgess and Gee travel far to compete in tournaments, the sport struggles for survival and respect. For one thing, its status as an arcade fixture has declined. “When I was a kid, I used to go to the arcade that had foosball tables and pool tables and pinball machines,” Gee recalls. “That doesn’t happen anymore. There is one arcade in Regina, and kids are just playing their Nintendo Wii or whatever at home.”

Beyond the arcade, its legitimacy as a sport is often questioned. Gee argues that foosball’s physical demands make it sport-like. “Strength obviously is a factor; if you watch men play foosball and watch women play foosball, there is definitely a difference. Speed as well,” he says. The fact that there are men’s and women’s divisions support the idea that foosball is a sport, he says. “In poker, women play men because there is no physical advantage, but in foosball, there is a physical advantage if you are a man versus a woman,” Gee observes. And you can get injured, something that in his mind tips the scales in favour of the game being called a sport. “My wrists have been so sore that I can barely move them and couldn’t play foosball for a few days,” he says.

Sport or not, it’s still serious business for Burgess. Tonight is just one of the many nights he’ll spend playing in his effort to prepare for an Edmonton Provincials tournament. Burgess excels on defence, where he has a knack for scoring goals from the back bar – a valuable skill in any game of foosball. He plans on competing in both singles and doubles amateur events, and will try his hand in the semi-pro level as well. Going into the tournament, he hasn’t been feeling too good about his game. He missed important practice time while vacationing in Mexico in January. The simple solution is to just get back on the table. That same line of reasoning goes for any player who wants to play foosball, whether a beginner or a professional.

Watching players like Burgess and Gee play, you soon realize it’s not the same game they play in basements or bars. The game is controlled, strategic and methodical. It’s intimidating, and Gee finds the biggest barrier is simply convincing people to try. “I’ll tell them to come out and play, and we’ll teach you how to defend properly and to see a different level of the game,” he says. “If you wanted to go and beat all your friends, come out and practice for six months and I guarantee you will be able to beat all your friends.”

Although he isn’t feeling at his best, Burgess believes he’ll be competitive at the upcoming tournament. He says he doesn’t expect to win – he just wants experience. “If I play really well and do happen to win, then I’ll be pretty excited,” he says. For tonight, all he can do is keep working on his rollover shot.
Fighter

Denny Heathen poses for a photo after a bout in the R U Tuff Enuff open fight boxing contest at the Art Hauser Centre in Prince Albert, January 29, 2011. Only those with no prior organized boxing experience were eligible to participate. The night featured 31 fights in the ring and several in the stands. Heathen's fight ended in a draw.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANNY KRESNYAK
It was no secret to Shawna Oochoo when her sister started to become a ghost. It was the distant look in Kara Oochoo’s eyes, the weight she lost. She was sleepy from the methadone, indifferent from the anti-depressants. But it was the tracks across her delicate arms that revealed prescription pills were no longer Kara’s drug of choice. She was still beautiful, a finalist in a local modelling competition, someone who could go anywhere and get along with anyone. But there were demons chasing her – a family history of physical and sexual abuse and addiction. Shooting cocaine kept her one step ahead.

One evening in 2004, Kara got high with a friend in the basement of her home in North Central Regina. Suddenly he hit a bad trip, holding Kara, her mother and daughter hostage with a knife. Kara was the last to go free before help arrived.

He went to jail. Kara turned to the needle.

A few days later she was found hanging, dead at 22.

Over the next few years, sister Shawna watched at least nine more friends take their own lives, each one suffering from either addiction or grief. An epidemic was rising. Was anybody counting the deaths or reading the obituaries? Who would be the next to take a last breath? The losses were silent and quick, like modern warfare.

Another day, another death in the neighbourhood.

Squeezed between the CN and CP rail tracks, North Central rose out of the open prairie in the mid-1880s to accommodate European settlers. It was a middle-class district for industry and service workers through much of the 20th century, and was gradually pulled into the heart of the growing city of Regina. Residents weren’t wealthy, nor were they impoverished. The neighbourhood had parks, grocery stores and more churches than schools. Husbands went to work and mothers stayed at home to raise the kids.

In 1963, Rod Ash was born to one
of these families. His family of seven lived in a two-bedroom house on the 1100-block of Retallack Street. Rod’s father earned a modest living working construction, putting in long hours to pay down a mortgage.

As a kid, Ash played kick-the-can and hide-and-seek, weaving in and out of neighbours’ backyards. The children held regular street hockey tournaments in neighbourhood intersections. In the winter he went ice-skating with his friends at Grassick Park, returning home with frozen feet. Seconds later, he would be bawling in pain, calf-deep in a kitchen sink of warm water.

He loved the neighbourhood. In the early Eighties, Rod bought his first home in North Central and started his family there.

A few years later, Doreen Lloyd, a single mother of two and high school dropout, moved to the city from Sedley, a farming community 53 kilometres south-east of Regina. At 28, she was already a repeat victim of sexual abuse and an alcoholic since her teenage years.

It was 1985. There were no gangs, and youth prostitution was only just emerging. For the most part, North Central was a pretty quiet place. But, in both Lloyd and the neighbourhood, cracks were beginning to show.

She struggled to be a parent, go to school and work, all while trying to hide her addiction. One night in 1990 she caved, downing a bottle of pills and writing a suicide note to her kids.

She survived. Co-workers urged her to check into a treatment centre. There, she learned the power of group therapy and counselling to heal old wounds.

She came back into the neighbourhood clean and sober.

Around the same time, Rod Ash, now 25, moved out of North Central for good.

The streets were changing. As the rural economy collapsed, rural dwellers like Lloyd flooded into the city. At the same time, amendments to the Indian Act lifted restrictions on the mobility of status Indians in 1985. People began arriving looking for a better future, but found only some parts of the city were open to them.

In 1991, Shawna Oochoo’s mother and her four children, including Shawna and Kara, moved to North Central from Gordon’s First Nation, in a last-ditch effort to escape an abusive father.

Shawna, nine, and Kara, 11, had the freedom to come and go as they pleased, as long as they came home before their mother did from work. Sometimes that wasn’t until three or four in the morning. The sisters quickly became friends with other kids growing up in the ‘hood who were also feeling lost. An apartment suite – abandoned by drug addicts who had skipped town and left everything – became an escape from the problems at home. By age 13, Kara was working the streets to make money to feed her sister.

That’s when the drugs started: first marijuana, then hallucinogens like acid and mushrooms. Shawna and Kara became frequent users, loyal to one of the city’s most dangerous gangs. They also became mothers, both before turning 18.
After Kara’s death, Shawna turned to cocaine for support. The high was instant, euphoric and seemingly the answer. But it always faded away. Shawna would go on to attempt suicide multiple times.

“The funny thing is, we were always taught never to hurt anybody else,” remembers Shawna. “But we were never taught not to hurt ourselves.”

By then, Doreen Lloyd – still clean and sober – was known as an auntie of the streets. She had obtained a social work degree and was working with community-based organizations in North Central, teaching self-esteem and life skills like money management and problem solving.

It was a busy time. She ran programs back-to-back. Yet every graduation was followed by a funeral for at least one of her students.

In 2007 an article published in Maclean’s magazine named North Central ‘Canada’s worst neighbourhood.’ The community uproar against author Jonathan Gatehouse was deafening. North Central residents were outraged. Politicians promised improvement. The city had been besmirched.

“We were always taught never to hurt anybody else. But we were never taught not to hurt ourselves.”

“Am I going to give up? No,” Mayor Pat Fiacco told the Regina Leader-Post. “I’m not going to let one guy who doesn’t know Regina at all, the real Regina, destroy our efforts. As a matter of fact, we’re going to work even harder now. And shame on Maclean’s magazine.”

Lloyd, however, was ecstatic. “I was going, ‘Right on,’” she recalls. “While everyone was trying to do a cover-up and a smooth-over and saying,” – her voice drops to a whisper – “‘it’s not that bad.’ I was thinking, ‘It’s about time.’”

Lloyd became resource facilitator at the North Central Community Association in 2008. Since the article, there has been progress, but a lot of things haven’t changed. Poverty is the wall. North Central’s median household income is just over $25,000, half the city’s average. Thirty per cent of the area’s residents depend on government assistance and only 34 per cent have completed post-secondary schooling, compared to 59 per cent in the rest of Regina. Overall, unemployment sits around five per cent for the entire city, but North Central’s rate is estimated to be four or five times higher. For aboriginals, the unemployment rate is three times higher than non-aboriginals. They are, by far, the fastest growing demographic in the city, with the lowest life expectancy. Seventy-one percent of aboriginals living in Regina are under 35; only two per cent are 65 or older.

And every time a new helping program gets off the ground, it seems to Lloyd that its funding disappears within months.

In North Central, there are 90 agencies working to address social issues in the area, all vying for the same government dollars. They live from project to project. Not one is able to provide long-term solutions and programming to their clients.

The worst part is that it’s easy to live comfortably in almost any other Regina neighbourhood without ever understanding these problems exist.

In 2009, Rod Ash – now Sergeant Ash of the Regina Police Service – came back to North Central, not to live, but to oversee the community cop shop. By then, crime in North Central overall had significantly decreased since 2000 – down almost 23 per cent – but crimes against people, like assault and robbery, had increased. The drug trade sits at the centre of the problem. According to Ash, overdoses are more common in North Central than the rest of the city and there is a higher rate of domestic disputes, often substance-related. The most hardcore junkies will shoot anywhere from 15 to 20 times a day. Track marks can abscess, leading to blood and bone infections, and overdose and organ failure are common.

Needles are a constant worry for officers, because of the disease that can spread from a single pinprick. Seventy-nine per cent of HIV cases in Saskatchewan are a result of injection drug use. In a recent survey, almost half of a group of Regina drug users admitted to sharing needles, syringes or injecting equipment in the past six months.

Of Ash’s family of seven, not one still lives in North Central. His father was the last to go, forced by his children to
Doreen Lloyd, the auntie of the streets, has struggled for years with the question of how to change the system. For too long she has grieved with families in the area; she has helped some families for three generations now.

A recent study revealed that residents living in six low-income neighbourhoods in Saskatoon, Regina’s sister city to the north, were over 14 times more likely to attempt suicide and three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts. Children aged 10 to 15 in these neighbourhoods were twice as likely to be depressed and 19 times more likely to be using marijuana. A similar study was commissioned in Regina, but has yet to surface. Lloyd is tired of waiting. The wait-list for drug and health assessments by local health authorities is two months long and she’s sitting on the back-end of another axed program, fighting for funding instead of being out in the community.

“People are dying. People need help.”

However, Lloyd has a plan. She wants to force public attention on the area’s problems by compiling the number of premature deaths in North Central over the past 10 years, from causes like drug and alcohol overdose, homicide, suicide and diseases like HIV/AIDS and diabetes. The statistics will be compared to numbers throughout the rest of the city, also taking into account demographics such as income, gender and race. The project is being spearheaded by the community association Lloyd works for and the University of Regina’s Community Research Unit.

“I want it done fast,” says Lloyd. “Let’s get the ball rolling.”

Counting premature deaths in North Central is no easy task. With so many residents moving back and forth between reserves, records are scarce. Across the neighbourhood, there are couch-surfers living with anywhere from 10 to 15 people in one house. How to track people who have no address?

As well, the community is wary, still wounded from the last time its sores were exposed. Even the head of Lloyd’s community association isn’t convinced that counting the dead is a good idea. “I’m not sure if it will help North Central,” says Tom Wright, North Central Community Association president. Pointing out problems might help in the long run by revealing areas that need to be addressed, he says, but “you can also take (the project) as a negative in that it focuses on North Central in a negative fashion, saying there are all these negative things that are happening in a greater proportion.”

Responds Lloyd: “By no means am I trying to paint a bad picture. I’m just trying to address that there are problems in this neighbourhood we can’t ignore anymore. People are dying. People need help.”

Against all odds, some do get the help they need. Shawna Oochoo is now 27. Gangs and drug use are part of her past. She’s in a treatment centre in Fort Qu’Appelle, determined to get healthier and stronger.

“I’m breaking the cycle of suicide,” says Oochoo. “I’m here to be a positive role model for my daughter and my niece, who my sister left behind. I’m trying to instill change.”

She hopes to see a North Central that is better for generations to come. Likewise, police sergeant Ash longs to see the neighbourhood transform back to what it was like during his childhood. Through the work of people like Doreen Lloyd, he believes things are improving.

