**Sue Purchase Part 2**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**May 9, 2017**

**At the Home of Amy Sullivan**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Sue Purchase -**SP**

Amy Sullivan -**AS**

**AS:** This is Amy Sullivan this is part two interview with Sue Purchase. We’re in my house in Minneapolis on May ninth. Sue do you give me permission again?

**SP:** I absolutely give you permission Amy.

**AS:** Thank you dear. I think we were around 2001. If you want to go back a little further we can definitely start. I didn’t listen to the very end to find out where we were. You were the director of Women With a Point from 1996 to ‘99?

**SP:** 2001. I resigned in 2001.

**AS:** We did start talking about the Fit Pack and you started to work in Australia.

**SP:** Did I talk about the Fit Pack with the disposal project that we did?

**AS:** I don’t know but go ahead.

**SP:** It ties in nicely with really raising awareness around harm reduction, the importance of certainly access to clean syringes. Some of the terminology was starting to change, rather than syringe exchange it would be syringe access. There were more sources available for syringes for people actively using illicit drugs. We had the pharmacy project going with four area pharmacies. One was in South Minneapolis on 26th and Nicollet. I can’t remember the name of it. They had two locations. That one and then there was one on Lake Street, really well known. Then we had one on the West Side of St. Paul where there was predominately a Latino population, lots of heroin. There was one on the East Side of St. Paul, more of white working class, methamphetamine. Then we had a pharmacy, I think it was Merwin Drug over on the North Side of Minneapolis. This project involved community based pharmacists selling, they could sell the Fit Pack. The personal sharps container came packed with a ten pack of syringes and there was a mailing card. There was a research component attached to it. It had a sticker on the front that we had designed that really talked about safe injecting, safe disposal, and harm reduction message. Then people were involved in that. I can’t remember exactly how it all came about. Participants at the storefront would participate in a survey; they got a t-shirt that had art on it that was designed by a program participant. It was of a demon being shot out of a syringe with flames behind it. It was a circular image, red and yellow and very vibrant. In a really interesting font it said, “Be Blood Aware. Better Safe Than Sorry.” We had this whole disposal awareness campaign. Through that what we learned was how pharmacies were participating with users, what the cost of syringes were. The one on 26th and Nicollet oftentimes charged five dollars a ten pack. They didn’t want active drug users in their pharmacies.

**AS:** Was that more money than they should have been charging?

**SP:** Yes. Syringes wholesale are seventy cents apiece or they were at the time. You’d get ten of them in a pack. With pharmacy access laws you were allowed to buy a ten pack but you couldn’t buy more than that at a time. Seventy cents wholesale being sold for five dollars a ten pack. Their policy around that was based on appearance. If you appeared to be somebody buying syringes for illicit purposes you paid five bucks. If you were a diabetic I think it was three dollars. There was a price break. That was interesting, not a surprise. The pharmacy on the North Side of Minneapolis they were asking for identification and limiting the number of visits that a person could have to a pharmacy. Really deterrents around enactment, on the surface it was really great to have pharmacy access but there were glitches in the system. This project the aim was to help alleviate those glitches, get more uniform policies throughout pharmacies, and give access to people, address safe disposal.

**AS:** Was this a grant funded project?

**SP:** It was a grant funded project.

**AS:** With Access Works?

**SP:** Access Works with the Minnesota Department of Health. It was titled the Better Safe Than Sorry Disposal Proposal.

**AS:** We have those documents.

**SP:** Yes, exactly. That got funded and really created another level of awareness. Working with participants, participants are more involved. The project, although the research component of it was never fully completed, we worked in collaboration with Sarah Riebeckie and Seth Wells from the University of Minnesota. I’m not sure whatever really happened with the data there. Sarah might know something more about it. There was that and that project was also replicated throughout New York City. At the time the big move was pharmacy access for drug users. Not all pharmacies in Minnesota wanted to participate. It was a voluntary thing. Disposal had never been adequately addressed for pharmacists to feel real comfortable with selling syringes.

