

Original Paper

The Empowerment of Drug Users to Combat Fentanyl Crisis Through Organized in a Campout: Based on the Fieldwork in Vancouver

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Abstract

Drug users' empowerment is critical for their sustainable development, particularly for their survival during the Fentanyl Crisis in which overdose deaths and non-fatal overdoses have increased in recent years across North America. As one of the epicenters, Vancouver has been suffering overdose deaths in the past decade. Simultaneously, Vancouver has a history of empowering drug users to save their lives since the 1990s. Based on the fieldwork in a campout originated by VANDU and REDUN in 2019, this study aims to understand the drug users' empowerment to construct their strengths, individual competence, and proactive behaviors when they are organized. The active involvement of drug users in their group's events has enabled them to employ innovative approaches to generate, sustain, and implement alternative methods. Empowering drug users through their organization in policy making and implementing policies to combat the Fentanyl Crisis leads to the evolution of a sustainable society.

Keywords

Drug users, Empowerment, Campout, Fentanyl Crisis, Organization

Introduction

The Fentanyl Crisis has become a significant public health concern in North America, identified by a rise in overdose deaths due to the use of illicitly manufactured fentanyl. Between January 2012 and December 2022, Fentanyl has been identified in 77,141 exhibits submitted for analysis to the Drug Analysis Service (DAS) in Canada (Health Canada, 2012-2022). More than 14,700 Canadians died because of an apparent opioid-related overdose between January 2016 and September 2019. Unprecedented numbers of illicit drug toxicity deaths in the province of British Columbia (BC) led to the declaration of a public health emergency on April 14, 2016 (BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel, 2022). Deaths due to illicit drug toxicity are the leading cause of death among 19 to 39-year-olds, and deaths due to drug toxicity have created a decline in life expectancy in British Columbia (BC

Coroners Service Death Review Panel, 2022). In particular, 2,224 British Columbians died due to illicit drug toxicity in 2021, of which 86% of deaths happened in Vancouver. This is a 26% increase in fatalities over 2020, with approximately 7 deaths per day recorded in November and December (DULF Release, 2022).

In response to the challenges of the Fentanyl Crisis, Vancouver has taken some strong actions to reduce the number of overdose deaths. These important responses include wide distribution and training in the use of naloxone, the establishment of supervised consumption and overdose prevention sites, and innovative harm reduction services such as drug checking. There has also been an increase in the number of clinicians providing addiction services, an expansion of addiction treatment options, and work to create more supportive environments for people who use drugs (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2021). Among these actions, the empowerment of drug users is one of the most significant theoretical frameworks in Vancouver. I chose Vancouver Downtown Eastside (DTES) as the community to conduct my ethnographic fieldwork to research the empowerment of drug users.

Empowerment theory is a useful framework for understanding the processes and outcomes to prevent substance use (Lardier DT Jr., 2019). The concept of empowerment is always associated with the idea of self-reliance, participation, networking, and knowledge. Empowerment is based on the strength of the individual and his or her social environment. Empowerment recognizes the capabilities that exist among individuals, groups, organizations, and communities, and how societal barriers are in place that hinder growth (David T. Lardier Jr., 2020). Empowerment processes arise as a consequence of an interactive dynamic, which is subject to varying degrees of negotiation between the capacities of an individual, group, or community and the opportunities made available by the physical and socio-cultural environments in which they navigate their existence (Shanti Riang, 2024).

Drug users in Vancouver have had a long history of empowerment since the 1990s. Low property values, lack of developer interest, and the closures of British Columbia's mental health institutions in the 1980s resulted in a high number of people with mental health, addictions, and poverty challenges overwhelming DTES. In 1993, a potent strain of heroin caused the overdose deaths of 300 people in the area (Maryse Zeidler, 2016). The inevitable spread of HIV through needle sharing led to a public health emergency being declared in 1997, with approximately 1000 people rapidly dying of the disease. At the same time, the emergence of crack cocaine increased the neighborhood's addiction challenges (Travis Lupick, 2017, p. 265). In response to these challenges, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) as the most influential grassroots organization was established to empower drug users to reduce harm both to themselves and their communities. It has organized drug users to protect themselves from the harm of illicit drugs and structural inequality, providing them with resources such as safe injection sites, access to clean syringes, and comprehensive health services. These initiatives aim to mitigate the physical dangers associated with drug use, such as infections and overdoses, while also addressing the broader societal issues that contribute to their vulnerability, including poverty, lack of education, and discrimination. These programs often involve outreach workers who connect users

with social support networks, legal aid, and employment opportunities, creating a holistic approach to reducing harm and fostering long-term recovery.

