

***Speaking of Poverty:
Conversations in Southwest Ontario***

Conversations taped and transcribed by:

Jasjeet Ajimal
Brittany Balkwill
Cassandra Brait
Ashley DeGrandis
Sumandeep Guram
Josh Jaques
Brienne Jones
Gareth Mason
Tara Morneau
Megan Muller
Beth Ropac
Erika Stewin
Tamara Susnjar
Bryan Tanner
Trish Zalewski
Anonymous

Edited and compiled by Lynne Phillips
University of Windsor
July, 2011

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Pathway to Potential, and particularly Adam Vasey, for moral and financial support for this project. Help in circulating the call for participants, from Adam, Adrian McKenzie and Voices Against Poverty members, was invaluable. Thanks also to Cas Graham-Stuart and Cathy Kolar for their help.

This publication is dedicated to the nine people who share their views here
and to all those who are struggling with poverty.

***Speaking of Poverty:
Conversations in Southwest Ontario***

TABLE of CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>		pp. 1-2
Emily:	"I have a plan"	pp. 3-10
Maria:	"This whole future ahead of me"	pp. 11-14
Jon:	"Between a rock and a hard place"	pp. 15-23
Johanna:	"The University of Life...is teaching me"	pp. 24-28
Steve:	"It's hard for a newcomer to find a job"	pp. 29-33
Candice:	"I haven't quite figured out yet if I'm stuck"	pp. 34-41
Yasmeen:	"I expected something when I came and I found nothing"	pp. 42-48
Donna:	"I thought retirement in your golden years meant time relaxing"	pp. 49-57
Lynda:	"One day I'm going to change the world"	pp. 58-70

Speaking of Poverty: Conversations in Southwest Ontario

Many Canadians do not believe poverty exists in our country. The voices in this collection eloquently demonstrate that poverty in Canada does indeed exist. But the story of Canadian poverty is not one story, it is many stories – not only of the many trajectories of newcomers to Canada from different parts of the world, but also of the different ways in which people come to live in poverty (“no one plans to be poor”) and the creative ways they work to get “unstuck,” as Candice in this collection puts it. The voices here tell us in straightforward, often heart breaking, terms just how deeply poverty touches lives. Some views are bleak, some are more hopeful, but all of them speak to a Canada that is failing to attend to the needs of its residents.

This collection, *Speaking of Poverty: Conversations in Southwest Ontario*, began as a classroom project at the University of Windsor. Students in a course on Public Anthropology were challenged to go beyond the myths regarding poverty in Canada by spending some time talking with people living in poverty. We knew that poverty exists in the region – and especially in Windsor-Essex County, where unemployment is the highest in the country and food bank usage has sky-rocketed. And students themselves are not unfamiliar with poverty: the fact that the university now has a student food bank is testimony to the economic difficulties many students are facing today. But the project was nevertheless an eye opener for all of us. Our first lesson was that people living in poverty are not necessarily happy to talk about it. Reading these stories, you find the obvious reason for this: a life of poverty today is a life which is intensely monitored – like living “underneath a microscope” – and, understandably, our requests for what we called “conversations” were viewed by some as just another request for specimens. We are all the more grateful to the nine people who did volunteer to participate in this project. We thank them for graciously offering their time and knowledge and for sharing their poignant personal stories. We hope this collection returns their generosity, however inadequately.

The purposes of this project were threefold. First, we were interested in hearing about the diversity of experiences of poverty. Clearly, poverty in the region is not fully represented here, but participants are different ages, male and female, from different cultural backgrounds, and able to access different resources. Hearing this diversity, we think, is crucial for shattering public stereotypes about “people on welfare.” Second, we hoped that people living in poverty might, in some small way, benefit from the project: this might mean, for participants, being heard in a social environment that otherwise assumes and judges their situation and, for non-participants, hearing something of their own experiences in this collection, confirming perhaps that they are not alone. Finally, these voices offer some guidance to governments and social services working “for” the poor. Perhaps the second biggest lesson we learned in this project was that, while people living with poverty are victimized by a cruel system, they are by no means hapless “victims.” They are taking action on their lives and have pragmatic ideas about how to change things. As readers will see, participants focus on a range of problematic issues, beyond the obvious one of scarce employment in the region. They speak, for example, of the poor resources devoted to mental health and physical disabilities, the lack of adequate childcare

for single mothers, the heavy surveillance by Children's Aid, poor housing conditions and the lack of compassion and support by case workers. For readers who are in a position to do something about these issues, we hope you listen closely, and act.

The students involved in this course project initiated, taped and transcribed these conversations. The students were: Jasjeet Ajimal, Brittany Balkwill, Cassandra Brait, Ashley DeGrandis, Sumandeep Guram, Josh Jaques, Brianne Jones, Gareth Mason, Tara Morneau, Megan Muller, Beth Ropac, Erika Stewin, Tamara Susnjar, Bryan Tanner, Trish Zalewski, and one student who wishes to remain anonymous. They all worked hard to make this project work, meeting the challenge of this "experiment" with good humour and patience.

A note about format:

The names and some details of stories have been changed to protect the identity of the participants, as required for ethics approval for the project. The real names of students are listed above, but pseudonyms have been used throughout the rest of the collection. The responsibility for editing was mine. In this role I tried to balance the needs of the reader (coherency, flow) and the particular speaking style of participants, some of whom speak English as a second language. For example, the dialogue aspect of the conversations has been minimized for ease of reading, some text has been abbreviated or deleted, and awkward phrasing has been changed for clarification. Comments or words in square brackets are mine.

Lynne Phillips
July, 2011

Emily: "I have a Plan"
In dialogue with Karen and Andrea

I was born in Windsor and then, when I was two, I moved to Belle River till I was maybe about nine. I lived in Windsor again for two years, then moved back to Belle River for a year, then moved to Windsor and stayed in Windsor. I went to high-school until the end of grade ten and I finished my diploma at adult and continuing education.

I lived basically on an old farm house and there were fields all around. So, I was very isolated as a child. I spent like a lot of time with cats and dogs and I had an interest in Vet medicine and that was my dream as a child: I wanted to be a vet. So that's basically what stands in my mind about Belle River. I remember isolation. My parents were lenient; they used to let friends come over often and stuff like that but, generally, it was quite lonely. My brother was living with my dad most of the time so I didn't really have a sibling. If he did come home it was usually for only four or five months and there's a nine year age difference so it's not like he was my friend. I was just a nuisance to him.

I am a mother to three boys so some of my main challenges are just getting the basic resources for the house. I am having a huge problem with utilities. I've been trying to get the bills paid. It's, basically, you just go day by day. 'What do I need to get through this week, this day?' You don't think too far ahead, you know. You have long term plans like university, job, but financially you go day by day because there is no money to plan in the future. There's not enough money to go around for everything that you need. Like everyone has wants, and I think that you have to... you can still get the things that you want, it's just that you have to work a little bit harder and wait a little bit longer.

My older son has a different father and he is sometimes involved with him, but [the father] isn't a very good role model; he doesn't pay child support. He picks him up once a month and takes him dirt biking and drops him off. The only reason why my son has a relationship with him is because he brings the grandfather into the picture and my son and his grandfather are very close. So, the only reason why he hangs out with his dad is because of that. With my two youngest, their father isn't involved and hasn't been involved for... I think he has seen them once in nine years. I have recently taken both [fathers] to court and, hopefully, I have an order put in for both of them. One has been kind of settled and now it's just a matter of collecting it and with the other one it is still not settled.

I have an appointment with [Keep the Heat Programme] tomorrow, tomorrow morning. Because, like I said, I have problems paying the utility bills. With recent bouts of being sick my money went towards, you know...I couldn't walk, so cabs to and from school, doctor's appointments. Probably in the last month I have spent hundreds of dollars just on cab fare, because I couldn't walk and I couldn't take a bus so...I have medical coverage [as a student], but my children don't. So when they need prescriptions it's full price.

Right now I'm at a different place [at university, on OSAP]. When I first had my children, but my children are older now, they are school age. When you first have children and they are babies, when you have to be home taking care of them, there is a huge barrier. Number one, when you go out to work, like I had a job and I was making... I think minimum wage at the time was \$7.25. I had three children I had to pay a baby-sitter and I managed to find a cheap one for five dollars an hour. And the quality of baby-sitting wasn't what I would have liked it to be and then you have to pay for that extra hour, like the transportation time it takes to get to and from work. So essentially you were working for nothing. So that was a huge barrier, you know. People expect that you're a mother and you have to get out and work, but when child care isn't affordable you literally are stuck at home. When I was on [social] assistance I never, you know, there's a stereotype that you're lazy that you're living off the system. I never was idle when I was stuck at home taking care of the kids. I took care of extra kids which was absolutely miserable. To have six or seven kids running around in your home, basically ruining everything in your home and messing your home up and everything like that. But, it was basically a necessity.

So another thing about when you're on [social] assistance, there is no way you can afford to live anywhere else. They specifically make it so that you can't afford to pay rent and utilities so that you have to go in geared to low-income housing. It's almost like you're segregated, do you understand what I mean? You try to make it, but you're not going to be able to and they will eventually... every time you say 'oh I am having trouble', they will say 'oh, then you need to go into subsidized housing.' Subsidized housing, you know, is essentially the projects. And it is a completely different social situation than anybody would have to live with. It is very hard once you're kind of thrust into a financial situation like that and you have, say, like in my case numerous children. There are a lot of parents that are single, mostly women that are single that have, you know, that have one or two children or three (in my case), sometimes more, and like I said, when there is lack of child care and even when they are in school and stuff like that, it's just really hard to get out of you know any kind of situation. A lot of times there is not a lot of opportunity for education. A lot of time [people] are not capable of higher education, like I hate to say it, but there were a lot of people that I lived with who were not going to have been able to continue on with college, due to just cognitive abilities, or lack thereof.

Right now I have a volunteer position. They say it is technically "work", but I am not getting paid for it. I contacted the personnel myself -- it's for New Beginnings. It's a program in Windsor and I wanted to specifically start in the group home, for the fields that I was going to go into.

Karen: Do you ever feel misunderstood?

Emily: I don't feel like I am misunderstood now, but what used to really bother me was when I was on assistance before and everything was... like I was going back to high-school not only to

get my diploma, but when [before] I started university, I didn't want to be lacking in information so I went back and did all the university prep courses that I was going to need. When I first came here I was in forensic science so there was like six of the biology, the chemistry, that you need...calculus. I wanted to go back and make sure that I had a head start over every other mature student coming in. So um, I forget the question just now....sorry. Oh ok, so in the instance that you were talking to somebody and you had to say where you were living, those locations are generally known. Even if I say that I was living on Central and getting into a cab and have to give my address you could see and perceive in a lot of people that there was a stereotype of 'Oh, *this* is where you live' and they would automatically think that once you live in subsidized housing that means you are under the poverty level and that's why you're there. Nobody pays to live there, or like pays full market rent, there's no way. So there was definitely a lot of stereotyping. I still sometimes feel it, like sometimes in the way I dress or I can't afford, like I don't have Ugh [boots] and a Coach purse. I can't afford all the brand name things that, you know I would like to, but it's a matter of, I have to feed the kids...

I was on assistance when they started the Workfare program, which I thought was actually a really good program. There aren't enough jobs in Windsor, which means that affects, you know... making people volunteer I think gets them experience that they can at least put on their resumé which will help them get a job later. I was in school and specifically remember I had a case worker and I swear she hated my guts, so she would try to make things difficult for me. I had friends of mine and acquaintances that had case workers that would bend over backwards for them. There was one time when I had been going to school for three years and they are supposed to give you an allowance each time you...for school supplies, for clothing, and you only get it once a year. It is only \$200. which is... I am sure you guys spend more than \$200.00 on everything you need for school in a year. I hadn't asked for [an allowance] in three years and then when I did ask for one I mean I already had all my school supplies already. I had been paying for them. So she was, like, 'Why did you buy a ten dollar binder? You didn't need that.' And I'm, like, I understand that I didn't need that, but I have been buying school supplies for the past three years and you just randomly ask me for receipts out of the blue? So she would try to make things difficult for me.

You could get penalized for that. There was another situation where they said that 'oh you have to join this program' and I said alright. They said it's mandatory or you don't get a cheque. So I went down and it was this presentation that was ridiculously simple, almost insulting to anybody of intelligence. They patronized you, they acted like you barely spoke English and it was like 'Ok this is how we are going to help you get a job. We're going to set you up for interviews' and everything and then they were like 'Ok, we need to sign you up for an appointment.' I went up to one of the workers at the end and I said 'Look it, I am in school full-time. I have three children. I have a plan. I have a plan to go to university and I am working on that plan.' They said 'Ok, well, you're not going to get your cheque if you don't participate, so just make an appointment and you can tell the lady at this new program', so I said alright. I said that's fine, so I signed the consent forms that they made me sign or I

wouldn't get a cheque which means that I can't feed my kids, I can't pay my rent for that month. Then when I went to that appointment, the lady said 'Well, you signed the consent form. We can make you drop out of school and get a job', because I signed the consent form! And I had to go to the MP and fight that because I was told that I would not get a cheque if I did not sign the consent form. When I signed it, I agreed to participate in the program and like it didn't make any sense to me. So there are still some flaws in the government system.

The thing that I did find is that, if the government implemented better child support and gathering child support from men, there would probably be a huge reduction in welfare recipients. Because the only reason... like if I were getting child support for all three of my kids, that would have been more money even at the very minimum that I would get; the more money that I was receiving from them, it would have given me and the kids more opportunities. Unfortunately there is like 70% of women, or something like that, who are single and don't receive child support. And they also make another part of the program, I'm not sure if they still have this but, they would have case workers to collect support. I was on assistance for many years, working, but I would have to get supplemented, and I would get forced to go to these appointments and they would say 'Ok, well, what's he doing?' I would say 'I don't know, I don't know where he even lives.' But if you didn't go to these appointments or if you missed an appointment they would hold your cheque back. So they would act like they were chasing them down, but they would never. I would sometimes give them information on where exactly they are working and nothing ever came of that for years. So, if there were a stricter policy then they wouldn't have to... they don't give you enough money to live off of, like I said, because they want you to be in the subsidized housing.

There are still some flaws in the system, but compared to other countries you kind of have to be glad that there is at least something in place. I honestly don't know -- I've never heard [about] any other support system from other areas in Canada. I imagine that we definitely have a better one than the U.S. because we don't have the food stamps. I couldn't imagine having food stamps and stuff, like it is degrading enough to be...there are a lot of other situations when you are on assistance where it is degrading. To use food vouchers and stuff would even be more so.

They do have some programs in place for the kids, though, which is good. They do have an emergency program for kid's dental. I don't have to pay for the kids to get their eyes checked. They do have programs that will help. My son needed glasses and that can be expensive, but I remember when I had to get glasses and my mom had to get me a pair of glasses that I did not like, when I was in kindergarten. So even though, you know, my son was in grade four when he needed them, I said 'I don't care, come hell or high water, I am going to get you a pair of glasses that you like!' So even though there was a program in place that I was eligible for, I chose not to go that route. But they did pay for his appointment to get checked out. So, there is dental and stuff like that's available, if you do live below the low income cut-off line.

It's just very hard cost-wise because you usually have to pay... now babysitters are more. They expect to be paid by the hour and when you have three children five dollars an hour doesn't cut it, unless they are sleeping. Mine are getting to the point where they are able to watch themselves, but I can't leave them for a full day. If I am [at school] for 12 hours they can't be, from after school, seven hours alone. There is no way. So even though they are older you know I'm still struggling with child-care to some degree, but when they are little, I mean, you're pretty much screwed. My oldest is 14. He's not really mature enough to handle the [others] awake; he doesn't have the capabilities of dealing with them when they don't follow what he says. So now I leave them with him for about an hour awake, but I wouldn't dare leave them alone for longer than that.

So, like I said, the child-support thing is just huge. It is a quick fix and it would be long-term [as a solution]. They do have penalties in place where they say 'Oh, you can lose your [drivers] license' [for not paying child support], but I've barely ever heard of that happening. I know people where they have known where the [fathers] lived and worked for years and the [government] has never gone after them. So, that would be huge. They just closed a bunch of subsidized day-cares [in Windsor] and that really frustrated me because the people who use the subsidized day-care are those single moms trying to get out, trying to get a job or better themselves or go to school and, when they closed those, it was like a direct blow to low income women when they closed all those. Not only that, but I used to have friends on assistance that were working for those day cares that closed. They were going to college and got their ECE [Early Childhood Education] and were working at the day-cares and they lost their jobs (because they do a lot of hiring from the whole turn around thing [internships]). So I would like to see better day-care. And I understand that the funding isn't there, but they need to increase what they give families. Like to get brand name pop was huge in the house, we couldn't [buy it] you know. I remember I got a Christmas basket the one time and it had Tide in it, and it was like 'Oh my god I can't afford to buy Tide' so I went outside and told all my friends 'Look, Tide!' And they were like 'Ohhh, aren't you fancy?' [laughs]

They do have a lot of healthy eating programs which are great in the schools. They do have a breakfast program at my children's school and they are more than affordable. They are supposed to let kids go there for like \$1 a day, but even if you can throw in two or three dollars a week [they let them go]. Even if you can't afford that, they never turn the kids away, which is great. Like you said before, 'buy local'; one of the highest causes of obesity is poverty which sounds counter-intuitive but it's not when you're trying to feed a family of you know five or six. Then, I mean, good-luck. Actually now that they have raised taxes, they have raised these taxes [HST] then they give you these cheques, right? I don't know if you guys get them, but guess where they are taking that money from? It's from your income tax at the end of the year. All that money has been taken off. I did my income tax and it was \$200 short of what I normally get and I have no income, like none. The only stuff they give me is the stuff for the property and the stuff for the kids. Because I am on OSAP I technically don't have an income. So I asked, 'It is a little bit shorter than what I thought it was going to be' and she was like,

'You know that cheque you just got? Yeah that's where it came from and you're getting two more cheques and next year you're going to get nothing back if you're not working.' So they are actually taking that money out of your year-end rebate and throwing a title on it so you shut-up about the new taxIt's taking it out of your own pocket. So that was when I found that out. I was like 'Wow, really, that's nice.' Like when I go grocery shopping it's not like 100 or 200 dollars, it is a good 400 or 500 dollars and probably almost a 100 of that is strictly taxes, which is ridiculous.

I am starting to see [poverty] affects men a little bit more than before. I am starting to see a few more single dads. Actually two friends of mine are now single dads, but still I think it is primarily women. And I think it is going to be that way for a little while. But it is nice to see that gender shift -- well, it's not really nice -- but, you know, it's more equal in terms of that, but I still think it is primarily women.

I find that when it comes to the kids you can almost get anything that you possibly need; you can get help from anywhere. There was even a time when....my son has asthma, and to get the one medication it was over a \$100 and I looked at the doctor and I said, 'There is no way. I can't afford that.' They said 'shhhhhh, don't worry about it' and they brought down a doctor and he was like, 'This is supposed to be a sample, but...' So there are ways that people are willing to help if you do have children, they seem to be understanding. In regards to... I think adults living under the poverty level, I think almost everything they are set up to do is to be slightly degrading. They have, say, the Goodfellows, they give the baskets out. Well, number one, they give a voucher so you have to go to A and P and hand in the voucher which states to everybody and all the people behind you in line that 'I got a food basket because I'm poor.' So even to wait in line and stuff like that, you're standing there for two hours in the welfare building, I used to hate that having to go in there and sit in there. Almost everything was set up to be....when you have a case worker that doesn't get along with you, or something like that, then she also sets up things that are deliberately hard. And then [there are] the stereotypes and everything like that. [My case worker] definitely wasn't a social worker. I would equate social work with actually helping and she was definitely a hindrance. To me, if you're doing something and you're not having just excess kids just because you want to -- I've seen people that have a child every three or four years just to get the, specifically so they can stay on assistance and collect baby bonus. I have seen that. It's sad. But when you're trying to do something, when you're going to school and you have a plan in place like you know: I'm going to university and I'm going to do this and I'm actually showing you that I am working towards that. If there was a resource available to me I would have liked her to mention it and she never would. I would have to hear about things from other people and then when I would try to get the same thing they did, it was usually a lot harder for me, or it wasn't available to me even though it should have been, or it was too late because she never told me. So, yeah, we didn't get along and there is no way to switch your [case] worker. You don't have a choice in the matter.

I thought Keep the Heat was specific to Windsor but apparently it's not. That program is absolutely wonderful. I have used it before about two years ago and it is a life-saver. Right now I'm about in \$1300 dollars worth of debt just because of utilities and I have \$40 in the bank. So, hopefully, when I go to my appointment they can help in some way shape or form or else, or else I wouldn't be able to live where I am living. I would have to go back to the subsidized housing and I have worked my butt off to get out of there. I don't want to go backwards, I want to go forwards.

