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# WALK WITH ME

A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH  
RESPONSE TO THE DRUG POISONING CRISIS

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We recognize and humbly acknowledge our place on the unceded, traditional territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. We give respect to this land, and to the K'ómoks and Pentlatch People who have been its caretakers since time immemorial. We acknowledge, as well, our place on the unceded traditional territory of the Ligwílda'xw people; the We Wai Kai, Wei Wai Kum, and Kwiakah First Nations, whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

It is with humility and gratitude that I respond to the invitation to reflect on the learning I have received over the past three years as Co-Investigator of *Walk With Me* – a community-engaged research and social action project intended to spur systems change in relation to the toxic drug poisoning crisis within small cities in British Columbia, Canada. I am a settler, who has gratefully received teachings and mentorship from Elder Barb Whyte from the K'ómoks First Nation, and cultural leaders from Laichwiltach territories.

My relationship to this work comes through a decades-long fascination with community wellness and transformation – especially that which responds creatively, and relationally, to the ravaged human landscapes brought about by colonization and capitalization. I am a community-engaged researcher and community organizer, who holds out hope for a vital and generative role for research, and organizing, in nurturing new pathways forward. It is my honour to work in community, and in pursuit of utopian futures.

- Sharon Karsten, PhD



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## ABOUT WALK WITH ME

*Walk With Me* is a research and community action project, developed in the Comox Valley and Kamloops in B.C. as a partnership between Comox Valley Art Gallery, Thompson Rivers University, AVI Health and Community Services, North Island College and Vancouver Island University, that aims to develop humanistic, and systems-based solutions to the drug poisoning crisis. Find out more at: <https://www.walkwithme.ca/>

For an in-depth look at the project, background, and policy recommendations, see our Policy Report: [Walk With Me: Uncovering the human dimensions of the drug poisoning crisis in small B.C. communities](#).

## ABOUT SFU CERi

Based out of the 312 Main co-working space in downtown Vancouver, SFU Community-Engaged Research Initiative (CERi) is focused on extending community-engaged research to provincial, national and international communities. Our aim is to act as an infrastructure that advocates for community-engaged research rooted in values of reciprocity, collaboration, equity, justice and social transformation. Find out more at: <https://www.sfu.ca/ceri.html>

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# INTRODUCTION

*Walk With Me* illuminates a powerful role for community-engaged research in spurring policy change in the negotiation of complex community crises.

Since labelled a provincial emergency in 2016, the toxic drug poisoning crisis in B.C. has claimed over 11,000 lives.<sup>1</sup> Government, health and community service providers alike have struggled to find solutions to the crisis, developing numerous interventions aimed to reduce deaths, harm and stigma. Despite these efforts, toxic drug poisoning deaths have continued to climb, with 2021 enacting the most fatalities ever.

The *Walk With Me* project emerged in 2019 out of a need to address how the drug poisoning crisis was effecting small cities in B.C. We began by collecting stories and insights from people impacted by it in Cour-

tenay, B.C., a small city on the east coast of Vancouver Island. Once we had a sizable repository of stories, we invited politicians, community leaders, people with lived experience, and the general public to 'walk' with and 'witness' these stories - in guided groups of up to 20 people.

Wearing mobile headsets, participants journeyed together through parks, over bridges, and through alley-ways, allowing the stories to wash over them. The act of walking stems from a creative practice tradition and from traditions rooted in community engagement to enable listeners to physically work through the stories; to viscerally process them. Our

walking practice relied upon, and was made experiential, through its integration with curated audio work. Upon returning from the walks, listeners engaged in facilitated sharing circles hosted by an Indigenous Elder/Knowledge Keeper. By mobilizing lived experience wisdom within a wider set of contexts, the project aims to reduce harm, stigma and racism associated with the crisis; spur community, systems and policy change; and cultivate new understandings and practices of community wellbeing and belonging.

After gathering stories and walking with those impacted by the drug poisoning crisis, we brought these stories forward within various ‘domains of influence’ with our advocacy work and policy report, *Walk With Me: Uncovering the human dimensions of the drug poisoning crisis in small B.C. communities*. Since its inception in 2019, the *Walk With Me* team has been invited to bring its various components into local systems within the intent to make change. We’ve been invited to ‘walk with’ front-line staff in hospitals throughout the Island Health region, and to activate a second tier of research with staff teams – probing at the ways in which this institution could better-support people at the heart of this crisis. We’ve been invited by local governments, through a partnership with our local Substance Use Strategy Committee, to help develop a drug strategy for the Comox Valley. We’ve been invited, by a consortium of organizations similarly-focused to those involved in the Comox Valley project, to bring the project into the neighbouring city of Campbell River – a relationship which began in the summer and fall of 2021, and which is continuing. We’ve been invited, as well, by various local institutions in the Comox Valley to work on a systems-change level in order to combat bias and stigma, and create opportunities for cultural and strategic change.

As we presented our work to decision makers, many spoke of the powerful experience they had while journeying through the walks. The curatorial work had foregrounded the humanness of the stories – ensuring that this element would not be lost in ‘yet another’ policy report. Further, the interweaving of ethnographic and curatorial forms of research produced a form of inquiry whose whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Our blurring of the art/science divide allowed something to occur beyond the scope of possibility available within either domain. The project has, over its short life-span, experienced remarkable growth and continues to chart new terrain as it is invited to mobilize knowledge and activate change in communities, institutions and government policy spheres throughout B.C. At the heart of this work is a commitment to relationship, to cultural and creative practice, and to generative forms of research and community transformation.

