

TRAC RECORD

20 years
of working for tenants rights in BC

Tenants Rights Action Coalition

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Foreword

What makes a community great? A great community needs education, culture, industry, commerce, all the usual things, but a truly great community also needs to have heart. Over the last 20 years the Tenants' Rights Action Coalition has contributed a whole lot of heart to our communities. Their kind of heart is driven by a compassion for tenants and a passion for social justice. The work that TRAC takes on in defence of tenants rights contributes to the creation of a more just society. In the course of championing tenants rights TRAC has urged communities, landlords and legislators to "Come on, have a heart!"

For 20 years TRAC's people have put their hearts and minds into standing up for renters. They've helped tenants organize to retrieve security deposit refunds, convince landlords to make necessary repairs, fight illegal and unjust rent increases, avoid eviction without just cause, drive landlords to meet building safety standards, engage in dispute resolution processes, and much, much more. TRAC has battled to have discriminatory legislation improved, and then fought again to have that legislation enforced.

Dedication to social justice takes guts and commitment. The process of gathering "TRACster" histories was particularly rewarding for me because their stories are more than interesting, they're **inspiring**. In my books TRAC people, and others who continue to fight for social justice, are heroic. You don't have to pull people from burning buildings to be a hero. You can save someone by helping them maintain their home when it's in danger of being pulled out from under them. In the long run saving someone's home may save their life, because the trauma of losing your home sets off a domino effect. Two of the dominoes that fall are emotional and physical health.

Part of TRAC's mandate is to remind landlords that it's just not logical for interdependent community members to exploit one another. In spite of all TRAC's efforts to make that clear, it's still our lowest income groups who have the most difficulty finding and keeping decent and affordable housing. As John Shaylor points out, "the person renting the 10' x 10' room pays a higher price per square foot than anyone else in the city."

TRAC puts forward options to sub-standard housing and homelessness and one obvious alternative is publicly funded housing. For successful examples of that we can look to other countries, or we can look back a decade or so to Canada's National Housing Program. The abandonment of that program helped create today's homelessness crisis. To that crisis TRAC proposes a solution called "The 1% Solution." Just 1% of Canada's gross national income would enable us to provide housing for all our citizens. Housing all our people is possible, what's needed is the will. In 1971 John Lennon asked us to "Imagine," and in 2004 TRAC is asking us to "Imagine...and Realize."

A community with heart is a community where people care about justice and about each other. Caring is not just a sentimental idea, it's crucial to our survival. And so, when we say "Hats off to TRAC," we celebrate their 20 years of pumping heart into the community. Let's make sure they're around for another 20 years, because our communities need all the heart that TRAC, and all the rest of us can muster. **Happy Anniversary TRAC!**

Marsha Drake
Your Story



TRAC Record: Twenty Years of Tenant Advocacy

From grass roots organizing around kitchen tables in tiny apartments to appointments on decision making Boards and Commissions, the people at TRAC have worked hard for over twenty years to stand up for British Columbia tenants.

Tenants in British Columbia have endured times of great insecurity. Greedy landlords have taken advantage of tenants and exorbitantly increased rents in order to cash in on the market. We've seen substandard, third world accommodation passed off as rental property, as well as disinvestment and demolition of rental stock. We continue to be intrigued by some of the ingenious means employed to scam tenants out of their housing and their rights.

Some issues faced by tenants in 1984 (prior to Expo 86 the Vancouver Worlds Fair) resurface from time to time. Now, in 2004 it feels like "déjà vu all over again" with closures in residential tenancy services and perhaps the threat of market driven rent increases related to the 2010 Olympics. Veteran landlords who know how to use the system to their advantage, and against tenants, have for years scammed tenants and yet remain in business today.

TRAC has always worked hard to improve things for tenants and we are lucky that over the years we've had advocates willing to go to the wall to ensure that justice is achieved. To them we are immensely grateful.

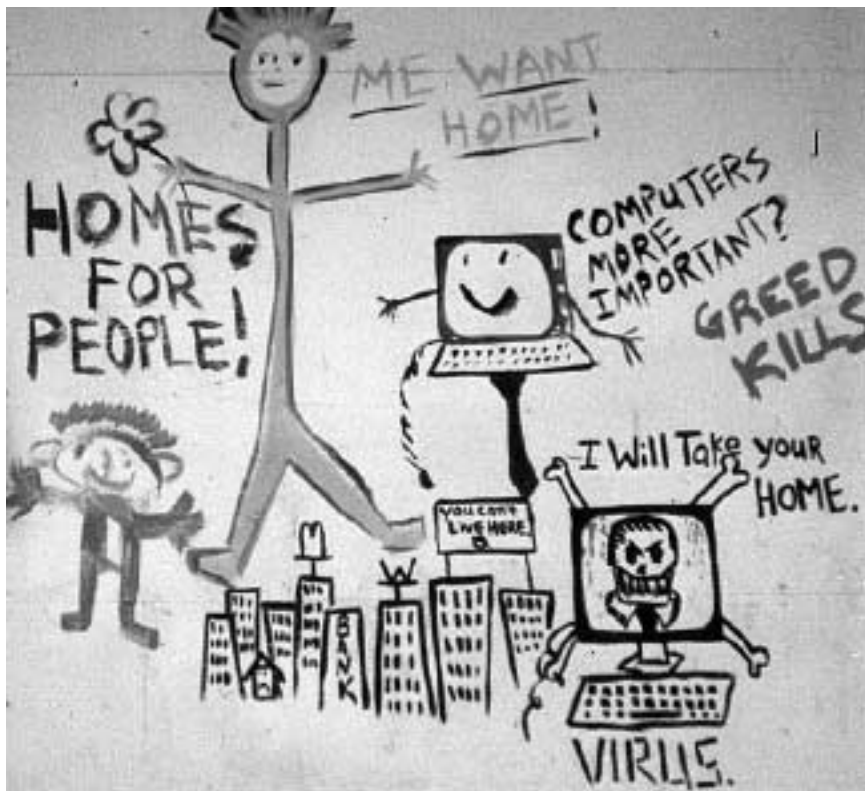


Homelessness and the 1% Solution

In 1993 the Mulroney Conservative government canceled the national housing program. This was a cost shared program between the federal and provincial governments that over the years created more than 650,000 units of non-profit, co-op and public housing across Canada. The Conservatives said that housing was a provincial responsibility and as the feds dropped out so too did all of the provinces, except BC and Quebec.

Other social programs were either reduced or dropped completely and soon the cumulative effect of the hole in the social safety net was increased homelessness on Canadian streets. The Federal Liberals were elected in late 1993 and even though they criticized Mulroney for cancelling the housing program, they did nothing to bring it back.

A movement was growing across the country as the homeless population grew from the stereotype of the transient drunk to a cross-section of society; single moms, seniors, people with mental and physical challenges, and young people called the streets home.



In 1998, the Big City Mayors through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities declared homelessness a "National Disaster". Community groups, churches, housing advocates and the First Nations community all called for a return to a national housing strategy to end homelessness.

TRAC joined the call for a national housing program and in March 1999 Vanessa Geary and Linda Mix joined hundreds of housing advocates, bureaucrats, housing developers, politicians and homeless people in Toronto for the national conference on homelessness.

Vanessa was a keynote speaker at the plenary session in the Council Chambers at Toronto City Hall and Linda spoke at a noon hour rally in the cold at Nathan Phillips Square. Speaker after speaker called for the return to a national housing supply program.

It was at that conference that the 1% Solution and the National Housing and Homelessness Network was born.

The 1% Solution was developed by David Hulchanski from the University of Toronto and formerly of the Centre for Human Settlements at UBC. If the federal, provincial and municipal governments committed 1% of their budgets to the development of affordable housing or programs to keep people housed, within ten years homelessness in Canada would be eliminated.

TRAC picked up the campaign in BC and worked to lobby the feds and any one else who would listen about the reinstatement of a national housing program. We're still working on it today and slowly, very slowly the federal government is coming around.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS



JIM QUAIL

Jim Quail. Founder Tenants Rights Coalition, Coordinator 1982-1983.

The Solidarity Movement in the early '80s marked the birth of a number of community groups, among them TRAC. As the British Columbia political pendulum swings back and forth, TRAC has always worked to advance the tenant agenda regardless of which government is in power. In the beginning TRAC's mandate was twofold: to challenge the regressive new tenancy laws and to educate tenants to help them to protect their housing.

As a student and a tenant in the West End in the 1970s I got involved with friends to form a tenants organization. It was a time of rising rents, no rent controls, conversions, condos and tenant-landlord friction and it escalated into the 1990s.

Several tenants organizations came and went in the 1970s. I was involved with West End Tenants Association which began in 1976 or 1977 when we got some funding through the West End Community Residents Advisory Board. That group faded when Bruce Yorke was elected to city council. (Bruce was one of the few early tenant activists and he was part of the anti-freeway development through Chinatown in the late '60s early '70s. He was also involved with the Trade Union Research Bureau and later served as a COPE city councillor.) Another group that was a force in Vancouver at that time was the Greater Vancouver Tenants Association.

From 1980 on, I was staff lawyer at Abbotsford Community Law Office and from 1980 to 1990 I was President of COPE, the Coalition of Progressive Electors. That's where I did my apprenticeship with Bruce Yorke, Bruce Eriksen and Harry Rankin.

I became involved in tenants' rights in the late 1970s and helped form the nucleus of the Tenants' Rights Coalition (TRC) in 1982. My role as Coordinator of TRC ended in 1987 when I went to work with the Legal Services Society. I remained on the Board of the Tenants Rights Coalition Legal Education Society for a few years.

When I was involved in housing issues there were wild swings in residential and property values that led to many foreclosures and landlord-tenant problems. I worked on tenants rights while articling at Legal Services Society and later at the Abbotsford Community Law Office. The Legal Services Society was part of the BC Legal Aid

JIM QUAIL

System that has been largely dismantled by Gordon Campbell's Liberal Government.

In 1982 we built a network of people involved in tenant advocacy. We met every month at Community Legal Assistance Society and the group included Alan Maclean, Barry Dean, Karen Dean, Tom LaLonde, the Greater Vancouver Renters Association, BC Public Housing, End Legislated Poverty and DERA. Our little nucleus of people hired Suze Kilgour as secretary and David Lane as researcher.

The BC Law Reform Commission proposed, and the Barrett NDP government enacted, the Rent Review Commission and the Office of the Rentalsman. They also provided seed money for community projects, all of which facilitated tenant organizing. After the NDP was defeated in 1983 the Socreds combined Rent Review and the Rentalsman to create the Rent Review Commission. Developers at that time argued that rent controls would end any new development.

After the provincial election in 1983 we had a good inkling of what the Socreds were going to do in terms of tenant legislation. So we put together an association to advocate for tenants and that became the Tenants Rights Coalition. Immediately after our formation the Socreds tabled their 26 Bills that dealt with everything from worker rights to human rights. That series of bills totally scrapped landlord-tenant legislation, eliminated the Rentalsman office, as well as all rent controls and any qualifications for eviction. We launched the Tenants Rights Coalition and immediately started the political work to fight that legislation.



