

*Theme Music*

**Marion Kane:**

It's easy for most people to turn away from despair but some people make it their mission to help. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth® and welcome to "Sittin' in the Kitchen®". On today's special episode, I speak with Cathy Crowe, street nurse, author, filmmaker and activist. Cathy has been on the frontlines of Toronto's housing emergency for decades. Her new memoir, *A Knapsack Full of Dreams*, recounts a lifelong commitment to social justice. She's led a fascinating life and I feel lucky to call her a friend. We met at Cathy's co-op apartment in downtown Toronto. Please listen until the end – it's a powerful moment.

*Theme Music*

**Marion Kane:**

I'm in Cathy Crowe's co-op apartment in downtown Toronto. It's nice and cozy and we'll have ice cream. What ice cream?

**Cathy Crowe:**

I made homemade ice cream and the flavour is Earl Grey tea with lavender.

**Marion Kane:**

Oh. I'm looking forward to it.

**Cathy Crowe:**

I just absolutely love trying new recipes and experimenting. My mother absolutely hated cooking yet she could make a wonderful roast beef and she made wonderful pies. Of course, it was the era of Campbell's soup when all the recipes were made with Campbell's mushroom soup or something – so there she is, that's her with my daughter.

**Marion Kane:**

She was a big influence on you.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yeah, that's for sure. She was an Emergency Room nurse, so really, from the age of five I knew I wanted to be like her and to be a nurse.

**Marion Kane:**

My daughter did and she's now a nurse.

**Cathy Crowe:**

That's fantastic. I look forward to meeting her. My mom was a very strong, strong-willed nurse and dinner table conversations were frequently around what had happened on her shift and the fights that she had had with doctors advocating for her patients. To me that was the norm so I grew up, I was a much quieter introverted person but that part of her comes out in me as I fight around homelessness and for people's needs.

**Marion Kane:**

My mother was passionate about social justice. She was always going on marches, ban the bomb marches, and she was picked up by police and thrown into a paddy wagon in Trafalgar Square. My mother died last year. Your mother died this year.

**Cathy Crowe:**

That's right. My mum died in March, yeah.

**Marion Kane:**

Do you miss her?

**Cathy Crowe:**

I miss her. I miss her a lot but she's so present in my book.

**Marion Kane:**

She's in your film *Street Nurse*.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yeah, she's funny in it, isn't she? Yeah.

**Marion Kane:**

She didn't conform as a nurse. She railed against doctors as gods.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Oh, she did. Oh, my goodness. There's one line I always remember her telling me the story about a doctor would refuse to come in on a Sunday to stitch up a child's face because my mother would ask him to because she knew that the intern that was on would do a bad job. And a child's face, that's very important. When the doctor would say, "No, I won't be coming in", she would say, "Well. I'll make note of that on the chart then."

**Marion Kane:**

(laughs)

**Cathy Crowe:**

I have used that line many, many times over the years with colleagues, with doctors I've worked with.

**Marion Kane:**

You were blacklisted for a time. Do you want to talk about that?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yeah, I talk about it now because it's history. When my Atkinson Fellowship ended, that was a period when I worked locally and nationally and remember I've been a street nurse for so many decades and in my life I had always gotten every job I'd ever applied for. I applied for all these jobs and I didn't get interviews and I didn't get hired and that lasted for four years.

**Marion Kane:**

You found out the reason.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yes. Well, I mean colleagues told me. My friend Laura Sky said, "You know that you're blacklisted," meaning my advocacy was too strong and people – organizations – were fearful of hiring me. I was told that directly by one executive director.

**Marion Kane:**

What organizations? Hospitals? And medical clinics?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Mostly community health places and a housing organization as well and an organization that was the city.

**Marion Kane:**

We have blacklisting in common.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Oh?

**Marion Kane:**

I was blacklisted in 1968 when I was a social worker in Edmonton. I was 21, and I objected to the Sixties Scoop of native children. I was a social worker who had a long list of permanent wards of the government. They were mostly Métis and First Nations and I raised the ruckus. I found out that I couldn't get hired by anybody. There was a file on me.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Well, now you're totally my hero. (both laugh) For the nurses and social workers and others listening to this, listen to that story – speaking out and fighting. Oh, my gosh. I'm so proud to know you for that.

**Marion Kane:**

I speak out, occasionally to my detriment (laughs).

**Cathy Crowe:**

Wow, wow, wow.

**Marion Kane:**

Thank you for talking to me Cathy, and thank you for this delicious ice cream. You're famous. You have the Order of Canada. How would you describe yourself?