Andrea: What about transportation because I know you said when you got sick you had all the cab rides and stuff and I heard that transit Windsor is trying to implement lower bus passes or lower costing bus passes

Emily: Yeah, that would definitely help. I would agree that that would help. But the reason I couldn't take a bus was because I was sick and couldn't stand and the length of the rides and different stuff like that. So there was a different reason [than cost for] why I didn't take the bus, but lowering the cost of buses would definitely help. They re-did downtown in all the nice wonderful grey colours -- it's like you guys are adding extra taxes, but I don't really see the mayor doing anything specifically for... like I said, when he shut down the day-cares, like a deliberate 'in the face' to single women in Windsor. And they said it was because of the city strike that they had to, you know, as a consequence....they said that there has to be some consequence, [but doing this] you not only hurt the city workers but you hurt a lot of people using those resources who are women.

Food banks would definitely be...if I were collecting food [that way], first, it is again degrading when you have to go and do that, but, second, if I was going to get food for my entire family, if you don't have a car, then how are you going to bring all the food home? Unless you want to bring it back in the big gigantic box that screams food bank; that would definitely be harder. What we used to do was we used to get a car-pool going of about four or five [people] and we used to head out to Essex -- so that says something right there, that there aren't good food banks in Windsor, where we would actually have to leave and go to a different town to get a decent amount of food. When you do go to a food bank, because years ago I had to use them, they don't give you a substantial amount. They don't give you food that you are even going to eat. Very few of them will. There was one time where I was just really short at the end of the month and I think it was because of utilities and they gave me like half a loaf of bread which was grainy bread that no child in this world would ever eat! [laughs] Then they gave me this little baggy full of lunch meat that looked like headcheese; it was again inedible. Then they gave me two cans of corn and peas. When I called them up they had to take down all this information and it was like for this little tiny grocery bag of food...It was a Windsor food bank, and I think we might have got a pack of hot-dogs and that was the only thing that we ate out of it. And you're lucky to get meat when you go to a food bank, so definitely there would have to be an improvement in food banks...In Essex, there is fresh bread, they have everything set up and they are like 'What do you need?'

Do you need laundry soap?' It's not just food there, it's like 'Oh, do you have peanut butter? Then there you go.' Some people made home-made jam. More people are willing to donate in smaller communities, but when it comes to Windsor, they are not as willing to donate. [In Essex] they ask you for each item, 'Do you need soap? Oh ok.' In Windsor, I couldn't tell you how many cans of kidney beans I had. And chick peas, it's like ok 'how am I suppose to...?' and it's like they don't give you enough to actually make meals with. You're lucky to get one meal out of something that you get from a food bank. And you can only go once a month. I think with Essex you could only go twice, twice a month I think. But Essex used to also do programmes for under privileged children at Christmas time and again they must have had a huge amount of supporters because that was like the place to go if they approved you.

It used to tick me off sometimes too when you're in a community, like the low-income community and subsidized housing and stuff like that, it's a world like no other. You learn to play a social game that you would never have to play anywhere else, and you have to play it to survive. The first thing that they do, I mean I have seen Children's Aid called because a kid walked across their lawn, like things like that. The first thing they do if you have a fight with somebody is that they have Children's Aid at your house. We used to sit on the porch and watch the workers and be like 'Oh, who is it today?' I remember I got a phone call once that I was apparently watching pornography with my children while shooting up heroin. I have never been a drug user or looked... like, you know, it was utterly ridiculous.

I never had a file open or anything like that. It was just expected, like you would sit and you would probably see a good three or four Children's Aid workers a day go to different houses just within the visual of sitting outside, so it was very hard to live in that community. Well in my opinion they definitely are governing over low-income way more than, *way* more than, you know, middle class and the rich. They have to investigate and I understand that. When I did have to deal with them they have always been friendly and always been cooperative, but there are horror stories out there. My opinion is that absolute power corrupts absolutely and that's what CAS [Children's Aid] is like. And they play a big part, which anyone who lives under the poverty level [knows]. The only way that you don't deal with them is if you're not living within subsidized housing which is, like, good luck. And, even then, with the school: I had a call from the school because my son hurt his thumb; he got it caught in his dresser. I bought one of those big storage cabinets where you can hang clothes and everything and it has drawers where his clothes are. Well he got [his thumb] caught in there laughing and joking around playing with his brother and he went to school the next day and he told one teacher that he hurt it in a cabinet and another teacher that he hurt it on his dresser, and I got a call and a visit from CAS. Because he, there was a discrepancy between "cabinet" and "dresser" which, I mean, I brought them upstairs and said, well, the cabinet *is* his dresser. So there is still a little bit of dealing with that but, yeah, you are always kind of put underneath a microscope.

Maria: "This Whole Future Ahead of Me"

In dialogue with Erin

To tell you the truth, I grew up pretty much everywhere...but, yes, for four years and a half now, I grew up here in Windsor and then I moved to Calgary for two years, and now I'm obviously back here. My mother's Italian, and my dad is Albanian. I grew up in Italy for most of my life. I am very outgoing [laughs], and I'm really big on education; I always wanted to be a doctor. There's an explanation behind that! I had nose surgery, because one of my blood vessels popped so bad, and I had to go to the doctor, and for a whole week I stayed at the hospital, and it was so cool having all these people around me (doctors and nurses) and I was like 'Yeah! I want to help people as well!' So, that is why ten years later, still to this day, I still want to become a doctor.

My friends and my family are my life! They are my priority in life.

I went to school back in Italy, and I was ten that summer and I turned eleven in November, so you could say I was eleven years old when I moved to Canada and a lot of people, they like their home country obviously, and so did I. I was in love with it, especially where I lived...but, I like Canada, I really do. It offers me a lot of good things.

Back home in Italy, I only grew up with my mother but, when I moved here, I had a whole family (my dad, my step-mom, my sister and my grandma). So, there is a big, huge change of living with a single mom, then going to a big family, you know? So, that was one of the big experiences I will never forget [moving here] and learning another language as well, learning two for that matter—English and French.

I am a seventeen year-old girl. I'm going to high school, obviously, and I have this whole future ahead of me, you know, if I don't get hit by a car today, crossing the roads, then I'll be fine [laughs]. But one of the challenges is that I don't have a job right now, so, you know, I don't really pay for much. So I get paid by the government, and then the challenge would be, you know, I'm alone, so if anything were to happen to me, like, let's say I can't reach my phone, or I can't reach anyone...like, that's a huge caution I have to take in my life. You know sometimes, I'm not saying it leads to depression, but when you spend so much time alone, you kind of become cold-hearted in a way. But, I am so glad I have my friends. My family [my mother] may be far away, but obviously, I talk to them over the computer every few weeks.

There's two [difficult] situations [I can think of]. The first, I think we all know what I'm going to say, like any other teenager at school, everything is unfair, right? You know, like telling the teacher you missed school because of this reason and they don't believe you, and you know like...I'm ALONE. If I had a parent to prove that I was sick and I missed school, then that would be the truth, but I'm alone, so I have no one to defend me. Then, the other experience is with my father; whatever he said, goes. I was never heard. I mean, he heard me, but he didn't listen, you know? There is a big difference in that. Like, he knew what I wanted, but at the

same time, he would not give it to me. That was unfair to me, but then again, it's not like life is ever fair.

Erin: But do you kind of feel privileged in a way? Because, you know, the whole independence thing, every teenager wants to be independent, you know what I mean?

Maria: That's a good question. A lot of people have asked me that before, and to be honest with you...I don't. I like being independent, but not necessarily living on my own. I like living with a family, because, you know at the end of the day, who am I gonna cry to? To my dad, my mom, whoever, right? At the end of the day, if I have a problem, I will discuss it with someone. Now, I can't do that anymore. I don't want to say that all my friends are cold-hearted people, but they have their own problems, you know. There's no one like family to help us. So, I have to say that I like my independence, but at the same time, you know, it gets.....really lonely.....you know, knowing that, you could have had a family, but it got destroyed, because of a certain someone in your family. But, to answer your question, I do like my privacy, I do like my independence, I'm not going to lie [laughs]...it's just ahh...I'd rather stay with a family, than on my own, at this age. If I was in my twenties, of course, I would live on my own for sure. In university, I could support myself, because you learn from it. Being so young (seventeen especially) and living on your own is a huge deal.

Right now I'm in the Ontario Works [programme]. I think that's what it is called. Basically, I get paid by the government. They pay my rent, my groceries, you know, my bus pass if I travel, because they know I go to school...and as long as I go to school, then everything is fine, right? But if I got a job, which I'm kind of hoping to, because you know, staying at home all the time is kind of boring. So, maybe weekend, have a part-time job. Then, they'd lower my income if I have a part-time job. If I have a full-time job, that is when I'm out of the Ontario Works, which is kind of called "Student Welfare." That's pretty much my financial situation right now. It isn't so bad.

I had a friend of mine (we don't speak anymore), he lied to the government saying that he was living with someone else, so his income would double! The thing is now he owes ten thousand dollars to the government, because he lied. The truth is, I had told the government that I live in a huge mansion, pretty much [laughs] with, you know, four other people, but we don't share anything...nothing, except the kitchen. When it comes to groceries, I buy my own. When it comes to cell phone bills, rent, I pay it. My roommates don't give me anything....And the thing is that he lied saying he lived in a house with a guy (another friend of his) and the government found out.

Coming back to what you were asking me, there are people that do take advantage of [welfare]. That's why I think that the government and the social workers should be more cautious about the people they're dealing with...and, you know, make them trust less, like if somebody like that lied to me, I wouldn't know what to do. Maybe having a social worker, you know, check the place out...to see if everything is true, according to what the person says...then, yeah, they should move forward with the process.

[The social support programmes here are] very helpful. I can't exactly remember what they're called, but they're like student workshops. When I was in Cadets back in Calgary, I used to do a lot of workshops, and I think that the government should have some of these workshops for people who don't work, you know? Like, try to find them easy jobs so that they can get paid, because depending on the government all the time, just...it is not possible. You have to support yourself. If you are in your forties, and you still can't find a job, you got to have a good reason.

I mean it's helpful to me, because I'm still young, you know? Maybe when I get into university, I'll have a good full-time job and I wouldn't need help from the government. Why would I want the help when I have a job and can support myself? Whereas somebody who has five kids and can't work-- they need it more than me.

Those workshops are really helpful...telling people what it is working at the government. People get the idea that 'oh the government is playing us'...you know, to a certain extent it is true, but they do pay for our healthcare, and grade schools, public schools..

After I'm done high school, I'd really like to take biochemistry in University, so I could go to med school and be prepared. If I were to go, I'd like to get a Bachelor's. I have huge goals. I like being supported by the government, but at the same time, I don't, because I know that someone else out there needs it more than me. So I kind of feel bad in a way. At the same time, let's say I was homeless, and come to think of it, it's -- for a rich country like Canada -- we have a lot of homeless people, especially in Toronto (huge city), Calgary as well, Vancouver, here in Windsor. Windsor is a pretty small city, but you know that every city you travel to, you see that there's homeless. Then you think about it, like 'We have such a rich country that offers so much, but people don't take advantage of education!' as I said. So, coming back to that, I am so glad that I am in school, you know. People have the potential to do or be anything, so they have to take advantage of that or other things.

Actually, I want to sponsor my mom, so [that] she comes here and has a good life with me. Italy is great! It is, but it's not as great as Canada. Financially, politically...Italy has jobs, just as any other country, but people are very rude and selfish there. Here in Canada, everyone is multicultural. Everyone is not racist. In Italy, there are a very few people that are very racist. When it comes to school as well. They have a perfect student with a ninety percent average and a rich student with seventy-five percent average. They're going to give the scholarship to the rich student, you know? It's just not fair! In Canada, you get 90, you get 90. It doesn't matter if you're black, white, blue, yellow, rich, poor. It's what you are capable of doing. People here in Canada think so presently. They judge you by what you are capable of doing. Back in Italy...no. In other countries as well, they judge you by what you've done, and that's the main difference.

How would I improve our community? I don't have any great ideas in my head, but as I said before, education is pretty important. Having a job, supporting yourself, that's number one! How are you going to support yourself to get by in this life? But, a lot of people don't take advantage of the schools, and they drop out at the age of sixteen. I think that they should

make a law in regards to that, saying that there should not be any dropouts, so that many people get to finish high school (bad or good, or whatever marks you get). At least you finished it, so you have some sort of diploma/certificate. In your twenties, you will say, 'Thank goodness I finished it because, without it...I'd have emptiness without it.' I think that would be a good change.

Italy is a beautiful country and I love the food. I love everything about it. Canada's home to me right now and I can't picture myself twenty years from now, because I have no idea what's going to happen. I would like to go back to Europe... I would love that, but umm...I think if I were to get a great job here in Canada, why move somewhere else and start all over again, you know....when you have already started a life here? Yeah, sure, I am going to travel there, but I don't think that I would want to live in Italy again.

At least here, you have a voice. If you want to change something, you can actually do it (obviously over the age of 18). The truth is in Italy, you don't have much say. What's done is done, what's written is written—you go by that.

Jon: "Between a Rock and a Hard Place"

In dialogue with Roberta and Dan

I grew up in Montreal and I moved to London, Ontario, about thirteen years ago, when I was twelve. I grew up in a middle class family. My mom was a stay-at-home mom and my dad was a general labourer. He had a job with...he worked for two places, he worked for the Palais des Congrès and a place called Bonaventure, and they set up car shows and stuff like that. And he did carpeting and flooring and stuff. Yeah, and I don't know, I had a chaotic kind of upbringing: two parents who came from strange kind of family dynamics themselves, and I think that really put a strain on their own relationship and our family life. And there was some alcoholism...It was a little unstable, I'd say. There were periods of stability and times when my family was really together and there were periods where my dad was gone a lot. He worked night-shifts to begin with, so it was like we didn't get to see him very often and he was what doctors would now call a "functioning alcoholic" so he was able to work five days out of the week, be completely miserable and be drunk the entire weekend, kind of thing. Yeah, it was kind of a weird upbringing. I can say that I have an odd relationship with my mom. It's pretty close . . . It's close, but it's uncomfortable at times. With my dad, I just don't really have one at all, at this point.

They were together a number of years. We moved to London, and [they] finally called it quits about five or six years ago, and now they live in separate residences. I talk to my mom on a fairly regular basis. As for my dad I probably talk to him on average about once a month, if that, with some contact over Facebook and stuff like that.

My parents having kind of a turbulent relationship -- that definitely affected my stress and anxiety levels growing up. I think that their relationship with one another kind of affected the way they raised me. I have to say that they did their best to raise me, and they were loving people when I was growing up. But I think that there were times where they would get frustrated and, you know, then kind of spill over, you know them handling me, or my anxiety level would spill over into school situations and as a result I had a hard time concentrating. I'd say some of the other hardships . . . I think it just started out with moving to Ontario in general. And growing up, I kind of always never had a good grip on anxiety and that from the get go. Being taken away from what was familiar was kind of rough. And it was really hard to make friends. And feeling like you had no support. And after that I went into high school, and then high school was a big realization for me. I came out of the closet, and discovered my sexuality at that point. And . . . Ok. So, when I got to high school, I'd have to say in grade nine I started realizing that, you know, coming to terms with the fact that I was gay, and that was kind of, in and of itself, being a teenager and going through puberty, I think is a lot of stress. Dealing with being in a new school and stuff like that, like the regular kind of stress of day-to-day life, and then that kind of bit, and that didn't go over well. It was like...my parents took it fairly well and were fairly supportive. I was kind of surprised in a way. At school I started getting harassed, and I started getting kind of pushed around and stuff like that. So, that's basically when I started having some difficulty in school. Prior to that I had done fairly well,

grade-wise. But basically, I started like...I'd have to say at that point in my life that was when I had the worst bouts of anxiety...Maybe even thoughts of suicide, just generally feeling depressed and kind of isolated.

My parents were still together [but] at that point stuff was probably at their worst peak in the relationship. My dad was drinking really heavily, like, he slept on the couch kind of thing. They didn't actually converse with one another for the last two or three years of their relationship, so it was pretty awkward. He was pretty miserable to deal with and she was pretty on edge all the time, and they would...When they would actually interact there would be this explosive ugly scene that you really wouldn't want to be around. That didn't help...I had quite a long bout of problems with drugs and stuff. So I think that definitely contributed to it. It's strange that when you are experiencing problems like that, like anxiety-related things, that you try drugs for the first time, and it's just a recreational setting, and it's kind of the instantaneous feel-good kind of thing. It was probably one of the first times that feeling [of anxiety] went away. I think I took that to the next level for quite a while.

It started out with me trying to have fun with friends and meeting a new crowd or whatever, just like the peer-pressure-y beginnings. And then I think it turned into a kind of self-medication process. And I'd talked to doctors prior, about some of the issues that I was going through, and I think that the reality is that I was just too young. And that maybe I wasn't communicating a lot of those issues right at the time. I just, you know, think for someone that young [doctors] don't take it as seriously and I think that...I think that they kind of expect that it's something young people go through. They expect that they'd be more prone to stress. Like everyone going through high school, and getting zits, and having hormones and changes, so it's expected that with keeping on top of grades and social pressures and stuff that you would kind of buckle sometimes. But, in my case I would get stressed to the point when I wouldn't sleep anymore. So it was a severe kind of thing. Again, I was young so I was probably not communicating that..

I do remember when I started partying a lot more, and I started using a lot of recreational drugs, I stopped going to school a lot because, I mean, there were other issues too. I mean I got kicked out of my house a couple times. And, [I was] just juggling my schedule, sleeping unregular hours and couch-hopping at that point.

Roberta: So you were homeless for a time?

Jon: Yeah. On and off through my teenage years there were periods where my mother got fed up and kicked me out of the house. So, yeah, there would be periods where I'd be working through, you know, while going to school, or whatever. Then couch surfing with different people. You know at the same time, still kind of living this crazy life of doing drugs, so eventually that definitely spilled over into going to school and when I was there I wasn't really attentive because I was really...I didn't really have the energy level; with sleeping erratic hours and not eating enough...Eventually I just missed so much school that I went to reapply for the next semester and they wouldn't let me into the school I was attending and claimed that I was

too old to apply. The cut-off date for most students, you can stay in school until you're twenty-four or twenty-five if you want, I'm pretty sure, so long as you keep going and stuff [Jon is now 24]. But they wouldn't let me re-register and I was told my only other option was an adult education center. And at the time that seemed really unappealing to me and I wasn't really ready to get reacquainted with a new school setting, you know, a new format. And everything was kind of condensed into three month classes and, I don't know. I think at that point I had just kind of given up on the idea of education. Again, being pretty bummed out, it can be hard to see the long picture and that it's going to affect you later on.

I have to say now one of the biggest barriers with the education and looking for a job now is definitely [that they are] kind of hurting each other. I think I've been out of school for so long it's rough to even fathom studying again, like I have to relearn how to do that. And because I don't have any education behind me I've been out of work for a while now. It's hard to apply for a lot of stuff because I'm simply not qualified anymore. So it's a little rough. I feel like I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place.

I have to say a lot of it has to do with mental health issues...particularly anxiety-related issues, and just dealing with depression and the effects of it. But more over the lack of support from doctors that I've gotten and the whole process of it. It's been kind of frustrating knowing that I have these issues and I'm trying to work past them in order to obtain a life for myself, and it's rough when you're told to ask for help and reach out to people who are qualified to give you that assistance. I've been kind of...the current family doctor that I have, I'd say, is kind of incompetent – not a very understanding person and a lot of his methods are really out of date and he isn't very quick to give you a referral or offer you any type of advice or any type of steering in the right direction as to where you're supposed to go with stuff, so... I was never able to get any referrals to a psychiatrist. I did once actually, and that psychiatrist ended up being really homophobic and it was really bizarre. I went in, he did a couple of kind of introduction questions and he asked me about my marital status and at the time I'd just gotten out of a long-term relationship and I told him it was with another man and he left. He had said he needed to leave the room for something and fifteen minutes later he came back and he said that he had a cold and that he didn't have any questions for me because I was involved with some group at the hospital.

It was kind of strange, if anything. It was just like maybe he was uncomfortable with something I had said to him or...It was literally the only referral my doctor had provided me at that point. The only reason I had been involved with the hospital was I had had a panic attack and went through emergency just so I could get the referral and actually go. So I actually had to pretend I was having a heart attack in order to get them to diagnose me or assess that I was actually having a panic attack. So that's how I got involved with that. As a result of my doctor offering very little support, I haven't been able to apply for things like ODSP [disability support] when I should probably actually be on something like that because they have better programs to support someone with my condition.

