VANDU

Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users

THE FIRST TEN YEARS

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1997

- The Vancouver-Richmond Health Board declares a public health emergency for six diseases, including Hepatitis A, B, and C, Syphilis, and HIV. Bud Osborn, a founding member of VANDU, was nominated for the Vancouver-Richmond Health Board.

- VANDU's first meeting is held in Oppenheimer Park.
- The Political Response Group (PRG), Portland Hotel Society, and Ann Livingston set up 1000 crosses in Oppenheimer Park to recognize the death of drug users in the Downtown Eastside.

- VANDU's first meetings are held at the Street Church every Saturday at 2:00 p.m. from September through December.

1998

- VANDU secures funding from the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (VCHA) in February.
- VANDU is incorporated under the *Society Act* in British Columbia in September.
- Fifty-two consecutive Saturday meetings are held in 1998.

1999

- With no funding, VANDU moves into a new office at 163 West Hastings Street. Retroactive funding from VCHA is provided.
- In November, Ann Livingston, Executive Director of VANDU, runs for Vancouver City Council as a Green Party candidate; and Bud Osborn runs for Council as a COPE candidate. Both parties adopt harm reduction in their platforms.

2000

- During discussions with Removing Barriers (which became Keeping the Door Open [KDO]), VANDU contributes to the founding of the Harm Reduction Action Society (HRAS) to gain support for a supervised injection site.
- 213 Dunlevy opens, which is a peer-run drop-in centre.

- On July 11, as a protest in favour of a safe injection site, VANDU sets up 2000 wooden crosses in Oppenheimer Park acknowledging the death of members of the Downtown Eastside community, building upon the 1000 crosses from 1997. The above image, taken by Elaine Briere, has become an international symbol for harm reduction, and was used in music videos by Social Distortion.

PIVOT

- While working at Sierra Legal Defence Fund, located a block from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, John Richardson talks to many people in the neighbourhood with legal problems and no access to legal support. Richardson, along with Ann Livingston, recognize through meetings with drug users and sex workers at the VANDU office, that legal advocacy is a necessary service. The result is the formation of the Pivot Legal Society.

2001

- A coffin is presented to Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen, as well as a cheque payable to the City of Vancouver for 90 human beings. At this time, one person a day was dying in the Downtown Eastside, and the City's 90-day moratorium on new services for drug users would represent 90 deaths. Within three weeks of the action, the moratorium is lifted.

- From May to July, VANDU pickets the Carnegie Community Centre for not allowing drug users into their building. This results in a Human Rights case, which VANDU was successful in having the "Seen Buying" rule abolished.
- In association with HRAS, VANDU begins writing proposals for supervised injection sites.
- VANDU begins operating an unsanctioned needle exchange table on the corner of Main and Hastings, in front of the Carnegie Centre.

- VANDU are the interveners in a court case attempting to prevent the Health Contact Centre (HCC) from opening at Main and Hastings. The HCC is intended to facilitate health services to communities with multiple barriers to accessing medical and health services. John Richardson of Pivot takes on the case, and VANDU succeeds in ensuring that the HCC opens.
- In August, The British Columbia Association of People on Methadone (BCAPOM) is formed as a sister-society of VANDU in response to the need that has been present since 1998 to specifically focus on issues surrounding methadone.

2002

- On August 9, Vancouver Police Constable Grier publicly apologizes to VANDU for accusatory statements that VANDU was involved in drug trafficking at its needle exchange table. Due to such allegations, the outdoor needle exchange table had been raided and shut down in June. The apology validates VANDU in its efforts in providing harm reduction services in the Downtown Eastside.
- During the time of the Woodward's squat, members of VANDU publicly bring to light to gross overrepresentation of Aboriginals amongst its membership in the Downtown Eastside. As a result, the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS) is formed.
- Human Rights Watch awards VANDU its 2002 Canadian Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights in September.

- VANDU is featured in the documentary *Fix: Story of an Addicted City*, released in October, which chronicles the events leading up to the opening of North America's first supervised injection site.
- The first international harm reduction conference to be held in Canada is hosted in Toronto in November.

- On Saturday, September 14, a group of community members occupied the Woodward's department building that had been vacant for 9 years, and takes up an entire city block. During that time various different community groups have fought to have the building converted into social housing, only to have the government agree, and then go back on their promise. Five members of VANDU's Board of Directors were locked inside on the 3rd floor.

