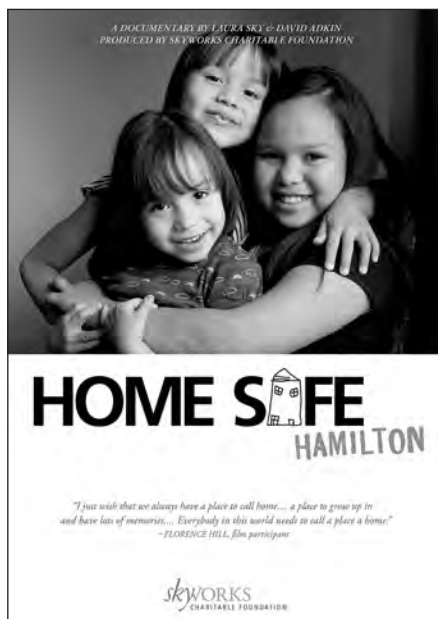


Housing and Homelessness: A Film Series

Review by Rachel E. Beattie



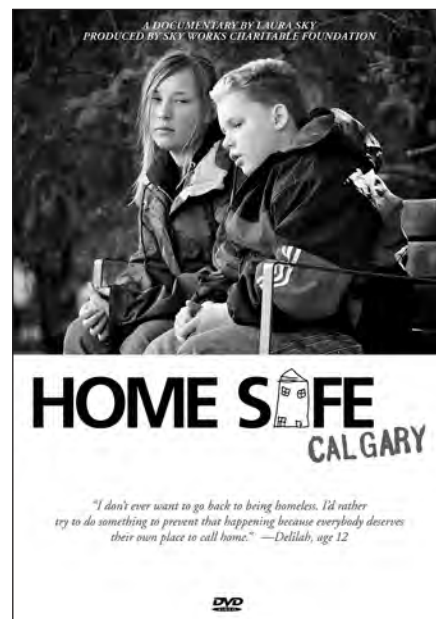
HOME SAFE HAMILTON

Directed by Laura Sky and David Adkin
2010, 86 minutes



HOME SAFE TORONTO

Directed by Laura Sky
Executive Producer, Cathy Crowe
2009, 96 minutes



HOME SAFE CALGARY

Directed by Laura Sky
Executive Producer, Cathy Crowe
2008, 99 minutes

AS THIS PIECE IS BEING WRITTEN there is a storm brewing in Toronto over public housing. A damning auditor's report about the Toronto Community Housing Corporation's expenses has been met with the city's new pro-privatization, right-wing mayor, Rob Ford, talking about privatizing community housing. How this fight works out will no doubt send ripples across other municipalities across Canada, as Toronto is one of the largest landlords for public housing in North America. With this debate in mind, a new series of films by director Laura Sky are a welcome tool for trade unions and homeless activists alike. The *Home Safe* trilogy tackles the issue of housing homeless families straight on and should be required viewing for anyone who enters the debate on the privatization of public housing.

As Andre Profontaine, one of the participants in *Home Safe Calgary*, remarks, a homeless person is often thought of as "a man with a beard pushing a cart." Through interviews with various Canadian families, the *Home Safe* trilogy effectively demonstrates that homeless-

ness affects a much wider range of Canadians. For some, homelessness is not necessarily the lack of a home but the conditions that put the family just one pay cheque, or financial disaster, ahead of eviction.

Director Laura Sky and street nurse Cathy Crowe conceived the project out of sheer frustration at the lack of attention given to families in crisis. The three films profile families and support workers in three cities: Calgary, Toronto, and Hamilton, Ontario. Each film profiles many families who are either homeless or have recently experienced homelessness. I recently spoke with Sky and Crowe about the project.

They set out to make a series of films that would be different from the often alarmist and judgmental work produced by the mainstream media. "Just speaking personally," Sky says, "the worst thing is when documentary filmmakers go out and make films about people without ever engaging; they never relinquish the power of their relationship. Some very awful films have come out of that process, especially around issues of poverty. Cathy and I would watch this

stuff, and think: 'There they are again: [being portrayed as] poor, pitiable people making bad life choices.' It's just disgusting stuff and we were both committed to challenging that in everything we did in making these films, and so the people who we were working with were crucial in that process."

Sky and Crowe collaborated with activists in each city but also with the families who appear in the film. Sky explains that they were very careful to make the interviews a safe space by allowing participants to refuse any question and to have the final say over what remained in the film. "If they agree to be on film, they haven't just signed their rights away: they get to see the film," says Sky. As a result, the families, and especially the children, opened up about their experiences with homelessness and the stigma around such issues. The families never come across as pitiable, both because the films are never exploitative and, also, the films demonstrate the incredible resourcefulness that many Canadian families exhibit when faced with a housing crisis. For example, in Toronto, laid-off

employees at the Progressive Moulded Products (PMP) plant pulled together and, with the help of trade unions, created a community centre (the PMP Workers Action Centre) that provided job retraining and emotional support.

Each film builds a picture of homelessness in its city. *Home Safe Calgary* examines the gap between the tremendous wealth of Calgary and the plight of some of its poorest residents. Cathy Crowe explains: "We discovered the situation in Calgary was a perfect storm around family homelessness: no shelter in the community for families, and people flooding there for work." In Calgary, the film introduces Tasha Brown and her children, including wise-beyond-her-years daughter, Delilah. Brown struggled to shield her family from the harshness of their situation. "So that it didn't seem so sad and depressing," she recalls in the film, "I bought the kids each their own little journal; their own special pen. And so it was kind of like their adventure books. We would call it, you know, 'We're going on an adventure tonight.' And they would write down their thoughts, or the volunteers they liked the best, and so they thought it was fun." The film profiles families who came to Calgary for employment but can't afford the incredibly high rents; families who have suffered from the lack of tenant protection laws; and frustrated parents often forced to choose between feeding their children or paying rent.