Roberta: You've had trouble trying to get disability?

Jon: Yeah, like I said, the lack of support that I get with my doctor...For example, it's unrelated but it goes to show you the relationship I have with my current physician: I went in one time with strep throat and I knew that I had it. I suffered from it prior so I knew what it felt like, and I told him 'I have strep throat if you want to take a look, I need to get some medication to get this cleared up' and he told me he didn't want to take a look at me because he wanted me to quit smoking. I told him that I thought that was really sound advice to give someone, but that I thought it was unrelated to having strep throat and that either way I needed to be treated for it, and he wouldn't. He wouldn't even look at me so I ended up having to leave there and go to a walk-in clinic where they confirmed that I had strep throat and they issued me medication and I cleared it up that way. So after that, any time I had an issue that I needed resolved, I didn't really go to my physician anymore and that kind of came back to bite me because I obtained ODSP information and paperwork and I went into my doctor and tried to get him to fill it out and he claimed that I was a 'part-time patient,' and because I was a part-time patient he wasn't informed enough to fill out my paperwork.

To me it was kind of ridiculous to go and see somebody that doesn't resolve your issues. Like, if I have to go and make a second trip to some walk-in clinic or emergency room in order to get penicillin or something, then I'm wasting my time, you know, I can't. I don't have the bus fare to, you know, unless they offer me a bus pass through OW [Ontario Works]. I'm pretty limited budget-wise to how much I can travel around and I can't make two trips for every issue that I have, I have to be pretty sparing.

It's kind of a catch twenty-two because in Ontario there is a real shortage of physicians. And any time you put yourself on a list, you can expect to be on it for a few years before anything opens up. I've tried a few times, but because I already have a physician they don't see it as it being very urgent. And because I know that there is a shortage of doctors I am really reluctant to discard this guy as my physician.

I'm on Ontario Works and for a while I had a really awful [case] worker and she was really unreasonable. Actually, right from the get go, the whole signing up process: you do your phone interview thing and you find out whether or not you qualified, and they assess that, and then you actually do a live phone interview with somebody who's really rude to you and, actually starts -- I can understand asking questions about my financial background and stuff like that, but some of the questions that they ask are kind of...you feel like they're really unrelated. They ask you to liquidate all of your assets. Asking you to, you know, how much money your family makes, what type of jobs they have, and you know, if you can ask them for money, asking if you have friends that you can ask for money, if you have a partner that you can get a loan from or anybody. They ask you if you have jewellery that you can sell, or, any type of assets, like a car, or a savings account, or, you know, stuff like that. And it almost makes you feel like they're trying to deter you from applying for the assistance to begin with. And then, you know, once you get on to the programs, or whatever, you're kind of made to feel, off the top, as though

you're abusing the system. Which I thought was really interesting. I've -- prior to this part of my life -- I've been working since I was fifteen years old, and often had full-time jobs all summer long. I worked really hard for everything I had. And then to be treated that way was kind of flabbergasting. And once you're on the program, like I said, they start making you jump through all these hoops. They have this expectation that they can just sign you up for anything they feel is necessary for you to get back to work, and they don't really consult with you. Which is...I do appreciate the help to find a job, but on the same token, I like to be able to feel as though I have control over it.

[They sign you up for] anything from job related, job search related stuff, resumé appointments, sometimes they're self-help kind of seminars type things. I got involved with this one place, and you know, I was told to start looking for a job and reporting all of the jobs I was looking for. But, they made me go to this place for a week and a half long. It was kind of ridiculous, the kinds of scenarios that we had to do. And one of them, I remember, was a questionnaire that we had to answer, and it was really kind of vague and broad questions talking about our decision making and stuff like that. And I remember they lumped my personality into these two types of personalities, and then the instructor elaborated in front of the room, and didn't address me specifically, but went on to say the personality groups that I was in were unfavourable, and all of this nonsense, and kind of spewed pseudo-psycho babble about people's personality types. And I thought that was kind of offensive.

It was kind of insulting to my intelligence too. I've actually been in extensive therapy and it's like I happen to know that my personality can be rather unfavourable at times. So that was nothing new, [laughter] it wasn't a huge shock to me or anything but, it was kind of like, you know, I'm forced to go to something at 7:00 in the morning that I never wanted to sign up for to begin with. And then, you know, if I wanted to do, like I had to do that, I wanted to make it worth my while, right? I'm figuring that we're going to be really going in depth, like the hidden job market, and we touched on that a bit in this course but it was all kind of useless stuff that you hear everywhere and that you already kind of know. And then, to be hit with this, that one morning, I was kind of like, "wow," you know?

A couple times I've refused to comply with some of the appointments they've made and then I received a letter of suspension in the mail telling me that I'm cut off from my financial assistance until I either contact my worker and resolve the issue or I comply with the requirements. And, I mean, sometimes I've received those letters of suspensions over anything -- they're a pretty constant thing when you're on OW. For example, when you have to have a periodical review instead of just receiving a phone call, or, like a normal letter stating that you have a review coming up, you receive a letter stating that you're suspended, [and] your cheque is on hold until you make the arrangements to come in and confirm that. And it just seems pretty heavy. It's kind of a drastic approach, especially for somebody like me. And I've explained to my worker that it really stresses me out to receive a letter like that. I'm kind of a worrisome person to begin with, and it's really important to me that my bills are paid on time and when somebody threatens that, I kind of take it almost personally. I've actually kind of

yelled at my worker a couple of times, 'you guys have all of my phone numbers, and you have pretty constant contact with me if you need to.' But, instead they choose to cut down trees to send me really kind of aggressive letters in the mail. It is kind of impersonal, especially when, you know, someone's dealing with your finances. It's kind of like they could at least talk to you. I don't know; it's just weird.

Roberta: So, do you find that there are extreme pressures on you to find a job constantly?

Jon: Yeah. I have to say that there is. It kind of stresses me out, especially because we've been in a recession for a while and, you know, there is a real shortage of work to begin with. And with my current state of my education and stuff like that, I am really limited. So, it's like I'm applying for jobs but there are only so many times you can apply for things and you have to wait in between before applying again. And, I don't know. I feel like I'm running out of options a lot of the time.

I now have a bus pass, thankfully, but I think that's just because it was issued to me and it's kind of one of those things that they forgot about, so I've been getting it on my cheque regularly. But prior to that, the transportation is rough when I have doctors' appointments. There was, for awhile, several times a week I was going for group therapy and stuff like that. And that was pretty essential. I was trying to get healthy so that I could get back to work. And they weren't providing me with a bus pass for that. And then they were, you know, tacking on all of these things that I had to go to, like these job type resumé appointments and whatnot, and they weren't providing me with bus fare. And it's not really like they're providing me with extra money throughout the month for a lot, for transportation. So that's kind of rough too, when you don't have anything to begin with. So that was kind of terrible. The one thing that the [work assistance] program, that did actually benefit me, was they got me in touch with a counsellor that was there. And, I'm not really sure why but she started touching on a lot of social benefit programs that had never been offered to me through any of my [case] workers.

I had been in getting interviews and I was really nervous about it because I don't have, really, business casual clothing. I've kind of grown out of a lot of the clothes that I've had over the years. So that's something I've really been reluctant [about], applying for office jobs and stuff because I don't have the attire to even go to the interview. And [the counsellor] told me that, they would contact OW, and push for it if I needed interview clothes. They have programs that can provide you with a cheque specifically so that you can go to Wal-Mart or somewhere like that and actually pick up interview clothes. They also informed me that, you know, because I'm trying to get back to work I should be as healthy as possible, and they started talking about my dental coverage, which was something that my OW worker had never launched into before. I thought that was pretty crazy.

I have dental coverage [but] I haven't taken advantage of it yet. I kind of actually heard some horror stories about some of the places that actually do cover it. It's really odd, too. I've had some friends actually have to deal with this, but - the thing with, and I'm not sure if I going off topic here, but, the thing with a lot of these dental places that are covered by Ontario Works is

that the dentists are only able to bill Ontario Works for every individual visit, so if you have a lot of issues going on with your mouth they'll actually - say you have four rotting teeth, and instead, [even] if it's something they can deal with in one visit, they'll actually schedule you out for four visits so that they can get paid more money. I've had a close family member recently had one of those doctors - because he's in a similar situation to me - and he had dental work done, and they were really haphazard about it. And they actually caused a lot of damage to his mouth. And, I don't know. I guess it's like I've been really nervous about getting it done. So, I want to make sure that whatever dentist I go to I'm being handled with care, not being judged as a second rate citizen because I'm on OW and because I can't actually pay cash or credit for the work that's being done.

I have to say that I kind of feel like I've been treated like I'm taking advantage of the system or something like that. I remember one time, just for an example, with my OW worker. I was told when I had signed up for OW that there were a lot of things that you could do to make yourself a better applicant for jobs and that there were a lot of programs, like Smartserv and back-to-work type of programs, like say, food safe handling and stuff like that you could take, and Ontario Works would cover it. So, I took it upon myself to get involved with a smartserve and I paid for it, and I got the receipt and I brought it to my OW worker. And, I was, like, you know, 'I took the smartserve course and passed' and I thought it would make me a better applicant for applying for restaurants. And, I was kind of hoping that, you know, I was going to be compensated for this, because I was told that, you know, as per the agreement that I could have these types of things covered through Ontario Works. And, she wouldn't cover it. And then she actually launched into this whole spiel about how it wasn't my right to be on OW, and how it was a privilege that I was even getting this money, and that, you know, it wasn't my right to just be able to take anything that I wanted. And I was really - I really felt she made me feel like I was taking advantage of the system or something.

I have to say that I'm almost intimidated by the [case workers]. Just because, I mean, they anger me a lot because I feel like - I mean, down to [when] you call in to actually talk to your worker and leave a message, you don't even leave your name. You leave a ten digit member ID number. You're a number, literally. And, so it's - there's no one-on-one individual kind of thing, you know, "I remember your case" or whatever, right? So, I mean that right off the top you know they are signing you up for these things that you feel like you're useless but you have to comply with them in order to maintain financial security. You don't want to get that letter and the end of the month, being you're cut off, and you're not going to be able to pay your rent on time. And, you know, you can't buy your groceries and stuff like that. So, yeah, there's a lot that I want to say to them, but I feel like I don't really have any power to do that because...I really feel like I'm going to get cut off and that's a really bad feeling.

When you have a welfare worker that's unwilling to sign off for, you know, to compensate for the money part of applying for these courses, it's kind of rough because I don't really have the money to do it myself. I don't have an abundance of extra cash floating around to sort of better myself with. If I can afford to go to these programs or if I can get my worker onboard with it,

then yeah, they're useful. There are certain programs in [London], like the program called Youth Opportunities Unlimited [YOU]. And they run off of government funding and you walk in off the street kind of thing. They're kind of like a Jack-of-all-Trades really. They have a street center, like an open kitchen type deal where you can go and do laundry there and stuff like that. I mean, it's kind of a rough crowd - if you want to grin and bear that kind of scene, then that's definitely something you can go and make use of, make a sandwich and do your laundry - stuff like that there. And then they also have a resource room downtown where you can go and, you know, look through job postings and stuff like that. They have a job bank folder. They also have computer access. You know, you can actually apply for GED upgrading there. You can apply for resumé appointments, like you can have somebody actually work with you to do out a professional resumé. They help you with cover letters, that kind of thing. So I think that resource centers like that are really useful for people especially because they serve a wide range of people, like anywhere from people on the streets to elderly people, middle aged people that are actually losing their jobs now and having to re-enter the work force. They can take advantage of those places. A lot of those people aren't really acquainted with computers and stuff, and that's where a lot of the jobs are, so it's really good that they have somebody that can work with them and show them how to do that. I've taken advantage of the GED upgrading course through a YOU program before; so, I think that they're really cool and really supportive. So certain ones are great and then, you know, and at certain times when you're forced into going to certain programs and you don't have control it's not really geared towards you. And that can be kind of just a nuisance. So yeah, I think that the [available programmes] are basically kind of a fifty-fifty.

I think that...people that end up on OW, maybe if they had, it'd be good to feel that, you know, some of these [case] workers were more of a support system for the people that were on it. Maybe if these workers could probe into why people end up on OW, maybe [that would be] a really good place to start. Some people just, you know, they need a goal, need a plan, right? And sometimes they have a really hard time taking, seeing four or five steps ahead and need someone to help them or need somebody to at least steer them in the right direction or send them to somebody, provide them with some type of reference to someone that can help them establish that. Maybe [it would be good if they were] not so intimidating about the whole process. I know I kind of feel like I have a candle under me at times to find a job or to get out to these appointments when I have a million and one other things going on in my life too. And it's - it's kind of rough. I think that something else that can be done, if I was in high school and I actually had an opportunity to talk to somebody who, you know, maybe made some bad decisions at certain points. I think that that might have smarted me up a little bit. I think that if I had had somebody say, you know, depression's a really awful thing to deal with, and anxiety can really be bad too. It's nothing that you can let rule you. I think that because I got off track in school and got into drugs and kind of messed it up at that point. I think that if I had somebody to say, you know, later on, ten years from now, it's going to be really rough to work it all out. Like, you're going to be stuck in a really rough financial spot and you're going to have people dictating what your schedule looks like and how you're able to get groceries and how

much groceries your able to get, and you know, what area of town you're going to live in, and what your apartment is going to look like. If you're going to be able to have a place with a clean washroom or an attentive landlord or stuff like that -- not really things I thought about in high school. And now, I kind of look at my life and "wow," you know? This isn't really where I thought I was going to end up, so that's kind of disappointing. And I think that if I had somebody, you know, that informed me, and maybe that would have been an eye opener at that point. I think at that point it would have been a lot easier to work my way out of it, and I think that there's still a lot of hope for me and I can still -- not very easily, but I think that, with some work -- I can get out of the situation that I'm in.

I think that there definitely needs to be better support for people that are already on the system too. Again, for people that are suffering from any type of mental ailment. I think that, you know, workers need to be a little more sensitive to stuff like that. Maybe keep people's stress [in mind], you know -- people could. Some type of support in establishing long term goals to get from point A to point B. I think sometimes it's easy to feel a little lost when you're on [OW]. It's not exactly something that makes you feel great about yourself to begin with. So, at this point, it's like sometimes I just kind of feel that I don't know what the next steps are going to be for me, you know what I mean? I know I need to get my schooling. I know I need to, but I'm not sure what I need to do first. I'm not sure where I fit into the job force at this point. I'm unsure of my abilities to go back to school. So, it's just...maybe if I had just a little more support and maybe feel like I had more people on my side. That would be kind of helpful.

Johanna: "The University of Life... is Teaching Me"

In dialogue with Irene and Talal

I didn't grow up in Windsor, but I've been here for five years. I like being here, in Windsor. It's a nice city, especially for my kids. I could have gone to Toronto but it would have been crazy. I thought, no, this would have been the best place to raise them. I like it here, even though there are challenges, of jobs and stuff like that. It's a good city to raise the children. I come from a country from Africa, one of the African countries, the Southern part, about five years ago. I went to school there but I didn't do university because I started raising a family.

I lived in the States before, so sometimes I tell people Canadians are nice people. I had a job [here] before, working at a call centre but it's a very hard job, very challenging. And I did that for two and half years and I got laid off in 2009 so I've not had a job since then and it's been very difficult here in Windsor. So I've been torn between having to move to a different province, it's quite difficult and with the children it's very hard too, like, 'should I, shouldn't I? Maybe things will get better.' You know, those kinds of things, but other than that I'm happy to be here.

I've already built my own community, like church, being here too, you know, we've started something here that's going to... We know how depressed people are, how disguised people are, so basically we want to amend. On my side, I have experience of going through difficult moments, so I think I have something in me that can encourage somebody who is feeling like low, low down there to help them to get back on their feet again. So our plan here [in our Centre] is to get clothing and help in a small way, like maybe we are planning on some Thursday we can offer free coffee here, where people they just come and sit around and – so with time it's difficult. We foresee helping a larger part of the community, the homeless and stuff like that. We believe we can do it. Something, you know. Providing food for the homeless...

Tonight, about eight o'clock. we are starting with, because it's Christian-based -- [but] it's not just for Christians -- we come together to pray, like tonight for an hour. Anybody is invited, whether you are Catholic, you are Muslim, you are whatever. It's a time of getting together to pray for each other. So that is where we are starting. With time I foresee a growth in that, and for the community and for us too, because when you help someone there a fulfillment that you feel inside of you. There's such a joy that I've been a blessing to someone. So we'll see what happens.

Basically the difficulties [I've faced here] would be the immigration [process], having to do, you know... I've not had challenges that much with the people out there except, where I really felt so alone at times was when I had to go through a lot of interrogations. My faith in God helped me to still be here now. So I was really bothered by that, that I could have this story that I knew, that I knew in my heart. I wasn't making it up! It's not because, I know there are some people that basically who can go and say 'you know what, I'm afraid of going back to my country.' That's just for an example. Not because there is something, but because they just

want to be comfortable. Whereas there's you [me, Johanna], you have a genuine thought, a genuine plea [and then] to have somebody just to say, 'no that's not true.' Basically that's the challenge that I face for myself, of not being believed.

And one other thing, the type of job that I was doing too at times would be so challenging. At the call centre, sometimes I would get calls from some people who would be kind of racist. I guess they could hear my accent somehow. They'd say 'go back to your country!' – all those kinds of things. They used to bother me at first but then with time you, people just...But other than that really, I like Windsor. The community is multicultural. That's very important too. Like, see some of us are at home away from home. When I feel like I need some African food I know where to go. I know if I need some African music just to keep me going I know where to go. And things like that make it a good community.

When I first started, before I got a job, I was on social services. Yeah I had that and then I found a job which is great and I had to get off that, which is like a big achievement for me that I have to basically support myself with everything. Social Services...I do appreciate the help, but at I times I feel like – I don't know if it's just me or what – those times I was on social services it was like, ok, you know what? This money, this help, is for free of course but at the same time you're under pressure of having to report this. If for some reason you don't report you know you'll be threatened 'oh, we're gonna take you out.' You don't feel good! I'm not saying - of course since it has to be done in order to...but at those times I would feel like, man, I just want to get out of this because I don't feel comfortable. At the same time I'm being helped and I'm thankful for that but you know it's hard to, you know, it's like I'm not in charge of my life. It's a good place but at the same time, too, it's kind of dark. That's just my opinion.

It was useful. Like I was saying, I'm grateful. If I can just maybe, if I put it into 100 percent I would say probably 80 percent was useful but the rest of like you know those kind of emotional [things], what you had to go through sometimes to keep that going.

You'd feel like...I don't know how to put it. But like I was saying 80 percent was 'now this is good. I have shelter. I've been provided shelter. I'm being helped for food. I have children here.' This and that which is really great. Because, with me, I have these children. I was being helped with their daycare which I really appreciate. I would just drop them there and then go to work and after work pick them up. That's great! And when we'd go home, there would be food. That's great. But at the same time it's like no, my life is in the hands of somebody else. I want to get out of that. It's a good system to be in but I would tell people not to get comfortable and to make their own plans, to find their way.

So, my friends, we were just talking, 'what can we do?' So just doing something like this [their Centre], because it's a free program that's supported by partners who pay 20 dollars per month to keep it going. In my heart I feel, ok, I've been helped by the Canadian government when I first came here. I didn't know where to go, what to do and Social Services was there for me. So that's one way to give back to the community to say I'm thankful. But I wouldn't say that...ok, like we were saying, all these other requirements by Social Services trying to make us feel

uncomfortable. To say 'You know what? I appreciate the help but no I'm not going to be there for long, I need to do something.' That's a good thing too. And I never thought that way until you mentioned it. But you have to think, make some plans. But they did a good job and I'm thankful.

So, basically I don't know if I would say there should be changes but I think sometimes— and maybe I'm wrong to think this way – but sometimes the way that things would be presented to you, you feel... like I was saying, you would be written a letter saying if you don't produce this at a certain date then you are out. I think that's too...too...there would be a nicer way of saying it. Maybe if I missed something or whatever, some way. You can make a mistake! But if you get a letter saying 'we didn't receive this so if not then you're out'. This kind of – I don't know if I'm being too sensitive.

You know! It's not like I don't want to live my life. Right now I'm in transition but ok let's just be nice. Because you are a human being, tomorrow it might be you. And I didn't choose, life just happened. It just happened for me to be in such a situation. I wish that we could just put out the word that let's just do our job but also be sensitive in a way.

