

In Dedication to a Friend

Bob Gaucher

Robert Francis Brydon passed away on April 26, 1999, in Winnipeg Manitoba, where he was visiting with family. He was 51 years old. Robert had been seriously ill over the winter and was recovering from pneumonia when he died in his sleep.

Robert was born at Seba Beach, Alberta, and spent most of his life in western Canada. For the past ten years he lived in Ottawa, where he became well known and appreciated in the community life of the city centre. His many involvements with the University of Ottawa, the Shepherds of Good Hope, Options Bytown (public housing) and his neighbours, left the lasting impression of a generous and forthcoming friend. On May 15, 1999, this community celebrated Robert's life and friendship with a Memorial Service at the University of Ottawa and a "farewell toast" at Dunvegan's Pub. Robert liked to sit by a window in Dunvegan's, bask in a winter's afternoon sun, and discuss our future skating plans for the Rideau Canal. Mostly we enjoyed the sun, the beer, and the conversation. On the sunny May afternoon of the Memorial Service we shared our stories of Robert and drank a toast to his friendship.

I first met Robert in the early 1960's, and our paths crossed on a number of occasions over the next twenty years. When he moved to Ottawa to attend university in 1988, I discovered that though adversity had characterized much of his life to that point, a thoughtful and considerate man had emerged. Robert was always willing to contribute what he could without expectation of reward or acknowledgement. His generosity of spirit extended to a strong willed desire to befriend and support the oppressed, whether it be the local homeless/street people, a struggling parolee, or the wrongfully convicted like his friend David Milgaard.

When it came to social justice, especially carceral issues and those pertaining to the marginalized and disenfranchised, Robert was always a "standup guy". He met Claire Culhane in the early years of her anti-prison activism, and they developed an enduring friendship and association. Robert's Prison Justice Day actions and his instrumental role in creating the Stony Mountain Penitentiary Students' Association exemplified their shared will to struggle and resist. Robert was a strong advocate of Prison Justice Day (PJD) from its inception in the 1970s. He

helped to organize memorial services and other actions within Canadian penitentiaries, and worked with Claire to extend it nationally. His poignant writing on Prison Justice Day issues, such as “Remembering Prison Justice Day” (1991, JPP, 3:1/2 pp. 89-92) revealed his own humanity and concern for the suffering of others. On August 10th, 1998 Robert was the principal spokesperson on CBC Radio’s national coverage of PJD services and actions across Canada.

In Ottawa he was a reliable supporter of numerous initiatives ranging from the university based campaign to Free Cameron Kerley, through local “street” focussed charities, and the development and production of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. Robert joined the editorial board of the JPP in 1993. His many contributions included that of writer, reviewer and “what can I help with” board member, who was always encouraging and optimistic about what the journal could accomplish.

Last year Robert helped organize the graduate student’s document centre/resource room in the Criminology Department at the University of Ottawa, and also worked enthusiastically on my Canadian penal press research. He believed in the legitimacy of prisoners’ accounts, and the literary and social importance of their writing. As a “sometimes” jailhouse writer and poet he felt an affinity that showed. He especially enjoyed working with copies of the Saskatchewan Penitentiary *Pathfinder* (1951-66) and the *Stony Mountain Flyer* (1978?-1983?) where he encountered old faces and past times. Robert was pleased that these accounts would not be relegated to the dust-bin of history.

Daniel Dos Santos, the Director of the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, announced at the May 15th Memorial Service that in the fall of 1999, the newly organized resource room would be dedicated the **Robert Brydon Criminal Justice Document Centre and Archive**. Robert addressed many university classes and always had time for student’s questions. His close association and lasting friendship with students in the department deems it a fitting tribute.

Bob has not left yet. He keeps walking through the door of the Celtic Cross pub, or jay walking across Bank Street on his way to ...? Chris keeps feeling his presence at the university and Kim thinks she may have seen him, at least twice in Lower Town. I have heard of similar experiences at the Hintonburg Café, and Larry claims that Bob keeps waking him up at night. Though Bob does not actually come swinging through the door of the Celtic Cross, he somehow seems to appear or at least get my attention. From that moment of misrecognition his spirit shares my space for a while. As I work on this issue of the JPP I keep getting a sense of his presence, as if he was adjusting his glasses while peering over my shoulder at the text. I feel certain that his memory will continue to encourage and sustain our efforts. He surely was a “good old boy”.