

# ORGANIZING OUR GRIEF

A Collaboration in Response to the  
Overdose Crisis



Working with Concepts  
April 2023



Ellyn Walker <i>Preface</i>	4
Karie Liao, Fraser McCallum, Jacqui Usiskin <i>Moving Parts: Making a Roving Public Memorial</i>	7
Nat Kaminski <i>kisâkihitin: A Mural to Remember With</i>	10
Zoë Dodd <i>The Solution to the Toxic Drug Death Crisis is a Non-Carceral Future</i>	12
Theodore (ted) Kerr <i>Making Community Archives: A How-To Guide</i>	15
Dan Gibson, University of Toronto Harm Reduction Collective, Blackwood Gallery Work Study students <i>Reflections, Letters, and Responses from Partners and Participants</i>	20
Lea Rose Sebastianis <i>Resource List</i>	25

*Working with Concepts* is a series of publications that report on workshops and events organized and hosted by the Blackwood. These programs position concepts as useful tools for fostering advocacy, dialogue, and resource-sharing across disciplines and sectors. *ORGANIZING OUR GRIEF* circulates strategies, reflections, and organizing principles that emerged from *WISH YOU WERE HERE*, *WISH HERE WAS BETTER*.

## Preface

Ellyn Walker

I had a dream in early 2022 about a roving artwork that would allow for us at the Blackwood, a contemporary art gallery at the University of Toronto Mississauga, to connect with communities across the campus and in the surrounding Peel Region. This coincided with a time when so many of us had been stuck at home for nearly two years, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through fan-girl text messaging, three-way phone calls full of tears and laughter, and later, weekly Zoom meetings with the Blackwood team, writer Theodore (ted) Kerr and community organizer and scholar Zoë Dodd gave meaning and shape to my dream—which was a mere seedling at the time. Together, we were invested in making material and visual culture—and their histories—free and accessible to and for all. Having been moved and transformed by art and visual culture ourselves within our own lives and learnings, we shared a longing to use art and language to honour and remember lives lost, and to re-imagine lives more liveable for us all. What we came up with would become the project *WISH YOU WERE HERE, WISH HERE WAS BETTER (WYWH, WHWB)* (2022), a mobile public artwork and event series that made space for people impacted by the ongoing overdose crisis and its intersectional issues of harm at systemic, individual, and local scales.

Dreaming as method and methodology is not something new—it is a longstanding and widespread Indigenous ontology,<sup>1</sup> a famous civil rights framework,<sup>2</sup> amongst many other things. Dreaming connects us to other worlds—ones full of possibility, remembrance, as well as pain. This is because dreams and dreaming can be haunting, in ways that keep us up at night in fear, regret, and grief. As a curator and curatorial scholar, I am inspired by scholars Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer's writing on curatorial dreaming "as an innovative method of engaged cultural analysis and critique"<sup>3</sup> and "a valuable methodology that simultaneously embraces research, analysis, cultural representation, creative expression, social intervention, and dialogue with broad publics."<sup>4</sup> Butler and Lehrer argue that working outside of one's comfort zones, through constructive rather than antagonistic approaches, is generative, as such "dreaming asks us to diversify our methods."<sup>5</sup>

This is true of *WYWH, WHWB*, a collaborative public art project that necessitated rethinking how to work together within an institution, specifically, a university gallery, and with distinct communities, to design an experimental artwork and public project that gave shape to a dream.

Dreams can be unsettling. They also involve labour: piecing together abstract, blurred, and ambiguous figures and facets of information and memory. We made sense of this dream by giving meaning and materiality to objects of care, memorial, and respect, that could be shared. I am grateful to have shared and realized this dream with others, and continue to keep dreaming of a world in which we no longer have to "wish here was better."



1 Roland Bleiker and Sally Butler, "Radical Dreaming: Indigenous Art and Cultural Diplomacy," *International Political Sociology*, 10(1), 2016: 56–74; Gerard Hall and Joan Hendriks, *Dreaming a new earth: Raimon Panikkar and Indigenous spiritualities*, 2013 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock); Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 1991 (New York: Penguin Books).

2 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have A Dream," speech delivered August 28, 1963. Transcription: NPR, January 16, 2023: <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

3 Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer, *Curatorial Dreams: Critics Imagine Exhibitions*, 2016 (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 4.

4 *Ibid.*, 5.

5 *Ibid.*



## Moving Parts: Making a Roving Public Memorial

Karie Liao, Fraser McCallum, Jacqui Usiskin

*Wish You Were Here, Wish Here Was Better (WYWH, WHWB)* was a weeklong public art project and program series organized by community organizer and scholar Zoë Dodd, artist and Plains Cree health promoter Les Harper, writer Theodore (ted) Kerr, and curator-scholar Ellyn Walker. The project created space for grief, solidarity, and mobilization amongst people affected by the ongoing overdose crisis and its related systemic impacts, including precarity, houselessness, and criminalization. It offered opportunities to collectively mourn while imagining and working towards a more just future.

