

Emily Carrington, [REDACTED] Gabriola Island, BC, [REDACTED] May 28/ 2024

Hello,

I am writing this letter to a variety of individuals and organizations to provide you with some information that I hope you will take into consideration as you develop regulations and policies, and as you think about how you can make life better for the people you serve, or at the very least, make decisions that don't make their lives worse.

I am an author and practicing veterinarian, so the process of developing the types of policies that are part of your work for many of you are foreign to me, and not my area of expertise at all. As a veterinarian, though, I can (and often do) phone the owners of sick pets a day or so after I have seen them if I am concerned about them, and ask how they are doing. I can see if my treatments are having the desired effect, and if not, I can make changes. And when a similar case comes in in the future, I can adjust the treatment plan to hopefully be more effective based on what I have learned.

I imagine this kind of follow-up is not possible for many of you in your jobs. So this letter is a follow-up letter of sorts, providing information to you on some recent decisions and some not-so-recent, that were made by the authorities.

I am going to use the term "authorities" in this letter to try to help you see the situations from the point of view of some of the more down-and-out people you might be dealing with. I came from a broken home, with an abusive mother, a father who had bouts of mental illness. I was an adopted mix-race baby who I suspect was a disappointment to my adopted mother and she took it out on me. I lived in the Maritime provinces when work there was very hard to come by and had to permanently move away from home to find work. I have been homeless, been on welfare, lived on people's couches, in cars and vans, in shacks. I was molested by my 40-year-old neighbour when I was 15. I have been in foster care. Four of my bosses sexually abused me. I dealt with addiction and anxiety issues for much of my life. I have experienced intimate partner violence. I had a drive to succeed, though, and when I was 36 years old, finally graduated from vet school. I am mentioning this to let you know that what I am writing about comes from both personal experience and from direct knowledge of the people that were down-and-out like me over the years that I know. To many people, the "authorities" are all lumped together. They are not there to help like they would for you and me - people with good jobs and relatively stable lives - people higher on the "pecking order." The authorities in the eyes of the poor are the people who can take away things that are important to you. Take away your tent if you are homeless, demolish your home if it doesn't conform to code, take away your children if someone makes a complaint, take away your drugs if you are an addict. Unfortunately for many, the authorities aren't people you go to for help, they are people you avoid at all cost.

This letter is mainly about homelessness. I am very busy with 2 careers to juggle and on my own in my fifties, so I don't have the time to take as much care as I would like to to write this unfortunately. I do feel the issues are important, though, so I am getting the information to you although it won't be as eloquent and in-depth as I would have liked. I am going to tell you about some people I know, and what happened to them after some decisions that were made by the authorities. I am going to use pseudonyms, although some of you may already be familiar with these cases and know the person's real name. I have the permission from most of them to use their real names as they also feel strongly that their issues should have been addressed differently, however I think pseudonyms would be less risk to them as I am acutely aware that some of you that I am writing to have the power to find these people and make their lives more difficult. I hope that you don't.

I grew up in PEI. I only ever saw one homeless person there. His name was Francis and he lived in a tiny cabin about the size of a small bathroom in the woods. I heard a story once that someone was shoveling snow and found him sleeping under the snowbank. Everyone knew Francis and they tolerated him for the most part. I am fairly sure nobody demolished his home. I remember seeing it often in the woods on the Seven Mile Road as I drove down it over the years. I just googled him as I write this letter and am going to include an excerpt from a newspaper article. Francis wasn't just a "homeless person," he was a member of the community, and almost legendary. This excerpt from the article shows it quite well I think.

My father knew Francis all his life. He grew up a few miles from the Quinn home place, and he used to visit my grandfather's as a young man. Dad would often try to engage Francis in conversation without much success. You could rarely get him to talk sensible for any length of time. I used to think he must be schizophrenic when he would start to ramble on

and talk to himself. “Oh he’s just acting foolish,” my father would say in frustration. “He knows damned well what’s going on.” It would be easy to make an argument that Francis’ mental health wasn’t a hundred per cent, but every once in awhile, I hear a story that makes me believe Dad’s assessment may have been closer to the truth. To my point, there is one Francis story I have heard more often than any other since my book “Island Characters” came out. I heard it when I was just a kid, so it goes back a few years. One hot summer day Francis was hanging around Main Street in Morell. Apparently he was having a few drinks this day, and decided to sit out on the lawn in front of the bank. Someone must have called the Mounties to come and pick him up. When Francis spotted the RCMP cruiser coming down main street towards him, he quickly took the pint out of his pocket and tossed it on the lawn.