**Cathy Crowe:**

I do always describe myself as a nurse first and foremost.

**Marion Kane:**

A street nurse.

**Cathy Crowe:**

A street nurse, yeah. I've been a nurse for 47 years but a street nurse for about 32. I use the term as a political term because it means that homelessness got so bad in Canada that a whole nursing specialty got developed to deal with it, to respond to it. While we do our nursing, myself and other street nurses,

homelessness continues to worsen. It's worse today than when I first started and that shouldn't be the case. I guess "fighter" is a term I would use.

**Marion Kane:**

Fearless and passionate?

**Cathy Crowe:**

I am passionate, that's for sure. I am, yeah.

**Marion Kane:**

You wear it well. How did your career as a nurse begin?

**Cathy Crowe:**

I went to Toronto General Hospital School of Nursing and when I graduated, I was hired immediately on the last floor I had worked on which was a Cardiology Step Down Unit which was the first of its kind in Canada. It was incredibly exciting.

**Marion Kane:**

At Toronto General?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Toronto General, yeah. Toronto General.

**Marion Kane:**

I read your book. It's a test.

**Cathy Crowe:**

And my mum was a TGH grad as well. I love that. After I had my daughter, I didn't cope well with shift work and having to try to sleep in the day time with a toddler and work night shift. I ended up leaving and going to a very 9-to-5 job on Bay Street in a very expensive corporate doctor's office which I quite hated. It was medical care that was providing care to the 1%, you know, the top executives in the country. I left and shifted to the community.

**Marion Kane:**

In Riverdale?

**Cathy Crowe:**

That's right. South Riverdale.

**Marion Kane:**

It's a test. (laughs)

**Cathy Crowe:**

South Riverdale Community Health Centre. I absolutely loved it and had huge learning experiences there with some pretty famous health workers – Dr. Philip Berger, Dr. Michael Rachlis, a nurse practitioner named Carolyn Davies. Then one thing led to another. I went back to school to upgrade my skills. I went to Ryerson where I got my degree in Nursing. Then I continued to work at different community health centres until one day I realized I was being prevented from working to my fullest capacity by kind of the

atmosphere or the doctors or the board of directors at a few places. Then I migrated to Street Health, which as you can guess by the name, was a clinic providing health care for people that are homeless.

**Marion Kane:**

Does it still exist in Toronto?

**Cathy Crowe:**

It absolutely does. It's grown, it has a very excellent reputation of nursing care, harm reduction. They have a supervised injection site and mental health outreach workers. Yep. It's at Sheppard and Dundas.

**Marion Kane:**

How did your day go as a street nurse?

**Cathy Crowe:**

It was busy, and the day went fast. We would have different clinics different days of the week. At Street Health, I worked as a team with other nurses. I then went to another community health centre where I kind of worked solo, but the pattern was the same. You saw people out of the office where they were.

**Marion Kane:**

On the street?

**Cathy Crowe:**

On the street but that would be more accidentally. You saw them in shelters or in drop-in centres where they would go for their meals or to spend their day. You would have a cupboard with your clinic supplies and people would sign up to see you and you would just see people one after the other with every possible health problem you can imagine. Everything from sore feet to bronchitis or pneumonia to maybe worrying they were pregnant. The whole range of health issues that you would see in a regular family practice setting. It would be super busy and it was really almost like an Emergency Room triage eventually because at one point I think I counted seeing 20 people in an hour. It was just like, bang, bang, bang, one after the other. You can really only deal with the shortest problem and then you also really realize you don't really change the person's circumstance which is why I got more involved in advocacy.

**Marion Kane:**

Was it heartbreaking?

**Cathy Crowe:**

In the early days, I think I was more shocked all the time by what I was seeing because I was extremely naïve. You're spending time in the place where people are spending their whole day or their whole night and you see the circumstances. There used to be one shelter where the men slept on mats on the floor and it was just concrete bare walls. Nothing Cadillac about it, you know? Sometimes our clinics would not even have running water at the sites we were at. Then things began to change and we were always figuring out how to respond to the changes, so more encampments of people under bridges and down by the waterfront.

**Marion Kane:**

Tent City?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yes. Tent City was the largest with up to 140 people at one point. That's where those of us working there really had to almost transform our work into refugee camp-like work. For me that meant being responsible for bringing in the portable toilets and dealing with the water quality because we tapped into water illegally. Then realizing that we would have to put wood stoves in the shacks so a little different kind of nursing, right? Yet we were still also dealing with people's health issues. Then the street nursing work kind of evolved. For myself I began to have to learn about pre-fab kind of housing construction and what materials to avoid because they were flammable because we had several fires down there. Several serious fires actually, where people were hospitalized. It was just never dull.

