

First, do no harm

Journalist Travis Lupick tells Vancouver, B.C.'s, story in his new book, 'Fighting for Space,' about the grassroots movement that changed how people looked at addiction and saved countless lives in the process

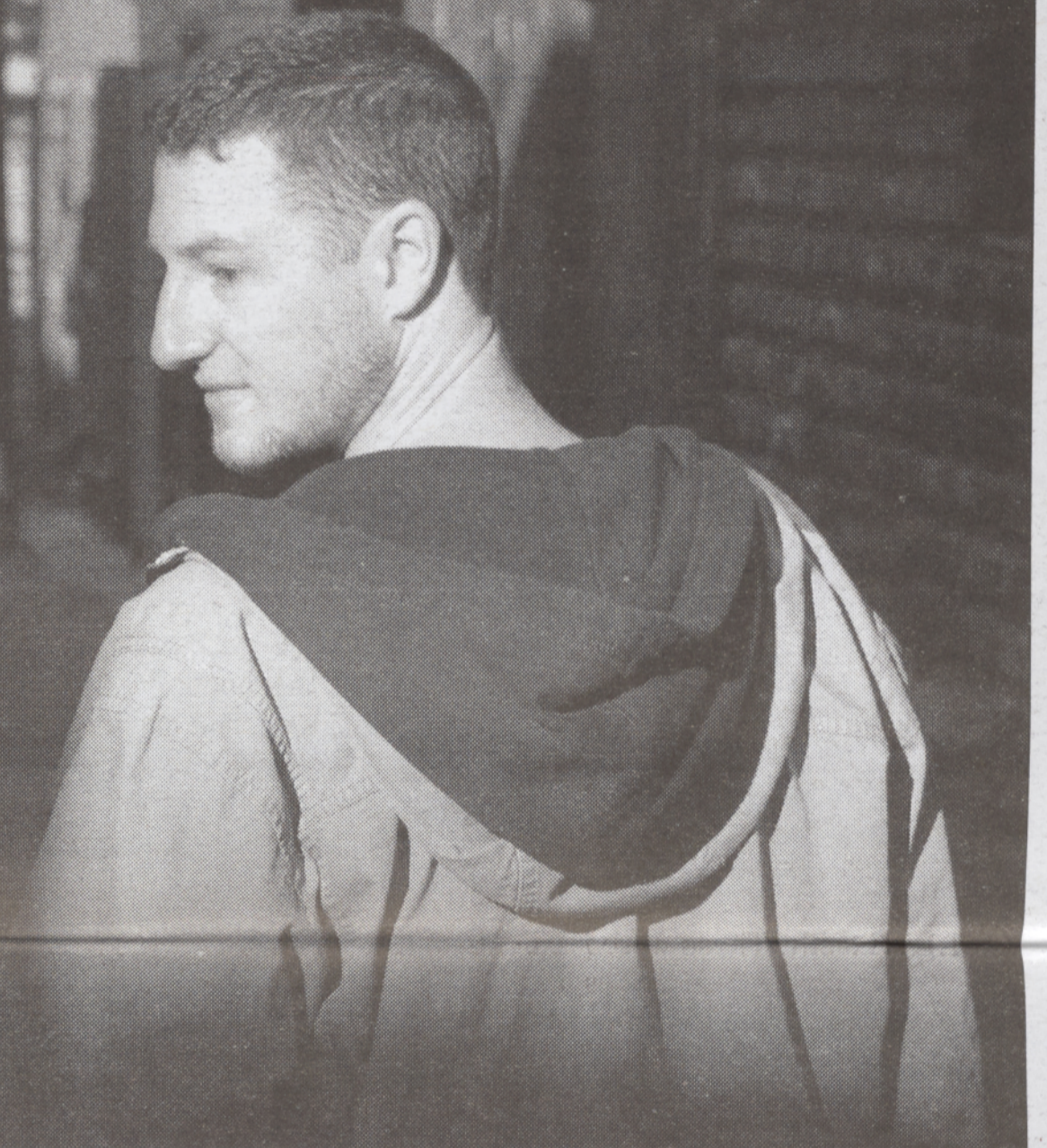


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Travis Lupick (above) is the author of "Fighting for Space: How a Group of Drug Users Transformed One City's Struggle with Addiction."

BY JOANNE ZUHL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

No major city in North America pushes the envelope on harm reduction further than Vancouver, B.C.

It started 20 years ago, when a group of drug users forced the city to look honestly at its drug problem and mounting death toll. But rather than blanch with shame and denial, they put convention to the test.

They formed a drug users union and openly advocated for harm reduction efforts, for the health and safety of users and non-users alike. In 2003, advocates and addicts worked against political opposition to open Insite, North America's first supervised injection site. Since then, other mini-sites have opened across the city to provide a safe place for injecting drugs, free from police intervention, with clean needles and water to prevent the spread of disease. In later years, the anti-overdose medication naloxone became freely available over the counter and is now a common sight on city streets. Police have reduced the number of arrests for injection drug users in an effort to drive it out of the shadows and closer to health care and recovery.

And yes, it's working.

Throughout those changes, illicit opioids remained just as cheap and easy to access as ever, however, the number of people

seeking detox assistance went up and the numbers of users and overdoses in the neighborhood went down, according to a 15-year-long study by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. And there was a 90 percent reduction in new HIV transmissions between 1996 and 2012, the study found.

Vancouver journalist Travis Lupick has authored a new book about that era and the grassroots movement that not only changed how people looked at addiction, but also saved countless lives. In "Fighting for Space: How a Group of Drug Users Transformed One City's Struggle with Addiction," available in June, Lupick tells Vancouver's story, offering up its lessons for other communities confronting the opioid crisis.

At this time, there is no sanctioned supervised injection site in the United States, but authorities at Multnomah County have proposed researching what such a facility would mean for the Willamette Valley, and this past November, a local grassroots group called Safer Spaces Portland launched its campaign in support of opening a safe consumption site in Portland. There are also grassroots and political movements in Seattle, San Francisco, Philadelphia, New York City, Ithica and Boston to become the first city in the United States to host such a facility.

Lupick is an award-winning journalist with the Georgia Straight newspaper and has written extensively about drug addiction and harm reduction for The Toronto Star and al Jazeera English. He's based in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a notoriously gritty neighborhood not unlike neighborhoods all across North America.

In terms of Canada's opioid epidemic, Downtown Eastside is Ground Zero, a place where addiction, poverty and infectious diseases converge. But it's also where a revolution took root and grew into an international movement to rethink addiction. Lupick describes the Downtown Eastside as a rough neighborhood with a very strong heart and a strong sense of community.

"There's a concentration of poverty, a concentration of mental illness, a concentration of drug use, and in more recent years, a concentration of social services," he said. "In the early 1990s, it was a desert of services. There was not one medical clinic in this community. In the early 1990s it was an impoverished community that was left entirely to defend for itself."

Joanne Zuhl: *And then came the people behind the Portland Hotel Society and the*

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