

HER NAME

— WAS —

MARGARET

Life and Death on the Streets



DENISE DAVY

## ACCLAIM FOR *HER NAME WAS MARGARET*

“Denise Davy’s fascinating yet terrifying account should have everyone storming the bastions of power to demand the government deliver on a sixty-year-old promise to provide generous, robust support systems as part of its policy of deinstitutionalization. Instead it threw people out of their psychiatric beds and left them on the streets.

“Against the tragic story of a woman named Margaret, Davy applies journalistic rigour to the great taboo of our times, homelessness. She disabuses the myths and explains the complex issues that cause many to tumble into life on the street. Homelessness is never a choice; it’s a desperate last resort, one that is largely ameliorated by the thankless hours, patience and kindness of doctors, health care workers and volunteers. Such compassion, however, is no solution: it effectively shields from action the political will necessary to wrestle the problem. Successful programs and solutions exist – Davy cites them – so why are they not implemented? Never has society been more prosperous; never has it been so ostrichlike when it comes to the great unnatural disaster of homelessness. Readers, be prepared to ride a wave of emotion from shame to anger to profound grief. *Her Name Was Margaret* is a reminder that the messy lives we see daily are indeed our responsibility.” – Jane Christmas, author of *Open House: A Life in Thirty-Two Moves*

“Growing up in a loveless but well-intentioned family Margaret Jacobson battled lifelong symptoms of mental illness. Davy has written a devastating portrait of a woman who floundered in the Canadian medical system seeking an elixir that couldn’t be distilled. Despite the ravages of homelessness, endless hospital stays and boarding houses, the reader will cheer Margaret’s indefatigable will to survive, her humour, her humanity. This is a book every social worker, every psychiatrist, every caring heart will read and reread. A triumph.” – Susan Doherty, author of *The Ghost Garden: Inside the Lives of Schizophrenia’s Feared and Forgotten*

“Riveting and heartbreaking, Denise Davy’s *Her Name Was Margaret* is a compellingly researched story of mental illness and homelessness. With brilliant attention to detail, Davy takes us inside Margaret’s world, and the result is unforgettable. A must-read for all Canadians with a conscience.”  
– Ann Dowsett Johnston, author of *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*

“I was moved to tears at several points. This was a very moving book for me. How little did I know of those horrible years.” – David Jacobson, Margaret’s brother

“*Her Name Was Margaret* is a moving portrait of a real-life human being – Margaret Jacobson – who lived with a mental illness on the streets of Hamilton. The book documents the many ways that Margaret was cruelly treated by the ‘system,’ and also explains in detail what public policies and programs are needed to solve the problems that people like Margaret face on a daily basis. Regrettably, governments still resist adopting these policies and programs.

“This book is a must-read for anyone with a social conscience. Hopefully the events it describes will motivate readers to pressure governments to finally seriously address the growing problem of homelessness in Canada.”  
– Michael Kirby, former senator and chair of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology

“Margaret’s story chronicles bureaucratic and institutional failures to provide adequate and evidence-based solutions to homelessness and deinstitutionalization. It is also about the kindness of strangers and the opportunity to spread and scale proven solutions to homelessness.” – Steve Lurie, executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Toronto

“Margaret Jacobson was an icon and a mentor to those of us trying to understand mental health and women’s homelessness in the 1980s and 1990s. Denise Davy has impeccably researched Margaret’s life, death and legacy, and written with compassion yet also bluntness about ‘victims of a plan gone mad.’ *Her Name Was Margaret* reads like a mystery story even

though we know the ending.” – Rev. Bill MacKinnon, homeless shelter worker, chaplain at Alexander Place

“Behind every homeless person you might cross the street to avoid is an untold story. The compassion and rigour that Denise Davy brings to Margaret’s story serve as both an epitaph for countless other lives of lost potential and an indictment of a system that neglects its most vulnerable.”  
– Rona Maynard, author of *My Mother’s Daughter*, mental health advocate

“Denise Davy tenderly and compassionately chronicles the painful, abusive and too often inhumane and cruel life and death of Margaret Jacobson. As I read, I was reminded of stark realities endured by those who struggle with disabling mental health, past trauma and other cognitive challenges. And so many youth, men and women I have had the privilege to know – too many of whom have also died in egregious circumstances.