I like that the fact that [in Windsor] you see Chinese, Japanese, you see Africans, you see all kinds of people, and this is a beautiful city too. There's not a lot of...Like Toronto is crazy, it's a nice city, but to me, it's too much! But Windsor I also feel safe, even though we are next to Detroit. At night I can just walk here and without feeling like 'oh man somebody might...' I feel so safe! Not to say that we should not take precaution and say that in Windsor we don't shoot up each other, but this is a very nice community. The people here are really nice. Good people. It's a beautiful city. And my children love it too. In the summer, the activities they put aside, what's being offered [is good].

It's only that right now we've been faced with the economic trial but, really, if we go the way that we are, we'll grow. That's keeping the same love, the same momentum of the way we do things; communication, interaction, planning. If we keep the way we are keeping... right now, I think, we can grow and become a better society.

For me, I am business-minded. I don't like nine to five jobs. I like to be in control of my life; setting up my own hours. That's something that even at home that's what I was doing. I just ended up coming here for some reason [laughs]. But, with me, I have faced hard times. It's hard to go to a bank and ask for a loan. It's hard, like you know. Coming as an immigrant plays a part as well. Until you reach a certain immigrant status -- no property, you don't have assets for security. Like, with me, I have already approached banks with this idea of maybe getting a house and do hospitality there and all this. So I [was given] a long list of requirements; a long list of ok this, this and this...Of course you know that's how it's done. But if you are still trying to get your life together, it's very hard.

It's very hard because you have all these [things]...with me, I'm thinking when I want to plan something I'm not just thinking of me. I'm thinking of the next person. I'm thinking of that

one, of the people that are coming, the youth. I'm thinking of a lot of people. So that means I have a very big vision that wants a lot of money. So when I go to the bank I say 'ok, this is my plan, this is what I want.' They go 'Woah, woah, what do you have? Deposit?' I go 'no, I don't have anything.' [laughs] That's the problem. But I don't know how long that's going to take for me to get to that place.

I haven't got a job and I've been looking for over a year and half now. I think maybe the pressure is getting off people because we don't talk that much about it like we used to. Now it doesn't seem so huge. Or is it because we are getting used to it? But you know things will change, we have to just hope it gets better.

One thing too that I would like to point out is that people who are in a low income state, there are people who have hope. There are people who have desires, they have visions and they have plans. So it's not like these are people who – ok I might be wrong – but because I interact with people, [there are] a lot who are saying the same thing: 'I wish I could be in a different place right now because this is my plan.' Like, with me, my desire is to be in a different place. I'd get a very big property and I'm going to do a lot. I'm thinking of women who are being abused and their children. There are men who are being abused. I'm thinking along those lines. Children who don't have homes or in the homes, there's violence. I'm thinking along those areas. I'm thinking of people because I used to have an alcohol problem many years ago, smoking and stuff like that. I know what it's like to be in a situation, so I want to reach out to those kinds of people. And this is not a small vision, it's a big vision.

So I wish that our members of parliament or the government could just know that people...it's not just that they just want to be there and say 'no I'm poor I'm being helped.' No, we are thinking big. We want to do something in our lives and in my heart it is to give back to the community and if we can be given a place and the resources to do that, for free, to change someone's life. Well...

Just to talk to somebody who says 'I feel so discouraged.' I say 'You can do it, because I've done it.' They say: 'I feel like God is so far away from me.' I say 'you know what? God loves you, that's why we are here. He loves you so much that we are connected, get back up and forget the past. Forgive yourself, let God forgive and start all over again.' Because I'm giving up from my experience of what I've seen, not something I've read from a book. Sometimes people say 'oh where have you gone to?' I say I've been to school this long but you know what? I want to rip it up by saying that I'm in the University of Life. That's my school. Life is teaching me something, like when I'm talking to you, there's so many ideas going on in my mind right now.

A place like this one [their Centre is] a start. We're just starting to see how far we can go with it and I foresee it moving from here and expanding. It's just been two months here. It's just new. We are just trying to see what the need is. So we talked to our neighbour, ok, we can start talking to the clinic here. Already we are collecting clothes too because we are planning in summer, when it's nice and warm, we will be giving out clothing. We just bring the cloths we

have collected for free; 'come we have coffee do you need anything thing here?' 'Yes.' 'Come take it for free'. And also on Saturdays we are planning to have a youth program where the young people just can come and just play their games here. We've got trampoline, we'll be playing some videos. Just to be here for an hour, we give them some pizza, they eat, and then they go home. Just to keep them occupied. They get to play their music, you know, those kinds of things. We are targeting the young people, we are targeting the homeless and the needy. And those who sometimes. . . I got a call from my friend in the States that his friend went and hung himself. Just went and committed suicide. This person didn't have anybody to talk to or probably he didn't know he could talk to somebody about it, no matter how deep whatever he was going through. He didn't know there was a place he could go and be accepted for whatever challenge he was facing. So those kinds of things for the community; to know there's a place I can go to and talk to someone in confidence. Why not? So we are just being available as mothers, mothers to the youth and young people.

My children are not just my own. I have to go out there and look for my other kids, these single mothers that don't know what to do with their children. I could give my expertise.

Steve's Story: "It's hard for a newcomer to find a job"

In dialogue with Jeremy and Amy.

In my country [in Southeast Asia] I saw, well, my parents left, and we lived in a refugee camp. When I lived in the refugee camp I had no job, but a lot of people couldn't find a job. A lot of the people were farmers, and we didn't really have a job in the refugee camp. We lived on the border [and] a few years later we left the refugee camp. I don't know I lost the word...

Jeremy: The United Nations?

Steve: Yes, for the refugees...The United Nations collected our people, and they provided food for us. When I lived in the refugee camp, they provided school for the refugees and I started learning in the refugee camp. There was a post-secondary school where we could study a little bit of English...A lot of people live in the refugee camp, 3,000 or 4,000 people. But the buildings are not like this. We did not have electricity and running water.

I was 27 year old when I came to Canada. I have been here three and a half, almost four, years. I came here with my parents. I have a brother, he lives in Manitoba. He first came here to Windsor and then the next year he moved there to get a job there.

I have always stayed in Windsor; I have never gone anywhere. My parents lived here and then they moved to another city. But I stayed here because I got married to my wife, so I stayed here. [My wife and I] lived in the same refugee camp and didn't know each other. There are many people there. It's like a city. We met here and got married here.

Amy: Are there any other experiences like that which happened here?

Steve: For me, here, it is very hard, for me to find a job. Because every place I go to, like the grocery store, I'm not worried to ask for a job there. You need university or post secondary education school here [so] I have to find a job in a restaurant or in a grocery store but no one is [getting back] to me and it's hard for a newcomer to find a job...

The [biggest] barrier for me is probably the language, the English language, and also I need to finish my school in Canada and if I don't finish the post secondary school in Canada then it would be difficult to get a job. I want to get an education, because in my country I had to start in the beginning and the problem for me is that I cannot go farther in it. That's why I want to go back to study because I finished in the refugee camp, I have a certificate...but it does not qualify me for [jobs here]. I don't understand...I have a certificate [but] if I go to the high school, I have no credits. I have to start all over again, to get all the credits again. That's why it's very difficult to continue my education.

[Here] they don't provide education, they just help with the language, to learn the language. It is helping me a lot. If you speak English you can talk with people in the community and if you cannot speak English then you can't talk. It's a more easy life for you to live in this community. When I first came to Canada I had to go see a doctor and I had a friend who helped me go to the doctor – that's when my English was limited. That's when the doctors told me you have to find an interpreter to help you, but I cannot find an interpreter. I have no money to pay the interpreter and also I do have a friend who speaks the language like me. We have the same immigrant [status], the same year, so we still have a hard time finding an interpreter and finding a job. Well there are a few local people who do [interpreter] jobs. The MCC, the Multicultural Centre, they help newcomers, but they really don't find interpreters because all the people from my country came in the same year. I just go to the YMCA and the MCC. Yes just two. A lot of the time I come to the YMCA here; they have a program to help newcomers and also the MCC, I go there to get ahead.

I don't think I have any other problems just the difficulty with finding a job.

Oh yes sometimes the neighbourhood is a problem. My neighbours are students, they are young teenagers; they have a party every Friday and sometimes... Because they are Canadian, and we are newcomers, I am very afraid to go to talk to them, very afraid to go to see them and talk to them and sometimes I have to go because they are loud. But the other neighbours are very nice. I never call the police. My friend calls the police, and the police come. I do not want to call them over, so other people do.

As a dad I have the responsibility for everyday in the house or the apartment. There was one time when my daughter was sick and I was responsible to take care of her, to go to the hospital or to the medics. I...yes, I cook all the time, sometimes my wife cooks and sometimes I cook, we don't have a problem. I like to cook food [from my country].

I have not applied for Canadian citizenship. I want to apply, but I can't yet. I plan to apply. I am waiting for something, because I need to change my name because I don't have a last name I just have Steve. I'm Steve Steve. That's why I have to change my name before I apply to become a Canadian citizen.

Yes there are a lot of barriers because I already have been to the lawyer to change my name, but the lawyer told me I need to get my father's birth certificate. I had to call my father to send me the birth certificate but he doesn't live here and I have to get a certified document. He told me that he didn't know how to do that, because the lawyer needs it certified. I don't know how to. Then my dad told me he didn't know how to go see a lawyer because he doesn't know how to speak good English. I don't know -- maybe the government [could] provide help for this.

It is better to live here, we have a lot of newcomers here and they need help and they can really get it. It is easier to get help in Windsor.

I was a farmer, my parents were farmers. We all did farming. Then we moved to the refugee camp, and we could not find a job in the refugee camp. I don't know how to [farm] in Canada. I have no friend, no one, to help me do that. We grew rice, and vegetables, some of the vegetables were cucumbers, corn, beans, so many kinds.....

Amy: Tomatoes and cucumbers and all that, like in Leamington? It's one hour away.

Steve: Ah yes I have been there. I already went there to get a job, but they don't want to pay me by cheque. They pay me cash, and I don't want that because I have to report [the money I make] to the government. They pay me cash, and I don't want to do that because it's harder to apply to social assistance. Because when they pay me in cash, I don't have a pay stub. At the end of the year, I need to report to the government and I can't do that [with cash payments]. That's why it's very hard for me. Some of my friends work there [and get] the government cheque. But because they pay me in cash, I don't want to do that.

Jeremy: Did you like farming?

Steve: Yes I love to do that job. But it's not easy to get to that job. You need a car or you need some way to go to a job there [in the County]. I don't have a car, and think that I'm going to move there or get out of the city or move to another city, I'm thinking right now. No bus goes to Leamington. Yeah that's why. If we had a bus it would be easy to get a job there but, no, I'd have to move to Leamington or get out of the city or move to another city, I think.

The social assistance? They provide me with money to live, to pay the rent or the food. Yes it helps my family a lot. Because we don't have a job, we cannot get any money for anything so the social assistance allows me the money to live or to pay the rent in the city. Ah, it's not really enough but it is good – not bad – it helps my family, it helps my friends, to live in the city before you get a job.

Ah yes, but we have a lot of problem with the social assistance – sometimes we don't get the cheque and I have to call the people who work at MCC. I call them [social assistance] and they don't respond to my call. I have to call MCC and the MCC will call for me. Sometimes they don't pay me the cheque by the end of the month but I have to pay the rent. I have no money. If I don't pay, I have to get out of the home. So I call them. I leave the message that says they will call me back. That's why I like to go to the MCC; they call them for me. The social assistance and my case worker will call the MCC and talk to the MCC. Sometimes they don't want to talk to me and don't call me back. The MCC, they solve the problem – not quickly, but they solve the problem. Two or three days after and it's solved, they try to solve it. Their work is very good on this.

I guess I want to change the social assistance programs. I want maybe for my case worker to be better. I want them to see my problem. Sometimes they don't see my problem. Sometimes for no reason they do a late payment. Without any reason they do a late payment. I need a reason, but they offer no reason. Sometimes they do late payments. That's when I'm very

worried for paying the rent. It's a problem. There was a problem with my case worker. I had already sent in my daughter's birth certificate. I sent it in already but they didn't receive it on time and they stopped the payment. Ah, I don't know, they stopped my payments. They stopped for not a long time but for one or two weeks they stopped.

The case workers...lots of caseworkers are different, not the same. Some case workers do the direct payment to the landlord. Some they send you a cheque, and you have to pay by yourself. My landlord is very nice to me, if we need two or three days or one week or two. I talk to my landlord before I get the cheques or because I didn't receive a cheque. I have to talk to my landlord about the problem. He's very nice to us. I have to wait for my caseworker to give us money.

But, before, we were in a problem with another landlord. He was not good. He'd say if you don't have the money tomorrow you have to get out. So, I had to borrow the money from my friend, because I had no money. Otherwise my family [couldn't] live here. I borrow the money from my father to get some money for the food. I have to take the money from my father and give it to the landlord. In the next few days, my case worker sent me a cheque and I give [the money] back. So sometimes they do the late payment without reason. That's the main problem, we need to change that problem.

I don't really know yet if it would be good to move or stay here. Not sure right now. Maybe I will go to move to Manitoba with my brother and maybe get a job there. A lot of people go there for a job, everybody has a job. Like in the restaurant or in the grocery store, but in Windsor no one can get a job in a restaurant or in a grocery store. I have no friends getting a job in a grocery store. I want to work but there's no...hardly, no jobs, so I'm assuming no one's going to give one to me.

I like Windsor because the weather is good, better than other cities. But sometimes when we have a lot [of snow] it's not good. Some days it makes our lives very hard.

Amy: The people in Windsor, are they nice? When you go grocery shopping or something is everybody nice around you?

Steve: Yes they're nice. Sometimes they make me angry. Not everybody is nice. But not everybody is angry. I don't need help [grocery shopping]. I can do that. When I first came, the MCC have people who work with the new immigrants. They sent me out to go to the grocery store and they taught to us to do it. My brother told me that in Manitoba they go to school like this [but] his teacher finds jobs for him. That's why he likes it.

I need – we need – more programs with jobs for newcomers [here]. Because there are no people here, we don't have people [from my country] who have already lived in Windsor. Other people are already here for people from Africa, so they already have a friend when they move and it's very easy for them to get a job and to do something in the community. Because we're the first immigrants, it's hard for us. We consider ourselves the first immigrants, so that's why

it's hard for us, very hard. Everything we have to start by ourselves. No friends are here who can help us do things....it's very hard.

Right now it's the business problem in the Windsor, especially Windsor. That's why it's very hard to get a job. I'm not blaming the community. It is a business problem; that's why it is a problem for the community and the problem then for the newcomer – [But] not only for the newcomer.

Jeremy: For your daughter, do you see her being able to succeed going to school here?

Steve: I think she will succeed because she was born here, so she needs to succeed. She has to. She was born here and she has to try hard because, for me, it is not easy for me.

Candice: "I haven't quite figured out yet if I'm stuck"

In dialogue with students Tonya and Amalia

I grew up a little bit all over the place. I guess I will simplify by saying that I've lived in Ontario the longest I have lived anywhere in my life. My childhood was spent in the West. My dad was in the Canadian Army, so he worked for the military and then, when I was about 15 months old, we moved to Saskatchewan, and he went to work for the Canadian Air Force. My parents actually had two postings to Germany: one, before I was born, from 1966 to 1969 (I was born in 1971) and they took a posting again to West Germany to the Canadian Forces base there from 1977 to 1980. So I actually went to public school for three years, grades one, two and three, on a Canadian Forces base in Germany. And then we came back to Saskatchewan in 1980 and we stayed there until 1982. My dad retired after 22 years in the services and because my father's family was pretty much (I guess I can generalize and say) from Windsor/Essex County and my mom's family was from a small community east of Chatham, they came to Ontario. We ended up in Chatham for 7 years and I did my high schooling there. My father had worked in the transport sector of the Canadian Military, so he was heavy equipment and he drove tractor trailer. He worked with a trucking company in Chatham that was looking to move. They had found a yard in Ruthven and he had been commuting for a couple years.

I was in an age where I was getting into a little bit of trouble, when I was 17, and some people told my parents to be very thankful because I was a late bloomer. [laughs] I'm an only child as well so, you know, I grew up as that sort of child, quote unquote, lonely only. And then being away, being away from family, I didn't really know anyone so there's always been a degree of disconnect because we weren't closely involved. Then in 1989 we moved here because my dad was tired of commuting to the trucking yard. He had a brother and sister who lived here. We did look around Essex County but found that, you know, that it was kind of nicer here and you know the high school may be better and I think that pretty much I've just been here ever since. Except when I met and married my husband in 1993, and then there were a lot of problems with my parents. There had been a previous separation and stuff and they were going through a divorce when maybe I was 21. I was kind of forced to move out. I was staying with my dad and he couldn't keep me and I was an adult so I was trying to make it on my own.

There are a lot of different things, like I did have an unplanned pregnancy at 18 and that didn't turn out right because the fetal development was very mutated. And I had applied to college. I was looking at going into conservation work for the Ministry of Natural Resources, so I would have gone to Sir Standard Fleming in Lindsay. But I kind of seem to have a trend in life of (I call them) incompletes, or there's just always, kind of like my lot in life is that nothing ever seems to go right for me. I didn't have the supports, there were no savings, so I didn't have like a college fund or anything. Whatever RSPs my dad had, he had to cash in. There was also mental illness. I have a parent with a personality disorder. It seemed to be a pretty comfortable lifestyle, but it was like hand to mouth. You know: he worked, my mom spent. He couldn't seem to keep on top of things. Like, even in Saskatchewan, when there was an economic crisis, and mortgages went through the roof, and people were putting their keys in the mailbox and

walking out – and at one time he was working three jobs to support the household. So, in some ways, you know, I was detached from my dad, I didn't really know him as a child growing up because he was always working and so he was kind of like never there, even as an adult.

I married young and I was just getting to know [my dad]. In 1994, we moved to North Bay, Ontario for about 2 years. In 1996 (...it might get a little emotional), I got the dreaded phone call, like he had had already been involved in a motorcycle accident two years before. The leg wasn't mending well, there were a lot of surgeries, and they had wanted to amputate. They had tried contacting family, in that year, so that was about 1994, my daughter was just born and stuff. So I've had a lot of dynamics, a lot of things, and we were up North and he had come up for a visit at Christmas. I didn't know he had hidden it from me; he did say he was going to go in for a routine physical to find out why the last little bit of his leg wasn't mending and that's when they found the lung cancer and it was terminal. They gave him 3 to 6 months. My second child was born in North Bay and, ah, he wanted to try and preserve and prolong his life to maybe have some viability in the children's minds but it didn't quite work out that way.

We left North Bay in 1996 because the economy up there, that's when the Mike Harris regime came in, the severe cuts and you know we're still feeling the effects now of what Mr. Harris had adopted in the province and the cuts to the social service program. And the expenses, even the cost of living up there was astronomical. The employment factor was a little of a different environment, because either you work in a logging camp or the trucking industry or there's nothing. And they even have a NATO base up there. They were transferring everything, they were shutting like three quarters of it down and so then we decided to come back home and get whatever little time I could with my dad. Unfortunately, the cancer was ravaging his body and I don't think he was really in his right mind and I had roughly 6 weeks with him before he was gone.

My marriage started to implode probably after we came back. We were living in Wheatley in about 1996 or 1997, and then we moved back here. And we always seemed to be in these emergency kinds of situations. We started to have a lot of financial difficulties and things like that and I started picking up on my husband's problems. One is that he was not responsible for his family. We could never figure out why rent cheques were bouncing, utility shut off notices, you know, all these kinds of things. And we were fighting a lot. We had at one point (I think they call it, I'm not sure) a trusteeship, or whatever, where it's literally like social services paying your bills. You are not allowed to touch the money. They appointed his brother as guardian because he used to have a really good relationship with his brother. It's kind of weird I guess [laughs] because I'm very responsible and I could be in control of the household. But he was working (and for a while we were not on social services) [and yet] he was not being responsible for providing for the household; I couldn't really get access to the money if he wasn't putting it into the bank. We were starting to have some warfare because you have babies to tend to. I just had the two children at first. My daughter was quite young yet, about two to three years of age.

