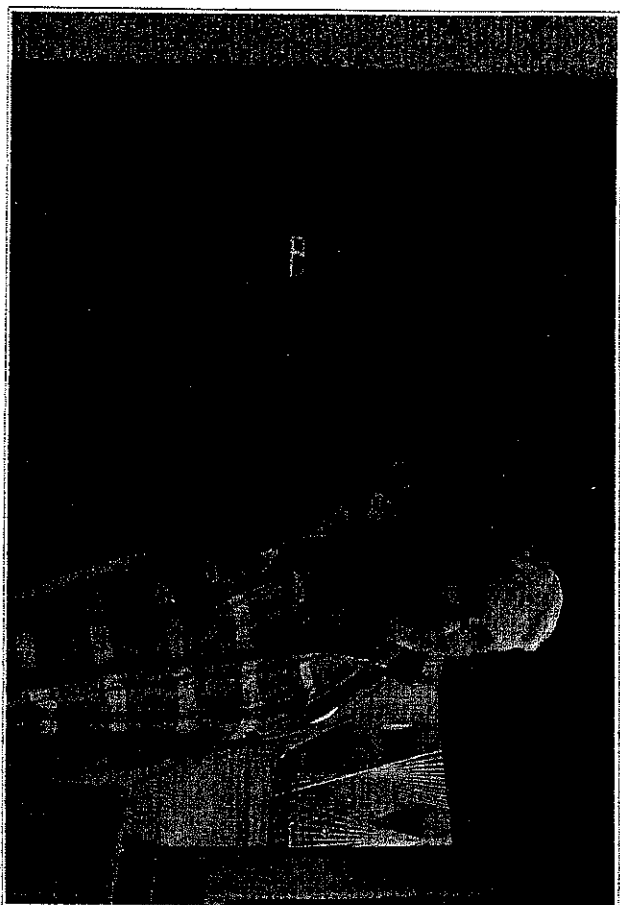


# MELVIN TIPPING

EXPERT WITNESS



Melvin outside Coroners Courts where he had been a witness, 2006

A kereset anyagát „Szorgalmi feladatok”, a főszoveget belkene a Szabmai műhelyre elolvastam, megestem.

~~Although the years have been hard, his eyes have retained their twinkle, and he remains a political news junkie, always bringing me up-to-date on current political affairs.~~

~~At the Tequila Sunrise, a coffee shop on Toronto's Queen Street West across from the Evangel Hall, we met to talk about his life. As if orchestrated to fit our conversation, vibrant piano, opera, and choral music wafted in as the perfect backdrop. Our conversation ended on Brahms' Requiem.~~

~~- Cathy~~

I WAS BORN IN WINNIPEG IN 1937. MY MOTHER WAS BORN IN Manchester, England, and my father in Liverpool. They came to Winnipeg when they were very young. We weren't rich and we weren't poor. My father was a banker, a teller. Then he went off to war in 1941 and served in Britain. It was bad then in Canada because they drafted almost everybody. He came home safely. My mother worked as a housekeeper during the war.

I have an older brother and three sisters who are younger. They live in Calgary.

My first memory is when I was about six years old. I got in my first fight and won. In 1954, I had a year of university, I was just seventeen, I was quite smart. I wanted to study social work because I felt sorry for low-income people, the homeless, and the unemployed. But I got in trouble with the law. I stole a coat for my girlfriend because she didn't have one. I was caught, she left me, and I had to do some time.

I was one of the first homeless people in Winnipeg although I didn't think of myself as homeless at the time. I got in an argument with my father and he threw me out. I joined a gang. Most of us slept on the street, wherever we could find a place. In winter, I stayed in stairwells in apartment buildings. That turned out to be practice for me when I later became homeless in Toronto.

In '64 I went to Ontario to work in smaller towns - Oshawa, and then Belleville, because I knew some people there. I stayed five years helping a farmer with his crops and cattle and stuff. It was easy. I've got a strong back.

