

ZWANINE HELPS JO-ANN BRING HER STORY TO LIGHT



Write of Passage

Who we remember and how we remember them can be shaped by prejudice, social standing and visibility. Walk of Life, a program in the Netherlands, records the life stories of marginalised people before their voices slip away.

by **Eliza Janssen** Acting Deputy Editor

It's been said that everybody dies twice: once, when we take our final breath, and again, when our name is spoken for the last time.

If this is true, then one not-for-profit initiative in the Netherlands is creating a form of immortality – for people who do not expect to be mourned or remembered at all by the world they're leaving behind. For the past four years, Walk of Life has been recording the life stories (“levensverhalen”) of people experiencing homelessness, addiction, marginalisation or profound social isolation. These mini-memoirs are presented on the Walk of Life website and kept in a growing database, to be shared and celebrated in the event of the person's passing.

Zwanine Siedenburg is Walk of Life's project leader, coordinating over 70 volunteers in Amsterdam and other regions to chronicle these rare accounts. She got in touch

with *The Big Issue* after picking up a copy on a family holiday to Australia and reading stories of disadvantage and homelessness that hit home – reminiscent of her neighbours in Amsterdam's red-light district and the complex histories they've shared. I ask Siedenburg if she believes that everybody deserves a legacy, if being remembered is a human right. “Yes,” she replies. “Of course.”

A Protestant pastor who works on the streets with people facing substance addiction, she remembers being asked to conduct a government-sponsored funeral for a person who was barely known to her – nor, it seemed, to anybody else. “They had no family, no friends, nothing,” she remembers, “so then I had to find something to say with little information.”

With support from a local ombudsman, Siedenburg and her team have since captured hundreds of levensverhalen before it's too late. “Everyone wants to be remembered,” she says. “They want to explain why they made certain choices in life, and they want to have a good funeral – where people will know who they were and what they did. There is a big group who might say, ‘No-one is interested in me,’ and, as pastors and volunteers, that is for us to convince them and say, ‘No, you're important. Please tell me what you've been through. The world can learn a lot from you.’”

Arriving at a hospice or shelter, the Walk of Life team may not have an easy time earning the trust of their subjects – people who have been cut off or cast out from social networks or may be in the midst of confronting dire health issues, if not mortality. With Jo-Ann, however, the bond came quickly. Volunteer Lida Langenacker wrote down Jo-Ann's account of heroin addiction, trauma and ultimate acceptance: *Jo-Ann knows that she is in the final phase of her life, the final sentences read. She is not afraid to die. It gives her peace.*

When Siedenburg asked for permission to take a photo, Jo-Ann – a transwoman in her late 50s – requested some help to look her best. “I didn't know her very well, but after 10 minutes of conversation she gives me permission to get so physically close, to shave her face for the photo,”



WALK OF LIFE FOUNDER ZWANINE SIEDENBURG



Siedenburg says. She's thrilled to accommodate requests like this – for moments of grace, dignity or just some well-timed silliness, like when a terminally ill patient asked for a dance. “I was dancing with her in that stupid hospital, and she put her scarfs over all the lights so that it was cosy. I will never forget it – that, for me, is religion.”

Despite her background in theology, Siedenburg says she refuses to proselytise to the people whose lives she records. “I am not on this earth only for myself,” she believes. “I will never use religion as a way to make contact; I only want to talk about what they want to talk about.” Still, the team are often shaken by bearing witness to lifetimes of trauma and can struggle to define where their duty of care begins and ends – how are we meant to talk about the unspeakable? “My daughter always says, ‘You're very Dutch. You're very open and blunt.’ That's how we are. But sometimes when you do speak with someone who is just facing death, waiting for death, I am so afraid to ask the wrong questions,” Siedenburg says. “I don't want to hurt them anymore. But, once you have built a good base and have their confidence, you can ask anything and they will say everything.”

“Everything” is cautionary tales, jokes, whimsical childhood anecdotes, confessions. “Everything” can be all the things one couldn't say in life, like calling out to estranged friends and family in the hopes that they might make a surprise appearance at an impending memorial service. Siedenburg passed on a message for one man

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who had fallen out of contact with his daughter – ailing, he wanted to leave some trace of himself for her to find but didn't want her to know that he was sleeping rough under a bridge. “My daughter is here studying at a very good school, and I feel ashamed for her that I have a life like this. She's not proud of me, but she has to know that I love her, so please write it down,” Siedenburg explains. “It's a sort of testament.”

The Walk of Life project leader always hopes that the alienated people she works with might be welcomed back into the families and communities remembered in their life stories. In a few instances, volunteers have been confronted by relatives who counter their deceased loved one's version of events. Siedenburg replies in these situations, “It's his truth. It's his story. I was not there, and who am I to say that it's not true to him?” And then we start talking.”

Through this talking, writing and memorialising, Walk of Life's expanding library of lives offers a paradox. No two stories of addiction, homelessness or loneliness are alike, capturing vastly diverse perspectives on social issues that affect every one of us; at the same time, it's startling how much they all have in common. Too many describe being abused or kicked out by their parents, being introduced to drugs by a romantic partner, being employed as a sex worker or committing petty crime as a last resort to support themselves. It can break one's heart to read two levensverhalen and realise that each of the subjects might have had a lot to offer one another – company, empathy, support.

“The line between what some may consider a normal life and a life living on the street, it's very thin,” Siedenburg says. “You would be surprised when people tell you their story, and it can start out very much like your own life.” She hopes that readers in the Netherlands and across the world can hear something of themselves in each Walk of Life voice. However, the primary audience of each biographical piece is, first and foremost, the vulnerable person being memorialised.

Jo-Ann thinks she has understood herself, reads the most recent story, capturing Jo-Ann's state of acceptance. *Her motto remains: YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE*. These are solid words to live by. Through Walk of Life, thankfully, they are not entirely true. ■

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