**AS:** With the idea that people would bring their used syringes back?

**SP:** That there would be this personal sharps container. The pharmacists were handing the syringes out within this ten pack and so they felt better. The ten pack was in the Fit Pack. They were handing out a disposal mechanism with the syringes so they felt better about that with the sense that discarded syringes weren’t going to be left laying on the ground.

**AS:** Do you throw the whole Fit Pack away?

**SP:** The Fit Pack can be thrown in the garbage.

**AS:** The whole thing when you’re done with those ten?

**SP:** Yes or it could have been brought back to the needle exchange. There were so many valuable aspects to the Fit Pack in that it also created a much more positive relationship with law enforcement. People who were on the streets having some encounter with a cop, they didn’t have to worry about patting them down and that they’re going to accidentally get a needle stick because they were carried safely. It also provided a level of safety for the user because the dirty ones were going down inside, one way flap. You can’t get them out. No one wants to stick their finger down there so that residue that will get people a felony when they’re trying to return used syringes to a needle exchange, that’s where some of the rub comes in. You want them returned but oftentimes people can’t hold on to them for fear of prosecution, something’s going to happen. It was a win, win situation in that way. It was a great project. It really raised awareness.

A lot of education happened that way not only for community pharmacies but for the individual user. Much more in a sense activism really a big part of Access Works was always about engaging and educating program participants, everybody, about whether it was know your rights, safe disposal, how do you write to your congressperson. In the storefront there was a room and all the walls were pretty bare. I think I bought two hundred dollars’ worth of posters and postcards from Northern Sun. It was fantastic because we created this collage on the wall. People would come look at them and ask about them and the quotes. It was such a wonderful opportunity to educate and open a mind and put forth other ideas. We had letter writing campaigns. We had the nuns; they had Peace House on Franklin. Are you familiar? They used to protest at the School of Americas. What were their names? They’re the Sisters of Carondelet. I’m going to blank it out, I should know it so well. They came and did stuff. We had voter’s rights; the women’s users group had the League of Women Voters. We did so many educational opportunities on a variety of topics.

**AS:** To just engage people who came through the door.

**SP:** Yes, an informed consumer.

**AS:** When we talk with Rae later we can go into what you guys did together and that stuff. Do you want to focus on your life for this? If you want to.

**SP:** We can do that.

**AS:** So after you went to work for Fit Pack what’s been going on in your life since?

**SP:** I went to work for Fit Pack and I worked for them until 2004, 2005.

**AS:** Did you leave the cities?

**SP:** I did. I moved to Tacoma, Washington. My husband Dave ran a program in Tacoma. Kind of a twofold, he had a needle exchange, it was the first publicly funded legal needle exchange in the United States.

**AS:** How did you meet Dave?

**SP:** Everybody knew Dave Purchase.

**AS:** But how did you meet him?

**SP:** I met him at a conference. I met him at the first harm reduction conference in Oakland, California.

**AS:** Do you remember the year?

**SP:** 1996. I thought he was a showboat.

**AS:** What do you mean by that?

**SP:** Well Dave was a presence. I thought that he was just a little too full of himself, met him there. Had to have a conversation with him about...Dave had the needle exchange in Tacoma but he also had a larger national organization. It was the North American Syringe Exchange Network, NASEN is the acronym. NASEN involved technical assistance for startup needle exchange programs in the United States and other places in the world. It had a buyers club for needle exchange programs. It had a grants program. Then I can’t remember if it was an annual conference or every two years Dave put on a conference. He was a really well-known figure. Dave was instrumental in starting all the New York programs. He worked throughout the country. He worked throughout the world, programs in Hawaii and Vietnam and Puerto Rico, everywhere. He’s this larger than life figure. I think he’s arrogant and annoying. I have to do business with him.