Home Safe Toronto went into production just as the worldwide economic crisis hit Canada and left massive unemployment (especially in the industrial sector) in its wake. The film documents families living in motel rooms that serve as overflow facilities for family shelters; families living in shelters; and those who have recently moved on to their own apartment but still feel incredibly

vulnerable about housing. "Toronto had to be done," says Crowe, since both her and Sky are based in Toronto, and "Toronto is the epicentre of homelessness in this country." The film portrays families such as the Richards, who moved to the Greater Toronto Area when Phil Richards took a transfer in an unsuccessful attempt to save his job in the auto sector. The Richards are cut off from their support network by the move, which adds to their problems.

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Again and again the stories of these families show what happens when unionized jobs with fair wages disappear and are replaced with low-paying, non-secure jobs.

Home Safe Hamilton continues where the Toronto instalment left off, with details of how locked-out or laid-off workers at the steel plants in Hamilton cope with keeping their families fed and housed. Indeed, the city is suffering through what, in the film, Sky calls the "after-shocks of de-industrialization." The film also examines how issues of racism figure into the housing crisis, and looks at how both immigrant communities and First Nations groups are dealing with housing issues. Shamso Elmi, a Somali immigrant,

like many other women in her building, faces exploitation at the hands of landlords in the private housing market. The experience of these women in their fight against unscrupulous landlords, who are not accountable to the municipality, is a strong argument for public housing. Elmi relates stories of roach and bed bug infested units, broken appliances, and cracked windows that landlords refused to fix. When tenants complained, the landlords threatened to call Children's Aid, the police, or even to evict them. Madina Wasuge, the executive director for Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion, explains in the film: "When you are an immigrant or you are a refugee claimant, the last thing you want is to have a police record. You don't know where your name will be ending, what will pop out the day you apply for your landing papers."

These films capture enough heartbreak and frustration to turn anyone into an anti-homelessness activist. Indeed, the filmmakers show groups, often organized and run by those who have experienced homelessness themselves, who work in solidarity with homeless people. For example, in *Home Safe Calgary*, women in Discovery House, a shelter for abused women and their children, talk about how the shelter has empowered them to regain control of their lives. In Toronto, we learn about places like the Stop Community Food Centre, which offers food, but also acts as a community centre and a place for grassroots organizing. Finally, in Hamilton, the film highlights diverse services, from one high school's S.O.S. Centre, which provides clothes, food, and other items for students in need, to Native housing groups like Sacajawea Non-profit Housing.

One of the greatest strengths of the three *Home Safe* films is that real families speak to the societal causes and cost of Canada's homeless crisis. Sky explains

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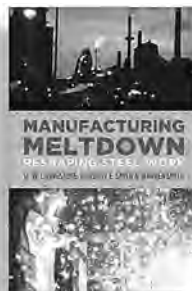
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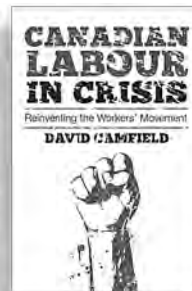
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that the film challenges attitudes, and public comments, of some right-wing politicians. "When Rob Ford says [to anti-homelessness activists] 'get a job,' he means get a 10-dollar-an-hour [minimum wage] job, and what we wanted to say is: 'Okay, folks, if we're endorsing policies that lead to 10-dollar-an-hour jobs, this is how [people have to] live....'" Indeed, the picture of families (including children) working multiple jobs and still living in shelters, shows that the answer to the housing crisis is not just to "get a job," but to create affordable housing, and encourage the growth of unionized jobs that pay fair wages and have benefits.

The *Home Safe* films are so effective because they show rather than tell their political message.

We see what happens when family shelters don't exist and families are forced to move, from day to day, to various church halls and basements, carrying all their possessions in backpacks to a new place to sleep. We see what happens when housing is left to the private marketplace and tenants are left to the mercy of negligent landlords.

We see how people who are forced to live on the minimum wage, with no benefits or sick time, simply cannot afford to provide housing and feed their children. Seeing the way Canadians are traumatized by the race to the bottom in employment conveys an urgent and effective political message.

When reflecting on how they coped with homelessness, Calgary women Kadija Ly and Tasha Brown agree that their friendship was essential. Ly concludes: "You develop tools." For many of the participants in the *Home Safe* films, the solidarity with others and developing activist skills were the biggest tools for survival. Organized labour has always understood solidarity and now we need those principles more than ever. These films can be an effective organizing tool for a collaboration between unions and anti-poverty activists in order to take on the austerity agendas of governments that threaten to dismantle the public services that all the unions fought so hard for in the past. As Laura Sky says in the film: "We can't say the children and their families are invisible any more. We've heard their

voices and can't stop listening now." This is the challenge of the films: now that we have seen and heard, we can no longer ignore this injustice.

Rachel E. Beattie is a member of United Steelworkers Local 1998 working in an audio-visual archive. Equally passionate about film and social justice, she is *Our Times'* new film buff. If you have an idea about a recent or current film you think she might review, related to work, workers' rights and social justice, send her a message via editor@ourtimes.ca or find us on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/ourtimesmagazine>.

To order DVDs contact V-Tape. Call (416) 351-1317 or send an email to wandav@vtape.ca.

Laura Sky and Cathy Crowe envisioned these films as tools to encourage discussion in schools, union locals, faith groups, and community centres, and will facilitate screenings anywhere. Any one wishing to organize a screening can contact them through Sky Works: (416) 536-6581 or info@skyworksfoundation.org. For more information visit www.skyworksfoundation.org.



PHOTO BY VINCENZO PIETROPAOLO

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