“I was also repeatedly struck by the parallels between the ways the current pandemic has fully exposed racist, classist and misogynist chasms in our economic, social and health systems and the manner in which the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals laid bare the near simultaneous evisceration of community-based supports. Then and now, long-existing and horrendous realities of the inadequacy of institutional care, whether for seniors and others in long-term care or those in psychiatric facilities, exacerbated by economic, health and racial inequalities have led to many more people being forced into poverty and homelessness.

“This book makes a valuable contribution to the policy and legislative work we need to remedy systemic and ongoing inequalities – the inherent inhumanity of systems that far too often render the lives of the most marginalized and vulnerable as disposable.” – Senator Kim Pate

“You will never forget Margaret’s tragic story as rendered here with meticulous research and unflinching compassion. Denise Davy shines a light straight into the heart of the national disaster of mental illness and homelessness in Canada. We have to do something and we have to do it now.” – Diane Schoemperlen, author of *This Is Not My Life: A Memoir of Love, Prison, and Other Complications*

“Margaret Jacobson’s story is woven through this book that informs eloquently the life journey of real people who are part of our community. It lays bare the desperate need to rethink services to ensure sustainable change for everyone’s benefit. Margaret and so many others deserve better. I found myself saying, ‘If only . . .’ so many times while reading about Margaret and hoping that many people will read this compassionately written book and commit to making change. Bravo Denise.” – Honourable Paddy Torsney

“*Her Name Was Margaret* is an unforgettable chronicle of loss and neglect, and a haunting indictment of how we as a society have failed the vulnerable in our midst. We want to cheer for Margaret as she encounters continual challenges and tragedies and somehow finds a way to survive, and yet we know that there are no happy endings in store for her, and many like her. Instead, we descend with Margaret into the darkest, most neglected corners of our cities, and endure every failing attempt to force her into narrow definitions of wellness instead of helping her live with a dignity all her own. Exceptionally well researched and engaging, *Her Name Was Margaret* is a remarkable achievement that compels us to not look away.”  
– Brent van Staalduinen, author of *Boy* and *Nothing But Life*

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*To Margaret and every person who calls the streets their home*

*To my daughters, Emma and Katie, who shine a bright light on every one of  
my days*