*Walk With Me* has illuminated a powerful role for community-engaged research (CER) in spurring political and policy change in relation to the negotiation of complex community crises. As Levac and colleagues (2022) describe, taking up the principles of CER (reciprocity, relationship-building, capacity building, community expertise, democratizing knowledge, bridging disciplinary and sectoral boundaries) in policymaking processes can position marginalized community members as policy actors with important expertise to contribute. The inclusion of these often-silenced voices can produce new forms of evidence, and reveal new policy solutions by deepening understanding of the complexity of policy problems, and of the kinds of transformation necessary in securing viable solutions. The inclusion of these voices can also decentre the state as the sole author of policy change.

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<sup>1</sup>“Toxic-drug supply claims nearly 2,300 lives in 2022: BC Coroners Service” BC Gov News, January 31, 2023, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2023PSSG0008-000109>



# RE-FRAMING THE DRUG POISONING CRISIS

*Walk With Me* positions the drug poisoning crisis as a symptom of a broken socio-economic system.

WALK WITH ME  
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*Walk With Me* positions the drug poisoning crisis as not only a public health crisis, but a symptom of a broken socio-economic system. The move toward centring the disfunction of our socio-economic system marks a progression beyond a narrative currently circulating within policy and harm reduction circles which advocates that the crisis be reframed as a public health, rather than a criminal justice, issue.<sup>2</sup> While the public health arguments have paved the way for the emergence of a less punitive, more compassionate, approach to the drug poisoning crisis, we understand the crisis to be more multi-faceted and structural than can be addressed within the public health system alone.

Vancouver-based psychologist Bruce Alexander, in *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (2008), traces links between rising levels of addiction in Vancouver and the growth of a form of ‘hypercapitalism’, in which free-market logics have grown to trump logics rooted in social and ecological health and wellbeing. Such logics, he argues, are now ubiquitous in cities throughout the globe and are consistently propagated through globalized mass media. They are responsible for a mass ‘impoverish-

ment of the spirit’ – including an impoverishment of community, and of the connections that bind individuals together.

A similar argument is made by physician and well-known addictions specialist Gabor Maté, who posits that the roots of addiction reside in a wider societal context and agenda that denies fundamental human needs:

*“...ultimately I’m saying that illness in this society, by this society I mean neoliberal capitalism, is not an abnormality, but is actually a normal response to an abnormal culture... in the sense of a culture that does not meet human needs” (2020).*

Addiction, mental health struggles, and many forms of physical and emotional distress can, in this view, be seen as a normal response to our failure as a society to acknowledge our fundamental need for connection and care. Addiction here is seen to serve as a coping mechanism in the absence of cultures of connectedness, belonging and collective care.

“

***Addiction here is seen to serve as a coping mechanism in the absence of cultures of connectedness, belonging and collective care.***

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<sup>2</sup>Advocates for the ‘public health’ argument claim that the drug crisis cannot be addressed primarily through incarceration, but must alternately be addressed through measures designed to assist and support people who use drugs. Within this shift, decriminalization and safe supply are touted as mechanisms by which to enable people who use drugs to pursue and receive the help, unencumbered by the stigma and incarceration risks attached to deviant conceptions of substance use (Karsten, 2019, p.19-25).

# COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH AS 'REGENERATIVE RESEARCH'

Research as that generates new ways of thinking, being and acting together.

In reframing the drug poisoning crisis as a symptom of a broken socio-economic system, *Walk With Me* recognizes any viable solution to the drug poisoning crisis to lie not solely in the domain of 'public health', but also in that of community development and regeneration. In what follows, readers are asked to consider the multiplicity of ways in which 'regenerative research' is practiced within this project; and to sit within the uncomfortable provocations these offer to a system premised widely on biomedically-informed notions of research that are rooted in passive understandings of 'knowledge procurement and dissemination'.

**In the face of societal crisis, our communities are faced with a challenge to re-create fabrics that hold us together – to generate conduits by which collective meaning and purpose can be produced.** If this challenge reads as utopian, this is only because we have become inured to our deprivation. Indeed, we occupy a profoundly utopian space, recognizing such a space as perhaps one of the last remaining ways of 'breaking through' the despair associated with the deepening layers of crises we as a species face. Within this

space, we see the phenomena of culture and art as both end-goals in and of themselves, and as catalysts by which to solicit and alchemize the 'material' of utopian imagining, thereby generating collective understandings and identities. Through these catalysts, we solicit meaning and understanding where previously existed only the rawness of human suffering. As Leonard Cohen, quoted in an interview by Mick Brown (1976), observes:

*"A cry of pain in itself is just that... It can affect you or you can turn away from it. But a piece of work that treats the experience that produced the cry of pain is a different matter altogether. The cry is transformed, alchemised, by the work by a certain objectivity that doesn't surrender the emotion but gives it form. That's the difference between life and art."*

Here, then, we speak to the creative, cultural and artistic impulses, the regenerative longings, underlying our research. We point to the wider forces that have caused us to embrace a utopian stance in our project, and a regenerative community development framework.