- An alegal injection site is run at 327 Carrall Street, opening April 7 and running until October. The site, personally funded by Ann Livingston and Dave Diewert, was also the site for housing meetings, support groups, and a drop-in centre.
- Without an office, VANDU organizes a march to Vancouver City Hall on April 9 to challenge the use of 50 additional police officers without a supervised injection site.
- In May, the *New York Times* interviews VANDU, as demonstrations and lobbying for a supervised injection site continue.

2003

- VANDU assists the Society of Living Injection Drug Users (SOLID), a drug user group in Victoria, to begin operating.
- In June, VANDU members begin traveling to 14 different Canadian cities, creating vectors of disease prevention by connecting with peer communities and service providers. This is a 15-month project.
- By July, safe crack use kits (SCUK) are being distributed.
- VANDU Empowerment Consultants, Ltd. (VEC), a social enterprise aimed at capacity-building, is registered.

- Insite, North America's first supervised injection site, opens in September.
- *Fix: Story of an Addicted City* wins a Genie Award for Best Documentary.
- VANDU members are involved in alley patrols and mobile needle exchange with the street nurses in the Downtown Eastside.

2004

- VANDU has now firmly established itself internationally as a voice for drug users, sitting at the table locally, provincially, nationally, and globally in consultations, conferences, and capacity-building around harm reduction, epidemiology, Aboriginal, and women's issues. Through this process, VANDU members speak to tens of thousands of Canadians at conferences and public and media events.
- On August 24, VANDU marches for safe inhalation rooms up Hastings Street in Vancouver to the Health Canada office.
- In October, VANDU speaks in Leeds, England at the Second National Conference on Injection Drug Use.

2005

- North America's first heroin maintenance study begins in February. The North American Opiate Medication Initiative (NAOMI) begins enrolling in Vancouver.

- VANDU secures funding through the Status of Women to begin the VANDU Women's Group on August 25.

Injection Support Team

- On September 1, VANDU creates an Injection Support Team (IST) in response to the serious health crisis facing people who need help with injections to provide education and support to people who cannot inject themselves. The project receives funding through the Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

- Vancouver hosts the International User Congress, and Canadian Drug User Congress in May, which sparks a series of dialogues led by VANDU that lead to the formation of international drug user groups, such as the Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs (CAPUD), and the International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD).
- A bedbug epidemic hits the Downtown Eastside, infesting thousands of rooms. In May, VANDU begins a massive bedbug cleanup project in hotels across the Downtown Eastside. The initiative also involves a public education campaign.

2006

- In June, as a response to recurring issues around access to health care for women in the VANDU Women's Group, the VANDU Women Clinic Action Research for Empowerment Project (VANDU Women CARE) is funded as a collaboration between the BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health (BCCEWH), the UBC School of Nursing by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

2007

- VANDU helps spearhead a large-scale campaign in support of social housing in Vancouver, primarily involved with the Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP) and Citywide Housing Coalition, Pivot Legal Society, and the Impact on Community Coalition.
- Beginning in the Spring, VANDU is a plaintiff in a Human Rights case arguing that Bill C-31 has violated Section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms with respect to identification requirements; noting that it is discriminatory towards individuals who may be homeless or drug addicted.

- On July 21, VANDU holds its first Drug User Memorial Day, beginning with a march from the VANDU office at 380 East Hastings and ending with a candlelighting ceremony in Oppenheimer Park.

2008

- In February, VANDU participates in the United Nations/Vienna NGO Committee on Narcotic Drugs' "Beyond 2008 NGO Consultation" to discuss harm reduction strategy on an international level.
- In April, in response to the housing crisis in Vancouver, the Pivot Legal Society, the Impact on Community Coalition, and the Carnegie Community Action Project officially file a Human Rights complaint to the United Nations, arguing that the City of Vancouver has breached Article 25(1) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
- VANDU is represented internationally at the International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA) conference in Barcelona, Spain.
- In May, Vancouver-Mount Pleasant New Democratic MLA Jenny Kwan puts forth a private members' bill to have Insite recognized as a provincial health facility, and removing from Federal jurisdiction. Over 100 members of the Downtown Eastside Community are present in the legislature, and receive a standing ovation from the entire panel of MLAs. This is the first instance of such an ovation in 13 years in British Columbia. The bill is accepted into reading.
- Just two weeks after the events at the BC Legislature, with VANDU as one of the plaintiffs in *PHS Community Services Society v. Attorney General of Canada*, The Supreme Court of British Columbia grants "users and staff at Insite, acting in conformity with the operating protocol now in effect, a constitutional exemption from the application of ss. 4(1) and 5(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA)."

- On July 19, VANDU celebrates its 10-year anniversary in Oppenheimer Park, where its first meeting was held.