



PHOTO COURTESY OF GILLIAN MAXWELL

■ Gillian Maxwell receiving the Queen's Jubilee Medal 2013 for community service

GILLIAN

MAXWELL

GILLIAN MAXWELL is a Drug War harm reduction policy advocate, public speaker, community organizer and proponent for INSITE, Vancouver's first supervised injection facility. As a "knowledge exchange broker" in her professional life, she offers knowledgeable advice on everything from drug policy and strategy to helping individuals and groups fulfill their purpose.

Gillian moved to a downtown Vancouver residential neighborhood where people who were severely addicted to injection drugs were dying in the streets; she became alarmed at the problem society had not dealt with. Being pragmatic, she set about to "do something". She found that the "Drug War" labeled people who do hard drugs--heroin, crack cocaine, speed, etc.--as addicts, criminals, to be looked down on as society's pariahs and left to die from neglect. This is a harsh view but it's come to that.

However, a decade ago, Health Canada broke the status quo mold. They ushered in a humane innovative approach to the Drug War practice of people injecting hard drugs in the streets, passing out and dying in public view. They identified addiction as a medical problem, not a crime, and in 2003 established the INSITE Injection Facility in Vancouver where people inject the drugs of their choice in a comfortable neutral setting, devoid of arrest, harassment or robbery, with access to nutritional food, counseling and drug treatment. Law enforcement and harm reduction advocates came to agree with taking the problem off the streets.

Gillian and other community advocates from KDO/Keeping the Door Open and VANDU/Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users were at the center of envisioning a rational practical "harm reduction" approach to addiction in their city. After several years of serving on the Vancouver Police Board, Gillian became "working chair", speaker and key organizer of KDO/Keeping the Door Open -- Dialogues on Drug Use. She was the only non-expert in a field of public officials, drug users, law enforcement, health professionals and the like, and helped KDO lay the educational groundwork that gave birth to INSITE. Gillian's seriousness of purpose is clear. When she discovered her own fears of marginalized people dying in the streets in her neighborhood, she took self-defense lessons and erased her fears.

WORDS
PEBBLES
TRIPPET



"Marijuana is the gateway drug for making change around drug policy. There are systems connections with other drugs. It is a wonderful opportunity for the entire community to end prohibition of everything."

~ Gillian Maxwell

"Keeping the Door Open was a group of people who profoundly changed my views on drugs, addiction and policies."

~ Senator Larry Campbell
Ottawa, Ontario

"As a member of VANDU, I was invited to meetings, of KDO which Gillian was chair of. She took an interest in me and showed me what I was capable of. She asked me to speak at an event at the Wosk Centre. She took me to my first conference in Toronto where I gave a presentation. If I had to pick one person who has shaped my life into what it is today, I would have to say Gillian Maxwell. She has the heart of an angel and the spirit of a warrior."

~ Diane Tobin,
Exec. Secretary VANDU/
Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users

"Under Gillian's leadership a fledgling Keeping the Door Open--Dialogues on Drug Use became the vehicle to facilitate public dialogue on drug policy in Vancouver. Gillian is the epitome of strategic creative thinking and in the process warm and empathetic. Over a 10-year period, I had the greatest pleasure working with Gillian to create these dialogues."

~ Irene Goldstone,
Professor, School of Nursing, Univ of British Columbia

"Gillian Maxwell is a gentle but powerful, creative & highly informed broker of truth and information on all subjects related to drug policy. Her commitment is to a compassionate, evidence-based and scientifically grounded approach to drugs... drug use and drug addiction."

~ Gabor Mate MD,
In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encount w Addiction

"Gillian invests her life in making the world a better place. She does this by building connections...so much so that I don't suppose it is even possible to calculate her influence."