I conducted my fieldwork in Vancouver to research the Fentanyl Crisis in Vancouver in 2019, and I was particularly grateful to Ann Livingston because she invited me to attend the campout organized by both VANDU and REDUN (Rural Empowered Drug Users Network). The first time camping trip of VANDU was held in 1994, which was inspired by Bruce Scottander's Rat Park research between the 1970s and 1980s. Scottander's ideas about the impacts that environment and social conditions have on an individual's prosperity to addiction have gained a degree of acceptance (Travis Lupick, 2017, p. 73), which enlightened VANDU to organize the camping trip. VANDU takes its members away from stigma, marginalization, and guilt by bringing them to a serene natural environment far from the bustling city. The lush greenery, the gentle rustling of leaves, and the soothing sounds of nature create a tranquil atmosphere where individuals can find solace and healing. The fresh air, filled with the earthy scent of pine and wildflowers, invigorates their senses, allowing them to reconnect with themselves and the world around them. This campout provides a much-needed respite from the urban chaos, offering a space where they can rebuild their confidence and self-worth without judgment. During the fieldwork in Campout in 2019, I was convinced that when people who use drugs organize themselves into coherent groups that take action, they are empowering themselves. The vibrant energy of the campsite buzzed with a sense of unity and purpose as individuals shared their stories under the canopy of stars. The air was filled with the earthy scent of pine needles and the crackling sound of campfires, creating an atmosphere of warmth and camaraderie. Each group, meticulously planned and coordinated, worked together seamlessly, their collective efforts fostering a newfound sense of agency and resilience. The sight of these once marginalized individuals standing tall, voices strong and determined, was a testament to the transformative power of solidarity and mutual support.

Preparing for the Campout: Supportive Organization

The organizers of this campout are Ann Livingston and Scott. This campout took place from July 26 to July 29, 2019. The destination was Castlegar City, which is over 600 kilometers from Vancouver, and the campsite is located at the junction of the Columbia and Kootenay Rivers. The participants were 16 members of VANDU and REDU, and, 17 in total. Ann Livingston said that I was the only researcher to attend the camp in the 25 years since it was organized and that they were very much looking forward to documenting their camping activities and presenting the results to the academic community.

I filled out a piece of the form named *Summer Campout Registration (Enhancing Peer Development) on July 26, 27, 28 & 29th, 2019* before I participated in observing this event. This registration form included five parts, 1) The participant's basic personal information; 2) Waiver of Liability, Assumption of Risk, and indemnity Agreement; 3) Assumption of Risks; 4) Indemnification and Hold Harmless; 5) Acknowledgment of Understanding. Significantly, the *Assumption of Risks* reminded the members to pay attention to the following:

Participation in Activity carries with it certain inherent risks that cannot be eliminated regardless of the care taken to avoid injuries. The specific risks vary from one activity to another, but the risks range from 1) minor injuries such as scratches, bruises, and sprains to 2) major injuries such as eye injury or loss of sight, joint or back injuries, heart attacks, and concussions to 3) catastrophic injuries including paralysis and death.

Thereby, the registration informed the members that listed all prescribed and non - prescribed medications in case of emergency. Besides, it also notified that they listed their emergency contact and phone number, personal food preferences, and camping equipment. Impressively, it enquired them whether there was anything important to be known.

According to the *Campout Agenda*, safety was the most significant issue, 1) Safety meeting when everyone arrives at 8 pm, i.e., Naloxone, Overdose Prevention Site, First Aid Kit, Point persons, etc; 2) Suggestion about not drinking alcohol. It has made relevant regulations concerning alcohol:

I have a concern regarding mostly alcohol consumption. In the past campouts, alcohol consumption has made things difficult, i.e., Arguing, fighting, wanting to leave the area, etc. To manage large groups of people this can be difficult for all. This can lead to a poor level of communication and can be disruptive, difficult, and potentially dangerous when taking into account we are in the wilds. We will be in an isolated area so we all need to take care. If alcohol is someone's drug of choice I ask that to please use alcohol to maintain well-being. I have no issue with people having an evening bottle of wine or beer/cooler. We don't want anyone to get hurt or have to vacate the premises because someone may be overdoing it.

