

# A 'TOUGH OLD MAN'



Allan Whitecap describes the Saskatoon Correctional Centre as "a nice place" where the younger inmates treat him well. PHOTOS: LIAM RICHARDS/SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

## North Battleford's well-known street person 'epitome' of homeless problem

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Allan Whitecap knows when to pick a fight.

Winter has arrived and it's cold in North Battleford.

Drunk, the 79-year-old yells and swears in a crowded hospital waiting room.

A police officer approaches. Whitecap's punch connects with his ribs.

The elderly man — a beloved figure on the streets of downtown North Battleford — is a former boxer. But years of heavy drinking and living homeless have taken their toll.

The officer gets the better of him.

As Whitecap is led to a police cruiser, he tries to deliver another blow.

Instead, he loses his shoe and falls.

Later, Whitecap laughs as he's locked up. The officer asks if he picked the fight so he'd be put in jail, out of the cold.

"Yes," Whitecap responds, then shakes the officer's hand and apologizes.

Days before Christmas, Whitecap is settled in at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre.

It's not the first time he's spent the holidays behind bars. He's done it so often that some of his friends refer to jail as "Allan's winter home."

"It's a nice place," Whitecap says, sitting on his walker near his small cell. "I don't sleep outside, I eat good."

Younger inmates sometimes fight each other, but Whitecap — sentenced to nine months for assaulting a police officer — says they treat him well. He has a knack for making friends in unlikely places.

Whitecap's been a fixture on the streets of downtown North Battleford for as long as many there

can remember and he's missed back home.

Staff and clients at The Lighthouse North Battleford supported living centre, where Whitecap spent more than 120 nights this year, wonder what trouble he's getting into — as do those who routinely chat with him at the corner of Central Park, where he's often found gazing at the street, bottle in hand.

"Everybody has a lot of respect for him downtown and everyone's always talking to him and asking about him if he's not here," said Caitlin Glencross, manager of the centre which opened almost a year ago. "He's got that old-man charm, so he kind of plays that up."

Whitecap is likely the oldest person living on the streets of North Battleford and looks all of his 79 years. He's hard of hearing and walks with a shuffling step, relying heavily on a walker purchased for him by RCMP officers who regularly give clothing and other items to the city's chronic homeless.

He could have had a bed and meals at The Lighthouse this winter, but old patterns are hard to break.

"These got me here," Whitecap says, raising his bony fists and laughing.

Jackie Kennedy, director of the Battlefords Friendship Centre, where Whitecap spent many nights before The Lighthouse opened, said she's amazed the "tough old man," is still around.

"Not a lot of people could survive like he has," she said. "He probably don't got many years in this world left."

In the decade or so Kennedy has known Whitecap, he's been drunk more days than he's been sober. And she doesn't expect that to change.

"He's not ever going to stop drinking unless he's in a hospital



David Whitecap, Allan's younger brother, said the family of nine from Moosomin First Nation, never went to school.

bed hooked up to machines," she said.

David Whitecap, Allan's only surviving brother, said Allan — the second oldest of nine siblings — was born on the Moosomin First Nation, roughly 60 kilometres north of North Battleford. The Whitecaps didn't go to school. Uneducated and illiterate, they worked on farms when they were old enough.

Allan liked the work and did OK for awhile. He had a place of his own, but then started drinking and couldn't afford rent. He eventually ended up on the streets.

"If he could make it to quit drinking, I know it would be good," David said.

Allan doesn't talk about his childhood or about what drove him to drink.

In a single breath, he says he should cut back on the booze and quips that beer is probably the reason he's lived so long.

Marcus Tobaccojuice, who also lives on the streets of North Battleford, said he worries about Whitecap. His health and memory have deteriorated in recent years.

"He's a good old man. I loved him and I still do," 32-year-old Tobaccojuice said. "He'd always get mad at me and punch me, but I got used to it."

The younger man said he makes sure Whitecap is warm and fed. He looks out for him in jail when they serve time together. On the street, he brings him Chinese food, booze, smokes and the occasional bottle of Listerine, any colour.

"You got to respect your elders," Tobaccojuice said. "I can't wait 'til he gets out so I can buy him a bottle."

North Battleford city councillor Ray Fox describes Whitecap as "the epitome of the chronic homelessness problem" and the failure of the system to reach people who need help.

"If we can't solve that problem, with one guy who actually is known to the whole damn city... then what can we solve?" Fox asks.



Marcus Tobaccojuice looks out for Allan Whitecap on the streets of North Battleford, buying him Chinese food, booze, smokes and the occasional bottle of Listerine.



Jackie Kennedy, executive director of the Battlefords Indian and Metis Friendship Centre where Allan Whitecap spent many nights before the Lighthouse opened, is amazed the "tough old man" is still around.

The Battlefords RCMP hope to hire an analyst next year to identify people like Whitecap who trigger the most calls for police service. When those people are found, officers can work with agencies, including The Lighthouse, to help them.

If that's refused, there's little to be done besides supporting those who choose to live high-risk lifestyles.

Whitecap is a prime example. Efforts have been made to get him off the street and into transitional housing, but he's never been able to stay sober.

"He's too old for rules," Kenne-

dy said. "Allan doesn't like being housed. He prefers to sleep in the park in the summertime. That's just the way he is."

Whitecap, approaching a month of sobriety in jail, is already looking forward to returning home.

He knows Glencross from The Lighthouse will pick him up from the bus depot whenever he rolls into town.

The weather will be warmer then. And he'll already be thinking about his next drink.

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Ray Fox, North Battleford city councillor, sits on a bench in Central Park where Allan Whitecap can normally be found. He describes Whitecap as the "epitome of the chronic homelessness problem."