

A black and white photograph of a person walking down a street at night. The person is wearing a dark hooded jacket and is walking away from the camera. The street is illuminated by several streetlights, creating a hazy, atmospheric glow. On the left side of the street, there are buildings and utility poles with wires. The overall mood is somber and quiet.

A SHELTER FROM THE COLD

IN ORANGEVILLE, HOMELESS YOUTH ARE OFFERED CHOICES

BY IAIN RICHMOND

PHOTOS BY TOM PARTLETT

When Justin came through the restaurant door I was relieved. This was my first meeting with someone who fell into the category of ‘homeless youth.’ My trepidation, the result of a conjured stereotype, was immediately dispelled. He looked like most 20 year olds: baggy jeans, red running shoes, fall windbreaker, backpack, all topped with the ubiquitous baseball cap.

Most comforting, however, was his open manner, his courtesy and his good humour. A recent arrival from the streets and shelters of Toronto, Justin (not his real name) had a connection in Orangeville who recommended Choices Youth Shelter as a springboard out of what he described as “the great sucking vacuum of Toronto homelessness.”

For young people, between the ages of 16 and 24, Choices provides “emergency and transitional housing” when they find themselves without a place to sleep. The reasons youths arrive at Choices range from rebellion against rules at home to much more grievous problems. Although some out-of-town transients, like Justin, land on the front steps, the majority of those who have used the shelter in the six years since it opened have been local. And the demand is high with 3047 ‘bed uses’ in 2004 – an 83.4 per cent occupancy rate. The closest shelters providing similar services are as far away as Brampton, Barrie, Guelph and Newmarket.

I was there to hear Justin’s story. He told me he has a caring mother whom he loves and admires and still communicates with regularly. She now lives in another province. In Grade 10, at 16, he says he felt he had no choice but to leave home. The man in his mother’s life at that time administered regular beatings to both him and his mum. A subtle scar over his left eye is testament to this. After four years spent travelling across the country, sometimes working, sometimes even settling, he found himself regularly drawn back to the culture of the streets. It had become the life he knew best.

His grey eyes steady, he was articulate, intelligent and fully aware that he alone was responsible for whatever became of him. At the same time he was grateful for the support he has had over the years from shelters, counsellors, anger management training and other support workers.

Most of us, when evoking an image of the homeless, see bodies huddled in sleeping bags in doorways or on sidewalks, or drug-addled, vaguely crazy men pan-handling for loonies. This describes only those who live on the periphery of society and who, more often than not, do indeed have problems related to substance abuse and/or mental illness. Social agencies describe this group as the ‘chronically homeless.’ They live at the far end of the continuum – the end that Choices hopes the youths who use its shelter will be able to avoid.

In fact, homelessness has “a thousand faces,” according to one expert. Every individual has his or her own story. A recent government document admits, “there is no consensus as to the scope of the phenomenon, its causes and remedies or even the composition of the homeless population.” Little wonder that this remains an alien landscape for those of us with fixed addresses surrounded by appliances, curtains and lawns. Trying to identify and quantify the homeless is like trying to grasp a handful of water.

Still, a general definition might be: “Individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.” This still casts a wide net, including people who have

lost their dwelling as a consequence of some natural disaster, the poor, the jobless, victims of family violence, those facing psychiatric challenges, refugees, and runaway youths, among many others.

The largest single group affected by homelessness is women with children, followed by youth. It has been a long struggle, but there is now a level of social understanding of women’s need for emergency shelter and an established infrastructure for them to turn to. And women, especially mothers, are generally more willing to seek help when they need it. In Orangeville, Family Transition Place has been providing women with shelter, counselling and protection from violence for twenty years.

Problem is, we can’t see them, so we can’t count them. They are described in the literature as the ‘hidden homeless.’ This includes kids who, by night, are ‘couch-surfing’ in the homes of friends, sleeping in secretive spots such as cars, abandoned buildings, rooftops, laundromats or (in the summer months) in secluded wooded areas.

Violence against youth can be just as dangerous, says Choices director Mary Vervoort, but they are not accorded the same social respect. If a teenager is treated violently by a parent, she says, the response tends to be, “You probably deserved it.”