Besides, the organizers also advised friendly to the campout members that buy a freshwater fishing license in advance because they could take fishing at the campsite:

Freshwater fishing is available a few feet from the campsite. Please buy a freshwater fishing license prior to coming to the campsite. People with disability can pick up a license for \$1 but have to first go through some paperwork with the Ministry of Social Services. For others, a fishing license is \$38.

The whole preparation for the campout was based on the experience and lessons from the over 25 years' campout. The seasoned team meticulously planned every detail, drawing from decades of accumulated wisdom and countless successful excursions. It was organized by VANDU and supported by all campout members, each bringing their unique skills and enthusiasm to the table. They were warm and considerate, meticulous and thoughtful, ensuring the smooth running of the camping activities within a legal framework. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the sound of crackling campfires filled the air, creating a welcoming atmosphere. Our safe return to Vancouver after four days of camping was largely due to their supportive organization, which included thorough safety briefings, well-stocked first aid kits, and a carefully mapped-out itinerary that balanced adventure with comfort. The camaraderie among the members was palpable, with shared stories around the fire and laughter echoing through the night, making the entire experience both memorable and secure.

Activities During the Campout: Empowerment of the Drug Users

The camping activity lasted for four days in total. I witnessed the solidarity and generosity of the drug users; they shared their limited supplies, offered comforting words, and supported each other through challenging moments. I witnessed the influence of different drugs on different drug users; some found solace in the numbing effects of opioids, while others sought the euphoria of stimulants or the escape of hallucinogens. I experienced the relaxing and quiet state of nature; the gentle rustling of leaves, the distant calls of birds, and the soothing embrace of the forest created a serene atmosphere. The empowerment of the drug users made them further believe in the concept of self-resilience, participation, networking, and knowledge to combat the current Fentanyl Crisis. They learned new skills, formed supportive networks, and gained valuable insights into managing their health and well-being.

26th July as the First Day: Departure and encamped

Ann arranged for me to go to the campsite with Liz and Frederick in Sheryl's car at 6:30 am (In the following text, except for Ann, all the others are anonymous). I was the only one who had never abused drugs in Sheryl's car, while three of them were people who used drugs.

Liz was 52 years old then. She likes to use cocaine. She showed me how to use cocaine. Firstly, she took off some cocaine from her little box. Secondly, she put it on the tin foil. Finally, she fired beneath the tin foil and smoked. Afterward, she began to sleep for an hour or two. Her state in the car was listening to songs, dancing with hands and necks, smoking, and sleeping. She was generous very much because she liked to share her food with others. She told me all the time that I should take care of myself, especially at night.

Frederick was already 40 years old. He liked to use meth and cocaine. I found that he was sweating, and asked whether he was ok, he said:

I'm very high because of the drugs. Please don't worry. I'm fine.

Sheryl was 32 years old then. I knew she used drugs because I found the disposable box behind his car. She smoked cannabis during her driving because it was too far for every driver. She turned on the music of her car loudly, most of which was pop music. I enjoyed the relaxing atmosphere with her because of the music and the landscape I saw on the way. Snow mountain Baker, forest, river, stream, farmland, rainbow under the irrigating water, sunset on the lake, all of them made up a beautiful picture. I experienced the tranquility of my life and the warmth of the lovely people who are even experiencing a marginalized life but love others still.

When we got to our destination Castlegar, Scott showed us poisonous ivy and warned us not to touch it. As well, he told us we could enjoy all the food feeling as at home. He cooked for me because I'm a vegan. Frederick helped me to set up my tent with his disability. He is generous very much as a gentleman, and he introduced me to everyone:

This young lady

He helped me but we did not set up his tent because it was complex, so he slept on the mat without a

tent. He said that he was very hot because of the drugs. He said:

There must be some places for me on the ground.

I had a good sleep because the protection from Frederick who helped me ignored the fear of the camping trip which was the first time in my life. He was a nice person and experienced much suffering in his life. I hoped that he could share his life journey with me.

27th July as the Second Day: Trust and Compassion

We stayed on the confluence of Columbia River and Kootenay River which is the place for First Nation people. Five valleys meet together which simultaneously calls for the indigenous people to meet here every year. It's the story of thousands of years ago when Russian immigrants Doukabour people came and settled down here. There are three generations till now. Columbia River is powerful while the Kootenay River is quiet, and finally, they converge to become a stronger river, the Columbia River, flowing into the Pacific Ocean.