I'm kind of back-stepping here but, as luck would have it, there used to be a community agency where you went if you have stressors with parenting and stuff like that and my daughter was quite unusual and extraordinary. She had almost a hyper-acuity where she was so aware of things and she had some behaviours I didn't understand. This started when we lived in North Bay. They had a lot of really good programs, and then again the one really excellent parenting program got cut. Funding service cuts and stuff like that, that was the whole Mike Harris thing, so there went that. I had called in some people, and my mom would interfere a lot because she wanted control and dominion of the household (but we'd be here for a week if I started explaining all that because it persists and there are still a lot of grievances now because of it). So I had called an agency and it had Children's Aid right in the name so I thought excellent: it's a society that aids children, so I phoned them. But it came around to a point where they couldn't properly evaluate my daughter unless they took her on a care agreement, and I'm still oblivious, I have no idea what this is. And then I was kind of ticked off at my husband because I remember the day the care worker came and I signed the papers, I was feeding the baby and I tried to get him involved in the decision making and he was just indifferent to it. And so I just, because, something, and probably when you become parents you will have this intuition, and this instinct seemed not right. Why do you want to take my child to another home? And why are you saying you can't evaluate her unless you have her 24 hours to see what's going on? So that was kind of step one in the chain reaction of things; she went into their care. And then I tried to terminate the service agreement, as they said you could, voluntarily, in writing, and it was difficult to get a hold of people. Calls went unreturned. Excuses came back. I was becoming physically ill because it finally clicked in, and I thought what are you doing? I, I just gave my daughter away to strangers. And I don't know I just couldn't shake this feeling. It didn't feel right. I tried to get her back, I couldn't get her back. I got served with court papers, that I had no knowledge of, I didn't understand.

Kind of ironically, after we moved back here, we got her back by default. Several months later she went into living in one jurisdiction, the original orders stemmed from North Bay and they slapped a supervision order on my son. My son was still at home and this was the notorious Children's Aid Society, so way back even in 1996. My daughter went to stay with my in-laws for about 6 months and that's when we got her back by default in November of 1996. But by December of 1997, the marriage was starting to unravel. My husband just went from being rather ordinary, we had our bumps, to strange, like somebody had flipped a light switch. But he was very quiet and very reserved, and this happened on Boxing Day. We were at the family's place for Christmas celebrations and he was avoidant and he was detached from the children. And he was spending more time away from the home. Just bordering on January 1998, I found newspapers with apartments circled. He was trying to tell me he was looking for something better for us? I kind of suspected that he was associating with this one older female, and I again started to get that instinct that he was pursuing other women.

It very quickly got much worse: 1998 was a very brutal year, it was like bloody warfare. He moved out, he denounced his family, his children; it was very bitter and very hostile. I find out I was pregnant again. My mother-in-law wanted me to terminate. I was just beside myself; there

was no way I could provide for a third child. I got this ridiculous idea, I had an appointment with a worker looking at the feasibility of adoption and then, again, I just gave my head a shake and was like: what are you doing? We'll fight through this. So I closed the package and the worker left. I had my third child under horrible circumstances because the Children's Aid Society was still involved. Sometimes I don't know, when I reflect on it, how I was able to manage the house. I was a single parent because I had an absentee husband, the harder I tried to make him responsible the harder it was on me and destroying the family. We tried to have a working separation, but it wasn't really. He wasn't involved with the kids, and we didn't go through separation agreements. So struggling through that and trying to make him compliant with certain agreements. There was a lot of mental cruelty and physical abuse and the police were there like all the time. When I say bloody warfare, I mean bloody warfare, I had bruises and usually he was the one that was bleeding. It took a lot to self-defend. Children's Aid never disengaged, they were always there mentoring. I was forced into a position where it was like I was standing out on the front lawn crying, the police are here, the workers here, and everything always seemed to fall on, rested on me. I felt like I always had to justify and defend. I always felt trapped in the middle.

And you have an agency, I still didn't know a lot about their powers of intervention and what can happen. They're standing there on the spot, in the moment saying: either you do this or we take your kids right now. My whole world would come crashing down around me and despite having family members in the area, there is a degree of disconnect. They don't know me, I don't really know them. They don't want to get involved at this point. I had to sign my new born child into foster care, which put another black strike against me because it came up later on in life. I didn't do it because he needed to be protected; I did it because the worker also saw what choice I had. I was going to be in a hospital for a week, I had no one to care for oldest two children. And my husband's not there because he's with an eighteen-year-old year he met off of a chat line and left me a thousand dollar bill for. I had a borderline husband, and a borderline mother and they were both fighting over me and my kids for dominion and control and ownership.

So I had a meltdown, I came unglued. I pushed the envelope one last time with my in-laws, and a lot of things were taken out of context and I did, poor judgment call, but I left in the early morning hours and I left the children in care with my brother-in-law and they went to the authorities. Because my husband and I were separated for months, he told them that the children had been abandoned. After a year of litigation, and the negligent Windsor lawyers, in the final hearing of a Crown [they ruled] award-ship without access, which means the full transfer of parental ownership and its full power to the Crown. In October 2001, the order was made by default. Literally, overnight, as soon as the children were gone into care, and I didn't even know this, there were accessibility issues. I was told I was very fortunate. Because I was responsible, I had my first and last month's rent paid so I got an extended stay in my house or else I would probably have 30 days to be out. Everything came due on my husband's birthday, so it was just like a snowball effect. The transmission on the car, the muffler was going, the license was coming due, the plates were coming due, and the insurance was coming due. I

went from \$1500-\$1600 a month to like \$400, overnight. Thirty days to be out of my house, but there is actually squatter's rights, so I pulled that under a domestic clause. I ended up in a room share with some crazy half-baked [person], who basically almost tried to kill me one night and I locked myself in the bathroom. He tore the place inside out. It took 4 police constables to take him down outside.

So I'm trying to pack up out of there, hold down a job, find someplace to live. I get into another room share; I'm undergoing child protection proceedings. You have to have stability; you have to show all this kind of stuff, and again I kind of get squeezed into a corner because of my husband. I was always sleep-deprived and under stress, and I really feel like I pulled off miracles. I lived somewhere else where I got robbed blind. I had told the Windsor Essex Children's Aid that I would get my own place inside of a month. I had over \$1200 in savings, and first and last [rent] on a two bedroom apartment, but nothing was ever good enough. Wherever they set the bar, they set it for you to fail because as soon as you achieve it, they move it and tell you that you are not compliant. I was in crisis, legal aid failures; I had to have an income evaluation...

An education isn't really your ticket out either. I don't see it as kind of like your "go pass". Because there is so much stuff in the economy, whether it is geography or it just seems to be a little bit too daunting and overwhelming in some senses...I [would have to] turn around and take this huge risk, and there are all these things that people don't seem to understand, like with this stuff that no one expects, after 10-11 years, this business with my kids is not resolved...again that lot in life I seem to have, all these things...and I always seem to be in a position within my marriage and all that, you know, domestic violence. If I wanted to keep my butt out of the fire I always had to fix it for him too. So I never really saw it before because I don't see myself as a kind of pious people-pleaser type person, but I was... if I gave up my housing, they're like: 'oh, well, put it in for a transfer'...there's waitlists, 7, 12, 14, 20 years? I did that once because there was something a little different going on, and I don't know the particulars, but I thought I may move into Windsor, but the funny thing is, I made this application probably about 7 years ago for the transfer and last year is when I got the notification like: 'oh, we got the place for you. Are you willing to accept it?', well now I'm not in a position to move and I really don't see that as a go pass, you're just in a different place with a new set of challenges. I don't know, it became...my focus was trying to reset the balance of relationships with my children and I've always sort of been like that even in my marriage and employment, and I finally said, hey, I'm a nonconformist and pressured to fit this model to do this and do that and I hope this doesn't sound arrogant or anything or oppositional but I'm like, you know, I'm not here to serve society. I'm not here for that purpose. I kind of found my purpose. I don't specifically set out to take from anybody, and I've had some [people] that feel that. Because I used to be kind of co-dependent on social services, now it's kind of a full dependency, [but] it kind of comes back that I contribute in some ways for what I take. There are a lot of people who don't adopt that attitude. Some people are, like, 'So what? You do advocacy work and volunteer'. You know, again, I get called some exploitative words because it's like I'm giving my talents and gifts away for free, and everything is always [supposed to] be

about money and to capitalize from that. You know, how can I sell myself? Or how can I make money from my brain? I do help people and they don't know sometimes how it is benefiting. This court case and my experience with my children have left a bit of a legal legacy in Ontario. When I depart this service, am I going to be told job well done?

I don't know, but I'm trying and I get by. Yeah I struggle with my lifestyle [limitations]. Yeah it's frustrating, it's hard. I have a circulatory disorder, kind of like a skin condition, where I live in the most climactic place in all of Canada and yet I take a chill. I layer up. I'm not young anymore and I have a little pull-along shopping cart...My bicycle is my transportation. It has been for a lot of years. There is that domino effect, where everything fell away a lot of years ago. It's almost too simple: you plop down your chunk of money - not that I haven't had a hundred dollars or whatever it is but, again, we don't have the drivers' testing here anymore, that was pulled out years ago, it's all in Windsor. So I'm like..I don't have a car, so I can't drive anything, I'm not licensed. Too easy. How am I getting to Windsor? Are you taking me? No one is willing to do that or offer it. There is a lot of "I" factor, and selfishness of the I, and in some ways poverty hurts in a whole different way [because of it]. But, as much as I'm isolated and alone, it's kind of funny the way the universe works, like it took everything having to fall away for me to have peace and security myself. No one can hurt me but me, really. And, I don't know, for some reason I don't feel under the threat of homelessness and stuff like that and no one has ever looked at this dark reality again because I have been here for 7 and a half years. I've had pretty much the same income for that whole time and living on a puny little less than six thousand a year and it's become a little bit of a science to me now because I am so accustomed to living like that and knowing how to make do. But there is never any money for any entertainment or stuff like that and undergarments are not really a justifiable expense for social services because they have clothing allowances for employment related things and I found ways to get things. Footwear is a hard commodity. Boots are expensive and sometimes it's hard to justify you know - you can't just go out and get a pair of sandals for summer. But you can do something like, oh, I need running shoes because you know I am volunteering and I'll be doing this. So it becomes interesting.

I'm kind of lucky in the sense of living here. It's walking distance and its right on the bus route to everything, to one of our main grocery stores. Now the city can only expand one way, so everything all the business and development is all going down by the lake so winter time is tough for me because of, again, costs and inflation. We have a flat rate taxi you girls aren't familiar with at all. I remember back in the day the cab used to be like four dollars and you could go anywhere you wanted, and if you wanted to go out to the outskirts and the concessions it was a couple of dollars more...Now it's up there, it's \$6.50, so you can go to the end of the block at \$6.50 or you can go from here to way out to the other side of town for \$6.50 but that's not within my means. I have a 40 dollar a week budget and that has to cover food and miscellaneous, my laundry, my transportation that's everything. I have gone to the grocery store and gotten basic needs and already it's, like, bam! \$40 dollars! Or in one shopping trip, I eat up two week's budget, so I have to make that last two weeks. I can't tap into any more reserves and, I don't know, I'm not sure, something may come up. That's

something: we say a lot of what "ifs". Like, oh, what if this happens, what if? You have nothing to draw on and I used to have a lot of what ifs. I've had times where I've been on the phone with [name], I don't know how she did it but she put me under some allowance and shot me a couple of dollars.

But I'm thinking everything has a cap on it. Everything has a limit. This could go on for me for another ten years. I can't have anymore expectations about people rescuing me. I've already more than extensively shown [that isn't going to happen]. Many years ago that was a big thing too. For example, if you have children at home and you have to go to work and you can't afford day care, I've been there too. And they'll say: 'oh, leave your kids with a neighbour. Well, don't you have family? Well, get your family to drive you to this or get family to take you here' and then I would explain the disconnect and I'm like I have to do everything for me because if I don't do it, it doesn't get done. There is no one to take care of me but me. And even when my children are grown as adult children I can't expect them to take care of me. Sometimes there's a guilt factor, and that's another thing, you were asking about kind of what hinders. I've had a lot of people tell me as soon as my children were made Crown wards, because I [now] have access, I should let everything go. So, like, 'you can't afford to have them.' That...I felt you might as well put a stake through my heart. How can you just turn around and...I went around for a while a little disgusted and reserved. I didn't communicate. I didn't socialize with people because they kept telling me things like this. And they're, like, 'what would you do, raise your kids on welfare? Why are you fighting so hard to have them when you can't take care of them anyway?'

I came from a freaky background. It wasn't because of my dad. I knew by the time I was ten, I didn't understand what I knew, but these two people didn't belong together. And I used to pray that I would have a sibling and now as an adult I partially feel guilty for that because I was just looking for some relief that my mother could go beat on my brother for awhile because she would never leave me alone. I don't know, even back in the 1970s or 80s or whatever, I didn't know there was child protection or social services. I was just a little kid in Saskatchewan and running around in the fields chasing tumbleweed down the road. I didn't get much of an allowance but I used to go scoop up all of the change from the bottom of the pool, me and my girlfriend, because I'd get the devil if I ever got caught with candy, and we used to sneak off to the candy store...

But I have found my path. Most people are miserable in their jobs. I know there are some people that love their job or they have a passion for it, but generally you hear people complain. I keep thinking Windsor is huge, factory-industrial, and they work factory job shift work and I'm, like, not me. It's like robots in a row. You go to work, you punch out, come home, you eat and sleep and shower and you have, like, no life. And somehow now I get satisfaction out of helping other people, like Christ capitalized, in what he gave to mankind. Somehow it will come to me if it comes to me. Right now, it is what it is. I don't know; some people are kind of tired of hearing that it is what it is. But I really, really struggled and was at odds, making myself sick and breaking myself down. That's another thing with poverty: if you start tearing yourself down

and feeling like less of a person because of where you are at in life, no matter what put you there, you can't progress. You stay stuck. I haven't quite figured out yet if I'm stuck. Because I do see an eternal cycle here and I know it's not going to magically happen that I'm going to end up in a relationship, and that's my ticket out. Because I sort of did that in another way and I didn't really see it until several years back. I did not marry my husband for love or money because he had neither and I didn't love him. I grew to love him. I married him for his family. That sounds kind of kooky but what it was...it was that unity and that traditionalism and I saw this wonderful family and I wanted a part of that.

Yasmeen: "I expected something when I came and I found nothing"

In dialogue with Ethan and Marianna

I grew up [in the Middle East]. I released my name to the UN so they told me I was approved to come to Canada, because they send me a visa, like a special visa, for widows or divorced. I am a widow, so the Canadians sent me a visa and then after maybe one year and four months I came here to Canada. First I came to Quebec City. I waited for ten days. I looked for an apartment. I didn't find one, so I came to Windsor.

There was war in my country. Also they treated me badly there, so I moved to Syria and after that I moved to Beirut. Syria is also not good because it is high for the rent. I don't have money; if I want food, there is no foundation. Someone advised me to go to Beirut, 'Beirut is good because there are fewer refugees, so they have more money.' But in Beirut there are more refugees so there is no more money. So then I wait and come here.

When I come here, I feel disappointment. Everything I expected, I expected something when I came and I found nothing.

You dream of something, like finding a job, finding more help, but I didn't find this.

I don't know. When I came here I found out that I have hepatitis B. This also disappointed me. Also I looked [for] a job to improve my life, [but] I do not find. Also the health unit, they [do not like me to] meet people, to deal with people. Like if you want marry you must not – no. If you want to eat with the people, because you have hepatitis, don't share with them. They [want] me to avoid people, so I stay alone. Now I avoid the people. I avoid...because we are Arab, we can connect with the women, but I [have to] avoid them and I stay at home.

There was a war in my country. My father was also... he treated me badly. I was 13. I got married and after, I don't know, one year, my husband, he died. I go back to my family. We are Arab so [my father] told me you are bad luck, your husband, he died. After that I try and go to school because in our tradition if someone, if a woman, if her husband dies, she stays at home until she dies. They don't let her to go out to find a job or to study. [But] after that I go to school. I finish the university. I found a job [...] If you are looking for a job back home, there it is not like here. Back home, they depend on the girl's relationship to the man, the sponsor. The supervisor, he hires you first but after that [...] after maybe 6 months, 7 months, they let [laid] me off. I didn't like it and I stopped [looking] and I don't go out. It's very bad back home. Also we lack the gauze and benzene; I suffer a lot.

There is a security here, but I didn't find a connection to the people, because when they tell me you have hep B you just stop meeting people and also my community. A lady she... if there is news or a party or somewhere to go to, she call me and she come pick me up and I go with her in her car. She also has 4 kids, but now she stopped it, when I told her what the health unit told me, because I eat in her house. I use the spoon. They told me like the bacteria is on the spoon. So I told her please make the appointment for the hep [test] so she asked me what is

hep and I told her and she felt very angry. I told her you and your kids...after that, she had a blood test and when [the doctor] told her ok, she cut the relationship [with me]. So I stay at home and no one calls me now. Also because I am Muslim, I suffer in my building. There are many, they speak bad to me.

I called the man from the coordinate, from the CHC [Community Housing]. He came to my house and I speak with him and explain that I want to move now. He told me it is difficult to move because there are many procedures. I told him sometimes when I use the elevator there is a lady that drinks and, I don't know, I want her to lift the elevator, and she says no. There is also a man. He told me that 'I want you to be my friend.' He followed me and I tried to go call the police. After that he follow me again when I see him on the bus. So I left the bus and he follow me and told me you must be my friend. I am told he's not like good and when you see in his face, like his clothes is bad. I don't know, he's behind my building. I changed the route. I'm afraid of him. Also when I left the building in the morning I saw him sit in the back table. There is a garden; he was looking for me. When I took the elevator I saw him behind me, and I said how can you enter from the building where I live? He told me the access, the exit door, you can enter the whole building because they gave him access to the exit door. So he can open the side building, back building, front building, so he can open the whole building and he can enter my building any time he wants he told me. After that when they open the elevator, he told me he was entering the elevator. I told him, 'No go take the stairs.' Like he wants revenge.

He told me, this man from the coordinator, to go call the police. No, we are enough calling the police. Back home we don't make the problem with the people. He told me while you are here, attend to your house and the police attend to his house. And this man he is still behind my building. If I call the police, he revenge, he revenge, and because [if] I called the police they [could take] him to the station or something.

They told me [at immigration] to be careful if somebody gives you Kleenex because they told me when I came here, they give me, like the immigration, he told me when I came, he told me 'be careful of this' because he knew. You don't know what happens to some of my people. He told me if he found someone in the corner or he wanted to put something in your mouth or if you [smell] something like [sniffing sound] this is maybe a drug. You are also to be careful when you drink and you go out to visit someone and in school if there is someone who is not Arabic, don't drink water or juice because someone [may have] put something in it. This is a problem, he told me. This month I went to the office and [but] he won't do nothing for me [to help me move].

Also when I enter my building they let the dog bark. I want to enter the lobby to take the elevator, they let him just like...yes, run. After that he said like 'come, come.' I don't know what his name is. I was still outside. So I limit my going out. I don't go out a lot, only to school [English course] and when I return I buy everything, the food, at 1 o'clock. I stay at home at 2 o'clock. Yes now when I return I stay at home until tomorrow.

Yes, so, I feel unsafe and I was told to call the case worker. Maybe she [could] change [the] place. When I talked to her about the stuff and how much she gives me for the rent and I took a payment from Ontario Works they give me, because I live in the CHC apartments, they give me \$200, \$115 for the rent and for the food \$221 for food and also because I am sick, special diet of \$50 dollars. When I told them I want to change buildings they told me that she gave you \$370 and you must put it in your pocket. I told them I don't have enough money. She tells you 'this is the limitation.'

The medical... they give me all I want. The medicine is free but some vitamins I buy. I buy them from my buddy. What else? I have the problem, I told the case worker, the blood, the blood, the blood. I told them it comes twice, I'm sick twice a month. I say if I bring to you the report from the medical that shows you that I'm sick, can I get extra money to buy the, the, uh... for me? They told me 'no', they don't give money for this. So I put like some of my money, so I put some money [aside].

Twice a month, I told [her] this. I'm sick. How can I twice a month and then [be] refused? They follow the law. You must find a job she told me. I told them before I worked hard to find a job, when I came. I took the course in customer service and in the culture centre. I took the work placement in the Radisson hotel, the one here. After that, I asked if there is a job and she told me no because the economy, there is no jobs, and I don't give up. I go to this the building 500. So after maybe like 2 months I took a work placement in [a Centre]. I'm active; I go every day. You must choose like maybe in a week you go twice or three times but no I go every day. I learn after that they told me this shop is volunteer, 'we don't hire the staff. It's all volunteer.' So they have students and if someone is in high school, they have after school hours.

I tell them I want to learn [to be a] cashier. Cashier is easy, like at the Radisson, at the front desk. I want to learn filing, how to print, or how to make a reservation for the guest. But now somebody advised me go to look in for a cashier and learn a cashier, if you go look in a store you might find and I took the customer service course in the filing. I asked if you have a work placement, are you looking for a cashier? She told me, she advised me, to go to [the Centre]. It's not easy to find a job and now also I'm ah, I feel sick. Yes, I feel weak. Before I felt active. This is in October, they tell me I have hep, so they give me the medicine so now I feel exhausted.