JIM QUAIL

Initially the Vancouver and District Labour Council (VDLC) organized a broad coalition with a large rally at the future site of Science World to get the ball rolling. Next the BC Federation of Labour (BCFED) created a province-wide umbrella to encourage action across the province. "Operation Solidarity" united affiliates and non-affiliates and the Lower Mainland Solidarity Coalition united community and labour groups. Our organization was the tenant component in both.

The summer of 1983 saw escalating political action culminating in a huge rally at Empire Stadium with lots of media. Premier Bill Bennett refused to meet but offered one of his ministers. The Solidarity Coalition made a collective decision to negotiate, while the BCGEU started job action.

I contacted Jim Hewitt, the Minister in charge of housing, who was I think in the Corporate Affairs Office. His Executive Assistant insisted that we meet at the Legislature—which was behind picket lines. I organized a meeting at The Empress Hotel, drew up a brief and called the media but Hewitt didn't show. He finally agreed to meet with us, not behind picket lines, after I went on the Rafe Mair radio show. Jim Green from DERA was at our meeting, and Jean Swanson from ELP and all the usual suspects. I was the spokesperson and we played up all the media we got.

That meeting with Hewitt led to one of my most memorable moments. It happened when he stated that, "The tenant has one fundamental right and that is the right to move if he wants to." Well, this was just wonderful for us! I went into the outer office and quoted Hewitt to the press, from which we'd had a lot of support already. The Vancouver Sun made it a front page article.

When finally the deal was cut and the escalating general strike stopped, we did achieve our core demands. The government agreed to provide a non-judicial forum for landlord-tenant disputes, a process to deal with unjustified rent increases, and eviction only in the case of just cause. The government scrapped Bill 5 and introduced legislation that essentially led to what's in place now, and that covered all three of the basic elements.

After the withdrawal of Bill 5 our next move was to set up an organization with core funding. From the Law Foundation's Legal Services Society we got the money to publish the *Tenant Survival Guide*. Then we set up TRACLES, a non-profit charitable society that acted as a conduit for Legal Services Society funding and for the delivery of public education.

JIM QUAIL

Our AGM was held every year on April 1st religiously. TRACLES published the first *Tenant Survival Guide* and that was our key educating and organizing tool because it applied to all tenants and organizations. We also built up a federation of tenant groups and trained paralegals in tenant issues. The Law Foundation supported a Telephone Hotline and that evolved into the Tenants Rights Action Centre or TRAC, which was initially operated by David Lane and Suze Kilgour. Over time TRAC became established with staff and funding.

I remember that the NDP had an intelligent policy when dealing with education, and that the Harcourt government and Joan Smallwood had an effective way of dealing with constituent groups. Joan in particular would meet with tenants and have very open discussions with them. She was up front and kind—the way a minister should be when dealing with constituents.

We felt we were on a solid footing and that we were fortunate to be dealing with a minister who was frank and honest about what could be done. We weren't interested in being self or tenant destructive, as it would have been if we'd tried to push Joan into an untenable position. She was an important ally. She had the will to help and she conducted herself in a way that meant she would try to work constructively with key constituent groups.

TRAC has had a succession of people who've done a great job. In my time some people denounced us for selling out tenants by making too high demands. But TRAC's strategies worked and its people have always stayed grounded in political realism and not in under or overshooting the mark. We stayed grounded in the art of the possible in order to find real ways to achieve concrete gains for tenants. The fact that TRAC managed to survive through the Vander Zalm camp is a real testament to the fundamental strength of the organization. Originally TRC/TRAC was a very left organization but also very pragmatic. If you're really intent on changing the world, you've got to be a realist.

**If you're really intent
on changing the world,
you've got to be a realist.**

DAVID LANE

**David Lane. Founder of Tenants Rights Action Centre,
Coordinator 1983–1989.**

In the few years preceding Expo 86, Vancouver's Worlds Fair, tenants began receiving substantial rent increases, rentals were in high demand and vacancy rates were lower than ever. The provincial government abolished rent controls and closed down the regional Rentalsman's offices, where tenants and landlords could go for dispute resolution. Landlords were cashing in on the state of affairs. Tenants got together and organized. They challenged changes to the Residential Tenancy Act that took away tenants rights. They also worked to blow the whistle on unscrupulous landlords. Unfortunately, some of those bad landlords are still around in 2004 and operating their businesses in the same shady way.

David Lane was TRAC's first Coordinator and he helped lay the groundwork for the way the organization works today—give tenants the information and the tools they need and they will solve their tenancy problems, protect rental housing, and help other tenants in the process.

I joined the Steering Committee of the Tenants Rights Coalition (TRC) in August 1983 and so was not at the founding meeting. I'm sometimes credited with being a founding member of the Tenants Rights Coalition. However I am founder of the Tenants Rights Action Centre (TRAC) which became the physical location where organizing and tenant advocacy took place.

The 1970s was a time of community activism and of tenants in revolt because we had almost no workable tenant law. Bruce Yorke, the main voice and organizer for tenants in the early '70s, led a Vancouver and then a provincial tenant organization. His popularity launched him onto city council where he was one of four very strong housing and tenant advocates with Bruce Eriksen, Libby Davies and Harry Rankin.

I learned what I knew about organizing from Bruce, Libby, Jean Swanson and Bruce Eriksen. They were my advisors and mentors during the early years of TRC. Most of them got elected to Council and once there were able to put forward initiatives and fund projects and do whatever they could within the limited jurisdiction of the city to stand up for tenants and housing. Without their support it would have been very difficult to launch TRC successfully. An organization needs organizers, so without funding

from the BCFED and the City of Vancouver, TRC probably would have had a difficult time surviving. A lot of the organizations that began with Solidarity faltered but the Human Rights Coalition and TRAC have lasted over the long term.

When the NDP were elected in 1972 they established the Rentalsman's Office and created a venue to resolve landlord tenant issues. At the same time they funded programs like Opportunities for Youth (OFY) and Local Initiative Programs (LIP) and programs that helped tenants turn apartment buildings into co-ops. All of that crashed at the end of the '70s. Community groups lost funding and had a hard time existing.

In 1982 there was an extremely low vacancy rate, but the province maintained that there was no vacancy problem. There was no problem in regard to average housing but the vacancy rate in affordable housing was .01%. As a result many individuals and groups came together at the Community Legal Assistance Society (CLAS). They agreed on the need for a larger group to advocate for and to organize tenants and they elected Jim Quail, a Legal Aid lawyer, as their chairperson. There were people from the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), the Vancouver and District Public Tenants Association (the largest tenants group at the time), and the Red Door Housing Registry. Red Door gathered statistics that helped them advocate for housing and co-ops. It's not clear in my mind whether other groups sent official representatives or just attended.

Just two days after TRC's founding meeting, Premier Bill Bennett brought out 26 pieces of legislation that in one fell swoop rolled back all the progressive legislation that the NDP had passed. Bennett's legislation united people on welfare, human rights workers, women, tenants, housing advocates, and the whole labour movement. No doubt Gordon Campbell's advisors warned him not to legislate his cuts all at once. Bennett's Bills included back-to-work legislation, as well as restrictions on strikes and public sector workers. And it all came down on one day, July 7th 1983.

The Vancouver and District Labour Council (VDLC) and the BC Federation of Labour formed the Lower Mainland Solidarity Coalition and Operation Solidarity respectively. The Tenants Rights Coalition was one of the more active groups in the Solidarity Coalition. Their Fight Back campaigns culminated in a mass rally of 60,000 people at Empire Stadium on Aug. 10, 1983. Each sector had its own section and banners in the bleachers and all 60,000 marched around the stadium. Once the Solidarity Coalition was formally launched, unions assisted TRAC with its Fight

Back. A Tenant's Week was organized and included a demonstration in front of the local Rentalsman Office which was scheduled to be shut down. Other actions included a Tent-in on October 1st at Vanier Park where we held a news conference on the plight of tenants and the fact that there was zero affordable housing. It was an incredible time.

It became clear that we needed a long-term fight against Bill 5, the Residential Tenancy Act, because it reinstated the landlords' right to evict without cause and removed tenants' legal avenues. It became clear that unorganized people couldn't change anything. We needed to organize and that's why we established the Tenants Rights *Action* Centre or TRAC.

I'd been involved in tenant housing issues since DERA from 1977-79. Now in the fall of 1983 I was looking for a place to put my energies and I became TRAC Coordinator. We operated on donations only until fortunately Mel Lehan at the Unemployed Teachers' Centre provided assistance. He gave us an office, a desk, a phone and some volunteers—and that was the birth of the Tenants Rights Action Centre in November 1983. It was a very humble beginning. We had five or six people and the Tenant Information Line got questions about the law and landlords. A lot of buildings would be in an uproar and when they rang us we'd say: "Call a meeting and we'll be there!"

We were soon swamped and knew we had to merge into something bigger when a fortuitous juxtaposition of resources occurred. The Solidarity Coalition was determined to win back some rights from the government. By late 1983 only two Bills were still under debate—Bill 5 and the Human Rights Act. The BCFED gave TRAC an organizing grant to hire someone half time (myself) to organize tenants and get the Action Centre more firmly off the ground. Simultaneously Vancouver city council became more favourable to tenants and housing. Mike Harcourt was elected mayor. COPE had four seats, and with NDPer Bill Lee there was a progressive majority on council for most social issues.

It became clear that unorganized people couldn't change anything.

The Human Rights Coalition was also mounting a Fight Back and in need of organizers and an office. We combined with them and established our own TRAC office on Broadway, with the Human Rights Coalition next door. We had two full time

people, Suze Kilgour and myself. We had a Tenants Information Line and an organizing centre where we dealt with rent increases, repairs, and unreturned security deposits. Our goal was always to give tenants the tools, the laws, and the organizing ability. We had a grab bag of tactics but invariably tenants would invent great tactics of their own.

The year 1984 was big for organizing in apartment buildings. We started the Action Centre and a coalition with Vancouver District Public Housing tenants and others. But we needed a core of organized tenants, especially in the West End, Kitsilano, and East Vancouver. Wherever possible we tried to make tenants self sufficient and part of the coalition. That organizing period reached a heyday with a couple of buildings owned by probably the most notorious landlord group at the time.

They made huge profits by neglecting repairs and raising rents as much as 50–60%. Mayor Gordon Campbell was just sitting on his hands and allowing the landlords and developers to do what they wanted. In one case 280 units were involved. The first tenants' meeting drew about 100 people, very raucous and anarchistic, and the tenants suggested a two-fold action.

Action #1: Rent Strike. They decided to do it in a way that would ensure that no one got evicted. Single mothers, seniors and immigrants have a lot at stake when taking on a landlord. They decided to wreak havoc. The law states that you must pay your rent within ten days and so every month everyone waited for ten days—which made the company's books run amok.

Action #2: Picket Lines. Rent increases and neglect had increased an already high turnover rate, and owners were desperate for new tenants. So at the end and the beginning of each month volunteers picketed during peak new tenant times. The picketers were armed with baggies full of cockroaches, and information sheets that they passed to all prospective tenants. The potential renters were so grossed out that no one crossed the picket line. In due time vacancy rates soared and the company lost money big time.

Finally we got a call from the landlord's General Manager saying "We should talk". Everyone in the TRAC office was jumping around celebrating. We called meetings for the tenants to determine their course of action and terms of agreement. At the next meeting the General Manager had to walk through a throng of angry tenants carrying picket signs. We ushered him into a back room meeting with the negotiating committee.