**AS:** Somehow a romance developed?

**SP:** Not so much. Then a year goes by. I had to apply for money with him. You had to. The needle exchange pots of dollars were so few and far between you didn’t not apply. I had to apply for money from him. I didn’t get funded. I remember calling him on the phone and saying, “What’s the deal? Where’s my money? Why didn’t I get some?” Out of that he sent me a little money for needle exchange. I remember then Dave was self-described as glib and he was. He’d make some comment like, “Oh darling you should marry me and take me away from all of this.”

Then some time goes by. I don’t know if it’s later that year but I’m at a drug policy conference in New Orleans and in the opening reception. I think I was with my colleague Toni. We’re standing at the bar. I look across the room and I say, “Oh no Dave Purchase is coming across the room. Let’s move.” We said hello. Later that night, Dave used to hold court in the bar, everybody was there. This was harm reduction in the United States. All these people who are the old timers now were young, having a conversation with him in the bar. It was a good conversation, it was an interesting conversation. He wasn’t annoying. It was enjoyable. Then there was an attraction. The conference goes on. I don’t know what the hell he had said to me. The last day or something he said there was a spark between us. I don’t remember how I responded to that. He was going on to Denver to another harm reduction conference. I was going home to Minneapolis. I think I had told him that I’d lived in Colorado for years. He had a sister that lived up in the mountains.

He sent me a card that said something like, “Proof of purchase to follow.” I think he sent me some Fat Tire beer in the mail. You couldn’t get it in Minnesota. That’s when it said, “Proof of purchase to follow.” He was coming to visit. That was the proof of Purchase. And visit he did. What a human being, certainly human. We had an amazing relationship for about nine years, travelled, worked together, my confidante, his confidante. We lived in Tacoma, Washington and he ran a program. I had run a program. I had run a much more progressive, comprehensive program. Dave had started a needle exchange and it didn’t really expand beyond where it was in 1988, on the corner of 14th and G Street. Minnesota offers a lot of services. Minnesota is hospitable. Tacoma is not hospitable. It’s the West Coast and there’s black tar heroin. Tacoma was built on Indian burial grounds and I think the spirits were revolting. I worked on the corner of 14th and G Street in a van.

The Tacoma Needle Exchange has a very strict one for one policy. They might still have a strict one for one policy. Dave created that policy when he was being glib with *People* magazine. He got all this attention, it’s the late 80s and it’s a new thing in the United States. Dave answered off the cuff and it became policy. Working at the needle exchange, if somebody didn’t come with a used syringe they weren’t supposed to get a clean one. That program was constantly under the gun. The people of Tacoma weren’t fond of the needle exchange at all. They were always looking to shut it down. It was located on the corner of 14th and G Street is the Catholic Worker community. There’s St. Leo’s, the Catholic Church sits right above with the hospitality kitchen. There is Father Bicks who is in charge of stuff. He was a Jesuit priest who used to protest at School of Americas all of this stuff. Bicks was an amazing human. There’s the Guadalupe House on the other corner and all the Catholic Workers. There is Joe the nurse who works at the medical clinic at St. Leo’s.

There’s a one for one policy. There are people in the neighborhood who spy. People, in order to have a clean syringe, a sterile syringe had to dig around in the dirt, they had to dig around in the grass, they had to find a piece of a plunger. They had to find evidence of a syringe and bring it. Dave had people working for him that were very obedient but that wasn’t me. I was a game changer at the exchange. They’d come on Fridays and I’d say, “Five can get you ten.” It wasn’t going to be a strict one for one. I wasn’t going to be stupid about it but it wasn’t a policy I could abide by. There was tension. The black tar heroin, the sex workers, on the West Coast the amount of homeless with people sleeping outside in the jungle.

