

Interview with Jagrup Brar on January 24, 2012 by Jean Swanson of Raise the Rates

Jean: How much money do you have left?

Jagrup: Around \$8 but I need to buy eggs and bread and, if I can, find brown sugar.

Jean: How is your weight?

Jagrup: I weighed on Jan 16 and I had lost around 8-9 pounds.

Jean: Have you been hungry much?

Jagrup: I have been hungry all the time because I don't eat properly. I eat just to keep going.

Jean: How much free food have you eaten?

Jagrup: I have lined up for 2 lunches in front of Carnegie that were Indian food, and I lined up for one dinner at Harbour Light. I worked at the Carnegie kitchen and as a result I got a free breakfast, and I got a cookie and cup of tea at the Surrey food bank when I did volunteer work. VANDU bought lunch for me yesterday and gave me \$3.

Jean: How did you feel eating free food?

Jagrup: It's difficult. It's hard to stand in a line where you're surrounded by people who are really hungry. It's hard to watch them. And also when I went to Harbour Light the line was very long. I was very hungry and had to wait about an hour and a half to just have a meal. It wasn't raining but I had to stand basically for about an hour outside, so if you're really hungry and don't have a lot of physical strength, it's really hard. I don't know how people do it every day. The only reason they're probably doing it is because they have no other choice.

Jean: Does standing in a line give you a new perspective on charity?

Jagrup: I think they are playing a positive role given the circumstances. I don't know where people will go and how people will survive if there are no charities in Downtown Eastside (DTES) to serve the most vulnerable.

Jean: What about Surrey?

Jagrup: It also applies to Surrey. But the crisis is way bigger in the DTES. In other places in BC they probably don't have many charities. It would be even harder for low income people to survive in smaller communities. Where there are fewer charities and food banks.

Jean: Are the charities enough?

Jagrup: They are playing their role providing food to hungry people but when we think about addressing the issue of poverty there are a lot more things that could be done like affordable housing, childcare, public transit, earnings exemptions for people on welfare so they can get part time jobs and supplement their incomes.

Jean: Did living on \$610 have any impact re: depression and self esteem?

Jagrup: It gave me a real perspective, understanding about the hardship one has to go through living on \$610. It made me understand the difficulty of finding an affordable, decent room; the difficulty to manage the budget with food, transportation, phone and clothing...lack of nutritious food did impact my ability to think clearly and stay energetic to live my days successfully and happily. There were times I really felt the need for a nap in the middle of the day. I did lose about an hour and a half of sleep every day. Everything you do is a struggle.

Jean: Have you been in many line ups? Can you imagine what it's like to have to be in them a lot to get your basic needs?

Jagrup: It would be really, really hard for anybody to manage...to line up for 4-5 hours to access free food and be a productive and positive citizen of the society. It is harder to keep a priority on finding a job for people in that situation. Finding a job becomes a really, really difficult thing to manage in those circumstances. And that is troubling to me.

Jean: Describe the housing you are living in.

Jagrup: I live in an SRO (Single Room Occupancy hotel room), 11 feet by 11 feet, at Jackson and Cordova St. It has a small table and 1 chair, a sink, and a fridge that doesn't work. It has no access to TV, internet and no microwave. I share my washroom with 11 other individuals living on the same floor. So every day is a huge struggle. How to manage the day is a huge struggle. It's really hard to continue cooking in the room as you can't store things in your fridge. Going to the grocery shop is an every day necessity which is hard to manage. It is also very hard to go to the washroom and take a shower shared by 11 other people. Sometimes you have to really be fully prepared to go in which means all the things you need must be in your bag. You can't make a mistake; you can't drop anything on the floor because it is dirty. If you forget something and come back to your room to get it, when you go back, it may be taken by somebody else. So living in that room with that condition is really a very hard, frustrating experience.

I never knew before what it was like living in a shelter and being homeless. I never knew what it was like living in an SRO. Housing, housing, housing. Now I can say forcefully that this is what has to be done.

Jean: Would you be able to stay in that place for the next year and survive on \$610? Would you have to get a fridge, for example?

Jagrup: It would be hard, extremely hard to live in that room with that amount of money. I don't know what I'd do for a fridge. I don't know if I could find a friend who could give me a small fridge that would make my life a little easier but I have to compensate by finding places for free food, or doing some volunteer work. Or I'd have to borrow money.