We speak to an approach to research that prioritizes culture and art, and that uses these as a way to discover, and re-discover, the fabrics that hold us together. These forces, as we will see, also play a strong role in binding ‘practice domains’ together – in bringing into relationship formerly disparate worlds of community operating; community protocol. In what follows, I’ll speak to the ways in which this ‘coming together’ has happened in the *Walk With Me* project, paying specific attention to the power they have to create realities of connection and solidarity.

We imagine potentials for community-engaged research as an ongoing contribution to the complex cultural life of communities; a way not only to uncover truths, but to generate new ways forward – developed through creative and cultural inquiry as a core stance and practice.

Community-engaged research is “a collaborative process between researchers and community partners with the aim of creating and disseminating knowledge with the goal of contributing to the discipline and well-being of the community” (University of Victoria, 2021). We add to this definition our belief that our research not only ‘creates and disseminates knowledge’ but that it is, in and of itself, a generative force contributing to the emergence of new realities; new ways of thinking, being and acting together. We see research as an active, rather than passive, force, one that is (or can become), in and of itself, a regenerative community practice.

# ARTS ORGANIZATIONS AS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT HUBS

The potential of deploying creativity, networks and resources in pursuit of social transformation.



Art institutions hold power to cultivate alternate community understandings and realities; to seed within their communities grounded forms of social transformation. Public galleries by way of their positionality (often) at the centre of downtown cores, their public service mandates and their activation of community-based programming, are in many senses positioned as de facto agents of downtown revitalization and socio-economic regeneration. City councils often invest in such institutions, recognizing their capacity to bolster the visual status of downtown areas, attract revenue into town cores, and create community connections. Yet in spite of or sometimes, because of their centrality and development role, galleries carry with them perceptions of elitism, and histories of colonialism, that are in many cases difficult to shake.

Such perceptions are connected, in-part, to a bleak history of colonization, a long past during which galleries have been seen to mobilize their community and civic networks towards a 'civilizing' agenda – reinforcing particular epistemological orientations in-line with a colonizing logic and sensibility.

Eurocentric, elitist and male-dominated notions of art were also for many years (and in many cases continue to be) systemically encouraged within galleries across Canada. Creative expression by women, minorities, Indigenous peoples, etc. were in turn systemically under-represented (Hunter, 2017; O'Neill, 2020).

In contesting the colonialist history of arts organizations, many Canadian galleries have emerged as sites of oppositional politics today, spaces where the seeds of a progressive and inclusive society have been sewn. Within this counter-movement, the same sets of agencies used for 'civ-

ilizing' populations have taken on a different role, one that uses the weight of these institutions' networks to amplify marginalized voices and include marginalized communities in leadership roles.

Managers of art galleries play a key role in activating this potential within their organizations. Through their skills, networks and connections, arts managers occupy a hinge role within their local communities, bridging worlds of art, community development and civic/municipal structures. They help negotiate and catalyze project development. Jennifer Snider (2015), speaks to this role:

*"The art administrator, labouring in support of the centres' governing boards and programming directions, is uniquely situated to help develop [a] new set of protocols. As the position is already mechanized to maneuver and negotiate the crucial terrain between art and policy, there is justification to propose that the role is already strategically well suited to the task." (p.4)*

My role as Director of the Comox Valley Art Gallery made available and easily accessible a network of community infrastructures and organizations that became important collaborators within *Walk With Me*. This project was framed, from the beginning, through an institutional (and research) lens – the Gallery having borne witness to the impact of the drug poisoning crisis on its local networks – including on the youth participants in its programs, artists with whom it worked, and members of the unhoused community who called the streets and alleyways immediately surrounding the Gallery home. The Gallery began to ask what an institution could do to make change.