**AS:** What do you mean by the jungle?

**SP:** The jungle was...you know Almond Roca candy? It comes out of Tacoma, Washington. So did Ted Bundy and the D.C. sniper. As we go on I’m sure I’ll remember some other highlights. Behind the Almond Roca factory, you know Seattle, Tacoma; the Northwest is really green and lush. Bushes, trees, you name it. Behind the Almond Roca there was the I-5 that goes through there. There was this big area, wooded under the freeway and behind the factory that was called the jungle that was the homeless camp. It was huge and dangerous and dirty. There are sex workers; there was the Green River killer. At the needle exchange I took the bad date report.

**AS:** What’s that?

**SP:** The bad date report was for women who were sex workers. If they had a bad date they could report it to us and we compiled a weekly bad date sheet so we would hand it out at the van for other working girls so they would know who to be aware of. It might be so and so got picked up. She was raped at knife point and thrown out of a truck at Tacoma Avenue or something, some story around that. We would compile that. I’d take those reports. There’s also SOAP and SODA laws in Tacoma. There is in Seattle as well, in many places in the United States. SOAP stood for “Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution” and SODA stood for “Stay Out of Areas of Drug Abuse.” If you had a crime, you’d had a drug crime you couldn’t be in those areas. All social services, all low income housing, the needle exchange, all of it are in these areas. Most of Tacoma are SOAP and SODA areas. You could only be there between nine and eleven, nine and twelve, ten and twelve that you could be there to do your business. Otherwise you were subject to arrest and brought back to jail. The correctional system is a revolving constant.

**AS:** I’ve never heard of that before.

**SP:** That’s a longer story too. We would help women escape the cops. They’d be there looking for them. They’d cruise the needle exchange. I had several encounters with law enforcement. The point of the needle exchange is not only that people get sterile supplies but also they can get some help with housing, they might need an ID, they might want to go to treatment, they might want to get on methadone. All of that takes time. That’s the work we did there. It’s long and complicated. That was work that I brought there that had never been done there in the past. It kept people hanging out at the van. There were complaints about that in the neighborhood. There was a dude named Wes who worked up at the hospitality kitchen and he liked to take pictures of the people who were participants at the needle exchange and then he would deny them food.

There was one woman in particular that I remember. There’s MRSA going around, a drug resistant staph infection, eighty five to ninety percent of the participants had MRSA. Abscesses, wounds that you wouldn’t even begin to believe. There was one woman who was intent on saving her life and get a clean syringe. She’d risk everything to come and get it. She’d have to shoot dope on the fly. Dope sick, got to get your fix, got to earn money, all those things that it takes to survive. The whole top of her arm, the left arm, was eaten away by an abscess. You didn’t have to worry about finding a vein. You could load it up and put it through your clothes and stick it in your arm while you’re moving and hiding from the cops. Those sorts of situations I see more and more and more. Dave and I have disagreements.

**AS:** Had you seen things as bad as that in Minneapolis?

**SP:** No, not at all.

**AS:** It was worse in Tacoma.

**SP:** Oh my God it was way, way worse.

**AS:** This was in 2004?

**SP:** Yes and Minnesota didn’t necessarily have black tar heroin, they had China white. Black tar is nasty. People would transport it under their fingernails; maybe it’s in their pussy. However you don’t get busted. You think about all the bacteria and you’re shooting it. The health risks are huge. I would help sex workers evade the cops. I’d drive to the site. I’d put them in my car, drive up around the block and drop them off so they wouldn’t get arrested. I brought people to clinics. I went to meetings. I talked. I spoke up.

**AS:** This rubbed Dave the wrong way?

**SP:** Yes. It began to certainly he was getting more flak from the community because there’s more presence at the exchange. All the participants loved me. They showed up. “Go see Sue. She’ll hook you up. She’ll help you out.” I’m seeing all this stuff and I’ve got things going on in my personal life at the same time.

**AS:** Were you married to Dave?

**SP:** We got married in 1999. There’s so much that’s happening. One of the things that happens towards the end, there’s a woman named Valerie. She’s a Native woman. She’s trying so hard to get her life together and get on track. She wants to go home to her family at the Flathead Indian Reservation. Montana is close to Washington. You get a lot of tribes. She got shot in the head one block down on Faucet. Shot in the head and killed. All I remember saying to Dave is, “Every social service provider in this town has blood on his hands, including you.” I had expectations of Dave. I believed that he should be doing certain things a certain way. He should have built that program and moved it along and been responsive to the needs of the community and he was not. I lost respect for him.

