

## *The View From Street Level*

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KEN FAUGHT/TORONTO STAR

Charlie Neil and his girlfriend, Michelle, bed down for the night in blankets at the edge of Allan Gardens, a popular gathering spot for Toronto's homeless population. They met seven years ago in front of a bar. The view from street level  
In Yorkville, a panhandler hopes for a celebrity windfall  
On Yonge St., a couple of pals go looking for liquid solace

[LINDA DIEBEL](#)

STAFF REPORTER

It's almost midnight, Day One of the film festival, and the money cars purr on the Avenue Rd. ramp of the Four Seasons hotel — a blue Ferrari, silver Porsche, big black Caddie, a Land Rover and a Lamborghini.

So sleek and rich, shining like they know it. Like they're preening for the celebrity gawkers in the street.

Around on the Yorkville Ave. side, David Harris waits, too, but not for just a glimpse of stardom. This is serious business for him. He's homeless, a panhandler and, over the next few days, this stretch of Glitterati-ville offers relief after a spring and summer of SARS, the blackout and tourists who didn't come.

"The tourists have stayed away. This is our only chance to make some money. Hopefully, we'll do a little bit better over the next couple of weeks," he says. He "pans" in prized turf. You try it, you'd be asked to leave, politely at first.

He's 57, a short man, slightly stocky, with a stiff walk and wild eyes.

"I'm as homeless as I can be," he says. "I had a nervous breakdown."

He carries a battered, hand-lettered sign.

CANADIAN VIETNAM VET NEEDS ASSISTANCE. CAN YOU SPARE SOME CHANGE?

"Tourists are good. So are celebrities," he says. "They don't see us all the time so they're not fed up with us. But most of the film festival people are at private parties and galas tonight. Like at Bistro 990, you know."

A lot of stars find a few bucks for a homeless guy.

"Too many to tell you," he says, then begins his chant, his sacred mantra:

"Gene Hackman, Charles Bronson, Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, Whoopi Goldberg, Ted Danson, Leslie Nielsen, Tony Danza, Clint Eastwood, Charlie Sheen, Martin Sheen, Edward James Olmos, Christopher Penn ..."

Charlie Sheen gave him 200 bucks once.

"Very nice. He treats us real good. Lou Diamond Phillips, too. James Woods is a good guy. And Charles Bronson before he passed away. Really liked him ...

"The American people are more generous to me because Vietnam touched every family," he says. "I get most insults from Canadians."

He says he spent 2 1/2 years with U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam; says he was wounded; says he's had a lot of problems.

*Clearly.*

He sleeps in a park up the street. "Yeah, it's rough, real rough," he says. "The insults are the hardest thing. I'm not putting a gun to anybody's head, ya know. You just have to tell me, 'Sorry,' and I'll say, 'Okay.'"

He's getting fidgety. Doesn't like reporters. Who can blame him?

He's talking to me tonight only because I'm with Steve Martin, a.k.a. Soulman, from the Sanctuary community centre over on Charles St. E.

He's taking Star photographer Ken Fought and me on a "street walk" through Toronto's underbelly. We've followed the panners uptown to the money.

Yorkville can be nice territory. Gourmet garbage. Sometimes grilled vegetables, or a piece of seared tuna, only slightly stinking.

This is where Martin's friend, John Dunn, died a few years ago, up a side street behind an art gallery. A homeless guy, would give you the shirt off his back — went cold turkey, died of convulsions. His body just gave out.

Martin's a big man, a biker-street pastor, 6-foot-4, 270 pounds, with a beard, sculpted mohawk and ponytail. A sweetie-pie with a look that says, "Don't mess with me."

Yeah, tonight, I'm with Steve.

Harris is yelling something, but I can't hear him. The churning backside of a big city garbage truck eats his words.

A taxi pulls up behind the garbage truck. Three oleaginous gents glide out, expensive Italian suits, white shirts open, no ties, gleaming shoes. On the prowl.