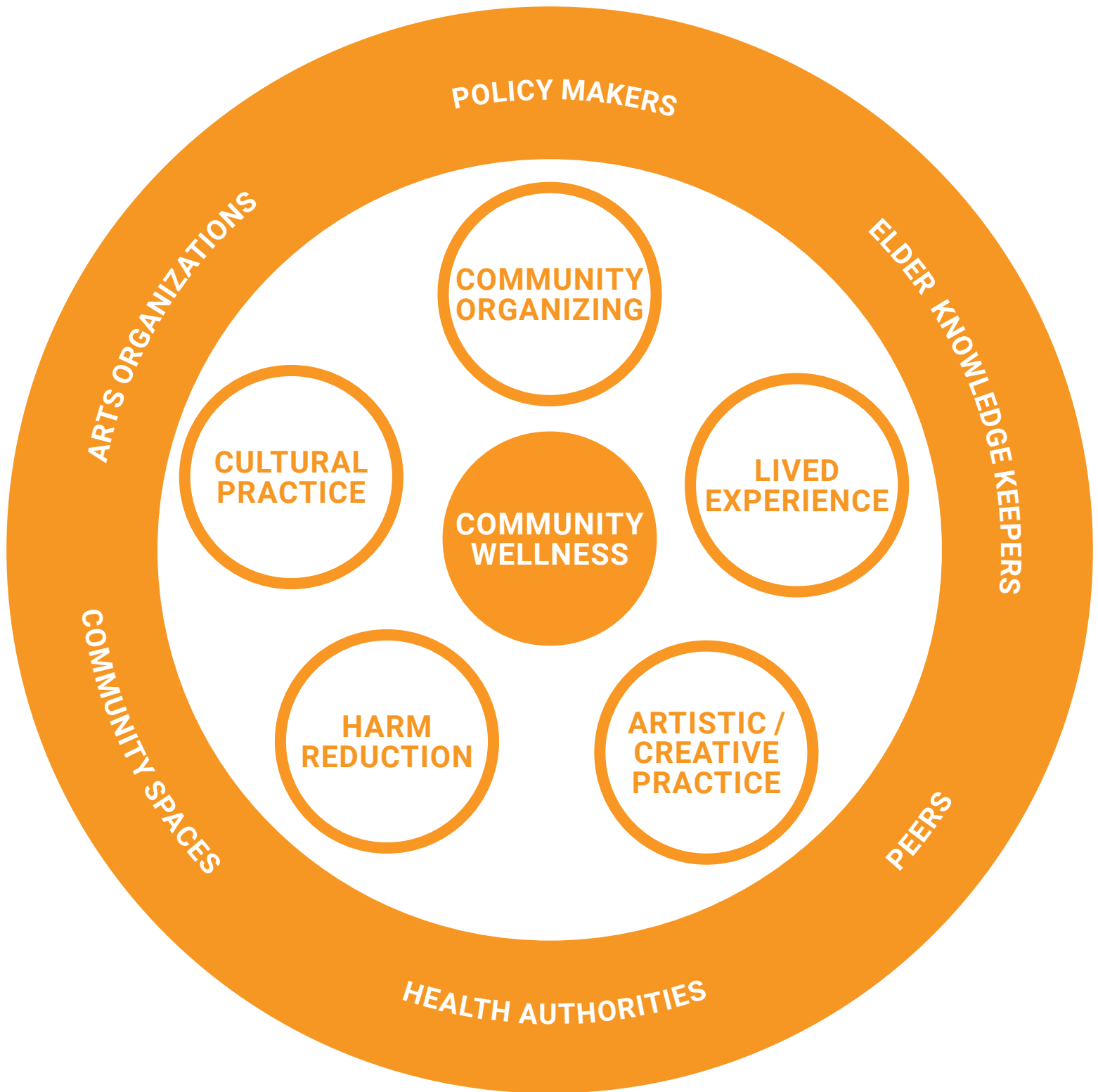
# THE CIRCLE

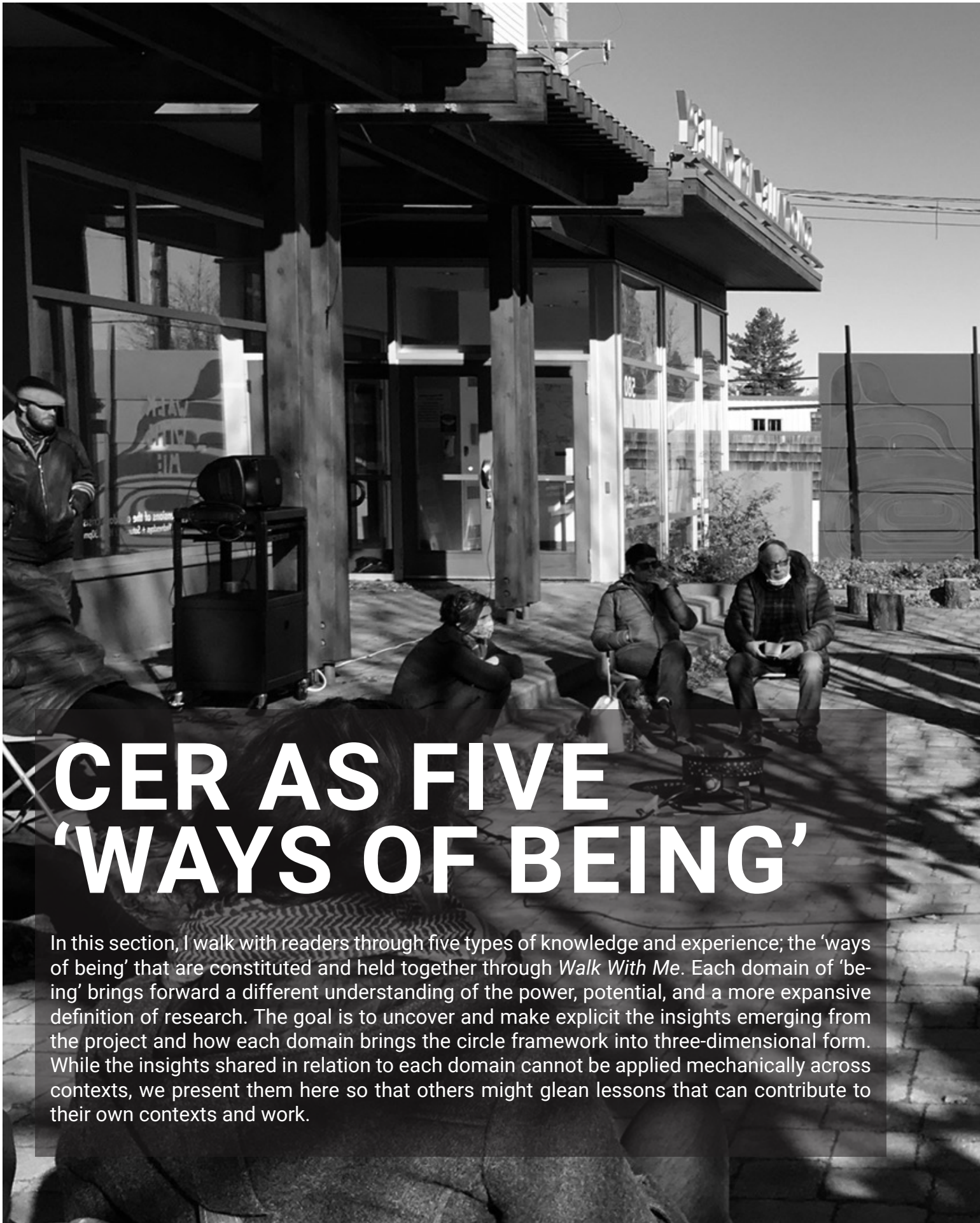
**'The Circle' metaphor has emerged as a core framework that anchors and permeates the work of *Walk With Me*.**