The tenants demanded that all rent increases be rolled back. The Manager agreed. As soon as he walked out the door all hell broke loose because they'd put up a grand and courageous fight and they'd won!

The Social Credit government of the day had a two-pronged platform. They cut government staff and put a hold on their wages and that led to a huge public sector Fight Back. Then in the name of cost saving the province eradicated many government services and offices. The Rentalsman was a public service where landlords and tenants could resolve disputes. Cutting that was a totally false economy because doing everything through the courts was way more expensive. Legal Aid didn't cover tenant issues so low income tenants found it impossible to get help. That's why the Tenants Rights Action Centre was needed.

Our legal incorporation as a society was in March 1984 as the Lower Mainland Tenants Rights Coalition. The Tenants Hotline was already hot and our first *Tenant Survival Guide* was printed on newsprint because that's all we could afford.

We used the media a lot when the Socreds passed an amended version of Bill 5's "No eviction without cause." The media likes to see average people taking action against slumlords. The Socreds also axed the Rentalsman's office and rent controls. Our long term coalition fight was to bring back those key rights. Ideologically the Socreds had to axe the Rentalsman, but because of us they established the current arbitration process. With Rentalsman gone TRAC represented people at arbitration, in spite of our greatly reduced staff and offices.

During 1985 and 1986, we were a going concern with three or four staff...thanks in part to consistent money from the City of Vancouver, because of Mayor Harcourt and the COPE councillors. The Law Foundation funding didn't begin until approximately 1989.

The coalition went through difficult times in 1988 with a withdrawal of funding opportunities. That happened to many groups because grants and money we'd relied on disappeared. From ten staff we dwindled to one (me) in 1988. We went from a large office to a shared office with the Human Rights Coalition, which had experienced the same cuts. TRAC was now a one-person operation with volunteers and I was trying to wear all the hats. Then, largely through Suze Kilgour's work with the Law Foundation we began to receive consistent and adequate funding. Once again the organization got new staff and was back on its feet.

DAVID LANE

In the late '80s and early '90s many seniors from Kerrisdale received eviction notices to make way for new condo development. They called us for assistance but decided to demand a meeting with then Mayor Gordon Campbell instead. I held back my cynicism. They walked out of the meeting with nothing but platitudes. At the second meeting with us they talked about doing more, but were queasy about the kind of tactics that would be effective. Instead they met with their MLA and MP.

Finally I got a phone call from one of the seniors on the steering committee: "We want you to come and teach us how to paint banners." And so we had a workshop, and a demo the next week, and the local paper loved it. In two buildings we had signs and banners about Kerrisdale evictions. The media and city hall had to start listening. It was a different fight and it wasn't won in many circumstances but some tenants managed to keep their buildings and keep the homes they'd lived in for years. Some had paid rent to their landlord for 20 years, paid for their apartments many times over, yet they were being evicted so the landlord could make an even bigger profit.

People learn from seeing the real world and not from being told how the world works. Tenants invariably get an education by going to city council. They're amazed to find that they're ignored by council or, in the case of former Councillor George Puil, lambasted for being there at all.

Shortly afterward, with the organization stable and strong again, I decided that it was a good opportunity to move on. As a leader that's how I operate: when TRAC or tenants get on their feet, reinvigorated and independent, I see it as a good time for me to leave.

I'm not an idealist, I'm a pragmatist, and I know that nothing happens unless you organize people to have a voice and take action. Things don't change because a couple of individuals are noisy but because a lot of people take action collectively. And that means changing things on the government and the municipal levels.

SUZE KILGOUR

**Suze Kilgour. Tenant Advocate, Community Organizer
1982-1991.**

The more things change the more they stay the same! There were a few large companies in the Vancouver area during the '80s that built their business by illegally withholding tenant security deposits, rent gouging, deferring maintenance and giving bogus evictions. TRAC advocates are still dealing with some of those same landlords.

We've found that most tenants are well equipped to deal with their housing problems once they are given the tools. The early self help publications developed by TRAC set the tone and template for future public legal education materials including the Tenant Survival Guide, our Factsheets and our website.

TRAC has assisted tenants both individually and collectively by helping them to organize.

When the first round of Bennett's restraint cuts hit I lost my job with Abbotsford Community Law Office. Nevertheless I carried on representing tenants at Rentalsman cases in Vancouver and was involved in the formation of the Coalition. I didn't want to be a director. I was there to do advocacy and I worked and volunteered on administration, finances and grants: they were my babies.

One of the founding tenant organizations was the Vancouver Public Housing Tenants Association. Margaret Mitchell was the very vocal and charismatic individual who represented public housing tenants on the coalition. She was a very strong character. I remember attending their annual general meetings where BC Housing would be raked over the coals. In Margaret's opinion people in poverty have something in common and it's good for them to be together and develop support systems. That was only one of the cases where I learned to appreciate Margaret's perspective.

When Bill Bennett's 26 Social Credit Bills hit the floor the tenant coalition solidified. (The only Bill I can think of right now is the Bill that legislated my Hospital Employees Union members out the door of their workplaces.) TRAC's first huge success at that time was around eviction without cause, which cut us all to the core, along with the Rentalsman closing. Our Law Foundation funding was truly valuable because the Foundation understood that tenants needed to fight against the massive land-owning machines.

I did an analysis on the replacement of Rentalsman with the Residential Tenancy Branch. Rentalsman had been a direct government office, part of the BCGEU, and their officers were intimately involved with and knowledgeable about the Tenancy Act. Because of their collective agreement many bright, committed and talented people lost their jobs and went to work in liquor stores, etc. That was a very sad thing.

Security deposits came under the Residential Tenancy Act and they became a huge issue. Bill 19 or 20 stated that deposits were a monetary issue, belonging in small claims court. That meant that individual tenants had to represent themselves and each pay the individual resulting court costs. Under that system only 10% of tenants claimed their deposits, so that was a huge coup for the landlords.

In response to that we wrote a self-help publication for tenants trying to get their deposits back. Then we realized we were helping *individuals* and that there was no organizing happening. Tenants needed to organize to fight this issue. So we held an information meeting in Richmond where many tenants of a large and disreputable landlord had not recovered their security deposit refunds. We advertised and brought lawyers and it was hot and it was absolutely magnificent. I don't know if there were 500 people at the meeting or if we had 500 cases in total but it was a huge meeting and a huge undertaking.

The owner of their building was then the largest landlord in the province. He owned many buildings in the West End and a couple by the Burrard Street Bridge. We proved that he was *building buildings* with the security deposit money that he owed to tenants.

That tenants meeting in Richmond was ominous. The Community Legal Assistance Society (CLAS) lawyer Allen MacLean explained everything and that started a mass application for security deposits. We helped all the tenants go through the small claims court process all at once.

That took about a year out of my life, a year of getting all those people to file. There were so many the landlord couldn't possibly respond to them all. In fact he didn't respond to *any* of them and they all got their money back. They had to go through the whole legal process to get it but they won!

While we were interviewing tenants a property manager for the landlord came to us and offered to testify against the company. She was

sick of the scams and sick of falsifying check-out documents. She offered to give us an affidavit testifying to the fact that when someone moved out the company policy was to add damages to the checklist—after the sheet was signed and before it was photocopied. She was fed up. When people know they aren't alone it makes a huge difference.

Our analysis showed that if the Residential Tenancy Branch collected the security deposits, kept them in a trust fund and paid them back legitimately with 3% interest, it would fund the entire Rentalsman service. There's big money in security deposits and landlords know it. There have always been landlords who abuse the system.

Next we organized a rent strike with tenants in another building owned by a major property owner. I worked really hard on that one and the tenants were particularly great, in fact, amazing. I'm an artist and we silk screened t-shirts and pillowcases in the building's laundry room. The shirts said things like "Z-- rents unfair." One tenant was a graphic artist with the Vancouver Opera and he did some wonderful artwork. We all had a gas.

Another tenant was in the movie business and he had a projector so we projected slogans or questions on the sides of the building such as "Where is Giovanni?" When a property manager failed to attend a meeting with tenants his name went up on the side of the apartment. Everyone walking by would see his name in the light show on the walls of the building.

I personally went through Smithrite garbage bins to get information on landlords. We got the names behind numbered companies by going to the law offices that covered them and reading the names on their magazine address stickers. This is my kind of sleuthing and it worked. However, as a single mum activist with an eight year old daughter I experienced certain challenges. My daughter used to come with me to meetings but then I was threatened. I removed her completely, and we were both given RCMP numbers for protection. That was the worst time, but I still went ahead with the work.

Rent increases were certainly an issue but it was around repairs that we did the most significant organizing. After the Rentalsman and before the Residential Tenancy Branch it was impossible to force landlords to make repairs unless the tenants were organized. They got nowhere alone. A building could be falling apart and you couldn't force the landlord to fix anything. More people got involved over the condition of their building than because of rent increases.

SUZE KILGOUR

As a tenant activist you see some very sad situations but you encounter some funny ones too. Once, a guy in a well known slumlord building had a broken grate on the outside of his apartment and pigeons would nest in the air duct. He was constantly cleaning pigeon poop out of his bathtub and he wasn't even safe *in* the bath! When the tenants wrote about their repair issues he wrote a most amazing letter. It was about eight pages long and just hilarious.

The positive side to the most horrible situations was that the tenants wound up organizing and empowering themselves. Horror stories presented a way to create change. Our advocacy training philosophy included education and empowerment. Advocates were not to go in and save the day for anybody. We assisted by working with the person and wherever possible getting them to participate. I hope that's still the same today. If a building was in terrible repair our goal was to get the tenants together as an organization, rather than to help one or two to help the others. Our goal was to get everybody involved.

I never held up any single person as a hero. It was the people I met along the way . . . the old woman who chained herself to her doorway to stop evictions. During the coup it was the Chileans: as the military moved someone out the front door they'd move them back in the back door. It was the collective action, the group—that's where I got the most energy. There was no single person, no hero. It was the group that rose above everything and the tenants all doing it together. We had David Lane as the front person and the rest of us held TRAC together. I was part of the glue that helped TRAC stick together.

It was the collective action, the group—that's where I got the most energy.

CATE JONES

Cate Jones. 1986 Researcher/Spy, former Board Member 1991–1992.

TRAC has always had an incredible and hard working Board of Directors. Many, many times over the last twenty years tenants who initially came to TRAC for assistance ended up dedicating their time to the Board of Directors. Another side of that occurs when former "TRACsters" continue their involvement with the organization and become Directors after they leave TRAC's employ.

I only worked at TRAC for a few months and that was thanks to a Section 125 Unemployment Insurance top-up grant. Donna Morgan and I had the title "researcher," but ours was a spy project.

Prior to Expo 86 landlords were both rent gouging and removing vital housing stock from the market through conversions. There's always been a housing crunch in Vancouver—a shortage of decent and affordable housing even at the best of times. However, at that time it reached crisis proportions. There had been a rash of single occupancy hotel evictions in the Downtown Eastside. In other areas landlords were holding back suites to use as short-term tourist rentals. It was our job to identify apartment buildings, mostly in the West End, that were willing to rent illegally on a short-term basis to Expo visitors.