Harris lifts his sign. They peer at him like gum on the sidewalk and walk off.

An older guy in a tuxedo, gray hair gelled back, saunters up the street, his arm around the shoulder of his young companion. His fingers doodle on her breast.

He, too, ignores Harris.

Now, I get what he's saying. He wants us out of here. We're bad for business.

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**`It's the dirtier side of Toronto, but I tell people, "This could be you."'**

*Steve Martin of Sanctuary*

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"Hey man, no photos, no photos," he says to photographer Faught.

He turns and rushes up the street, away from us, almost dragging his back leg, and hustles round the corner on to Avenue Rd.

Cut back to 9 p.m.

We're at the Sanctuary, an old brick building, once a gospel hall, with its red-lettered wooden sign. It's a non-denominational centre for street people, financed through churches and private donations. Community support, food, safety, a bathroom, a weekly health clinic — companionship.

Martin and fellow staffer Sharon Tiessen, 36, take us out. The usual street walk is for business groups, lawyers, students or social advocates.

Masses huddled under girders, wrapped in plastic. A colony of homeless at city hall. Street trade, teenage hookers, poppers, crack, needles, pus and blood.

This is our city, bad breath and all. Take a look.

"It's the dirtier side of Toronto, but I tell people, 'This could be you,'" says Martin, 36.

"You know, you're 13, horribly abused, Mama's got a new boyfriend and you're in the way. ... Next thing you know, you're in the streets."

He's studied at Wycliffe College, U of T. He's been a street pastor for 15 years; his father is an Anglican minister with the Inuit in northern Quebec.

Martin is our guide to a world where, over 15 years, 50 of his own friends have died on Toronto's streets. Overdoses, exposure, disease, accidents, murder. A community ravaged. Cultural genocide, he calls it.

"They're people. Each one is somebody's child."

Herbie Scaife and Roger Lacrois have finished dinner. It's a Thursday night ritual at Sanctuary. Now, they're heading out in the direction of the LCBO, south of Wellesley.

Scaife is 38. He looks 138; he'll tell you that. He's 5-foot-9, maybe 130 pounds, a skinny rail with a ragged beard, rheumy eyes and few teeth. "Yeah, they hurt," he says. He talks with the leaden slur of the 24-hour alcohol fog.

"My dad was a drunk. I broke his legs when I was 15. He touched my little sister 'cause he was drinking. I heard her screaming so I grabbed a baseball bat and went in there and broke both his legs," he says.

His mother died when he was 10.

"My oldest brother, the one that died in a car accident, came up and found out what I did and he beat the living s--- out of me. The only man who broke my nose."

He worked odd jobs, traplines, farming, sawmill. Says he put his little sister through school. She's a teacher.

He helped daughters Chrystal, 21, and Amanda, 18, stay in school. Their names are tattooed on his right arm. A dagger tattoo. Got it in prison. Don't ask.

He pans on Yonge St. at Bloor, in front of Tim Hortons. "My spot."

His demons are hard-driving; he goes through 24 beers a day. If not beer, rubbing alcohol, Listerine, whatever ...

Plus he's got lung and liver cancer.

"I'm legally allowed to smoke marijuana. That's all I want. I smoked pot since after my mom died, but I don't smoke it every day," he says. He has a lot of pain.

"I take pills. I call 'em my 'Herbie pills.' Do they work? Yes, ma'am. But I got high tolerance," he says. "I've got to do three, AND I drink all day, and it STILL don't put me to sleep.

"People say, 'Oh, I got high tolerance.' I say, 'You don't got no high tolerance.'"

Roger Lacrois is Scaife's pal. He's 53, from Cabbagetown. He carries his life in a dirty old Roots Salt Lake City Olympics knapsack. A blanket, a roll of toilet paper, some dirty laundry ...

He wears a Barbados T-shirt and a grimy Blue Jays cap.

