

## 100 Conversations

By Jesse Wegenast

“Hi. My name is Jesse, and I work for an organization called *Vibrant Abbotsford*. We’re conducting a short survey to try to get a sense of people’s opinions and views surrounding local poverty. Would you be willing to participate?”

This was the preamble I gave to around 350 individuals, 100 of whom agreed to sit down and chat about the topic at hand. The interviewees were asked questions such as: What do you think of when you think of poverty in Abbotsford? How is poverty an issue for Abbotsford and its citizens? What efforts do you think you/ the community could make that would have the biggest impact on reducing poverty in Abbotsford?

Participants in the survey were male and female, old and young, and from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

I initially thought that the participants would be split in to two groups: those with an understanding of local issues, and those without. However, three weeks, 100 conversations, and hundreds of rejections later, different trends emerged while sifting through the information gathered. Through their answers, the participants seemed to divide themselves in to four groups, each of which gave like answers and expressed like opinions: senior citizens, teens and young adults, “soccer moms” and their male equivalent, and new Canadians (with an outlier or two from each category, of course). Each group seemed to express a unified perspective on the issue at hand.

Many seniors, when asked the first question responded with, “Poverty? Here? Son, I’ve seen poverty, and you don’t find it in Abbotsford”, or something to that effect. I was then regaled with tales of shoeless winters in the Ukraine, property seized in communist Russia, or the hungry times spent in Yarrow, when 8 year olds had to leave school to go to work picking hops. I couldn’t help but be humbled by what I heard. In many cases, they were right. Poverty of that sort and on that scale does not exist in Abbotsford, and for this we must be thankful.

However, another unifying sentiment was expressed by many in this demographic: People who go without their daily needs are all lazy, and should just go get a job. This response turned up among the other three groups as well, but not nearly as frequently as among the seniors.

A second cohesive vein of answers was expressed by middle to upper middle class people, most of whom were parents, or, as I referred to them earlier, “soccer moms and their male equivalents”. From this group, most answers to the questions asked began or ended with the phrase “my tax dollars”. Many in this group identified drug addiction as the leading or sole cause of poverty, and is found almost exclusively downtown and in the neighbourhood around Jubilee Park. Concerns about local poverty centred around government spending to help people who are too lazy to help themselves, and the issue of safety in the downtown area. When asked how to better engage the community on the issue of

poverty, however, most in this demographic passed the buck to the church and government, saying that they should be doing a better job addressing these concerns (notice the logical fallacy here surrounding tax dollars). This group was far more likely than the others to look at the issue of poverty strictly through the lens of how it affects them, rather than through the eyes of the people living in it every day.

Group three can be best described as the “I Don’t Know Group”, otherwise known as teens and young adults. To be fair, within this group I did encounter some very thoughtful and compassionate individuals, but even they seemed to be more bleeding hearts than activists. The rest were largely an apathetic bunch, and seemed completely unaware that there was anyone at all in Abbotsford living below the poverty line. Forgive me for not spending much time discussing this group, but they truly had very little to say of any interest or relevance. A cause for concern? Yes indeed.

The fourth group, composed exclusively of new and first generation Canadians, had by far the most interesting views on poverty in Abbotsford. When asked what comes to mind when someone mentions “local poverty”, answers such as “the boy at my son’s school who never has a lunch to eat” and “women who have many children but no husband” were not uncommon. Many interviewees, particularly those from south-east Asia, made mention of their surprise that someone could work two jobs and still be poor. People in this group were also more likely to say how “sad” or “embarrassing” it is for Abbotsford that there are hundreds of homeless people in this city, and hundreds more who are marginally housed. It was very interesting to hear the perspectives of new Canadians on age old Canadian issues.

The way our city looks through fresh eyes is quite a challenging thing to face. Are we actually saddened and embarrassed about the state of local poverty issues? Or have we just grown used to and come to accept that people in this well-off community in this wealthy country may just end up not knowing where they are going to sleep or when they are going to eat next? One Vietnamese woman pointed out that a city with such a large religious community shouldn’t need a food bank. Yet people like myself, who have never lived outside the Fraser Valley, can’t imagine the food bank not operating in the community.

Maybe a fresh look at old issues is exactly what we need.

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