**Marion Kane:**

There was an epidemic of TB also.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yes. That was in the early 2000s. What was extremely frustrating about that was the Public Health Department knew about it but didn't tell anyone about it. They actually did not tell the Street Nurses Network, or clinics that were providing healthcare for people that were homeless. A number of men died of TB which is unnecessary given it's treatable. How did we find out about it? Well, people were coming to see us with little empty bottles of their INH medication saying, "How can I get this renewed nurse?" And of course, we looked at it, we knew what it was, and we began talking with each other and realizing we were all seeing this phenomenon, and we challenged the Public Health Department and eventually it led to more mass screening of people to make sure they didn't have TB. It did lead to a better program after an inquest happened as well. The same dilemma continues because we had a Strep A outbreak only a few years ago and once again, the Public Health Department did not do communiqués to us to let us know about it. So, it's a constant... it's like a war-zone. It's a constant battle.

**Marion Kane:**

There's a scene in the film *Street Nurse* where a homeless man says he's afraid of the shelters because there's disease and a mental illness and defecation on the floor where there are sleeping bags. That's horrific.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yes, he's absolutely right. People risk everything from scabies to bed bugs to lice and I've seen firsthand in some of the Out of the Cold programs where people are sleeping very close together and a worker gets called to have to wipe up urination or somebody has lost their stool and it's because people are in such poor, poor shape and the conditions are so crowded. I would say the newest concern is that more people are carrying weapons in the shelters and drop-ins, in part around protection but also drug dealers have entered that world so people are very much at risk. Front line workers are extremely alarmed and there was, in fact, a stabbing where a man died in a drop-in centre just two weeks ago.

**Marion Kane:**

Has this situation got worse over the years?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yeah, I would say every year I say this is the worst winter ever or this is the worst summer ever. It's true the numbers of who is homeless is higher than ever before. We're losing shelter beds. There are always new twists to the health issues. Once it was TB, then Strep A, Norwalk Virus which is extremely serious.

**Marion Kane:**

It's a stomach virus.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Yes, and it causes massive gastral symptoms. There's unsafety – and we now... I think what makes things really worse right now is we've now accepted somehow that we'll have this second tier. Second and third tier in the shelter system which are worse conditions than the regular system. People in Toronto will see these large domes that have gone up in the last few months. Those are respite centres which are like a shelter but all the shelter standards don't apply so it's very crowded. People are sleeping on a cot not a mat. We continue to have this Out of the Cold program – it's now in its 33<sup>rd</sup> year which is a lifesaving program – but again it's not a real shelter and it's run by volunteers. People are in desperate states. What I see with my own eyes, and you and I have talked about this, is the huge number of people out on sidewalks, and parks that are very visible. To me, many of these people close to death. Do you feel that way?

**Marion Kane:**

Yeah. I feel that way. I walk often downtown on Bay Street and Yonge Street and I feel it makes me cry. I give money to everyone and it's a drop in the bucket. They need housing. Why don't they get it? Doesn't government care? Or don't the public care?

**Cathy Crowe:**

I think the public cares but many don't know what to do. It's easy to just dismiss people on the sidewalk. We're allowing shelters to close so there are more out on the sidewalk and in parks and ravines this year. It is very frustrating because the federal government, it really appears through the language of national housing strategy, that they have a strategy but we're not seeing it materialize in Toronto. I think it's a combination of factors. It's Toronto City Council and our mayor. It's the province. Premier Ford. It's the federal government. Somehow they are not collaborating and deciding to roll out the money in an emergency fashion to start building, because it takes years to build, right? In the meantime, shelters are closing so if there's anything a listener can do it can be make sure you're letting your city councillor know that the closing of shelters and, for example, the cancellation of cooling centres this summer. The City of Toronto, despite all the advice from experts, decided to cancel the cooling centres that would open on the extreme days. So we have a very callous municipal government, if you ask me, that justifies that.

**Marion Kane:**

What would you do, Cathy Crowe, if you had the power to solve it?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Well, at the local level I would want a State of Emergency or the Emergency Act to be utilized so that the city can immediately expropriate some empty properties and demand some empty properties from the province that they have sitting empty. Like, there's an empty court, and there are empty schools and immediately turn those into shelters/housings. Shelters that can then be transitioned and remodelled into transitional housing. Hamilton's doing that. Other municipalities talked about doing it and there are experts such as John van Nostrand, an architect with us at Tent City that can do that. Federally we have to have a fully-funded national housing program that's like Medicare.

