

I remember when

*Keynote at Haven Toronto's AGM
May 14, 2019*

It's been really great to get reacquainted with Haven (Good Neighbours Club) in the last few years. Thanks for the work you do: wonderful staff volunteers and partner organizations.

Many moons ago I would come down once in a while to look for a client. Someone named the Major stood at the main door deciding if he would let me in or not. He ran a tight ship. I also had a lot of fun playing baseball on the Street Health team against your team.

Thinking about way back then I'm reminded how very naïve I was as a young street nurse working just up the street at Sherbourne and Dundas.

I give an example in my upcoming memoir with these questions I asked myself, and then the answers I learned.

Q: Why were there so many people with Maritime accents?

A: Just like the context in the movie 'Goin' Down the Road', during times of recession all roads lead to the big city. People migrate looking for opportunities or services not available in their small town.

Q: Why did the man I see in the clinic wearing a shirt with the name "Hank" written above the pocket say his name was something else?

A: Because he got the "Hank" shirt in the clothing donation room.

So about my book. It's called A Knapsack Full of Dreams.

Tommy Douglas was described as having a suitcase full of dreams. He not only fought for Medicare, he wanted good schools, good roads – infrastructure. I feel the same way.

By the way, my ‘Knapsack’ is now in the Museum of History in Ottawa.

I want to read a few excerpts from my book:

“Lessons Learned

I always say I cut my teeth as a Street Nurse in All Saints Church where we operated two clinics.

It’s where I learned that having access to running water at a clinic made it the “Cadillac clinic.”

Every single time I carried the basin to the bathroom to fill it with water to soak someone’s feet, I thought of the symbolism of Mary Magdalene.

It was at this job where I learned how to scrounge for supplies, such as getting donations of first aid supplies from VIA Rail. It’s where I learned how to do quasi-sterile dressings in the most unsterile environment. It’s where I saw frostbite, tuberculosis, lice, necrotizing fasciitis (flesh eating disease), and second-degree burns from sleeping on a grate—all for the first time.

I’m ashamed to say that while I was nursing at street level, working at Street Health at Sherbourne and Dundas in 1993, I did not see the federal government cancel its national housing program. I was totally unaware. I don’t recall reading about it; I don’t recall any activism like protests on that front at all. It’s why I say, “Don’t ever let a program that you value disappear because it’s almost impossible to get it back.”

I learned my lesson.

When Ontario’s Premier Mike Harris went on to also cancel our provincial housing program in 1996, I joined with activists to fight back. Sadly, Harris was successful in cancelling 17,000 units of affordable housing that were already under development. It is estimated these units would have housed 40,000 people. Across the country, this pattern of governments withdrawing from building and supporting affordable housing repeated itself and the rest is history. And we still see it today.

I learned other important lessons during this time.

I learned that Canada's so-called social safety net has many holes in it. I learned that homelessness and its accompanying evil twin—poverty—were acts of structural violence and a direct result of decisions made to allocate resources away from social programs.

I learned that the health care system itself had little impact on my patients' health and that as a nurse I better work beyond providing "Band-Aid" care.

That meant looking upstream. (Parable: The story of visiting healthcare workers pulling bodies out of the river, attempting resuscitation however more bodies keep coming down the river. Finally someone says who or what is pushing the bodies into the river upstream?)

I remember one of my early eye-opening experiences that taught me about upstream/downstream. In 1989, I heard about the Inglis plant closure in Toronto. The plant was famous for its employment of women during the 1940s, when it had produced over 150,000 Bren machine guns during the Second World War, and then during peacetime for its production of washers and dryers. The plant closure was attributed to the new Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement, with production transferred to a non-union plant in Ohio. Several months after its closure, I was shocked to see some of the plant's laid-off workers at the Dixon Hall men's shelter. They were homeless. These were the men "thrown into the river." I was so taken aback that I realized that to better understand my work, I would need to look at how policies like Free Trade were impacting our economy and pushing people into danger. In order to better understand and address homelessness, I would need to pay attention to the business pages of the newspaper.

Over the years I've been invited a few times to speak to CMHC. I would always tell them a story or two to try to express to them the urgency for them to actually fund and build housing.

Alex

Alex was a Maritimer from New Brunswick and about fifty-seven when I first met him. He was unemployed and had been homeless for decades. He usually stayed at Seaton House or the Dixon Hall Shelter and periodically outside. I could always tell when he'd been at the old O'Neill Bath House because he would still have this thick, white coating of soap all

over his body. Everyone used to. He always drank. Over the years, he became emaciated, more timid, and unable to hold on to his money. He was repeatedly robbed, kicked, and beaten on welfare cheque day. I remember the day he told me that he had been raped the night before at Seaton House.

I also remember the night he was found in a snow bank, having wandered from a room in a rooming house that I had found for him. His core body temperature was very low. He was unconscious, but miraculously was resuscitated in St. Michael's Hospital Emergency. Thinking he might die, I contacted the RCMP In New Brunswick to help find his sisters, whom he had been estranged from since the '70s.