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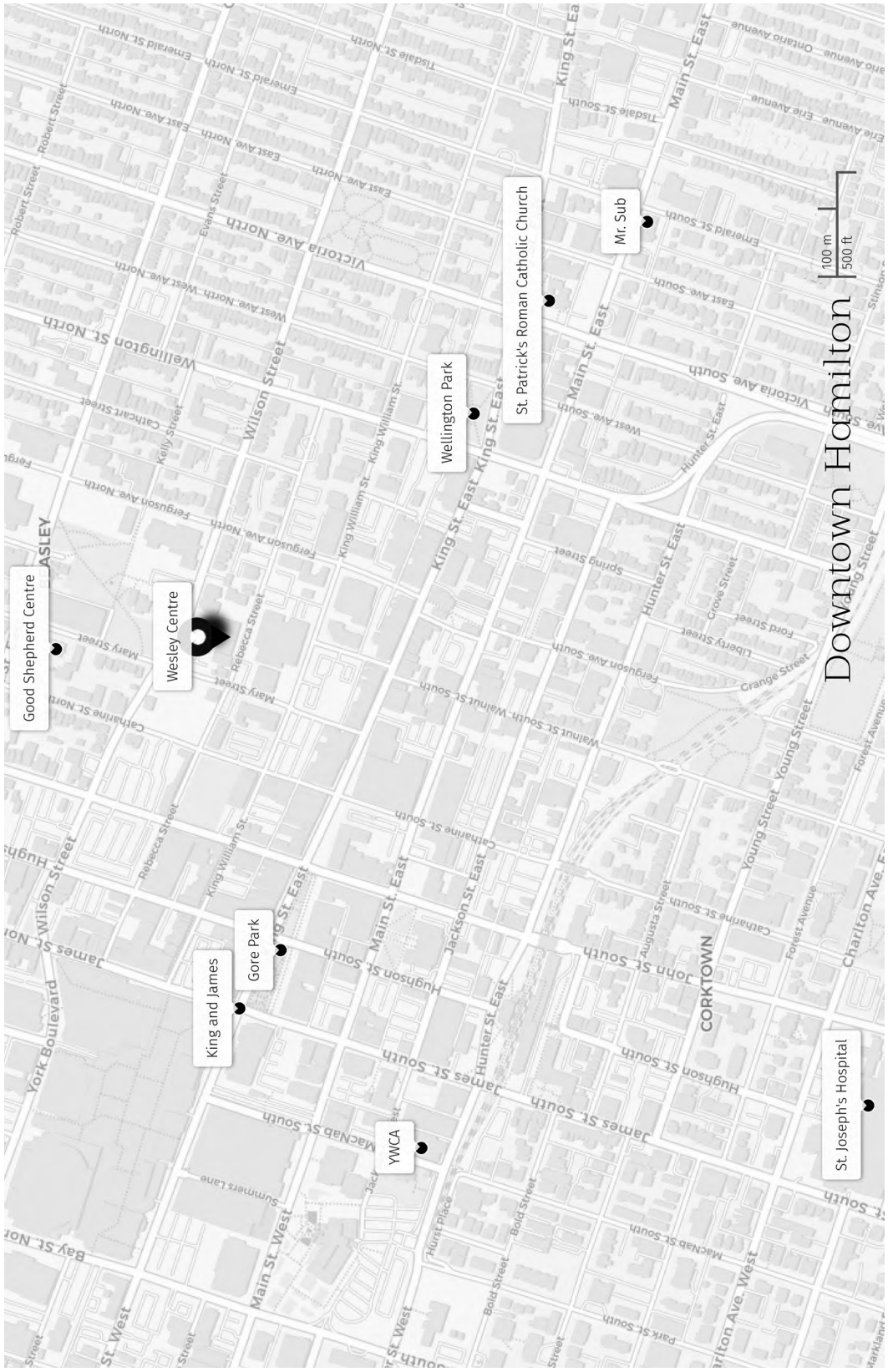
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Good Shepherd Centre

Wesley Centre

King and James

Gore Park

YWCA

Wellington Park

St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church

Mr. Sub

St. Joseph's Hospital



Downtown Hamilton



Margaret as a child. Courtesy of Jacobson family.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The mysteries of Margaret's life were buried among her medical files, an adoption report, a church newsletter, a coroner's report, letters from her family and her personal diary. To fully understand what she went through, I read through hundreds of pages and talked to family, friends, social workers and shelter staff. I exchanged emails with her two nephews in the States and her brother, David, in China. I also visited the shelters where she stayed, retraced her steps from the night she died and sat in the chair where she had her last cup of tea.

The chapters on her years on the streets were pieced together with information from interviews with her friend Bob Dixon, with all facts confirmed by shelter staff. I relied on this information to weave Margaret's story together and recreate some of the more extraordinary moments in her life. Where I don't have permission from a person to quote them, I have used a pseudonym. This is a work of non-fiction; however, the views expressed in parts throughout this book are mine.





## INTRODUCTION

When I began writing this book, my focus was on telling the story of a homeless woman named Margaret, who I met at a shelter one cold winter night. I sat across from her, transfixed by the broken-down woman before me and listened as she shared her story. Meeting Margaret opened my eyes to the reasons why so many homeless people on our streets have a mental illness and became the starting point for my twenty-year journey into the homelessness crisis in Canada.