Then there was somebody else. There was something else that had happened, which I can’t remember right now. I met a woman named Linda. This is a story about stigma. Linda had lived on the streets for fifteen years in Tacoma. She was beautiful when she was young. She was from Montana. She had kids that she was estranged from. She did sex work to survive. She had seizure disorder. She would go to the medical clinic up at St. Leo’s. The nurse that ran St. Leo’s medical clinic was on the Catholic Worker community, Joe. Joe had been a medic in the Vietnam War. He had a heart of gold. He understood what happened with people on the street and how hard it was. How I met Joe and I met Linda is they came to the van one day. He explained what was going on with Linda and her seizures and she couldn’t hold on to her medicine and was always disappearing. People like seizure medicine. You can get high on it. The arrangement is I would hold on to Linda’s medication and she’d come by the van every morning to get them. Linda wasn’t much of an injection drug user. She was a crack smoker. This arrangement worked for a while. I make sure that every day Linda gets one pill in her mouth. It happens for a week, two weeks, a month. Then Linda disappears. I don’t think much of it. I hold on to the meds.

Then there’s this dude named Troy. Troy comes by the van a lot, a good guy. He’d come by and he’d say, “Sue, Linda got housed.” I’m like, “That’s awesome. That’s really awesome.” He’d be like, “You should go visit her.” I’m like, “Yes I should. I’ll do it.” Then he comes by and he tells me that she has cancer and she doesn’t have long to live. He really wants me to visit her. I agree. Troy and Linda had been friends years before. I don’t remember what Linda told me. Troy had a reputation on the streets for slashed throats. The streets are rough. He’s kind of funny. He gave me this beautiful hand knit scarf. He liked me. He and Linda had had some issues. They got along. They were friends, they were close.

I finally go to visit Linda. Her belly is really distended, she had liver cancer. Linda had been living with AIDS for twenty years. She’d gotten housed for the last six months of her life. She had this boyfriend. What the fuck was his name. I can picture him in my brain. I don’t think much of the guy. She’s got a son in prison. She’s got this guy as a boyfriend. Linda likes to smoke crack. I go over and meet her. We talk. I meet her daughter in law, I leave. Somehow I get in the mix with Linda. I started checking on her; make sure she has her meds. She loved to smoke cigarettes and she loved to smoke crack. Somehow in there we had an agreement. She needed some care; I could help out with it. I knew she smoked crack. I’m like, “Here’s the deal. I don’t care.” We became very close and I ended up helping her with the help of Joe the nurse and Linda’s boyfriend, we helped her die at home. It’s a longer story. It was representative of the stigma, the lack of services, and the lack of caring for people who were homeless, strung out, and had been drug users in Tacoma. There was no harm reduction there. There was a needle exchange. Needle exchange is a strategy that reduces harm but it does not mean that it’s done with compassion or with any sort of insights or care. It simply exchanges a syringe on a good day. The marriage ended after that, not long after that. I moved back to Minnesota in 2007. Before I leave Tacoma Rae wants to leave Access Works. Her computer had been stolen and she had had enough.

**AS:** We’ll have to have that story tonight.

**SP:** We’ll pick up there with Rae. I went back to Minnesota. She had called me saying, “Do you want the organization back?” I said, “No, not necessarily.” I was burnt out on needle exchange. I was burnt out period.

**AS:** It takes so much energy to do it the way you were doing it, with more harm reduction model than just needle exchange.

**SP:** It takes a lot. The idea behind needle exchange is it builds a bridge to other services.

**AS:** It’s a part of harm reduction but it’s not the only part.

**SP:** Right. I take it back on a temporary basis. I was shocked by what had happened there, what had changed. The program certainly was booming when I left but by the time I get back, this is four years later; there are youngsters there that are from the suburbs. Pills are plentiful. People are coming through the door.

