

# FINDING UNEXPECTED GIFTS IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

*Alain Spitzer – Executive Director*

The centre will be celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and although quite a lot has changed during this time, we are still committed as ever to developing relationships with some of the most isolated people in this city. On a personal basis, it has been a privilege to serve the centre for the past six years. Those years have flown by, and during this time, I am happy to say that I have learned as much from the members of the centre as they have hopefully learned from me. Spending time here has a tendency of changing your entire outlook on the hidden potential that all of us have to make a difference in our communities.

Because many of our members live on the street, and struggle with addiction and problems related to mental illness, it is easy to overlook their boundless potential. Time here is time well spent in tearing down those misconceptions.

I was reminded recently just how resourceful many of our street friends are.

Besides working full time at the drop-in, I also volunteer one afternoon a week at my local community church preparing hot meals for 70 or so men, women &

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## *The team*



Top row: Alain Spitzer, Anne-Marie Beaulieu, Valerie Myles-Labine, Cécile Aubin & Ron Melanson. Second row: Danica Straith, Bernard Racicot, Caroline Hamel & Victoria D'Amour

## Rose garden in the desert

*By Ron Melanson*

I struggle when I see someone trying to numb the pain of life by doing things that destroy his/her body. I cringe when confronted with a system that doesn't seem to understand or have compassion for those who are slowly killing themselves, looking for an escape from the pain of rejection and loneliness brought on by mental illness and addiction.

I struggle with this society that can't get past the inconveniences of poverty to see the distress of hurting human beings.

My heart is broken when I hear my friend (who is drunk on rubbing alcohol) tell me how much he hates himself.

I struggle when I don't meet the expectations in relationships where so much more is needed.

Strangely in all this brokenness and suffering, where I think the spirit is most likely to be crushed, I find something basic and beautifully human shining.

There is a sense of reality here that sheds light on the superficial layers of our

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children who are unable to provide for themselves. Every week now for the past two months, a few of the members here at St-James tag along, and help prepare those meals on Thursday afternoon.

Every last Wednesday of the month, we facilitate group discussions with our street friends during which they can share their concerns, their fears, their hopes (...). The idea for this group originated from one of our members who has spent the better part of two decades on the street.

On any given day, we prepare over 80 meals for those who spend their nights on the streets of Montreal, or who cannot make ends meet; all these meals are prepared by a dedicated team of St-James members who have been at some point or another 'street affected'.

Every morning of the week a couple of our members come into the centre to take care of all maintenance, cleaning, and laundry responsibilities.

I walk out of my office, and I see one of our members preparing a plate of food for another member; a few feet away two members are sharing coffee over a game of cards.

The stories are endless; but one thing that has become clear to me over the past few years, is that many of those that we have a tendency to devalue in our societies, have very generous lifestyles to share with us.

In July the centre will be hosting a social justice summer camp, and our hope is that the participants will walk away with a new sense of commitment to those that are all too often overlooked. I have come to realize over the past 6 years that our street friends have far more to offer than we could ever have imagined, and their gifts to us are a blessing to our community.

Thank you for your support which makes all of this possible.



Kevin Maguire preparing meals

## THE PURSUIT OF ONE'S FULL POTENTIAL

by Sarah Berry

For the past decade, I've spent a great deal of time thinking, speaking, and writing about health within academic settings. I've written articles about drug advertisements, lectured on mental health, and spoken about women's health at conferences. While this has been important and fulfilling work, the most valuable and enduring lessons I've learned about health have taken place beyond ivy-covered university walls, within communities such as the St-James Drop-In Centre.

In 2008, I was enthusiastically introduced to the Centre by Rob Bull. Rob's passion for the Centre as a supportive environment for persons who are margin-



alized and homeless, and his commitment to working with the staff and members, was infectious; I contacted Alain Spitzer a week later to get involved. Alain immediately demonstrated the same passionate connection to the Centre and to its members, and a tenacious commitment to fighting social inequalities.

So where's the connection to health in all of this? The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Health and overall well-being involve more than just infections, vaccines, and hospitals! True health, and the pursuit of one's full potential as a human being, requires contexts free of violence, discrimination, abuse, neglect, and inequality. In the absence of such a perfect world, communities such as the St-James Drop-In Centre offer tangible, empathic support and advocacy for marginalized persons who face enormous social, cultural, and material barriers to integrating and thriving within society. This

# Morale therapy

by Christopher Reid

*This is the first time  
I guess I have asked myself  
What do I care about  
St-James Drop-In Centre?  
What I care about is victory?  
We are enjoying victory  
here at St-James Drop-In Centre  
over isolation, prejudice  
and abandonment.  
In the art room for example  
we are victorious in receiving  
federal funding under a program  
called the National Homeless Initiative.  
We also have exhibits that allow us to  
exhibit our art work free of charge,  
because certain businesses or community  
centres sympathise with our endeavours,  
to include those who suffer  
mental-illness into society.  
Here in the art program at St-James  
any member of the centre,  
has access to the workshop.  
Here we enjoy what I would define  
at morale therapy.  
If you have ever suffered  
from mental-illness,  
you would know  
that morale  
is very  
important.*



# Becoming a member

Jacques Élisé

The St-James Drop-In centre is a place where we can gather and meet new people. And once you become a member, you will never be bored again! There are many things to do here, including working your magic in the art studio. It is an opportunity that no one should let pass by. With a generous coordinator in Anne-Marie Beaulieu, and many enthusiastic volunteers, the studio is never a dull place. Let me also take a moment to thank Bernard Racicot, the art studio assistant, who in his own special way, always makes us feel welcome. We love it here, and although we may be perceived as marginal, we are perfectly content with our lot.



