



A Knapsack Full of Dreams: Memoirs of a Street Nurse

Cathy Crowe

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A Knapsack Full of Dreams is a cogent, genuine nursing memoir straight from the front lines of social justice.

Toronto street nurse and social activist Cathy Crowe advocates for equitable health care and national housing reform in Canada. Her memoir of an accomplished career, *A Knapsack Full of Dreams*, builds an eloquent case for political nursing.

Crowe draws on over thirty years of expertise as a street nurse—a term coined by a homeless man that captures her job's focus on serving the marginalized. Also a producer for documentaries on homelessness, Crowe demonstrates how privatized health care hurts the most vulnerable people and argues that the lack of affordable housing is a public health crisis. Lucid, thematic chapters portray nursing as an intersection of passion and social justice—a “humanistic profession” that can effect change.

From her start at Toronto General Hospital to community health centers and beyond, Crowe describes her path toward working in Toronto's bleaker neighborhoods. Sharp observations on the factors that influence the quality of patient care mingle with personal reflections; overviews of nurses that inspired her; campaigns that Nurses for Social Responsibility—which Crowe formed—took part in; and hot-button issues that people don't always associate with nursing, including the death penalty, nuclear armament, and the environment. Crowe's eye-opening, compassionate logic underscores that nurses are well placed to challenge such problems upstream, rather than waiting to take care of negative health effects downstream.

Informative facts regarding Canada's social welfare cuts combine with Crowe's recollections of the people who were most affected by them. She paints the stark gulf between policy and reality. Descriptions of Toronto's former tent city are humane and disturbing. A chapter that details the contents of Crowe's nursing knapsack, which includes items like duct tape for repairing shoe soles, drives the point home: a street nurse's job is closer to that of an aid in a refugee camp or nurse in a war zone than it is to clinical nursing.

The book succeeds in its outrage, which is balanced by solid research. Crowe focuses on positive steps, even while condemning the Canadian officials whose choices lead to homelessness being declared a national disaster in 1998. For American readers, sections on the failures of the Housing First program in the US—and its implementation as a model in Canada—are thought-provoking.

An intelligent tie-in to Crowe's experience with documentaries and love for film is woven into each of the chapters, which are prefaced by descriptions of influential film festival entries and Hollywood favorites. They highlight Crowe's self-education in social justice as it's portrayed on screen, while also creating a road map for others. Apt quotations, poems, and excerpts from Crowe's speeches and journals amplify the book's call to not only witness, but act.

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KAREN RIGBY (August 9, 2019)

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