“Francis, is that your liquor?” The Mountie sternly inquired.

“No,” Francis denied.

“Well it is sitting right beside you?” the Mountie argued.

“That bank is sitting right beside me and I don’t own it either,” Francis replied and put an end to his interrogation.

Every once in awhile you hear a story like this, and it makes you wonder about the most renowned Island character of them all. I have heard several different versions of the same story taking in place in different Island communities so I am not even sure if it’s true anymore.

This article shows him as not just a homeless man, but part of a community. It also illustrates the authorities as the people to be avoided. In this case, they are coming to take Francis’s alcohol.

The reason there was virtually no homelessness on PEI in my opinion, is on PEI we had a psychiatric ward that took people in, and jail. I remember stories of people committing petty crimes so they could stay in jail for the winter if they didn’t have a place to live. But the main reason is we lived in a quiet, close-knit agriculture based community with strong community values. Many people took me in when I was homeless, and I slept on couches, sometimes even having my own bedroom for months at a time. These people were poor but we always found money for bread, and there were always free potatoes, and beef, and pickles people put up for the winter. People shared and helped each other.

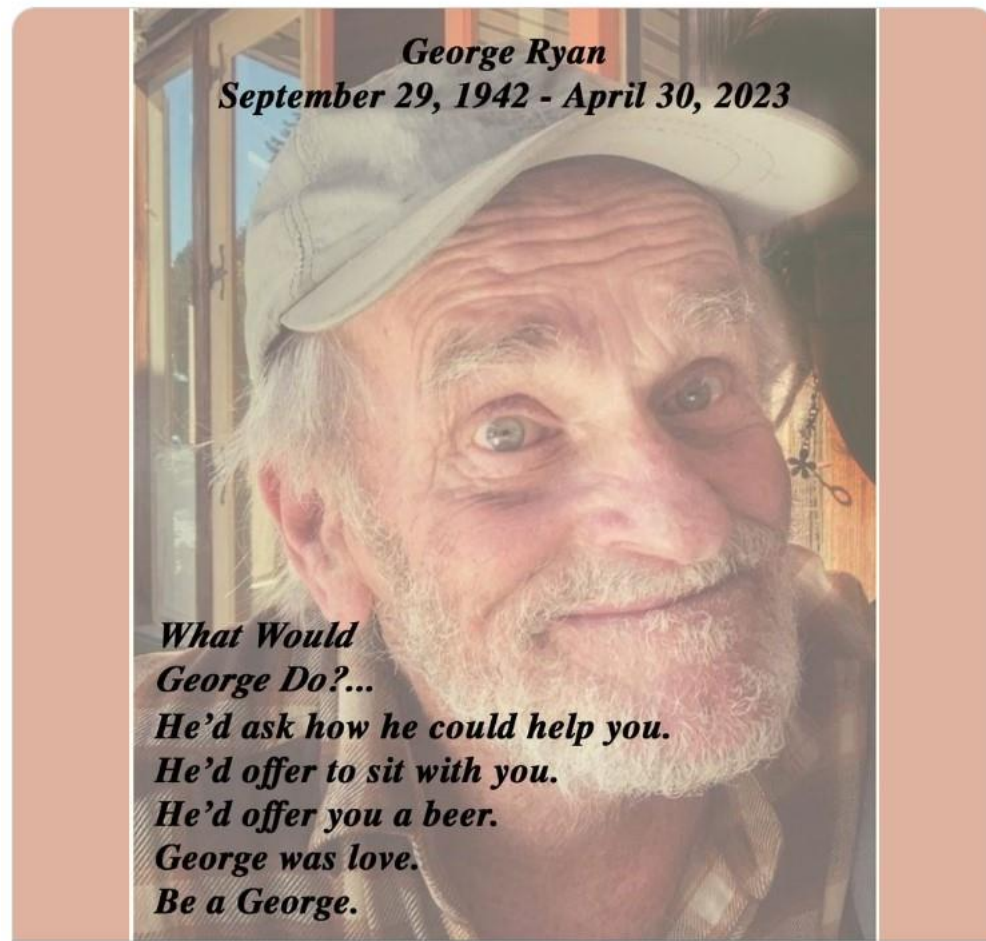
So I am writing to you not to blame any of you for the homeless situation, as in many ways it is a result of communities that are too big for people to know each other, and a result of the individualistic society we have here compared to the more tribal feel of the Maritime Provinces. On the East Coast, when I was homeless I went to stay on someone’s couch for a few days and they shared their food with me. On the West Coast, I lived in a van and hid someplace like an industrial park or pub parking lot or by a church, hoping the police wouldn’t give me a hard time, or stayed in illegal shacks that if the authorities found them would be demolished. I am only writing about what I have lived and seen that it might be of some use.