Every day we'd go out, buzz apartment managers, and say we had relatives coming for a week or two for Expo. We'd tell them the relatives wanted a furnished apartment and not a hotel. Amazingly enough we found a number of managers who were doing that, even though it wasn't allowed under the Tenancy Act. We collected the evidence and brought it to city council, which was looking for ways to deal with that kind of abuse. Our little spy project got a lot of media coverage.

Donna and I were never afraid because we worked together. In fact, we had fun. Mostly we talked to management through intercoms. It was seldom a face-to-face conversation. That helped us because it's harder to maintain the facade when you're face-to-face. We'd just drive around in our Volkswagen Super Beetle until we found an available building manager. Then we'd deliver our pitch, find out what they were up to, and say "Thanks very much. We'll talk to our relatives and get back to you." If we couldn't find a resident manager we'd go on to the next building on our list.

CATE JONES

Through our cold calling we uncovered around thirty buildings that were renting illegally. The apartment owners or managers were charging a month's rent for a week's rental. If they rented a suite four times in one month they did very well. Of course what they were doing was totally illegal. Expo was with us for six months so you can imagine the amount of money this kind of person could make in six months.

We discovered buildings that had renovated and furnished suites specifically for Expo and we toured some of these suites. One I remember is the Lee Building, which was in the news recently over its huge rooftop billboard. City council's been fighting with them for years over that. The owners say they need the billboard because the revenue from it pays for the building's maintenance. Council keeps telling them: "That's what your rents are for!" Well, the Lee Building had a number of illegal suites ready for Expo.

We found the thirty buildings that were renting illegally in just a couple of months. We didn't push it too hard. We'd ring the manager and try to get an answer and if they said "No" we'd leave it at that. Who knew when owners sanctioned the practice and when the managers were pocketing the money? A manager could send the usual month's payment into accounting and everything would seem in order. Actually the suite could be pulling in four times a normal month's rent. We didn't always know whether we were talking to the owner or the manager. Some would have worked out a joint strategy.

CATE JONES

Unfortunately the landlords we caught were not prosecuted because the City of Vancouver didn't have the resources to go after them. The landlords got warning letters, which helped to scare them, and all our publicity must have made them think twice. The apartment managers became quite hesitant to deal with cold calls. Of course they'd have to wonder "Is this a TRAC researcher, or someone legitimately looking for Expo accommodation?"

Thinking back over the years I remember TRAC's various office homes. The moves reflect the rise and fall of TRAC's fiscal situation. When I first joined we were in a tiny office at Broadway and Manitoba. David Lane and Suze Kilgour shared the coordinator's position and they had at least two or three advocates. Then six of us from the Section 25 UI Grant joined them although the office was really only big enough for two or three. Only a lucky few of us were paid!

Then we moved downtown and since we were non-profit there was no money for renovations. Consequently staff did all the moving and painting. I remember Suze and I trying to move the photocopier, without a dolly I think, into someone's van. I was in my twenties at the time but I still knew that this was insane. Ah well, nothing's too good for the working class.

When TRAC got more funding they moved to larger digs at East Hastings and Slocan, which was home for many years. The downtown



CATE JONES

office was a little swishier but this office was bigger. Unfortunately in summer it became a towering inferno. It wasn't really towering (only second floor) but it sure was hot! The 1990's have been the most stable in terms of government funding, so TRAC could afford to pay for a fairly large staff contingent.

In 1990 the Provincial Information Project (PIP) expanded the Tenants' Hotline into the whole province. The NDP were elected in October 1991. Before that we had "the Bills," Bennett and Vander Zalm. Well, BC politics always has been crazy.

I've carried TRAC's advocacy and Hotline training into our constituency office (Joy MacPhail). Their style of advocacy is to give people the tools and let them solve their own problems. If you solve people's problems for them you create a dependency. Whereas if you tell them: "This is what you need to do, these are your rights, so follow these steps," they become independent. The TRAC Hotline is already in huge demand and if TRAC tried to do everything for everybody they'd serve far fewer tenants.

TRAC does a lot of public education and they cast their net widely. We have the *Tenant Survival Guide* on display in the constituency office because it helps people learn how to exercise their rights. TRAC provides advocacy training for constituency assistants so that they know what to tell people who need tenant assistance.

I think TRAC has survived because they've had strong coordinators and staff and they've been smart in terms of the projects they've taken on. They try not to take on too much and then burn themselves out. Another part of their success is that they're a coalition. I don't think they're organizing tenants in the way that they used to, but they've been very good at mentoring people. And look at how long their staff stay—it's not as if they're getting rich working there!

I'd say that TRAC is smart and selective with strong people who provide solid public education.

**Only a lucky few
of us were paid!**

JOHN SHAYLER

John Shayler. Coordinator 1989–1991, Board Member 1992.

Providing information services to tenants is one of the primary focuses of TRAC's work. But it became evident in the years after Expo 86 that local land use policies have an immediate effect on tenants and their security of tenure. The City of Vancouver witnessed a significant loss of rental housing stock when the new Condominium Act came into effect. The result was that apartments built in the late 60s and early 70's under federal incentive programs to provide rental housing were converted to condos.

A booming housing market, developers buying on speculation and grossly inflated housing prices made Vancouver an unaffordable place to live. In the upper middle class neighbourhood of Kerrisdale, hundreds of three-storey walk up apartments were slated for demolition to make way for new Condo development. Most of the tenants in those buildings were seniors on fixed incomes. TRAC worked to raise the issue of equitable land use policy and the preservation of rental housing.

The way I got my title is a story in itself. Back around 1987–1988 after Expo 86, the Non Partisan Party swept city council except for one seat and Social Credit swept back in provincially at the same time. It was a bad time for non-profits and TRAC was having trouble getting funding. David Lane and Suze Kilgour found money through the Law Foundation and it started to look good. TRAC had become smaller and quieter after its heyday years. In late 1988 or early 1989 they posted jobs, mostly for paralegal workers. I thought the researcher job sounded wonderful after a long time as a spokesperson both at DERA in 1988 and as president of the Grandview Woodland area council.

I wanted to apply for the research position but they wanted me to apply for the coordinator's job. They said: "Don't worry, we'll run it as a group. David will be here and we'll all pitch in." So I hummed and hawed but said "Yes", and it turned out that the Law Foundation and another grant allowed for four staff. Suze was still there as treasurer and she'd done the legwork for the Law Foundation funding. I was a reluctant coordinator but a few weeks later David got the Fisherman's Union job and ultimately that's how I became coordinator.

We had a good group. It was small but really good and I thought

JOHN SHAYLER

it was my job to coordinate but not to be the boss. We had some great people involved who just don't get enough credit. History forgets them. Brett Haughian was an excellent paralegal and an inspiration to me in the sense that when he spoke with a tenant he would always say the right thing, ask the right questions and be very patient.

Another person hired at that time was Roneen Marcoux. She'd worked for the City of Vancouver and she was very knowledgeable. And Suze Kilgour was doing the books as a volunteer. We had generally speaking a cohesive group with talents in many areas. The spokesperson role fell to me, not so much because I'd particularly wanted it, but because of my background. We have this great-person theory of history and he or she *is* the organization, and I don't go with that. We all did Hotline phone shifts and the set up is still consistent with earlier days.

Our office was in the Patel Building with the Van East Cinema on Commercial Drive. It was a pretty small space and we did the Tenant Hotline at our desks. We planned our work together with a real sense of give and take. We'd get walk-ins demanding direct front line service once in a while, but these were often hard for us to handle. The walk-in clinic on Saturday was for that purpose. It was a very challenging job and with all the stuff we were doing we were incredibly busy.

In the early 90s when Vancouver Land Corporation started building the "mini-suites" our little office decided to build a mock up mini-suite. We got a tarp, measured out 320 feet and put a bed and a couch into it. Then we invited the media. We made a little doorway and they all came in with their cameras. There was an air of seriousness but a sense of humour too. "Come on in and sit down, sit on the couch," we'd say, with everyone standing around because there wasn't any room. "Is this the way we want to live? Come on in, come in!" (When I was at DERA we worked with people who lived in 10' x 10' rooms and you know, when you worked it out on a per-foot basis they were paying more per foot than anyone else in the City.)

The number one focus for TRAC was political organizing. There was often trouble in big buildings in the West End between 1989-91. But it's not like Vancouver has had one housing crises. It's kind of an ongoing thing. However that just happened to be a time where there was a significant explosion in the area of tenants' rights. We were working with other groups and coalitions to connect tenants together. I particularly admired the people I worked with who were struggling to keep their housing.

JOHN SHAYLER

The other focus for TRAC was legal education. We put out the *Tenant Guide* and we had a legal clinic down at Legal Services. When asked we also gave workshops on tenants' rights at community colleges or ESL classes, etc. The third part of our work was the Telephone Information Hotline. The Law Foundation funders requested that and it ended up being an excellent complement to going out to buildings and organizing. The Hotline kept us abreast of exactly what was going on all over so we knew what to say to the media and where to focus on change for tenants.

After Expo there was a real acceleration in the buying, selling and demolition of affordable rental housing. There were still conversions happening in the Downtown Eastside so single room occupancy hotels rooms were disappearing by the 100s. In Kerrisdale building owners were evicting tenants, ripping down apartments, and building condos. This meant a permanent loss in rental housing stock. Buildings with 40 or 50 rental units were torn down and replaced by 14 or 15 condo units. Multi-family houses were bought up in groups, boarded up and left vacant. Rents were going up 50-100%, it was a real crisis, and the NPA council was putting a squeeze on secondary suites. The Lower Mainland vacancy rate was consistently below 1%, and more like .8%.

Federally Mulroney's conservatives cut social programs and withdrew all commitment to a national housing policy. Housing was clearly not an issue for the Federal Government. And the province wasn't interested in saving or building affordable housing. The city was losing



affordable housing with everything going condo, as it still is. No one is building rental housing because there's no money in it.

To fight back we organized a city-wide tenants' coalition. We'd go and meet with 100 people who were asking questions and coming up with ideas. There was real excitement in the air. And it's not just the great people—it's that call for justice and for taking action together. Our little staff was doing legal clinics in the East End and going out as far as Burnaby. In Burnaby housing that was supposed to be rental for 15 years was being turned into strata title and most people were getting eviction notices.

Fortunately we could carry that coalition because we had staff! We nurtured the coalition rather than directing it. We tried to get Mayor Gordon Campbell and council to hear a delegation's recommendations to alleviate the housing crisis but the city wouldn't allow it. Once Gordon Campbell became mayor it became harder to gain access to city council meetings.

The group decided that we should go to council anyway. A committee drafted the recommendations and prepared a plan. That committee included people from all areas. We met consistently to talk about how to support one another. A retired United Church minister delivered the recommendations and he was the perfect person to do that. Those meetings led to one of the proudest days I've had as an activist.