I left Belleville in '69. I wanted to see Toronto. I'd heard so much about it. Rent was cheap then. Five dollars a week for a room. I'd saved fifty dollars and I rented a room in the east end. There were agencies to help you find work. Or you could line up at Sherbourne and Queen. People in cars and trucks would come by and point and say, "You, you and you." Sometimes you got work, usually hard, physical labour for a day or two and sometimes longer. When it was busy you might get work every day. I worked in construction and I moved furniture. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself. That's the way it goes sometimes. I even worked at the Branson Hospital in North York. Cleaning. Then I got a disease where you turn yellow. Jaundice. I probably got it at work. But I never saw a doctor or collected any benefits.

Being sick put me back on the street again. Someone I knew in the east end let me stay with him for a while. Then I went back to doing hard labour. I was thirty-three or thirty-four then. I could never bring myself to panhandle. I don't think a man should have to do that. Every man should have a chance to work. It's 1971 or '72. I'd work and then spend time with my buddies, having a few beers at the Duke of York at Leslie and Queen. And other east end pubs. I was drinking heavily. But I kept working. I had to work so I could drink.

I got married in '74 in London, Ontario. I was there looking for a job. We stayed in London for a couple of years and had two kids. Then we moved to Peterborough - I knew someone there and we had another kid. Then we broke up and I came back to Toronto. I was homeless again. I'm not in touch with my kids - that's in the past and I've moved forward. I'm at peace about that.

I was in the shelter system a couple of times but I didn't like it. I preferred the street and slept wherever I could. I didn't want to be sleeping with a large group of people. The guys are too close together. You lose stuff. You get robbed. I got bugs in the shelter.

That's how I lived during the '80s and early '90s. I still had hope that I'd get straightened out and sober.

The word "homeless" didn't mean anything to me until much later when I was on the street in Toronto. I had only the little work I did for support.

### The Homeless Memorial

When a homeless person died we used to hold a press conference or march to the site of the person's death or to the Mayor's office. Then, so many people were dying, we couldn't respond any longer. For so many reasons. Marching to the locked glass office door of then Mayor Mel Lastman felt useless. Homeless people and activists were increasingly overwhelmed by the grief of it all. We were surrounded by death. We couldn't even convince the City to help create a permanent homeless memorial — like ones we have in the City to honour war vets, or injured workers, or the Chinese immigrants who built Canada's railway, or police killed in the line of duty. Sara Boyles, at the Church of the Holy Trinity, saw the community grief and worked with members of the congregation to develop a Homeless Memorial. It includes a monthly ceremony held in conjunction with the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, on the church steps, in the shadow of the Eaton Centre, followed by a meal inside the church. Each month the service varies but candles are always lit.

Sometimes I went to the shelters for meals but it wasn't something I was comfortable with. A lot of the time the food was greasy and too spicy.

I moved off the streets to Cabagetown where I rented a room for \$390 a month. I hated it because it was too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. There were mice and cockroaches and the landlord took most of my money. He was a good guy then because he would lend you five dollars when you asked but you paid him back ten dollars. In fourteen years of being on the streets I was alone. I had no help until I met a street nurse named Wenda Hickmott. She helped me to get an apartment. Half of the stuff in my apartment Wenda got me: a bed, chair, dresser, dishes, a can opener, and clothing. Finally I had a home. She also linked me to COPA (Community Older Persons Alcohol Program). For the first time since 1973 I was sober and getting help for my drinking problem.

When I first moved into where I live now, my nurse Wenda wanted me to

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poetry is read, a song is sung, and political statements are made. Names of homeless men and women who have died since the last month are added to the board. The list has grown.

Melvin came to the twenty-four hour vigil at the Church of the Holy Trinity. The event marked the addition of the four hundredth name of a homeless person.

"I knew about thirty or thirty-five of those names," Melvin said, "and I probably know some of the John Does too. Eugene Uppier was a nice fellow. I came today to find out how many names were on the memorial list. Four hundred — I was shocked. It's quite a disaster. The City, the Province and agencies are not doing enough. Especially at nighttime, people need more help. I feel quite resolved to keep on helping the homeless to get out of the situation.