**AS:** You’re saying the users changed, the people who came through the door between 2004 and ‘07.

**SP:** Yes, it’s like the fall of 2007. They’re younger, they’re from the suburbs, and they don’t look like they belong there. They are there looking to hook up.

**AS:** They’re there looking for heroin because their pills are too expensive or not available.

**SP:** Yes. They’ve got a habit. They’re coming to the needle exchange. I’m looking around in part in disbelief of what I had created there. It was working. It was a drop in center. We had active drug users providing services across the board. We had people shooting dope in the bathroom. We had kids…

**AS:** This is what was happening there that hadn’t been happening before.

**SP:** Not to the degree. It was always a struggle because it’s harm reduction. Even prior to me leaving people would dump off bodies that had overdosed. They weren’t dead but they’d drop them off at our back door. They knew we were a safe place. I can’t even begin to tell you all of the stuff. All of the reasons that that space served communities. There were funerals for people who were infected with HIV through injection drug use, had worked in the community and had died. Robert Preston, his was there. The intention is always that it would be normalized community. That people, all people, were viewed as part of the community and welcomed if they wanted to come there. They did. It was astounding. There’s this safety issue. I think I showed you the sign that says, “Please don’t shoot dope in our bathroom, if you must please use the sharps container.” People would put syringes down the toilet. We had wraparound services in there. Rae can talk more about that from her experience in terms of being hired and what she had implemented in my absence. It was working and it was working well.

It had changed. You could see certainly the increase in drug use. During that time in that transition period with Rae and I, we’re getting Narcan brought in with a doctor, Jim Hervenco. I can’t remember what days we had the clinic and how the training happened. He wrote the prescription. People had Narcan the first day that we had it. One of the outreach workers, Tommy Stevens, he had run in the front door of the drop in and said someone in two buildings over had overdosed. I think he had fallen behind a couch. Tommy Narcaned him, brought him out, saved a life, just that quick. It was absolutely amazing.

I’m burnt out; Rae’s burnt out and has moved on. The board isn’t particularly affective. Fundraising is difficult. I want out. I didn’t like working with them. I’m fried. In my own life at the time I had friends dying of cancer. My mother had died and suicides among friends, countless overdose deaths in Tacoma. There were at least ten overdose deaths in Tacoma in the year that I was working at the exchange there, the woman who got shot in the head, Linda dying.

**AS:** You’re just surrounded by trauma.

**SP:** Surrounded by it. I remember sitting in there thinking...I’d gotten a divorce. People continued to tell me one sad story after another.

**AS:** You’re off the chart for that list where you have to make a point for everything.

**SP:** I couldn’t be there anymore. I didn’t have the magic to save that organization. I think Rae had been in discussions somehow with MAP. I don’t remember how that happened. I’m like vehemently opposed to MAP having that program. What happens is that they hire this woman…

**AS:** She did say, “We took over your program.”

**SP:** Yes she did, fucking bitch. There was a woman named Laurie Wolner who was hired as the executive director. Laurie Wolner had been a case director at MAP for many years, a terrible reputation, not nice to people, all sorts of things. She shuts it down. She decides to close. They tell people it’s a funding issue. Lorraine Teal could see the writing on the wall. She wanted money for her program, her needle exchange. During the history of Access Works there were times...Dave’s needle exchange conference was in Minneapolis in 2000. We had honored Dave. He had beat cancer. People came from all over the world for this conference. MAP was there. Bob Tracy was there. He talked how MAP had deemphasized needle exchange. There were grants that we had written that MAP plagiarized. I knew people. I had friends that were the founders. They read my applications. I think it may have been Dave. He’d read my applications. He read MAP’s application and recognized my program description. They had taken my stuff and plagiarized.

