

The power of the street lens and pen help an 'invisible' poet get seen

Jean Boulay's first impression of "Crazy" Dave Dessler, the homeless poet eking out his days on the sidewalk, scribbling verse on stray cardboard, was a cold-hearted chill.

"There it was; a dark mass, triangular in shape and seemingly frozen in time. It looked and felt totally out of place. As if emitting some form of energy, it seemed to strike at my subconscious. Suddenly there was movement — a hand came



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COMMENTARY

out from under the dark covering and pushed back the part of the blanket that covered his head — just enough for his

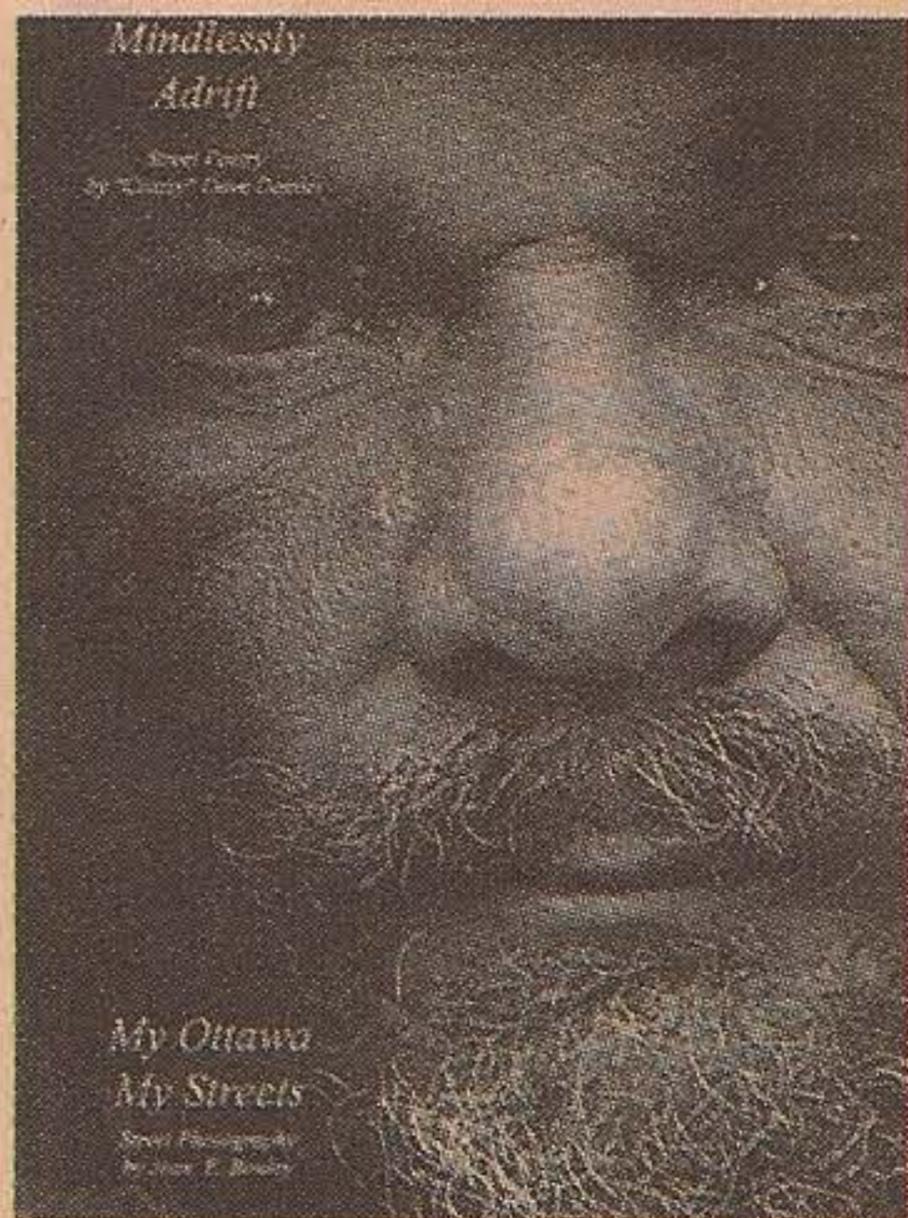
face to appear into the light of day.

"I was in a strange place to say the least," he later wrote.

It was Dec. 9, 2006 — the birthday of an unusual collaboration. Mr. Boulay said a little voice in the back of his head told him to take the homeless man's photo.

He did so, striking up a conversation that has never really ended.

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BOOK COVER PHOTO BY JEAN BOULAY

Photographer Jean Boulay and poet 'Crazy' Dave Dessler collaborated on *Mindlessly Adrift* — *My Ottawa My Streets*.