As a roving public memorial and community-centred project, there were many moving parts considered in its development and delivery; below and throughout this publication, we share our strategies and decisions as a resource for organizers who wish to replicate or build on aspects of the project.

This report is not envisioned as a comprehensive instructional document, but rather a case study that can function as an iterative guide on how organizations, organizers, and groups (in and beyond the visual arts) might meaningfully engage with people who use drugs. Taking on various formats and styles, contributions to this publication reflect on harm reduction practice, collaboration with social service providers, ways of connecting with communities affected by the overdose crisis, and methods for framing art and artmaking as tools for memorialization and mobilization. To begin, we set the table by outlining the project's parameters and local context.

### Mobility

Mississauga and Brampton, Peel Region's two largest cities, are both characterised by suburban sprawl and car-oriented neighbourhoods. Anchored by a high-roof cargo van, the project popped up at different sites for visitation and information. Operating out of a van enabled the project to traverse many kinds of spaces, facilitate face-to-face interaction, and meet people where they're already located. A familiar vehicle akin to those used by social service organizations, in this case the van also served the practical purpose of transporting staff and supplies.

*WYWH, WHWB* continues a legacy of mobile and ephemeral public artworks and community actions. This format follows pivotal past works including Gran Fury's *Kissing Does Kill* (1989), a series of New York City bus ads that dispelled misinformation around the HIV/AIDS epidemic; *WochenKlausur's Medical Care for Homeless People* (1993–98), a van that offered medical services to people neglected by the healthcare system in Vienna; and more recently, Bronx Móvil (est. 2018), a community-led harm reduction van for drug users, with services offered in Spanish and English.

### Visibility

As with many vehicle-delivered art projects and public actions, *WYWH, WHWB* presented visually impactful messages while parked and in motion. On one side of the van was a mural, and on the other, a stylized rendering of the project title, both printed on removable vinyl.

These visuals prompted curiosity and interest for onlookers and visitors. The commissioned mural, a photo collage by Harper, featured portraits of Peel residents who have died due to the overdose crisis. Portraits were gathered with the help of a local service organization and drug users' advocacy group (see Kaminski, p. 10). For Harper and the organizers, the artwork served a key role of memorializing the lives of people who have died by prominently sharing their images—this act resists the erasure of individual lives lost to the toxic drug supply.

### **In Community**

*WYWH, WHWB* partnered with service organizations and community groups in the region—Moyo Health & Community Services, Peel Drug Users Network, and Regeneration Brampton—to host the van at their respective sites. Site pop-ups were geared toward the existing schedules of partners and their communities. Building on the harm reduction, health promotion, and anti-poverty work already being done in Peel, the project aimed to link interconnected struggles, and to make space for conversation, artmaking, and reflection, despite the acknowledged limits of a one-time project.

We chose to approach organizations, frontline workers, and those in close relation with the communities we hoped to reach. Through existing relationships, team input, and research, we sketched a picture of the activist networks, service organizations, and support groups currently active in Peel. Through a detailed project vision, and an outline of distinct forms of involvement, we shaped the project in direct dialogue with each partner, with consideration to their communities' unique goals and needs.

While this project was free and open for everyone to participate, select site locations

were kept unpublished, and invitations to the Closing Feast (detailed below) were primarily by word-of-mouth or circulated directly by our community partners. Respecting and protecting the anonymity and privacy of community members was paramount. The same discretion was exercised with social media posts and project documentation, which avoided sharing participants' faces or names unless explicitly given permission.

### **Rituals and Offerings**

A significant aspect of *WYWH, WHWB* was the creation of rituals to mourn and bond as a community over preventable deaths attributable to various forms of state abandonment. But the project also sought to find moments of joy and beauty to celebrate the lives of individuals lost too soon. We encouraged rituals by sharing offerings and take-aways including instant film photographs, artists' postcards, flowers, and candles. We also shared printed matter including copies of the *Harm Reduction is Not a Metaphor* zine, excerpts from *Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, select issues of *The HIV Howler: Transmitting Art and Activism*, and informational handouts from partnering service organizations. Food was also an offering: at every site, the project was catered or stocked with hot meals or refreshments, which made it easier for everyone to gather and linger.

### **Open-ended Poetry**

At each site, we set up a whiteboard for poetic reflections: a word bank with a wide array of words on magnets that speak to grief and mourning, but also politicize the drug-poisoning crisis. Through poetry and prose, participants were invited to question drug policy, share their experiences, and imagine alternative futures rooted in care and harm reduction. The exercise was

open-ended, echoing the project's overall approach towards community outreach—with an adaptable format, the daily pop-ups were shaped by the interactions and relationships that unfolded at each unique site.