It was the last council meeting before Christmas. Between 200 and 300 people representing diverse communities from across the city entered City Hall at 2 p.m. We were disciplined and thoughtful. The Raging Grannies sang and Santa Claus was in his suit. After everyone's effort it would have been really unfortunate if someone, because of ego, had stolen the show. But the demonstration had power because we came in with a power. This "little group that could" went in and said: "We're not on the speakers list but we're going to speak anyway. We're going to speak for 15 minutes so just cool it." People who've walked on picket lines and demonstrated will agree that when everyone works together to create the power everyone feels good about it. Our action didn't create much change but there was a real process to it. People from single rooms in the DTES and people from much different situations in Point Grey were talking respectfully to each other and listening to one another.

Early the next year there was a famous building squat on Francis Street. Developers or numbered companies were buying up buildings on speculation and leaving them empty. And city council was doing nothing

to stop this clear cutting of affordable housing. Some squatters took over a building and the police got involved. When it came up at our coalition meeting some of the older people who'd lived through the Depression said: "It's absolutely wrong to do that to those buildings! Why shouldn't those young people be in them?" Common sense can be a beautiful thing.

After Expo there was a major change. People wanted answers to questions such as: "Whose city is this?" "Who's making the decisions here?" "How do we get neighbourhood councils and housing representation in a democracy?" "What about a Ward system?" "Who's running the show, the developers?" "Can developers buy and sell Vancouver without anyone else having a say in it?"

**And it's not just
the great people—its
that call for justice
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These questions were the election themes at that time. People like Mel Lehan had been organizing in neighbourhoods around planning and housing. Mel started the group Neighbour to Neighbour that was made up of organizations in Vancouver west and east.

That municipal election was fought on these issues and it changed the face of council. I would have liked to have seen the NPA kicked out on the basis of what they'd done around the housing issue but still there was a real message sent, and community people were acknowledged for their work.

The opposition was able to mitigate the effects of Gordon Campbell's policies in the city. But by the time he became premier he was more practiced in terms of pushing his agenda. People would have to organize province wide, which is a much bigger job, in order to mitigate his provincial policies.

What I'm most proud of in terms of TRAC is that our small staff ended up playing a big part in the 1990 civic election. That election ended with an incredibly close vote (6–5) and with housing being a central issue on the agenda. That happened because of the city-wide tenants' coalition, which is not an easy thing to bring about.

MIKE WALKER

Mike Walker. Coordinator 1991–1997.

Over the years TRAC's position has evolved from "community agitator" into a more consultative or advisory role as the voice of BC Tenants. It was a still a struggle to break through, even with so-called "friendly" provincial government administrations. It takes talent and determination to be seen as a stakeholder and taken seriously, to bring forward issues in order to change the law.

When Joan Smallwood was Housing Minister, and responsible for the RTA, she seriously considered TRAC's recommendations around rent regulations. We were calling for rent controls or at minimum a requirement that landlords justify high rent increases. Mike Walker was instrumental in providing input into the rent protection system. It meant that if a tenant challenged a rent increase through the Residential Tenancy Office, an arbitrator could require the landlord to prove that the increase was justified. That system worked and kept landlords honest until 2004 when the BC Liberals legislated a fixed amount of allowable rent increase. Unfortunately, the BC Liberals also brought in loopholes that landlords could use to raise rent higher than the allowable amount.

I'd been working part time, trading on my ability to keep books and hanging around the Left working on a Co-op Radio program. TRAC was advertising for a half time bookkeeper and I knew people who worked there so I applied and started keeping books. It didn't take long before I clued into the legal stuff and started taking calls on the Tenant Hotline and just became part of the organization. It was a good fit. The job descriptions were a little bit loose. I think I was called the administrator but I did that about half the time and the other half I was doing either telephone or organizing work. We were well funded by the Law Foundation. I became coordinator a year or year and a half later and stayed on for six years. The staff was very collaborative though not always serene.

The phase up to 1991 was really distinct from the phase between 1991 and 2001 after the Socreds lost the provincial election. After a decade of Social Credit government it took the organization almost a year to catch on to the fact that we now had a social democratic government.

These days TRAC is seen as an NDP organization but then it

MIKE WALKER

was more Left. Consequently prior to 1991 it wasn't plugged into the provincial NDP. From the fall of 1991 we tried but found it hard to engage with the provincial NDP. TRAC has had two focuses: one being whatever makes housing available and the other being the legal landlord and tenant relationship, but not everyone understood that. We may have seemed rigid when dealing with the Socreds because we knew they'd never meet us half way. But because of that the NDP thought we lacked subtlety and we thought they lacked the will to do anything. It wasn't satisfying because they weren't an enemy and we weren't getting anything accomplished.

Moe Sihota was responsible for the Residential Tenancy Act but he wasn't interested in dealing with us. The first NDP Housing Minister was Robin Blencoe. At one meeting I unintentionally noticed that his assistant's notes read "TRAC is only interested in rent control." The NDP wasn't interested in rent control at that time and they identified us as a single issue group. However they made the first round of Tenancy Act amendments in '93. We didn't really have anything to do with it. Mostly it was reasonable stuff, which we thought didn't go very far. Vancouver city council was just glad that 1989 was over because of the big trouble over the Kerrisdale evictions. Gordon Campbell and then Philip Owen were Vancouver mayors while I was coordinator.

What really turned things around was when Joan Smallwood became housing minister. She came from an organizing background and I believe when she became minister the Tenancy Act and the Housing Ministry came together. Joan was quite cooperative and responsive and we started having an actual exchange of views and so TRAC was able to organize around objectives that the province could satisfy. She understood and was interested in what we were doing and how we thought. While she couldn't give us everything we wanted she opened a dialogue between ourselves and our member groups and Victoria. She was unusual in that she understood what community organizing was about.

It's quite likely that a part of the NDP wanted rent regulation and a part was terrified of it. The 1994 legislation included a very moderate rent regulatory system. We wanted a full-scale system. What the government brought in gave a standing tenant the right to contest a rent increase but in between tenants the rent could be raised. That model aimed to provide greater security of tenure for tenants who stayed in one place as opposed to controlling the price of a commodity in the marketplace.

It was a compromise. In the long run they didn't intend to affect the level of rents at all. But they did give us some organizing tools in the

legislation. A number of tenants could—Joan Smallwood was instrumental here—band together and sign up on one legal action against a landlord. They had to sign up individually so it was a joint action not a class action. With this new framework if there was a building-wide problem we'd say to two or three people in the building: "Here's the issues, the tools, the legal framework, and these are your organizing options. One option is to gather your case, sign up your neighbours and tell them you'll go to the hearing and speak out for them. If you can't speak we'll speak. All you have to do is be part of the crew."

In the early '90s the Law Foundation helped fund the toll-free telephone line which meant we could offer our service across the province. The Provincial Government under Joan Smallwood made a grant program available for organizations that wanted to organize around housing problems. Joan understood that community organizing isn't expanding the Residential Tenancy office and giving people five more places to go and talk and expand government service. Spin doctoring might be useful but it's not organizing.

Organizing takes tools like the joint arbitration and it takes some resources. It doesn't happen on its own. It takes inspiration and people and time and good ideas and good political instincts, but you can sure help it along with just a little bit of resources. Joan's ministry made some very modest resources available for us and also for groups in other areas. There was housing money going into a lot of centres in the province. It was modest amounts of money, but enough that it got into the hands of people who wanted to do some creative organizing with it.

Any organizer who has ever dealt with an NDP government has heard the words: "If you just bring the public onside with your issue we'll be happy to do something about it." The Liberals say the same thing to the business community: "Get the people onside with you. Prove to us that they are. Make these conditions work on the ground and we'll be happy to do that." The great thing with Joan was that she went one step farther. She said, "How can we help you create the conditions within which we'll be able to respond to your ideas?" We couldn't have organized the people

Through all the changes in government I think TRAC has survived because it's been able to reinvent itself.

who were onside if we hadn't had cooperation from Joan and the (CHI) Community Housing Initiatives program.

During my six years with TRAC we also had to do some organizing work around the funding programs because when you take a program like CHI and you're giving grants to community groups, it's government employees who deal with the applications, reporting, rules, etc.

Most bureaucrats or public servants don't think like community organizers. The NDP were progressive minded by and large but they didn't understand the organizer mentality. I recall in maybe 1995 the province sponsored a provincial conference for housing advocates. We organized with other advocates to influence the direction of the funding and drove it toward community organizing over the not so subtle objections of the mandarins. Joan was ready for that and she deserves a lot of credit for understanding what organizing is and for moving resources around to help it happen.

Secondary suites presented another issue where it took us a while to figure out how to work with a social democratic government. We got nowhere with the municipalities. Landlords and people renting secondary suites were both living in fear of being reported and so we pushed the province to legalize secondary suites. Because of the position taken by the Union of BC Municipalities the NDP declined to pick a fight. Instead, they used partial measures and brought a new sub-chapter into the Building Code.

For example, they made secondary suite standards lower than duplex standards. Instead of requiring sprinklers they went for interlocked smoke detectors for a fraction of the cost. Another example is less than full height ceilings and things like that. We were inclined to write their efforts off at the time saying: "They're not even listening to us, it's as if we didn't say anything!" But since that experience I've come to understand the incremental approach of a social democratic government. At first an action might seem like a half or quarter or eighth measure but it will eventually pay off.

Now I recognize how difficult it is to be a social democratic government. After several years the NDP is not the government but the Building Code is still there. In Vancouver the NPA is also out and now the governing COPE council is looking at legalizing secondary suites. Their starting point is the amended Building Code which in particular circumstances allows for a secondary dwelling in a house to be built.

MIKE WALKER

I'd have to say that Joan Smallwood's attitude and her ability to take hold of a situation was the most inspiring thing I saw in my time at TRAC. She could identify her natural allies, see the possibilities, think them through and give people just a little bit of help to do the job better. She didn't get lost in the kind of fear and loathing and indecision that is government.

Through all the changes in government I think TRAC has survived because it's been able to reinvent itself. Some organizations that are dedicated to a social agenda have a real hard time reinventing themselves. There are phases of intense activity then it disappears and then they're tamed. Its relationship with the Law Foundation could have tamed TRAC. If you get service oriented funding year after year (for the toll free line) you can be turned into an official kind of agency, more like a social service. Somehow TRAC reinvented itself around the opportunities for organization that different provincial governments presented. If an organization isn't able to reinvent itself I think it will become an official agency and that to me is not far from being a diseased organization.

There's no magic about it. An organization that can reinvent itself makes the job easier for people organizing around the issues. TRAC is a repository of information and analysis around urban planning and land economy as they affect housing supply.

Editor's Note: While Mike did not discuss or even mention the following two initiatives, they both took shape during his watch.

Advocate Training

In the mid nineties there was an increased demand for legal education on tenancy issues. Local advocates were thirsty for information. TRAC had done legal information workshops for tenants and legal workers, but it wasn't until Kim Zander took over the reigns of advocate training that TRAC's legal education provision took off. Kim developed a model for advocate training that is accessible and interesting and that gives the advocates valuable tools. Still based on Kim's model, TRAC training is in high demand.

The Multicultural Project

Post Expo the face of Vancouver was changing. Immigration was at an all time high and it was evident that a significant number of renters

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did not speak English and were easily taken advantage of by some savvy and unscrupulous landlords.

In many cases landlord/tenant disputes involving newcomers were linked to language barriers and the newcomers' lack of knowledge of BC's residential tenancy laws. This assessment provided the direction for the Spanish Language Legal Education and Advocacy Project.