Olivia

I suspect Olivia has some kind of mental health issues, although I'm not sure what they are. She has lived in our community for over 20 years too. She is very quiet and timid and almost I see her as nice and as far as I can tell, gentle and harmless. In 2020 I believe it was, I heard that the authorities had attached a "do not occupy" order to her trailer door. Right in the midst of the worst part of the pandemic, they required her to tear down her own trailer by the fall, or be taken to court and given a huge fine. So she tore it down, herself, bit by bit, and in a few months it was gone. They she found a tiny cabin to live in with no electricity or running water and one little window. I won't tell you where, as I really hope she can be allowed to live in peace as she wishes. Ever since she was made to demolish her home, Olivia has lived in housing LESS safe and sound than the trailer she was forced to demolish.

George Paul Ryan

George is dead, so I am going to use his real name. George used to work for the CBC apparently, doing sound or lighting for Mr Dressup and The Friendly Giant years ago. For the last decade or so, he has been the homeless guy (between residences as he liked to say) and hung out at the mall and talked to people and drank beer out of a paper bag. Everyone knew George, and talked to him, and often would give him rides in their cars as he didn't have one. He was a well-loved member of the community. Once Olivia found out her house had to be torn down, George, who I understand was staying there at the time, was asked to move out. I heard he moved into a tent in the woods in walking distance to the mall and lived for a few months in the tent until he found somewhere to live in the fall. Want to take a guess at how old George was when he went to live in the woods in a tent? According to his obituary, he was 78 years old in 2020 and where I come from making a 78 year old man homeless is a shameful thing to do. George died a couple of years later of health issues almost certainly related to his drinking.



Rob Stacey

Rob (his real name) is also dead. Olivia's trailer was big enough that she could put a blanket in the middle of it hung from the ceiling to divide it in half and it gave Rob a private room-like area that he could live in. Once Olivia found out that she would have to tear her trailer down, Rob moved out. He went to live in a tent in the woods in another part of our community. On October 20 of 2023 he was found dead in the tent. Did the decision to have Olivia's house demolished contribute to Rob's premature death? We will never know, but it is possible that it did.

Two deceased persons found over weekend on Commons property; and Dragon's Lane

Sounder News

Gabriola RCMP were involved in two unrelated incidents this past weekend involving persons being found deceased.

Cpl. Jordan Mullen, Detachment Commander for Gabriola RCMP, provided information on the incidents.

On Friday, October 20, RCMP were called to a forested area on the south-west side of the Commons property. A male had been found deceased in a tent.

Gabriola Fire and BC Ambulance also attended and worked with RCMP to transport the deceased to a secure location to await the Coroner. Next of kin will be notified, at this time, the identification of the deceased is not being released publicly. The death is not deemed to be suspicious at this time. Cause of death will be investigated by the Coroners Service.

On Sunday, October 22, RCMP were called to the end of Dragon's Lane around

2pm. A body, wearing a flotation device, had washed ashore. Gabriola Fire and the Canadian Coast Guard were also called to the scene.

The male has been identified and does not reside on Gabriola. The RCMP and Coroners Service are investigating the death. No further details are available at this time. If anyone has any information regarding these incidents, please contact the Gabriola RCMP non-emergency line at 250-247-8333.

