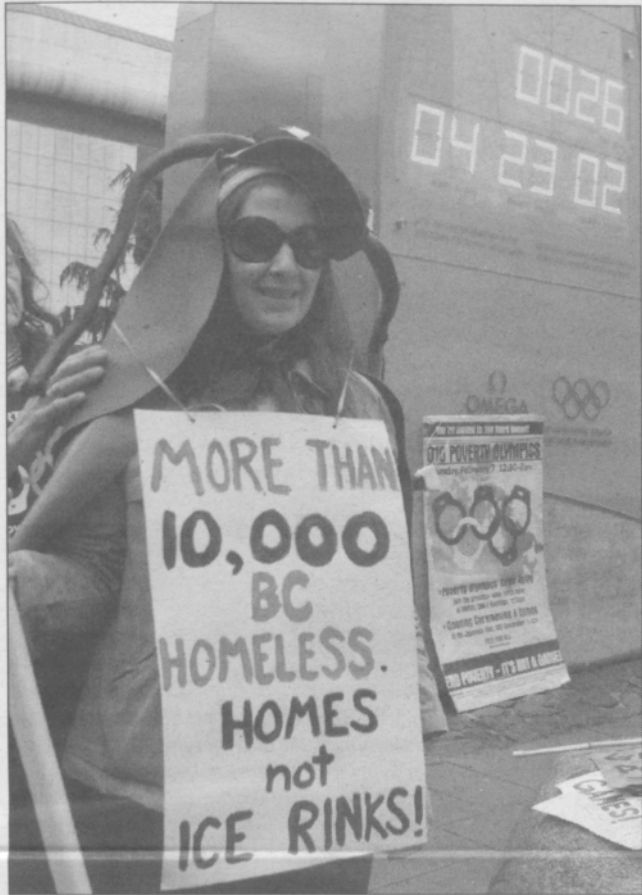


RINGS, from page 1

there was a lot of fear and trepidation when Vancouver was awarded the Games that we could see the same thing that has happened in the past happen again.

In many ways, things have not been as bad as some predicted. We haven't seen the massive sweeps, and housing advocates, through tireless protests and squats, were able to harness the Games and embarrass the provincial government into investing more money into shelters and social housing.



Poverty protestors hold rally at the Olympic count down clock in Vancouver. REUTERS/ANDY CLARK

But by and far the Olympics have hurt low-income people. Vancouver promised that no one would be made homeless because of the Olympics, and homelessness has more than doubled since the city awarded the Games. We have seen the Games help gentrify the Downtown Eastside, which has caused a lot of the displacement that many feared.

We have also seen an increase in the criminalization of poverty. Over the past year the Vancouver police have handed out thousands of tickets to Downtown Eastside residents for minor bylaw infractions such as jaywalking, spitting and riding a bicycle on the sidewalk. Many people feel these tickets were given out as a way to change the Downtown Eastside's street culture, which can be very chaotic, for the Games. But these are tickets, between \$100 and \$500, that homeless and low-income people can't possibly afford to pay and we are now seeing these people being dragged to court with warrants because of failure to pay.

Ultimately, the Olympics have brought very little benefit for homeless and low-income people on something the provincial government has spent at least \$6 billion of taxpayers money on — a two-week party that most people can't even afford to attend. That money could have been used to virtually end homelessness in Vancouver and across British Columbia and would have left a much greater legacy than any sporting event could have.

J.Z.: Megphone was covering the Olympic issue years before the Games even started. What role has your newspaper played as an independent and street media?

S.C.: At Megaphone we've tried to add some context to how the Olympics are impacting the homeless, but also the environment and the public piggy-bank.

One of the big problems we have in Vancouver is that the city's two dailies, The Vancouver Sun and The Province, are the official media sponsors of the Games. The country's biggest daily, The Globe and Mail,

has owners that are official sponsors of the Games. So because of these financial connections, which I believe are gigantic conflicts of interest, the corporate media has been doing more cheerleading than critical analysis and Canadians aren't getting the full story.

Luckily, the city has some strong independent journalism that has kept up the pressure on the Games organizers and has forced the mainstream media to look at some stories it was ignoring. Here at Megaphone we have tried to show that, unfortunately, hosting the Olympics has little to do with the actual athletes and has much more to do with the corporatization of the city. We have been able to remind our readers about the broken promises and break news about Olympic evictions and ticketing. It has been important at Megaphone that we not get caught up in the hysteria of the event because we are going to have to live with the impact of the Olympics long after the actual games are over.

J.Z.: The Downtown Eastside has factored prominently in the Olympics and their impact. For people not familiar with Vancouver, tell us about the Downtown Eastside neighborhood and how it has become such a battleground in the Olympic protests.