Egan: Poet hopes to afford a place to live

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The two men — a destitute poet, a middle-class photographer with a government IT job — have melded their art into a new book, *Mindlessly Adrift — My Ottawa My Streets*.

It was launched yesterday — where else? right by Mr. Dessler's personal piece of concrete, on George Street near the corner of Sussex and later at La Petite Mort, a gallery on Cumberland Street.

The man with no home now had a tome. Before curious rush-hour traffic, in a spitting rain, the two men sat under a portable tent and signed their glossy effort, about 100 pages of poems and photos.

Mr. Dessler, 46, said he was a little overwhelmed at the attention. He said his hands actually shook when he opened the book for the first time.

"I was astounded."

A fixture on the same corner for more than two years, he admits to a "checkered past" that includes jail time and stays on the street because, like so many, he loathes shelters.

A self-described busker, he sells his poems, which tend to focus on what he senses at street level.

Invisible is a typical effort.

"The wind blows, the leaves flutter with its touch, the birds sitting in the branches, chirping. People pass, oblivious to this, and anything else, as they rush through their busy days. Seconds tick, hours pass, B4 long, the day is done, And still, I sit here, knowing what it's like, 2B invisible."

He is hoping the proceeds from the \$40 book will give him

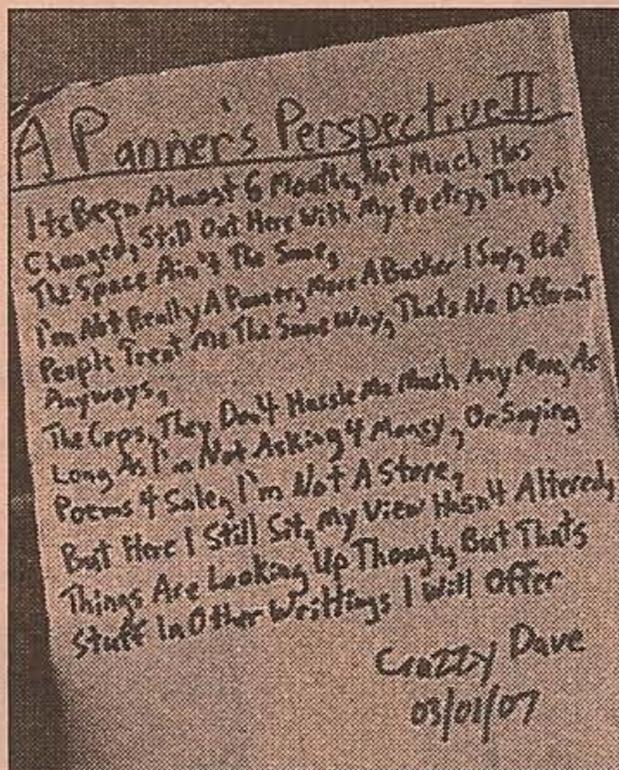


PHOTO BY JEAN BOULAY

'Crazy' Dave Dessler sells his poems on the street and calls himself a busker.

enough of a stake to establish himself in a room or apartment. His writing may evolve to short stories or novel-writing, he said.

"If it leads me to somewhere better, then fantastic. If it leads me to somewhere safer, then perfect."

Mr. Boulay, 54, a self-taught lensman, often roams downtown practising "street" photography, a genre that juxtaposes common urban settings with unusual human activity or simply casts the mundane in an artistic light.

He shot hundreds of pictures of Mr. Dessler, dropping by about once a week for about a year.

In the book, the homeless poet is presented in summer and winter, asleep in the low light of morning, smoking, chatting, faceless with only hands out, holding his cardboard poems, and surrounded by his motley belongings.

"I'm trying to show what it's

like to be Dave on the street," said Mr. Boulay. Only days ago, he had some firsthand experience when he sat in Mr. Dessler's spot for an hour.

"You should see the way people look at you. Some guy wanted to buy my camera. And I thought, 'How could he do this for two years?'"

The book was made possible because of the financial backing of Steve Hambling, president of Piccolo Grande, a By-Ward-area ice cream shop.

Like hundreds of others, Mr. Hambling first met Mr. Dessler as he walked down George Street and felt an immediate sympathy.

"I call him Super Dave. If you can sleep on the friggin' sidewalk in December, January, February, when it's minus 30, you're a hero, man."

He heard idle chatter about the possible book for weeks, then, out of frustration, decided to get involved. He contacted an acquaintance at Tri-Graphic Printing Ltd. and, before he knew it, he was on his way to becoming a first-time publisher.

Mr. Hambling only wants his original stake back, allowing the men to split the profits.

The book also includes a second chapter on Mr. Boulay's street photography and the transcript of an interview he conducted with the poet.

The book is available at Piccolo Grande on Murray Street and from the co-authors themselves (check www.jeanboulay.com). Bookstores are now being lined up for retail sales.

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