Furthermore, when young people are troubled, they tend to isolate themselves from the adult world. If they have a difficult relationship with adults in their family or school, they are more likely to seek comfort in a peer group.

School is popularly believed to be the great equalizer. In fact, high school in particular can exact a rather rigorous right-of-passage that segregates the population into clearly defined strata. It wasn’t supposed to be that way when schools were ‘de-streamed’ with the goal of desegregating – and de-stigmatizing – the ‘technical’ students, as they used to be called, from students in the academic stream.

‘Choices’ is a springboard out of what Justin describes as “the great sucking vacuum of Toronto homelessness.”

With budgets that rarely allow them to go beyond ‘the basics’ and an increased emphasis on standardized testing, the stress on academic achievement suits only a portion of a student body. As the other students fall behind, their drop-out rate increases. Such rates are much lower locally than in inner-city schools, however. In the last three years, according to the guidance department at Orangeville Secondary

School, the percentage of students who leave school early has fluctuated between four and eight per cent.

Nevertheless, there is a social stigma attached to kids who fail or drop out of high school. With a limited set of skills and few options in the job market, their social status plummets, and presumably so must their sense of self. Is it any surprise then that many of them seek validation elsewhere? If there is also conflict at home, some of them turn to the culture of the street, with all the attendant temptations that implies.

Another misconception about homelessness is that it is exclusively an urban issue. Not so, says Dr. Noni McDonald, a former researcher of pediatrics at the University of Ottawa. She finds that “homeless youth are everywhere throughout Ontario, including small towns and rural communities.”

The problem is, we can’t see them, so we can’t count them. They are described in the literature as the “hidden homeless.” This includes kids who, by night, are ‘couch-surfing’ in the homes of friends, sleeping in secretive spots such as cars, abandoned buildings, rooftops, laundromats or, in the summer months, in secluded wooded areas. By day they become just young people walking from here to there or standing about in parking lots. It is a fluid population, always on the move.

So, is homelessness a problem in the hills? Orangeville police chief Rod Freeman doesn’t think so. In his words the issue is “not problematic for us.” This means, at least, these youngsters are not attracting police attention by committing crimes. When I asked Justin the same question, he did not hesitate: “If the shelter is full, there is a problem.”

Toni Heemskerck, a full-time youth worker with The Door, the drop-in and out-reach service provided by Highland Youth for Christ, offers further insight. Two or three nights a week Toni, who is by now familiar with the homeless haunts, drives around town dispensing drinks and snacks and offering counselling to the kids on the street. Even she isn’t sure how many are ‘homeless,’ but estimates that at on any given night there are a dozen kids sleeping, or trying to sleep, in the shadows of Orangeville’s streets.

Mary Vervoort has kept records on the 465 young people who have used the shelter since 1999. There is no ‘typical’ youth, but a summary of her data looks like this: Average age, 17.5 years old; 60 per cent are male, 40 per cent female; Grade 10 incomplete (fewer than 5 per cent return to school immediately); 70 per cent are from broken homes; 50 per cent left home as a consequence of personal safety issues; 90 per cent have suffered abuse in one form or another. (Mary quotes an expert as saying, “The power of the spoken word lies not so much in how it is intended as how it is perceived.”)

Asked what would happen to these young people if there were no interventions like Choices and The Door, Mary says bluntly: “They likely would wind up in jail.” More than 70 per cent of the kids who arrive at Choices have already been in some form of conflict with the law. Not, Mary says, because of serious crimes, but rather ‘crimes of circumstance,’ such as stealing food or trespassing in order to find a warm place to sleep. Without a local option like Choices, many of them would almost certainly drift into the “sucking vacuum” of urban homelessness. In any case, if early intervention were not available, the cost to the community would only escalate.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

IN ORANGEVILLE, HOMELESS YOUTH ARE OFFERED CHOICES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

Through the efforts of local social service agencies and volunteer groups, federal funding through the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI, or Skippy, as it is known) recently arrived in Dufferin. Under the auspices of the county, The Door received \$147,000 and Choices received \$100,000 to put toward their programs. The Door is affiliated with a national organization, Youth Unlimited, whereas Choices is independent. However, both rely on the generosity of private donations and the energy of volunteers.