And there is no relation [social contact]. I know an Arabic student before the customer service course, the relationship as a student, but they avoid me. I don't know why. Maybe they're scared. I work hard and I say to the lady 'hi, how are you?' They're my age and I say to her 'Let's go to the Tim Horton' but she said 'I am busy.' I don't know. Also when I like met a man also my age, but he is from South Africa, when I met him, 'Hi, how are you?' like I ask, 'How is school? How are the children?', but umm, 'We are busy'. I don't know. There is no... I'm also, 'give me your telephone number [to] I call you' but, no, they refuse. They don't know [whether] they want a relation [with a] Muslim, and Muslims we suffer really.

In the Food Basic store, the lady who [doesn't] like Muslims, [she says] 'you are shameful; you are in Canada, [so] you must to be like Canadians. You are not to put on the scarf.' And she speak bad about us. I also suffer when I go to the library. I know some ladies... I told her please this DVD doesn't work between chapters I tell her to put something to fix it. I know this lady when she says 'yes, can I help you?' I said 'please this DVD.' She is silent, she don't like me. I tell her you must put some paper or something... but she don't like me, she don't speak to me when I tell her the DVD isn't working. So when I see her, I know she is not like...she's not friendly. When I say to her 'good morning,' she doesn't answer me.

[But] we are here lucky, because...not like in my country, [here] they give us the bus pass which is good, I use it [...] and for maybe one year I have begged [the case worker] to give me money for clothes and finally she gives me 15 dollars because I'm always 'please, please, please.' Before, she refused. When I told her I want this for me, she refused, and I call her again and she refused.

I live in a bachelor, not a one bedroom. I also have bed bugs, twice, so I called them to clean it and I called them another time. I threw out the bed; it is new and I throw it in the garbage. Someone told me we must, we have to clean it. They don't only spray your apartment, they need to spray all the building when it happens for someone in one apartment, you must spray. So they always return...and [the building] is very dirty. I always goes to the lady office and told her please go to the building on the second floor, there is like garbage they throw it [down the chute], but they don't clean it; they are lazy. Now I give up. I always go to this lady from the office because I tell them, and now I just take my garbage outside this building I live in.

I didn't choose this building. This lady [her case worker], she selected the building. She told me this is downtown and it is good because it is near the Arab shop and the restaurant so it was good, I thought. Also [one time] I told this man I want to sleep but the music is loud and the police won't come. There are many problems to sleep... there are just many problems.

I would like to take more customer service [courses] because maybe we are lucky to find a job [after the work placement], but [the case worker] refused. She said 'no, you must go to school.' If I tell her no I want to go to customer service [because] maybe there is a change, she just refuses. When I tell her, 'Look, I took customer service. I work hard. I volunteer,' she told me no. She threw it in the garbage. She said you must go to school. Now I take the [English] class.

And I'm looking for maybe there is a chance for cashier or something in cleaning, but she refuses. They refuse, they refuse, they refuse and I feel disappointed and I feel sick so I don't deserve to go to work because they always refuse.

Like she encouraged me to find a job, she tells me to go find a job, but how can I? You must have something that they give you direct, because if I go, if I say I want to volunteer, they refuse [because] you must be someone they know, you understand me?

They need to know your name, your address, so if something is stolen from the shop they know, so someone [needs to] know you. After that ...

Ethan and Marianna: What can you tell someone to help them out in their future, if somebody is trying to do the same thing you did like coming to Canada?

Yasmeen: I advise them to volunteer; it is good to volunteer so you can contact with the people, so you can speak with them, even [so] you can have a relationship. I met people from [the Centre] so I speak with them and I try to... they correct the sentence, they help you. They helped me a lot, they are like friends, they are colleagues. They teach me how to deal with, how to work. Like if someone wants a gift, I ask him what he wants and you help him to find a good gift, or making a gift card – the gift card is not easy because you must put it in the computer. It's good for me. I don't know about how to make the debit, the Visa. It is very new for me. They tell me how to punch the number and you must make sure... for the first time, for me, I clicked 48 but I forget to click 00, so the paper it comes and the next day the supervisor he told me 48 cents for the coffee on the debit, 'No, no. 48 *dollars*.' He told me you forget to click 00. He told me now when the customer comes and he has the Visa, you make sure then you take the receipt and you look exactly on the device for the computer, make sure it says 40 dollars. It was a very good learning experience. I also speak with the people in English. I ask them this and this in English.

I learned English also at the Radisson; they taught me how to make bookings, how to make a keys, how [to do] filing. Sometimes I go 'What's this? Show me first how to do it' and after that they told me. I tell them that this is like I'm in the army. I love it, this work.

Before, when I was volunteering at the Radisson, I was active, I wore beautiful cloths; every day I changed my clothes. In my eyes, I'm happy, happy. Now when I come here [to school] you are everyday wearing this clothing. I don't like to come to school, every day, to the same faces [laughter]. I hate it here. I want go outside and speak with the people. She told me 'you only have these clothes?' I told her, no, I have many, but nothing here, it's not the same. So I don't have desire to come to here, you know? Yeah, so I dress in anything. When you don't like to come here, you don't like to change your clothes.

Maybe in 5 years, I'll be the same, here in the school [laughter], because here they refuse, as I told you, the case worker just wants you to go to school. I told her how can I find a job? So when you come here after 5 years you will see me here!

I don't know. They told me... [in the course] we go on the Google, we look for job, we make the resumé, we ask them if there is a job. Only like waiting, no one answers, because I'm ready now. I know how to deal with the... maybe the office is very difficult, but I found in the shop it's easy, like cashier, like in the bakery, that's easy, something in my hand. But here there is no factory or, you understand, I didn't find here in Windsor [jobs] making clothes or I didn't find here anything [in a] factory, nothing.

The lady from the school she tells me they are opening a factory for shoes, not here, in China. I told her why she tells me this because... China is cheaper, not like here, because here you want money. You want a health card. But in China, they don't worry, they don't need anything... I told her I would travel to China to find out [laughter]. This is the problem. If I'm absent 3 days [from school] she cut the money from me, like if in a month you are absent from the school 3 times they send a paper warning that you must attend every [day]. No, no, you must not miss more than 3 days of classes. Maybe they send a warning letter and after you must check not to be absent...She [could] cut everything like the rent, the rent and the food. Before, when I went to the doctor she give me only part time not full time [prescription]. She writes it for two months. I give it to [the case worker], she approve. After that I forget [about it]. At the end of two months she said, 'We cut the payment.' When I read that I said 'What is this? Because we didn't send some medical [note]? And she sends the paper on the 27th; there is three times for the payments. I said 'no you must send it in ten or nine [days in advance] so I can prepare to go to go the doctor to make an appointment.' There is no time three days before, understand me? I told her there is no time. She said. 'No, we don't care.' So, I'm writing to say please look to this paper, they cut my salary.

Marianna: Do you think you should have the option to change case workers?

Yasmeen: No, no, don't say that [laughter]. I don't know, maybe when I told her I have bed bugs, maybe she felt anger. I live in a private building. After I told [CHC] there are bed bugs I threw out [the bed], immigration they gave me only the bed on the list of things I put, like clothes ('they won't' she told me). She asked the translator why we threw out the furniture; back home, would we have thrown out the furniture? She felt very angry. I told her we are not back home; no they don't here if I move to CHC if I bring the furniture with them they feel very angry, see what I mean? They give me only 400 to buy a bed and the carpet. I thought that CHC is very clean, but after that I found they...the building is very dirty.

I think like the problem of Ontario, they don't give us the chance. They don't tell us this is the place they need volunteers. We always [have to go to] school; we want to change the school, so like some months in the year we want to volunteer. But we always have school and the school year I feel is so boring. So we don't make us speak only with the student, the students. You must go out; [even] in the library, I thought maybe we could speak with others but we sit silent. Yeah sometimes we are not like resting, we are thinking. Thinking.

I feel like there are ideas. Like the teacher, we go on trips. They took us...to the apple orchards in Leamington. I picked. And there is like to the throw... I forget... bowling. [But] you don't speak with someone, only play and nothing. And I asked what happened at the conference in Caboto club, and [I was told] we did nothing, just sit like this, and someone speaks and we say nothing. I feel very bad that they went and I didn't go because I was sick, [but not if] we just listen; we want some [time] to speak with the people...to learn some new vocabulary.

Here at school, so maybe here I find the teacher is good but [it is] only listening, not speaking... to go on a trip and you return to school you feel very active; maybe send us not

only to silence but [to somewhere] we can speak, so we can try to ask and listen to the answer and make noise tomorrow when we return to school. We make noise telling the teacher what we asked -- this is active!

Donna: "I thought retirement in your golden years meant time relaxing"

In dialogue with Anne

I'm a new guest here in Windsor...I grew up in and around Ottawa, but I was born in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, up north. I went to many schools. As a young child I attended the regular grade school; first one year I would go to English and the second I would go to French, so that I could be equally knowledgeable in both languages. I come from a very intellectual, normal, income average working family. Both my mother and father worked all of their lives to support and bring up their children. After I graduated grade school, I was sent to Paris, France, for two and a half years. I entered the convent as a postulant and spent two and a half years there learning the language and learning the arts at the Notre Dame De Lure, the Good Sisters of Poverty.

Then afterwards I came back home and finished my commerce courses in high school in Ottawa, and graduated there in 1953. I then set out and went looking for jobs and that is when the government started their...because we were the post-war baby boomers, all jobs were frozen. That was my first experience in finding out exactly what the government was up to, versus what they said. [Eventually] I got married and got a job in the electronic world. So I picked up everything I could there, only during that time the organizations were big organizations and the electronic world was just being born in Ontario, Canada. It was a very strenuous but wonderful field. I spent about 45 years working in it. Paid my taxes; was a good hard working citizen; raised my children. I conducted myself without knowing what poverty was -- or the unfortunate, or whatever that was. That all came after 1997. I had an accident; which put me in the hospital. I then got fixed up and covered well enough but...I could go back to my job and try it out, but because I couldn't stay, I then was placed on Canada Pension Disability by the government, telling me that was the best course to go -- which again was not true.

They seem to have a hidden control over you. Then I started to see the true workings of people being on different levels of welfare, the different levels of Ontario Works (when they decided to change it). I still didn't know the real problems of it, really, other than my own personal private case; but I still considered myself lucky because [of my doctor]. He was a very prominent doctor, he passed away now, but he was the head of neurology over all of Canada. He worked out of the civic hospital, in the heart centre in Ottawa. His son took over when he passed away. Okay, they took my case because it was actually a case of having an accident in a low income district area where there was a policy regulation that was broken. I fell and slipped on a muddy path, knocked myself out into a concussion, damaged my hip, broke my neck...yeah, and after they got me all fixed up and back together, of course they were willing to pay all these special bills. But ever since my disability retirement, I then began to figure out what the government covers and what the government doesn't cover. The programs that they have in place for the low income or poverty people, people who can't work, people who...single mothers, transient people, who have no homes -- all these policies are so rigidly regulated that no one can really follow them properly. This is how I began to acknowledge that the government has us under bondage. That is exactly what it is!

Now, for instance, if I got sick when I was on disability and if I was under the age of 60, I no longer had any coverage for drugs or hospitalization. I just had the basic, a bed in the hospital if you needed it, surgery... that's all that I had covered. I was not able to afford a proper eye examination or dental coverage until I turned 65. When I found out that I could go, and I was told by disability that there is a coverage that they give you if you only make so much. So I inquired and I fell through the cracks of bureaucracy because I made only five dollars more than what they allowed. This is how their rules are. Yes. I was rejected...for everything other than the basic OHIP.

Throughout the years, from the age of 55 to 65, I have been listening to the government. When they cut their finances, they don't pick on the well to do; they don't even pick on society that is hard working. They pick on the low income earner, the poor. It is the poor that don't have any right to hospitalization; it is the poor who don't have any right to medical. Even today you watch all the commercials on television, all these wonderful drugs they come up with -- how to quit smoking, for instance, which is basically the low income population's majority problem. They all want to quit but they all can't, not because they don't want to, like the government says, but because they can't afford it, it is beyond their means. The same as today they can't afford a funeral. Most low income people can't afford to have coverage insurance for dying. And one thing the government doesn't clarify is that if you can't afford to bury yourself, it is put on your children. Yes...yes. When I looked into... after my last husband passed away, I looked into a lot of things. I had to sell half of my home in order to pay for his funeral because he didn't have enough coverage. Yup.

These benefits that they tell you...okay, I worked 45 years, paid into [and] out of my pay cheque came coverage for Canada disability, and the income supplement, that's just government owned and it is going to stop sooner or later and they are going to take it away. Old age security is another one that is gone, as soon as they can get these big companies in place to put a benefit on so that people can buy compensation benefits. But most of the places that I worked there is none. Our RRSP contribution from the company and your input through your pay cheque didn't start until about a year and a half before I finished my job. We were only starting to pay our portion when these companies started closing down. Free Trade is another thing! Everybody wanted free trade. Look what it has bought us, all it has bought us is our countries go to other countries because they can make more money, by feeding off the poor in other countries. So what did they do? They sold out their country. We are known for high unemployment. It's not because we don't want to work, like the government said, there is nothing out there for us to work. The line-up for jobs is as long and time consuming as the line-up for getting in for surgery and a hospital bed when you need it. And that is what our government has put in place for us. These are their new upgraded ideas. From the time I was 65 I literally had to phone each time I took an ambulance ride to the hospital. They would send me a thing in the mail, you have to pay us forty five dollars for your ambulance ride. I would phone them up and say 'well, I'm on disability. I shouldn't have to pay, '...well we don't know

that, well here's their number. No, you have to phone them.' So I phoned them and said 'why can't you put on my card...' – I literally didn't believe the way they ran. When I turned 65 I phoned them and said, 'does that mean I'm all cured now and no longer considered disabled?' 'No, ma'am, you're still considered disabled.'

'Well how is the hospital supposed to know? How is anyone supposed to know unless they phone you?' I said, 'do you like having a phone call from everybody and whomever, why don't you set...?'

'Well it's just the way we are set up. I know we aren't set up properly and we will be changing...'

'What? I'm going to be long dead.'

I mean these changes I'm trying to make will hopefully be for my children and their children so that they don't have to struggle. I thought retirement in your golden years meant time relaxing and seeing all what you missed while you were busy working and raising a family; but it is not so.

This new manager came to my apartment building when CHC (Community Housing Corporation) bought it. He came here, sat down and told all of us we were all passé, we're all not with it anymore and [that] we will do and follow the regulations. It wasn't a month after that there was a tenant association formed [giggles] for the benefit and protection of the tenants. Yeah there are a lot of us living here that have Alzheimer's and different disordered stages of...I wouldn't say disease...but old age, which is normal. But we really are treated like we're passé. It seems the minute we quit work we are no longer suitable to work.

Living here is wonderful and we get along fine. We introduced a lot of programs; we have a social club that sets up programmes for entertainment. We have the tenant association and we are registered with the Ontario government to legally help protect the tenant [using] the proper residential act and human rights act...it all started with us taking the CHC to the tribunal, over a severe maintenance default. That's when they started hearing us and they knew we weren't going to sit by and be abused in any way, shape or form – that we have rights just as much as they do; we have a voice. This is why we formed this association because before then, no word of a lie, I was shocked, because I'm new here; I never in my life saw so much fear in the faces of seniors – because they are helpless, and I myself, to be honest with you, was an instigator. I wasn't living here more than two, three months and I had a discussion with the manager. And he laid this awful, awful speech on me about "all you people are out of your mind, you're all stupid, you're all high on drugs..."

Anne: 'All you people?'

Donna: Oh yeah! You should've heard him. Okay, it was so bad I went back and thought... nope, no. Because I didn't know then the webpages, addresses or anything like that – I wasn't even part of the tenant association – I just wrote a letter to the higher up. That I knew how to do, with my experience with business all my life, I knew how to do [that] and I wrote them. I

told them word for word how [the manager] conducted the interview. It wasn't a week later that he was called on the red carpet; he was made to make an apology, to bring me into the office and apologize to me. So I thought okay, I'll fix you. I went down to the office. I didn't have nobody as a witness. I had [whispers] my little tape recorder [points to her right pocket]. He apologized and said 'Why did you go over my head like that? You hurt me you know.' So I said, 'Why did you behave in such a nonprofessional manner? Did you not attend college and take managerial classes?' I said 'I know I did. Your communication skills are the pits! Besides did you not study up on the Human Rights? Do you not have protocol procedures on how to address people?' I said 'I don't know where you come from but you don't treat these people like they are a bunch of people that are all sick mentally and physically.' And then I said, 'And if you do, then you're in crisis because you're not supposed to do that to the mentally challenged and physically disabled.'

I have been fighting with him ever since [laughter]. [The higher ups] know him, and he is good in one area of his expertise and I have learned since then, that's the area you use, okay? He is good for the fact that he will do and say anything to save CHC financial burdens. He is another scrooge in other words. He is very good for the corporation but he is no good for the other side and that's the problem. Going to the meetings and all the other programs, I found out that there is a lot of mistreatment.

Programmes geared to income, low income, people in poverty suffer at all levels. The biggest problem in all areas is communication. For one thing there is not enough written material out there, none of these people who go to these services, individual services, really know regulation of what is versus what isn't. When they, for instance, when a person that is transient, without a home, they go to Ontario Works for an interview. Who does the most interviewing or questioning? It is the person who wants to know why you are here. Okay. Now if that transient says I am without a home, I have nowhere else to go, no family to see, nothing, before that person who is listening will help them, they pretty well near have to give everything up – no home, no food, no job, no bank account, nothing, not even a name in society – before they will even lift a finger. I found that out because I interviewed the welfare department in my town where I come from after my husband passed away. I no longer, could...half your finances are cut off when your spouse passes away.

I was put on...as soon as you are "incapable," your job, your money is far less. You are then put on a budget and that budget is stuck with you for the rest of your life. I now realize that the people on Ontario Works or whatever, they are on a budget, but they are still better off because of the way the system works. Why do you think most people that are on Ontario Works don't get off of it? Because they really can't afford it; they can't afford the cost of educating themselves to get a good paying job that will cover all their financial needs. Okay, that's one. Number two, they can't afford to go out there on their own and find enough [money] because the minute...it's dollar per dollar...the minute they do find something, even just the first step up the ladder to complete independence, they can't do it because they are

burdened down by the rules and regulations of Ontario Works. Ontario Works, it's easy for them to sit down there and accept money off the government and create little scams in order to survive, and I don't even call them scams anymore, I call them survival of the fittest, survival of the repression of government regulation.

[Our government support programs] are very inadequate. They are very harsh and they don't treat their low income people like human beings. They treat them like they are criminal and they are the whip. They are going to whip them into shape and they are going to tell them what to do from the time they get up in the morning till the time they go to bed at night, from the time they are born until the time they die, they will tell them what to do. I don't call that democracy. They have no human rights; human rights were established for the rich. Residential Acts were...that is all control. You know. Even our lease regulations: we can have company in here, we can have our family, but only for two weeks at a time. That's it. We can't get involved and we can't help each other out. Let's say there is a young one who wants to attend college or attend university here, and they are trying their best to get a foot in as best they can. We can't bring them in and help them until they get another place, until they can afford to get on some kind of a budget, till they get on their own, because we are not allowed. What is that rule? Where is the positive-ness in that rule? Where is the help in that rule? The rules and regulations are outdated and insufficient. They are not put in place for the welfare and the well being of these people, they are put in place for the well being of the government. And I mean ads in the newspaper will prove it to you. The senior citizens are dominated by bondage and heavy rule and regulation. We aren't sitting at home having a good time on our big fat Canada Pension Plans. We are sitting at home struggling to keep the budget in place to cover everything. Some of us have income so low, between the Canada Pension Plan – and a lot of people don't have the Canada Pension Plan; some of us were not lucky to have a job all our lives to have it.

When I turned 65, they crossed me over... they cancel out disability and put me on Canada old age, Canada Pension Plan benefits which I paid into. They didn't change the amount; as a matter of fact there is a three percent penalty. They subtract, because you retired before they thought you should. It doesn't matter that you became disabled...Hello! [laughter]. You see what I mean? And young people don't know this, and the Social Forum is trying to get the government to open their eyes for the young ones so they have a chance before it is too late for them. This is what I was talking about in the Canada Social Forum, I said, 'Get out there now!' It might be too late [but] we can't just sit because we are retired. That is not going to help those loved ones we leave behind. You know the government has been at it for years trying to tell us when we worked, 'Get yourself some kind of benefit work program, insurance package for retirement age.' But it was so expensive then, if you were a family raising five kids on an average income... you can't even take ten dollars out a month. Every cent you made went on what you were doing at the time. I know I was approached with that very same thing but I spent most of my life raising three boys single, where I was the only wage earner. Every cent you made had to cover your bills, your three kids.

