

Tent city shows that the power of protesting is all in the tactics

by Brendan Doyle

They were tired of waiting, and realized they could be waiting a long time.

They decided to publicize the issue and draw out the media. They put a tent city in a very public place and brought homelessness into the light.

Though the group has existed since 2003, many people are not aware of the Advocacy Collective or what they do. According to founding member Asaf Rashid, the group formed to facilitate access to justice for low-income individuals.

Rashid points out that many people cannot afford a lawyer, are not familiar with the courts or the justice system, and may not be comfortable going to the police. He says that the group can help people politicize an issue that is often ignored by mainstream media.

One of the group's first actions surrounded the eviction of a number of families from a Doone St. low-income housing unit. Six families were evicted, under what some felt were suspicious circumstances, in late September 2003.

Rashid feels that the fact housing issues have predominated the group's actions is an indicator of the number of low-income people who need assistance.

Bonnie O'Dea approached Vaughan Barnett, also a founding member of the Advocacy Collective, who has extensive legal experience and a good working knowledge of the courts. Rashid said this is the standard procedure: someone contacts Vaughan, who then decides if the rest of the group's support will be necessary.

Like other members of the group, Rashid got involved so he could help the less fortunate, with a focus on helping to publicize their plight. One tactic used to bring O'Dea's case into the public eye was a poster and flyer campaign that saw thousands of the documents posted throughout Fredericton. Though the posters and flyers identified specific people involved in Bonnie's case, the Advocacy Collective was not worried

about facing a libel suit.

Rashid said that Jennifer Sloat, Peter Kessels, Fred McElman, and Justice Paul Garnette work in a public service capacity and are therefore open to scrutiny. By listing the specific actions the four took, or did not take, Rashid and the other members of the group hoped to raise a public outcry.

The Advocacy Collective and O'Dea decided not to elaborate on the details of the harassment that is mentioned in the poster campaign. Though her children were allegedly subjected to abuse, harassment, and even a death threat by another tenant in the low-income housing unit where she lived until August 2004, the group felt that the matter could be more effectively handled by the Fredericton Police Force. Rashid claimed the police received 31 reports regarding this situation since late 2003.

Rashid is convinced the Advocacy Collective's higher public profile has helped the group's actions. Though the tent city action was very effective, using a technique of continual escalation of tactics, Rashid stresses that tent city was the final step in a long process.

The group went through the courts, the police, the Rentalsman, and anyone else they thought might have jurisdiction with regards to O'Dea's case. Rashid says that some might say that, "they're just taking the law in to their own hands. Well, we put the law in their hands and they didn't help us."

Because O'Dea did eventually have her subsidy reinstated, the Advocacy Collective hopes this will give them a better reputation as a group that will refuse to back down. They also hope that this will result in quicker or more effective actions in the future.

Rashid said large groups and unions have the advantage in staging protests in that they can often sway public opinion on an issue. When asked about the protests last winter against Canada's participation in the U.S.-led war in Iraq, Rashid conceded that these protests "never took very long... and didn't require much commitment,"



Brendan Doyle / The Brunswickan
A group of protesters, including Bonnie O'Dea at center, are served with a notice to vacate Centennial Building grounds.

but pointed out that the Advocacy Collective's tent city action demanded commitment from the start. Rashid feels it was this commitment that set them apart from other, larger protests, and may have contributed to their success.

Bonnie O'Dea and members of the Advocacy Collective were given notice to vacate the premises of the Centennial Building on Friday, August 6, and served with an injunction from the courts on Aug 10 that barred them from occupying Centennial Building grounds. On August 23, the injunction was extended until September 10. The injunction is based on the contention by the province that members of the Advocacy Collective disrupted regular government business and necessitated extra security personnel.

Referring to O'Dea's decision to lock herself to a fixture in a Centennial Building washroom, Rashid said that, "because the responsible officials were giving us the run-around, making us go from person to person without actually ever dealing with the matter... We said, 'that's not good enough, we want legitimate negotiations, we want to talk about the issue in a way that's going forward. So we made it clear that if by that day [Friday] they hadn't done

the decent thing and actually spoken with us in a fair way, we were going to have to push it a bit further."

Rashid emphasized that no violent or aggressive actions were taken by any members of the Advocacy Collective, who he says did nothing to justify the increased security or locked doors from August 5 to August 10 at the Centennial Building.

On September 2, the province filed a document with the court removing Vaughan Barnett from the injunction. Rashid speculates the province dropped the injunction against Vaughan as a matter of convenience; by dropping the charges against him, they removed the only member of the group who could provide a credible defense.

"How are they going to argue that Vaughan was less involved than myself, Bonnie and others? How do they justify keeping me in there and keeping Vaughan out?"

"It's a strange strategy and I think they assume we have such little understanding of the law that we would be terrified once Vaughan was removed [from the injunction] and we'd all just give up. They're afraid he might say something which will cause their injunction to be defeated. I can't see it any other way."

Question and answer with Asaf Rashid

Protesters normally want to do things on their own terms, but the Advocacy Collective jumped through all the hoops and still got nowhere. Where did the idea of tent city come from?

"Tent city came out of frustration... It wasn't us just standing around with signs all day then going home. It was us staying overnight, with a camp, bringing the issue of homelessness into a very public place... The media has to cover it, it's almost impossible not to."

Tent city has been taken down and Bonnie has had her subsidy reinstated, so why is the province seeking this permanent injunction to ban members of the Advocacy Collective from Centennial Building property?