### **Sites of Learning**

"Material things remind us that there are material realities," Kerr said during a class visit at the University of Toronto Mississauga campus. Within the context of an educational institution, *WYWH, WHWB*'s material offerings and poem exercise served as important tools for learning outside the classroom. For students, this inquiry-driven and interactive approach aided in processing the material realities of the ongoing overdose crisis.

On the university campus, the project engaged a range of student participants across disciplines and generations, including a cohort of medical students advocating for empathy and compassion in the health-care field; a course studying communication, technology, and social change; and a high school class volunteering at Regeneration Brampton's food bank. Fostering both self-reflexive and collective thinking, *WYWH, WHWB* facilitated resource-sharing and responsive activities that provided a space for students to reimagine what "here" and "better" could be for themselves and their communities.

### **Being Together**

*WYWH, WHWB* included three public events throughout the week. First, *URGENT ARCHIVES*, a panel discussion featuring Kerr, Dodd, and local community organizer Anu Radha Verma that fostered connections between historical and present-day social and political activism toward harm reduction, LGBTQ2S+ liberation, and HIV/AIDS prevention and destigmatization (see Kerr,

p. 15). Second, an Overdose Response Workshop with presenters from Street Health Toronto that trained participants to administer naloxone while grounding overdose response in histories of social justice and activism. Finally, *WYWH, WHWB* concluded with a Closing Feast, which engaged in rituals of collective grief and mourning. At the Feast, an Indigenous healing circle was co-led by Harper and Dodd with drummers and dancers. Participants were invited to prepare spirit plates—meal offerings for dear friends and family that they've lost—and to share thoughts and stories about the recipients. Gathering, eating, remembering, and honouring together were recurring rituals throughout the duration of the project.

### **About ORGANIZING OUR GRIEF**

As another chapter in the Blackwood's *Working with Concepts* series, this publication seeks to promote knowledge-sharing in the arts sector. Readers who are interested in working with the themes or communities engaged in *WYWH, WHWB* will find some starting points to guide their thinking in doing so: read on for tools, strategies, and considerations that informed and emerged from the project.



Les Harper, *kisâkihitin*, 2022.

## kisâkihitin: A Mural to Remember With

Nat Kaminski

*Nat Kaminski of Moyo Health & Community Services, Brampton, was closely involved in outreach for Les Harper's mural, kisâkihitin ("I love you" in Cree) used on the project van. In a transcribed interview, Kaminski elaborates on that process, and shares reflections on the project. As told to Karie Liao.*

It was exciting to learn that *WISH YOU WERE HERE, WISH HERE WAS BETTER* was dedicated to the Peel Region. Having previous relationships with organizers Zoë Dodd and Les Harper gave me confidence that the project was being developed through a social justice lens and aligned

with harm reduction principles. It created a sense of familiarity and trust, which made collaboration possible.

To gather portraits for the mural, I asked people from our community to provide photographs [of people lost to drug poisoning]. The process of collecting was slow because when you're experiencing constant mourning, you lose the people—their names and faces—because there are just so many of them. As someone who was once deeply entrenched in substance-use street culture, and currently supports the same people I met during that period

in my life, I didn't want to re-traumatize the artist, Les, who I know has supported people who have died from drug poisoning. I was very sad that we couldn't use all the photos, but we found ways of keeping them for a future memorial or ceremony.

Most of the photographs are of people we have supported, friends, and family members. They were sourced from workers in the community, the Peel Drug Users Network, and my personal album of death notices. Included among the portraits was someone I've known since I was seventeen—he was a huge champion in our community and all of our peers were deeply connected to him. Two weeks prior to the *WYWH, WHWB* project launch, I had spoken with him about how he was going to be a part of the event—but in that small window of time, he overdosed and was eventually taken off life support.

Every time a person from our community passes away, a rumour starts about their death, followed by a confirmation, and then a funeral or [memorial] event is organized, but there's never any closure. Oftentimes, people are having to process grief and mourn on their own, and agencies haven't created a streamlined approach that people can count on. This project allowed for a holistic process towards healing—being able to do spirit plating<sup>1</sup> and having conversations. Seeing the people who have passed in the mural and remembering them suspended time, creating a space to recognize that the overdose crisis is a war and that our champions are dying.

The large-scale and mobile characteristics of the mural had a noticeable impact on the community. Even if community members didn't directly connect with project organizers, they were excited to see people they knew on the van. One of our peers who does a lot of the outreach distribution invited her friends and parents to see the mural, and it really empowered her to show

off the importance of her work but also collectively acknowledge the grief, death, and ceremony involved.

One of the main barriers [in gathering photographs] was the organizational structures that we have within our own organization, where things have to go through managers who aren't on the ground. When an event is being planned for community that isn't in community, there are a lot of considerations that get overlooked. For example, the siloed communication channels between managers and frontline workers often result in poor planning. I was disappointed that more service providers didn't engage with the project. It's a reminder that the societal stigma towards people who use drugs is even present within the network of organizations that serve these very communities. We could have engaged more people with power, privilege, and resources about the importance of these issues and we lost that opportunity. I'm really grateful that the project organizers filled the room because it would have been harmful to walk into a room with any less, as that runs the risk of re-stigmatizing and re-triggering all the rage, hurt, and pain for people who use drugs.