~ Dan Reist,
Centre for Addictions Research of BC

GILLIAN, YOU ARE CREDITED WITH BEING A PRIME MOVER AND PROPONENT OF INSITE, VANCOUVER'S SUPERVISED INJECTION FACILITY, USING HARM REDUCTION AS A STRATEGY. INSITE IS THE FIRST SAFE INJECTION FACILITY IN NORTH AMERICA, ALTHOUGH THERE IS A NETWORK OF 90 OTHERS IN 60+ CITIES IN THE WORLD, LOGGING 700-800 DAILY VISITS. THE PUBLIC SAFETY ISSUE STANDS OUT. ISN'T INSITE'S PRIMARY FOCUS AVOIDING OVERDOSE DEATHS IN THE STREETS, BY PROVIDING INSTEAD A SAFE HARBOR INDOORS FOR INJECTION OF HARD DRUGS UNDER TRAINED SUPERVISION? INSITE IS A MODEL OF COMMON SENSE.

Harm reduction is simply common sense. Yes, that is exactly what INSITE is about -- reducing harms from injecting and ingesting street drugs. For instance, if necessary, they teach a person how to use a syringe properly in order not to tear their flesh.

Upstairs above the injecting room, there are a couple of floors (ONSITE) where people can detox and access addiction counseling, meditation, Yoga, things like that. They have a relaxed policy toward people who relapse while still there. Harm reduction is all about

meeting people where they are at, and at ONSITE, this is honored. Moving away from addiction is a process.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN ADDICTION POLICY? IT'S AN UNUSUAL FIELD.

I was what you'd call a "late bloomer". I wasn't aware of addiction in my younger years. In my 40s, I moved to Strathcona, downtown Vancouver, east side. It was a community in flux, full of marginalized people, not your usual predominantly white population, as well as new people moving in, beautiful houses, close to downtown, we could walk there, and it appeared to be a great real estate investment.

As we settled in, I realized there was a lot going on in my neighborhood. The atmosphere was frenetic--ambulances coming and going, people injured and dying in the streets, the Residents' Association complaining about "those people".

Living there made me nervous and I was not ok with going out at night. I took a self-defense course and learned how to defend myself. After that, I wasn't afraid and saw that people were really sick, physically and mentally. I discovered they were more afraid of me because



I had power and they didn't.

Mostly the people they met during the day were police. The police's job is to keep the streets safe. What that meant to these people was that they didn't belong on the streets where they lived. That's not fair.

At the end of the '90s, overdose rates went way high, one per day in the province of BC. It was a mess. They declared an HIV epidemic. There were so many marginalized people in the streets, the neighbors wanted them taken away; wanted the police to do something; they made the neighborhood unsafe.

I got into INSITE because I was upset. Terrible things were happening. The problem of people dying in the streets wasn't being dealt with.

But I realized being angry isn't helpful in the slightest. This low level vibration allows people to ignore things. For example, I spent time in the beginning trying to talk to the Residents' Association. I was blacklisted by my neighbors for raising harm reduction. They wanted the problem to just go away. They were fearful of their stuff being stolen and they wanted more police! I told them about European models. I was sure that once they heard there was something



■ Gillian, first days in Vancouver, 1976

we could do that was kinder, less expensive and proven, they would embrace it. Not! They didn't want to hear it. It was pretty much a disaster. Several neighbors were convinced I wanted to ruin the community and were outspoken in their condemnation of my point of view. I was ostracized. I learned the power of fear -- how for some people, it completely overcomes humanity and compassion.

At that point in my life in my early 40s, it became more important to be there for my disempowered neighbors whose courage I admired than to be liked and approved of by my residential community.

I longed to become involved and be in service. So I joined a community health committee and met many people who inspired me. Bud Osborn was the founder of the group VANDU. He was a longtime heroin user and fought depression from early childhood. He instantly won me over. Bud taught me to never give up in the face of opposition and to stay deeply committed no matter what! This quality is probably the most important for a social change leader.

This all took place in the 1990s and INSITE opened in 2003. In 1999, I was invited to join the Vancouver Police Board, the citizen oversight for City Police, working closely with five others and the Mayor of Vancouver to set policy for the police. The Mayor, Philip Owen, had an epiphany in the late '90s and supported change -- harm reduction and supervised injection sites. He told me, "I can't say this in public, but you can."

The new mayor, Larry Campbell, won on a harm reduction platform. Ex-cop, chief coroner, street fighter -- he didn't blink. He understood harm reduction and was willing to carry it out. This was happening under the reign of federal liberals, thoughtful types most of the time, unlike Harper.