People who attended this camping trip are relaxing and enjoying their lives in nature, meeting their friends at parties. Scott said that they would hold a meeting tomorrow, so I just talked with some people. Fortunately, I got a lot of inspiration from their experience and intelligence.

Liz still stayed in the car Sheryl with Frederick, smoking their Cocaine, I approached them and said:

Thank you for your trust. You guys allowed me to observe your daily life closely.

Both of them said:

Thank you for your trust.

And Liz said:

There is nobody likes to sit in the same car with three addicts except you.

Frederick said:

Thank you for your trust last night.

Frederick slept outside of my tent all night without any tent and sleeping bag to give me the feeling of safety. I'm grateful for his care and help, and said:

Thank you for your help last night, You're a gentleman.

Liz said:

He asked me whether he could accompany me, and I told him to please take care of Jingzi well. Give her the feeling of safety. You know, the feeling of safety is very important. I was abused by my parents since I was a child, and I was abused by my first husband too, so I hope I can give the feeling of safety to others. I hope I can take care of others. If other people are happy, I will be happy. I went away and called Wendy to come out right away to check what happened to you yesterday. It's the reason why I left you alone to deal with the bother of the drunken man.

I expressed my gratitude to them and said that I had had a good sleep last night because of the fresh air.

Liz said:

Air, water, food, and sleep are the most important things in our life, there is not anything that can be compared to it. If I have a good sleep, my asthma will be better than before. If I'm sad my

asthma will be worse.

I asked whether she checked her drugs, and she said:

I always buy pure cocaine. I have lived in DTES for over twenty years, so I know where I can buy pure cocaine and who has it. I bought pure cocaine for 470 dollars per gram. Pure cocaine is without any additives and the pipe is clean. If it has other additives, the pipe will be dark. I only use cocaine, cannabis, and morphine to kill pain. I never use heroin because it will make us addicted to it. I DO DRUGS NOT DRUGS DO US.

I was shocked by what she said and talked to her with respect:

You are a philosopher.

She smiled and said:

I went to school only in grade nine. I never went to senior high school like others and university, but I know what is my life like. Using drugs is my own choice. I do not owe others. I do not steal from others. I do not rob others. I used my own money to buy my drugs.

She showed me her money bags with 300 dollars inside and continued to say:

My mother told me many years ago that if you have a habit, have it. If you don't have it, don't have the habit. 'Have' here is the meaning that you can afford it. I can afford my drugs, so I can have my habit of drugs. I control drugs not being controlled by drugs like heroin addicts. Heroin can influence the whole body but cocaine can only influence my head. People don't understand it and think that all drug users can not control themselves. It is not true. I teach you and I hope you can tell others.

I noticed that Frederick was sweating, and she said:

He likes poisonous drugs, but his body does not know that it is poisonous. So he has many sweat.

I said that this place was beautiful and the First Nations were intelligent enough to select this place as their settlement, Liz said:

I don't like the word of the First Nation. Who is the First Nation? Do they know the difference between aboriginal and indigenous? Aboriginal people are great but they are not indigenous people.

I asked the meaning of the Indigenous name of Welcome, and Liz answered:

The meaning of the name is that I can protect our planet with many methods and my intelligence.

Every word Liz said was intelligent and thoughtful.

I found that Liz looked like an innocent baby. If she was happy she was calm, intelligent, and logical, but when she was sad she would be irritated and like to cry. I witnessed his tears and I fell into a huge sadness too. I knew she experienced a lot of suffering, trauma, and abuse. I picked up some food, fruit, and water for her, and she was very grateful for me. I knew that she had a soft heart.

After a while, I talked with a senior gentleman, Leo, who shared with me his perspective:

If a person lived only in one place for his entire life, he would be very stupid. I like to read books because there are no dirty words like fuck in books which can reduce the inefficiency of talking. I

have moved from my hometown in Alberta for nine years. I like the state of moving.

I talked with Hason who shared his opinion on the global drug policy with me:

Every politician looks to push the reform of drug policy but the stigma is worldwide. I hope that drugs will be legalized in the generation of my daughter's daughter. Sadly, many people died but they didn't need to die because of the poisonous drugs.

A woman who was transgender shared me with her necklace and said that she was very happy to be accepted by the team. She introduced the blue one to me and it was best luck for me to take it.