Lloyd’s research assistant completed a preliminary report in March 2011, after meeting with 14 community-based organizations. Each organization confirmed that premature death was a real problem. All agreed the deaths needed to be tracked. The findings could help change the neighbourhood, but not overnight. At 53, Lloyd acknowledges significant change likely won’t even happen during her career. She no longer lives in North Central. Returning to her rural roots, when the day ends she finds peace and solace in a country home just outside Regina. The inspiration to keep driving back to the city every morning comes from the faces of her children and grandchildren but, most importantly, from the community. As a recovering addict, she feels a kinship with North Central’s people.

“I live for today,” she says. “I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. A lot of these people are in the same boat.”
Football

Receiver Nick Flegel evades coverage by Garrett Earl to grab a pass during an Estevan Comprehensive School Elecs football training camp in Estevan, August 23, 2010.

PHOTO BY BRIAN RODGERS
Canada slaughtered nearly 90,000 horses in 2010.

By Amanda Williams

Bunnie Harasym has always been relentless.

For eight years, since the day she and her husband Lawrence first started Paradise Stables, she never gave up. Oh sure, there were times when she’d listen to friends’ vacation stories and she’d feel a pang of envy. She’d think back to all the money she’d spent to stay right here in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on days like today, when the weatherman says minus 40 with the wind chill. Hands clasped together firmly on her thick oak dining table, she gazes out the dining room window. Her tired brown eyes seem far away, dreaming of tropical vacations she’ll never get to take. Every weekend volunteers flock to Paradise Stables to help her feed, groom and socialize the horses. Still she finds herself exhausted.

“Until we opened, no one heard of horse rescues in Saskatchewan,” Harasym tells me. She rolls up the sleeves of her grey fleece and leans forward. “Let me tell you about the horses,” she begins.

“Straight!”

Another kill buyer thrusts his index finger toward the already overcrowded holding pens. “Straight” means straight to slaughter. There are two pens to choose from. The first is the quarantine pen, for horses known to have received banned substances, including specific growth-promoting steroids and antibiotics. It will take six months before they’re considered ‘clean.’ This horse, however, came with all the right paperwork: the horse’s Equine Information Document form details its name, sex, color, marking, pedigree and registry numbers. It documents periods of ownership, vaccination and, most importantly, drug history covering the last six months. This information may be legitimate and honestly written or it may be filled out underhandedly for a quick sale.

The horses in both pens will meet the same fate; one just has a more direct route.

Twyla François of the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition has been to many horse auctions. According to François, the scene is always the same. Young women scamper about the front of the ring, serving up drinks and greasy burgers to the men sitting in the front row, who sit like little kings with pockets...
flush with industry cash, ready to fill their aluminum trailers with fresh cargo. These are the kill buyers – men who earn a living by purchasing horses for slaughter.

Sitting across the ring with limited funds in her pocket is a rescuer woman. Her resources are small but she remains hopeful. She waves her arms desperately in the air, vying for the auctioneer’s attention. Each small increment in cash she manages to offer up is quickly shot down by the meat buyers. It becomes a grudge match; the buyers steadily raise the stakes on a horse they would normally pay no more than $300 for. In the end, the auctioneer pretends not to see the rescuer. She’s driven up the price, but kill buyers are an auction’s bread and butter.

Finally, the rescuer gives up.

“Straight!” The winning kill buyer shouts and takes another bite of his burger.

Although many horses destined for slaughter are native to Canada, a large pipeline runs north of the border from the U.S., where horse slaughter was banned in 2007. American kill buyers ship nearly 150,000 horses to Canada or Mexico for slaughter every year. According to the U.S.-based Animal Rescue Unit, it’s common for horses to be in transit for two to three days without a break. This is in violation of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s humane transport regulations. The Canadian Horse Defence Coalition claims that many of these animals are transported across the border overnight when border guards are most likely to look the other way.

Horsemeat was a $16 million industry in Canada by the end of 2009. Its popularity lies predominantly overseas, where horsemeat is considered a delicacy in European and Asian cultures. With roughly 200 to 250 horses being butchered daily in the country’s four abattoirs that process horses, Canada slaughtered nearly 90,000 horses in 2010 alone. Yet according to the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition, nearly two-thirds of Canadians don’t know we have a horse meat industry. Almost all the meat for human consumption goes overseas. Fresh or frozen horse meat is most popular in France, where it was first consumed out of necessity by starving troops in Napoleon’s army. Switzerland, Japan and Belgium are next in line. Japan’s horse meat industry prefers to slaughter their own animals and accepts live horses only.

Despite the continuing popularity of horse meat in Europe, François says her work is starting to make an impact. After the Coalition gathered hours of secret camera footage displaying inhumane treatment of animals at the Bouvry Meats and Richelieu facilities, disgusted Belgian grocers couldn’t pull horsemeat off their shelves fast enough, she says.

One of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s mandates is to ensure livestock is treated humanely from transport to slaughter. The agency’s website states that qualified veterinarians and inspectors are routinely present for this reason. Yet getting answers about the details isn’t easy. CFIA employees, including agency veterinarians, are next to impossible to contact without the agency intervening. And the agency itself appears reluctant to set up interviews to respond to allegations of tainted horse meat, illegal transport and substandard slaughterhouse facilities. After weeks of foot-dragging and requests to see questions in advance, the response comes via email:

“The CFIA takes its role in regulating animal welfare during slaughter seriously. CFIA inspectors, including veterinarians continuously monitor operations at federally registered establishments to verify that food safety and animal welfare requirements are met. Specific complaints, concerns and allegations of inhumane treatment are investigated. If it is determined that there is non-compliance to the regulations the CFIA may issue an Administrative Monetary Penalty (AMP) or prosecute. CFIA is required to make a written request for an action plan when non-compliance is noted. CFIA has recently adopted the policy of identifying repeat offenders on its website. See the AMP website for more details on this policy.”

Rick Byrne grew up on a dairy farm in southern Ontario. Now based in Saskatchewan, he’s been around horses all his life. After retiring from a job with the Canadian Labour of Congress, Byrne trains horses on the outskirts of Regina. He says he loves horses – yet he also believes horse slaughter is absolutely necessary. Slaughter keeps unwanted horses to a minimum, he argues, making all horses more valued and better cared for.

“People who have horses that don’t have a lot of value to them turn them out – and if you just turn animals loose you have insects, disease and starvation,” he says.

Since the U.S. ban, Byrne says the value of the animals has depreciated to the extent that people would rather purchase a new animal than pay to care for a horse properly.

“For meat horses (in Canada) the buyer will pay six or seven hundred dollars. But without industry, they will pay 40 bucks in the U.S. for a good horse. How well are you going to take care of
that horse if you only paid 40 bucks for it?” he asks.

Byrne says years of working with advocacy groups as an employee of the Canadian Labour of Congress have convinced him that most Canadians, animal lovers or not, have no understanding of the industry, and fail to consider the full implications of a ban. He argues that horses are treated no differently than the cattle, pigs and chickens that keep Canadian people well fed.

“It’s not something that’s easy to talk about with people. But people still go to the restaurant and buy their steak,” he says.

But horsemeat won’t be on the menu if Bunnie Harasym has her way. At Paradise Stables, she works daily to bring horses back from the brink of death.

“Let me tell you the story about Caboda,” Harasym says. “Saddest case I’ve ever seen. Race horse, he was. When they unloaded him here off the back of that truck he was so skinny.”

She takes a deep breath.

“No matter what I did, no matter how much feed we gave him, he just wouldn’t eat. I gave him a big bucket of oats every day plus his regular feed.” To illustrate, she wraps her arms around a massive pail of invisible oats.

“I tried so hard with him. Ya know. Every day.”

Harasym’s eyes wander back out to the pasture.

“We finally got him to put some weight on. He wasn’t as skinny.”

“Then one day, one of the volunteers came into the house to get me. ‘Caboda’s dead,’ she told me. I remember going out to the stable. I thought maybe he’s just sleeping, ya know? Like he was really tired. But no, he was dead.”

It’s easy to wonder how Bunnie keeps going and why anyone of sound mind would continue on this crusade at the cost of her freedom, time and bank account balance.

“I know there are 250 horses being slaughtered every day,” explains Harasym, jutting out her chin. “But I know that even if I have only saved 15, like the ones I have here, at least we are doing something.”

Meanwhile a truck crosses the border in the early morning light, after long nights and days of unbroken travel. The Canadian prairie is big enough to spread every sound as thin as paper and muffle it against the open sky. But when the truck finally grinds to a halt in front of the loading bay, you can hear them. Horses. Dozens of them, at least 50. Barely able to move in the cramped trailer, they still manage to kick. They’ve been travelling for hours, half frozen, starved and thirsty. As the truck slowly reverses into the building, their thudding hooves fade.

What goes on after the doors close, good or bad, remains an open question.
Born this way

Gender provides a confusing set of rules to navigate.

by Jenn VanRiper
Sitting on the blue bleachers at the Space Stadium Stage on the second floor of the Saskatchewan Science Centre, the audience is waiting for the show to begin. It’s a weekend and the winter windchill has driven families indoors. A loud boil of chatter quiets to a simmer when Dani Tunney, a Science Centre Explorer, starts talking.

Tunney has lost track of how many times she has performed the fire show but it’s still one of her favourites. She loves to throw in new bits of information that she picks up in her university classes. Into a petrie dish of flaming methanol, she throws in various chemicals to create ‘fireworks.’ She adds isopropyl alcohol to a 40-litre water jug and swirls it around. Then she lights the fumes on fire, creating a loud woosh.

But it’s not the fire show that children in the audience are paying rapt attention to.

“Is that a girl or a boy?” they whisper to their parents. They stare. They giggle. Some even point.

On stage, Tunney performs the experiments with the same enthusiasm she’s had since her very first show. Her snug white lab coat suggests that she is, in fact, a girl. But the children, and even some of the parents, are not satisfied.

The whispers continue as the show carries on.

Is the girl onstage oblivious to the audience? She performs this same show for different audiences a few times a week, each time with more explanation and attention to detail than any of the other Explorers.

Yet on a daily basis, she feels herself being stared at and hears that same question – is that a boy or a girl?

“I’m basically another exhibit at the Science Centre,” she says.

Currently, Stats Canada does not ask about gender identity on the census, though many have suggested it be added. The number of people born as transsexuals is thought to be underestimated because it is based on the number of people who seek medical treatment. Based on treatment rates, one of approximately 11,900 people is born as a male-to-female transsexual and one of 30,000 is born female-to-male. A greater number of people may choose to never deal with the situation, remaining hidden from the stats.

They stare.
They giggle.
Some even point.

Whether treatment is sought out or not, transsexuality is difficult to live with. Gender is a confusing set of rules to navigate if what is in a child’s brain doesn’t match the social role they are supposed to fill – a role assigned at birth based on genitalia.

Gender Identity Disorder is recognized as a psychiatric disorder by the World Health Organization and, while some forms are temporary, transsexualism is forever. Put simply, making the outside match the inside is the recommended treatment.

A transsexual individual is defined by the advocacy group Egale Canada as a person “presenting with a persistent and compulsive desire to become a member of the opposite sex.” This would describe Tunney. But the word “disorder” is highly contested, according to Professor Sheila Cavanaugh, sexuality studies coordinator at York University and author of Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination. “Transsexuality, like homosexuality, is not a disorder but rather one way to navigate bi-gendered culture,” she says. In her view, ‘disorder’ only describes those who want access to medical intervention to bring their physical selves into congruity with their gender identity.

Calvin Neufeld, a post-operative trans male, disagrees with avoiding the word disorder. The physical body and the mind are in a state of disorder and trans people want to correct the problem, says Neufeld. He adds that attempts to make the brain match the body have always failed. You have to make the body match the brain.

But it isn’t easy getting there. Many people in the transsexual community have other underlying psychological issues, such as a personality disorders, or secondary problems, like drug and alcohol addiction, that prevent them from getting treatment.

There’s a lot at stake: if untreated, transsexualism has many negative impacts on a person’s life, from depression to suicide. According to a recent Ontario study, 77 per cent of trans people in the community have seriously contemplated suicide and 43 per cent have attempted it.

As for Tunney, she says it is hard to explain what gender identity disorder means to her. She simply knows she is in the wrong body.

Tunney already knew she was different when she was the same age as many of the pre-school children watching her stage show. When the house was empty, she would sneak down the stairs to the basement. Inside an antique metal trunk filled with dress-up clothes, she had a favourite grape-coloured dress, the kind of princess gown worn only as a costume. She would put it on and twirl around in circles, feeling free. But in the back of her mind, she knew
it was dangerous. The calm feeling was replaced with panic when she heard the sound of the doorknob turning upstairs, warning that her mom was coming inside from gardening.