During my 3 1/2 years on the Police Board, Vancouver's Health Authority declared a public health emergency because of an HIV epidemic. People were getting infected and regularly dying of drug overdoses. This was six blocks from my home! It was third world conditions in one of the "most expensive, livable and beautiful cities in the world."

I was invited to join an NGO called Keeping the Door Open--Dialogues on Drug Use (KDO), a coalition that represented different voices from the community, including drug users from VANDU, families and service providers. I worked with KDO for 12 years. I was the only person who was not an expert in something related but what I had to offer was a community voice and

"Gillian has a way of being with people that both affirms them and invites them to consider the impact and validity of their beliefs. She is gentle, firm, curious, knowledgeable and a delight to work with... the perfect partner to engage people in serious thinking about tough societal issues."

~ Diane Abbey-Livingston,
Trainer/facilitator Canadian School of Pub Service

"Gillian is infectiously motivated by a deep and visionary sense of social justice. Her ability to identify key causes and to rally and organize supporters makes her a most effective change agent. She is also a fabulous connector with a unique Maxwell blend of radiance and style."

~ Andrew Johnson,
Professional Integral Coach™, Facilitator/Consultant

"Gillian has a rare ability to be present. She is right there with you at any given moment, and in her presence, you feel supported, accepted and cared for. This magnificent quality is accompanied by her discerning judgement and expertise in seeing creative solutions."

~ Kasia Malinowska-Sempruch,
Open Society Fdn/Global Drug Policy Pro

"Gillian's special gift is in enabling very different groups to work together in ways that honor the distinctiveness."

~ Tom Rankin,
Indepen Consultant/Facilitator
Canadian School of Pub Service

"When I think of Vancouver and who to call, I immediately contact Gillian to find out. She is extremely well connected with the diverse group of players in the drug reform world... From a street entrenched person to an elected official, Gillian is at ease with whomever she meets."

~ Ethan Nadelmann
Executive Director, Drug Policy Alliance

"I have worked with Gillian on facilitating knowledge exchange between medical professionals from Eastern Europe and their peers in Vancouver. Gillian is a natural mediator; she is able to diffuse the tensions and facilitate a dialogue when the differences seem too great to overcome. She builds bridges and forms meaningful connections, locally and globally. Her strength is her highly observant and analytical nature coupled with compassion and empathy that instantly put people at ease in her presence."

~ Maria Golovanevskaya,

Intl Harm Reduction Dev Prog Open Society Fdn

"Gillian's...assumption of intelligence on the part of the audience, making connections between seemingly different areas of thought, drawing on Goethe and Gandhi to make a point about supervised injection sites...makes for more creative enduring solutions."

~ Kim Balfour,

Balfour Consulting Group

"Gillian Maxwell is a quintessential connector, facilitator and communicator. She has a natural affinity for bridging relationships between individuals of different opinions. Above all else, she is a kind soul with an open heart, embracing humanity. I am honored to be a friend and professional colleague, having worked with her at Keeping the Door Open (KDO) for 13 years."

~ Maxine Davis,

Executive Director Dr. Peter Aids Foundation,
Kdo Colleague

"Gillian Maxwell is a social justice champion and progressive change-maker. With grace and intellect, she challenges policies that lead to unnecessary suffering, finding solutions for the betterment of her community and society as a whole."

~ Philippe Lucas,

Compassionate Consulting,
former Victoria City Councillor

my organizational skills. So I became the "working chair" of the committee and, for a few years, we actually generated enough interest and funds to pay me!

We fought for supervised injection facilities to solve the problem of people dying in the streets. We produced about 15 public events overall, dialogues to educate about harm reduction and ending prohibition.

Doctors and nurses would come to us for advice. Businesses got to the point of saying, "It's so bad; let's try it."

The City devised a Neighbors' Agreement where we pledged to come back together in 60-100 days with a report on the injection site's effect on the neighborhoods. A good report came back. Businesses said it was "better" ... fewer needles left on the street, far fewer people ODing. In the process of change, generally about 80% change their mind with new information. That leaves the people who have vested interests and resist change at 20%. We are the counterweight.