Frederick got a cold because he took care of me last night, I was very sorry for that. I asked for help from Scott and he let us stay in a big tent that can afford eight men to live. I could not stay in my tent alone because it was very far from our camping base, so Scott let me stay with Frederick and another man. It was the first time in my life to stay with another two men in a limited space. I knew I was safe because I trusted them. Frederick told me the truth about it on the morning of 28th July, that is, he was an addict of heroin. It was not cold but the withdrawal of heroin. He needed heroin last night.

I witnessed the innocence, kindness, generosity, and bravery on this camping trip. I was impressed by their pure nature and their responsibility for others.

When I wrote the field note on the evening of 27th July, I sat on the riverside listening to the music of the Columbia River. The powerful river led me to think about the meaning of my life. I watched the flow so strong and rushing everything in the world just like the life of many people. I hoped that I could help people who lived experience, but I understood that what I should do was just witness, observe, and listen just like that moment. The most beautiful pictures for me were the river, the mountain, the song of nature, and my writing on my laptop near the riverside.

28th July as the Third Day: Building Shelter and Discussing Safe Supply

I woke up after both Frederick and Aron had gotten up. I washed my face with river water which brought me to my happy childhood. I wrote the field notes on the riverside of the Columbia River after my breakfast. Ann came slowly wearing a long white dress and said to me with a smile:

You are the only researcher in the past 25 years of VANDU. There was not any researcher to attend our camping trip. I knew it was important for your life experience and your research.

I went to Liz's car and asked whether Frederick was better. I was so sorry that he got a cold for me, and Liz said:

Did you tell the truth? He is a heroin addict. He needed heroin but his drugs were not enough this time.

Frederick was excited and liked to talk because he found drugs from other team members, he smiled:

Yes. I did not get cold. I need heroin.

Liz said:

I told him many times. Please use cocaine, not heroin. You should understand your body. If your mind understands your body, you don't need any medicine.

Liz was proud of her self-medication because of her many diseases. She smoked cocaine which was

called rock cocaine. She said it was pure cocaine without any additives. She said:

Cocaine is the opposite of fentanyl. Cocaine let us up but fentanyl let them down.

After chatting with them, I walked to the public space where there was the outside kitchen, campfire, and square tent. Scott was busy in doing something. I was interested in what he was doing, he said:

I'm making a shelter.

He used different tools, such as a handsaw, ruler, hammer, etc. Ann asked me:

Can you take a picture for us? We are busy and we need somebody to take a picture for us. We should pay money for you.

She smiled. I said:

Can I take pictures for you? I should get the permission from you. I respect everyone, so when I did my fieldwork in China, I didn't take many pictures.

Ann smiled:

We need pictures. If anyone needs a picture, I will let him ask picture from you.

Permitted and welcomed by them, I took pictures of them. It's my first time taking pictures of many drug users.

Scott designed the shelter within the limits of rural areas. I do some assistant jobs for him because I have experience helping my father in my childhood. Scott was very glad:

You learned a lot when you were a child. It was a good experience for you.

Scott, Michael, Adam, George, and I worked together to build the shelter. We went to the forest to pick up some dead trees. We sawed them into certain pieces and took them back to our campsite. When we prepared the door, walls, and roof, Scott started his presentation for all the camping members on how to build up shelter in rural areas. Being attracted by the excellent presentation, everyone listened to him carefully. Claps are aroused occasionally.

One lady came into the built-up shelter and talked with Scott:

Scott. You're amazing! Thanks so much for your presentation. You give me a great idea of how to find a place to live in a rural area.

Scott said:

Yes. It's convenient. And please cook outside not inside to prevent the fire.

I felt sadness that there were so many homeless in the industrialized country. Simultaneously, it was a huge irony that we were building a 'perfect house' at the most beautiful riverside for the homeless in rural areas. Without any interest in the landscape but only compassion for the happiness of the poor people.

Scott told me part of his life:

I worked in the military for five years when I was in my twenties. I found so much corruption in the government. And I said to myself, fuck! I will never serve any government. I will do something from the ground. So I went to the countryside and lived in rural areas. When I did drugs, I thought about more about life. I love the country. I love farming and gardening. I hope I will go

to travel in China to look the life in rural areas.

I welcomed him by sending him my cell phone number in China.

Subsequently, Scott sent a questionnaire to everyone and all of them filled it out carefully, and I was impressed with their enthusiasm for participation. As well, I noticed that some of them shared drugs and used drugs after the presentation.