The mural was welcoming and initiated many conversations. In speaking with the community members, I learned many of them made a point to take and keep the poster version of the mural. Some of these folks lose everything, but they still have their posters because it's a collection of people they knew all in one place. It's healing to think how the mural was put together and the way it looks like a group of friends. It mirrors how we emotionally hold on to the idea that the people who have passed are no longer in pain from losing everybody, because now they're all together.

<sup>1</sup> A ceremony, common across many Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions, in which small plates of food are prepared for ancestors who have passed on.

# The Solution to the Toxic Drug Death Crisis is a Non-Carceral Future

Zoë Dodd

*Every human being is a raindrop.  
And when enough of the raindrops  
become clear and coherent they then  
become the power of the storm.*

—John Trudell<sup>1</sup>

I carry the stories of people I know who are no longer here in this world. Wherever I go, I bring them with me, stored deep in my brain and body—never forgetting them, and harnessing their power and loss for action and change. I retell the stories of people I love, of their lives, and of living, so they are not forgotten. But also, I share who they are so people can understand how we have gotten here: how this isn't just the story of prescription pills and de-prescribing; it isn't just the story of how fentanyl came to be mixed in with heroin and took over the opiate drug market. These are the stories of people who have been harmed by the systems of oppression we are forced to live under—and that many endure. Those systems contributed to their deaths, and to the mass deaths we are collectively experiencing.

In Canada, since 2016, over 30,000 people have died from the illicit toxic drug supply. In 2017, two people were dying a day in Ontario, and by 2023, that daily number rose to nine. Now, across the whole country, over twenty people die each day.

In conservative and politically hostile environments, the government would rather let people die than act, as long as they can keep the status quo. And yet, we are losing generations of people.

Every overdose death—a policy feature of Canada's drug laws.<sup>2</sup>

Drug prohibition is and always has been about racial and social control. Prohibition has always been used as a tool for furthering Canada's colonial project. The first laws of prohibition targeted Indigenous peoples for over 100 years—prohibiting the sale, trade, and consumption of alcohol. These laws were used to lock up thousands of Indigenous people for over a century while white people could consume, sell, trade, and enjoy alcohol legally. It is easy to see, then, how colonial values underpin Canadian laws, policies, and practices. These have had massive negative consequences for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized groups. And it is because of prohibition that we have synthetics taking over the illicit drug market, as they are easier to get across borders, smaller to transport, and can be made locally.

Responses to the toxic drug death crisis have been hindered by right-wing ideology and those who want to maintain a grip on archaic, violent, and oppressive drug laws. The need to change drug laws and policies is necessary to end a preventable crisis. So while we fight and work to save each other, we have to find ways to honour and care for our grief and loss, too. Grief and death can bring more loss—they contribute to factors that increase a person's vulnerability to death. Whole families, siblings, parents have been lost, unable to cope with the painful grasp of loss that can take over.

Public acts of mourning help us collectively, as a society, come to a shared understanding of how we got to today. This includes sharing our stories, mourning together, and educating one another on the causes and the solutions. When we understand how the system works and operates, how it affects groups of people differently, that knowledge is a tool—it is power to be harnessed, so that more people don't die.



Community Feast, October 8, 2022. PHOTOS: NOEL PENDAWA.

Actions like claiming space to mourn in public have been healing for many of us who have been fighting a long time to end the toxic drug death crisis. These actions force you to not be swallowed by grief entirely and to divert that energy into change.

One way *WISH YOU WERE HERE, WISH HERE WAS BETTER* acted through grief was through the commission of a mural by local artist Les Harper (Plains Cree, from Saddle Lake Alberta) which honours people lost to toxic drugs in Peel Region since the start of COVID-19. *kisâkihitin* portrays individuals we love, care about, and miss; and this was confirmed for us at many of our pop-up locations, where community members saw the mural, and in it, saw their friends, neighbours, family, and kin.

When I reflect on what is next, I often think of Rebecca Solnit's words: "Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal... To hope is to give yourself to the future—and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable."<sup>3</sup>

This quote has helped me to get through some pretty hard times. I'm not entirely hopeful, I struggle to make meaning or make sense of this world. What I do know is that we have no choice but to act. We have to be the "power of the storm."

1 John Trudell, "What it Means to be a Human Being," *Radio4all*, speech recorded in San Francisco, California, March 2001, <http://radio4all.net/program/13563>.

2 See also Matthew Bonn, "Every Death a Policy Failure: The Other Public Health Crisis," *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 14: LINGERING (January 2023), 4–5.

3 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (London: Haymarket Books, 2016), 4.



URGENT ARCHIVES, October 5, 2022. PHOTO: HENRY CHAN.

