

STORIES

13 Anatomy of a Hero

Joseph R. A. Motuz¹

This is the story of Andre Robert Joseph Motuz, or ‘Old Eagle Eyes’—a Métis elder (Woodland Cree and French) from Victoria, British Columbia, who is, to many of those who know him, a modern-day hero. Few people can say that they have lived a life with purpose and meaning, and even fewer can say they achieved it against insurmountable odds; Joe can. He has created meaning in his life where once there was none, he continued to try in the face of hopeless circumstances and he loves a world that had abandoned and forsaken him. Joe does these things every day.

After being homeless and addicted for many years, Joe pulled himself off the harsh Canadian streets and into permanent residency in a Victoria apartment. By blazing a pathway out of homelessness and addiction—he has been sober for 30 years—Joe has shown that it is possible. His example is a beacon of hope to his brokenhearted “brothers and sisters” still left in the cold. Perhaps the best way to describe Joe’s impact on those around him

¹ Recounting memories of homelessness and trauma can be very difficult for some people. As a result, Joe’s story has been written by Jesse Thistle and Ernie Talda based on conversations with Joe.

is heard in the words of his dear friend and confidant Ernie Tadla: “Joe is a light; a beacon shining forth in what to many people is a dark, cold, lonely place... [He is a] citizen of the streets, caring, giving help and assistance to his brothers and sisters on the street and in the shelters.” Kind sentiments can be allotted to any person, but when these words are contrasted against the many hardships of Joe’s life, the true value of Old Eagle Eyes’ heart can be understood and fully appreciated.

Joe’s painful life story begins on March 6, 1949, in Saint Boniface, Manitoba. Joe never knew his father; unfortunately, he would not know his mother either. She rejected him, as his father had, leaving him abandoned to the care of the Children’s Aid Society. This tragic beginning took on much darker tones when sexual abuse, perpetrated by a babysitter, began at his first foster home at the age of four. Stripped of his innocence at such a young age, Joe’s life seemed perhaps doomed before it really ever began. Unfortunately and sadly, this was not a one-time incident. At nine years of age, while living at his second foster home, Joe was again sexually abused, however this time it

Even the farm animals were treated better, according to Joe, because at least they could rest and they weren’t beaten.

was inflicted by a Catholic priest at Bible camp. What little remnants of Joe’s broken heart were left to him after this horrendous incident were completely crushed by the ogres at his third foster home. They did this by subjecting Joe to a grinding regimen of forced labour. Day in and day out, Joe was working by 4 in the morning, followed by school, dinner and farm work until 11

at night. This was all much more than any grown man should bear; let alone an 11-year-old boy. The dehumanizing, near slave-like environment did not end there: vicious beatings were inflicted with predictable regularity and forced confinement in the basement was frequent. Even the farm animals were treated better, according to Joe, because at least they could rest and they weren’t beaten. Finally, after enduring three years of this constant torture, Joe was placed in a home where he was at last given a chance to recover from his traumatic childhood. He was 14 years old.

The elderly woman at his fourth foster home took good care of him. She was a warm and loving soul who was keen to treat the damaged adolescent like a human being. She did this by rebuilding his health and nurturing his confidence. Despite this, Joe still yearned to know his family of origin. He needed to meet the mother he never knew. The kind old lady who cared

for him, as nice as she was, just couldn't give him the pieces to the puzzle of his past. So at 17, Joe decided to look for his mother. Mustering up all his youthful courage, Joe bravely set out to get answers to the questions that had burned inside him all his young life, and in doing so left the foster care system once and for all.

Joe found his mother in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The reception his mother gave him was not the reception he'd expected. She wasn't interested in knowing him like he was in knowing her. In fact, she outright rejected him, just like she had done years earlier. It was more than Joe could handle. His mother's reaction, coupled with the years of abuse in foster care, culminated in a severe nervous breakdown. His mind had buckled, his heart had imploded and Joe's life went from bad to worse.

*His mind had buckled,
his heart had imploded
and Joe's life went from
bad to worse.*

He was committed to Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital. Joe spent four years there, and the treatment he received was typical of a Canadian mental institution of that time. A combination of shock therapy and psychotropic medication were administered to help Joe 'rehabilitate.' It was a futile effort. The treatments did nothing to heal the deep wounds of sexual abuse and abandonment, they only numbed and contorted young Joe's shattered mind. Patient reintegration into society is something modern psychiatric institutions struggle with today. In the late sixties and early seventies, the concept of aftercare was almost non-existent.

