

Acceptance Remarks by Marge Reitsma-Street
upon receipt of the Dick Weiler Award
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work,
University of Toronto, October 14, 2009

I can imagine no greater honour than to be a recipient of the Dick Weiler Award, along with Gilles Seguin, a man I've respected for so long, and whose weekly newsletter and website is the only one I have consistently used for years, and recommend to others.

I wish to thank the members of the Weiler Award Trust Committee for selecting me. Early in my doctoral studies, here at the University of Toronto, I remember reading a discussion paper on crime prevention through social development--written by Dick Weiler and Irwin Waller. That paper, and Dick's policy work, encouraged me to focus my life's work on social justice and policy development.

Many thanks to those who nominated me and co-wrote letters of support: **Stephanie Baker Collins**—Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at McMaster University; **Kim Pape** Director of the Canadian Elizabeth Fry Society; **Pat Rogerson**, retired assistant director the the N'shwakamok Native Friendship in Sudbury and **Elaine Porter**, Director of Sociology at Laurentian University; and Associate Dean of Research **Leslie Brown** at University of Victoria and **Bruce Wallace**, community activist and health researcher.

I am delighted to see members of my family and friends here today—my parent Thelma Reitsma from Strathroy; my sisters Bette Vandergiessen and Wilma Joy Veenstra. My good friends and colleagues Sheila Neysmith, Pat and Elaine, and Stephanie. My close friend from doctoral days, Karen Swift, Professor in Social Work, York University, so regrets not being present today, and is represented by Peter Holland, also a long-time friend. Most of all, I wish to acknowledge the presence of my husband, Harry Street who has supported, worked, and prodded me on for nearly 40 years.

I share this honour with them today, and with many others. **For social justice is created by working together, and by making choices. I wish to highlight four choices by telling the following story.**

Twenty years ago, early on a cold January morning. I received a call from a reporter. She asked for my reactions to a national CBC radio item aired that morning; it quoted me as saying Sudbury had the highest child poverty rate in the province. I did not know what this news story was about. I knew that the

previous year I had completed a substantial child poverty study in North Bay with students and social workers, and there had been good media coverage as part of the early efforts of Campaign 2000—to eradicate child poverty in Canada by the 21st century. I started to worry about a “background conversation” that I had a few months ago with a reporter who was doing a follow up story on that North Bay project. He had also asked about poverty rates in my new home town. I said I didn’t know, but estimated there would be over 5,000 children living in low income families according to what I had learned since moving to Sudbury.

This speculation became a fact, and more people phoned for information. Then I was called by the President of Laurentian University who said a top ranking local politician had phoned him, very annoyed, demanding that I be fired for the negative and false portrayal of Sudbury. Now I was worried, new to the community, and without job security. Yet, I knew I needed to do more than worry or justify myself. I faced the first choice in all social justice struggles: fight, flight, or wait.

Fortunately, my husband Harry took the initiative. He took me shopping—for clothes. And he bought me a gorgeous jacket, that to this day, I still wear. That jacket says to me “I’m here to stay, and I am loved.” Then we discussed the options. I decided to choose to **fight this fight that had landed on my door step**. I am not saying all issues need to become fights. There are times when it is best to **not** take up a particular campaign or issue, as there are many worthy causes and not every time is a good time to take up the struggle. However, it is wise to make a conscious choice about whether to take action, wait, or no action.

But what action? I didn’t really know what was going on, and needed help to make sense of the situation. So I phoned Marion Dewar, an astute woman who had been the mayor of Ottawa and a Member of Parliament. Marion helped me to see the second choice I had to make. ‘You can choose to worry about your job and academic reputation’ she said, ‘Or you could choose instead to focus on your concern, the injustice of child poverty.’ She then warned me to get the facts right, and invite others to become curious about the nature of child poverty in their community.

Although the advice was helpful and inspiring, I was still baffled how to proceed. I next called Pat Rogerson, Assistant Director of the Native Friendship Centre; she had recently invited me to join a group that was working on a funding proposal for a community prevention project in low income neighbourhoods. Pat and others demonstrated the third choice that is fundamental to social justice struggles: the selection of a community to stand with, and to make decisions together. Pat called a meeting of those working on the funding proposal, all of them committed to fighting child poverty. Everyone at the meeting agreed there was child poverty, and my speculative estimates were too low. We also agreed to create a process about how to engage with the media.

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There is a fourth choice to make. That is: the choice to move beyond the general intent to act, into responsibility for a particular task, project, or direction. I chose to join a child poverty coalition and to start a project on the “facts” about child poverty in Sudbury, and a debate on its consequences. Months later, once the project was completed, the media reported the results: over 9,000 children were living below Statistics Canada low income cut-off: far more than I had estimated; and far, far too many for any community.



Today, we in social work know that life in the streets, homes, and organizations of our communities, has become even more challenging to many, and the future is worrisome. Thus, we continue to speak the truth about poverty and inequality, and to imagine new policies and practices relevant to today’s world. I wish to congratulate those in Ontario who worked on the successful campaign to enact an anti-poverty law in Ontario just this past May. I know many others worldwide are working this week on TheGlobal Action Against Poverty in order to reach the Millenium Development Goals of the UN by 2015. Back home in British Columbia, a fledging coalition to reduce poverty is working on a provincial strategy to change policies and laws that negatively affect so many children, families and single people.

As Richard Weiler did in his day, so too each of us choose how to take action in the search for social justice. My thanks again for honouring me with the Weiler Award, at this School, my alma mater. All the best to the future students who are selected for the new Weiler scholarships in social justice. I wish them well, and I wish all of us courage as we make choices about how to respond to what lands on our doorstep, and how to stand together to create a more provident world.