“I knew I wasn’t supposed to be doing it and that I would get in trouble but I didn’t know why I would get in trouble,” she says. “It was just one of those things.” She would take the dress off quickly, throw it back in the trunk and return to “normal.” Back then, she knew wearing dresses wasn’t something that boys should do, but she didn’t know why. Tunney says for a long time she didn’t realize that girls didn’t have penises.

In high school, Tunney began buying girls’ clothing. She would slip into the dressing room with four or five male shirts and one girl shirt that she would buy. She would wear the shirts when no one else was around. But it wasn’t enough and her discomfort grew. Despite trying to act straight and “normal” during that stage of her life, by age 13 or 14 she had figured it out.

After she was accepted to university, she got ready to tell her mother. Not only did she register for classes, she found somewhere to live in case her mother kicked her out. Recalling the conversation when she “came out” to her mother, Tunney laughs now. “She said, ‘Are you gay? ‘Cause it’s okay if you are. You don’t have to be a girl to be gay.’ ” The question didn’t make sense to Tunney. “There’s a huge separation between who I want to date and how I see myself. A lot people just automatically assume it’s one and the same,” she says. Even in high school, a lot of people believed she was a gay male.

Gradually she began to dress only in female clothes. Today she lives full time as a female. In April 2011, to move her past the in-between space, she began hormone therapy.

Hormone therapy is putting her through a second puberty of sorts by altering the chemical messengers that regulate the development of physical characteristics. For between $60 and $100 a month, she will take estrogen daily for the rest of her life. Estrogen will work directly on tissue in her body to enhance feminine traits such as developing breasts and redistributing body fat to the hips. Anti-androgens will suppress her male characteristics, reducing but not eliminating the growth of body hair.

There’s no standard dose, so Tunney is trying different combinations until the right one is found for her body. The hormone cocktail can cause a variety of effects but it can’t change the pitch of a person’s voice or the bone structure an individual is born with. Tunney will always have noticeably large hands, but she is fortunate to not have a deep voice or a large Adam’s apple that would require surgery. Hormone therapy and sexual reassignment surgery are often not enough to make trans people feel comfortable in their bodies. Many male-to-female transsexuals seek additional breast augmentation, not because of vanity but because if the face doesn’t quite give away gender, breasts are the next thing to look at.

There are pay-offs. Studies indicate that suicide rates are significantly lower in trans individuals who have been treated. In fact, there are greater risks to untreated patients than any of the side effects caused by hormone therapy. Untreated transsexuals are 20 per cent more likely to commit suicide than those who seek medical help.

Sounds simple, right? But the recommended treatment isn’t easy to access.

Although basic surgical procedures are covered by medicare, Calvin Neufeld found the bureaucracy so difficult to navigate that he ended up paying for his treatment himself. Saskatchewan, for example, covers in-province procedures such as chest reconstruction, hysterectomies and breast augmentations. However, sexual reassignment surgery isn’t available in the province. Traveling
out of province requires the approval of a committee of Saskatchewan Health. Male-to-female sexual reassignment surgery is completed in Montreal at Saskatchewan rates, which are approximately one-third of a Montreal clinic’s fees. But travel and accommodations are out-of-pocket expenses, as are related procedures not covered by medicare, such as electrolysis.

The process of being accepted for government funding for surgery is intensive and takes years. First, a transgender person must live as his or her gender identity on hormone therapy for a year. Then the surgery candidate can visit the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto for an assessment. Since sharing his experiences in Briarpatch magazine, Neufeld has heard from people across the country about their experiences with the assessment process. The questions asked are very personal in nature and mostly related to sex and sexuality. Many people come out of the lengthy process more damaged than before they went in, he says, with a chance they will get turned down at the end.

The facts of Dani Tunney’s life are pretty ordinary. She is a full-time student at the University of Regina, works part-time at the Science Centre and loves to shop and hang out with her friends. She always holds the door open for other people. When she tells someone that she has plans with her special lady on a Friday night, she is talking about her granny. There is something innately nurturing and delicate about her. But this doesn’t match her physical appearance. Tunney faces prejudice and feels like an exhibit not just at work but everywhere. Some days she doesn’t go to school because she can’t face the world. Still, she remains optimistic.

“I haven’t made myself a hermit.”

She sits straight in a chair with one long leg crossed over the other, an ankle resting on her knee. The eyeliner pencil she holds looks small in her large hands. It used to take her ten minutes to apply eyeliner. Now she easily applies her makeup first thing in the morning. She finds it heartbreaking to take off such gender markers at night. At six feet tall, Tunney will always stand out in a crowd. She has learned to mimic a graceful feminine way of walking, talking, even tucking her hair behind her ear, but it is not quite fluid after being socialized to be male for most of her childhood. The tiny incompatibilities will make strangers stop for a double take and stare. Even on campus, people stare; they see her every day but still act like she is a novelty.

The simplest things that other people are able to do without a second thought will cause Tunney anxiety: shopping for clothes, going to the gym and, especially, using public washrooms. Professor Cavanaugh describes bathrooms as the last segregated space in the western world, allowing access only to those who can identify as either male or female. “Sometimes trans folks experience verbal and physical assault or forceful removal by security guards,” she notes.

Even though treatment helps trans individuals accept their bodies, the world is not as accepting.

“Anything to do with sex, gender, genitalia, it makes people uncomfortable,” says Neufeld. It all stems from a lack of personal experience, he adds. Once you know someone who is transgender, it doesn’t seem nearly as scary.

“I haven’t made myself a hermit,” says Tunney. “It’s just a little bit harder to find a date. People aren’t too open a lot of the time. They like their men to be men and their women to be women. So when you kind of mix that up, they don’t know how to deal with it.” But she is hopeful that things will change and one day it will be as common to have a trans person on a television show as it is to have a gay character.

Once her transition is complete, the gap between how she feels on the inside and how she looks on the outside will narrow.

The world may not change but Dani Tunney will.
In Newfoundland, men still set their nets and wait. But these days, dreams of plenty are as faint as the city lights fishers live to avoid.

by Leila Beaudoin

Conway Caines has spent most of his life in a place still quiet: Port Saunders, Newfoundland, where 747 people live comfortably around the harbour. The air is spiced with sea salt. It’s a place where great explorers came and dipped their nets, found them full, and settled. The village’s well-protected harbour, nestled into the Great Northern Peninsula, was once busy with traffic. From his window, Conway looks out at the wharfs. Men still set their nets and wait but, these days, dreams of plenty are as faint as the city lights fishers live to avoid. Conway remembers the night former Fisheries Minister John Crosbie announced the cod moratorium. Men in their wheelhouses stood still in disbelief. Instantly, everyone was out of work. It’s not the only poison this village has swallowed.

It’s springtime and the little harbour should be bustling as men prepare for the seal hunt. Instead the harbour is calm. Conway takes a sip of tea and sits back down. They used to hunt.

In years past, the men of the village welcomed the fisherman’s broadcast annual announcement of the seal hunt’s opening. Conway was not much more than 13 when he went on his first hunt. It was an early rise. The crews loaded their boats and steamed out to sea. There was lots of ice back then. When a patch of seals came into sight, they shut down the engines. After a quick breakfast on board, they were out on the ice. Around ten in the day, the job became a little easier. The sun was just above the floes and the seals basked in the warmth. With little more than a piece of toast in his belly, Conway and his father walked toward a patch of seals. Before long, the afternoon sun was gone and a sharp westerly breeze took its place. Conway hauled a seal carcass to their dragger, trying hard to control his shivering. They worked fast. Three men on deck cleaned and packed the seals as fast as the others passed them up, “Gotta get ’em skinned before the rigor mortis sets in, boys!” one yelled. Despite Conway’s best efforts to hide it, a man aboard noticed how cold the boy was. “Here, son,” he said. “Haul off dem gloves, this will help.” The man grabbed the last seal that had been pelted, opened up its gut and stuck Conway’s hands in. “There ya go, b’y. Warms ya up nice, doesn’t it?” With warmer hands, Conway was quickly back into the routine. He easily lifted a 40-kilogram seal and chucked it up and over to the men. He marveled at the speed of their work, how their faces showed no sign of the below-freezing temperatures. He was proud to be on the water with these...
men. Yet he was still relieved to hear the day’s quota had been caught and it was time to call it a day. Back on board the dragger, they steamed toward the sunset. The kettle was on; the crashing waves and cold westerly wind now felt like a lullaby.

It’s no wonder the Atlantic Ocean surrounding Newfoundland is better known as the Sea of Tears; it bears a cold history. Men have braved the minus 50 temperatures, the nasty northwesterly winds and the swallowing ocean for as long as ice floes have surrounded the rock. The seal hunt is as old as the island. Newfoundland’s first people hunted seals over 4,000 years ago. The ice floes around the island have always been peppered with seals. As ships evolved, the 19th century was dominated by the sealing industry. In 1976, over $5 million was added to Newfoundland’s economy by the seal hunt. It has always been barbaric trekking across ice, wind lashing in your face, but it was ‘the way’. Men would stab through their hands and feet with their gaff, and keep on going. Sometimes seal fat would get into their cuts and scrapes, causing an infection called seal fingers. In the old days, on-board carpenters built coffins for the men who were lost. Death was all but guaranteed. Nevertheless, still they went, every spring. The hunt was life and life was the hunt. Some argue it is the most dangerous hunt in the world, but that’s never stopped a man from going out on the ice. The Halifax Chronicle announced the death of a sealer on May 11, 1914 with little fanfare:

CHARLOTTETOWN, May 10 – On Sunday morning a lobster fisherman employed at S.C. Clarke’s factory at Bloomington Point on the North side of the island found the body of a man frozen fast in a floating ice cake about half a mile from land. Having nothing in his boat with which to cut the body loose from the ice, the fisherman had to abandon; a heavy gale coming up, the boat had to make from land, and could not return to the body, which was carried out to sea. The dead man was evidently a sailor or a fisherman judging by his clothing and it is thought to be one of the Newfoundland sealers...

Conway remembers one year when he almost lost his friend. It was a bone-chilling day. They were sealing off Fort Bough when they noticed a patch of seals. Their spirits rose and they made way across the ice. They came to a slushy area with a lot of breakage. They had to jump ice-pans, like most times, to get to the seals. John was jumping pans when he reached one that couldn’t hold his weight. A doughboy, they called them, and down he went. Thinking fast, John placed his hakapik across the ice pans, saving himself from slipping completely into the watery deep. The men grabbed his cold, soaked body up and out of the ice.

Thus Newfoundland’s boys were quickly turned into men. They were born with sea legs. The warm gushing blood of the seal hunt nourished coastal life ever since the Paleo Eskimos first embraced the northern rock of the island, some living and working just eight kilometers from Conway’s current home. The hakapik was their briefcase, the white ice their office space, and the seal their paycheque.

Then things changed. Living in New Brunswick, a man named Brian Davies took notice of the hunt. He was close enough to get in and take photos. After being welcomed to photograph the hunt, he published the bloodiest possible photos. Davies said he saw a seal skinned alive, an allegation he later retracted in court. In March 1964, television spread the images wide and the anti-sealing movement was born.

Davies thought there was a better way to live off the ice. He would bring American tourists to Newfoundland to look at the seals. Wildlife tourism was a more promising industry than the seal hunt, which was barbaric, he argued. But first he had to stop the hunt. Seeing is believing, he used to say. The best tactic was to bring people out on the ice to witness the death-twitches of a bloodied seal. The tactic worked. In response, the International Fund for Animal Welfare...
launched a global campaign that many argue has been the greatest factor in ending the 4,000-year-old hunt. Money came in quick. In four years, IFAW was generating annual revenues in excess of $500,000. Davies’ pictures did their job, especially after IFAW decided to hire Coca-Cola’s New York-based advertising firm. The Stop the Seal Hunt campaign was off to a bloody, vivid, red-and-white start.

In 1976 Greenpeace joined the anti-sealing movement and took a more direct action approach. The ice floes became a battle zone that year. Activists sprayed red organic dye on more than 200 young white-coats. Drenched in dye, the seals were economically valueless – but also more susceptible to the cold and predators.

Sheryl Fink is the director of IFAW’s Seal Program. She remembers taking a flight to Newfoundland one time. Her seatmate was a man from the island. She was shocked by his reaction when she told him who she was. Their happy chit-chat soon turned into an uncomfortable silence; he closed himself off and turned away. The man was from St. Anthony, a town about two hours north of Port Saunders, one of the towns badly shaken by the dying hunt. But Fink doesn’t believe tradition is a good enough reason for the hunt to continue. She sees it as a short-term activity that doesn’t bring in enough revenue to keep someone from leaving his or her community. Times have changed, says Fink, and it’s time to put the hunt to rest.