In our community circles, we always move to the left. This act signals our intent to speak from the heart. We embrace the principle of equality represented in the circle and give our attention, our deepest listening selves, to the individual whose turn it is to speak.

As an organizing principle, The Circle describes how knowledges, experiences and relationships are embedded and activated within the project. The circle graphic shows how these various domains relate to each other as part of a whole. Each aspect of the circle offers a unique approach; each contributes its own philosophy and skill. Together, they describe a type of 'listening' – of receiving, processing and interpreting knowledge and experience. Through this act of listening and inquiry, the generation of new realities becomes possible.

We attribute much of the changemaking power of the *Walk With Me* project to this framework and the interconnected web of knowledge, experience and action it facilitates. In 'travelling the circle', I challenge readers to consider the ways in which collective inquiry is functioning as an antidote to systems of hyper-capitalization.





# CER AS FIVE 'WAYS OF BEING'

In this section, I walk with readers through five types of knowledge and experience; the 'ways of being' that are constituted and held together through *Walk With Me*. Each domain of 'being' brings forward a different understanding of the power, potential, and a more expansive definition of research. The goal is to uncover and make explicit the insights emerging from the project and how each domain brings the circle framework into three-dimensional form. While the insights shared in relation to each domain cannot be applied mechanically across contexts, we present them here so that others might glean lessons that can contribute to their own contexts and work.



- 1 RESEARCH AS CULTURAL PRACTICE
- 2 RESEARCH AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE
- 3 RESEARCH AS LIVED EXPERIENCE
- 4 RESEARCH AS HARM REDUCTION
- 5 RESEARCH AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING





## 1 RESEARCH AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

Cultural Practice means different things to different people. Here this term is used to describe a strong commitment held by project constituents to practices of decolonization, anti-racism and cultural inclusivity. The *Walk With Me* project honours Indigenous cultural epistemologies and ways of knowing and being, prioritizing knowledges that stem from those on whose traditional territory our work occurs. In tangible terms, this honouring involves making space for Elders/Knowledge Keepers as leaders within the project team, honouring their teachings, and conducting our work ‘in a good way’ in accordance with the teachings that have been gifted. It involves ongoing

listening and reflection, guided by the wisdom of Elders/Knowledge Keepers, and the ongoing pursuit of an anti-colonialist, anti-racism stance.

K’omoks Elder/Knowledge Keeper Barb Whyte serves as Elder/Knowledge Keeper within the project, and in this role provides ongoing wisdom related to the ways in which to hold community sharing circles in accordance with Coast Salish teachings. Barb offers spiritual wellness modalities to those who participate in the project including therapeutic touch, smudging and healing circles for parents and family members. She also directs ceremonies held to honour participants who have told their stories, such as the blanketing ceremony hosted at the end of our community walks in Campbell River. Barb has taught us about the impor-

tance of physical nourishment in hosting. She brings homemade food – often soups and stews and chillis – to our gatherings. This act of nourishing signals a deep care and respect for those we are fortunate to have in our circles.

Shawn Wilson, in his book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), outlines the premise that research, beyond providing a way to collect and disseminate knowledge, can be structured as an act of accountability to relationship and developed as an act of ceremony:

*“Relationships don’t just shape Indigenous reality, they are our reality. Indigenous researchers develop relationships with ideas... Indigenous research is the ceremony of maintaining accountability to these relationships”* (p.6).

The cultural practice elements of *Walk With Me* strive to achieve this level of accountability to people and their wisdom, to places and ideas with which we have come into contact, and to the communities at the centre of our work. Through these elements, the project assumes a deeply humanist stance – one that proposes a form of leadership and belonging centred around a deep and reciprocal care for community.

*Research as Cultural Practice* builds into the project a framework of deep trust and respect for people and communities. In its focus on cultural teachings, cultural safety and the physical acts of nourishing and holding space, this way of being activates a deep and humanist form of respect – such that those entering into relationship with the project know, on a gut level, that they are seen, and that their voice and story matters. This act of recognizing, of ‘seeing’ and honouring people, lies at the core of the project and its generative work.

## 2 RESEARCH AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE

‘**Cultural mapping**’ (deep storytelling) serves as *Walk With Me*’s core methodology. Participants with lived experience of the drug poisoning crisis, family members and front-line workers are asked (after having been taken through a consent process) to ‘draw / talk’ to their lived experiences of the crisis. The project team documents/ records these insights (visual and verbal), analyzes them, and shares them with a wider public in the form of a research report. Partic-

ipants are offered honoraria for their time, and are hosted in sessions that include food, as well as various forms of support.

