

WOODWARD'S

Oral History Collection



Interview with:

Julie Chapman (JC),
Member of Woodsquat

Conducted by Brit Bachmann (BB)

Transcribed by
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“Some people found themselves here [in the DTES] by accident, like myself, but it’s a community. That’s what keeps me going, [you find] a community that you feel passionate about that you want to fight for. [...] There are only a few of us left in the [Woodward’s] building that are original Woodsquatters, only 3 of us or so. [Actions like Woodsquat] are getting rarer and rarer. Now people figure there’s nothing to fight for anymore, but there’s always something to fight for.”

– Julie Chapman

BB: What brought us to you was the poem published [in West Coast Line 37/2-3], “Twelve Days of Squatting.” It’s based on themes of Christmas, of living, and questions what is generosity. Have you continued writing and having your work published?

JC: Yes, I’ve been published many times in Megaphone. They’re local and they publish a lot of stories and poems. They did a vendor profile on me recently, but I’ve had poetry in [the magazine] for the last 10 years. I’ve maybe had a dozen of them [published], in the magazine and also in their books.

BB: Is writing your main creative outlet?

JC: Yes, and piano is my other thing. I use the creativity that goes into my poetry to also make music.

BB: At the time around Woodsquat, were you writing mostly poetry?

JC: Yeah, I was writing mostly poetry. I also used to write short stories, but I had a problem writing endings. They would just seem to go on and on and on. A lot of poems I have edited for that fact, because some of them would repeat themselves too much. Some of them have been reprinted over the years, and what not.

BB: Did you always publish under the pen name, Jewel C?

JC: Yeah, or I would change up the spelling. I wasn't trying to be anything special, though. Now I just go under my real name because I've got grown up kids, and anything I've done I'm not ashamed of.

BB: I'm trying to find the right phrasing of a question to ask you about your experience during Woodsquat. Is there an easy place for you to begin? I understand what led to Woodsquat, why were you participating in it?

JC: This is going to sound strange, but I kind of happened upon it by accident, you could say. [...] At the very beginning when there was hardly anybody—maybe 8 or 10 people squatting upstairs inside the building—they were outside during the daytime, trying to get people to be a part of it. I was kind of curious about why they were doing this. I used to go shopping with my mom at Woodward's all the time, so it was really bizarre and ironic. Anyway, they told me it was about social housing and how there wasn't enough room [in the Downtown Eastside], and how we needed to make this specific place 100 percent social housing, if possible. [I said,] "That sounds great, what can I do?" And they told me, "Well if you want to support us, this is what you have to do. We're squatting. We're taking up space here until they agree to give us [social housing]." They knew they probably wouldn't get the whole building, but you know, aim higher than what you think you'll get. And I thought, that's pretty cool. Everything they said meant a lot to me, to my standards, to my morals and values. [I said,] "If just being here helps, that's great. I support the cause, 100 percent." And it turned into a 3-month expedition. [laughs] I just didn't think about [what it would be], it's crazy.

BB: Were you recruited in advance of what is officially considered the time of the squat, beginning on September 14?

JC: I wasn't actually on the inside of the building [where they were squatting] upstairs on the 7th floor, because it was pretty scary getting in there. You had to go up two ladders onto the roof, kind of of crazy. [I joined] once they came outside and started squatting on the outside of the building, which was not that long after. I actually got there the night they told us that the building was going to be raided. At 5 in the morning someone told [the squatters] that they were going to get shut down, and if they didn't want to get arrested or have any chance of being arrested, that they might want to get out, so people respected that. People supported [Woodsquat], but not to the point where they wanted to get arrested [for it], and that's cool. Then they got out of there ahead of time, and sure enough at 5AM, timed right down to the second, the cops came in and told everyone they had to leave the property, that it was private property.

BB: Reading accounts from that morning makes it sound really scary.