Fink says the IFAW campaign is more focused now; they operate in 11 countries around the world and are no longer reliant on Davies’ single-minded leadership. However, his tactic of using visuals remains IFAW’s most effective tool for gathering public support. Photos that portray inhumane kills get the strongest reactions – even though Fink admits such kills, which happen when a seal isn’t hit directly on the head, aren’t the norm. And although it’s been nearly 25 years since Newfoundlanders have hunted white-coats, white seals are still featured in IFAW ads. A brief, fine print statement is included: “This seal will be killed after it is matured into a grey seal.”

When the IFAW polled Canadians, they asked the question, “Would you support legislation that protects seals less than one year of age?” Most people said yes. This innate ‘baby appeal,’ combined with the notion that seals are killed for luxury items like purses and coats, is what turns people off the hunt. Fink has no intention of updating the photos or adjusting IFAW’s campaign to factor in those still making a living on the hunt. She says the men should be able to find work elsewhere.

When John Cabot discovered Newfoundland in 1497, he reported back to England that you could throw a bucket overboard, haul it back up and find it overflowing with fish. Conway’s ancestors came for the fish; the sea was always plentiful. Port Saunders became a boomtown. Things changed around 1949, when Newfoundland finally agreed to join Canada. Fueled with dreams of modernization, the province attempted to urbanize the island. Men, women and children were asked to leave their outpost homes. This process brings back bad memories for many Newfoundlanders, some of whom were nearing retirement and unable to adjust to city life. Global warming, along with over-fishing and mismanagement, added to the growing coastal distress. Today’s fishers find it hard to survive. The seal hunt supplements their meagre incomes.

This is why Clyde Jackman, Newfoundland’s minister of fishers and aquaculture, is at war with anti-sealing protestors. It’s been a tumultuous battle but one he says has always been worthwhile. Thousands of families rely on sealing. He feels it was a mistake for the federal government to stand back and allow the initial anti-sealing photo-frenzy to proceed unchallenged. Now they’re playing catch-up against powerful, well-heeled organizations that have the attention of celebrities like Pamela Anderson, who raised $4.8 million for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in a single ad campaign. “They are practically operating as a business … money doesn’t seem to be an obstacle for them,” Jackman says.

In the spring of 2011, protestors printed, emailed, posted and tweeted a provocative image of crimson on the white ice surrounding the island Jackman knows and loves. The hunt forbids the killing of white coats, yet Jackman sees the image of white coats everywhere.

These days, Jackman is working alongside the Canadian government to alter the prevailing image of cruelty. They’ve made connections with hunting groups in Europe, and are touting the medicinal value of seal products, taking the emphasis off fur. Europe represents one of the industry’s most important – and toughest – customers. In 2006, Canada exported nearly $6 million in seal product to European Union countries. Then in 2009 the EU decided it would no longer accept seal products, a ban Jackman maintains was triggered.

Davies said he saw a seal skinned alive, an allegation he later retracted in court.
by the emotional appeal of white coat photos and not the exposure of any actual documented cruelty. Later that year, Ottawa challenged the ban under the rules of the World Trade Organization, arguing that it was a form of trade discrimination against an industry that is no more or less humane than any other animal industry. “We are harvesting an animal just like people do cows and chickens,” Jackman says. If anything, Jackman argues, the hunt is more humane compared to other forms of animal husbandry because the seals live and die in their natural environment – unlike livestock packed into feedlots and then driven to the killing floors of industrial slaughterhouses. The WTO fight continues to this day. In June 2011, the EU released a statement advising Canada to drop its challenge because it was derailing talks on a Canada-EU trade agreement. But Jackman vows he will continue to fight for the hunt until the rest of the world realizes exactly what it means to Newfoundlanders. “The reality is, we catch fish for a living and we seal. This animal, the seal, they are there in abundance and we go out, we harvest them and we make a living off them,” he says. “We’ve done that for centuries and I certainly hope we can do that for centuries to come.”

Meanwhile back in Port Saunders, times have never been this tough. Conway and his partner Colleen have two boys. So far, the family has managed to stick it out in the little village. It is home. For Conway, the prospect of changing careers at age 32 is disheartening. “I fish,” he says. “Seal, crab, lobster, turbot, halibut, capelin, mackerel, and herring.” In spring, the fishery falls quiet. Bigger boats head far out to sea to harvest shrimp, but Conway doesn’t have the boat or the license needed to follow them. He would normally take advantage of the short downtime to go sealing. But not this year. Conway says Newfoundlanders have just been let down. He is angry the protestors were allowed to come to his island and photograph the hunt; he says they manipulate the photos and tell the story they want to tell. He says their campaign belongs to the Eighties, when the industry crested and larger ships were sealing – not sealers like Conway, who take just enough to make a living. Conway never thought about making millions on the international market. He simply wants to pay the bills.

Conway can see the tide from his window. It flows in and out; waves crash and he knows he is home. Walking out to his shed, he takes in the salty air. He looks out on the sea beyond, big, blue, and cold, and notes the quietness of the sheds packed around the harbour. In the old days, they would have been bustling as men prepared for the great hunt. He turns back toward home, to his wife and two children. He has to feed them; they need him to survive. It’s common for Newfoundland’s men to give up and move out west. Conway has been to Alberta; he has worked in the oil fields and has even given Toronto a go. But there was nothing out there for him. “I grew up here,” he says; summer days he would row across the harbour over to the island and row back. He cannot think of life any other way. As he steps back inside his house, a distant seagull cries. He looks at his son and tells him if he could go on the hunt this spring he would love to take the boy with him, out on the water.
Picture yourself in a hospital room.

Your clothes are in a neat pile on a chair in the corner. The thin blue gown is little insulation against a cold vinyl exam table. You dangle your feet over the edge and count the tiles beneath.

“The doctor would like to give you your test results in person,” the receptionist had informed you. He’d like you to come in as soon as possible.” Sounded like a priority so, you booked an appointment for the next day.

You never liked hospitals, only going after the pain in your stomach had become unbearable. Now, the mix of sterile and sickness fills your nose. Your eyes sting under the fluorescent tube lights. No sleep last night. What could it be? It sounded urgent. Why are they buying time today’s cancer patients have options – if they can afford them.

by Danny Kresnyak
not rushing to tell you? Is the guy in the next room getting worse news?

Nurse shoes squeak outside in the hallway. Seems like a lot of time has passed since they told you to strip and wait. The room is relatively bare: white walls adorned with brightly colored anatomy diagrams. You fixate on the pictures. Finally the door opens. A man in a white lab coat places his hand on your shoulder and closes the door behind him. He looks at you through thick-rimmed glasses and says one of the most feared words in the English language.

Cancer.

Nearly 3,000 people were diagnosed with cancer in Saskatchewan in 2010. After diagnosis, treatment becomes the focus. Chemotherapy is the most common course in Canada. Patients undergo numerous rounds and side effects are often debilitating. “I tell my patients that they are going to hate me but, in the end it’ll be worth it,” says Dr. Colum Smith, vice-president of medical affairs for the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency.

Seated at the agency’s boardroom table, Smith’s kind eyes and soft demeanor suggest a delicate bedside manner. “We have to devise methods that are proven beneficial and effective,” he continues. “We need to ensure that the patient can survive treatment.”

Ancient Egyptian doctors were the first to surgically remove tumors. Large masses of tissue were crudely cut then cauterized with fire brands. The Greeks were the first to draw the division between malignant and benign. Blood-letting, laxatives and diet were common methods of treatment. These practices remained common until the 19th century. In the early days, surgery was performed without anesthesia. Most cancers were untreatable and patients often died on the operating table. The 20th century was a period of drastic surgical and medical advancement. Today, modern treatment options include chemotherapy, radiation and surgery.

When the disease has metastasized, surgery often enters the realm of experimentation. Advanced cancers are much more difficult to treat. So-called ‘radical’ and ‘super-radical’ surgeries are invasive and high-risk. If the procedures aren’t available locally, your specialist can refer you to treatment in another province or country. “If the treatment is required, the cost is not my concern,” says Smith. Saskatchewan Health will pay the bill. The ability to travel afar for hail-Mary surgeries has opened new doors. But not everyone gets the all-important referral.

“Almost every patient hears about a miracle surgery that could save their life,” explains Smith. “As doctors, we are obligated to balance a patient’s need for hope against medical reality.” If the patient is unlikely to withstand highly traumatic surgery, doctors have a tough call to make. “Desperation makes it seem like the only option but it’s about improving the patient’s quality of life,” says Smith. Without a referral, the patient is forced to cover the cost of surgery out of pocket. The ones with money can go ahead and do it. The ones without have no option.

Wendy Moldovan was 42 when a nagging abdominal pain sent her to the hospital. Her family doctor had prescribed a change in diet. “He told me I needed more fiber,” she said from her hospital bed. Her new diagnosis – cancer – was alarming but treatable. She was prescribed an aggressive course of chemotherapy. Doctors hoped that radiation would contain the tumors and induce remission. “Chemotherapy makes you feel close to death. It hurt more than the stomach pain,” Muldovan told me. She would undergo nine rounds of chemo over the next three years. She had always been a petite woman
but now she dropped to 40 kilograms. In January 2010, the Muldovan family finally got some good news. Her oncologist told her she was in remission and her chemo could be discontinued. Her husband Don, two daughters and three grandchildren were thrilled.

Before her illness, the Moldovans had been building their dream, a family-owned campground in Christopher Lake, Saskatchewan. They had already cleared the land and poured the cabins’ foundations. The project had swallowed the family’s savings. Wendy and Don planned to retire there. They would operate a camp store and live in a suite attached to the back. Wendy was in charge of much of the planning. With her clean bill of health, work could begin again.

By April her pain returned. “I couldn’t stand. I couldn’t sit. I couldn’t lay down. I was just worn out,” she recalled. A preliminary exam uncovered a large protrusion in her abdomen. An emergency scan revealed a 30-centimetre tumor in her colon. When the test results came in, everyone’s worst fears were realized. She had an aggressive form of cancer called adenocarcinoma. It had spread through her body. Muldovan was put back on chemotherapy, but her condition worsened. Her daughter Marie began researching the options. She typed ‘stage four colon cancer’ into Google. The Mayo Clinic, headquartered in Rochester, Minnesota, was the first thing that came up.

Retelling the story months later in a downtown Regina coffee shop, Marie Muldovan fumbles with the ridge of her disposable cup, her red hair hanging just above her glasses. “They had told us that they couldn’t operate because the tumors were too close to nerves,” she says. “I talked to someone from Mayo and they said it can be done and is done regularly at their clinic.” She stares down at the cup, rolling the ridge, smoothing it like a worry stone. “Everything mom needed was in place. She had a file number; all she needed was a referral.” The referral never happened. The family would have to raise the money on their own. The Christopher Lake property went up for sale but offers were slow. “Every dollar was a dollar closer. We tried everything to raise money.” The cup’s rim is nearly shredded. “I even did a walk-a-thon with my pig.”

From her hospital bed, Wendy Muldovan began writing a blog. As the weeks passed her entries were a demonstration of the stages of grief:

“I need up to date surgery. They don’t offer it here in Canada, so I will have it done in the States, so I’m asking for you all over the world to come together and help me save a life my life you don’t know me but I’m everyone’s daughter, someone’s child, a wife, a mother, a friend, a sister, everyone has it in their heart to donate to save a life it doesn’t cost much a buck or two makes a difference, once everyone joins together means a lot.....Even got my house for sale to come up with some of the money I need for surgery.....

Muldovan’s doctor refused to comment on her case, citing the bond of confidentiality. However, most referrals are denied when the doctor believes the patient will not survive surgery. Although not her doctor, Dr. Smith has been treating cancer patients for nearly 30 years and knows the burden of such decisions. “The first rule is, do no harm. I can’t ethically prescribe something my patient cannot recover from. Sometimes the only treatment may be holding their hand,” he says.

In January 2011, Wendy Moldovan succumbed to cancer, one year after being told she was in remission.

With cash comes exotic cars, tropical vacations and private medical treatment. Surgical tourism blends at least two of these aforementioned benefits of wealth. Pat Baumet of Regina is an entrepreneur and family man. He’s earned a handsome living selling bongs, vintage records and band T-shirts. Baumet is a self confessed workaholic. Six years ago, he was diagnosed with colon cancer. He has continued to run his business, Vintage Vinyl and Hemp Emporium, during an intensive treatment regimen.

The bong world is a truly global industry. Baumet and his daughter Janelle travelled to Thailand to set up an office for the family business. The long international flight was a problem for Baumet. “My body can be prone to blockages from all the surgeries,” he explains. On arrival, he went to Bangkok’s Bumrungrad International Hospital for a check-up. “It was more like a five star hotel than a hospital. The attendants were dressed in uniforms, like little bellhops,” Baumet recalls.