The Neighbors' Agreement was a collaborative effort. This is Canada. We're big on collaboration. You sit down together at the table with drug users, police and various levels of government and work collaboratively to improve things. When INSITE was finally opened, the people running it had built a bubble around the site, a neutral zone agreed to by police and dealers had to agree not to stand outside. It all worked.

WHAT'S IT LIKE INSIDE?

There are many overdoses inside. The street drugs they bring are nasty. Those bodies take a lot of punishment. They are not healthy. Many are HIV+. When you don't use and you're trying to quit, going back, you can use the wrong mixtures of dangerous drugs and OD.

WHAT POSITIVE CHANGES HAVE COME ABOUT?

Police will see someone injecting in the street and offer to escort them to INSITE, either that or



■ INSITE exterior, blue building on the left

take them to jail. It's illegal out there. The Federal Government is in charge of narcotics. But not inside INSITE, where there's an exemption to the Controlled Substances Act.

KDO was a key part of turning around the stigma toward people who use drugs, which resulted in INSITE opening in 2003. Our work was not done however because the current Conservative federal government of Stephen Harper was elected in 2006 and he went on the attack against INSITE in 2007. We knew they were going to make it difficult and that we were fighting for the survival of INSITE. We had to regroup to save it.

WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

Injection drug users of VANDU along with another community group both filed a lawsuit against the Federal Government through the British Columbia Court, then the Supreme Court. The Feds lost twice on appeal. The Court issued guidelines the Harper Government has to follow and said more sites can open if the need is proven. But Harper has introduced restrictions on new apps, in effect making it virtually impossible to gain approval. A local AIDS Health Care provides a single injection room, so we have two sites in Vancouver.

In the early heady days of INSITE, we got funding from the somewhat supportive federal Liberals government. There was no conflict. We were not bound to not criticize them. This was part of the democratic system. When we disagreed, we simply suggested they think larger and broader.

Then Harper showed up. He called INSITE "an abomination". Our main source of funding



■ Bud Osborn, founder of VANDU



was from the Feds and he made sure that was cut off. We carried on to keep INSITE open, plus we were turning our attention to ending prohibition. My role became a volunteer position.

WHY DID THE DRUG WAR MOTIVATE YOU FROM THE BEGINNING TO GET SO ENGAGED?

I was so disappointed by our lack of compassion and pragmatism, that made so many people's lives miserable. They were already dealing with difficult personal issues and society was kicking them when they were down. That was not ok with me and I met up with a group of like-minded people who got down to work to change it.

WHAT ATTITUDE SHOULD SOCIETY HAVE TOWARD DRUG USERS IN CREATING POLICIES THAT ADVANCE THE COMMON GOOD AND ARE NOT STUCK ON CONDEMNING THE ADDICT?

It's all about love and compassion. Just imagine if all policies were grounded in these qualities. The world would be a very different place. We all have our own version of addiction/compulsion/habitual behaviors, and to point to someone else and say theirs is worse is hypocritical and a good strategy of distraction that serves to keep us from being responsible for who we are...Let's blame someone else and maybe no one will notice mine.

WHAT LESSONS ARE IMPORTANT FOR YOU PERSONALLY?

There are many. Not to take things personally. See to it that the most vociferous opposition is

■ Gillian being interviewed during the Crosses Banner campaign in 2007



photo by Murray Bush

listened to. Treat people with dignity in all interactions. Respect all points of view. All behavior makes sense—look for what is underlying the point of view that can be influenced or changed. Recognize that some will never change and don't give them much time or energy. Take care of myself. Look for something new that I don't know and need to learn. As a visionary, I can

clearly see how things could be and know it can happen. Once I've articulated the vision I have to let go of it because it may take a very long time to manifest. Patience. I used to be way more rigid in how things should roll out. I also didn't care for incremental. I have learned that change is a series of incremental steps that culminate in a shift and even though it has taken forever, peo-

IN THE SCHEME OF HARM REDUCTION, HOW DOES DRUG PROHIBITION HARM SOCIETY?

"How Drug Prohibition Harms Society."