Choices was born out of the work of the Dufferin Youth Action Council, a committee formed in 1998 with funding from Employment Canada and administered by the Town of Orangeville. Its mandate was to determine the needs of local young people regarding education, employment, housing and other services. Funding for education and employment was made available to Community Youth Services on Armstrong Street, leaving the Youth Action Council to concentrate on housing and other services. Under the direction of Ila Sisson, the committee consulted adults and young people in Grand Valley, Shelburne and Orangeville. Out of these meetings it became clear that lack of housing was a critical impediment to youth employment. It's hard to apply for work without an address. Therefore the establishment of a shelter became a priority.

The committee was offered a house on Chisholm Street and the Orangeville Rotary Club agreed to pay the rent for the first year. As luck would have it, though, a bureaucratic foul-up resulted in a sudden withdrawal of the Employment Canada funding. This left the committee with a rented house, but no money to implement a program. Discouraged, but with remarkable resolve, they continued with their objective to get the shelter up and running. To do this required volunteers. And, in an extraordinary instance of grass roots energy and endurance, the committee soon found people willing to devote time to supervise the house, solicit donations of furniture, bedding, toiletries, food and clothing.

"I felt real pride," Ila recalls, "in being part of an organization that kept itself alive through money that came from the community and through the efforts of volunteers." More angels fell from the sky. The United Way made money available, Clorox, (a local company) contributed \$11,000, and the county contributed \$4,000.

Sitting at the end of a cul-de-sac, the townhouse is modest by any standard. With a living space of less than 1,000



Youth worker Toni Heemsker estimates that on any given night there are a dozen kids sleeping, or trying to sleep, in the shadows of Orangeville's streets.

square feet, the front door opens into a living room lined with cast-off couches. This leads through to a long narrow kitchen stretching across the twenty-foot width of the house. Upstairs five sets of bunk beds are distributed among the three small bedrooms, giving the shelter its ten-bed capacity. The county funds five of the beds on a per diem basis with money from the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Mary Vervoort and the eight frontline and administrative staff at Choices are welcoming and instructive. Talking to them, one feels the depth of compassion and concern they all share for the kids who flow through the shelter. The mission statement defines their purpose: "To be a safe and supportive resource within Dufferin County that offers youth, 16 to 24 years of age, an alternative to living on the street and supports their transition to a more productive and brighter future."

Residents can stay at Choices rent free for the first month. After that residents are charged ten dollars per week as a first step toward taking responsibility for themselves. The average stay is

sixty-nine days, says Mary. "There is no specific cut off, as long as they are progressing toward a plan." Choices offers them the time they need, with the help of local agencies, to find work, return to school, choose to return home, or otherwise support themselves independently. "Right now," says Mary, "every one of our kids is working or at school."

Choices is a "good place" according to Justin. "The rules are strict, but that's necessary if the place is really going to help kids prepare for the next step towards a more secure life."

Those rules include no smoking, sexual contact, drugs or drug paraphernalia in the shelter. Residents must not miss scheduled appointments in the community or house meetings. They must call if they're going to be late coming in. They must also keep the bedrooms clean and clutter free, do their own laundry and wash the dishes after meals, and complete other assigned household chores every night.

Failure to comply with the rules could lead to discharge. However, even if someone is asked to leave the shelter, he or she can, by arrangement, come back for

lunch, dinner or a shower if required.

On January 6, Choices will move to a new, permanent home at 59 Townline. The new house is more than twice the size of the current location and has already been approved for fourteen beds. Owning the house will save the costly rent drain and, it is hoped, reduce the three-to-six week waiting list for their services.

The purchase was made possible by the appearance of two more anonymous angels. Both will contribute to the down payment on the new house, and one of them has guaranteed three years of mortgage payments. This leaves the board and staff to find the remaining \$15,000 to complete the down payment.

As far as Ila Sisson is concerned, "This is a perfect opportunity for the community once again, to come in and move this forward." And, as Mary adds, "We can't always depend on government. Communities have to look after themselves some of the time."

There is no doubt, this is a home built on community support.