Artist Nadine Bariteau serves as Creative Director for the project and brings an artistic approach to fieldwork. For instance, when research participants were asked to address the question ‘how has the drug poisoning crisis impacted you and your community?’, they could answer through a standardized audio-recording format, but were also offered creative tools including paper and art supplies, digital cameras, printmaking equipment, poetry, spoken word facilitation and other modes of expression. These elements allowed participants to define the terms by which they engaged with the project, and by which they told their stories.

The support provided by artists working in multiple media signaled our intent to meet participants ‘where they are’. Such an approach, in turn, enabled a methodological shift, through which was emphasized the value of relationality and multiple ways of knowing and being.

Apart from fieldwork components, creative practice elements were evident within the ‘analysis’ and ‘community engagement / dissemination’ components of the project. Alongside conventional research analysis methods (transcription, coding, writing), the audio data was also compiled and edited by Nadine into curated ‘tracks’ (approximately 40 minutes each) which take listeners through the stories of those impacted by this crisis. The tracks, alongside a curated exhibition of visual work produced through art gallery partnerships,

formed the basis of our community engagement work.

This combination of audio/visual analysis and reporting with creative production, enables transferability of research into policy domains, and into places where ‘academic rigor’ and ‘analytical excellence’ are valued. The concurrent development of both an analytical and creative lens allowed the project to resonate ‘both’ as a legitimate and rigorous form of analytical inquiry, and as an experiential, humanistic art form.

*Research as Artistic Practice* enables a creative language of sharing. This language allows people entering into relationship with the project multiple media by which to contribute their stories and voices in ways best-suited to their expression. It allows participants to articulate that which cannot be said through standardized mechanisms of public discourse, and audiences to ‘walk with’ these articulations in a real and visceral way. This modality also produces a series of artifacts – drawings, photos, prints, songs – through which lived experience dimensions can be represented and translated into an array of social spheres. Through creative practice, articulations are made visible, and tangible, that would otherwise have remained hidden.

### 3 RESEARCH AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

*Research as Lived Experience* enables those in academic and community settings alike to model new understandings of the ‘researcher’ role. Here, dominant depictions of the kinds of knowledge and experience embedded within this role are challenged and new possibilities manifest. Within the non-profit health and social services sectors, the moniker ‘**nothing about us without us**’, has come to be recognized as a mantra, of sorts, calling for the active inclusion of people with lived/living experience (including of homelessness, income disparity, racism and also toxic drug use) in decisions that impact their wellbeing.

Within the academy, such practices have been gradually gaining steam, but in ways sometimes seen as complicated and problematic. Equity and power differentials dominant within academic biomedically-rooted research frameworks are seen to create barriers to this work. Elitist overtones evident within dominant research models, in which certain types of knowledge are preferenced over others, are seen to limit the leadership and potential of people designated by research institutes as ‘subjects’.

This power imbalance is not unique to academic institutions; similar imbalances are found in health care settings. Anecdotally, we have heard from many Peers who have felt tokenized within these settings, excluded from decision-making roles, and undervalued as leaders and contributors.

The *Walk With Me* project has been acknowledged by Peers, harm reduction partners and government stakeholders with whom we’ve worked, to hold a unique and progressive approach to Peer engagement. This success can be attributed to various factors. First, we blatantly, and unashamedly, blur the line between researcher and subject. This is done, in part, by including Peers (many of whom have also engaged in the project as subjects/participants) on the leadership team, and in all levels of our research and community engagement work. While we maintain the academic and ethics protocols necessary to enable ‘subjects’ to consent to the use of their voices and to understand their contribution in terms of the larger project, the culture of our interaction feels more like a community gathering than a formal research engagement.

Secondly, the *Walk With Me* team blurs the lines between professional and personal domains. The Peers working on this project, as with our Elder/Knowledge Keeper, artists, researcher and outreach workers, have become part of the *Walk With Me* family. This family provides personal connectivity to its members – we in some cases live together, support one another through difficult times, spend time together, celebrate together and engage in cultural practices together. Team members are involved in all levels of decision-making, and contribute to the project’s vision and direction in a sustained way. The group brings the full power of personhood to this project including, but also extending beyond, ‘lived experience’. Together we hold a network tied together through strong professional and

personal connections.<sup>3</sup>

*Research as Lived Experience* draws attention to humanism, relationship and the physical presence of those experiencing social phenomena first-hand. If, as many say, the opposite of addiction is connection, such bonds might be seen to pave the way for new understandings, new approaches, in our attempts to reverse the toxic drug poisoning crisis; and to contest the individualized silos produced in an age of hyper-capitalization. These bonds, perhaps, form the basis of a generative form of community development, and of research. They model a type of collective relationship that has been radically diminished in our hypercapitalist world.

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<sup>3</sup> Note: As a team we do set boundaries – determined by our capacity to support community members and one another, and by the appropriateness of our support within a given context. We connect people, including members of our team, to community resources in cases where we do not have capacity, or are not qualified to, support. And while our team as it first developed interacted frequently with one another in both personal and professional domains, we recognize the project’s growth may involve a re-definition of these dynamics, such that staff may join who maintain a stronger boundary between personal and professional selves. Still, those at the core of this project, those who lead it, feel it important to remain porous in relation to the states of emergency and need we encounter. This work calls us to move beyond a ‘9-5’ state of being; to honour the rapidly changing human landscapes we encounter.