They joke around. But every so often, the banter goes sour, like a bad stomach, like a bar fight about to erupt.

When Lacrois grew up, "there were three families in one house, you know we're all related. Drinking became a problem, there was a little bit of incest going on. It was my sisters. I threatened to kill my dad when I was 15 because he was beating on my mom.

"I said, 'I'll kill you, you ever put a hand on her again.' He used to come home drunk as a skunk ..."

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**'I've got to do three (pills), *and* I drink all day, and it *still* don't put me to sleep.'**

***Herbie Scaife, street person***

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His mother died when he was 17.

"I missed her when she was dying. I got a call and by the time I got there, she was dead and everything was out of the room. So it turned me flippy."

Like his friend Herbie, he's an alcoholic. "It's genetic, you know."

Lacrois says he won't pan. Gets by on \$195 in monthly welfare payments, sleeping in the streets and knowing the food route at community centres. Not your usual tourist map of Toronto. Thursday dinner at Sanctuary, sandwiches every other Friday, the Salvation Army, Seaton House. ... You won't starve on Toronto streets, say its connoisseurs.

Suddenly, Lacrois is gone. He wafted off down a side street.

Scaife regroup. The LCBO wouldn't serve him, so he cuts over to Church St. to see if the beer store is still open. He stands hunched over, Canadian flag hat over his face, counting his change.

9:30 p.m. We walk south on Yonge St. It's pretty quiet. Panhandlers here and there, but most of the action tonight is up in Gucci-land at Yonge and Bloor.

Tattoo parlours, tarot cards and psychic readers. They vie for space with gleaming open-concept hair salons. Gentrification coming on.

Farther down, we pass "Boystown," stretching west along cross streets, another area where cars slow down to pick up homosexual street trade.

"During elections, you see cars with campaign posters in the back," says Martin. "Limos. K-cars with baby seats."

By 10 p.m., we're moving east over to Carlton St. and down to Allan Gardens, the sprawling park that many street people call home.

St. Andrew's Lutheran stands on the north side of the park, all dark stone and gothic brooding. Jarvis Street Baptist guards the south end.

It's beautiful here, with city greenhouses and manicured beds. But the big trees stink of human and animal pee and there's the sorrow of a thousand broken lives.

Recently, over by the fountains, there was a memorial service for Cassandra Do, 32, a transsexual prostitute from the area. She underwent years of plastic surgery to give her a woman's face, only to end up strangled in her bathtub.

So far, her murder is unsolved.

Charlie Neil, 47, and his girlfriend, Michelle, 48, bed down for the night by St. Andrew's wrought-iron fence.

It's 11 p.m. and already turning cold. Soon, it will be winter. They have a tattered gray quilt and a silver thermal ground sheet from Sanctuary.

They met seven years ago in front of a now-defunct bar, Sophie's, over on Parliament St. She was hooking outside and he approached her. She charged him a case of beer.

They've been together ever since.

She's slight and brown-haired, and in the church's dim glow, she looks 18. She's deaf. Children's Aid took away her four kids.

He has bad memories. "Biggest alcoholic in town," he says of his father.

"My worst memory is waking up in the snowbank after my father fought with my mom. That's where we landed whenever they had fights. He used to beat the s--- out of me — until I turned 16. Then, I took a baseball bat and beat the s--- out of him."

Same old, same old.

"I'm an alcoholic," he says. "I love my booze."

He has a long, sad face and large wire-rimmed glasses that give him a blinking, unsettled look, as if he's stumbling through an entire lifetime without ever quite getting it. His life, that is.

He is sweet with Michelle, signing to her and moving in close so she can read his lips.

"Good guy," she says, each word laboured and distorted.

He puts his arm around her and they settle down into the quilt.

The dogs will be nosing around soon enough, big-tongued and slobbering, at 6 a.m. in this off-leash park.

"Sometimes," he says, "I think dogs is better off than people."

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