Joe's early manhood is a testament to this deficiency in the mental health system. At 21, Joe, being declared of sound mind, was cast out into the world with no support mechanisms. Figuratively, he was as naked as the day he was born, but this time he was even more vulnerable as he no longer had institutional help, family, friends, hope or a home. It is no wonder he ended up the way he did—he was the product of two broken institutional systems.

The oblivion that drugs and alcohol provide can soothe a torn and homeless soul. They can suture and mend the deep emotional lacerations of a traumatic life that won't heal. They can also induce a kind of amnesia, helping one forget who they are and the pain they bear. Drugs and alcohol are thus attractive remedies to the downtrodden and injured, alas, their effects are temporary and they come at a great cost. This was something that Joe was soon to find

out. Crime, jail, overdoses, short-term memory loss, epilepsy, police beatings, gang muggings, street violence and years of homelessness became the debts that Joe paid to the twin overlords of addictions and hopelessness. As his appetite for the numbing effects of narcotics and booze increased, so too did the seriousness of his crimes: from petty theft to shoplifting, to break-and-entering, all the way up to armed robbery. Young Joe was becoming a professional criminal, one who consorted with heavy criminal elements and, just like all serious thugs, started doing serious time. His behind-bars

He lived by a new code now, the criminal's creed: live for today, forget the past and damn the future.

initiation began when he got pinched for armed robbery, which landed him in Toronto's infamous Don Jail. He did six months of dead time² there, which is no small feat. Comparatively speaking, doing six months at the old Don in the seventies is roughly equivalent to doing three years in Kingston Penitentiary today. Luckily for Joe, his

brother George was a bailiff who understood the risks of the Don and bailed him out. Surprisingly, at the robbery sentencing Joe only received probation, a slap on the wrist. The judge's leniency did nothing to faze Joe nor did his incarceration in the 'Don-ster.' Quite the opposite happened. You see, Joe had graduated from common thief to full-fledged hardened criminal. He no longer cared about the world that had taken so much from him, leaving him with nothing. He lived by a new code now, the criminal's creed: live for today, forget the past and damn the future.

Joe had grown accustomed to the concrete in jail cells, the dark back alleys and cool side-street doorways. He also learned to trust his instincts, becoming wild and street smart, tough and lean. The frozen earth he slept on every night matched perfectly against the hard-boiled countenance of his heart. But the life Joe had grown used to was beginning to take a toll on his body. Over time, the rugged desolation of street life slowly ebbed away at his constitution. A steady diet of drug and drink had been working silently in tandem with neglect to sap Joe of his most valuable asset: health. Joe knew that The Reaper was near, the lack of strength in his malnourished body proved it. He could feel its pull. Death followed him from campsite to campsite, from rooftop to rooftop. It even followed him to a garbage bin where he woke up covered in noodles after a blistering night of inebriation. Everywhere he went, so too did death's icy grip. According to Joe, death did

2 Time spent before a bail hearing or after an unsuccessful bail hearing.

indeed catch hold of him—more than once, in fact—as he received last rites from a priest five times. But death, by Joe’s testament, did nothing to slow him down or scare him off the streets. Quite fittingly, the one element that would resuscitate Joe from the depths of his homeless despair would not be death at all, but life, heralded by the birth of his fifth child in 1982.

His fifth child’s birth shifted something within Joe, something monumental. It was as though the rusted gears within his heart began to churn after being seized up for so many frosted years. Living on the streets, Joe had tried to love many times. The proof was in four failed marriages that produced four children, none of whom had the same effect his fifth child had—they hadn’t thawed his frozen soul. Not that they meant any less to Joe or that he loved them any different, just that he wasn’t ready to change with them in their turn. His fifth child was different. It came at the perfect time. It reminded him what a precious gift life was. It also reminded him that there was love in the dark, cruel world. All at once Joe was deeply invigorated. The mental and emotional chains that had bound Joe to misery his whole life had been obliterated by the coming of his infant child. He no longer needed to drink or do drugs, or wander—his mind was finally free. The cries of his newborn baby had released him from his life of bondage. The physical addiction, however, remained. This was of no concern for Joe though; he marched undeterred and steadfast into withdrawal and later recovery.

It was as though the rusted gears within his heart began to churn after being seized up for so many frosted years.