**AS:** How did they get it?

**SP:** How did they get my program?

**AS:** How did they get copies of your grant proposals?

**SP:** A lot of it was public information. You’d have access. There was always competition for it. In the beginning of Women With a Point, prior to funding through the Health Department, we’d want to have a collaborative relationship with MAP. We don’t have the budget, they’ve got it and we’re disposing the syringes we’re collecting with Minnesota AIDS Project. They get to have our numbers. Numbers matter for grant opportunities. They got to count our numbers. The first year in what I didn’t think was a successful year; it’s a brand new program. We exchanged ten thousand syringes. I don’t remember what MAP had exchanged, four thousand or something. It’s significantly higher. We start getting funding and we’re doing our own disposal. MAP can’t count our numbers anymore. Competition stiffens. In Minnesota for funding competition is everything. It’s a competitive process. They don’t encourage collaboration. It’s a dog eat dog. Lorraine is nothing if not competitive. She can see Women With a Point and Access Works becoming the hottest gig in town. Everybody talked about it and we got more and more money.

**AS:** You did get Ryan White funds.

**SP:** We got Ryan White funds, we got directly funded CDC grant. We were the first needle exchange program in the United States to have a directly funded CDC grant when federal funding for needle exchange was illegal. It was a coup. She resented every bit of it. Opportunity knocked at her door. They got it and they shut us down. Access Works went away. That’s directly attributed to Lorraine Teal, without a doubt in my mind.

**AS:** What did you do after that?

**SP:** I started Morpheus Project in Minneapolis. It was a brief intervention needle exchange program with Lee Hurtle. I have to leave Minnesota. At the time my best friend is dying of cancer. I was really in Minnesota because she was here dying of cancer not because I really wanted to live in Minnesota. My youngest son was still in high school and graduating. I came back. I was here from 2007 to 2011. I ran Morpheus Project, distributed Narcan. I really ran a needle exchange out of my house. I worked for Simpson Housing. They wanted a harm reduction housing program for women. They thought they’d hire me. It was a brand new start up program. It had amazing potential. I had eighty five percent of my case load were chronically homeless native women. It was good work. It was really good work. For me that was a slacker job. I’m losing my shit.

**AS:** What do you mean?

**SP:** Mentally I’m struggling. I’m in grief. My friend Lisa had died. Her son Grant had died from a suicide a year and a half before that. It was just so much death. My sister Dianne died. I’m sure there were others, friends, overdoses in Minnesota. I know a lot of people. Simpson Housing, we have a parting of the ways. I bug out. I saw the Dalai Lama on Mother’s Day of 2011. I’d been in grad school. I was going to do an MBA on strategic planning and using a harm reduction model. I had it all figured out in my head how it could work. I thought it would be a good place for me because it’s a liberal catholic women’s college. It wasn’t quite liberal enough for me. That went south. I flunked out of grad school. All through school I’d had a 4.0. I just couldn’t keep it together anymore. I sold all my shit, took all my stuff, brought my Buddha to Rae’s house. I have a two hundred and fifty pound sandstone Buddha and he travels with me. He had to go to Rae’s house for a while. Then he was over at a meditation center in St. Paul for a while. I retrieved him in 2013 when I moved to Georgetown.

I had been in therapy and diagnosed with PTSD. Drugs had become a problem in a way that was reminiscent of early days. I had to go. So I left. I got rid of all my shit except for like two crates. I brought those down to a friend’s house in St. Louis, stayed there for a bit, got healthier. Then I went to Colorado. I went to the mountains. My daughter is there and things aren’t good with her. She’s in and out of jail and precariously housed at that point. She steals all my money. It’s just really hard. I worked at Loveland Ski Area for a season. Then I got in my car and I drove to San Francisco and stayed there for a while. I couch surfed and got my car towed on 4/20 in the Haight Ashbury neighborhood. It’s kind of a funny story. I went down to Tucson, stayed with friends. Went back up to Seattle and stayed with friends there.