**Marion Kane:**

Affordable housing?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Affordable housing that provides social housing, provides co-op housing, seniors' housing and there needs to be regular call-outs for people to apply for the funding to be able to build. Recently in Toronto, a co-op was trying to expand and build another building and they couldn't piece together the money to do it. And that's because the National Housing Strategy is too difficult to access. We really need to, you know, we have an election in October -a federal election- people really need to ask hard questions at the door to their candidates. "What are you really going to do? And what's affordable?" Mayor Tory is establishing 10 or 11 properties that some affordable housing will be built on. But that affordable will be like 80% of the market rate in Toronto which is not affordable for people on a fixed income such as retirees and people on social assistance. So that term has to be made real.

**Marion Kane:**

I envisage an affordable housing program that gives every person a small home, but a home.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Mmhmm.

**Marion Kane:**

Do you think a home is a human right?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Sure, I do. I think we just had that law enacted in Canada but we don't see it, do we?

**Marion Kane:**

No.

**Cathy Crowe:**

I mean, it happened just a couple of months ago – a right to housing piece of legislation passed. I'm really happy actually, proud that on the back cover of my book it says, "There is no right to housing or shelter in Canada", because there still isn't. If not, we would not be allowing so many people to still be in shelters and out on the street and we would be seeing a massive build. I did a lot of research because at one point I thought I would make a film about it because it was such a phenomenon. After World War II, there was a massive housing build across the country. It was massive. You can still see signs of it whether you're in Regina or in East York in Toronto. Where we are right now. This whole St. Lawrence community was built when we had that program. It created a lot of jobs. It meant that 20,000 new units were built every year. Every year across the country and we're going to have to do that level of a build again. Like a BUILD, a real build.

**Marion Kane:**

They say it's cheaper to house people than treat them on the street.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Well, for sure. I think the governments feel that by not putting money into housing they can give better tax benefits and monies to corporations, right, and/or divert funds to the military. That's, I think, their real incentive in supporting development that is like the development that is being talked about on the waterfront which is this new sidewalk hi-tech community. Why are we even talking about that when we have this housing crisis in the country?



**Marion Kane:**

Cathy Crowe, what gives you hope? You are hopeful. You keep going.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Most days I'm hopeful. Today's one of them. I think people really care about this. I think we're just in a bit of a weak point. My friend Barrick German always reminds we go through lulls, we go through peaks and valleys, in terms of our activism in the country. Right now, we're in a valley. It's at a low point and that's for a few reasons. We haven't had the strong union support. We haven't had the strong faith sector support. We've got a province with a Conservative agenda. We've got a Conservative mayor in Toronto. A weak city council. Who knows what will happen in the federal election? But those circumstances can lead people to come together and I get inspiration from various sources. From John Clark at Old Cap and my buddy Barrick, and we're always kind of analyzing. We have formed this new network that I know you have been to – the Shelter and Housing Justice Network. We have to kind of work on building that up a little bit. I received a call from an activist in the Maritimes, this week actually, who told me about how many tent cities were happening in her small community. I was shocked and it's happening in Peterborough and activists... front line workers I should say, aren't really allowed to speak out much about that because they can lose their job or funding will get cut. But I think people are going to have to start speaking out about it because it's so visible.

**Marion Kane:**

My message to people is, "Wake up and have compassion for the homeless." What is your message?

**Cathy Crowe:**

It's that but it's also, "Read and watch films about the issues". Figure out how you can contribute, whether it's learning more about the economics of homelessness, about political ideology. Whether it's about donating, becoming involved. You know that slogan "Do Something"? Do something.

**Marion Kane:**

Yeah. Do something. Do something people! This is a poem read by a man in your film, a homeless man. It's called "Home" and would you read part of it?

**Cathy Crowe:**

Oh, sure. I'd be honoured to read This poem called "Home."

"Home is where you have your parents,  
Home is where you do belong,  
Home is where you got your talents,  
Home, your shelter from the throng.  
But just as everywhere,  
Things when old will have to go,  
And so your home will once not be there,  
But in memory it will glow."

**Marion Kane:**

Beautiful. It's a tearjerker. It's a great ending to your film. Home is where the heart is. Thank you, Cathy Crowe.

**Cathy Crowe:**

Thank you Marion. Marion, it's so easy to talk to you.

*Theme Music*

**Marion Kane:**

That was my conversation with Cathy Crowe. Her new book is *Knapsack Full of Dreams: Memoirs of a Street Nurse*. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at [marionkane.com](http://marionkane.com) and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.