Liz talked with a woman and gave her a piece of cocaine, and the woman gave her twenty dollars. Another woman was smoking crystal meth with her husband. With white smoke coming out of the tool, she was enjoying her experience. A boy was blowing his pipes on the fire to make different types of tools for meth. He asked me what I was doing, and then he shared me with his experience:

I love meth the best of all the drugs. I began to use meth when I was 14 years old. I'm twenty-four now. That is, I use meth in half of my life. I don't think it is a shame. I play drugs. I control drugs not be controlled by drugs.

He was still strongly judged by his body. Above all, he is very young. However, the saddest thing that happened to most people who used drugs is that they were controlled by drugs gradually without any warnings and signals from their experience. For instance, Liz said she was not addicted to cocaine, but her brain had been changed by drugs. Her feelings, and emotions were changed by drugs but she denied it all the time.

The drug scene after the presentation of Scott was just like a banquet of drug users where they celebrated their freedom far away from stigma, moralization, and criminalization. They are a community in this place which is the secret place for indigenous people. They used different kinds of drugs at different times and in different places for different reasons.

Ann started her presentation after supper. Her topic is Why organize associations of people who use drugs. As a co-founder of VANDU, Ann is an excellent activist in this field. I interviewed her for a whole day, so I won't write all the details in her presentation but just a few inspirations from it.

Ann said:

We organized the associations of people who use drugs to give voice to the people who are most vulnerable to oppression. You have a deeper inside of people. We should have the sense of not letting things go. They are scared of HIV, so they are scared of Injection drug users. We need some self-medication sometimes. We should ask how many people were hurt by the transfer from methadone to methdose. OAT is opioid assistant therapy. People who use drugs are people who live productive health. Drug users have less ability to pressure. The government won't cover all the therapy. Nobody can change the drug laws except the drug users. Drug users just fight for justice not services. The most important thing for everyone is a steady income, a place to live, and social networks. That's why we do social networks for drug users. They are lack of social networks. Isolation kills drug users. Why are you afraid of cops? It is because cops can produce tremendous damage. Drug users know about drug use. Drug users should be in charge of drug user groups. DRUG is not a charity but can accept charity donations.

When Ann was presenting, everyone listened carefully, and the presentation was welcomed by each person. They were involved in the presentation and discussed many topics with Ann. The meeting was concluded by Ann at 10:00 pm. While there were still some people sitting around Ann and talking about many topics with her. As the PPT showed that safe supply is life. Stigma kills BC.

When the presentation was finished, I talked with Mark who is a member of REDUN. I asked the meaning of REDUN, he said:

The meaning of REDUN is rural empowerment of the drug users' networks. VANDU is our mother organization and we learn more from VANDU. Although I am sixties, my body is still strong. I do many work in REDUN with Scott. REDUN has the same meaning as rebirth.

I shared with him that I was reborn when I researched drug use in China because I witnessed the suffering and happiness of life. I found the meaning of my life. That is, I hope I can help more people who are the most vulnerable. Meanwhile, I expressed my admiration for their strategy to focus on the rural areas' drug users.

I talked with another man. He said the drug policies in BC and Ontario are different. BC is more left while Ontario is more right.

The whole campout was a kind of empowerment community where there was both public space and personal space. People cook, eat, talk, and make friends in public spaces, such as the bustling kitchen where the aroma of sizzling food fills the air, the campfire where laughter and stories echo under the starlit sky, and the presentation place where ideas and dreams were shared with enthusiasm. People used their drugs silently in their tents most of the time, which are private spaces for them, providing a quiet refuge from the vibrant communal activities. Also, there are some elites who are responsible for everybody in this event, such as Ann, Scott, Mark, and Michael. I was impressed that Michael worked silently all day, from picking up garbage to cooking, from building up the shelter to calling for the presentation, his dedication evident in every meticulous action. The leadership in this team is so democratic that everyone in this small community can express their feelings, emotions, and affection to this community, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect.

Completing the Campout: Unwillingly Return to Daily Life

29th July was the last day of our camping trip. I woke up in the huge tent and said good morning to Michael. We did not find Frederick. He just let me go outside and talk with others on the 28th night, but I did not go because of my exhausted body. After getting up, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and ate breakfast. When I met Frederick, I asked him where he went to sleep last night without any tent, he said he went to sleep near my tent, just using the sleeping bag. I asked him to help me to package my luggage. He said that let's go. I walked with him, but I found my tent bag being near Ann's car. I was excited and stunned by him:

Why are you so fast?