In the fall I went back to Colorado and started therapy. I’ve been there ever since. Morpheus Project—for whatever reason I can’t not do needle exchange. I have Rocky Mountain Morpheus Project up there, this fledgling little stellar mountain needle exchange program at the continental divide. My last real effort in developing a program in that way. During my days of couch surfing I volunteered with the Berkeley needle exchange program which is called NEED. I’ve worked at needle exchange programs and volunteered throughout the country. For that I am so grateful. It’s an honor in ways that many people don’t understand. What Dave liked about me and what he saw from the very beginning was that I got it. Should we talk anymore about my personal life?

**AS:** You don’t have to say her name but could you tell me about the person who you brought to the harm reduction summit and what you were doing for her for those days? I don’t want you to say her name because I don’t have her permission but if you could just tell me.

**SP:** I know her because I know her mother.

**AS:** Is that connected in any way to your harm reduction work?

**SP:** I’m always taking care of somebody. My last big save or something before I bugged out is that I knew that she needed to leave the reservation.

**AS:** Bugged out when?

**SP:** When I left Minneapolis. She was struggling on a reservation in South Dakota. She came to Minneapolis and lived with me for a few months. I had gotten to know her through her mom. She would show up periodically in Minneapolis. She wasn’t necessarily living on a reservation then, she was somewhere else. The first time I met her I picked her up at the emergency room at HCMC because she’d been down in the Franklin, Nicollet area and someone had stabbed her in the head with a screw driver. Her mom needed her to be picked up at HCMC which is frequently referred to as the chop shop. I picked her up there. That was the beginning of us knowing one another. She would periodically come and go out of Minneapolis. I always kept track with her mom. She’d come and stay with me. She had some things happen on the reservation that were awful. She came to Minneapolis, she went to treatment. She’s been here ever since. She was always a drinker in the past. She’s got a meth habit. She is a community theater performer on homelessness and telling her story. Everybody wants to hear a good homeless tragic story for whatever reason. She talks about her hopes, her dreams, things that she’d like to do. She’d like to be a nurse. She has an uncle who works for the tribe in South Dakota and does amazing work and they’re really close. She wants to do work like her uncle does. She’s got some stuff to work through. I brought her up to White Earth with me. I thought it would be a good environment for her, we’d have quality time. She’s got an apartment; she’s got a place to live. She’d be with some supportive people. She’ll tell you that telling her story is really hard and it opens everything up. When the performance is over there’s nothing but a bottle. What do you do with that?

**AS:** Really what is the point of all this?

**SP:** It’s to educate the fucking white people in the community about homelessness so they’ll rise to the occasion and do something goddamn different. So they’ll be sympathetic and not stigmatize people. So they’ll learn a lesson, so that they look around and wake the fuck up, all of it. I’m so, so sad. People think now that Trump’s in office look what’s going on in the world. Where the fuck have you been? Where have you been? The Democratic Party, there’s a lot of great things to say about Barack Obama but there’s a lot of shitty things to say about Barack Obama. What the fuck is wrong with people? The looky loo tour everybody loves it. I used to take people down to Curry Avenue.

**AS:** The what?

**SP:** I used to call it the looky loo tour because there’s people that are liberal and they want to do what’s politically correct and then be hipsters and groovy at a cocktail party and talk about how edgy they are. I’d bring them down to Curry Avenue. They’d have no idea. What they knew was Block E and the drive by on the highway. They’d never been to Curry Avenue. Some people got it and they were truly humble and appropriate. Other people got baptism by fire and it was good for them. They would never forget it. I would say that I have contributed a lot to Minnesota.

**AS:** I would say you have.

**SP:** Thank you for the opportunity to talk about it.

**AS:** You’re so welcome. It’s been my privilege.

**SP:** There’s just so much sadness. I can’t come here in the wintertime.

**AS:** Thank you Sue.

**SP:** You’re welcome. I can fill in blank spaces for you in the future if you want.