## 4 RESEARCH AS HARM REDUCTION

The term ‘harm reduction’ is used here in several ways simultaneously. On one hand, this term refers to “a movement: a community of people working together to achieve equity and social justice for and with people who use drugs” (National Harm Reduction Coalition, 2021). The term is also used to describe an approach to drug policy and service delivery that foregrounds a humanistic, rather than punitive, approach to drug-related crises.

Harm reduction ideals are housed and organized, in-part, through a range of non-profit and community agencies, whose work to reduce harm can take many forms – from the provision of safe equipment and Narcan kits, to the provision of overdose prevention sites, of ‘wrap around services’.

Our relationship with the harm reduction community began with a partnership cultivated between the Comox Valley Art Gallery and AVI Health and Community Services, a non-profit organization focused on front-line harm reduction in the Island Health region. AVI became a core partner in our work and has supported the project by providing outreach staff, connecting the project with Peers and allies, and standing together with us as we present our research to local government, funding agencies, and other bodies.

Our relationship with AVI led to the formation of other community collaborations with harm reduction champions including Community Action Teams in Comox Valley and Campbell River, B.C. which form a consortia of organizations banding together to reduce deaths and harm caused by the crisis, Unbroken Chain - Indigenous Harm

Reduction Program, and Kwakiutl District Council Health, an organization that oversees the health needs of six Member First Nations on Vancouver Island.

*Research as Harm Reduction* draws attention to the humanity and wisdom of those at the heart of the crisis. Through these connections, we’ve been taught the importance of ‘meeting people where they are’, of ‘honouring people in their moment’, of listening and caring deeply. The harm reduction community contributed a humanist intention to this project, and made available a network of Peers and outreach workers whose stories and supports were to become essential to the fabric of our work.



## 5 RESEARCH AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing as a ‘way of being’ offers an infrastructure and mode of operation that shapes and defines the role of *Walk With Me* in relation to wider community networks. Community organizing is the practice of “listening to, and mobilizing, people to make their community a better place” (INRC, 2021). The instruments of organizing activated through this project, ‘arts management’ broadly, and ‘gallery management’ in particular, embody a particular network of relationships; a realm of agency and potential, brought to bear in developing the project as a nexus point between worlds of culture, creative

practice, lived experience, harm reduction and policy. Community organizing helped weave these worlds together, with my role as Art Gallery Director (occupied on and off between 2011 and 2021), used strategically for this purpose.

The art gallery as community construct, and as part of a civic infrastructure, and my role as Gallery director served as an enabling force in bringing multiple domains together. The Gallery provided a hub through which a wide range of community connections could be held including relationships with Elders/Knowledge Keepers, Peers, the harm reduction community, civic agencies and funders as well as relationships with artists. My role as director (and researcher), helped activate these connections

and translate knowledge and experience between these normally segregated domains and fuel the project through fund procurement.

*Research as Community Organizing* offers a mode of operation that shapes and defines the role of *Walk With Me* in relation to wider community networks. It generates the resources and structures by which they are enabled to operate together. It translates the multi-dimensional knowledges and experiences stemming from the project to a wider network of community and policy actors. It legitimizes community research as a policy-making vehicle, and develops infrastructures of meaning and engagement that root and sustain this work over time.



"I was honestly just thinking about where people are allowed and not allowed to be, and to exist in. I was looking at – when people are forced to live so far out in the community, they die all by themselves... they overdose all by themselves. Whereas at least when these things happen downtown there has been some response, and people's lives have been saved. But what I hear about is when it happens way out there, and there's no one".

– Outreach Worker



"On my picture here, I've drawn the red road, which is, what was explained to me in the Aboriginal healing and treatment centre that I had gone to, the red road of recovery, it's the safe path, it's desired to be grounded upon and walk along that road. In hope of finding serenity. I learned a lot of good things from the Elders there."

- Peer



"People use the train station to walk through town so they don't have to walk on the street... people on quads taking drugs up the train tracks.... A lot of drug houses in town have paths to the train. The tracks, bushes, bridges, Bill Moore park, wherever you can find a place to get some peace and quiet to use your drugs, without people coming by and stuff like that."

-Peer

# KEY INSIGHTS

The following insights reflect our learning journey into a multi-faceted way of pursuing policy and community transformation. We acknowledge this learning as unique to the *Walk With Me* project and context and we leave it to others to determine its relevance within their own communities and contextual domains.

## KEY INSIGHTS ARISING FROM *WALK WITH ME'S* WORK:

- 1 Pursue the wisdom and guidance of those on whose territory your work occurs.
- 2 Spend time with Elders/Knowledge Keepers – seek their wisdom.<sup>4</sup>
- 3 Pursue cultural respect as a driving force.
- 4 Pursue creative practice as both catalyst and end-goal.
- 5 Spend time with people who have the most to gain, and lose, from your research.
- 6 Acknowledge people with lived experience for their multi-faceted humanity, and leadership capacity.
- 7 Harbor relationships at the heart of everything.
- 8 Don't enter into communities without an invitation.
- 9 Listen to the unique needs, and opportunities, emerging from within each community.
- 10 Seek out individuals and organizations that have strong alliances with your work; enable them to sing together.
- 11 Find strength in the collision between science and art epistemologies.

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<sup>4</sup>It is standard practice within CER for community partners, Elders and Peers who participate in research-related activities and provide their expertise to be provided payment for their important contributions.