During the check-up the doctor informed him of the hospital’s treatment options. He was told all his cancer could be removed for $35,000. “I was only there for four hours. I got registered and I got in to see all the doctors,” he says. Within a week, Baumet was scheduled for surgery. “I immediately threw out the rest of my chemo and went in for these surgeries.”
Doctors removed 20 per cent of his lung, 61 centimetres of colon and intestine and 6.4 centimetres of spine. The intense surgery left Baumet’s body in a state of shock. He lost nearly 16 kilos and experienced other extreme cognitive and physical side effects. “I was trying to play this game with my daughter, a really simple game, Connect Four. She must’ve beaten me a hundred times. I just couldn’t connect four,” he says.

Baumet required six weeks of intensive recovery. He spent the time in Bumrungrad International’s private care unit. “It was nicer than my first apartment. There was a kitchenette and a big couch and living area that my daughter slept in,” he says. Originally, the Baumets had planned to stay in Thailand for three weeks. When Baumet exited the recovery unit, he’d been away from home for nearly three months. “As soon as the doctor said I could fly, I booked a ticket. We were back home a day later.”

The surgical option comes with no guarantees, even with a doctor’s referral. Like Wendy Muldovan, Jeff Lukye of Estevan, Saskatchewan, had stage four colon cancer. It had metastasized and required extensive surgical intervention that could only be performed at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. In this case, his doctor thought super-radical surgery was worth a shot. Between December 2010 and February 2011, Lukye underwent seven procedures. He was on the table for more than 40 hours at a cost of $280,000. During the procedure, machines kept him alive while many of his organs were removed. At the beginning of March he was back home, feeling healthier and ready for the future. But then, during his first follow-up check-up at the Mayo Clinic on April 25, 2011, Lukye had a seizure during a routine CT scan and died unexpectedly.

No one can know the future, but there are always options to grasp. Surgical tourism and experimental treatment give patients hope, but at a cost. Some are eligible for research medicine, while others pay out of pocket for experimental drugs. In this environment, it’s difficult to tell patients they are untreatable, says Dr. Smith. “Patients cling to the hope that more can be done,” he says, adding that it’s important to ensure desperation doesn’t cloud judgment.

Meanwhile, Pat Baumet is home, slowly easing back into his life. Every day he gets up and goes to have his dressing changed. His body requires a lot of rest during recovery. However, a few days a week he can be seen in his shop. He knows there is no guarantee that his cancer will not return but for him the gamble was worth it. He felt he had to do everything possible to stay with his family. “There is no luggage rack on a hearse,” he explains. “Everything else was just temporarily prolonging life. This could give me 20 even 30 more years.” His battle with cancer continues but the surgical option has given Baumet hope.
The flood

In disaster’s wake, a small prairie city struggles to its feet.

by Courtney Mintenko

With 18,000 residents, Yorkton, Saskatchewan is a city by the numbers. But it doesn’t feel like one. It’s the kind of place where people open doors for one another, where you say hi to a stranger. Farmers wave when they pass each other on the road. And you always seem to run into someone you know. “It’s just a big town,” says Mark Butchko. Maybe that’s what makes Yorkton strong. In the summer of 2010, that strength was tested.

Yorkton has its traditions. Canada Day at the museum is one of them. Hundreds of people gathered on the grounds of the Western Development Museum for the 2010 celebrations. Wisps of cotton candy floated in the air. Smoke drifted from M&M Meats’ barbeque tent. Picnic tables and blankets filled the big green field. People sat and watched entertainers perform in the old wooden gazebo. Others toured the museum, went for hayrides and savoured bread fresh from a clay oven.

Mark and Lori Butchko decided to enjoy the day in their new house with their daughters. They had just moved in that spring. Others across the city enjoyed the holiday in their own way – starting construction projects, doing
house renovations, or gearing up for the Riders’ rematch against the Alouettes.

The heat made it a long day. The sky was clear; hot rays of the sun beat down. At the end of the afternoon, the museum’s staff and volunteers saw relief in the building rain clouds. The last acts were finishing up on the gazebo and the crowd was thinning. The clouds filled the southwest horizon, stacked in layers to the top of the sky. Clear daylight still peeked out behind the darkening sheet. Storms from that direction are known to hit the city. The wind picked up. The sky turned green, then black.

From the Butchkos’ house on the northeast side of the city, they could see the cloud building. It looked bad. Mark phoned the family business, the local Dairy Queen, and told them to shut down the grills. If the power went out, the fans wouldn’t be able to clear the grill-smoke.

Back at the museum the rain hit hard and fast, stranding staff members in outlying buildings. The cloud shadowed the entire city, drenching everything underneath. You couldn’t see across the street. The wind grew fierce. Traffic slowed to a crawl. Drivers followed the four-way flashers of the vehicles in front of them. Downtown, water gushed onto sidewalks as eaves-troughs overflowed. The storm sewers couldn’t handle it all. Water collecting on the side of the roads began to grow, creeping up lawns. The wind knocked trees around, and then the hail came. Branches and debris scattered onto the streets. The hail came in all sizes: pebbles, marbles, golf balls. It trapped people in their cabins at York Lake, in their cars on King Street. But it was a small concern compared to the rain. The water crawling up people’s lawns began to enter their homes. Across the city, people blocked windows with towels, bailed out with buckets. It was impossible to stay ahead of the rain.

Edralyn Lints started moving files to higher ground in her downtown office. She had gone in before the rain started, to get some work done in the quietness of the holiday. Her husband Mark was at their Agricultural Avenue home with their three-and-a-half year old son, Marco. As the water rose, Mark frantically moved the family’s vehicles from the street to higher ground. When he was finished, he went to pick up Edralyn, leaving Marco with his brother and sister-in-law, who shared their home.

From the top of King Street to the corner of Agricultural and Broadway, just a few blocks away, is a deviation of 32 feet. As the rain let up, the storm sewers overflowed, and the water drained into this low-lying part of downtown – Laurier, Brodie, Agricultural and Assiniboia Avenues. Water began filling the houses, some of it from the streets, but most from open drains and toilets in the basements. The sewage water destroyed everything it touched. By the time Edralyn and Mark returned home, they had already lost their basement to a foot of dirty water. They knew what they needed to do: get young Marco somewhere safe. After throwing a few things into a suitcase, they waded out into the water. It must have already been three feet deep. That’s when they heard the crash. Behind them, the weight of the water broke through their basement window. There was nothing they could do.

Yorkton was settled on the banks of the Little White Sand River, when the York Farmer’s Colonization Company decided to invest in the west. On May 12, 1882, the company bought land in the new Provisional District of Assiniboia, North-West Territories. Four investors were the first inhabitants. They called it York Colony. The hamlet’s name changed to Yorkton when its post office opened on January 1, 1884. Today’s city sits 4.6 kilometres south of the original site, surrounded by the rolling parkland and farms of east-central Saskatchewan.

Yorkton has been hit by floods before. The first significant one was on April 20, 1923. A stream of water from...
Laurier Avenue flowed onto Broadway Street like a river. Only wagons could pass by. Water ran three feet deep in the streets, eight feet deep in the surrounding fields. Houses from Laurier to Assiniboine had several feet of water in the cellars. A house on the corner of Laurier and Broadway reportedly had two feet on its main floor. Across the street, horses were led from their stables at the Western Grocers building. Men were called out from the villages of Rokeby and Orcadia to help. A railway section gang dug a large culvert at the railway crossing, preventing further damage. The culvert was later made permanent to reduce the risk of future floods.

There was no chance of flooding in the next decade. The 1930s brought drought to the Prairies. The rich prairie soil was blown away by strong winds. Farmers could only hope for rain. A full 50 years passed before the next flood, on August 27, 1973. Damage was pegged at more than $1 million after three inches of rain fell in just over one hour. Men paddled boats down Broadway in front of Western Grocers. The grocery wholesaler’s basement filled with water, resulting in thousands of dollars of damage. In the city’s southwest, houses suffered broken windows and smashed fences. Buildings were wrecked, and gardens everywhere were flattened. The most extensive damage was downtown, between Maple and Brodie. Sewers backed up, leaving three feet of water in people’s homes. Eighteen families had to abandon their homes.

Ten years later, on June 24, 1983, a late-night thunderstorm dropped four inches of rain in four hours. The sewers couldn’t handle all the water at once. The water poured into the section between Laurier and Assiniboia. Over 6,000 phones were knocked out for more than 12 hours. Power wasn’t fully restored until three days later. The fire department had nine calls directly related to the storm. Lightning did damage to a transformer, and caused the wooden steeple of the 82-year-old St. Paul’s Lutheran church to catch fire. A prairie summer usually offers more dry days than wet. It doesn’t rain often in Yorkton but, when it does, floods have hit the city hard. And the water always seems to collect in the same area.

Before the rain had even stopped, the Butchko’s tried to get to the DQ. They hadn’t been able to talk to their staff again since the rain began. They had no idea what to expect.

The DQ sat on the corner of Agricultural and Broadway. “It was like the store was sitting on a little island, surrounded with water,” Lori recalls. They parked their truck on the neighbouring lot and went inside. They heard a noise from the basement. The lids of the two toilets were banging open, flopping from the water gushing out of them. Mark and Lori had six staff on that day. Together, they started grabbing what they could from the basement. Everything was down there – files, papers, supplies, extra ice cream – and they had no idea how high the water might get.

After a while, the power came back on. The electrical system was wet, and they were all standing in the water. Mark knew he had to get everyone out of the basement. There was nothing more they could do.

By seven o’clock, roughly an hour-and-a-half after the rain had stopped, an evacuation was called for the area south of Dairy Queen. Teams of firefighters paired with RCMP started checking every house on Brodie, Agricultural and Assiniboia. People who hadn’t left their homes were now trapped in them. The 63.5 millimetres (about two-and-a-half inches) of rain that fell in just over an hour was draining from the rest of the city into these low-lying streets. Working in the muggy night air, the firemen’s suits grew heavy in the water.
The flashing red, blue, and yellow of the emergency vehicles’ lights reflected off of the street’s stream. Canoes arrived, along with one of the city’s pay loaders. As teams checked the homes, people were loaded into the pay loader and taken to higher ground. City buses then transferred the 126 evacuees to the Gallagher Centre, home of the Yorkton Terriers hockey team. That night, 74 families had to leave their homes.

The Insurance Bureau of Canada reported that as a result of the floods from the July 1 storm, insurance companies paid out $100 million to Yorkton and area. Thousands of claims were filed following the flood. The process was made more difficult by the fact that Yorkton’s insurance offices had also been hit by the flood. Across the street from the Dairy Queen, Farrell Agencies lost computers and their basement office space. They couldn’t open their doors to claimants until three days after the storm. Dave Nussbaumer, one of the agency’s owners, remembers that when they did open, a steady line of people formed at the door. For a week, 15 to 20 people would always be waiting with their claims and stories of loss. It was hard for the staff to deal with. Working long hours, hearing story after story, it was an emotional time made worse for some staff members who also had their homes flooded.

Among the claimants were Mark and Lori Butchko. The Dairy Queen was a mess. The water in the basement picked up deep freezers, the water tank, and the ice machine. The water line connected to the icemaker had broken off, spilling out more water. They joked that they were paying the city to add more water to their flooded basement. Mark and Lori kept a tally as they threw away 680 kilograms of ice cream. An adjuster arrived first thing in the morning on July 2. It was the first step in an insurance struggle that still isn’t over, a struggle shared by people across the city. While some parts of town were hit harder than others, no area escaped damage.

For many, this was the first insurance claim in their lives. They didn’t know where to start or what to do. Jim Prokopiuk, a local adjuster for Aviva Insurance Company of Canada, said he felt like both a psychologist and an adjuster. “A lot of people that I did deal with were very emotional or crying,” he recalls. Going through the paperwork became a repetitive process for Prokopiuk, but his heart continued to go out to the people he dealt with. He couldn’t help everybody. Insurance depended on what kind of water was in the home. Sewage is covered by most insurance policies. But if people only had rainwater damage or seepage, insurance wouldn’t pay.

On July 2, Mayor James Wilson called an emergency city council meeting. The councillors passed a resolution declaring a state of emergency. A second resolution was passed asking for assistance from the province. After that, the Provincial Disaster Assistance Program determined that the extent of the damage qualified Yorkton to receive assistance. The program helped cover costs where home insurance fell short, including direct flood damage, or seepage. The employees were already well seasoned: a few weeks earlier, on June 18, the southwestern town of Maple Creek had been hit hard by floods, forcing the closure of the Trans-Canada Highway. The office was already running full steam when the storm struck Yorkton.