JC: Yeah, it was nuts. Like I said, I chose to be down below and not in that. Some people were dragged off kicking and punching. Most of them just wanted a peaceful thing, and the cops didn't want it peaceful at all. It was so sad. [The police] turned it into a non-peaceful protest.

BB: That's classic police show-of-force shit, but it's great that someone told the squatters about the raid ahead of time.

JC: Yeah, I still don't know who it was. It was someone who had good connections in the media, or even with the cops. Someone had information and we knew [them well] enough to take it seriously. That person was credible.

BB: When you were squatting outside the building, what was the re-

sponse from neighbouring businesses and people in Gastown?

JC: It was a mixed bag. Some neighbours were really supportive, saying "Right on! Good for you! Go for it!" Others were like, "Get a real job you hippies." It started to get to a point where we needed to contain it a bit better because people were hearing about [the squat] in the media, and coming down here just to be able to say that they were a part of it, but they didn't actually know what it was about. When you would ask them, "Why are you here?" they would say, "Oh, I just heard it was a good place to crash." It wasn't a flop-house, though. So yeah, the neighbours had mixed reactions because when we got bigger numbers of squatters, [there were] a lot more issues of garbage and refuse. There were no washrooms, so people were defecating in the alleyways and stuff like that, because there were no other places to go. Obviously if I was a neighbour with that going on, I would be angry too, but what are you supposed to do? Some of [the neighbours] were great. There were neighbours who wanted social housing there and wanted to support it, so that was cool. And then there were developers who were the exact opposite – it's all about money money money money for them. All they see is dollar signs, so they didn't care what became of us.

BB: Were you very aware at the time of how Woodsquat was being represented in the media while you were participating?

JC: Not while, no. I don't think so. We had people who were talking on our behalf [to media], from the Anti-Poverty Committee – Ivan Dru-ry was one of the instigators, but he also helped us stay motivated and get more numbers to protest peacefully. Anti-Poverty Committee stood for the neighbourhood because they were from the neighbourhood. Their ideals were right – you gotta help the people that aren't rich and filthy, you gotta help the small people too. Some [passersby] were

downright rude to us, literally getting into confrontations with people. But you know, everyone's entitled to their opinions, and I respect that.

BB: Josh [Gabert-Doyon] and I went to the [Vancouver] City Archives to research what was happening internally at City Hall at that time, and we could read all the newspaper clippings and letters from the mayor, city staff, councillors, developers. What is really obvious is that though strong words and insults were hurled from all sides, and the city was tolerating a lot of aggression towards the concept of Moodsquat, that the squatters themselves were seen as a force to be reckoned with. It was not taken lightly, which you can tell by how seriously they took the raid. I got the impression that the city officials, the developer, and even the cops were freaked out and intimidated.

JC: It was neat to know that just a group of casual people from the same community could rally together. It was pretty cool to see that, if they actually really wanted to, people could put their minds to it and rally in a way that wasn't causing violence or problems, to make a point and a statement without instigating a riot. It's definitely a tricky situation when people get their adrenaline going.

BB: What was the experience between the squatters themselves, interpersonal dynamics? Did people get along?

JC: In most cases yes, they did. There were little conflicts here and there, but for the most part, I think everyone just wanted the same thing. The big picture was to get everyone [housed] in the big building that they were planning for that spot, so that it wouldn't just be condos, because that's how a lot of the neighbourhood is now. Who can afford these condos? Well, it's great that [people living in]

the better part of the town can, but those people already have better places to live in to begin with. I don't know. It's not for me to judge, but now [housing] seems even worst [than back then]. Now we need even more social housing. We need a lot of social housing, and affordable housing does not qualify. Affordable housing could still be \$900 per month, and that's not affordable to me. [It could be affordable] to somebody else, but not to someone who lives on the Downtown Eastside. [Someone needs to] figure out how we get social housing and how do we make it enticing enough [to build]. If [developers] are not getting any money out of the deal, why do they want to build it? Give them a reason. It's all about money for most of [the developers] down here. With Woodward's, obviously somebody listened to somebody because they gave us 125 units of social housing, but still, that wasn't enough. [...] It's not fair how many people I see on the streets right now. I haven't seen it this bad ever in my life, it's gotten way worse down here. Because I do part-time outreach as well, I see some crazy stuff. There are young kids out there, and it just breaks my heart. I have kids that have grown up now, and I see how they could have become one of these kids. What do we need to do to stop this from happening? It's just not right.