- 12 Dare to challenge dominant power hierarchies.
- 13 Dare to combine the personal and professional.
- 14 Hold stories and communities with great care.
- 15 Acknowledge the hard work of bearing witness.
- 16 Don't underplay the power of emotion and experience in research.
- 17 Prepare to sit with people for as long as it takes.
- 18 Prepare for your research 'subjects' to become lifelong friends.
- 19 Prepare to support and be supported.
- 20 Pursue community organizing as a way of mobilization.
- 21 Prepare to reflect, reflect, and reflect again.
- 22 Do this work with your whole heart.

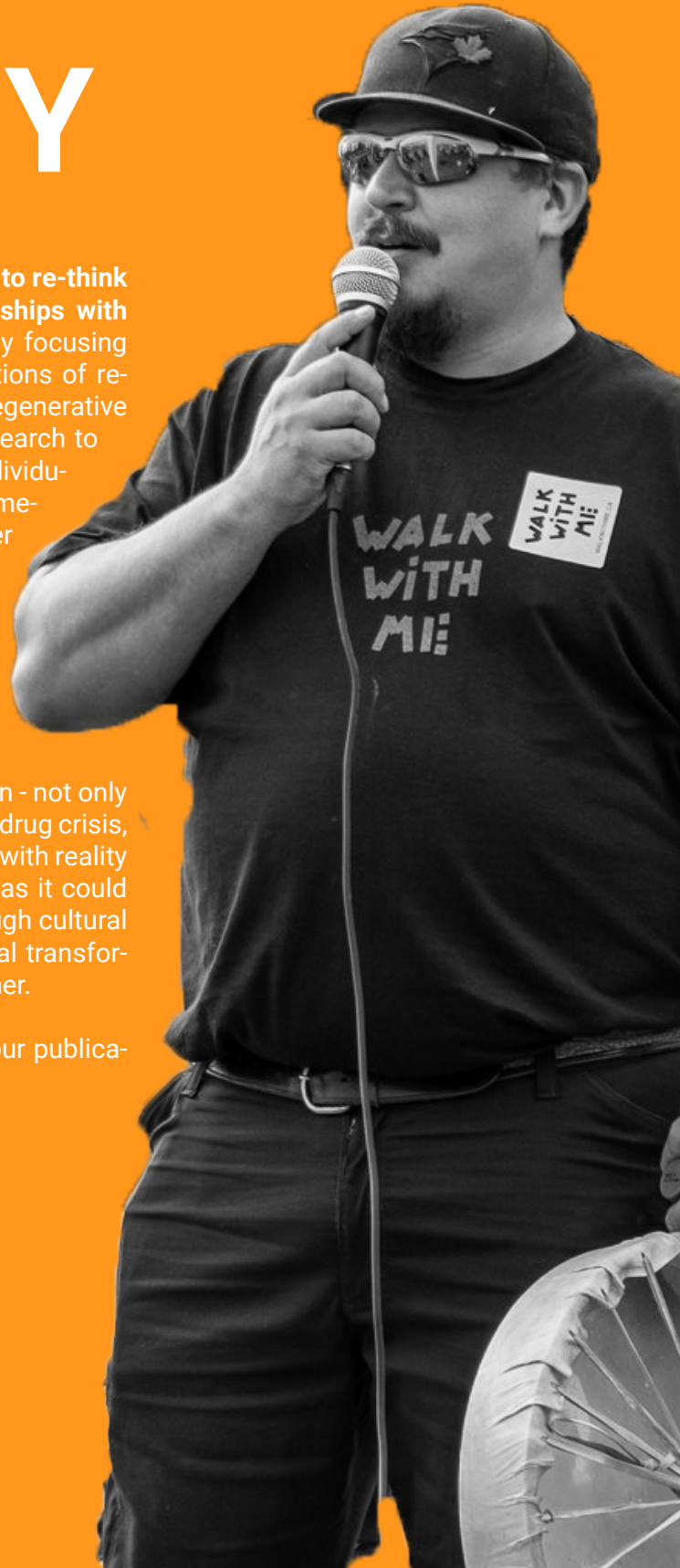


# SUMMARY

**Most crucial in this conversation, it seems, is the need to re-think dominant conceptions of research such that relationships with underserved communities are placed at the centre.** By focusing on such relationships, biomedically-informed conceptions of research are radically challenged, and room is made for regenerative possibility. Such possibility I see as imperative in our search to address not only the toxic drug crisis, but the toxic individualism inherent to hyper-capitalized socio-economic frameworks. Together, *Walk With Me's* five 'ways of being' offer a robust framework of outcomes embodying multi-faceted forms of listening, reflecting, translating and sharing. Together, they create a nexus-point between multiple diverse worlds and enable knowledge and experience to be mobilized between them, and to ripple out into the wider world.

In closing, the term 'Walk With Me' serves as an invitation - not only for new ways of thinking about and addressing the toxic drug crisis, but also, for research that moves beyond an occupation with reality as it is. Regenerative research is occupied with reality as it could be. Through deep and sustained relationships and through cultural and creative inquiry, regenerative research enacts social transformation as *process of becoming* we are engage in together.

Note: to learn more about *Walk With Me*, or to access our publications, please visit: [www.walkwithme.ca](http://www.walkwithme.ca)



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# WALK WITH ME

A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH  
RESPONSE TO THE DRUG POISONING CRISIS

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