## Making Community Archives: A How-To Guide

Theodore (ted) Kerr

### Five Steps to Make Your Own Community Archives Event

1. Begin with objects, let memories and conversations emerge from there
2. Define *archive* with others, and for yourselves
3. Consider the limits and possibilities of your event, and archives in general
4. Question what needs to be visible and accessible, and to whom
5. Remember, no archive is an island

### URGENT ARCHIVES: A How-To Guide

*What does it mean to be the one who remembers? How can physical objects from the past help us survive and thrive in the present? What becomes possible when we come together and share our stories?*

At *URGENT ARCHIVES*, Zoë Dodd, Anu Radha Verma, and I wrestled with these questions and more as we shared objects from our personal archives related to our work within the overdose response, HIV/AIDS movements, and BIPOC queer world-making. It was an opportunity for us, along with the audience, to think about what we mean when we say “archives,” and how the things we hold, save, and carry relate to the past, present, and future of our movements. Below I use the experience of *URGENT ARCHIVES* to share five key considerations for people who may want to host their own community archive event.

### ONE: Begin with objects, let memories and conversations emerge from there

*What objects do you have? What stories do objects held within your community tell?*

As an event, *URGENT ARCHIVES* came to be over the phone. On a call with the *WYWH*, *WHWB* organizers, Zoë spoke about a banner she saved from the Toronto Harm Reduction Union that reads: “REDUCING THE HARMS ASSOCIATED WITH WORK.” As she named some of the people that had been involved in the union, I could feel her eyes light up, even over the phone. The banner, like other objects in her archive, is a powerful relic that connects her to a time, a process of community support, and people who—like her—were part of the response.

At *URGENT ARCHIVES*, Zoë, Anu, and I were provided some wall space and plinths to display our objects, in a classroom that served as our venue. Audience members were encouraged to look around as they entered before the program began, and then the three of us spoke. There were some light refreshments available. As people looked at our archives, they took special interest in objects that related to them, be it through a common relationship to an issue, geography, or a shared experience of an action.



When it came to the banner, some audience members were part of the same action, and had their own recollections and related stories to tell. Through Zoë's presentation and casual discussion, the need, use, and impact of the banner came to light. We make possible the ongoing process of liberation in our communities when we tell—and repeat—our stories of power, ability, and survival. For *URGENT ARCHIVES*, we did that work by starting with an object (Zoë's banner), and letting the memories and conversation emerge from there. The banner became the nucleus around which the frisson of vital nostalgia was able to spark.

**TWO: Define archive with others, and for yourselves**

*How do you define an archive? Have you ever talked to people in your movements and communities about what the term archive means to them?*

A few nights before the event, some of us went for dinner with a friend we have in common. She works in the arts, specifically community arts, and has an impressive background in community organizing. As we spoke about *URGENT ARCHIVES*, the friend shared a difference of opinion. For her, the archive is rooted in the act of institutional care over time. She was skeptical that an individual could have an archive. She suggested that what we were talking about was more of a collection. A few days later, we reflected upon what she said and came to the conclusion that we needn't all have the same definition of archive. And that in fact for us, an archive can be understood as any intentional collection of things that connects to a moment and is accessible by others to gain insight on the past. So, Zoë's banner and vast collection of flyers, buttons, and other saved and stored ephemera might one

day be considered a collection within an institutional archive, but for now, for us, it is a standalone community archive. What constitutes an archive is a highly contextual question that brings up issues of power, location, and access. While I can't say there is no wrong way to have an archive, there are many meaningful ways to have one.

**THREE: Consider the limits and possibilities of your event, and archives in general**

*What are some of the reasons you want to bring people together? What are some of your archival and event goals? Are you able to see what is possible in the short and long term, and what might be unrealistic or a distraction at this time?*

In 2015 I co-founded a collective called What Would an HIV Doula Do? (WWHIVDD), which, like Visual AIDS, operates further back from the front line of the crisis. We are rooted in the understanding that a doula holds space during times of transition, and that HIV is a series of transitions. At *URGENT ARCHIVES*, we each had twenty minutes to present. For my time, I had a slideshow that primarily focused on digital publications that WWHIVDD created throughout the first few years of COVID. It was a time of transition for us and the communities we were in, learning how to live amid multiple pandemics, and begin to help each other understand health and our bodies amid lockdown, long-hauling, and the activism that bloomed in 2020 and beyond. The publications were something we needed to focus on as creative and service-oriented people and were an offering to our communities. These publications were not prescriptions for living, but rather zines of our ideas, insights, and alternatives for how to survive and thrive together.

Similarly, with *URGENT ARCHIVES*, none of us were deluded enough to think that any gathering we organized could end the overdose crisis, BIPOC queer erasure, or the AIDS epidemic. But we did proceed knowing that creative and politically minded interventions can be part of community building, information sharing, and power creating.