BB: I think there is a misconception that social housing is affordable housing and vice versa by people living in their own bubbles, like the person in Mount Pleasant complaining about their rent increase. They need to roll down the hill.

JC: Yeah, I grew up in a good part of town, in Kitsilano, so I have seen how the middle-upper class are. It's great, I don't have anything bad to say about them, but they are definitely in their own world. If I had to trade it, which [world] would I choose, living over there or being down here, I would choose here. There are way more real people [here] who aren't shallow or materialistic, just

down-to-earth people that had a cause or a mission of some sort, or maybe they haven't found their mission yet and [that's why] they're here. Some people found themselves here by accident, like myself, but it's a community. That's what keeps me going, [you find] a community that you feel passionate about that you want to fight for. [...]

There are only a few of us left in the [Woodward's] building that are original Woodsquatters, only 3 of us or so. [Actions like Woodsquat] are getting rarer and rarer. Now people figure there's nothing to fight for anymore, but there's always something to fight for. Of the Woodsquatters, I was one of the last people to get a suite in [the community housing]. They told us that they would give priority to the Woodsquatters.

BB: Did Woodsquatters actually get priority housing when the community housing was finished?

JC: To a degree, but not for everybody. I found out [about the priority] by accident, by a friend who was also a Woodsquatter and said, "Hey, did you get your number yet for your room?" and I said, "What room?" Everyone got a number for a lottery-style draw, and that's how they chose who got which rooms because they didn't want anyone fighting over rooms. And I thought, "Wow, that's pretty bad but okay, it's a room. [...]" I got the last wheelchair accessible room, thankfully.

BB: Are you happy with your room?

JC: Oh yeah! I'm at the end of the hall and it's a bigger room. Everything's wheelchair accessible, so I have a lot more space. I have a view of the mountains. Between two high-rises, I can see the ocean a little bit, so that's cool. The patio has an amazing view, too.

BB: I think it's a really beautiful poetry that you were able to end

up there, and other Woodsquatters, too. Immediately after Woodsquat, I understand that many of the squatters were funnelled into Portland Hotel Society (PHS) places. Where did you go?

JC: Well, PHS is who I ended up with eventually, but first I was at The Lamplighter, and then to The Stanley, which is now closed down. My doctor was also with PHS, so that was helpful. It was one of the reasons I was recommended to [Woodward's Community Housing], so I had already basically had it all figured out. I wasn't going to fight for something like I fought for Woodward's, and just be like, "Okay, well that was that." Even though [the squatters] weren't totally communicating with each other [after the squat had ended], we all sort of knew without speaking that this social housing was important to us, and those who wanted to be in there could get in there, and those who didn't want to be there didn't have to be. We all had the choice.

BB: We had heard that there was some disagreement between the Anti-Poverty Committee and squatters because the Anti-Poverty Committee were possibly having some secret meetings. Do you know anything about that?

JC: I didn't know anything about that, maybe they were meeting in private to discuss other squatters? Or maybe to discuss tactics, and they weren't sure who was leaking or snitching? If they were meeting secretly, it was probably just for security reasons, but I don't know. I know Ivan Drury quite well, and he's not a sneaky person. He does things publicly, the more public the better. They could have been discussing issues with the squat, problematic squatters. When you get enough people in one spot, there are always problems.

BB: Especially when you're participating in an action based around civil disobedience, I imagine.

JC: Exactly, because everyone had their own sort of ideas about how things should be done, but we all stood for the same values.

BB: I find it interesting how important the building itself was, sentimentally. You see that to an extent with Army & Navy today, there's a community around it. Woodward's seemed like so much more than just a department store.