We have to continue to fight to get housing. If we let this go another four years, we'll have a lot of problems."

— Cathy

quit drinking, so I quit. She thought I was too old to keep working, and that I needed a rest. That was '94. I was fifty-seven. She's the one who got me the apartment in Metro Housing. This is my twelfth year there.

Once I got housing, I started becoming involved in housing politics and coalitions. The first was called "Housing Not Hostels." I became active in other ways. I talked to the media. I've made presentations at City Hall. I've done informal counselling with people who are new to the street. Some have kids and want answers to where they can find housing.

In the early '90s, there were suddenly more and more homeless people out there. Some came to Toronto from other parts of the country because the economy was so dire. I've seen a lot of changes. Far more young people are homeless today. There is more violence. There have been quite a few attacks, including murders of homeless people.

More and more homeless people dying.

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Melvin at home, 2006

I knew Eugene Upper. I used to play cards with him in the shelter. He was one of the three men who froze to death in Toronto. He died on Spadina in a bus shelter. I went to the Freezing Deaths Inquest every day, and thought something good was gonna come out of it, but I was disappointed. I was the only homeless person allowed to be an expert witness at the inquest. I wasn't scared to testify. I wanted to testify more about one of the homeless men who died, Eugene Upper, but when I was on the witness stand, they said I could only talk about my present life, not my former life or the homeless men. The Coroner and the Crown Attorney thought homelessness had nothing to do with the deaths. I wanted to say that Eugene could have been helped more. He could have had a place to live where there were housing workers on site for support and help. Workers that lived in the building or weren't too far away.

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This is what I believe and what I prepared in my 1996 legal "will-say" for lawyer Peter Rosenthal, who represented the Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness:

My feeling about the men who died in the street is that they were too alone. I feel that there has to be housing so that people don't freeze in the streets. There needs to be outreach to people so that they feel that they have a friend they can trust. There needs to be non-profit housing. I believe that social housing is necessary. Premier Mike Harris plans to stop social housing. He is taking away any hope from the hundreds of Melvins out there. Harris is taking away any chance of getting off the streets and getting a place to call home. Housing in Ontario is a right, not a privilege.

They repeatedly tried to stop me from talking about housing on the witness stand. But I was able to say on the stand, "Most homeless people want housing." Later, when the inquest was over and the jury's verdict was delivered – attributing the deaths to homelessness, I joined with the Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness and delivered the verdict to Housing Minister Al Leach's office, one block away. We were not allowed in by security guards, even to deliver the letter and the jury verdict.

"Victim 'could have been me'  
frozen man's pal tells inquest"

– Rebecca Bragg, *Toronto Star*,  
July 19, 1996

"It could have been me who froze to death," Tipping told the inquest into the freezing deaths last winter of Upper and two other homeless men. "I slept outside many times." Although coroner Dr. Murray Nalberg disallowed questions about what his life was like while he was homeless, Tipping told the *Star* outside the hearing that he had been without housing for 14 years. Sometimes he slept in hostels but most of the time he lived on the street.... Contrary to testimony heard earlier, Upper "wanted housing quite badly and wanted to quit drinking," he said.... "Upper's dislike of hostels was understandable," Tipping said. "In hostels, people rob you, beat you up. Most homeless people want housing...."

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### Wenda and Melvin

I recently got in touch with Wenda to ask her about her memories of Melvin. Wenda has remained up north working for the Yukon government in the First Nations community of Pelly Crossing. She was curious about Melvin and offered these memories.

— Cathy

"I don't think that there was anything in particular that drew me to Melvin other than Melvin's persistence and my interest in wanting to help him achieve what he wanted, which was safe housing. He felt he was getting 'too old to do this anymore' and he wanted housing that he didn't have to keep moving from or be afraid to go to. That's the state he was in when I got involved in helping him. He felt that some nights it was safer to sleep in a park or a hostel instead of his rooming house. I remember feeling somewhat distraught that an older person would be in this situation.