**FOUR: Question what needs to be visible and accessible, and to whom**

*Who are you thinking of inviting? What do you want to be seen and shared? How are you and your community stewarding your histories?*

At *URGENT ARCHIVES*, Anu shared some highlights from her impressive queer BIPOC archive related to Mississauga. Her archive began as she started saving pamphlets, buttons, advertisements, and other ephemera from events she was aware of and participated in through her community over the years. Eventually, she witnessed how quickly the contributions of people who look and love like her were being neglected and disappeared, often as the same stories from a handful of queer white people in Toronto got told and retold again.

As she builds the archive, she is clear in her intention to never give it to any civic, provincial, university, or federal institution.

She does not trust that such places will be able to actually witness, let alone value queer BIPOC lives and contributions.

As Anu shared recollections and research from her archive, she passed around related objects. This trust she had with the audience, along with the show-and-tell vibe she created, communicated the intimacy of her archive. It was a reminder that what she is producing is a history, and that a history can hold people, moments, and places in a way that provides opportunities to see the past, present, and future. Visibility and circulation are predicated less on the demands of an institution, and more within the possibilities of community, connection, and intimacy.

**FIVE: No archive is an island**

*What can you do to bring together disparate yet compatible community archives into conversations? What do you see as being a benefit in having differences represented?*

*URGENT ARCHIVES* brought Anu, Zoë, and I together. Presenting our archives together, both on the walls and plinths and through our presentations, helped us make connections and witness differences. It also brought together our communities, who at the very least had to listen to the three of us, while also navigating the snack table together.



## Overdose Awareness Day

Dan Gibson

At Regeneration, we are a community that gathers seven days a week, 365 days a year. We are also a community that exists beyond the depth of an average service provider or agency. Therefore, our volunteers, staff, and guests have an opportunity to relate to one another like a family, often experiencing firsts and celebrating milestones, like a birthday, a new home, or a week sober. This also means that we celebrate the toughest of moments, and with the reality that faces so many of the people who call Regen their community, we stand with those who are dying due to the prevalence and destruction of Canada's opioid crisis. Though these highly addictive substances have been a part of Canadian society for decades, for the past decade the scourge of fentanyl overdose-related deaths has had a sobering touch on every person who is connected with Regen.

As I write this note I am sitting at a cafe downtown remembering one of our guests, a man named Troy—who died due to overdose one year ago today. I cannot help but reflect on his life, the relationship that I had with him, and the impact that his life will forever have on my own. Troy was a once-in-a-lifetime character, a man that was an enigma, a protector, a Bible savant, and a jokester all in one. His addiction did not define him as a human being, but it ultimately did steal many years of him from his loved ones.

The Regen community found encouragement even through the sadness of his death. Prior to his death, Troy's mother chose to volunteer with us several times a week to maintain a closeness to her son and his people. I will never forget the events of that day—July 29, 2021—when my colleague Kira and I wept with Kathy at the news of Troy's death. For those who are fortunate enough to have not lost a loved one to an overdose, it can be difficult to understand the complexities of mental illness and addiction. Every single story is unique and the challenges faced by those who suffer from addiction vary. In Ontario alone, approximately seventy-five individuals died by overdose per day in 2021, and this number will not drop while those who live on the margins of our community continue to battle the stigma of mental illness and addiction.

At Regen we have the privilege of walking with those in the midst of their gravest challenges, hearing their stories, and trying our best to provide them with support, love, and encouragement. As I think about people, like Troy, who have had their lives ended early by overdose, I ask that you kindly consider supporting Regeneration as we continue this difficult but rewarding work of redemption in our city.

Dan Gibson, Director of Community Engagement, Regeneration Outreach Community  
August 31, 2022

## Overdose Prevention and Response Training: Continued Inaction by the University of Toronto

Jann Houston, Andrea Bowra, Tenzin Butsang, Harsh Naik

The drug crisis in Canada is escalating, yet the University of Toronto remains the only major university in Ontario without overdose response measures in place. With almost 30,000 apparent opioid toxicity deaths in Canada between 2016 and 2021, this silence and inaction by the university is unacceptable.

In 2021, with the support of twenty-six other student groups, we wrote an open letter to President Gertler calling on the university to provide overdose response training, low-barrier access to naloxone kits, and the inclusion of harm-reduction education and overdose response training in the university's clinical programs. We received no response. In 2022, for Overdose Awareness Day, we wrote an open letter published in *The Varsity* calling on the university

administration and faculty to respond to this crisis. Again, the university has been silent.

In the meantime, our student group has hosted online and in-person overdose prevention and response training sessions, attended by hundreds of students. We are consistently approached by a broad range of groups to train their members. However, as a small student-led group, we do not have the capacity to meet the needs of the entire campus community. That is why we continue to call out the university for their inaction. It is time for faculty to join us in our demand for the university to respond to this devastating overdose crisis.