"I think probably the most significant reason [for the injunction] is that they want to remove an option from us for the future. They don't want us to do what we did, they want to make it impossible for us to engage in a similar protest because they know it was effective."

Is the province assuming there are going to be more difficulties down the road with housing in Fredericton?

"I think that's exactly what they're assuming. I really think they are worried about our group. So this is good for us, we should be really happy. I think it's a compliment to us that they're seeking a permanent injunction on us, indicating that they're worried about our group doing this again in the future."

When asked if the group found it hard to get any accountability from government officials, Rashid says they spoke with assistants who were empathetic and understanding, but unable to take action. As for the top officials, "they're not dealing with the grievances, they're sending the grievances around in a circle to avoid them."

Does the fact that Sloat, Kessels, McElman, and Garnett refused to speak with the media on this issue give them a negative perception in the public eye?

"I think it definitely lends credence to what we're saying, because 'no comment' never sounds good to me. By them not talking and not trying to explain themselves, I think what that communicates to a lot of people is, well 'don't they have any counter-arguments? They must have something if they believe what they're doing is fair.'"

"I've heard the argument, and it's a valid argument, that because of the institution they're involved in, because of their capacity, it's more difficult for them to challenge things in the way that [the Advocacy Collective is] challenging them."

Do you think these four people regret their decisions?

"I think they probably do. I think they never thought it would get this far. Because not enough of a public scandal is made out of it, [wrongful eviction] just happens. They're not used to being challenged."

Aside from Bonnie's subsidy being returned, what does the Advocacy Collective hope to get out of this situation?

"What we're hoping for is jobs to be lost in this matter. Although Bonnie got her subsidy back, everyone who subjected her to injustice has not been punished. None of them, and that's completely wrong. We need an investigation into the conduct of these officials and why they're able to get away with what they have."

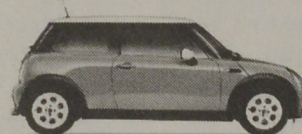
THIS IS FREE ROGERS-TO-ROGERS CALLING. THIS IS THE CHANCE TO WIN A NEW MINI. THIS IS MAKING THE BEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE EVEN BETTER RIGHT NOW.

FREE ROGERS TO ROGERS CAMPUS CALLING.



- Free local calling to and from other Rogers™ Wireless customers.*
- Offer available to post-secondary students with valid student ID.
- Available on selected 2 or 3-year terms

WIN



A NEW MINI Cooper Classic.

Enter for your chance to WIN 1 of 3 MINI Cooper Classics, plus a computer a week and thousands of other prizes.*

Visit rogers.com/MINI for your chance to win and other ways to enter.

ROGERS™ WIRELESS
Your World Right Now

SHOP AT ROGERS.COM, 1-800-462-4463, A ROGERS™ WIRELESS, ROGERS PLUS OR ROGERS VIDEO STORE

RadioShack.

ROGERS™ plus

ROGERS VIDEO

FUTURE SHOP

WHEN YOU BUY ONLINE

2 MONTHS WIRELESS ESSENTIALS

©2004 MINI Canada. "MINI" and the MINI logo are trademarks of BMW AG used under license by BMW Canada Inc. Some models may be shown with optional equipment or options not available in Canada. *NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. Contest closing date October 31, 2004. Open to Canadian residents over the age of majority. See full rules. *Offer available for subscription until March 31, 2005 and requires a valid Canadian college or university identification from a participating educational institution (see website for details). Free local calling will apply for the duration of the service agreement. Both parties on the call must be Rogers subscribers for the call to be rated as no charge. ©2004 Rogers™ Wireless Inc. All rights reserved. *Rogers, Rogers Wireless, Your World Right Now, and the Mobius design are trademarks of Rogers Communications Inc. Used under License.

ROGERS™ WIRELESS

FREDERICTON
Hughes Communications
1055 Prospect St.,
Unit 4
450-8485
Regent Mall
455-3388
MONCTON
1380 Mountain Rd.
383-4123
SAINT JOHN
418 Rothesay Ave.
658-6150

ROGERS™ WIRELESS

FREDERICTON
Interactive Computer Systems
320 Queen Street
458-8858
Rogers Video
1221 Prospect St. E.
459-6747
MIRAMICHI
Rogers Video
2445 King George Hwy.
773-5000
Vision Communications
Northumberland Square
622-2404

MONCTON
Atlantic Total Communications
1100 Main St.
384-8888
Costco
25 Trinity Dr.
872-1919
Rogers Video
9 Champlain St.
854-3453
Rogers Video
1134 Mountain Rd.
860-7633

DIEPPE
Vision Communications
325 Acadia Avenue
870-4440

OROMOCTO
Hughes Communications
Oromocto Mall
357-6700

Rogers Video
1198 Orondaga St.
357-5787

RIVERVIEW
Vision Communications
620 Coverdale Road
383-4224

SAINT JOHN
KC Communications
McAllister Mall
642-5040

Rogers Video
47 Consumers Dr.
646-9330

SHEDIAK
Vision Communications
333A Main St.
532-4240

ST. STEPHEN
Hughes Communications
71 King St.
466-3700

TRACADIE
Vision Communications
3497 Rue Albert
395-6777

WOODSTOCK
Currie Hardware
213 Holton Rd.
328-2861

SUSSEX
Hughes Communications
Gateway Mall
433-3177

ROGERS™ plus
MONCTON
Champlain Place
857-3930