Margaret is one of thousands of homeless people who have been victimized by a government plan that resulted in one of the grimmest and most shameful chapters in the history of Canada's psychiatric care. What happened to Margaret is the untold story of why so many homeless people today struggle with mental illness and why so few social services exist for them.

This book follows one woman's brutal descent into homelessness and shows how she went from hospital patient to homeless person as a result of deinstitutionalization that swept across the country starting in the 1960s and led to thousands of psychiatric patients being discharged into boarding homes and communities. It was supposed to help former patients become more independent and productive, and take them out of oppressive hospital environments.

Deinstitutionalization moved forward without opposition, and over the next many decades led to the closure of more than 80 percent of psychiatric hospital beds in Canada. The problem was in the government's failure to

set up community services and provide supportive housing for the former psychiatric patients. These same people who had been receiving 24-7 care inside the hospital were moved into the community and suddenly had to fend for themselves.

The supports that were promised never materialized, nor did the services that were supposed to help former patients secure housing and find jobs. The health care workers weren't hired to make sure former patients were taking their medications, and the community treatment centres that were to open in areas close to where patients were being moved were never built. Instead of the former patients living in supportive housing and having access to a wide range of supports, they ended up sleeping in alleyways in cardboard boxes and on top of hot air grates, and begging for spare change for their next meal. Because of this rough living, they're dying at much higher rates and at much younger ages than the general population.

This book shows how deinstitutionalization was the catalyst for the crisis that exists on our streets today. While it may have successfully reduced the patient population inside psychiatric hospitals, it also created a subculture of mentally ill homeless people who wander the streets today. Most survive by relying on a network of underfunded shelters and hot meal programs that are held together by shoestring budgets and the compassion of dedicated volunteers.

MARGARET HAD THE misfortune to enter the psychiatric hospital system in the 1960s, when deinstitutionalization was in full swing. She was only seventeen, still an impressionable teenager. Caught up in the frenzy to close beds, doctors repeatedly discharged her into rundown, unregulated boarding homes that were typically operated by people with zero experience working with persons with mental illness. Although no community supports were offered, she was expected to do it all – from making bus trips to the hospital for medication to keep her schizophrenic symptoms under control to managing her finances.

In short time, she would falter. She would stop going to the hospital and, once off her medication, would begin her free fall. During the twenty-four years that Margaret spent in a psychiatric hospital, she was discharged several times, each one ending more tragically than the one before. With each move, she became sicker and sicker. But that didn't deter medical staff from releasing her again. This same process was inflicted on thousands of psychiatric patients during deinstitutionalization. Staff who worked at the hospital remember being told that the goal was to get patients out, regardless of their condition when they came back. Because there was so little, if any, follow-up on patients, their outcomes and how they fared isn't known. Their stories have never been told – until now. As a result of gaining unprecedented access to Margaret's 869-page medical file, we're being given a glimpse into what happened to one of those patients and how it led her into homelessness.

Margaret's story unfolded many years ago on the streets of Hamilton, Ontario, but similar stories have played out – and are still playing out – in cities and towns across Canada. Every year, an estimated 235,000 people are counted among the homeless population in Canada and, on any given night, 35,000 people are sleeping on our streets. The exact number who have some form of a mental illness may be as high as 70 percent.

They often fall into the group known as the chronically homeless – those who have been there the longest – and they suffer from the most severe health problems. They are more vulnerable to developing frostbite and sunstroke and other issues from exposure to the elements. Having a mental illness puts them at much higher risk to experiencing homelessness; however, some people develop a mental illness only after they become homeless. The cruel reality of sleeping rough means not knowing where you'll be sleeping each night, eating a poor diet and living in a heightened state of fear of being assaulted or raped. All of these explain why there are such high rates of anxiety and depression among homeless people.