Leon

I met Leon at drop in soccer in the 1990s. He was athletic, funny, intellectual. For years I only ever saw him at the soccer field, before he started to watch car racing with my elderly Dad and I learned more about him. To be very brief, Leon, his wife and children were very poor but active in the local arts community. Leon built a home, and although it was a very unusual home, he was a fully qualified carpenter and the people I know who are knowledgeable in carpentry and building inspection and building science feel it was structurally sound. When the home was almost done (about 20 years ago), the authorities came and bulldozed it (after court proceedings). Leon was devastated, it was his life's work in terms of creativity. He moved into a camper and lived in it on the side of a local quiet road. Soon after he and his wife broke up and he hardly ever saw his children after that until they were grown up. After living in the camper a few years, he moved into a trailer in the woods, far enough from the road he hopes the authorities won't bother him. He is content to live without electricity, running water, or television and works to support himself and uses no substances. He is a reliable, useful, productive and seemingly happy person at this time, but just needs to live differently than most people to be himself. For the last 20 years, Leon has lived in housing LESS comfortable and sound than the home he built that was demolished.

Rita

As I was writing about Rob from two paragraphs ago, I heard a knock at my door. It was my friend Rita, who I have known for almost 30 years. She looked stressed, so I invited her in. Rita used to live in rented old double wide trailer that she was in perpetual fear would be torn down by the landlords to build a better home, so she bought a small trailer and fixed it up and now lives on someone's property (with their blessing) in her trailer, which is tidy and beautifully painted and has burgundy and purple curtains and looks really nice. She was right about the demolition of her previous rental, it is now gone. She got out just in time. She is about 66 years old, and not able to work and has minimal savings. Without the trailer, she would be in deep trouble. After moving into the trailer the look of stress vanished from her face, and she looked so much happier. Now she had a place of her own! But today the stressed look is back, as the authorities (the Regional District of Nanaimo) are harassing people she knows who are living like she does. Will she be next? If so, where will she be able to afford to live? She told me they are currently harassing two people she knows about who I'll call William and Matthew. Here is what she told me earlier today:

William

William build an unconventional but affordable small home (which Rita believes it is structurally sound and I have seen it, it looks nice) on someone else's property with the property owner's blessing. It is a nice sized acreage with room for a garden. His girlfriend has one child, and she is pregnant. Recently William received an order to stop living in his home. This is causing him great stress, as you can imagine, and stress to all the people who have heard about this and worry if they are next. The authorities I believe are also threatening to fine (or maybe have already fined) the land owner for having the structure on his property. In general I find people are living in the best home they can afford at the time. When you push them out of their homes, they end up somewhere worse.

Matthew

Matthew wanted to build himself a small affordable cabin on a property that a land owner had given permission for him to do. The authorities got wind of this and put a stop to this. Now he lives in a camper.

When Rita and I sat down for a cup of tea, she said she wished that the authorities would stop threatening her and the people she knows. She wishes that the authorities would consider motivation when they receive a complaint. She has heard of land owners complaining because they want to drive a person living in unofficial housing off a property they are looking to buy, and she suspects real estate agents are complaining to tidy up land to get a better price. She says people have received letters about complaints that were inaccurate and may have been made out of ignorance or spite, and wishes the authorities would check the validity of these complaints before sending threatening letters to people. I am not sure of course how accurate any of that is, but I can tell you that recently I heard from someone who I believe is a reliable source saying one single person in an adjoining rural community made 25 complaints about different people. What I have seen with my own eyes over the years is people with more money move in and complain about the people already there, and make changes that gradually push the local people out to live in less desirable housing. This, as you all know, happens all the time all over the world.

I know a woman in Victoria, BC, who used to run a lodge for people with mental issues. They were safe and had good food. When the funding ran out she closed it and she said that after a while she began to see her clients living in their cars, they after a while they just had shopping carts and lived downtown on the street.