After he made up his mind to get sober and lift himself off the streets, it seemed nothing could stop him. Joe stoically decided to go cold turkey. Following his decision came the violent effects of an abrupt withdrawal. The chicken skin, the vomit, the diarrhea, the aching, the restlessness, the shaking, the hypersensitivity to light, the hot and cold sweats—all were uncomfortable and all were painful beyond belief. Notwithstanding their terrible effects, perhaps the most dangerous side effects to Joe’s instant and herculean sobriety were the alcohol DTs³. They caused him to black out, vibrate constantly and thrash about unconscious in grand mal seizures. For five, seemingly never-ending days, Joe endured all kinds of physical excruciation, and even though

3 ‘DT’ is short for ‘delirium tremens:’ an acute episode of delirium that is usually caused by withdrawal from alcohol.

the chemical demons screamed in his bones and gnashed at his flesh, Joe remained obstinate. Joe held on. This is something that Joe still does to this day. But, as he will tell you himself, sobriety wasn't an event: it was more like a lifelong process.

He attributes his miraculous rise out of homelessness and liberation from addiction to three things: a return back to nature, a reconnection to his spiritual past through First Nations and Métis Elders and spirituality.

It's been 30 years since 63-year-old Joseph 'Old Eagle Eyes' Motuz, the Métis Elder, gave up drugs and alcohol. He attributes his miraculous rise out of homelessness and liberation from addiction to three things: a return back to nature, a reconnection to his spiritual past through First Nations and Métis Elders and spirituality. All of these culminated in 1990 when Joe underwent an intense period of introspective learning whereby he accepted the idea of a higher power/Creator, understood the power of healing, began to

appreciate the power of prayer and incorporated the importance of sharing into his life. He also credits the Canadian Mental Health Association as a secret to his transition from homeless addict to housed citizen.

Today 'Old Eagle Eyes,' the man who walks with soft moccasins, can be seen making and selling jewelry on the streets of Victoria, British Columbia. This is also where he sells copies of *The Victoria Street Newz* to people who walk by. It should be known that any earnings Joe makes is faithfully, and honestly, declared on his monthly welfare statements. Joe is politically active and has participated on the Action Committee of People with Disabilities (ACPD) for four years, where he serves as both a board member and the Vice President. The ACPD's mandate seeks to assist and/or advocate for people with disabilities.

Nature, the Creator and service to his fellow street family keep Joe vibrant and alive. He is not afraid of spreading his wallet thin so that his homeless brothers and sisters can eat or avoid end-of-the-month binds. He is also not averse to sharing whatever clothes, food or household supplies he has. Generosity comes naturally to Joe because he believes, in his core, that the Creator made all men, women and children equal regardless of nationality, race, colour or creed. When one bears in mind that the crucible of fire that was Joe's life could have very easily turned him into an apathetic monster, the quality of Joe's empathetic heart becomes apparent. By choosing to rise

above it all and love, Joe shows other homeless people, and the world, how to triumph in the face of colossal adversity. It is often said that the meaning of life is to give life meaning. Many in life never figure that out, but it's safe to say that Joe has. Ask anyone who knows him.

In Joe's words:

“The Homeless are my brothers and sisters. We are all equal in the Creator's eyes. I accept them the way they are. They have been part of me for many, many moons. I always look for their good side, their humour, their qualities and their personalities. Until we walk a mile in their moccasins, we have no right to judge. I am an outdoors individual. I love the woods, the lakes and streams. Anywhere there is wildlife there is beauty, peace and tranquility. I love to watch wild animals, birds, and insects; make a campfire and breathe fresh air. Surviving all these years by your wits, street knowledge is a feat in itself. It will take all I have to survive till my journey ends. I have many challenges ahead. In the future I hope to live peacefully with humankind and myself. I want to remain independent and keep my dignity. I count all my blessings, because there are people worse off than me.”



Joseph R.A. Motuz
(Old Eagle Eyes)

I am doing fantastic, now that I turned 65 years old on March 6, 2014.

Now that I am Métis Elder my life has changed a lot. I am going through a transition as we all do. I am now enjoying life and going in a new direction within life. As a hobby, I will still do my jewelry; this is my 45th year. I'm planning to do some travelling, have more quiet time for myself and be the Wolf. I count my blessings daily, including that I am alive and have the opportunity to enjoy life. I am very positive and optimistic for the future. I get my strength from the Creator, family, friends, and from Elders of all races.