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WORK

Diving into the life of a binner

Exploring a scavenger's daily grind in the Downtown Eastside

TOM HAWTHORN

Special to The Globe and Mail
 September 12, 2007

VICTORIA -- Armed with a notepad and a tape recorder, Crystal Tremblay headed into the wilds to study exotic peoples.

In her case, the wilds consisted of the untamed streets and alleys of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The subjects of her research were those citizens engaged in "informal resource recovery." That's academic jargon for bidders, who are also known as scavengers, garbage pickers or dumpster divers.

Two summers ago, when she was 25, the graduate student left the comfort of the ivory tower for some real-life experience. Born in Vancouver and raised in the Laurentian resort village of Morin Heights, Que., Ms. Tremblay got a quick education.

"My first days down there were really shocking," she said.

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Globe British Columbia



Gun use a sign of increased gang violence



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As it turned out, she had no problems in her many hours spent at a bottle depot. The bidders welcomed her inquiries, pleased someone was interested in their working lives. (They were also relieved to discover she was not a government snooper.)

Cursed by many for generating noise and mess, bidders are generally seen as an urban nuisance. "We are just low-lives to the general public," one of the bidders told her. Ms. Tremblay came to view the bidders much as they see themselves - working people providing a service.

"They are contributing to the society, helping the environment," she said. "They said to me, 'I'm working hard, doing something productive. I'm not sitting there begging or doing crimes.'"

Ms. Tremblay had returned to British Columbia after earning a bachelor's degree from Concordia University in Montreal. She was struck by the sight of dishevelled people pushing shopping carts filled with pop bottles and other detritus.

Back east, empties are easily returned to the stores found on most residential corners. Here, plenty of recyclable material is dumped into garbage bins. One man's junk is another man's 10-cent treasure.

She took as her base of operations the United We Can bottle depot, which bills itself as "a street charity that means business." The depot, at 39 E. Hastings St., handles 50,000 bottles a day, many of which would otherwise wind up in a landfill. Ms. Tremblay surveyed 100 bidders, taking 10 to a nearby coffee shop for lengthy interviews.

She learned the bidders follow what they call "traplines," a regular route and a territory which they claim by seniority. The bidders also informally divide themselves into subgroups - skimmers (also known as beachcombers, who don't usually go into bins), tourists (seasonal bidders, who often come into conflict with their more established brethren) and professionals (who work full days and often have made arrangements with businesses and residences).

She discovered some of the professionals follow a daily trapline as long as 45 kilometres. Despite the distance, she found they shun other bottle depots found along their route for the familiarity and friendships to be had at United We Can.

While many residents may not like bidders, bidders like binning. The oldest she came across, who was approaching 80, did so because he felt it made him useful.

"I could go get a job, no problem, I know I can," she was told by another bidder, aged about 40. "I could get a 9-to-5 job, where I do the exact same thing every day, like a robot. Now binning - I work my own hours, I am my own boss, I can work in any direction I want, I work any hours I want, I don't know who I am going to [see], I don't know what I am going to find, how much I am going to make. Every day is a brand new adventure."

In a survey of 100 bidders, she found most to be middle-aged men. (A substantial minority were older women of Asian heritage, but she was unable to conduct interviews without a translator.) They turned out not to be who one might suspect.

Fifteen had worked in construction, while another six had been employed as labourers. Some of the other occupations included chef, miner, plumber, tree faller, woodworker, ironworker, fisherman, bartender, landscaper, hairdresser and shellfish farmer.

Six were receiving disability benefits. Two had been in prison; one had been a prostitute. Another gave his occupation as criminal, while one bidder said he had been a drug dealer.

Fifteen described themselves as homeless. Of course, some bidders suffer from drug addictions and mental-health problems.

As welfare cutbacks in recent years have forced ever more people to find other means of income, competition even for a chance to pick over garbage has become more intense, leading to fights over territory.

The noise of shopping carts rattling along alleys in the middle of the night is a common nuisance, especially in the West End in summer. Bidders are not fans of the shopping carts, which the police sometimes target as stolen property.

One solution is the UBU (urban binning unit), a pushcart being developed by industrial designer Michael Strutt. With a collapsible frame and a canvas basket, the unit is like a high-end bundle buggy.

Groups and individuals are being canvassed to sponsor units for bidders in exchange for advertising space on the side of the bin.

Some have also joined a Bidders Association, in which they receive an identification card. A "bidders code" has been written. (Rule No. 5: Try to be polite to the people you meet and avoid swearing if you can.) There is also talk of stewardships, where bidders would keep alleys clean in exchange for recyclables.

Ms. Tremblay's thesis argues for government and community co-operation to make life easier for bidders. Their poverty is eased by culling garbage; there's less garbage because they cull the recyclables from waste.

Her research earned her a master's degree from the geography department at the University of Victoria.

On Friday, she will spend the day, rain or shine, at Centennial Square in Victoria at an event called The Binning Community in Victoria: A Participatory Exploration for Livelihood Enhancement. Police, residents, politicians, business owners and homeless people have been invited. The event is also open to the public.

The bidders who attend will be drawing maps of the city as they see it. Where do they find drinking water? Water to wash their hands? Toilets? They will also be asked to show their traplines. Bin there, done that.

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