When I met Melvin he had just started using the Street Health clinics that were held in All Saints Church. I was a nursing student doing my comprehensive placement for my degree. He was a very apologetic-looking man who talked softly, with sparkling blue eyes. He told me how he made money by delivering flyers and that he walked hours doing this. I remember that it took a few visits to get him comfortable enough to even let me look at his feet, but he did. In fact, he liked the care and came back frequently. I think it was during this time that I learned of his

Outside the minister's office I read the following to his representative, and to members of the community who were present (this was the third time the letter had been delivered to the minister's office): "We are looking to you as minister to take personal responsibility for these matters. The Coalition would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience to create a plan of action."

housing issues. It wasn't until I worked for Street Health that I was able to assist him through the paperwork and interviews that were needed for the affordable housing. I remember how nervous Melvin was about going to the meetings. We tried three times before being able to make the first appointment. I remember my frustrations at the interviews that seemed endless. I finally got upset and said that it sounded like they were not interested in giving him housing. We had travelled by subway at least four times to do these interviews and there always seemed to be something else that they needed, or another form that Melvin needed to fill out. After I spoke out we were told he had made the list and we went to view the apartment. We talked of his fears about having housing, and his past experiences, the difficulty of keeping the place clean, making the rent on time, being bored, and resorting to drinking. We dealt with his concerns one by one, at his pace and his priority, over a six-month period. For example, it was important for him to have access to a library and to be able to get phone calls and bus tickets to stay in touch with us. On moving day he was so nervous, he was unable to really participate, but he did move in!

Finding housing was a long and tedious process and the bureaucracy seemed to work against helping those it was set up to help. I remember thinking, "no wonder people give up trying." I was feeling that way at times, but I was determined not to quit as long as Melvin was holding in there.

He was really proud of his achievement. I think I was more worried about whether it would be a long-term success, but Melvin has proved that he was able to do it."

A staff person from the minister's office said it wasn't his responsibility. The meeting never happened.

I'm pretty happy with my life right now.

For the last twelve years the system has worked for me. I live in a bachelor unit. It's home, the first real one I've had since I was a child. My apartment

looks like a library. I have books everywhere. I read all types of books – the last one was by Joan Collins's sister. But I read political books too. My rent just went up to \$392. It's too much but it's still a bargain compared to other bachelor apartments. I'd like a larger place. I'm hoping to move into new housing, either Evangel Hall's new building, or Portland Place, around the corner from here. Ideally, I'd like a one or two bedroom.

I'm on Old Age Security and the GAINS (Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement) – that means I have a bit more money to spend now, I get about \$1100 a month – but it's still hard by the end of the month.

I get some homemaking help from St. Christopher House. They clean my apartment and give me a shower twice a week – it's hard for me to reach my back. The only other thing I still need is air conditioning and a TV. The one Cathy got me broke.

Faith plays a big part in my life now. I wasn't religious as a child. I became religious when I first got the place where I live now. It happened over time. I'd almost died from a drug you take if you want to quit drinking. I drank and I had a vision that I was in hell. I was yelling, "Get me out of here!" A few friends of mine had died and I blamed God for that. One was so young. I don't blame God anymore. I was bitter for a long time. I'm not bitter anymore.

I've been in an acting group. I'm pretty good.

I don't think my life is the common story of who is homeless. I think every homeless person's story is different. Remember, there are lots of reasons why a person becomes homeless. They're not all the same. I don't think we should view homeless people as being bums. Whatever the reason they're on the street, homeless people need a place of their own.

I try to keep up with what's happening politically. I read five Toronto papers every day. I've never seen anything like the Liberal mispending that the Gomery inquiry looked into, and it makes me angry. I think Ontario is going to pay the price for the election of a Conservative government in Ottawa. We're in bad trouble now because of Stephen Harper. I think he's going to really hurt Ontario money-wise. I don't think there will be any more buildings built apart from the ones that are started. That makes me feel sad.