Signed,  
University of Toronto Harm Reduction  
Collective

## Student Reflections on *WISH YOU WERE HERE, WISH HERE WAS BETTER*

Blackwood Gallery Work Study students (Nyah Cadogan, Isabella Iacoe, Abigail Kohut, Gladys Lou, Natalie Ng, Suki Wong)

The project solidified that as a community, we are interconnected. Whether we realize it or not, the issues that impact one person also impact the rest of us. When we acknowledge this fact, it provides us with the groundwork to understand what role we, as individuals, personally impact these issues, and how to support others in healing. How does reframing your mindset allow those who have been marginalized to succeed? What sorts of beliefs do I carry that are harmful to those who are struggling with addiction? These are important questions that can incite change in reframing how we look at the opioid crisis. —Nyah

At first I was very self-conscious. I carefully thought about how I wanted to present the project and wanted to make sure not to sound anxious or ill-prepared. I quickly realized that none of that really mattered. No one would remember what I specifically had to say. Instead, I hope they remember the project and the person it made them think of. I see hundreds of students a day walking around campus and living inside their own thoughts. For just a few moments, I got to see into their world. People just like me, walking the same halls, attending the same classes, and yet leading such different lives. The burdens that people carry are immense, and each person puts on a brave face until they are looked in the eye and are given space to grieve. —Isabella

Participating allowed me to learn more about harm reduction. It gave me a chance to understand how complicated substance use can be, as well as its stigmas. By sharing thoughts with different people, I learned more

and empathized with the real issues behind substance use and overdose. The publications shared during the project allowed me to discover more about the discrimination and the decision to fight for the rights of those suffering from substance use, along with their loved ones.

—Natalie

In supporting programming on campus, I was pleasantly surprised by how curious students and faculty members were about our mobile exhibition, and even more so by how open they were to sharing their difficult experiences. Although themes of loss and mourning are heavy and often hard to talk about, I find they are important. Even so, many of us are unaware about the opioid crisis despite how severely it has impacted our communities. This is why I found the naloxone training so important to attend. Not only did it teach us about emergency situations that we could encounter but the workshop was also facilitated by people who have had previous experience with drugs. Hearing from them made it more worthwhile, since they used their experiences to discuss addiction and rehabilitation.

—Suki

As a youth who hasn't been exposed to recreational drug use before, this project was eye-opening for me. I never realized that death, a concept that seems so abstract and distant for me, could be so intimate and close to some people. At the injection site, a woman told me she knew thirty people who passed away due to overdose in the past year. I watched as she stood in front of the mural on the back of the van, pointed at each



Overdose Response Training, October 7, 2022. PHOTO: HENRY CHAN.

of her friends' faces, and called them by their names. I can't imagine how painful it must be for her to face the death of so many people she was close to in such a short time. Zoë Dodd shared that she has lost many people who are important to her due to overdose. These stories remind me of how vulnerable and ephemeral our lives are, and I am inspired to treasure my friends and family more while they are still here. *WYWH*, *WHWB* promotes a safe and supportive future for substance users, where they can thrive without being stigmatized or criminalized. —Gladys

It is one thing to relay information over and over, but it is another to have a conversation. The project sought to create a space for discourse and healing around highly stigmatized topics. Some people breezed on

by with passing sentiments of appreciation (or disgust) while others stopped to have thoughtful talks with us at the van. As attendants, we were able to provide constructive knowledge on the overdose crisis, as well as share our own experiences. I connected with an individual who, after going to rehab, had decided to pursue drug and addiction counseling through a college program. He had just finished classes and happened to walk by. We talked for a while, and I told him about my troubles with a cousin lost to the crisis and we took comfort in being able to exchange stories in a non-judgmental environment. It was both wonderful and taxing to be able to create a space like that, and to potentially change some outlooks on the opioid epidemic, all while promoting the voices of those impacted. —Abigail



## Resource List

Lea Rose Sebastianis

In assembling a resource list, we considered the varied ways they might be used—what’s useful, when, and why varies greatly depending on the individual or group. Meeting one’s needs can look vastly different—whether it’s obtaining harm reduction supplies, drug testing, or understanding drug policy. This list includes national and international resources for educators, policy makers, or individuals looking for compassionate and timely information. Use it as a starting point to further your own knowledge and engage your local context.

**Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs** [capud.ca](http://capud.ca)

CAPUD is a national organization comprised of people who use or have used drugs whose goals include empowering its members, advocating for drug decriminalization, and fighting for policy reform. They approach drug use from an evidence-based and compassionate perspective, taking action through studies, advocacy, and resource-sharing.

**CATIE** [catie.ca](http://catie.ca)

CATIE is Canada’s source for HIV and hepatitis C information. Their website serves as a centralized source of information on prevention, testing, diagnosis, treatment, and care. Through an ordering centre, healthcare providers across Canada can access free print materials for their clinics and facilities.