Jean: Are you frightened in the DTES?

Jagrup: I was when I came here. I had fears as to how people would react to me because I didn't know them. I also had limited knowledge about the people with mental health illnesses and drug addictions. After my first town hall meeting at Carnegie my perspective changed when people told me their stories. The stories tell me that they are people like any of us, although the people here are boiling in anger against the system. The meeting was conducted in a respectful manner and that impressed me. In my day to day life people have been very friendly and supportive and appreciate what I do and that is surprising to me because I thought it may not be the case.

Jean: What things have you done without, not counting your family?

Jagrup: The only thing I bought with the \$108 I had left was food only. I brought from home utensils, a pan, a plate, a bowl, a spoon, fork and knife and cup and glass. I also brought salt and pepper and things for personal hygiene like soap, shaving cream, shampoo and clothing. In my day to day life I would eat out at restaurants which I didn't do at all with exception of the first day when I had no room and no place to eat. I would end up buying things when I would go to a store-clothing, shampoo, soap. I don't have dish soap. I use the same soap to wash my hands and dishes. Today I have to wash my clothes too. I was thinking I would go do some laundry but I don't have money so I'll have to wash them by hand in my room.

Jean: You haven't actually been looking for a job like people on welfare have to, but what do you think that experience would be like, living on \$610?

Jagrup: If you are living on \$610 it would be a really difficult and frustrating exercise to focus on job finding.

Jean: Would it be easier to look for work if the rates were higher?

Jagrup: If you had decent housing with washroom and kitchen that may make it easier cause you could cook your own meals and bring your costs down and you'd have a place to shower to keep you healthy. And you could manage your day better because you would be more independent that way. But if you have to share your washroom with 11 people and not have fridge and microwave it makes job finding very hard. Transit is another piece. It's really hard to manage the budget. You can't spend a lot on transit so your job search has to be limited to a smaller area cause you can't go very far without the bus. And that will cost you money.

Jean: Has this experience blown up any myths?

Jagrup: Quite a few. First the myths about the people who are homeless, that they are lazy and don't want to work. That myth is wrong. My experience shows that people are homeless because of a reason: some have lost jobs in bad economy and couldn't find one again. Some have been hit by a life changing tragedy like the loss of a family member. Some have faced abuse at a young age or even later. People with these issues sometimes get into addictions to control their pain.

Another myth is that getting welfare is very easy. That is wrong. My experience going through the

application process shows that the application process is complex, difficult, time consuming and frustrating.

Jean: And you have 2 Masters degrees?

Jagrup: One needs to have a good academic background including accounting skills.

Jean: If you had a disabled relative and couldn't support them yourself, would you want them to live on \$906 a month, maybe for their rest of their life?

Jagrup: Nobody would want their disabled relative to live a life of fear , humiliation and struggle.

Nobody would want that. I think affordable housing, affordable and accessible is very important to people who are disabled.

Jean: What do you think of the 100% claw back of child support from people on welfare?

Jagrup: I think we need to have a hard look at the rules affecting all the people on welfare including single parents.

Jean: What about the 100% claw back of earnings exemptions?

Jagrup: I think that we need to find a way to encourage people to find employment including part time.

That will give people the confidence and opportunity to supplement their income. Therefore earnings exemptions are something we need to really really have a hard look at.

Jean: What's the most surprising thing you have encountered?

Jagrup: The most surprising thing for me is that we have so many people homeless people in our rich province. In my dusty poor village in India we don't have a homeless person. I fail to understand why we have thousands of people who are homeless in this very beautiful and rich province.

Jean: The saddest?

Jagrup: To see people not having any place to sleep, struggling just to pass a night without having any place to sleep; also to see people living very difficult lives in SROs, even people who are working, that they can't find a place where they can live with respect and dignity.

Jean: The most hopeful?

Jagrup: I think we as a society have to take the issue of poverty seriously and find ways to provide real help to the vulnerable people to give them a better life full of hope and opportunity. So poverty reduction must be part of our policies. I don't think we have a choice not to do that.

Jean: What's next?

Jagrup: I took this challenge, it's a personal decision of mine. I have the support of my caucus. I wanted to tell the story of half a million people living in poverty and initiate a debate about the issue of poverty.

I will take all of this experience to my caucus and work with them to build a poverty reduction plan.