So too quickly the years roll by and there you are getting close to your [retirement]. I had planned, [but] I didn't plan that accident. I had a plan to work till the day I die, because I loved my jobs. The different jobs I had, I loved them. I worked hard at them and I was proud, I did! You know, then all of the sudden because of an accident I'm taken down, and when your taken down, I now know how the low-income, poverty people feel. They are treated like animals, not like normal people! Just because we don't have a job, we aren't bringing in income, doesn't mean we are less intelligent. It's just that we are so overburdened with this daily survival, we don't have time to get into this fight with the government. We are so oppressed, depressed, that we just give in and go along as a slave. We are bound to the government's rules and regulations, it is as simple as that, and it needs changing!

I go to the Pathway to Potential meetings and we try to put heads together to 'do the math.' That is another thing, 'doing the math'. Our job is to try to bring up something to the government to make them aware. Like one of the things that Pathway to Potential did was to go out amongst the members of parliament to ask them to spend a week on a normal, very low-income budget. Right now our biggest fight with the government is: people aren't even getting enough money to eat right! Doctors and governments always talk about good nutrition; how can a person on a very low budget get their nutrition let alone have enough money to last? Okay, you want to know something? A lot of old age seniors are living on dog food and cat food, because basically our animals are better kept than we are. So they are cutting off their financial obligation to us, on OHIP for the people. Animals now have the best insurance, hospitalization in the world! And we are being cut off.

We need the voices to be heard, this is why you are here today. You are going to be our voices, we can get together and tell our stories over and over again but it is not going to mean anything. I listened to a young man who is just married, he is fairly new in this country, he is on Ontario Works with him and his wife, they have a new baby and you know he went to the Ontario Works office to see if they would help him buy a crib, a decent crib for his baby; they refused him. Who knows why. Inventing another rule or regulation; I guess they just didn't see the normalcy of it. I don't know! Most of their rules and regulations are so abnormal, I don't see how any of these people get help. I see more people turned away than I see people being accepted for anything. When the job recession hit Windsor, I asked myself 'why did the Ontario Works run out of money? Why did the unemployment insurance run out of money? If their programs were so good and they were taking money out of people's pay cheques, why did they slam the door in their face when it came time to help the very people who did their work and gave their taxes, gave to their unemployment insurance?' Their only excuse in the end was, 'We ran out of money, sorry.'

When I worked and OHIP started, every person who worked paid out of their weekly pay, or every two weeks you get a paycheque there was a certain sum for singles and a certain sum for those who had a family that was taken out and put towards your OHIP. So you had your OHIP coverage. Do you know that when each and every one of us owned it, it ran much better?

When the government took it over, that is when they started chopping everything. It started in 1953, I think. I'm not sure, but all the time I worked from 1963 to the mid-eighties, maybe late seventies, we paid into it. Then all of the sudden the government took over. At one time, you and I could go for as many eye examinations as we wanted to and if our prescription needed changing, our OHIP would cover it. First they covered 100%, then they cut it down to 80% and after that they cut it down to nothing!

My sister and I were born twins four months early. We were born blind because we were underdeveloped; our optic nerves were turned backwards and we had one eye that didn't completely develop. So, after seven years, my mother and father were able to get enough money (at that time there was no OHIP, so my father worked night and day in the mines). They brought us down to Ottawa to the general hospital because there was a surgeon there who would perform the surgery. We have, because we are very identical, our DNA is identical; we both had an eye transplant, one eye each. And then they turned our optic nerves forward so we could see, because before that our eyes would go their own way. We're in the World Book of Guinness for that kind of operation.

When they changed the [OHIP] laws they didn't look into the medical aspect per individual. There's no medical board that is going to say it is okay for her because she has special circumstances. The regulation that is set down for one is set down for all! The only way I would be covered is if I had "special insurance." The medical system is now a two tier system, didn't you hear? The medical system is turning into a two tier system just like the States have. I [know these things because I] look it up. I just got tired of listening. See, my children and my family are going to be third generations of living on welfare. I never liked that, see. I grew up in a family where everyone worked. You were proud to be a worker, you were proud to earn your money, success was [based on] hard work and elbow grease, like my mother used to say.

Slowly, I have noticed that Transit in Windsor has backed down and lowered their bus fares for the low-income people so that they can take the bus more often than not. Our next program is, we are trying to get the government to give an allowance of an extra hundred dollars for food, because people on low-income are starving; and it's not that they don't spend it on drugs and booze, they just can't eat right. I'm still fighting for the right to get eyesight and dental covered, to get it back. Because older people are running around "gumming" it because their teeth were so rotten they had to have them pulled; but they can't afford to get dentures. Did you know that a pair of dentures is five thousand dollars? Where the heck is an old age person going to get that? Physiotherapy is another area they slashed. If you have private insurance it might cover a certain percentage of it, I don't know. Each insurance plan is different in what they cover. I've haven't looked up all of them yet. I'm just checking out Blue Cross versus Greenshield versus Flexcare, which is the newest one. I'm curious to find out how much bondage they have over us.

We are trying to make the [other tenants] aware of [these issues]. Some of them are well off and settled and they don't care. As the Tenants Association, we are trying to provide education programmes so we can tell [tenants] what is real versus what is not real. But before we impart any information, we have to do our homework and that's where I am. I am the researcher. I have some help for the other tenants who have their areas of expertise. If there were ever a big fire or blow up in this building, we are all told just to go out on the veranda and wait for help. Yeah, and that comes from the fire chief! That is our sole hope for being saved, 'we will come and get ya.' There are fifteen floors in this building. If there is a fire, no matter what, stay in your apartment. That is a regulation you can read anywhere on the boards. I was appalled when I heard it! It is their idea of, you know, put so many matches in a little box and let them go, they are old and dying, who cares anyways?

Why do you think people don't go out and vote? You should be proud of Canada. I have even told many members of parliament right to their face, 'I'm not proud of being Canadian, because I'm horrified: you say you are working for the people and look at you! Come with us, come take the walk, come and learn amongst the people and let them show you what really and truly *is* versus what you plan.' We are no longer really living in a democracy; those human rights are really not for us. They say they are but where do we get to exercise them? At a tribunal maybe, if we can afford it. Today if you are discriminated against you have to be able to afford it. They no longer help you to fight for your rights in court. You have to have money, got to have money to live, got to have money to die. How else can I say it? It is just one thing after another. People are getting very despondent and don't want to go out and vote. Why? They will say it right to your face: who is out there who really fights for us?

[But] voting makes a difference. Not right away, but us advocating for the seniors, for the poor, it's not going to come true tomorrow. But do you think we should quit just because we don't get what we want right away? It is the same with the right to vote. Words are powerful. You can punish the people, you can dominate the people but the word, once it is out, cannot be forgotten. What made me not throw in the towel was years ago, when I started working in the electronics business, it was new, especially because there were very few women in it; it was all men. So, I had one of the electronic architects, he said, 'Do you know how rough your road is? You won't be given any privileges, you won't be considered, and most of your opinions, your ideas, will come across as 'just a woman!'' Still is true today, you know. They may say we have equal rights, but we are still fighting for equal pay, for equal rights. As a citizen, as a mother, as a spouse with a partner, do you not think that you should be heard, if not for yourself, for your children, for your future, to make it better?

Our members of parliament won't know really, and how can they? They work in plushy places, they are catered to, everything is covered for them. They really don't know and if we don't voice our opinions, how are they to know? It's not easy for a member of parliament to voice their opinion and go out for a vote you know. They have to satisfy millions of us, so their job is much harder. I go back to when it first started. A lot of members of parliament today, they go

to school, they go to university they spend thousands of man hours learning all of this, but none of them seem to come from the banks of poverty. They are lacking in experience. Every day of their lives they listen to people who are well off just like themselves. Nowadays people don't want the truth because the truth hurts, and they want to have the almighty power. [But] if you don't answer to your decisions in this life there is going to be another life where you will. Now what life I have left, I don't want to have to come back and undo the damage I have done in this lifetime. I am looking for eternal peaceful rest. The only way I am going to do that is to fight for our rights, because the only one rule that God gave us from the beginning of time to eternity is to love one another, as I have loved you. That's our only duty is to help one another no matter what. We can't judge anyone, okay? We can't tell them [the politicians] how to lead their lives. We can only make it clear to them who is suffering, who is doing without and why. That's all it is: who, where and why.

Lynda: "One day I'm going to change the world"

In dialogue with Mona and Terry

I grew up in Toronto, in a very poor neighborhood, Jane Finch, which has quite a reputation, mainly because, during the 60's and 70's, that's where they put large populations of immigrants. So, you know, I grew up there, me, my mom and my two brothers. She was a single parent as well. For the record, generational poverty does not exist; it's just a stigmatization that they put on people who are poor. I hate to tell you that. My mom was a single mom because my dad left. She did not have enough education to get a job. That's not to say that she didn't work -- she did work, but she didn't make enough money to live and raise three kids by herself. I grew up there. I lived most of my life there. I moved out of there when I was older and had children of my own. Much like my mom's situation, I had problems, domestic violence in my relationship, and just a lot of garbage in my life. I moved to Windsor to try and have a different start and a different "thing". When I came here 17 years ago, I stayed very focused trying to make my way back to school. Now 6 years later I'm finally graduating and I've raised four kids. My oldest is married, my second oldest is not, my third child is working her way towards going to college, and my youngest is going to high school still. So pretty much that's the long story short.

When I was about 21 years old I lived on my own with my 2 children. One was just 1 and the other one was going on 2. I lived with my cousin, she was 14, she was living in foster care and I didn't want her in foster care so I agreed for her to come live with me. Back in the day, this was just before Ontario Works came in, I had this [case] worker and they were allowed to come to your house to visit. One day she came, and first of all, she made a big deal because my house was messy. Like, sorry, I have kids. I don't know anybody whose house is immaculate that has children, and if it is, then you need to check those kids because there's something up with that. But she came in, and she was kinda giving me that look like 'ew, your house is gross,' and she didn't want to touch anything, and then she was complaining about it. I'm thinking to myself, you're a professional and you're doing this. Then we're talking and she asks me about my second son, and she asked if I was going to pursue court documents that, because even though you may be the parent of a child, if you don't have legal custody of your child, then the father has a right to take the child and come and go as they please. So until there is an actual court order that says you have custody of your child, your spouse, or your baby's father, or whoever, can take that child. So she said, you need to pursue it because that's the social works, that's the laws in the social services. But I said I went to a messy court thing with my first child, and I don't think I'm going to have an issue with the second. I really don't want to go through that again. So she goes 'well then you're a direct violation and we can kick you off.' So I say 'you're going to kick me off with two kids and my teenage cousin, and leave us with nothing.' We already live in poverty, what are they going to do? She proceeded to tell me that it was girls like me that don't deserve to be on the system and that I should be ashamed of myself, and that I created my own situation. She went on and on about, 'it's people like you that give people like me a hard time.' Meaning, basically, like, I'm taking her money

out of her mouth so to speak, and meanwhile she knew nothing about me. I mean I'm 21 years old raising two children by myself. I took in another person -- kid, I mean -- I can't be that super horrible of a person. But, you know, when you're younger and you really don't know that these impressions come from bigger systems, you automatically blame yourself.

That happens to people who live in poverty. We really blame ourselves because we don't know any better, or are different. So that lady got away with talking to me like that, and I tell you for like a week after I cried all the time. I felt like the most horrible person in the world, you know. Meanwhile, she didn't say anything about him, you know the kid's father. Here I am raising kids, why don't you go in his house telling him he's a bad person? Why is it me, the woman taking care of the kids, being responsible, doing what I chose to do, being a mother? You know what I mean? Like that was a horrible experience. I said one day I am going to change the world. People like you will not exist. People will not be allowed to judge someone else without knowing the whole story. But, like I said, it's been a long time, 21 till now, that's 22 years of my life, that I've always felt that feeling, and that experience has stuck with me that long. It makes me so angry.

I hate Social Work. It took one of my [other] professors to convince me to go into social work because she said that, 'you know, we need people who have lived experience, who know the system, who know what needs to be changed, who have passion. You have all those things, you need to go and change the world, but you need to do it in a way that's productive, you can't just sit around and be upset'. I was like, 'oh, ok, I really don't want to do it.' She also convinced me, [...] 'you have a lot of experience with women and women's issues,' she goes, 'imagine if you had your Social Work degree, a professional degree, then nobody could talk to you like that'. As soon as she said that, I thought, nobody can talk to me like that, 'oh even better.' Ok, I'm taking social work. I applied, and had a little bit of problem because they didn't have final grades for me, but I got in. So I think it's kind of motivating me to be a social worker, but like we were talking about earlier, there's administrative restrictions, and legal restrictions, and laws and stuff that make it virtually impossible for people who are on social assistance especially. There are different kinds of Social Work, but I'm talking particularly about social assistance because we are talking about poverty. But that kind of stuff is like the hardest to deal with because they have front line workers who are not even Social Workers working. Social workers are professionally trained, we are trained to talk to people about their social problems and work with them to get them off the system. That's not the reality of a lot of cities, especially in Windsor right now.

Do they save money by doing that? Yes, of course they do. Plus on top of that, the city day cares close so they have all those workers, and they can't fire them, so they integrate them into different things. They are great, I know a lot of the city workers who are ECE's [Early Childhood Education]. They are great people and they have good hearts and stuff, obviously, they are working with kids. But as far as speaking of a social worker, you come into a new system and you're mandated, so you don't know when you can't push the boundaries because you don't

know what you can and can't do. So there's the challenge. So you just have to do the front line work.

Believe it or not, still putting food on the table has been the biggest challenge ever since I can remember. Being in poverty, you have to choose, do I pay this bill, or do I pay that bill? Do I pay the rent or don't I pay the rent? OSAP, even though you may think, you know you're a single parent your getting OSAP, I get maybe close to about \$150 more than what I would have gotten if I was still on welfare. So, technically, I'm not getting much more than what I did then. So I mean, putting food on the table, it's choosing which bill is more important. My kids need new shoes, I have to buy them shoes. My kids are older now so it's not as hard, but it's still a challenge because there's very limited money coming in. Two of my kids don't live at home anymore. They are on their own, and they have their own [kids], well, one's married so he has his wife to consider. My second son he's working so he's paying for his own stuff as well. My daughter, she has a part time job, but she's still extremely dependent on me right now, and my little son, he's 17 but he's still at home and still needs his mom to be doing that. Even though everyone should be more responsible and start working, I kind of raised my kids to the extent of, like, while you're a kid, I want you to be a kid. While they are in school, I want them to concentrate on school. Yeah, things are going to get tough, and things are going to be hard, but school is the only way you're going to be able to change things for yourself. Financially, I don't see life getting any better, but education is going to move you from one thing to another, and it's not an easy job and it's not a nice job because no one really likes school. Ok, I kind of do, but I mean, you know, most kids don't want to go to school.

My oldest, he moved to Ottawa just after he turned 18, so he moved far away. Then he was with his girlfriend. You know one thing about, when you get into the real world, and I mean the work world, you start making money and you start accumulating bills and things change, your life changes and you kind of focus around your job. That's what gets you in the way of going back to school, so he's in the process, he's working now so it's getting in the way of him going back to school. But his wife, he worked while his wife went to school, and she got her postsecondary degree at college. He's still in the position where he's trying to decide what he wants to do. My second son was in college, and he didn't like the program he was in so he switched over. But he didn't tell OSAP he was switching and they didn't give him the funding for his program because he didn't tell them he was changing. Little technical glitches. So right now he's not in school, but he's working towards going back. But prior to me going to university there was no talk of post secondary education for my kids. They didn't talk about it; it wasn't on their mind, it wasn't even on their radar. Then they started seeing me go to school, although they kind of didn't like it, because you have long hours at school. Sometimes I have to study and I don't have time for them, but it kind of really influenced them. It showed them, if you really want to, if you really feel that that's something you need to do in life and your dedicated to it, then you're going to get through. It takes a long time but it's worth it, and I keep pushing that on them. Just don't say it to them, but I keep showing them. I'm a model mom, I model stuff that I want my kids to do. So, I don't want them to get drunk, I don't have alcohol in the

house, and I don't drink, so they don't drink. Well I can't say that, but for the most part. I don't smoke, they don't smoke kind of thing, right? So stuff like that, the same goes for school -- I go to school, they see how hard it is, but they see how dedicated I am. They see me struggle. I've cried a lot, but stuff like that, education, is important. Now they talk about post secondary education. My daughter wants to go to college next year, but she's just trying to decide what program is for her, and she's looking outside of the city because St. Claire doesn't have anything she wants to do. The little one, we have a long way to go with that one.

So, yeah, poverty: food on the table. I know we totally went off topic, but food on the table is the biggest issue for me, but that's, like I said, because I've had to decide which was more important. You always have to decide what's more important. Do I need to do this, or do I need to do that? There could have been times where I could have been homeless if I would have chosen to buy food over paying the rent.

I found that a lot of times, when I was younger I really didn't work because I wanted to be home for my kids, until they started to get older and Ontario's work legislation came in and they had the work-fare thing. But one thing I've always done, since I was young, was volunteer. I've always been a volunteer person, so I started volunteering at the kids' school, then I got a lunch job there. That wasn't enough so I went out...every time I seemed to have secured some kind of part time employment something has happened in their system that I couldn't stay on. For example, I was working in a bakery, nights, which was perfect because my oldest was like 14, and the youngest was 9, so I was able to work at night. I know it sounds scary, but the kids were sleeping, and my work was only 20 minutes walk maximum. It was perfect. I would leave when they were asleep and I would be back on time for them to get ready for school. 9/11 happened and [the bakery] stopped shipping to the States, so they had to let go of staff. The thing is, I was trying to make myself more of a good person to keep on staff, so I learned my job plus another job so that they could see that I was motivated and that I wanted to be there, and that it was important to me; but I was one of the first people to be let go. So, you know it's not always by choice that things happen. Some employers are not understanding when you have kids, you know, if you need to leave, or if you have to go and you can't get a babysitter to work certain shifts. There was always stuff like that that was like a barrier. Child care was a barrier; timing is a barrier; funds – money – are a barrier. Because you may work and you may seem like you're getting ahead, but then you go and get your welfare check and they cut it and you only got like \$10. Meanwhile you had all this money during the month to pay other things, then you get \$10. I'm like, wow. It was sad. So the barriers are like childcare, transportation, getting to and from jobs. Some places are right off the beaten path because those are the kind of jobs you can get when you do that kind of work: low paying jobs. Education was a barrier as well, because even though I'm really smart and I'm a jack-of-all-trades and learn things real quick, you know they are still looking for credentials. This world is way too credential-centered. I had a lot of friends in a lot of different, like, the head of big networks, and friends in different areas, and I could never work for them because of the fact that I didn't have my education. So, yeah, those are the kinds of barriers.

I'm a highly motivated, very passionate person. I'm working towards change, not just for myself but for other people as well. I do what I can. Sometimes I get frustrated and give up hope, and then I look at myself: six years later and I'm still in the same position I was six years ago, only I'm in debt. That's another hard thing about being in poverty. Before I came to university, I was on welfare, and had been on welfare a long time because I couldn't secure a job. So I finished high school at 33, and at 35 I decided to go to university. I waited a couple years because I wasn't sure if I wanted college or university: how much dedication, how much debt did I want? Ontario Work's social assistance, or anything, does not support parents coming off welfare... It would be like an immigrant who comes to this country who has a degree and they have to go back to school. That means that they have to go into debt. It's the same thing for people who dare to go off welfare. I was broke before, because I had zero, now I'm like negative numbers. It's so effing scary! So scary for me, you know. Most people have a parent when they finish university, they have their parents to go home to. I don't have anyone, I have to hit the ground running. So I'm already, like, my resumés are out there, my feelings are out there, my networks are out there.

Terry: It's so scary because you're done school, and you're, like, great now I can start working, but really you have to pay back all the debt, so you're working to pay it off.

Mona: And there's just not a lot of jobs out there.

Lynda: Yeah, so it's like everybody is working towards getting those little amounts of jobs. I'm lucky because I'm considering moving out of Windsor. Only thing is I really like the social system here. If you work in the anti-poverty area, like I do as part of my own choice, my own free will, you can see that there's a large network of people who really care, who are working hard to get changes made. But changes are slow, always really, really slow. That's another problem with the system; it's really slow to change. That means if I needed help today, I wouldn't get the help I needed. But you know I can change it for someone five years from now who might need the same help, but why does it take five years? Why don't these people care now? So that's what I hope, I hope things will change. If I move out of Windsor, I hope that all the things that I have learned I can bring with me to the next place and start my own stuff. Do the same thing that we're doing here in a different city, that may not have those kinds of things, or some existing system there, and maybe breathe new life into it and say 'well, in our city this is what happened'. Windsor is small enough that it can work, but not big enough, you know what I mean? A city, like Toronto, you'd have to break it up.