He smiled without any words. It was a strong expression and answer to my question because he was

always silent. Meanwhile, if he wanted to talk he could speak as a philosopher. I asked him for help with packaging my luggage. I told him:

I always cannot package before my departure. I'm not good at it. My husband or my sister helps me to package.

He smiled with his red face:

If you can learn, you can package.

We gave back to Scott his sleeping bag and mat. And then we had breakfast. Scott cooked pancakes for the people who were from Vancouver because we would leave there first. It's 600km from Vancouver. Scott told me how to prepare the pancake: wheat powder, eggs, milk, blueberry, and water. I hoped I could taste it but I couldn't do it because I'm a vegan.

One woman lay down on the seat of Ann's car letting her peer inject drugs into her neck vein. She also used meth with her husband, but her husband couldn't help her. She painted different colors on a framed picture writing 'love'. When she finished injecting heroin, she silently put the needle in the yellow box which is the regular disposed needle box permitted and dispensed by the government. She did it so skilled that I can feel that they care for others in terms of public health. I had no fear of being hurt by any of them, but respecting them more.

We said goodbye to each other and took pictures to be a memory. Frederick and I helped Sherly to organize her car and luggage. Frederick worked efficiently with the team spirit. Without too many words, his spirit was still strong and pure. His pure and shy eyes told me that he was an innocent person. Both Liz and Sherly were tired after two days' campout. There was no happy smile on the face of Liz. She said:

I don't want to go home.

I was very sorry that she was traumatized by her family. On the other hand, how it was similar to their life to ours. Wherever and whenever we go to have a travel, we always start with happiness and end with sadness, because most people like to run away from the frustrated reality to an isolated place to relax and enjoy the tranquility of their life. Just as social worker John said:

There was no difference between them and us. We are the same human being.

I said goodbye to Scott and hugged him. I appreciated him so much for his endeavor for this camping trip and invited him to travel to China.

When we waited for Liz, I helped her to pick up her stuff, but I was blamed by her that I was rushing her. Although I felt wrong, I knew that she had a mental problem caused by drugs. Three of us just waited for her silently. She picked up all his stuff and put it into her bags. Some of her stuff was dropped on the floor of Sehrly's car. She closed the door of her side and said:

Let's go. Time is so fast! Four days were finished.

I said:

Because we are happy.

She said:

Yes. Time flies so fast when you have fun. It is a saying.

Without any happiness like our coming, Liz was nervous and tended to cry. She said once another time the same words:

I don't want to go home.

Although it reflected the affection of many members of the campout, we had to go home. The drug users unwillingly returned to daily life, because their experience during the campout made them feel free of stigmatization, marginalization, and criminalization. The fresh air of the forest, the warmth of the campfire, and the camaraderie of the group had created a sanctuary where they could momentarily forget their struggles. The laughter and shared stories around the bonfire, the scent of pine needles, and the sound of rustling leaves in the breeze, all contributed to a sense of belonging and acceptance that was hard to leave behind.

Conclusion

One key function of the campout was to allow attendees to unwind from the stress of fentanyl overdose, overdose recovery, and living amid poverty and criminalization. The serene natural setting provided a much-needed respite, with the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant calls of birds creating a calming atmosphere. It is important for people who use drugs to gather, enjoy each other's company, and build solidarity. Many of them had not previously been around others in similar situations outside of emergency services and urban environments, where the constant hustle and bustle often left little room for genuine connection. They brought overdose kits just to be prepared, but they never needed to use them. Instead, they spent their time sharing stories by the crackling campfire, exchanging laughter and tears, and finding comfort in their shared experiences. Although this campout has been completed for over six years, I still reflect deeply on its significance, especially the empowerment it provided for drug users in the context of the ongoing Fentanyl Crisis. The sense of community and mutual support that blossomed during those days remains a beacon of hope and resilience. When people who use drugs organize themselves into coherent action groups, they empower themselves by creating a unified front that amplifies their voices and strengthens their resolve. These groups often provide a sense of community and belonging, fostering an environment where members can share their experiences, offer mutual support, and strategize for collective action. The structured meetings and collaborative efforts enable them to advocate more effectively for their rights, access resources, and challenge societal stigmas. The shared purpose and coordinated efforts within these groups can lead to tangible improvements in their lives, from better access to healthcare and social services to increased political influence and reduced isolation.

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