TRAC was able to secure funding from Legal Services and the Immigrant Settlement Adaptation Program of Canada, a Federal Government Program, in 1994. The project was taken on by Deborah Romero and while the focus of the Spanish Language Legal Education and Advocacy Project was on the Spanish speaking community, the project evolved to become the model for further outreach to the Chinese, Punjabi, Vietnamese, and other ethnic communities within the Lower Mainland.

In 1994 Sadia Ramirez, a former school teacher from El Salvador, joined TRAC and took on the Multicultural Project that is central to the work we do today. Initially the Project had two main objectives: a) to write and publish an accessible, culturally appropriate handbook in Spanish on



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tenants' legal rights and responsibilities (in the form of a 'foto-novela' or some other illustrated text) and b) to train Spanish speaking advocates and settlement workers to serve as advocates on landlord/tenant issues.

The project was successful in training and establishing a network of Spanish speaking settlement workers and advocates in the Lower Mainland. The publication was less successful however, in addressing the legal information needs of the Spanish speaking community as a whole. The cartoon format did not have much appeal for the Spanish speaking community we contacted and the publication was discontinued after a short run of 1000 copies.

In 1996, TRAC together with The People's Law School Cultural Minority Program, and OPTIONS designed the informational sheet "How to protect yourself when renting." This sheet was designed for recent immigrants and provided important tips about what to pay attention to when looking for a place to live, or before renting a home. Because of its popularity among recent immigrants this sheet was translated into nine languages including Russian, Croatian, Serb, French, Spanish, Chinese, Punjabi, Vietnamese and Korean. At the same time, TRAC and People's Law School worked together organizing and delivering workshops on landlord tenant law for different immigrant serving organizations.

In 1999, TRAC published 12 factsheets that supplemented the English language *Tenant Survival Guide*, providing targeted information on key areas of concern for tenants. These factsheets were translated into Chinese, Punjabi, Vietnamese, Spanish, Filipino, and Korean.

TRAC continues to work in the multicultural sector and we have translated the *Tenant Survival Guide* into 5 different languages: Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish, Vietnamese and Korean. The booklets have received very positive feedback from settlement workers, recent immigrants and the ethnic media.

During the past ten years TRAC has worked with over 60 immigrant serving agencies, provided over 350 workshops to speakers of languages other than English, and trained over 200 multilingual advocates on the Residential Tenancy Act. By reaching out to the Multicultural community, and through Sadia's tenacity, a number of scams targeted at non-English speaking tenants and newcomers have been exposed.

VANESSA GEARY

Vanessa Geary. Coordinator 1997–2003.

For years, in almost every municipality, the issue of secondary suites has caused conflict and manifested Nimbysism to an embarrassing degree. It is estimated that there are over 25,000 secondary suites in Vancouver and thousands more across the Lower Mainland. Secondary suites are one way that the private market augments rental housing stock. There is a real patchwork of secondary suite policies around the Lower Mainland and for years TRAC has worked to get this form of rental housing legalized. In the mid-nineties, TRAC Community Legal worker Paul Clairmont and other advocates in Surrey formed "SALSA", the Safe and Legal Suite Alliance, to promote reasonable suite policies in Surrey.

Erin Goodman and Kim Zander worked tirelessly with tenants in Delta and in one situation gained intervener status for TRAC on a case that went to British Columbia Supreme Court. In partnership with the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre, the decision in this case set the precedent that municipal bylaws concerning accommodation for family only, violated the Charter of Rights on the basis of discrimination based on family status.

Municipalities are coming around and in 2003 the City of Vancouver finally legalized secondary suites. Other GVRD municipalities are looking at Vancouver's bylaw.

I became aware of housing issues in the late '80s when the City of Vancouver did its first secondary suite review. It was an appalling process, with people screaming at each other and it had a lot to do with the idea of "them and us." Landlords considered tenants transients without roots in the neighbourhood, who bring down property values and party all night and other negative stereotypes. The neighbourhoods around UBC voted against secondary suites. The city didn't want to close them down because they'd end up with thousands of people displaced and on the streets. It was this process that made me realize that not everybody has safe, secure, affordable housing and from there I went into planning school.

The first time I phoned TRAC was when I had my own housing problem. Our landlord decided to evict us so the house would be empty for viewing. TRAC informed us of our rights and told us that she had

no legitimate reason to evict us. Then I got involved with TRAC because of research I was doing for them. That was in the early '90s when Leslie Stern, Tom Durning and I updated David Hulchanski's paper on rental trends in the city of Vancouver. Through that project I became more closely involved with TRAC.

Throughout its history TRAC has had a very good 'trac' record of raising housing issues and putting them on the public agenda. After years of Social Credit neglect groups began to see the need for collective action around housing. TRAC was instrumental in creating the umbrella group called The Lower Mainland Network for Affordable Housing, which I was involved in. The early 90s was an exciting time in housing because all this stuff was happening. My first "real" job was with BC Housing and although I have a masters in planning I've never worked as a city planner.

During my three years at BC Housing I saw a number of programs that came out of the provincial commission on housing. The NDP solely funded a non-profit housing program, a co-op housing program, a bizarre program (that didn't really work) on home ownership,

People who work at TRAC and other advocacy groups don't do it for the money. They do it because they care deeply about the issues and they have a real sense of commitment.

as well as something called the "Community Housing Initiatives" program (we pronounced it "cheap"). One of my jobs was helping to administer that program. The idea was that we could solve many housing problems by building new social and co-op housing. TRAC helped the NDP re-vamp the Residential Tenancy Act to make it more fair for tenants. Rent protection, another thing that TRAC can take credit for in 1995, also came in at that time.

The NDP tried to regulate the market to increase stability, affordability and supply. They also recognized, in part thanks to groups like TRAC, the need for housing advocacy in government and public arenas. The CHI grants were quite radical because the government was financially supporting community advocates. Community work in public education is really about advocacy and action. Groups all over the province got money

for education and advocacy, and that helped create a provincial housing network.

TRAC's form of advocacy has taken on tenants rights, secondary suites, non-market housing, and positive response to non-market housing because it's essential to the health of our communities. Thanks to the Community Housing Initiatives program TRAC had the resources to push municipal issues such as secondary suites, standards of maintenance, by-laws and density "bonusing." Bonusing is trading off height bylaws for public benefits like affordable housing or daycare centres.

As a result of administering some of their contracts I became in awe of TRAC's effectiveness. While they've never have a very large staff they've raised issues in a constructive way, knowing when to yell but also when to talk. Their approach is both strategic and proactive. They were leaders in raising awareness about the national housing crisis. And now their approach is to raise a whole bunch of flags around the Olympics insisting that if we have the games they should benefit everyone.

A lot of groups are afraid to bite the hand that feeds them but TRAC has stood up even to friendly government. When the NDP wanted to cut legal aid or the housing program, TRAC was there to say "Hey government, what you're doing is all wrong!" Some people may say, sometimes fairly, that TRAC could take a stronger stand on some issues. But what I admire about TRAC is that they're very strategic in choosing when to roar and when to sit down and negotiate.

TRAC, together with the groups funded by CHI, organized a fight back campaign when that program was endangered. The government changed the program, which it probably needed, by setting up regional housing centres around the province. TRAC became one of the centres and partnered with the Lower Mainland Network for Affordable Housing on two housing centres. Then they partnered with a Surrey group for another few years. The continuity of the CHI grant also enabled TRAC to push the secondary suite issue.

In 1997 when Mike Walker left for law school I applied and became TRAC's next coordinator. We had these amazing, long-term advocates with way more knowledge and experience than I had in tenancy. People who work at TRAC and other advocacy groups don't do it for the money. They do it because they care deeply about the issues and they have a real sense of commitment. TRAC has always attracted committed, passionate, knowledgeable people.

VANESSA GEARY

Everyone involved with the Telephone Hotline finds that it keeps them grounded in the immediate issues. You're providing legal information to people who are sometimes upset and that can be emotionally draining. It can be devastating, especially when there's just nothing you can do for them. I remember a father saying, "I don't need information about my rights, I just need to know where the nearest shelter is because I have to take my kids there." What do you do in that situation? Well, you listen for a few hours and then you start working on a campaign to legalize suites or to strengthen tenants' rights. Then you know you're doing the systemic work to improve things for people like that father.

The delicate balance of direct service with systemic advocacy helps explain where TRAC's people get the energy and the inspiration to stay on. This dual purpose is also ultimately responsible for TRAC's effectiveness. Real tenant situations guide and motivate the organization's advocacy and activism. Often a group provides either service or advocacy. I think the coming together of those two roles has been one of TRAC's great strengths.

Another aspect of TRAC's success can be attributed to the organization's ability to recruit a strong and diverse Board of Directors who bring in a variety of skills, interests and experience. In my time at TRAC the board was always hardworking, generous with their time and respectful of the staff. Both staff and board are grounded in the desire for a strong tenant voice and social justice. They believe it's their job to ensure that housing be seen as a basic human right—not as a privilege. These beliefs permeate the organization and are in fact its heart and soul.

The creation of the coordinator's role ushered in some tumultuous times. At one point we recognized the need for delineation in terms of responsibility, decision making and accountability. When consensus works, the board respects staff recommendations and sometimes the board is proactive and says "this is the way it's going to be." But for the most part the board believes they've hired the right people for the job and that they are there to provide support and guidance. They might question or recommend, but I can't think of any situation where they've overturned staff recommendations. A mutual respect exists.

Sometimes we organized retreats to enhance staff and board communication and to share visions of TRAC's short and long-term future. Not all retreats were equally successful. In some cases you went back to work and forgot what happened in the retreat but at least the effort was made to include everyone in the decision making process.

VANESSA

Working with a strong board and being part of a province-wide coalition helps TRAC to maintain a broad perspective on housing issues. Unfortunately, the coalition is heavily dependent on provincial funding. Some members were forced to fold because of funding cuts. TRAC tries to be responsible to other groups but its success in that area is also tied to time and resources. We did our best to ensure that member representatives were able to attend retreats. It was great to hear what the groups were working on and what they needed.

One of the big campaigns in my time was the Security Deposit Trust Fund. We wanted legislation that would prevent landlords from illegally keeping tenants' security deposits. As it was, they had no satisfactory recourse. To get a refund tenants had to apply to the Residential Tenancy Office and go through the complicated legal process of getting an Arbitrators Order, which demanded that the landlord return their deposit. The order was basically meaningless because it was almost impossible to enforce. Landlords ignored the process because of the prohibitive time and expense required. Consequently, most tenants walked away from their deposit. The law clearly stated that landlords couldn't do this, but in fact they could and they did. One developer was building new apartment buildings on the security deposit money he hadn't returned!

Mike Walker learned that the Australian government had a system where security deposits were held on behalf of tenants and landlords and placed in a trust fund. At the end of the tenancy the fund was accessible to the tenant unless the landlord claimed unpaid rent or damage. The beauty of this system is that there is a substantial amount of money earning a substantial amount of interest. And the interest can be used to serve both tenants and landlords. Ideally tenants would benefit most because it's their money. Mike did a research paper on it, and we started to flog the idea publicly in 1998. We wrote a brief, presented it to government and had a province wide "Return to Renter" campaign that got substantial media attention.

