

# Vigilante targets 'Crazy' Dave

Sidewalk poet doesn't deserve 'free pass,' thief says

**O**n a fresh, clear-eyed morning in May, 'Crazy' Dave Dessler is alone on a milk crate on George Street with his cardboard poems, his tin of coins, his concrete comforts — home sweet home.

"I'm a guy sleeping on the sidewalk," he says, voice



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COMMENTARY

about to snap the whip, "and they're robbing *me* blind."

It is a puzzle, like many things about Mr. Dessler, a fixture on the city's home-

less scene with his messianic hair and quick, acerbic wit.

As a poet, he might appreciate the clash of sympathies now playing out in his life: should we help the homeless with stray money and small comfort or hustle them along in a tough-love effort to prod them into housing?

Mr. Dessler, 46, finds himself exactly there.

He has been in this prominent spot, just east of Sussex, since October 2006. He

is a busker, too, performing not music or mime, but dispensing poems, usually written on pieces of cardboard retrieved from the urban jungle.

Over time, his pile of belongings grew, as did his reputation, stretching along the sidewalk below the rear of the Chapters store.

On April 23, a downtown resident claiming to be "R.F. Cartier" decided he'd had enough of the so-called sidewalk psychiatrist.

In a letter delivered to Guy Bérubé, a Dessler supporter, our Cartier character (male, one supposes?) said he disposed of the homeless man's belongings in less than five minutes.

Nor is he stupid.

"I am a private tax paying citizen living downtown and after many complaints to the city of Ottawa, I took it upon myself to clean the filth that Dave called home," he wrote.

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## CITY

# Egan: Ready to leave the streets

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"I will continue to keep our streets clean and safe and shame on you for perpetuating the homeless crisis here in Ottawa. And shame on you for giving him a free pass while others have to live by the rules."

Mr. Dessler lost dozens of his poems, his clothing, sleeping bag, blankets, and various publications in which he was depicted.

He bristles at the suggestion that Mr. Cartier was merely exercising his right as a responsible citizen to safe, clean streets.

"I pay little attention to what this guy is trying to say. I mean, what a moron! Who is going to feel safe on the street when this guy is going around stealing your stuff?"

In the days following the theft, he managed to find one of his journals, stuck on the bottom of an adjacent garbage bin. The rest are gone.

There was, later, an outpouring of support, much of it funnelled toward Mr. Bérubé, who once exhibited and sold some of Mr. Dessler's poetry in his gallery, La Petite Mort, on Cumberland Street.

The two men are friends and Mr. Bérubé is hoping he can help his friend get off the street.

"I'm not trying to give him a makeover, I'm trying to give him a hand," said the gallery owner.

He admits he is learning much about the complex problem of homelessness as the weeks unfold. He is now trying to direct the right resources toward Mr. Dessler, who probably would require ongoing support once he has a roof over his head.

"He needs a helping hand, like we've all needed at one time or other."

The poet is, in fact, tired of life on the street. "I'm so mentally and emotionally beat to sh--, I don't know how much longer I can do this."

He has a proud streak. He refuses to collect welfare, calling the level of monetary support "a farce." Nor does he like emergency shelters.

Percy Rowe has heard it all before. He is the chairman of the Alliance to end Homelessness in Ottawa.

The long-term homeless have complicated lives, he explained. There may be addictions, mental illness, a deep mistrust of support systems, an aversion to shelters. "It is difficult for you and I to understand."

On top of this, there is simply a shortage of affordable housing with adequate social supports in place, he added.

A lifeline may be on the way. Mr. Dessler is collaborating with photographer Jean Boulay on a book, expected to be published this month.

It is to be a mixture of his poems and Mr. Boulay's images, shot over many months and seasons.

Mr. Dessler, who admits to a "checkered past," hopes the proceeds from the book will be enough to provide a small nest egg to establish his own housing. From there, he hopes to cobble together enough income — his street poetry, possibly a small home business — to get by on his own.

*Mindlessly Adrift* is to be the title poem. It ends like this:

*Searching For My Centre, My soul  
partially corrupt,*

*Maybe My Freedom, For Me, Is Too  
Much,*

*But Thats For Tomorrow, I'll Worry  
About It Then,*

*I See Land On The Horizon, I Knew  
This Sea Would End.*

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# 'MENTALLY AND EMOTIONALLY BEAT'



PAWEL DWULIT, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**'Tax-paying citizen' R.F. Cartier claims in a note that he — or she — is responsible for getting rid of the belongings of 'Crazy' Dave Dessler, a homeless poet who has become a fixture at George Street and Sussex Drive. 'Who is going to feel safe on the street when this guy is going around stealing your stuff?' argues Mr. Dessler.**