Jacques Élyse

I would like to take this time to thank God for having guided me to this centre, and for surrounding me with such great intervention workers as Caroline, Victoria, Valerie, Ron, and Danica. Last but not least I would like to thank our director Alain Spitzer who brings his humanitarianism to the forefront.

The centre is a place where prejudice is defeated. Everyone helps one another.

Besides the art studio, we also have the opportunity to share time together through music and poetry workshops. In addition to all this, throughout the year, members of the McGill music conservatory come and play beautiful music for us at the centre.

I was once a user; it is not something I feel I need to have. There have been a few times in my life when I have relapsed; but thanks to the Drop-In and my faith, everything seems to be good for me right now.

Once thing that I can say for sure is that I could not have made it to where I am at this point in my life without St-James. It has saved me! It is a place filled with love!

Thank you very much for taking the time to listen.

## HOUSING PROGRAM

by Victoria D'Amour

I started my stage here at St-James in January, excited but nervous about the new challenges to come. When I was approached with the opportunity to occupy a position here, I was thrilled. Starting up this month is the St-James Housing Program, which I proudly get to be a part of. The program entails apartment searching in all areas of Montreal while keeping in mind



Victoria D'Amour

the specific needs and desires expressed by the member. It also allows time for scheduled home visits to offer support during the social reintegration process. Workshops at St-James will be given on many subjects, such as budgeting, house cleaning, finding local resources, etc... I am looking toward to this experience, hoping for nothing but positive results, yet knowing that obstacles will arise that may interfere with my idealistic expectations. The members of St-James have unlimited potential and have surprised me over and over again with their talents, great minds and amazing personalities. Thanks to many of them, I've had great laughs and memories that will not be soon forgotten. With the right motivation, as well as the strength of working together, we are very hopeful in achieving our goal: finding adequate housing and offering support during this transition.

## Thank you

The Canadian Mental Health Association, Les Frères Maristes de Québec, Beaver Lodge No.6 Les Frères de St-Gabriel, COOP La Maison Verte, Mazon Canada, Dianova Canada, Mr. K. Shea, EJLB Foundation, Price Waterhouse Cooper, The Jackman Foundation, Regional Health and Social Services Board, The Harold E. Ballard Foundation, Québec Support Program for Community Organizations, The Henry and Berenice Kaufmann Foundation The Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Hockey For The Homeless, Les Religieuses Hospitalières St-Joseph, The Hylcan Foundation Shaika Cafe, The Homeless Partnership Initiative of Canada, The Church of Saint Andrew and Saint Paul, The Toronto Dominion Bank, Zeller Family Foundation, PA Supermarket, Youth Unlimited, Direction Chrétienne, Le Garde Manger pour Tous, Government of Canada-SPLI Program Régie régionale de la Santé et des Services Sociaux, PSOC Program, Dianova Canada, St-James United Church, David Eggert, Mollie Witenoff, Kelsey White, Sarah Berry, Nancy Keays, CLSC des Faubourgs, Paula Klein, Montreal City Mission, Compagnie North West Clothing, Isabelle Leduc, Chambréclerc, Li Stock, François Hoang / Aoiro Studio Concordia University : Art Education, Dawson College, Cegep du Vieux-Montreal, CÉGEP Vanier, Everest College, Pax Street Ministry, Program Dialogue, Mark Beaudet, Montreal Gospel Choir, Merrell Canada Chaussures Leclair, River's Edge Community Church, The Mustard Seed Calgary, Siloam Mission, Erin Hogg, Joe Donohue, Mountain Equipment Coop, Comedy Nest

## Rose garden in the desert suite...

society that puts high value on individuality and so much importance on "how we look" and "what we do" instead of "who we are".

It is here in the midst of this wild environment, that I find a reality of life that is fragile and vulnerable, characteristics that aren't high on the list of a success driven society.

It is here that (if only for a moment) I get released from the seduction of believing that what I own and what I do defines me.

I am brought back to remember how I take for granted the importance of relationships and caring for one another.

This is where I get a chance to see and experience the power of respect and dignity and how it can replace thoughts of despair. St James is a place that cares for me and accepts me for who I am with all my struggles and encourages me to grow and learn what it means to be a part of a vibrant community.

## THE PURSUIT OF ONE'S

## FULL POTENTIAL suite...

is undervalued and sometimes painful work, but the rewards or "success" can be measured in the simple but powerful connections that are formed when humans take the time to care for, and truly *see* one another.

This past winter, I invited Alain to give a guest lecture on homelessness and health in a Sociology course that I teach at McGill University. One of the goals of the course was to encourage students to recognize the links between social inequalities and health. Alain powerfully illustrated this connection for students not through the use of sophisticated audio-visual equipment, statistics, or formal academic theories, but through his recounting of the everyday experiences of members at the Drop-In Centre and on the streets of Montréal. The response to Alain's lecture was phenomenal; several students felt inspired enough to get involved in the Centre and eventually became volunteers, while other students asked to write their final course papers on the topic.

Perhaps the most exciting outcome of Alain's visit was my realization that it is possible to connect seemingly disparate communities - to encourage them to truly *see* and support one another - in ways that are supportive of health, well-being, and the pursuit of each person's full potential as a human being.



1435, rue City Councillors, Montréal, Québec H3A 2E4

1440, rue St-Alexandre (entrée des membres)

Téléphone : (514) 288-0039

Télécopieur : (514) 288-7032

[www.stjamescentre.ca](http://www.stjamescentre.ca) / [info@stjamescentre.ca](mailto:info@stjamescentre.ca)