The highlight of the campaign occurred at TRAC's 15th Anniversary party at the Waldorf Hotel. Ujjal Dosanjh was there and he was running for provincial party leader at the time. He announced, to everyone at the party, that he promised to bring in the Security Deposit Trust Fund.



VANESSA GEARY

Some of us were more sceptical than others. Landlords were vehemently opposed to the Fund but the NDP did have staff looking into it. In the end they concluded that the idea wasn't financially feasible because of low interests rates. At the end of the day there wasn't enough political will to do it and that was very disappointing.

During another part of the campaign we collected thousands of postcards signed by tenants and demanding that the government institute a Security Deposit Trust Fund. I take a lot of responsibility for the fact that we stalled too long on that campaign. We presented the cards at the cabinet office in a nice little demonstration with a staff member dressed as Santa Claus and the slogan "all the tenants want for Christmas is a Security Deposit Trust Fund." Santa presented this big bag of postcards to the Attorney General Graeme Bowbrick who was responsible for residential tenancy at that time.

If I learned anything from that campaign it was that we weren't—vocal is not the right word—we didn't yell loudly enough. That was partly because we had a sympathetic government that had done some really good things for tenants and housing. It's tricky because you don't want to undermine the good things they have done, but you do need to be aggressive. You need to know when to yell. We did good solid research and we delivered a well-written brief. We were great at public awareness and media attention, we got the meetings and we did all the follow-up. But we should have pushed a little harder.

We didn't put enough pressure on the government and that was a strategic error that I take full responsibility for. And it's unfortunate because I believe it would have benefited tenants *and* landlords. Certainly the Australian landlords were happy with it because it removed a huge bone of contention and a lot of hassle. In my six years at TRAC that campaign was both a high and a low.

TRAC might resurrect the Security Deposit Trust Fund later but I don't think there's a hope in hell that it would go anywhere with this Liberal government. They've revamped the Residential Tenancy Act, which they say will improve the return of deposits. A tenant's deposit doubles if the landlord doesn't return it within a certain time period. Maybe that will work. The Residential Tenancy Act held some terrible rulings for tenants. We'll have to wait and see what comes of the changes they have made. On the positive side, because of TRAC's pressure on Victoria, the Liberals didn't go as far as you'd expect them to go in the direction of eroding tenants rights.

JIM GREEN

Jim Green. Downtown Eastside Housing Advocate, Community Organizer, City Councillor.

Prior to Expo 86 there were over 14,000 Single Room Occupancy hotel units in Vancouver. These tiny, one-person rooms primarily in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Downtown South, traditionally housed transient resource workers who came into town for the winter. Later on SROs became low income housing by default, and for many the last stop before living on the streets.

After Expo and with a tourism boom, thousands of rooms were lost to conversions for tourist use and back packers' hostels. Every time we got word of a hotel planning evictions TRAC and the Carnegie Action Project, led by Tom Laviolette, would lobby City Hall, stage protests in front of the buildings and work with Legal Services to get the tenants into the Residential Tenancy Office to challenge their evictions.

TRAC and others worked for seven years, lobbying the City to implement SRO protections. The City did its own internal research that confirmed our position on protecting SROs until replacement housing for this population could be built. A consultant hired to study the issue made excellent recommendations around SRO protection but that report gathered dust.

During the bid process for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games TRAC again raised the issue of SRO protection to avoid a repeat of the EXPO evictions. The municipal election of 2002 brought in a progressive council and in the fall of 2003 Vancouver passed a bylaw to protect SRO accommodation.

From the early 1970s Libby Davies and Bruce Eriksen had fought for SRO (single room occupancy) tenants to be covered by the Residential Tenancy Act. When I started working with DERA (the Downtown Eastside Residents Association) in 1980 or 1981 the Residential Tenancy Act was called something else and we had a Rentalsman, which was a government run place where landlords and tenants could go for dispute resolution. Unfortunately the NDP failed to include SROs in the Residential Tenancy Act in the early 1970s and it was the Socreds who finally passed the legislation. However, they never proclaimed the legislation so it never became law. DERA and TRAC worked on all those issues together. We always had a very close relationship and it worked well. Later on in the

JIM GREEN

whole movement around Woodwards, TRAC was the most supportive organization and the Woodwards Committee relied on people from TRAC. We were always allies and that's who you looked to first for support.

In 1983 we occupied the premier's office. There were 80 of us protesting several issues including human rights, welfare rights, deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities and Residential Tenancy Act applications in the Downtown Eastside. Extending the Residential Tenancy Act to people in hotels was one of our chief demands. An argument we strongly put forward was that the Socreds could use this as a "feel good" thing because it wouldn't cost a penny to give people those rights. And according to the United Nations definition of homelessness you could argue that you'd saved 15-20,000 people from homelessness simply by giving them security of tenure.

I got together with David Lane from TRAC and we put on a vigorous campaign because of the coming world's fair, Expo 86. We knew that without any protection there would be evictions and quite possibly deaths. So we really went after the Social Credit government to proclaim this legislation and we tried to convince Mayor Harcourt to take the idea forward on our behalf as part of the city's plan for Expo.

We organized a bunch of demos called "Do it Hewitt!" then housing minister, to demand that he proclaim the new Act that included SRO tenants. We had about 500 people at one demo but they didn't proclaim it. As a result, we ended up with a thousand Downtown Eastside people evicted in 1986 for Expo. They lost their homes and there was mayhem. In fact the Downtown Eastside hasn't recovered from that yet.

There were huge battles and I was called, among other things, "the Kaddafi of the Downtown Eastside." I loved that one! The Social Credit Government set up a task force to study me and my "abuse of housing" but their study turned into a glowing report on our housing work in the community. So that was a nice thing.

In 1983 I was asked to chair a meeting about the future of housing advocacy at the First United Church. There may have been 50 or even 100 people there and two major things happened. That meeting became the founding meeting of TRAC, which at that time was called the BC Tenants Rights Coalition (BCTRC). In the end the province wouldn't allow us to use "BC" so it had to be removed. Jim Quail was the lawyer who worked with us on that and he's still around today and involved with COPE. A second major thing happened at that meeting when Art Kube, head of the



BC Federation of Labour, announced Operation Solidarity, which went on to become the Solidarity Movement. So Operation Solidarity was founded at the founding meeting of TRAC. Art is also still around and he's with the Coalition of Senior Citizens.

Quite a few people came to TRAC through DERA: Tom Durning, Laura Stannard, Linda Mix, John Shayler. When Warnette Kennedy was a councillor he accused DERA of being a left wing political factory: which I kind of liked. We were pumping people out like mad.

Jack Kemp was one of the ministers attacking us and attacking social housing at the time. He'd say things like "social housing is a waste of money," and "we shouldn't have it." Then one time I was on the Jack Webster show (the big show of the day) and the producer leaned over to tell me that Jack Kemp was phoning in from his home...which just happened to be a co-op in Victoria with a hot tub. So that was pretty good, that was fun.

As a community organizer I've had a number of interesting experiences. Marguerite Ford, an NPA City Councillor, was constantly attacking me personally and housing on the Downtown Eastside in general. After seeing me on TV training people to run a co-op she informed council: "He's not building housing, he's building an army by giving these people capacities." She argued that you could only use the "model of outside control." This meant that you had to have an outside agency to run housing for poor people and the people themselves couldn't have any say in it. Of course we have the exact *opposite* model.

JIM GREEN

So in a housing co-op like Four Sisters lots of welfare moms sit as directors on the boards, work on the design and oversee construction. They learn about what materials to use and why. They get on the finance or membership committee and run the co-op and one day they say: "Wait a minute. I'm the president of a \$10 million dollar co-op with a yearly budget of \$1.5 million and 500 residents. So don't tell *me* I have no skills or self esteem!" Eventually all these capacities transfer over to community use and self improvement. And they come out of the whole development process and the opportunity to use housing as a tool for creating new people. That's my little pet thing.

Some people think that homeless shelters are an effective way to house people. But shelters probably cost 8–10 times what it costs to house people. That's short sighted. The New York Times reports that every homeless person in New York City costs the taxpayer \$40,000 a year and the numbers are probably the same in Canada. What if we weren't paying for that? What if we were putting \$10,000 a year for four years into that person's life? We'd save a fortune and we'd have productive people in our society, or at least people who were taken care of.

Other people think the homeless somehow deserve to be homeless because they make those choices. Or they say we don't have the money for housing right now so we'll take care of it later. But it's a lot more costly to rehabilitate someone later than to put money into developing housing and people's capacities.

. . . they come out of the whole development process and the opportunity to use housing as a tool for creating new people . . . That's my little pet thing.

SEAN McEWEN

Sean McKewen. Architect and friend of TRAC.

In the late '80s I'd been aware of the housing work that TRAC had been doing. I had always been interested in housing from a design perspective and years ago toured social housing projects and learned about systems to construct social housing, primarily those used in Europe and especially in France. I also knew about the Vancouver civic party COPE's strong interest in urban issues and housing. I'd followed COPE's policy on social housing and advocacy for rental housing, including the work of Councillors Harry Rankin, Bruce Yorke, Libby Davies, Bruce Eriksen, and also of Jean Swanson and Sandy Cameron. Of course Jim Green and a lot of people in the Downtown Eastside at the time were very active in housing, through DERA and other groups. I followed their actions with interest.

Also in the late '80s, I had got involved in a public way in my own neighbourhood over the rezoning of a significant amount of industrial land to make way for housing. I helped organize my neighbours to try to promote more housing variety by including rental, social, and assisted housing as part of the rezoning. We were up against Gordon Campbell and his NPA Council so our ideas didn't get far. The rezoning finally turned into a large market housing development.

A couple of years later Peter Greenwell who was associated with TRAC, and a group of West End Tenants in city-owned houses needed some technical and planning assistance. They thought I could help them based on some of the work I'd done as a housing advocate in my own neighbourhood. Peter introduced me to Blair Petrie from Mole Hill and TRAC's Tom Durning.

I worked with them and with the Mole Hill Living Heritage Society to save the houses as rental housing and single room occupancy accommodation.

Blair did extensive archival research on the block of 26 vintage houses, the Society put forward its ideas for saving the block and I added my architectural expertise. People like Tom Durning and Mike Walker of TRAC focused on housing policy arguments and the importance of preserving existing housing stock.

We made presentations to the city planners and politicians. It was a tough sell. Mayor Philip Own and his council seemed to have had little empathy. They wanted to capitalize on the city-owned land by building

highrise apartments or trading for park space. The Parks Board's long term plan was to move the more important heritage homes to one end and use the rest of the block for green space and tennis courts, in spite of the fact that all surveys showed that people wanted the houses preserved. We pushed the notion of incorporating park-like spaces in and around houses to encourage public use, which is what you see there today.

It was a long, long process with many presentations to city council. Finally Councillor Jennifer Clark challenged us to come up with a strategy to underwrite the project. It was then that the Mole Hill Society began to lobby the province in earnest. Tim Stevenson the MLA was a big help. Jenny Kwan and housing experts like Jim O'Dea also assisted us and promoted our ideas to the province.