I have lived in shacks, trailers, cars and vans. It was hard, but I always felt safe when I was on my own in these places. Safe except for what the authorities would do if they found me. If you think people with homelessness issues should just rent a room, that is not always possible or safe. As a young woman my poverty and homelessness put me at risk for sexual abuse. Renting rooms and sharing rooms has led to me being sexually assaulted including unwanted intercourse on several occasions, fearing for my own safety and having to leave a violent home in the middle of the night, living in homes with drug and alcohol abuse and drug dealing (by the way I never used drugs but it was all around me) Some people have mental health issues that make living with someone else very stressful for them. I have given some examples of a few different kinds of people here, trying to find a safe place of their own to live in peace in their own community. I live a different life now, and have my own home, and a good job, but I keep touch with people who are on the fringes. In fact, they are nice and interesting people. I pick up groceries sometimes for Rita, I take another woman's laundry to town when I go so she can have clean clothes, I watch car racing with Leon now that my father has passed away. They are friends. Having an affordable place to live allows people to save money and hopefully make their overall lives better and more stable. For me, living in vehicles and shacks allowed me eventually to gather the money to finish my education.

So lets bring it back to what is happening now. Although we hear about SROs in Vancouver being demolished and the poor being displaced, I am talking specifically about my community, Gabriola Island.

The authorities (I believe they are employees of the Regional District of Nanaimo) in all the cases I have mentioned above, probably believe they are making the community better by demolishing these homes. What I have seen with my own eyes is the opposite. Stress, anxiety, worse homelessness, broken families, worsening substance abuse, and possibly even one shortened life, have resulted. Because I am a veterinarian, I also talk to people with money who make assumptions about my values based on my title who I have caught telling massive untruths about the people I know living in unofficial housing. I hope these untruths are from not knowing rather than malicious intentions. Accusing the people in unofficial housing of violence, theft, and being criminals from Nanaimo, and they were surprised when I replied well actually I know these people personally, I know their names and where they live, and have known many of them for years, and I happen to know that those rumours aren't true. Most of them have lived here for decades, most are not criminals, and work or have worked in the community, are young families, and older retired women. There are many other examples I have not mentioned that I personally know. Most of the other ones I know about are single

women (in their 40s to 70s) who are spared the risk of violence or sexual abuse by being able to have an affordable place of their own. I hope that making false complaints against people is a criminal offense. It is so easy for the well-off to ruin the lives of the poor with false fear-inducing statements.

As the West Coast becomes more populated, the agricultural and rural lifestyle that promotes community and the growing and sharing of food to bring people together is gradually pushed out and housing costs go up as regulations demand more and more expensive and complex housing. I have seen this happen lately in PEI too with an increase in homelessness as building codes are enforced and housing costs go up. I don't know the answer for all of this, but do feel strongly that demolishing the homes of poor people, or giving them fines until they are forced off their property is wrong. Wrong and counterproductive and harmful. Especially in a rural area like Gabriola Island which does have a rural feel and still has enough of an agricultural community to bind people together.

Why do I care? Because I was taught to care by the caring community that I lived in when I grew up on the East Coast. You look out for your neighbour, you help those in need. You share, you work together. I don't see those values expressed here in the same way in the thirty odd years I have lived in this area, but I still believe in them. I wish the values of caring and community could be taught in school. I wish there were more community gardens and rural experiences for children growing up. I think there should be funding for facilities for people with severe mental health issues instead of leaving them on the street. The values I grew up with make demolition of homes and targeting the most poor as fundamentally wrong. I know about many of the unofficial homes that are being targeted now by the RDN. This is causing an immense amount of anxiety for many of Gabriola Island's poorest residents. It also causes anxiety and distress for people like me who are friends of those targeted. I had tears in my eyes more than once when I wrote this letter. As I have seen with my own eyes long-lasting and adverse outcomes to people I know about from actions taken by the RDN in the past against my friends and acquaintances, over not just years but decades, I am strongly against the actions they are currently taking. I have sent messages to the people I know of who are being targeted, or told them in person, that if their home is threatened and they want me to, I will come and stand in front of any bulldozers that come to tear down their homes.

I sincerely hope you consider the long term financial, housing, and physical and mental health outcomes of the people and the communities they live in when creating and enforcing the regulations regarding unofficial housing especially. These policies can cause or make worse homelessness, poverty, addiction, physical and sexual violence, anxiety, depression, broken families, and can destabilize communities. It causes fear and anxiety in those in similar situations, and is destabilizing to attempts for long term integration into a community and finding long term employment. It causes people who might benefit from help to hide from and fear all authority figures, even those that could help them. The job of the well-off like yourselves and myself isn't to get rid of the poor because you don't like how they look and live, it is to treat them fairly and humanely and help lift them up.

Sincerely,

Emily Carrington DVM