

# Blue Roses documentary shines light on Ottawa rooming houses

"It's an important contribution to helping us understand those people who are marginalized."

BLAIR CRAWFORD ([HTTPS://OTTAWACITIZEN.COM/AUTHOR/BCRAWFORD10](https://ottawacitizen.com/author/bcrawford10)) Updated: December 5, 2019



Bob Jamison, middle, the central character in *Blue Roses*, poses for a photo with filmmakers Danielle Rolfe and Ed Kucerak. *TONY CALDWELL / POSTMEDIA*

"There's no such thing as palliative care in our neighbourhood. What we see are people who are sick, who are suffering, and then they die," Robert Jamison says, choking back tears as he speaks. "A lot

of folks don't really want palliative care. Because death's kind of welcomed after you've suffered so many years in poverty, so many years as a chronic substance user, so many years out here on the street."

Jamison is a peer support worker with Ottawa Inner City Health and he's speaking at a workshop on end-of-life care for the "precariously housed" — the unknown number of people who live in hundreds of Ottawa's licensed and unlicensed rooming houses. It's one of the many powerful, unvarnished moments in the documentary *Blue Roses*, which follows Jamison — or "Bobby J," as he's known to many on the street — and other peer support and health professionals with Ottawa Inner City Health and the Somerset West and Centretown community health centres as they make the rounds of hundreds of rooming houses that serve as the last stops before utter homelessness.

The documentary will be shown at a special screening next Saturday, Dec. 7, at the main branch of the Ottawa Public Library. It's an encore presentation co-hosted by Ottawa Inner City Health, which sponsored the film, and Compassionate Ottawa, a volunteer organization that aims to improve quality of life for the frail elderly and those facing life-threatening illnesses. A screening of *Blue Roses* last spring at the Mayfair theatre quickly sold out.

"I've heard from so many people who said they weren't able to get in, so I'm glad that we're going to have another chances to show it," said Compassionate Ottawa's chairman, Jim Nininger. "It's something we don't tend to think about. It's an important contribution to helping us understand those people who are marginalized. It tells that beautiful story of Bob, the social connector who would visit people and talk to them and brings everyone together."

In the film's opening scene, Jamison gathers friends together in an Ottawa park at a memorial service for a woman named Krystal, who died alone and without family.

"This is what we're trying to do at Compassionate Ottawa," Nininger said. "To have neighbours helping their neighbours who are dealing with dying and loss and grief. We've abdicated that to the medical side and we need to reclaim that."

Filmmakers Danielle Rolfe and Ed Kucerak say they knew little about Ottawa's rooming houses before they began work on the documentary in the spring of 2018.

"In terms of issues of poverty and access to healthcare, that I knew about," said Rolfe, who worked as a health researcher before becoming a filmmaker. "But seeing it first hand? I'd never walked into a rooming house. Bob had to prepare us for some of the stuff we'd encounter: bedbugs, the violence ... It was life-changing for me. You can't go back to your old ways of thinking after seeing what I saw."

"I'm still trying to recover from the experience," Kucerak added. "Some of the things we saw. Some of the things we heard. Every time I see that movie, I see something that brings back another memory. When you think of Ottawa, you think of a capital, the power of the federal government, beautiful parks, the wonderful, historic canal, all the green space ... but we forget about this population, that it's not all this magical, beautiful city."



## Blue Roses Trailer

from **Kublacom Pictures**

02:53

For five months in the spring and summer of 2018, the filmmakers followed Jamison and others on their rounds of Ottawa's rooming houses, checking on the well-being of people who live in such trying conditions that even minor infection or a broken leg can be fatal. Many struggle with mental illness and addiction on top of crushing poverty. For Jamison, the work is a kind of therapy, a way to help others after having been helped himself.





"If someone is in crisis, if they're having a breakdown, it's a lot easier to help them if you know their name already," says Bob Jamison, an outreach worker with Ottawa Inner City Health.

*TONY CALDWELL / POSTMEDIA*

Abandoned by his parents as a child, Jamison grew up in dozens of foster homes and was eventually sent to the notorious St. Joseph's Training School in Alfred, Ont. He lived on the streets, rode with a motorcycle club and spent "30 or 40" years as a drug user. He finally kicked drugs when he was sent into treatment as part of a court-ordered diversion program.

"In treatment they kind of break you down," he said. "They tackle old traumas and break you down until you're pretty raw."

After treatment, Jamison found himself drug-free for the first time in decades and looking at the same streets where he'd grown up.

"I was raw as raw could be, and people were dying all around me. For me, it was so emotional. Everything I experienced so intensely. I just started doing what I could. It was almost working in triage. What I learned really quickly is that it wasn't all the stuff going on. For most folks it was their loneliness. That's what started it for me. Helping with the little things. Helping people with their isolation."

Jamison's street experience helps him reach people who might not otherwise respond to social workers or health care providers. Peer support, primarily as a volunteer with Inner City Health and more recently on staff at Somerset West Community Health Centre, was a natural fit.

"For me, someone who'd quit substances and was covered in tattoos, it wasn't like I was going to go out and find a great job," he said, wryly. "To stay off dope, I had to go out and get engaged and connected. I realized the benefit of peer engagement. If someone is in crisis, if they're having a breakdown, it's a lot easier to help them if you know their name already."

Blue Roses screens in the auditorium of the Ottawa Public Library Main Branch at 120 Metcalfe St. on Dec. 7 at 1:30 p.m. Those with library cards are asked to register online at [bibliottawalibrary.ca](https://bibliottawalibrary.ca) (<https://bibliottawalibrary.ca/en/event/blue-roses-documentary-screening-and-panel-discussion>), although you can still attend even if you don't have a library card. Doors will open at 1 p.m.

The film will be followed by a panel discussion moderated by Wendy Muckle, executive director of Ottawa Inner City Health.

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[Twitter.com/getBAC](https://twitter.com/getBAC)

Correction: Robert Jamison worked primarily as a volunteer with Ottawa Inner City Health during the filming of Blue Roses and later as an employee at Somerset West Community Health Centre. An earlier version of this story contained incorrect information.

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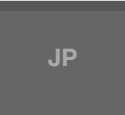


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jack porter 6 DAYS AGO

compassion makes a difference, he knows he cannot fix a lot of the issues that these people suffer from yet he is still kind and he cares, if only more of us could say the same, I know I cannot, I donate but there is more I could do

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**Don Henderson** 7 DAYS AGO

i commend Robert Jamison for what he is doing. In the end we are all the same, rich or homeless. We come face to face with the reality we are about to die and leave all we have known behind us. We cannot bring our wealth with us and we are all on the same level playing field.

REPLY 0 0

SC

**Stan Cohen** 8 DAYS AGO

Robert Jamison is a remarkable example of resilience and perseverance in the face of difficult life challenges. We should never forget or dismiss those less fortunate people

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