JC: Yeah, it was a whole thing. The Christmas windows, I knew all about. I remember when I was younger, there would be these big picture windows with displays, and a Santa Clause with robotics or whatever, and I just thought, wow! That was worth going down there, even if I had to try on a bunch of stupid clothing. It was worth it to see the windows, but of course, everything looks so much bigger and brighter and amazing when you're small. I know there are still some Woodward's [paraphernalia] in the Nesters store, I see it high up on the shelves. It's not for sale, just little displays of old items.

BB: With regards to Woodsquat, looking back on it, are there any things that you think could have been done differently?

JC: There's a few things. There were a couple issues, like we set up a donation box, just a box behind a desk for people who wanted to give money to the cause, but then nobody knew where the money was going. Who's in charge of the money? That was a big problem, because nobody knew who started the fund or where it was going. There was no treasurer. There were a few instances where people made large donations, and those donations were never found, they just vanished. [...] Yeah, we had some meetings [about it] because there were a lot of crazy stuff like that going on, where people would drop off a \$100 bill. It's just such bad karma to steal from your own people. Anyway, there were a few issues too with people getting drunk and being

disorderly and acting like jerks to the neighbours, and of course, that wasn't what we were about. We had enough issues with neighbours already, as it was. Most of them didn't like us, the businesses at least. [The squat] started getting messy and dirty, a lot of people would bring their animals with them too, and some people were just coming to the squat to use [drugs] and leave, and it was getting really bad to the point where it made us all look bad. We needed to regroup. [...] We realized we couldn't keep doing this, that nothing was getting better. The more people heard about it, the more people would just show up and flop there, go when they were drunk and just pass out, but that wasn't what Woodsquat was supposed to be about.

BB: So do you feel like Woodsquat came to a natural ending? Like, it all happened like it was supposed to?

JC: I think so. I can't remember how we decided [to end the squat]. I remember we were shown some city plans about what they wanted to do with the space, but they didn't invite [the squatters] to the open house, which was kind of weird. I found out, again, by accident. I was walking down Pender Street and I saw a big "W" sign that said "Woodward's Opening," and it was all just for retail. They were selling the tower condos. I couldn't believe it. I was actually sent one of the real estate brochures through the mail, it was kind of ironic. I know they were sending them to everyone, and I know it wasn't personal, but it was kind of weird. [They were selling condos] before they were even finished building them. I think \$200,000 was the starting price for a bachelor suite. [laughs]

BB: Have you been involved with other housing, social housing actions? You mentioned you do outreach.

JC: I've done a lot of outreach. I've also done research. [I've been a] PRA – Peer Research Assistant – for the evictions study through BC

Centre on Substance Use. They were basically doing surveys on where people were living and how they were – basically everything to do with hotels, not SROs but hotels. It was actually startling [in hotels], most of them didn't have bathrooms or wheelchair access, just horrible. To get a bathroom [in the Downtown Eastside] is almost considered a luxury at this point, it's crazy.

BB: It's also crazy that these types of surveys and studies have been going on, like 40 years worth, and nothing has changed.

JC: I know, I was told we are the most researched people in the world, that the Downtown Eastside has been the most researched of anywhere [for poverty].

Another [project] I was involved in was a research study to make [...] a mission statement [for researchers to present], to make sure that people are treated properly when they choose to participate in a study, to make sure they are treated respectfully and not just used. A lot of peoples' [experiences] are just used and taken for granted. It's amazing how words can be used against you.

BB: Are there any other aspects of WOODSQUAT that you want to convey?

JC: Just that we came together as a bunch of people. Most of [the squatters] were already acquainted and even though I didn't know anybody at the time, once I was there, they welcomed me in. We still have a really strong bond, still to this day. Roger, myself and Colleen, and Chris. We're all doing separate things, but we know that we all stand for the same things. So even though it's been years since we've actually talked about it, when we're in the same room, we're connected through our ideals.

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