The week after I met him, Justin found work with the assistance of Dufferin Community Services and is now saving for that necessary first and last month's rent. He will also begin work soon, through Community Youth Services, towards his high school equivalency credits. He has such potential. They all do. ∞

Iain Richmond is a retired teacher and freelance writer who lives near Orangeville.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN THE ORANGEVILLE AREA

Choices Youth Shelter
519-942-5970

Highland Youth for Christ, The Door
519-941-0690

Centre for Mental Health, Orangeville
519-938-8776

Community Youth Services
(Employment Counselling)
519-942-9986

County of Dufferin Community Services
519-941-6991

Dufferin Child and Family Services
519-941-1530

Dufferin Parent Support Network
519-940-8678

Family Transition Place
519-941-4357 or 1-800-265-9178

Homewood Community Alcohol and Drug Services
519-942-2361

Salvation Army Family Services
519-941-2570

Wellington-Guelph-Dufferin Health Unit
519-941-0760

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

It's not just youth who can have difficulty maintaining adequate shelter.

The period between the late forties and the early eighties has been described as the golden years of social housing in Ontario. In the span of 26 years between 1947 and 1972, government funded 600,000 new housing units. In 1973, the Trudeau government created The National Housing Act, maintaining that "good housing at a reasonable cost is a social right of every citizen of this country... This must be our objective, our obligation and our goal."

Things started shifting in the eighties, when reducing the deficit became a political priority and social spending began its precipitous decline. As the investment in public housing waned, the number of people turning to shelters escalated. In Toronto, bed use rose from an average of 1,000 per night in 1985 to 2,400 in 1992, and to 4,900 in 2000. Clearly, as the economic deficit shrank the social deficit grew.

In 1995, the Ontario government reduced welfare payments by 20 per cent. According to Professor Michael Ornstein of the York University Institute for Social Research, "These cuts alone forced 67,000 single parent families from existing housing – the largest eviction of families with children in Ontario's history."

In 1999, the federal government took the first steps to redress the crisis, promising to make available \$735 million nationwide over a six-year period through the National Homelessness Initiative, and its offspring, the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative ('Skippy'). The intention was to "assist government and community organizations to work together to alleviate homelessness." Choices Youth Shelter and Highland Youth for Christ in Orangeville were recent beneficiaries of the fund.

This summer the provincial government announced a new affordable housing program by which the province will match federal funding provided by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Daniel Best, director of County of Dufferin Community Services, knows that very few people choose to be homeless for an extended length of time. Dan and his staff prefer to see themselves in the business of 'homelessness prevention.' Through them, the province funds five beds at Choices and three at Family Transition Place. In addition, they operate a 'rent bank' to help financially stressed residents avoid eviction, as well as an 'energy bank' for those facing hydro or gas cut-offs. They also partner with the Salvation Army to offer motel vouchers and transitional housing to people in temporary need. In addition, they administer the Ontario Works program, providing financial and employment assistance to about 250 individuals.

Community Services manages the 225 county-owned supportive housing units in Dufferin (of which 165 are designated for seniors) and administers the funding for another 347 non-profit or co-operative units. There are currently about 420 applicants on the county's three-to-four-year waiting list for supportive housing. (If that seems like a long time, Daniel points out that the waiting list in large urban areas like Toronto is up to ten years.)

With the announcement of the new provincial funding program, Daniel Best and his staff are already preparing an application to improve the stock of affordable housing in the county.

In her office on Mill Street, Donna Kennedy of the Salvation Army puts a human face to the statistics and the need as she describes the recent situation of one man. He was a 31-year-old refugee from a war-torn country. Under threat of death, he left a successful business and emigrated to Canada with his wife and 10-year-old daughter. Landing in a small Ontario city a few miles from here, unable to speak English well, he could not find work. Soon they found themselves homeless. He suffered a personal breakdown, his marriage crumbled, he was alone and desperate. An acquaintance suggested he relocate to Orangeville. He arrived at Donna's doorstep penniless and without hope.

That was last March. The Salvation Army put him up at a local motel and offered moral support and friendship. Within a week, with the help of Community Services, he found work in a local factory. Six months later this man had regained his self esteem, found permanent accommodation, joined a local church, and involved himself in sending aid packages to his homeland from the Salvation Army Thrift Shop. Best of all, he has now reunited with his wife and daughter and is looking forward to the time when they can move into their own home in the community.