1. It harms the individual who uses a substance that is prohibited because it instantly makes them a criminal.
2. The purchaser has no idea what they are buying, which is dangerous.
3. Prohibition is a tool to oppress. Mass incarceration of predominantly people of color and indigenous people point to prohibition's success all over the world.
4. Psychedelics have much to teach us about raising consciousness and this is not allowed due to prohibition.
5. There is great medicinal potential from plants and synthesized medicines that is not available because of prohibition.
6. There are many unrealized uses of hemp that would be particularly beneficial for the environment.
7. There is significant deforestation because growing is often carried out in remote areas to avoid detection.
8. The War on Drugs in Mexico alone has killed tens of thousands of people.
9. The profits from producing and distributing all these illegal substances are huge and result in illegal money, in need of being laundered by gangs and corrupt governments. That is a recipe for disaster and intersects with inherent corruption, causing instability and insecurity at many levels.
10. It is inherently divisive and disruptive which holds back social cohesion and spiritual growth.

ple think it was sudden and seem to forget how it was before. An idea is simply a seed. Putting it out for sewing and nurturing is far more creative than thinking you know how it should go. Design it to assist in waking up, then let it go.

HOW DOES CANNABIS FIT INTO THE SCHEME OF THINGS?

Cannabis is the gateway drug for making change around drug policy. There are system connections with other drugs. It is a wonderful opportunity for the entire community to end prohibition of everything.

Our harm reduction work always includes people working in cannabis reform. The bigger picture problem is prohibition-

-people arrested, jailed, stigmatized and marginalized for medicine.

ARE YOU IN FAVOR OF ENDING PROHIBITION OF ALL DRUGS?

Yes, I am, in an incremental way. Portugal has done a wonderful job of decriminalizing everything. They have a healthier population. They have better services since they're not spending money on arresting people. That is not enough though, since prohibition puts billions of dollars into the pockets of the most corrupt people on earth who destabilize countries laundering cartel money, and don't have anyone's best interests but their own in mind.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT CANADA CHANGING ITS MEDICAL CANNABIS REGULATIONS? YOU CAN NO LONGER GROW FOR YOURSELF. YOU HAVE TO FIND A LICENSED PRODUCER TO GROW FOR YOU. YOUR MONTHLY SUPPLY WILL BE DOLED OUT UNDER AN AUTHORIZATION TO POSSESS. HEALTH CANADA'S ROLE IS TO AUTHORIZE THE PRODUCERS

AND KEEP THE MEDICAL RECORDS.

Now, thanks to Harper, the whole system is going corporate. It was the worst thing he could have done and he did it. In the last few years, organized crime is everywhere. Small mom and pop organizations who grew and safely supplied all of Canada's medical cannabis are about to be phased out, so the government can award big contracts to a few licensed producers. The quality and diversity of the product will suffer. Health Canada was supposed to give out licenses to little people. What happens to those people who were growing for Canada's cannabis patients? Everyone knows where they live. Can we expect raids in the future? We now have forfeiture laws here... the outlook could be bleak.



AFTERWORD

IF THERE IS SUCH A THING as a universal advocate-organizer, Gillian Maxwell has to be it. Trusted by injection drug users and public officials alike, she is known for connecting diverse people with a common purpose, then helping them carry it out.

Gillian -- a professionally trained public speaker, community organizer and compassionate advocate for doing what's right and good in the world -- moved to a new neighborhood in downtown Vancouver and encountered the surprise of a lifetime -- injection drug users overdosing and dying in the streets because society had stigmatized and abandoned them by prohibiting their choice of drugs, then locking them up for using them. The law sidesteps the medical issue of addiction by calling it a crime and letting it fester into a public infection.

But Gillian, in her 40s with fresh non-judgmental eyes, was emotionally opened up to society's outcasts and moved on her own to tackle the problem of an inhumane and ineffective drug policy. She brought harm reduction models from Europe into the mix plus her knowledge skills, low-key professional temperament and willingness to dedicate more than a decade of her life to ending drug prohibition, starting with those most in need. INSITE was created as a safe zone for injection drug users and remains a testament to the large human spirit that resides in Gillian Maxwell, "bridge builder...a kind soul with an open heart... and a visionary sense of justice." 🌱