The tragic story of deinstitutionalization's impact has never been told. Neither has any group or government body ever been held accountable

for the outcome. While the closure of psychiatric beds and hospitals saved the government billions of dollars, few of those funds were rerouted into community supports. It wasn't that anyone disagreed with the concept of deinstitutionalization; it was the subsequent failure to set up adequate community supports and supportive housing that was the problem.

The truth of how Margaret's life trajectory was impacted by that flawed plan needs to be told because the reality is, we are still sentencing people with mental illness to life on the streets. Their stories are the stories of deinstitutionalization's failures. And yet today, as the numbers of homeless grow, so has our capacity to look away. Now when we see someone on the streets, we walk by and ignore them. As American psychiatrist and essayist Charles Krauthammer wrote, "Thirty years ago, if you saw a person lying helpless on the street, you ran to help him. Now you step over him. You know that he is not an accident victim. He lives there."

That's true in cities across the country. In Toronto, encampments have been built under highways where people sleep in tents, even during the winter. In Windsor, Ontario, in 2016, a woman was discovered sleeping in a dog cage on the street. The *Windsor Star* reported that by the time word of her plight spread through social media, she'd been living in the cage for eight months.

In Edmonton in 2017, city workers removed 1,690 homeless people from camps set up along Edmonton's River Valley, where people were living under tarps and in tents. One homeless man named Shane told *Global News* he had stayed in a tent with two other people in -25°C weather. Said Shane, "I don't want to spend another winter [outside]. No. My feet, my back, it'll kill me."

In 2016 in Victoria, BC, droves of homeless people camped out on the lawn of a courthouse until the province closed the tent city down. Victoria has one of the highest (per capita) numbers of homeless in Canada. According to a 2016 count, there were 1,387 homeless people, although shelter workers said that the number was closer to 1,800 as the count didn't include the hidden homeless, those people who stay with relatives, friends

or even strangers because they have no other option, also known as couch surfing. Some became homeless after losing their low-rental housing to gentrification. Others may have been hospitalized for a mental illness then released under short stay policies, then because of so few supports, they ended up in a shelter. Many people who struggle with a mental illness find the loud, chaotic environment of shelters impossible to handle, and so they sleep on the streets.

But people with mental illness aren't only languishing on our streets; they're stagnating in our prisons where the numbers are so high that prisons have been called the new asylums. Inmates with a mental illness are living within these chaotic confines and are not receiving any supports. It's little wonder they're at such high risk to self-injury, premature death and solitary confinement, which involves isolation for twenty-two or more hours a day in a cell the size of two queen-sized mattresses.

With more people living on the street, it's highly likely that the number of homeless deaths has increased; however, it's impossible to know since many municipalities don't count them. BC is an exception, and in 2016, a report from the BC Coroners Services showed that the number of homeless people dying on streets across BC had steadily increased since 2011, largely due to the overdose crisis. Of the 175 deaths reported, ninety-three – more than half – were the result of drug overdoses or alcohol poisoning. That number is triple the thirty-eight homeless people who died due to drugs or alcohol the previous year. The 175 homeless deaths, including sixteen in Victoria, was more than double the seventy deaths recorded the year before. That was up from 2011, when twenty-five homeless deaths were recorded.

On the east coast, on Cape Breton Island, the Homeless Hub identified 137 homeless people. This might not seem like a high number, but consider that the island's total population sits at around 100,000. The problem is particularly serious for homeless women as there are no overnight shelters for women on Cape Breton Island. The executive director of the Cape Breton Community Housing Association told council: "Twenty-four of those in-

dividuals were sleeping outside or in a place not fit for human habitation.” Many would say that we wouldn’t subject dogs to the kind of treatment we deem acceptable for homeless people.

In 2016, CAEH and York University’s Canadian Observatory on Homelessness released a report called *The State of Homelessness in Canada 2016*, which recommended ways for the government to start solving the homeless problem. They include expanding the supply of permanent housing by 50,000 units and creating an Urban Indigenous Housing Strategy to address the disproportionate number of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. While Indigenous people make up around 4.9 percent of the population, in major urban areas like Toronto they comprise 20 to 50 percent of the homeless population. Other groups who experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate include LGBTQIA2 youth, new immigrants and people who struggle with mental illness and addiction.