Some Yorkton families were never able to return to their homes. Fourteen houses on Laurier, Brodie, and Agricultural developed structural problems that couldn’t be repaired. The Lints’s house was fine structurally but, after almost a year, the family still couldn’t move back in.

Talking with the displaced families, Mayor Wilson learned things about the
community he didn’t know. Those same houses had been flooded at least once every decade. The basic problem was a lack of a major drainage system, and a limited capacity of the piped drainage system. Overland flow is cut off by the downtown train embankments, trapping the water in the low areas. The system was outdated, something difficult and costly to update.

In the months following the flood, the city put forward a plan to deal with these problems. A proposed $4 million upgrade to the Dracup Avenue storm system would see three storm water retention ponds built, a new drainage channel, and more culverts installed. Some $800,000 has been committed to the first phase of the Dracup Avenue project in 2011. The city is also looking at purchasing 13 homes on Brodie Avenue that have had repeated issues with flooding, and is considering creating a storm water pond in the area. City staffers see storm water ponds as a potential long-term solution; they would not only prevent flooding, but would also remove pollutants and improve the city’s water quality.

Even with these changes, there are no guarantees floods won’t happen again. By September 2010, the city was already worried about the spring. The amount of moisture in the soil was high, and the spring freeze-thaw could potentially break down basement walls that weren’t repaired properly. But the city did its best to prepare, inspecting drainage lines with cameras to make sure the lines were clear of debris, and clearing snow from the lines. They steamed culverts to get ready for the freeze-thaw, and continued work on drainage studies.

People have been fixing up their homes. Even when they’re done, they will continue to pay. Prokopiuk says insurance rates will go up, with deductibles jumping from between $500 and $1,000 to as high as $25,000. And insurance companies are putting tighter conditions on who they will cover. Homes will now have to have a back-flow valve installed into the sewer line. Prokopiuk estimates that installation, supplies and labour could cost around $1,000.

Costs aside, people are moving forward. The community came together and recovered from the mess the water left. As a result, the city’s economy was given a boost. Local companies were overwhelmed with restoration calls. People came in from as far as Edmonton, Vancouver, Ontario, and the U.S. to help with the rebuilding.

“We’re trying to do every single thing local,” Mark Butchko says, vowing that every service that they can hire out of Yorkton as they rebuild, they will. Mayor Wilson thinks Butchko’s attitude is shared by many in the city. “It’s an investment… a person should give their home community number one choice,” says Wilson. He adds: “It’s certainly not the economic stimulus we were looking for.”

Less than one year after the disaster, the rebuilt Dairy Queen broke ground on April 20, 2011. By the winter, Yorktonites will be able to enjoy Blizzards and other frozen treats again. And the store will be even better. Instead of the former Brazier, the new store will be a Grill & Chill, featuring an Orange Julius maker. A drive-through will be added, something the former 46-year-old building couldn’t accommodate. Mark and Lori know that they will be more in debt than they were when they first bought Dairy Queen. But with optimism in his voice, Mark says, “You talk to us a year from now, it’ll be the best thing that ever happened to us.”
I

t was time for the weekly staff meeting. Instructor Dwight Krauss walked slowly down the long hallway of the National School of Dental Therapy to the classroom where everyone was meeting. Every step he took echoed. He had a gnawing feeling in his stomach. Was it true?

Inside the classroom, superficial chit-chat between a dozen faculty members lingered in the air while the instructors waited for school director Sheila Ahenakew to begin her announcement.

Krauss’s mind wandered. He remembered graduating from the school himself many decades ago. Back then it was a small building located in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, affiliated with the University of Toronto. After graduating, Krauss worked as a dental therapist for several years in remote communities in Alberta and B.C. Before he arrived, a dentist would visit the communities on an itinerant basis, or to respond to severe dental emergencies. There was no one present for day-to-day extractions and fillings. For many northerners, chronic dental pain was a way of life.

As a more permanent fixture, Krauss was able to, in his words, “turn around the health of the community quickly” through prevention education and routine dental work. His community clinics were often located right in the schools.

“The students aren’t missing school anymore from dental pain,” one of the teachers told him. “They aren’t missing school anymore because of the fact that you are here now.”

In 1982 the dental therapy school moved from Fort Smith to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Krauss became an instructor in 1986. He would devote the next 25 years to teaching young students, who would then take their skills back to their local communities. He was one of the instructors who stayed on with the school in 1995 when it changed hands from the University of Toronto to the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), which grew into the First

The National School of Dental Therapy trained aboriginal students and brought dental care to isolated northern communities. Why would anyone pull the plug?

by Alanna Adamko

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Nations University of Canada (FNUniv). He watched the school thrive from a handful of students to a graduating class of 25 each fall.

The host city of Prince Albert also benefited. Every year, over 3,000 low-income residents, including seniors and people living on nearby reserves, received free dental care from the school. As well, each student was expected to carry out an eight-week placement in a northern community. Krauss became one of the instructors who travelled with the interns, teaching them not only how to care for teeth, but also how to operate an isolated dental clinic. Students – most of them aboriginal – came from Newfoundland, northern Manitoba, northern Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories for the unique learning opportunity.

But now everything was in jeopardy. Krauss’s mind snapped back to the present. It was common knowledge that Health Canada didn’t renew the dental school’s contract in May 2009, a major setback for the school. The contract with the federal government’s First Nations, Inuit and Aboriginal Health branch was the school’s only funding. Krauss was hopeful, however, about ongoing negotiations between the FNUniv and the Health Canada branch. Many organizations across the province were in support of the school. Prince Albert’s mayor, Jim Scarrow, local MLA Darcy Furber, and members of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Prince Albert Grand Council and the province’s Northern Health Strategy group had all met with the school and written letters to provincial and federal governments asking to keep it open. They had years’ worth of letters of gratitude from First Nations chiefs. With so many people cheering them on, thought Krauss, surely the school had a future.

Ahenakew remembered receiving a surprise email in May 2009. A Health Canada manager had emailed her a few days after FNUniv officials met with Health Canada to tentatively agree on renewing the school’s contract for another three years. Health Canada had provided funding for the school since it began in 1972.

When Ahenakew opened her inbox however, she saw the Health Canada official now wanted her to change the school’s financial forecast to two years instead of three – and that the school wouldn’t have its contract renewed past the two years.

Confused, Ahenakew contacted Health Canada’s director-general.

“I thought you already knew. I’m sorry you had to find out this way,” the director-general responded.

An 18-month departmental review had determined that the dental school did not fit Health Canada’s mandate. It was an educational institution, not a health service, the director-general explained. Ahenakew sat back in her chair in shock.

“That being said, that doesn’t stop you from seeking funding elsewhere,” said the manager.

Easily said. Not so easily done. Ahenakew and others within FNUniv turned to the province. They began talking to officials at Sask Education and the Ministry of Advanced Education. All the while, the clock was ticking. The talks were complicated by strained relations between the dental school’s umbrella institution, FNUniv, and its funders. Since 2005, FNUniv had been battered by infighting, allegations of corruption and, now, a worrying budget deficit. After hints that the university’s funding was in jeopardy, in early 2010 the hammer came down. On February 3, the province announced its intention to suspend funding effective April 1. The feds followed suit five days later.

The room fell completely silent. Krauss looked around the room at his colleagues’ faces. He saw written on them the same emotions churning inside himself. First surprise, then shock, hurt, confusion, even anger.

His hope evaporated as Ahenakew told staff that the FNUniv, in negotiations with the federal government to save its own funding, had come to a compromise. The university’s operational funding would be restored on a probationary basis but the federal government was clear on one point: FNUniv wasn’t to be asking for a penny more. The university was no longer in a position to negotiate funding for the dental therapy program. The dental school was on its own, with less than a year to find a new backer.

In April 2010 the school made a difficult decision. A notice appeared on the school website in red block lettering: “With no funding in place to continue past March 31, 2011 there will be no year one student intake in September 2010.”

That fall, Ahenakew met with officials from Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, hoping they
would take on the school. After touring the school, the SIAST officials said they were very impressed with the program and its facilities. They were interested.

Hope glimmered. SIAST would be a good fit for the school, thought Ahenakew. The technical college already had dental assistant and dental hygienist programs. And they seemed interested in keeping the dental school’s current staff and location. Ahenakew envisioned the change to be as seamless as it had been in 1995, when the school changed administration from the U of T to SIFC. She could imagine it already. The only thing that would change would be the letterhead. If anything, it would be an improvement for the school. Under SIAST, the dental therapy school could work to become an accredited direct transfer program. Students who completed the two-year program could then go on to finish a four year dentistry degree if they desired.

The only hitch in her plans, however, was to convince the provincial government to fund the dental therapy school under SIAST. Ahenakew put in a call to the advanced education minister and SIAST submitted a formal proposal. Then they waited. And waited.

Ahenakew was typing at her desk when the phone rang. She picked it up. Was this the call she’d been anticipating? No. At the other end of the line was another hopeful young person who wanted to apply to the school.

“I’m sorry, we are not accepting any new intake of students at this time,” said Ahenakew.

It was now March 2011, and there was still no word. Ahenakew had turned away more than 90 interested applicants for the 25 suspended seats. The situation was beginning to hit home. She realized that this year’s graduating class might be the last to walk through the hallways of the National School of Dental Therapy.

“We have to know by the end of March,” thought Ahenakew. Provincial budget day, March 23, was only a few weeks away. It was the absolute last opportunity for the school. If the province didn’t announce funding by then, the school would be operating without a contract at the end of March – and when the contract’s funding completely ran out on June 30, 2011, the doors would close forever.

Ahenakew had heard the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, representing First Nations chiefs, had written a letter asking for federal dollars to bring the school under the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT). But she was skeptical. The federal government had already been adamant that it was out of the game.

If the school were to be saved, it would have to come from provincial funding, she was convinced.

But time was running out. The fading days of March contained the school’s only hope.

On March 22, 2011 the federal Conservative government, preparing for an impending election, announced a budget that tantalized affluent voters with tax relief and program cuts. There was no mention of the chiefs’ proposal to federally fund the dental school under SIIT.

The next day, Saskatchewan finance minister Ken Krawetz rose to his feet with the provincial budget address in hand. His message that day was “lower taxes, improved services, less debt.” The average person would pay $1,000 less in taxes this year, he announced. It was little consolation for Ahenakew and Krauss. They listened in vain for mention of the dental therapy school. They heard nothing.

Against all odds, Ahenakew clung to hope. As far as she was concerned, the dental therapy school was still fully operational until the end of the school year. “Even if they had to wait until May 1 at the latest, we could still have time to find students for the intake in the fall and hire a few more instructors,” she thought, adjusting her internal timeline.

She sat in her office, continuing to wait and hope as the federal and provincial governments continued their pre-election dances, wooing affluent voters. The feds had said they would shift funding to scholarships, but no one wanted responsibility for the school itself. Where would students learn? And who would take care of northern children’s teeth?

Ahenakew wasn’t alone. The school was just one of several First Nations-orientated programs among the budget unmentionables that spring, left on the sidelines of the federal-provincial political dance. Still she waits, hoping to be noticed before the music stops.
As a child, I told God I didn’t need salvation. Now I’m not so sure.

By Raquel Fletcher

I was around 10 or 11 years old when I first questioned the existence of God. I was changing into my pyjamas before bed when I wondered if the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-the-time was looking at my pudgy, naked body and if he was watching, or if he could choose to close his omniscient eyes while I changed. Despite some obvious self-consciousness, I was a confident and, as I remember, bold child, because at that moment I decided I could face the world on my own. I wasn’t going to be duped by anyone, nor told to follow rules from someone I wasn’t sure was really there or not. I considered God one last time and then brazenly told Him, “Thank you kindly, Sir, but I don’t need salvation.”

In my lifetime, the number of Canadians who have either ditched out on church or abandoned any religious affiliation altogether has grown to over 40 percent, up from 30 percent in 1984. Among those most likely to reject mainstream religions in place of their own makeshift faith are my peers, those university-aged. Like them, I was also content to live with this vague, undefined sense of spirituality. Then I met Sumaiya Saleh.

Saleh was born and raised in Toronto. She moved to Regina in 2008 when her husband became the imam at the Regina Mosque. That’s where I met her for an interview last April. I was working on a story about the highly controversial ban Quebec had just imposed on the niqab, the face veil worn by Muslim women. To me, the reason some Canadian
women choose to cover their faces was a political issue, so I was unprepared to be so personally touched by Saleh’s spirituality.

Inside the mosque, Saleh spoke easily and openly. Although barely in her mid-twenties, she projected the self-certitude of a much older woman as she explained why she decided to wear the niqab. “I wanted some kind of struggle and I wanted to prove something to myself,” she said.