Terry: Do you ever feel misunderstood?

Lynda: Yes, very much so. Like I said, most of your life, especially when you're in poverty, people think you're lazy and they have all these myths and misconceptions about people on welfare. They say 'oh I can't stand that woman she dresses raggedy.' Meanwhile she doesn't

understand that maybe I dress raggedy because I don't have any self esteem and I don't feel good about myself. Maybe I dress raggedy because most of the money I had I spent on my kids, or I put food on the table, or I paid the rent. Maybe we're lucky and have cable, or maybe we have a phone. I've gone without a phone for like a year and a half, because I didn't have money to pay for a phone bill. You can't do that when you have kids. If there's an emergency, what are you going to do, right? But stuff like that, it's what people...sometimes they just make those calls on you. The misconceptions about what poverty looks like, who lives in poverty, and why do they live in poverty. They are always looking for justification, 'she must have done something to deserve to be in poverty.' Really? Really? What did I do? I was born into the wrong family? That's probably mainly the only thing.

Other than that, you know, it could have been you. Some people are one pay check away from being poor. I know people who have houses, and cars, and boats, and now they lost their job and they only have enough savings for the next three or four months. They are considering, what are they going to do? 'I can't find a new job, I can't afford my \$350,000 home or my three cars and all the insurance, and I can't afford those dock fees for my boat.' See what I'm saying? Yeah, things can change real quick.

Mona: How useful do you think the Government's support programs are for people living in low income? And what would you like to change about them?

Lynda: Wow. Ok, well, Ontario Works is legislation now, so it's law. I wish that they would have done more research before they allowed the law to be passed. It went through the House so quickly. I think there were two readings within a month and then it was passed. It's legislation, so it can't be changed. They can [only] do amendments to it. The way that social services distribution [works], [the legislation] cuts it down even further. They think of social services like a business. Therefore they run it like a business, and they are being pressured to make people come off welfare before they are ready. They penalize people consistently all the time. They need to move those restrictions back right to the corner. They need to push the administrators right back to the extent of the law, so that it's going to be more fair, more equal, with more opportunity for those people who need the help. I think I heard someone talking once, and they were talking about how people love to live on welfare. There's maybe 3-4% of all welfare recipients that screw up the system for everyone. Maybe one family in 200 or 2000 screw up. Yet everyone else is held by that same standard; I hear, 'I know someone who lives on welfare and they have this, this and this.' Ok, well, I don't know what welfare they are living on because you can come to my house and you can see. I can account for every single penny I have spent because in some cases the social assistance will ask you to do that, especially if you are a minor, if you're 16-18 you are accountable for everything you spend. They can ask you, it's their right. What they need to do, like I said, they need to evaluate all that stuff push it back to the limits, stop talking the way they are, don't make people take jobs that are not going to be beneficial, or are temporary, because they need to work right away.

They should be helping people to make choices that will get them off the system. Maybe it means pushing them towards education, maybe it means pushing them to consider a different employment than they are currently in. There are so many ways that they can change the system to make it more helpful for people. You gotta help people. Case loads are too high, social workers can't handle the case loads that they have. They don't have time to sit down and know who their clients are, what their needs are, how they can help them. Remember that some of those workers are not social workers too. If you're going to call it "social", think about the human beings before you think about the money. Concentrate on helping your clients get their lives together. You can't hold their hand and make them, but you can give them some things to lead them the right way so that they can start making better choices. Most people don't know their opportunities when you're poor. People don't sit down and talk to you and tell you how it is. They don't feel listened to, they don't feel heard, they feel dismissed. It's terrible, it's horrible. How I'd like to see the system change? Like I said, push it back to the limits, push it to the limits of whatever, because with all laws and all regulations there some flexibility, there's flexibility in the legislation. Do your magic, people, make it happen, let's help people. Stop hurting people. It was a political climate, right, which caused legislation to go into place. Mike Harris was effing up everywhere in the system. He decided to blame poor people and everything he talks about, all personal responsibility, individual responsibility, so everyone who's not individually responsible is "obviously" sitting on welfare right now.

They need to make the system accessible. It's not accessible as they like to think it is because if you've got someone who doesn't speak English very well calling and they have to listen to that recorded message, they are not going to understand that they have to call and make an appointment at a different number at a different time. There are so many things that they do to mess with people. Like, be straight forward, have a human being answer the phone and deal with people. What because they might have to pay them?

Automation, automation, automation. The roadblocks. People call, and then they're frustrated, and the first thing they do is take it out on the worker that answers the phone. Ok, just an example, it will never happen in my life time, but if I was a social worker at social services and someone had gotten into a problem and their cheque got cut off, maybe they didn't submit any information that was required for that month, so they will call and the first thing they will do is yell at me. A majority of social workers would be like 'excuse me I'm not going to take this.' Yeah, you kind of do, because you're the front line worker and this person does not understand that it's not you per say, instead of personally attacking that individual you have to say that 'I'm not personally attacking you, it's not me, I'm following through with what the agency says, and this is what it says, can you calm down and talk to me and be nice and I'll talk to you. If you're upset and need a minute to get it out, can you call me right back?' They don't understand what it's like to be in poverty, and for someone to have the power over you and then have to deal with that person on the phone. When my cheque gets cut off of course I'm upset. I'm down to no food, you know baby bonus was on the 20th. I bought food for the week because I knew my cheque was coming, and now I don't have anything, and now your cutting my cheque off. I

can't pay my rent. So, they need to be more understanding of their clients, be a little more sensitive. They have got to understand that people don't know it's not a personal attack by a worker. A lot of sensitivity training needs to happen.

I've been volunteering for Pathway to Potential. Pathway to Potential was set up by the City of Windsor to create a poverty reduction strategy in the city. We're modeled after the Hamilton one. A few other cities... I have a book it's called Vibrant Communities and there's about 8 or 9 of them in different provinces and it's like a satellite. What Pathway does is that it invites everyone to the table, it invites people with lived experiences, it invites business people, it invites community workers, it invites politicians and then everybody gets to the table, everybody talks about what the issues are, everybody talks about how to solve those problems and they actually make things happen. It takes, like I said, it takes time, but this is really new; it's two years old. In two years they've accomplished a lot for the city and I mean a lot of people don't know about it or are just hearing about it or, through word of mouth, it's getting around but you know we're trying to get our word out, who we are, what we do kind of thing. But it's really unique that the city has allowed this to happen and, believe it or not, City Council really takes some of the advice and some of the things that Pathway says to it seriously. Low income bus passes -- the city had originally taken them all away like social services had taken it away and it was only limited to a few people who could apply for it. We, as a team, lobbied for it to be available to people on social assistance...and seniors who were on CPP and stuff like that and they managed to get it. So now there's a low income bus pass. But it was a joint effort with a lot of people coming to the table making compromises about stuff and bringing the issue forward and lobbying for it. So I think the social... there's a lot of caring individuals in this city, who I've been lucky to meet, who really feel the same way and they've been working hard towards change.

I met Maria Clemens who's been [in the Drouillard area] for a very long time and she helped run Drouillard Place right from the start. It has a food bank and a co-op and an "Early Years" drop in centre and an afterschool kids program and it has a lunch, snack and meal for kids who might not go home that night with dinner but they had something to eat at the Centre. And then they have a computer area that you can drop in if you need to fax/phone. People like that; the city has really good people who are dedicated to changing the social environment, to make life better for everyone. But, it's coming from the community, it's not necessarily coming from the politicians. Slowly but surely, I'm seeing now that... Although [the politicians] kind of matter, the reality is that it's people who are going to make things change, it's not governments, it's not businesses, it's not anybody, it's people. People make the change happen. They just have to...But you know it takes a long time and it takes getting people to become aware and you know eliminating myths, getting out to more places, letting people know we're here. With poor people talking to each other -- making them feel validated, giving them a sense of empowerment because people, every single person in the world, I think, has an asset to contribute and it could be something really big, could be something really small. But if they don't know that their values are worth something, then they're not going to do anything, you

know? And the voting thing, people need to learn to vote, or need to care about voting because voting's important. If you don't vote, you're allowing someone to make a choice for you. And I mean sometimes the choices aren't that great but the lesser of two evils is always better than letting evil run, run amuck right? Once you feel strong and you feel that you're listened to and that you're validated, look out!! [laughs] Trouble!!! [laughs] Right?

I just watched a movie called *The Take*, on Argentina, where [the workers] went in and started the plants up again. But part of that was they had to set up a business partnership with somebody else and show that them that their product was needed and wanted. So they did that. The other companies had been taken over by people too so they made a contract with them, so they went back in and they started making products for the other company that was also making products they were selling, see what I'm saying? Like they made it so, they made a network and they just started working even though the plant was closed. And all these plants [in Windsor] start closing, all these businesses that are folding, why can't people get smart enough to do that here? Why can't they just go in and start taking over stuff like they did there and start reclaiming their own stuff? You know, there was no hierarchy in the company, everybody got paid the same, everybody had to, you know... One person did the book keeping and she said 'I don't know why they need an accountant for all of this because I did it and it didn't cost them that much money' right? So why can't people here be like that? Why can't we start caring about ourselves and taking care of ourselves like that and start moving into these businesses?

Welfare's always saying "you gotta go work, go work, oh we'll train you." What the effin' job are you training me for? There are no effin jobs out there! They need to promote small businesses, they need to attract new businesses and stop counting on stuff like the Casino or Ford or Chrysler, like whoopi-do! You know, you got to learn to change with the times. It was good for 300 years, okay it's time to change! [laughs] You know, change is good, it's not comfortable, but it's good! It's not a hard thing to do but it takes dedication, because we are in a slump.

There are models out there that work. In Quebec, you pay \$6 for childcare and you can either have private childcare, you can have childcare centre, or you can have them, there's another kind of like childcare they have there but it's smaller than a centre but it's somebody who has a lot of kids and it's like a private daycare. The pay \$6 a day, and it cost I think a billion dollars, a billion point two dollars for the Quebec government per year, or something like that. And [people] can afford to work because they have that childcare in place. Universal childcare has been on the books since 1968, when they did the status for women, when they did a review for everything, cause for two years the government said "we want to know what women's challenges are in Canada". They sent out all these guys, for two years, to go do all these surveys and everything and find out what women had to say. They came back and they had 68 recommendations and one of them was universal childcare. Since 1968! There's still no universal childcare!

People think there's no poverty. We did a social audit to talk about poverty, you know, what it looks like, how it feels, and that kind of stuff, because we were going to send the information to the [provincial] government because they do the 5 in 25. (They promised in 5 years they would have a 25% reduction in child poverty... Yeah, it's not going very good!) So, we did that to bring forward what's going on, what people feel, how they feel on social assistance. Has anything changed? Of course, nothing's changed. But, some of the people that were invited there were social providers, we call them service providers, so they don't necessarily cater to poor people but what they do is provide services, right? When they came to these things they were like 'oh there's no poverty in the country,' we're, like, what? 'See all these people sitting on this side of the table? They're poor!' They're like "no, they're not." Oh, yeah, they are! So, I think its denial, you know; denial's a terrible thing. So, drunk bums living on the street...yeah they live in poverty but what about people like me? Hardworking person, I live in poverty. I go to university, I still live in poverty. You can't judge a book by its cover because you don't know. Poverty has so many faces and it looks so different.

I think that you have to really listen to people, especially those who live in poverty, you know what I mean? You have to make them a part of a conversation. If you're going to change things, invite them to the table, find out what the real issues are. Find out what it's like to live in poverty. Don't assume that you know. Even for people who live in poverty, our experiences are so different from one another. So maybe collectively we have some things, like bad experiences with social services – a lot of people in poverty have that in common – but why we have it in common is totally different from every story to every story, right? I didn't do anything to deserve my life, the way it turned out. When I was like 19 and I had my first kid, I was working a 40 hour a week work week. I lived in a really nice apartment, I had nice furniture, you know? I could do all the things that most married couples could do. And then when things went downhill after that and I was pregnant and I was on my own with two kids... like things happen. You never can tell how you're life's going to turn out. So, I don't know, I just don't want people to, I want the myths to be broken up. I want people to believe, and to ask, and to know the truth instead of assuming, you know? You can never assume that you know something about someone, you got to ask them, 'tell me your story, tell me about you.' Be nice to people, no matter who you are. It's not hard to be nice to someone.

I just get angry, you know? It's very frustrating. Change is slow; trying to combat something is hard. Especially if you have people who don't understand what you're trying to do, it's hard to work in that system, right? And you can never speak for someone else, you know? I can't talk for someone else who's an immigrant, who lives in poverty. I can't do that, because their experience is completely different than mine. My experience is so different than most people, I know, because I hardly know anyone who came off welfare and went to university. By the way, six generations, I'm the first one to go to university, can you imagine?

It was really hard, because like I said, I didn't know if I could get OSAP because like I'm poor, they're going to give me OSAP? Because most people get OSAP when they're low income but they at least have an income, right? Didn't really have an income, so I kept my credit clear for

like 6 months so I made sure all the bills were paid on time and stuff so that there was nothing in the credit, because they usually look back 6 months. So, I did that and then I got accepted into university with the OSAP and I was like 'oh yes, thank-you God.' At first, I took 5 classes and I was like okay, I'm an A student. When I came to university, I got a C! I threw up, I was crying [laughs]; it was worth 20%, it was a midterm but, to me, it was a C, I didn't care about the 20%, I didn't care that there were still 80% marks to go. I only cared that I got a C. I was throwing up and I was crying... I was, like, I'm too stupid to be at the university, I need to quit [laughs]. And you know, I was talking to my friend on the phone, he was laughing. I go 'don't laugh, I'm crying.' He goes 'no, you'll be okay, you'll be okay, it's only 20%, 20, and you know it's your first time writing an exam. You didn't know what to expect, so you know you better prepare for the next one, you can pull it up, you can pull it up.' So actually that conversation was pretty funny but it wasn't funny. I was sitting on the steps of Erie Hall crying and people are walking by and I'm just like [fake crying]... But, you know, I *didn't* know, so I went from 5 classes down to 4. The second semester it got harder, so I was like I can't do this, so I dropped down to 3 classes but I had problems with OSAP because I had 4 classes and I failed 2 out of 4 so they put me on academic probation.

Then, in my second year, my uncle had ALS and I'm like the matriarch of my family even though I have aunts and grandmothers and then I have my cousins and everybody and then my own family under me, but I'm kind of in the middle and I'm the most educated so whenever something goes on, they call me. If they can't figure it out, they call me and they ask me to help. I had to help my mom and my aunt because ALS is a debilitating disease where you slowly lose muscles, so you can't talk and then you can't swallow, and then you can't eat, and then you die. You can't breathe because your body forgets how to do all that and then you die, right? It's a slow, not so nice way to die. So, my uncle was really sick and I told my mom and her sisters, 'you have to go and get a legal document to become the power of attorney for him so that later on when he can't do things for himself, you're going to have to make the choices and on top of that you have to find out what he wants. Does he want a feeding tube? Does he want a breathing tube? Does he want to prolong life? You need to know these kinds of things.' And that's a hard conversation to have with someone you love who's going to be dying, right? But you know, then I had all that, and I had school on top of that, and then I had my kids... So, you know, I just broke down. I lost 2 credits out of 4 again, and then they were ready to kick me out of university. Here comes the dilemma... I got a grant for \$2,500 to cover my costs for school and my bursary came through, so that covered my school and my books but it didn't cover my cost of living. So I had no money to pay for rent, no money to eat, no money for anything. Because you know you're waiting for your OSAP to come in... I usually pay up my bills 4 or 5 months when my OSAP would come in. I'd pay up 4 months on the hydro, 4 months on this, 4 months on that, and whatever's left, it was left. So that's what I usually do, so by the time the next installment of OSAP comes in then I would do the same thing again, but I didn't have it.

So I went to Welfare to tell them, you know, can I get like an emergency loan until I figure this out? I've made an appeal to OSAP, it might take a couple weeks, it might take a month because

they're processing everybody's and, like, how many thousands of students come here? They denied me. They said I wouldn't be eligible because I would have to be able to look for a job. So I said, it doesn't matter that I'm in university, studying, and that my tuition's already paid and that I just need enough money for a month just to get through, to pay my rent, to feed my kids, you guys won't even help me?! And she goes, 'no they're going to reject your application.' I didn't know that I could appeal because I was still learning about the system. I didn't know I could appeal that if that's what it came down to and I probably would have gotten an emergency loan from them. That's what LAW [legal assistance] told me afterwards but I didn't know at the time. So I was like crying and upset and my teacher's like, 'ok, let's write an appeal. She wrote an appeal with me. Then they let me in because my tuition was paid, my fees were paid, right? OSAP straightened everything out and they said 'okay next time, you're out of university.' So I went down to 3 classes and with 3 classes I've been able to function extremely well and ever since then I've been taking 3 classes. So I've been doing really well, I'm kind of a B average student. I mean, I get the occasional A and I get the occasional C but more or less Bs straight through. I'm not an exceptional student but I work really hard, plus my community life on campus, I'm part of, like, if you saw my resume you'd be, like, when do you have time to breathe? [laughs]...

Another thing about people who live in poverty, dispelling myths, but telling the truth... Because we have such little control over our lives and a lot of aspects -- especially when it comes down to money and stability -- we like to take a lot of control over our lives and have things the way we want it. And we don't trust people very often. So, you know that, "us" and "them" mentality... Even now, sometimes I have that "us" and "them" mentality but it's slowly breaking down because I know both sides of the coin. I found a way now that I can talk more openly and more with confidence about poverty and about being poor, you know? And trust that the people I'm talking to are using it for something that's going to benefit, not harm, you know what I'm saying? So, I think that's another thing that has come with time and from learning things. But, one thing about poor people, once you screw them, they're never going to trust you again, ever! They don't care, your intentions might be good, you might say the right things, you might think that they trust you, really? No, not all, they don't trust you, you know? On the bus pass issue, they were taking their time and I spoke to one of the ladies who was in charge and I said, you know if you screw us, you can never turn to us again for help because we'll never support you, and that's all there is to it, it will never happen again. I go, I know I'll never trust you again. Trust is, like I said, we have such little control over our lives, over things that happen, that we like to be in control as much as possible of what we can control. It's just weird things that you learn about yourself as you go along in life.

Another thing with people living in poverty is: we keep going back to the listening and the voices thing. It's very important for them to talk and to share their stories, but they will only share with people they trust, right? So you know, some of us are readier at telling things or talking about things. But, like I said, for the longest time I felt like it was my fault, like I was totally to blame and that everything that social worker said was so true and then I was like, ugh, it's all my fault, you know, if only I would've made better choices... Like anybody can

make a bad choice, and I don't think bringing a life into the world is a bad choice. Being a good parent is not a bad choice. Recognizing that I need welfare is not a bad choice. It's a good choice; I'm taking care of what I'm supposed to take care of. Going to the Food Bank, the hardest thing in the world, your self-esteem, you know you feel like crap as a parent. You're going 'I can't believe I can't even support my own kids. You know, what kind of a hero am I supposed to be to them?' You know, how can they look up to someone like me? And then you just suck it up, you go in and you get the food, you come out, you go home, you know the kids are like 'yeah, we got food!' Why are your kids excited about having food? [laughs] Other kids are excited, 'yeah, I just got a new sled,' this kid's like "I got a sandwich, whoooo,' you know? So, it's weird, it's really weird how life changes...

But, as my kids were growing up... I wouldn't always show them how I felt, I wouldn't always cry in front of them if I was really hurt or if things were just too much, because they're kids and I wanted them to be kids and to have a kid life and to enjoy what they could. But, you know, there were times where I never sugar-coated things, like:

'I can't afford that. We're not getting it.'

'Why?'

'Because we don't have the money.'

'Why don't we have the money?'

'Because we live on welfare.'

'Why do we live on welfare?'

'Because I can't find a job.'

'Why can't you find a job?'

'Cause no one will hire me.'

'Well, why?'

'Okay listen, enough with the questions! The reality is, I can't find a job. I don't have the money. Accept it.'

And then, there's some times where we had to make decisions in the family. Okay, if I buy your shoes for basketball that means that we can't have, you know, we might be short food for a couple days and we'll have to eat noodles. 'Well, we'll do it', you know what I mean?

But, they're learning. So, hopefully they'll make different choices. I won't say better choices because there's no such thing, but I hope they'll make different choices that will make their lives better...