LOOKING BACK INTO the history of psychiatric care, it’s a challenge to find any period in which people with mental illness have been treated well. In the 1750s, some US asylums began allowing visitors so they could gawk at the “lunatics,” a practice that became so popular it was likened to a Sunday afternoon visit to the zoo. As Robert Whitaker wrote in *Mad in America: Bad Science, Bad Medicine and the Enduring Mistreatment of the Mentally Ill*, “Philadelphians were eager to get a glimpse of these wretched creatures, with good sport on occasion to be had by taunting them, particularly those restrained in irons and easily roused into a rage.”

Today, more than 260 years later, you don’t have to visit the local asylum to catch a glimpse of the patients – you just have to walk down the street. There you’ll see the ragged parade of men and women pushing rusty grocery carts and sleeping rough on sidewalks and in alleyways. Lest you think we’ve come a long way, these scenes are a testimony to how little progress has been made. As long as one person is sleeping on a park bench or struggling to find warmth over a hot air grate, we can’t pride ourselves on being a

compassionate and caring country. In a country where housing should be a human right, it's instead only available to some.

THIS IS MARGARET'S story. It's the story of a child who showed great potential; she was an A student, played the piano and accordion, and taught Sunday school classes. Her grade school teacher described her as a "quiet, hard-working girl with a great ambition to succeed." Instead, she became a toothless, worn-down homeless woman who haunted the streets and smoked two packs a day. Margaret wasn't just a mentally ill homeless person. She was a human being and she had a name, which is the most important piece of identity anyone has. Once we know the names and stories of all homeless people, it will be harder for us to turn away.





DENISE DAVY IS a nationally recognized, award-winning journalist who specializes in writing about mental health, homelessness and gender issues. She worked at the *Hamilton Spectator* for twenty-six years, was twice honoured with the Journalist of the Year award by the Ontario Newspaper Association and is a recipient of a National Newspaper Award, several Ontario Newspaper Association awards and two awards from the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario. In 1993, the Canadian Association of Journalists awarded her for co-founding the National Women in the Media conference.

She is the recipient of four national journalism fellowships, which allowed her to investigate child prostitution in Thailand, poverty in India and the crisis in children's mental health services in Canada.

She is founder of Purses for Margaret, which provides toiletries to homeless women. She lives in Burlington, ON.

At age eighteen, Margaret Jacobson was admitted to the Ontario Hospital, later renamed the Hamilton Psychiatric Hospital. Years later, she died homeless and alone in the city. With meticulous research and deep compassion, Denise Davy has pieced together Margaret's story – from promising student to patient, to homeless woman, to an unmarked grave – and asks us to look hard at the system that buried her there.

## Praise for *Her Name Was Margaret*

“Read this book. Open your heart to the human beings in front of you surviving, against so many odds, on the streets. As a society, we have erased the history of so many people every time we walk by them without wondering what brought this person to this place. This story will help you find your humanity.” – CLARA HUGHES, *OLYMPIAN* AND AUTHOR OF *OPEN HEART*, *OPEN MIND*

“Davy tells two stories in this fine book – the riveting, but tragic, story of Margaret and the bigger story about the failure of our social services to care for people with chronic mental illness. Davy helps us understand the point of view of homeless people and increases our empathy and desire to act on their behalf. I recommend this book to all who want to make the world a kinder place.” – MARY PIPHER, AUTHOR OF *REVIVING OPHELIA: SAVING THE SELVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS*

“Being sick with mental illness shouldn't lead to homelessness and premature death. Let the intimate story of Margaret touch you, make you weep, motivate you to rage against government's inaction; then inspire you to work for change.” – OLIVIA CHOW, FORMER MP, FOUNDER OF INSTITUTE FOR CHANGE LEADERS



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