Her petite stature was draped in an oversized abaiya, hiding her budding pregnancy completely. When the camera was turned off, Saleh removed the black veil that covered her nose and mouth. Her smile beamed from ear to ear. Only a few years older than me, she was already prepared for family life. It was an opportunity to worship, she said. When I asked her if this life of devotion and choice to cover up made her feel like she was hidden away from the rest of society, she laughed.

“Have you heard of Canada’s Wonderland in Ontario? It’s a big amusement park. I’ve been on every ride with this on,” she said. “I’ve been bungee-jumping twice. I don’t feel invisible at all.”

Her spiritual journey and devotion to Allah was inspiring. For her, the issue was about God, not politics. It made me think of the first time I went running with “T.” Until university, I found exercise, in general, about as enjoyable as being dragged behind a freight train on a track of laser beams, but eventually I began to long for it – the pain, the exertion, and the clarity that came with gasping for air and thirsting for water. There were fleeting moments when I ran where I felt thankfulness to a greater being. Saleh felt that clarity all the time and I longed for what she had: a life much more meaningful than mine, a life of worship, of service and joy.

I longed for what she had, a life much more meaningful than mine.

“I used to be very shy, but it’s made me stronger,” she continued. Beside Saleh, I felt like a floating balloon, rising up, up, up into oblivion, while she was so strongly anchored to her faith.

It was Saleh who opened my heart to organized religion. So when Jasmine, a long-time friend, called me in early September saying a new session of adult Christian initiation was starting at her church and would I be interested in coming, I said yes.

The catechumenate is a process that dates back to the apostles themselves, who baptized or converted early adult Christians. When Christianity was legalized in Europe in the fourth century, infant baptism became the norm and the practice of initiating adults into the church in a communal structure fell by the wayside. In 1972, the church felt a need to restore the adult initiation process, establishing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, known familiarly as RCIA. Although the number of infants baptized has decreased in Canada – from 168,909 in 1978 to 110,204 in 2008 – baptisms of people older than seven are on the rise: 6,755 in 2008 compared to only 4,305 in 1978.

The first eight weeks of initiation is an ‘inquiry’ period of relaxed evenings in parish members' homes. Tonight, our host has cleared most of the furniture in her living room to the side to make room for some 20 inquirers and our sponsors. She has also prepared a buffet feast. Linda Mueller, the petite and friendly RCIA coordinator for Resurrection Parish, is overflowing with hospitality. Does everyone have a cup of tea, coffee, water? She shakes our hands happily and distributes name tags.

Mueller’s dark hair falls just past her shoulders in a neat bob; you would never guess that she’s been married 26 years and has four grown children. She peers over her dark-rimmed glasses as she begins to share with us her faith journey, one that even as a “cradle Catholic,” as she calls herself, has been difficult. Her father was an alcoholic, uninvolved in his children’s upbringing. Her oldest son has a disability, something that’s difficult for her to share, but Linda doesn’t mind being vulnerable. “It also leads into the blessings that I’ve received from having a child like this,” she says. She says she wants to assure us “the journey is long and you don’t just get there overnight.” A sense of community is important for everyone to grow, she adds; tonight is a night for sharing.

Several weeks later, I’m welcomed into the church in a special ceremony. As my sponsor, my friend Jasmine puts her arm around me and leads me into the chapel. She’s been praying for me, she tells me with a smile. Inside the church, in front of the congregation, the priest gives me a blessing and presents me with a Bible. Our sponsors offer prayers of intercession for the catechumen – the word that describes those of us who have never been baptized.

Jasmine isn’t the only guide in my journey. My first memory of Father Stephen Bill is probably rather tame compared to most. T and I were in Sunday mass and I remember thinking the homily he had just delivered was the best I’d ever heard. Father Steve, as he is affectionately called by the congregation, is known for his unique use of...
props, once bringing a chainsaw to mass to demonstrate the painfulness of cutting away sin.

Born in Estevan, the twelfth of thirteen children, Father Steve graduated from high school in 1983 with the intention of entering the priesthood. In 1991, he was ordained a priest in the Archdioceses of Regina. Now in his mid-forties, he has served as parish priest in nine different communities in southern Saskatchewan. He has his own theory why people like me, born in secular homes, are drawn to his faith. “The Lord is tugging at our hearts and at some point we begin to hear that, we begin to sense that,” he says.

Today Father Steve has gathered us in the chapel for a meditation prayer. We settle into the pews, while he stands at the altar. Above him hangs a life-size crucifix. Early Christians used a fish as a symbol. The depiction of Jesus’s tortured, suffering body nailed on the cross wasn’t adopted until the mid-13th century, emphasizing Christ’s humanity. The reminder of His humanity is comforting now, as prayer has never been one of my strong suits. My first memory of praying is not the most enlightening.

I was driving home from T’s house one winter night when I was first moved to reach out to a higher power. We hadn’t been fighting, unusual for us. There were many nights I drove home anxious and upset after spending long hours tearing each other apart. However, this particular evening had been a tranquil one. Nevertheless, when I turned onto the highway a mere 10 minutes from my house, tears began to well up in my eyes. I looked up into the immense prairie night sky and yelled at Him, “Where are you in this relationship? Why have you abandoned us?”

Fortunately, tonight, Father Steve is here to help us pray to Jesus, using one of his more unusual techniques. To begin, he tells us to imagine we are standing on top of a mountain. I close my eyes and listen to Father’s words. I see a hermit.

“He may be a stranger or he may be someone you recognize,” says Father Steve.

He’s someone I recognize, all right. It’s T. He’s standing there in the habiliments of a monk from the Middle Ages. Without thinking, I punch him in the face. Hurt and shocked, T moves away. It is only then that I notice the valley before me – a scorched desert village lies in stark contrast to the lushness of the mountain. With Father Steve’s coaching, I make my way down the sharp embankment to the valley bellow. The community is deserted, a ghost town, and I am now truly alone.

I start to panic until Father Steve tells us that Jesus has come into our valley. I have never been more relieved. Jesus puts His arm around my shoulder. I bury my face in His chest and cry. I am crying in reality as well. Real salt tears are falling down my face and landing on the floor between the pews, a detail I pay little attention to, as I am lost in my meditation. Finally, Jesus asks me why I am crying. After all the hardship it took to climb down that mountain I have found nothing but a deserted sandpit and now I must climb all the way back up in search of T, but I’m afraid. Jesus takes my hand and tells me He will help me climb the mountain. I wonder how long He will stay with me, but He says I don’t need to worry. He promises He will never leave.

Wednesday’s RCIA meetings now take place in the church and begin with a short liturgy. It’s the middle of January and it’s storming outside. It’s almost minus 40 with the wind chill, and it always seems windier in the church’s open parking lot. Jasmine and I run to escape the bitter cold, and I wonder how I could have forgotten to wear my heavy winter socks on a day like this. Inside the chapel, I still have my sweatpants on under my skirt, but we’re running late and Father Steve is already starting the liturgy.

It was the dead of night when Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews and one of the Pharisees, came to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. He was risking compromising his position of power to be seen with the man who called Himself the Son of God. Together they stood overlooking a dimly lit Jerusalem and Nicodemus addressed the Messiah: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.”

Jesus dismissed his compliment, telling Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of heaven unless they are born again. Understandably, the Jewish leader was confused, so Jesus explained warmly, “I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit. What is born flesh is flesh and what is born spirit is spirit.”

Father Steve’s homily tonight is centered on the sacrament of baptism. He
I close my eyes, and for one elated moment, I feel like I can hold on to this feeling of God forever. I don’t want to wash the oil from my hands.

I need a Godparent.

It is a few days after the prayer of exorcism and I have a dinner date planned with my mom at Casino Regina’s restaurant. I seize this opportunity to talk to her about the upcoming Easter vigil ceremony where I will be baptized and that I plan to ask Jasmine to be my Godmother.

“So you’re for sure going through with this, then?” she asks.

I haven’t really talked to her about my religious intentions and I’m still not sure exactly what she thinks. My mom was raised in a Catholic home and my parents were married in the Catholic Church, but she is no longer practising.

I avert my gaze to stare at the strings of glowing beads that partition the casino from the restaurant. When I turn to look at her, she’s grinning. “I can tell you my secret now,” she says.

When we were born, my mom was conflicted about baptizing my younger siblings and me. She didn’t want to deprive us of the Holy Spirit, but didn’t think it made sense to initiate us into a church she no longer felt a part of. When I was about 12, she brought up her dilemma with a Catholic co-worker, who suggested baptizing us herself.


That night, my mom awoke suddenly in the middle of the night to find herself staring at the devil – that is, a demonic shadow she found frightening enough to be the devil. The next day, however, she forgot about the incident – until lunch, when her colleague handed her a small vial of clear liquid.

“I don’t know why, but something told me to give this to you,” he said.

“It was Holy water,” my mom tells me, while we eat our supper.

That night while my brother and sister and I slept, Mom took the water, along with some prayers she doesn’t remember, and secretly blessed our house.

“I never worried about it again. I knew the Holy Spirit was with you guys after that.”

As my Godmother, Jasmine’s first role is to testify to the archbishop that I am ready for baptism. It’s the first Sunday of Lent and the congregation is giving us an eager round of applause during a special mass at Resurrection. I smile and waves from the back of the church. My parents look lost amongst the ritual, but they also smile at me. Father Steve, leading the clapping, is beaming like a proud dad.

After lunch, the congregation moves to Holy Rosary Cathedral for the Rite of Election ceremony, the first step towards full initiation. Thirty-one other catechumen sit with their godparents, waiting to receive the bishop’s blessing. I wonder if they, too, have found their calling to pray for those far away whose lives have been shattered by war, earthquakes and tsunamis, and to mend through our faith the relationships with those closest to us.

“Blest are they whose hunger only holiness can fill.” I do a little skip down the aisle after the closing hymn and then I turn and genuflect to the tabernacle. Thank You. I feel like dancing.
We’re surrounded by farmland – so why do we import almost everything we eat?

by Julie-Anne Johnston

The story of the tomato on your kitchen counter starts over 3,000 kilometres away in Mexico. Illuminated by the noon sun shining through your window, it’s still somehow red, despite its epic journey. “Tomatoes on the vine, 1.79/lb”, the flyer declared when you bought it. How could the fruit be ripe when you buy it in the store, and yet somehow be transported all the way to Canada without damage?

The tomato was picked among hundreds of others still green, and only perfectly shaped ones make the cut to be sent many miles north. Once that nicely rounded tomato gets to the store, it’s put in a ripening room and exposed to ethylene, a naturally occurring gas that is normally produced by fruits and vegetables in small quantities. The hyper-exposure accelerates the ripening and aging of plants, and turns the tomato into its red, unblemished self. After all that, your tomato looks perfect perched on the counter. Its shape and colour look straight off the vine it didn’t actually ripen on. But cut into it, and the flavour and smell don’t amount to much. Still, it looks perfect. And isn’t that the bottom line for sales?

There are other tomatoes out there, though. From Regina, Saskatchewan, follow Highway 48 east. You’ll be traveling through farm country, a beauty that spans miles across three provinces, from Manitoba to the foot of Alberta’s Rocky Mountains. August winds push waves through the golden wheat crop. About 150 kilometres down the road lies Windthorst, a village of about 200. Here you’ll find Pusch Farms. The Pusch brothers, Rod and Graham, set up a greenhouse operation that allows Saskatchewan
people to eat real, earthy peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes grown in the same province they live in.

My first encounter with such tomatoes begins in the city, at Body Fuel Organics in Regina’s warehouse district. It’s Thursday, a ‘bin day.’ Five store workers perform an elaborate dance around each other as they pack pre-ordered bins with organic bananas, pears, strawberries and vegetables. At the back of the crowded packing room, storeowner Lana Andreasen sits at her computer, surrounded by the week’s produce for delivery. Her workstation is completely open to view from the back of the store, a transparency I find comforting.

The smell here is an earthy one, the smell of a lot of vegetables in one place. It’s in stark contrast to the chain grocery store I visited earlier that week to buy groceries. Entering the cavernous grocery store’s produce section, the only smell in the air was a vague sweetness. It was impossible to distinguish any individual vegetable or fruit from its neighbours. Employees worked silently in the aisles, stacking shelves and avoiding eye contact.

Here at Body Fuel Organics, I’m offered a cup of coffee and a place to sit, even though there’s hardly any room for me. All the workers chat easily with one another as they work. A large flat of shiny red tomatoes sits on a shelf, and I pick one up to admire it. The sticker says ‘Pusch Bros. Greenhouse.’