S.C.: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is often referred to as "Canada's poorest postal code." While it is not especially dangerous, it is an extremely poor neighborhood that is suffering from a massive health epidemic. A poverty clusterfuck, if you will. According to a United Nations report, 30 percent of the neighborhood's population suffer from HIV and just under 70 percent have Hep C. At least one-third are intravenous drug users, with countless more addicted to crack-cocaine.

However, the neighborhood's spirit is very strong and benefits from a lot of amazing community activism. Because it is so dense, and so close to the city's downtown, it also attracts a lot of media and public attention. With very vocal activists groups, the Downtown Eastside is always a big part of everyone's discussions.

But it is a neighborhood that has certainly been left to suffer in neglect. As other Vancouver neighborhoods were gentrified, the police and politicians were only too happy to push into this neighborhood. And as long as everything stayed concentrated in a few blocks, they let the problems fester.

As businesses closed and welfare failed to keep up with inflation, the neighborhood became overrun with drug abuse, homelessness and prostitution. And even though roughly 200 people were dying from overdoses every year, it took years before governments would approve a safe-injection site, which the federal government is now trying to shut down). (See page 11 for the story on Insite)

People down here have been through a lot of trauma. But make no mistake, they are fighters. Like I said, they have an incredibly strong spirit and sense of what a community is all about. There is a lot of compassion and support down here and people are willing to fight to maintain their community. And they understand what's at risk. There are a lot services in the neighborhood for this population, which has so many health problems. So if people are displaced and can't access these services, it could prove fatal.

J.Z.: We've read about "Olympic evictions." How are you defining those and how much of a problem is it?

S.C.: Not long after Vancouver won the Games, low-income buildings (or single residency occupancy hotels) started going down like dominos. Vancouver was already going through a rather ridiculous housing boom (with the average house selling for more than half a million dollars) and speculation began that the Downtown Eastside would be transformed into an upscale neighborhood. So unscrupulous landowners began to take advantage and

started evicting their low-income tenants or just let the building fall into disrepair, so the city would do the evicting for them.

Roughly 1,400 units of low-income housing were lost in the Downtown Eastside since 2002. However, housing activists galvanized around the evictions and began protesting and doing housing squats in empty buildings. This did help generate a lot of media attention and public sympathy and embarrassed the provincial government into buying up 24 of these low-income buildings, saving them from being gentrified or shut down.

Because of the public pressure, what we are now seeing is slow conversions. Buildings are slowly changing from low-income to mid or upper-income as new suites become available. This is a room in the Downtown Eastside that is no more than 200 to 300 square feet. While it is great that these buildings have been improved, they are now no longer affordable for most of the neighborhood's residents.

J.Z.: Do you think your coverage has had an influence on the mainstream media coverage?

S.C.: The protests have certainly gotten a lot of coverage. A lot of people in Vancouver are very sympathetic to their causes and want to support the fight to end homelessness and poverty. The activist has also been very good and organizing large numbers and getting noticed. While its good that the mainstream media at least covers the issue here, I would say that it hasn't done a good job explaining what the issue really is about and often criticizes the activists. This has caused a lot of confusion with the public and resulted in many people turning off from the issue or actually becoming agitated by the cause.

The alternative and independent press has continued to be relentless, though, and has done a great job explaining the issues and putting pressure on governments to act. This has helped keep awareness high and I believe more of the public is turning to these sources to learn about the real story.

J.Z.: Have the games, in a sense, been a good thing for the homeless community and the advocacy movement in helping raise the profile of the situation in Vancouver?

S.C.: It's very hard to say. On one hand, it's really positive that the Vancouver bid committee signed an Innercity Inclusive Commitment Statement that made a whole series of promises to make sure that the homeless community did not suffer from the Games and in fact would see some benefits. This was the first time any host city made such a promise. And when Vancouver held a

"It has been important at Megaphone that we not get caught up in the hysteria of the event because we are going to have to live with the impact of the Olympics long after the actual games are over."

plebiscite on the Games, these promises were used as a big selling point and helped generate a lot of support (63 percent voted in favor)

But ultimately, Vancouver has been left with a legacy of broken promises. Homelessness has more than doubled, thousands of low-income housing units were lost and there has been no housing legacy. Originally, the Olympic Village was supposed to be converted into one-third market housing, one-third middle income housing and one-third social housing. It then got reduced to just 20 percent social housing and the rest market housing. Now this social housing component is in jeopardy.

I feel the homeless were used by a massive corporate event that is nothing more than a real estate grab. They were swindled and exploited and they now they are suffering even more.

Staying Alive
Read about Vancouver's revolutionary self-injection site: page 11