Finally Blair Petrie, Linda Diano, a key Mole Hill leader, and myself spoke with Mike Farnsworth the NDP Minister of Housing. While there was no program for BC Housing to support the renovation of existing rental stock, Farnsworth worked behind the scenes to make it happen. Finally Cameron Gray, manager of the City Housing Centre got together with BC Housing officials and crafted a Homes BC Program proposal to make Mole Hill a program-sponsored project. Once the city politicians saw that there were provincial resources in place, they came onside.

In all, it took about four years of constant lobbying, mostly by Blair Petrie, Linda Diano, and people like TRAC's Vanessa Geary, Linda Mix, Tom Durning and others. TRAC played a huge advocacy role to get provincial and municipal commitment. City council passed a resolution to turn over the 26 houses and their properties to the Mole Hill Society on a 60 year lease, the usual terms for social housing. Essentially Mole Hill came about because the provincial government underwrote a housing program and provided long term housing subsidies for the residents with low incomes.

By the time we got government commitment Mike Walker had finished law school so he became the society's lawyer and I became their architect. Since the job was too big for one person I associated with a long-established firm and became the team's lead designer. It's been a fulltime job for well over four years and I'll have put in a total of almost 10 years guiding the project from conception to fruition.

I should mention that TRAC's Coordinator Vanessa Geary was absolutely key to Mole Hill's success after Mike Walker left. Vanessa's energy helped make the project a reality and was central to its success.

While acting as coordinator of TRAC she was volunteer president and spokesperson of the Mole Hill Society. As well, Tom Durning was a creative policy person who made great voluntary contributions to the Mole Hill Society.

In another vein of my work with TRAC, I'd also like to mention the Lower Mainland Network for Affordable Housing, an umbrella organization of non profit and advocacy groups like TRAC, that formed after 1993 to advocate for the reinstatement of federal government housing programs. It also worked to promote more social housing opportunities in BC Housing and in municipalities around the region. In 1995 I was lucky enough to be hired as an advocate to help work on specific planning initiatives for the Network. It was great fun for about three years.

During the time that the Lower Mainland Network for Affordable Housing was working closely with TRAC, the province organized a number of advocacy associations (called regional housing centres) around the province. TRAC became absolutely central to the operation of the Lower Mainland Housing Centre. I worked with Tom Durning, Vanessa, Linda, Sadia and Erin Goodman and we produced a newsletter for all councillors and directors of planning in the Lower Mainland. Some municipalities had no knowledge of housing issues but we successfully raised awareness in cities all over the region.

Erin and Tom were central to the newsletter's production. Part of the challenge was to write to planners in their own language and to give them information that was current and accurate. TRAC had also organized a clipping service and would dispense articles where needed to help with housing advocacy efforts. Today TRAC carries on that wonderful service of disseminating information and partnering with other organizations like it did with the Network in years past.

Although it's taken years of involvement, I'd do another Mole Hill. I like to work with non-profits and people who work at the community level. I do only limited market-oriented development in my professional work. These days I'm active in the Downtown Eastside and I work with agencies there. It's a good thing to be working on projects that you feel are important. I prefer to work on community based projects rather than helping the captains of industry keep their rank.

In my opinion the basis of the profession of architecture is to assist the public and help define the culture. The values of a market based culture are not as meaningful as they could be because they tend to serve

only smaller segments of society. They don't serve everyone's needs. I believe that the real strength of community-based planning and advocacy is the fact that you're helping more people to live a better life than you might do in the pure market based system that so many of our politicians today seem to aspire to.

I've learned a lot from the groups that I've worked with. The people involved really are the most important thing. I bring along some planning experience and technical expertise, but the essential thing is to partner with people who really know what they're doing and who have a strong commitment. And I can't think of anybody I'd rather partner with than the people at TRAC.

Linda Mix at City Hall.

One of the advocacy areas I worked with TRAC on was the Downtown Eastside. Before the Vancouver Agreement was put together the assistant city manager was helping Philip Owen's council organize a series of programs for the Downtown Eastside to (yet again) try to revitalize the area. Many groups in the Downtown Eastside had lots of experience with planning efforts and really didn't think much of the city's notions to try to revitalize their area. The council and the city manager informed them that an announcement concerning new policies for the Downtown Eastside would be made at the Carnegie Centre. They invited all the groups to send their representatives to Carnegie for the announcement.

Meanwhile the city had another plan. With all the community activists carefully manoeuvred out of the scene and directed to the Carnegie, a press conference was organized for City Hall. At Linda's suggestion, she and I crashed their party. She said, "Why don't we go where the real action's going to be?" So Linda and I showed up in the mayor's office. About 30 people from the press were watching a power point presentation by the city manager.

When it ended the mayor asked if there were any questions. Linda immediately asked a strong question: "How will these particular programs contribute to positive kinds of development in the Downtown Eastside? Will they be simply gentrification oriented or will they include opportunities for many of the local residents?" It was a galvanising moment! Suddenly a forest of microphones was shoved into Linda's face and all the cameras focused on her. And the reporters just kept asking her questions so that there were no questions for Philip Owen or the city manager. The two

of them were left to stare at each other while Linda took over the whole meeting.

I thought it was the best hijacking of a political meeting that I'd ever seen. The mayor didn't know what to do because no one was asking him anything so he saw me and came over and struck up a conversation, maybe because he had no one else to talk to.

People always come into the Downtown Eastside and want to do something from the outside. Mayor Owen, to his credit, went through a political and spiritual sea change and eventually came to bat for the Downtown Eastside through the Vancouver Agreement and the Four Pillars Approach. He became a staunch advocate for appropriate programs for change, especially from the housing point of view. These days you still find politicians like Lorne Mayencourt who think they can legislate solutions to the Downtown Eastside. But solutions need to be community based and come from the people who are part of the living fabric of the area. Laws against issues like panhandling, that are imposed from the outside and the top down never work. They cost a lot and that money would be so much better spent if it were enabling community organizations to do better work.

The whole basis of the profession of architecture is to assist the public and essentially to help the culture. The values of a completely market based culture are somewhat temporal and not as meaningful as they could be because they serve only a small segment of society. They don't serve everyone. I believe that the real strength of community based design planning and advocacy is in the fact that you're helping more people to live a better life than you do in the market based system.

SUSAN CAMERON

Susan Cameron. TRAC Tenant and Board Member
1996–Present.

I moved into The Beaconsfield and into a wonderful community of artists, writers, entertainers, entrepreneurs and other terrific people about ten years ago. The unspoken arrangement was that you could do what you wanted with your suite, within reason, and no one asked any questions. Rents were relatively stable and everyone was happy. That is, until 24 out of 38 of us received outrageous rent increases. Many of us had been hit with \$50–\$130 extra per month. An older lady, a 12-year resident, got one of the highest increases which would probably have forced her to move out.

We knew nothing about the Residential Tenancy Branch or our rights. But we knew each other and we rallied together. We made some phone calls, discovered TRAC, and called an information meeting in my suite. Linda Mix and Sadia Ramirez from TRAC gave us the lowdown and answered all our questions. They also informed us about the arbitration process to challenge rent increases and 17 of us agreed to go that route. And that began my own particular journey into a three or four year venture.

According to the Tenancy Act a landlord could increase rents if he could justify the increase. Arbitration could examine his statement of earnings to determine a justifiable increase such as operating costs. The arbitrators took our case seriously, maybe because there were 17 of us, and asked to see the landlord's books.

The arbitrator knew our proceedings would take a day or two and asked if we'd agree to a 2–3% increase across the board. We agreed because it was reasonable. The landlord agreed with one hitch: the increase would apply to every suite but mine. The arbitrator asked to see his books but the landlord didn't produce them, so everyone *but* me got a 2% increase and I got none!

Next we applied for building repairs and maintenance. Our washing machines overflowed and that sort of thing. It was not a pretty time. The owners were ordered to make a number of repairs, some of which they did and some they let go and we let them slide too. They painted the hallways a nasty shade of brown.

So that was our first experience with TRAC and the Residential Tenancy Branch. We got a tremendous amount of press and the NDP

SUSAN CAMERON

picked up our situation and turned it into an election issue. "Will the Act stay in place if the Liberals come to power?" Four days after the NDP were re-elected I got an eviction notice stating that my apartment was needed for a caretaker's suite. This particular kind of eviction is one of the most difficult to dispute.

I decided to arbitrate. We went to the Arbitration Review Panel and the eviction was overturned but the decision had loopholes and the landlord appealed. Fortunately Linda Mix and Diana Lowe were with me. We went back and forth between the Residential Tenancy Branch and the Arbitration Review Panel (an expensive and inefficient body now gone thanks to TRAC) and then we didn't know where to go.

TRAC saw that our only recourse was to file a petition with the court. That's when I knew I was in over my head. TRAC had worked with me on everything to this point but they couldn't go into court. Miraculously I met Carol Reardon and Dermot Foley, two advocates who'd moved into my building. Carol is a lawyer and she agreed to take my case. Rob Grant a senior partner at the same firm thought we had a constitutional argument. No one could believe the landlord would behave so badly.

**I couldn't possibly
have done it without
TRAC's education,
connections, process
and even emotional
support.**

First we fought to maintain possession of the suite – once you lose that you're inclined to give up. Through my team's kindness and perseverance we won our case. We were tied up in Supreme Court for three years. It was the first time a tenant issue had gone this far and the Residential Tenancy Branch

watched the case closely. The judge decided that it wasn't necessarily a constitutional argument and sent us back to the Arbitration Review Panel. The panel seemed afraid of precedent setting; I guess that fining a landlord seemed outrageous to the bureaucrats.

Now I'm a pretty determined individual but I could not, in my wildest dreams, have gone through all this without Carol, Dermot, my friends and TRAC. I lost my room mate because it was so all-encompassing. I couldn't possibly have done it without TRAC's education, connections, process and even emotional support.

SUSAN CAMERON

The case was sent back to the Review Panel and the Residential Tenancy Branch for a hearing as though it were the first time around. But it was almost four years later and here I was still fighting for occupation of my suite! Thanks to a coincidence our arbitrator was our first one, the one who'd requested to see the landlord's books but never received them. So she understood our history. And we won our case.

A splinter group formed about three years ago when the owners tried to introduce new lease agreements. Most of us are on a month to month basis. The owners brought in a key access card and intimidated tenants saying that only those who signed a lease would get an access card. New people were signing and some ended up paying \$200-\$400 more per month for the same suite. We thought about trying to buy the building as Tenants in Common but that idea didn't go anywhere.

We had another arbitration but couldn't take it on for everyone. We were successful and this time the arbitrators ruled that we were entitled to compensation for loss of use! The landlord wasn't happy with that and he appealed. Since the Arbitration Review Panel is no longer there he went to court. Thanks to the great support of Community Legal Assistance Services lawyer David Mossop we won that too. I know I couldn't have done it without all the people who were willing and able to lend a hand.

I don't remember if I joined the TRAC Board during or after this whole process. It feels like I've been on the board for a long time. When I was asked I wondered what I'd possibly have to offer. Now I see it as an opportunity to give back the knowledge and experience I've gained as a renter.

I know for a fact that TRAC attracts a certain kind of individual. A number of TRACsters have left TRAC and gone on to law school. I remember sitting on my first hiring committee thinking: "This is such a privilege. They've given me so much and now I'm able to give something back." I hope that our board and our volunteers can continue to help BC tenants.