When a tomato is picked from the plant in late summer and goes on a sandwich from sitting all day in the hot sun, that taste can’t be reproduced. That eruption of moist, rich tomato innards so nicely punctuated with freshly ground black pepper can only be tasted near a garden. Its flesh is warm and the smell of the fruit lingers on your hands. The scent, so out of place in February, can be found in these local greenhouse tomatoes.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” says Andreasen as I lean in to take a photograph.

Andreasen’s interest in healthy eating began in 1999 when her daughter Hannah, age one at the time, suffered chronic ear, throat and chest infections. Repeated antibiotic treatments didn’t seem to help.

“If we can get it here, we won’t buy it elsewhere”.

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and... I wasn’t getting any different results,” she says. Then a friend asked if she had tried alternative medicine. A naturopathic consultant encouraged the family to stop eating refined food like white flour, white rice and white sugar. Eating more holistic, natural foods posed a challenge for Andreasen, a single mother at the time. The organic produce she was able to find was high in price and low in choice. What if people could choose what they wanted, she thought, and pick their budget range, too? She obtained a GST number and began sales in 2005 by word of mouth, eventually growing Body Fuel Organics into its current Ottawa Street warehouse.

Today she admits it’s easy to take her family’s health for granted, but the choices she made those years ago still stand today. Buying local and organic means less worry about how the food was produced and what went into it. And a greater portion of the dollar goes to the local farmer, she reasons. Body Fuel Organics sources locally as much as possible.

“If we can get it here, we won’t buy it elsewhere,” she says.

I think back to my trip to the large grocery store. Any packaged food product on the shelves lists any number of ingredients. Honey, rolled oats and brown sugar are easily recognizable. But some are difficult to read and pronounce, and their purpose is unclear – like soy lecithin (aids in memory and cognitive function, also useful in manufacturing paint, textiles and lubricants) or tартразин (adds yellow colouring to a variety of foods, and is not recommended for consumption by children). Tracing ingredients, natural or added, can be tough, according to rural sociologist Andre Magnan. “Even when it says ‘Product of X country’ it could very well be that different ingredients were sourced from all sorts of different places,” he says. His advice to consumers? Focus on whole foods versus processed foods; a shorter list of ingredients generally means fewer preservatives.

Whole foods are definitely high on the menu for Sarah Atcheson-Achter, a holistic nutritionist. I met Atcheson-Achter at the Green Spot Café in downtown Regina, a vegetarian café full with the mid-morning coffee crowd.
Food quality includes being able to talk to the person who grew it.

“I grew up on a farm and my mom always had this enormous garden, and really took care of her plants like they were people,” she says over the chatter of office workers. One slender hand grips a cup of organic coffee, the other dances expressively in the air as she tells me that plants are living entities with a life force that infuses the people who eat them.

“If you look at food as a living thing, the moment it’s picked, it starts to die,” she says. This is why foods from afar lack taste and texture. Foods picked closer to home still brim with the taste of life.

In the days when you bought your bread from the baker down the street, or made it yourself, there was no term to describe local food. It was a way of life. Nowadays there’s a word for people who eat locally: locavores. Toronto-based journalist Sarah Elton took the term and turned it into a cross-country journey, after buying a cookie for her daughter and discovering it was made in China. Traveling across Canada, she visited local food producers and discovered local food doesn’t begin and end with a farmers’ market, open on Saturdays from nine to noon.

I discovered the same thing when I visited the Pusch farm. For Graham Pusch, food quality includes being able to talk to the person who grew it. His relationship with buyers is something he’s proud of, standing in stark contrast to the brothers’ grain farming days. When you truck your grain to the elevators, you get to know the workers over the years, he tells me. But the purchasers themselves – Cargill, Louis Dreyfus, Viterra – view farmers as little more than a necessary evil for doing business.

Despite the vast tracts of agricultural land, 97 per cent of the food Saskatchewan people eat comes from outside the province. Providing the food people want to eat – instead of raw grain – requires some investment and ingenuity. The Pusch brothers are able to produce fresh food because they have a greenhouse, something Graham Pusch says could be feasible for more farmers in the province. The cost of building and running a greenhouse in Saskatchewan means their vegetables are a little pricier than imports from warmer countries, but Pusch finds people are willing to pay extra for food you can taste. “It’s a far better quality and the people are appreciating that greatly,” he says.

The tomato from Mexico is still sitting on my counter, but today there’s another one next to it. It has a small ‘Pusch Bros. Greenhouse’ sticker on it, and eating it will feel a bit different. Talking to the grower and learning about the soil around the tomato adds something visceral to our food. We may live in a globalized world but this tomato’s sun-ripened flesh can’t be tasted the same way anywhere else. It’s homegrown.
Portrait

Randy Real panhandles for coffee money outside the Cornwall Centre in Regina, January 29, 2011.

PHOTO BY JOHN B. PLUCK
Lauren takes a deep breath before descending the stairs to the university’s chilly underbelly. The 25-year-old is filled with dread when she thinks about chem lab. She knows her classmates – including her much younger lab partner – will have their assignments completed, while she struggles to comprehend what seem to be simple concepts to the rest of the class.

Today is especially nerve-wracking. It’s the day Lauren gets her first assignment back. She settles in next to her partner and waits while the teaching assistant circles the room. Finally, the assistant reaches Lauren.

She glances at her paper. A red, glaring 56 stares back at her. She has only one thought, repeating over and over in her mind. People who get 56 don’t get into vet school.

Lauren grew up on an acreage with horses, dogs and cats. Being surrounded by animals planted the idea of working with them in her mind. But when she went to university at 22, she decided instead to pursue a double major in history and political science. After graduating, she spent three years working and traveling. But the dream hadn’t left her. At 25 she enrolled in the pre-veterinary program. Two years of pre-requisite courses are required for admission to vet school. From the first day, she viewed her time in pre-vet as a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

I have to make this count. I can’t waste any time. These are the only two years that have ever really mattered.

Until now, life has been simple – nothing really bad ever happened to her growing up. She is not a ‘troubled youth.’ But getting where she wants to be has proven surprisingly tough.

Laura shares a tiny kitchen with her roommate. There is a lone plastic chair with a 1970s pattern, and a table where her organic chemistry book lies open. She hunches over the text, well into her fourth hour of non-stop studying. She’s trying to learn – no, not just learn, to actually understand and comprehend – the words on its glossy pages.

She feels herself slowing down. Focusing is becoming increasingly difficult.

I just don’t have anything left in me to give to this. But I can’t quit. I just can’t.

Giving up would mean giving less than 100 per cent to her dream.

Lauren’s roommate, an arts student, enters the room. Lauren knows her roommate has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and takes Ritalin to treat the symptoms. She also knows that Ritalin can be used to prolong periods of focus for people who don’t have the disorder.

“You’re always stressed. You’ve been in that chair for four hours,” her roommate says. “I keep telling you, you can have one of my pills. It will help, really.”
Ritalin, or methylphenidate, is a stimulant that affects chemicals in the brain and nerves that contribute to hyperactivity and impulse control. It is used to treat ADD and attention deficit hyperactive disorder, or ADHD, conditions that cause inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. More commonly identified in children, adults are also occasionally diagnosed.

Methylphenidate is a Schedule III drug in Canada, meaning that it is illegal to possess or use it without a prescription. Being caught in possession of a Schedule III drug without a prescription carries a maximum fine of three years imprisonment. Yet many people don’t consider Ritalin to be a ‘serious’ drug.

According to the Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey, 25 per cent of respondents aged 15 years and older said that they had abused prescription drugs at least once in the past year. One in 10 users turned to stimulants like Ritalin.

Because of its chemical-altering properties, Ritalin is more commonly abused by students looking for ways to remain focused and study for long periods of time. Stress and anxiety can contribute to students panicking and looking for creative ways to manage.

Prescription drug abuse by students is a widespread problem that leaves no school untouched – from sprawling universities in central Canada and the U.S., to the relatively small, close-knit campuses of the Prairies.

“I actually had one of my peers approach me and ask for my medication,” says Jane (not her real name), a University of Regina student. The friendly fourth-year is known for stopping friends for a quick chat in the hallways. One day she met up with someone who knew she was on a low dose of Ritalin for mild ADHD. To her surprise,

"I keep telling you, you can have one of my pills. It will help, really.”

the conversation began to move in the direction of persuading her to share “a little bit” of her medication.

“It was a very casual conversation,” she recalls. “(He said), ‘It’s not a big deal. If I could figure out how to channel my brain to focus more...I wouldn’t need it any more.’”

She admits that she wasn’t completely against the idea at first. But then she considered the consequences – legal and medical.

“I said, ‘You know, really, what you should consider is getting tested (for ADD).’”

The student has no idea if her acquaintance managed to obtain Ritalin from another source, but she doesn’t believe he followed her advice to get tested.

“In a sense, I can understand a little bit where he was coming at, in that, well, the only way I can have access to this medication is if I actually declared myself (as learning disabled) and maybe I don’t need that,” she says.

Besides being addictive, Ritalin has a long list of side effects. Agitation, nervousness, anxiety, headache, heartburn and dizziness are just a few of the possible conditions that may develop in those who are prescribed Ritalin.

Ritalin has also been called Kiddy Cocaine because long-term use can lead to brain abnormalities similar to those found in cocaine users. In fact, studies have shown the human body can’t tell the difference between cocaine, amphetamines and Ritalin. Scientists at the University of Buffalo have discovered Ritalin has the potential for causing long-lasting changes in brain cell structure and function, meaning negative effects remain long after the drug’s...
therapeutic effects have worn off.

Still, for students facing pressure imposed by their families, their friends and even themselves, Ritalin seems to offer the key to guaranteed success.

“When you hit university, it’s a different process. A lot more work has to be done and people begin to experience new stresses,” says psychologist Dr. Brian Sveinson, head of the University of Regina’s Student Counselling Services.

Stress is the physical response to feeling pressure or having a burden, explains Sveinson. Symptoms include increased heart rate and blood pressure.

“Anxiety is very similar to that. With anxiety, there’s just kind of a sense that there’s something bad waiting for us,” he said. “Usually what’s involved is some sort of catastrophe – the idea that if I slow down from (studying for) 17 hours to 16 hours, I’m going to fail.”

Under mounting pressure, pre-vet student Lauren has a choice to make. She has refused her roommate’s offer of Ritalin before. But this time, something has changed.

“It may not have been the most healthy outlet, but I don’t care.”

“Sure. Give me some,” she says suddenly.

For a moment she contemplates the pale blue tablet. Then she throws the little pill back with a glass of water and waits.

Soon, Lauren’s heart rate goes up. But it’s not the panicked heart racing of impending deadlines and fear of failing that she’s become accustomed to. This time it’s not a bad feeling. She feels like her whole body has entered a calm, focused state. The dry mouth she’s experiencing seems a small price to pay to feel her worries dissipating.

In fact, Lauren hasn’t been this excited about learning in a long time.

In some ways, Lauren is lucky. Ritalin is a habit forming substance, meaning that it’s very easy for people to become addicted. For her, the temptation is always there – her roommate allows her to keep a small stash of the medication in the cabinet in their bathroom. But she manages to only turn to the little blue pills roughly 10 times in her two years in pre-veterinary studies, usually during midterm or finals week.

Months have passed, and Lauren has finished her pre-requisite course studies. She’s sent her application to veterinary school and has been interviewed about her reasons for wanting to get into the school. But she still doesn’t know if it’s been enough.

In mid-July, while working at a sheep farm, she overhears a co-worker telling another worker that university acceptance letters should be arriving that day. The remainder of her shift and the ride home pass in a blur of nerves.

Arriving back at her apartment building, Lauren unlocks her mailbox with shaking hands and tears through the mail, throwing all but one envelope on the hallway floor.

She rips open the envelope, destroying the brown paper.

Congratulations!

The countless hours, the stress, the worry – it’s all forgotten. Lauren has achieved her goal.

Reflecting back on her experiences, Lauren says she feels that taking Ritalin was not a mistake. “It may not have been the most healthy outlet, but I don’t care,” she says. Her situation isn’t unique. She could be any student – an arts major in Toronto, a science major in New York, a law student at Harvard – who at some point decided failing was a scarier option than abusing prescription drugs.
A Message From Prairie Dog

To The Students And Graduates Of The University Of Regina School Of Journalism

Congratulations on choosing journalism! It’s a very important career. In a democracy, reporters are the public’s representatives. It will be your job to find out what politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders and other public figures – and the institutions and companies they work for – are up to. Canadians need you. They need you to get them the facts, untangle the spin, catch the lies and expose the secrets. When you do your job well, you’re giving ordinary citizens the information they need to make informed decisions on politicians and policies. And that helps make Canada a better country for all of us.

We just wanted to let you know that your work really matters and we salute you. Good luck, heroes!

prairie dog
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