**Homeless Hub** [homelesshub.ca](http://homelesshub.ca)

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness runs the Homeless Hub, a library of over 30,000 resources including fundamentals on homelessness, nationwide community profiles, research case studies, and solutions. COH is a non-partisan partnership between

academics, policy and decision makers, service providers and people with lived experience of homelessness.

**Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation** [cdpe.org](http://cdpe.org)

CDPE conducts research and outreach on drug policy and substance use. Their local impact in Toronto includes a drug-checking service ([drugchecking.cdpe.org](http://drugchecking.cdpe.org)) and evaluation of supervised injection services. Through international collaboration, CDPE’s additional projects include a technology challenge for drug checking, drug policy mapping, systematic policy reviews.

**Drug User Liberation Front** [dulf.ca](http://dulf.ca)

DULF is a community-regulated heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine compassion club in Vancouver, which distributes tested drugs that are packaged with their potency and quality. In January 2023, DULF reported, “After 6 months of operation and over 1kg of substances provided, there have been no deaths resulting from the club. Further, members of the club are reporting less involvement in crime, less overdose risk, higher financial stability and increased control over their lives.”

**Filter Magazine** [filtermag.com](http://filtermag.com)

*Filter* is an online magazine covering drug culture, use, and policy across North America. With regular reporting, op-eds, resource guides, and videos, *Filter’s* contributors share wide-ranging perspectives on the impacts of the war on drugs.

**TalkingDrugs** [talkingdrugs.org](http://talkingdrugs.org)

A UK-based online platform that aims to tackle drug issues neglected by the mainstream media. *TalkingDrugs* is uniquely international in scope, with English-language coverage of news and analysis on drug policy, harm reduction, and related issues around the world.

## Biographies

**Zoë Dodd** is a long-time harm reduction worker, advocate, organizer, and scholar. She is currently the inaugural Community Scholar at MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions at St. Michael's Hospital. For the last two decades her work has focused on issues related to hepatitis C, HIV, drug policy, poverty, and overdose. She has been instrumental in addressing the overdose crisis, which has taken the lives of thousands of people in Canada. She is the recipient of many awards, is engaged with several research projects, and has a Master's from York University.

**Les Harper** is originally from Saddle Lake Cree Nation in Northern Alberta. He is the son of Elder Pauline Shirt and the late Elder Vern Harper. He is committed to bringing traditional lifestyle and healing practices to an urban environment through art and culture. Les uses an arts-based practice as part of his counseling and community work. Les's work in the health and social service sector has focused on Indigenous Harm Reduction, the health and wellbeing of people living with HIV, people involved with the carceral system, and People Who Use Drugs. He has also served as a community leader in grief and healing supports for individuals affected by the intersecting crises of failed drug policy, violent carceral systems, and ongoing colonization.

**Nat Kaminski** holds lived experience as a person who uses drugs and spent sixteen years embedded in homelessness, poverty, the child welfare system and in various conflicts with the law and justice system. They began advocacy and policy work at a very young age and have continued these efforts at social service organizations across the GTA for over a decade. They currently hold Research Assistant positions at the University of Victoria and University of

Toronto, contributing to the literature on community care models for drug users, and consult and lead on the Drug Policy Gender Equity Project at the Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver. Since 2017, Kaminski has been a Harm Reduction Outreach and Peer Programs Supervisor with Moyo Health and Community Services. They are also President and Co-founder of the Peel Drug Users Network and Ontario Network of People who Use Drugs, and sat on the Board of CAPUD from 2019–22.

**Theodore (ted) Kerr** is a Canadian born, Brooklyn based writer and organizer. For the US's National Library of Medicine he curated, *A People's History of Pandemic: AIDS, Posters, and Stories of Public Health*. He edited an *On Curating* issue entitled, *What You Don't Know About AIDS Could Fill a Museum*. He is a founding member of What Would an HIV Doula Do? With Alexandra Juhasz, he co-wrote the book, *We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production* (2022).

**Ellyn Walker** is an interdisciplinary arts scholar and curator based in Toronto, Treaty 13 territory. Her work explores questions of representation and place-making in the arts as they pertain to distinct positional, cultural, and institutional contexts. Ellyn has studied at the University of Toronto, McGill, and OCAD University, and completed a PhD in Cultural Studies from Queen's University where her research focused on decolonial curatorial methodologies used in contemporary exhibition-making and museum practice in Canada and beyond. She is currently working on a co-edited anthology titled *Curatorial Contestations: Critical Exhibition-Making Practices in Canada*. Ellyn teaches curatorial and museum studies at UTM, where she was the Acting Director/ Curator of The Blackwood from 2021–22.

## Acknowledgments

**ORGANIZING OUR GRIEF:  
A Collaboration in Response  
to the Overdose Crisis**  
April 2023

**WISH YOU WERE HERE,  
WISH HERE WAS BETTER**  
October 3–9, 2022

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### Organizers

Zoë Dodd, Theodore (ted) Kerr, Ellyn Walker

### Community Partners

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