

Pacific Summit on Drug User Health

It was a wonderful privilege to be given an opportunity to take part in the **Pacific Summit on Drug User Health, June 12-14, 2009 in Vancouver**. This Summit, which was run by users for users, was organized and hosted by the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) with generous funding of \$50,000 received from the Vancouver Foundation.

VANDU pulled off a fantastic conference with such modest funding. In fact, they did at least as much as most organizations would accomplish with a budget twice as big. Most significantly, the Summit was a drug users gathering in its entirety, from its inception, its many months of preparation, and most importantly, all who participated in the actual three days of meetings in Vancouver.



VANDU brought together nearly 100 drug user activists from all corners of B.C., such towns as Fort St. John, Nelson, Prince George, Prince Rupert, Port Hardy, Grand Forks, Nanaimo, Victoria, Merritt, Abbotsford, Kamloops, from Whitehorse in the Yukon, and even a couple of user activists from eastern Ontario. So many active drug user participants got to meet one another, network, brainstorm, focus, eat and party together, and in the end of a busy three days, we accomplished the formation of the **BC/Yukon Association of Drug War Survivors**.

Besides VANDU being an organized user group, three other cities were represented by user groups at the Summit. From Victoria came several members of SOLID (Society of Living Intravenous Drug Users), from Nelson came members of REDUN (Rural Empowered Drug Users Network), and from Kingston, Ontario were two members of UNDUN (Unified Networkers of Drug Users Nationally).

VANDU was successful in providing hotel rooms and meeting space for the Summit at the lovely downtown Vancouver Delta Hotel on West Hastings, just two blocks west of the impoverished Downtown Eastside, the home neighborhood to so many hardcore poor and aboriginal community members, and ultimately, the sad and tragic end of the road for

too many thousands of drug war victims during the past couple of decades. The Downtown Eastside is the home neighborhood of VANDU.

In spite of much reason for despair and helplessness, the spirit of the Summit was upbeat and hopeful and the participants, most who came directly from the streets themselves, were unified by a shared commitment to resistance and common cause. The Summit was definitely a testament to the strength and resilience of drug users and the collective power we share when organizing together.

Of all the many conferences I've attended, this Pacific Summit on Drug User Health was the most impressive I've ever been to. One sees by the speakers from VANDU and its Board of Directors that it is the real deal when it comes to an organized group of drug users. All its members are from the life and in the life but nonetheless they have learnt how to work together to stand up for all people who use drugs.

It was so fantastic to take part in a gathering of actual users, instead of a conference of professionals and social workers. Real active drug users attended, many of whom were also sisters of the street trade back home. VANDU was very proactive in taking care of Summit attendees by having something they called the "Bunk Prevention Team". The Bunk Prevention Team was made up of VANDU Board Members and they were identifiable by their red armbands. All attendees were provided with a notice that said "In order to avoid rip-offs ... contact them for a drug tour after conference hours". VANDU understands that if active users are going to travel then they need to be assured they can safely and assuredly score in the city a conference is being held in.

Another very cool thing about VANDU as a drug users' organization is its out-front support for street users of all drugs. VANDU members made statements during the Summit that they are committed to advocating for the needs of crack smokers just as much as they support heroin injectors. This commitment is illustrated in the Summit logo which shows a crack pipe along side a syringe. In fact, during the Summit one VANDU Board member challenged a lawyer who was presenting about the struggle for the InSite safer injection site. The Board member stated it was all well and fine that the lawyers fight for services for injectors, but asked when will they be launching legal fights on behalf of smokers. This point was well taken and the lawyer agreed that it is high time that the concerns of crack smokers be translated into a legal case on their behalf.

VANDU just recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. It has grown from small weekly outdoor meetings of a couple dozen users to a strong organization of some 2000 drug users with a large and active office. (see VANDU history at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hepc/pubs/vandu/index-eng.php>) VANDU runs several groups within its membership, such as the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society, the B.C. Association of People on Methadone, and an active Women's Group.

I was blown away by the professionalism of the VANDU members in facilitating one workshop after another, and in guiding group discussions, all of which lead to us

collectively agreeing upon a six point statement of unity for the B.C. Yukon Association of Drug War Survivors:

1. We are a group of survivors of the drug war.
2. We strive for social justice and advocate for rights for people who use drugs.
3. “Our lives, our voices, our way” – people who use drugs must have real representation and power within institutions that have a significant impact on our lives.
4. We work to eliminate the discrimination, criminalization, stigmatization, and isolation of people who use drugs in all areas of political, social and economic areas of life.
5. We are against the prohibition of drugs and in favour of a regulated system of distribution of currently illicit substances.
6. We recognize that different groups are differently effected by the harms associated with drug use, and therefore, that they may need to organize autonomously as well as part of the larger group. We support the self-directed empowerment of drug war survivors and are committed to diversity and autonomy of our membership.

You can find VANDU on the web at www.vandu.org or phone its office in Vancouver at 604-683-6061

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