After the hypothermia incident, I helped to find a safe place for him to live with nursing supports and protection for wanderers.

He lived there for several years, although once his sisters found him, they tried to whisk him away by convincing his doctor to drug him for the plane ride. Together, the doctor and I prevented that, knowing his wishes were to stay in Toronto. He eventually was admitted to a nursing home. It's interesting to note that once safely housed in long-term care he never drank again—not once, not even at the home's Happy Hour. Alex died in his late seventies.

I'm not really sure that at that time, or since then, if the CMHC has learned much about homelessness and affordable housing or what its role in the issue should be. I'm reminded of yet another time when I spoke to CMHC at a meeting in the trendy Distillery District in Toronto.

It was a focus group, and I was sandwiched between two developers over a pretty fancy lunch. After our discussion, our CMHC host presented us with a gift bag. Each contained a "Made in Canada" birdhouse kit and an enormous hardcover coffee table book titled Old Toronto Houses.

CMHC uses a picture of me in some of their presentations with one of my quotes: "There is no such thing as someone who is hard to house. It is the right housing that's hard to find." No kidding."

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So over the years let me tell you some other things I remember that are almost laughable if they weren't so inhumane.

There was once a men's shelter that, I suppose trying to save money, only gave the men paper towels to use after a shower. (Note: we protested and won towels back.)

Another shelter—Seaton House—proposed urine testing for drugs before allowing men entry. Not exactly a harm reduction approach. (Note: we protested outside with a big plastic jug of apple juice symbolizing you know what. We won.)

Metro Council planned to cut the \$3.75 Personal Needs Allowance. (We held a press conference on the sidewalk at Sherbourne and Dundas showing what people had to use that money for. We won.)

When Kwellada (Lindane) had fallen into disrepute as a treatment for scabies or lice—because it was toxic—it was still being used at the Harrison Baths for homeless men. (We stopped that too.)

When our patients began coming to clinic in waves with empty bottles of TB medication—well that's how we learned there was a TB outbreak. The city did not alert us. We held a public inquiry, then an inquest and ensured massive screenings and better follow-up including fast-tracking someone to ODSP.

If SARS had entered the shelter system this was the city's plan: a lockdown at Seaton House—for everyone. We fought that and won motel use for home quarantine of homeless people.

Even after the TB micro-epidemic and SARS, the city did nothing to ensure that the Out of the Cold program would not have to provide shelter—necessitating nightly movement 7 nights a week. We've just seen the OOTC operate their 33rd year and last year the new GM of Shelter Housing and Support asked Rafi Aaron if they had ever considered operating all year. Remember—they are volunteers.

Recently during a Strep A outbreak at Seaton House, again months went by before we heard this news from Public Health. (Note: a leak to media forced some action.)

Bedbugs were not considered a health issue. (Again we had to show media first hand and that included taking the bugs in a jar to the Board of Health.)

I learned that homeless people could freeze to death, there could be an inquest, nothing would be done and then there would be another freezing death, and another, and another.

I witnessed the city stop allowing city-funded agencies to give survival supplies (sleeping bags, blankets, hot food) many years ago. Peterborough is apparently considering the same brutal action. (Note: at the Recent Grant Faulkner Inquest others and myself provided evidence on the importance of these supplies and the jury recommended the city allow the provision.)

When the city was forced to open warming centres they operated without cots, mats, food, snacks, games or things to do—or health care on site.

I learned that there was an entire population of folks that no one provided health care for. Public health nurses did not work in rooming houses. I learned that rooming houses were the main affordable housing option for a lot of single men, like the men that come to Haven. I learned they were good cooks and with colleagues we produced a cookbook. (We did win a short-lived rooming house nursing project with the city).

More recently the city was pushed to open cooling centres on Day 1 of a heat wave not Day 3 but they tried to operate them without staff. This summer the entire program is cancelled and repurposed.

There was a big ‘WE’ during this period of activism. There was the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, the Street Nurses Network and more.

Many of the leaders were or had been homeless themselves.

Dri who initially we thought of as a hermit down at Tent City, but who became a leading advocate, travelling to demonstrations with us in Quebec and London. He fought for housing not just for himself but for all.

Melvin Tipping who knew it could have been himself who died in the cold. He attended all 5 weeks of the 1996 Freezing Deaths Inquest and was allowed to testify by the coroner.

The Colonel, another Tent City activist who still holds court at Sherbourne and Dundas. He also delivered a strong message to former Mayor Lastman about the need for more housing.

Marty Lang, who delivered the first presentation at a national housing and homelessness conference, describing his experiences and again the need for a national housing program.

These men all have their stories in my first book 'Dying for a Home'.

I can't sugar coat it. Today's conditions are worse than anything I've ever seen.

Warming centres that have turned into respite sites—a second tier of inadequate shelter with such poor conditions that Haven folks would know well why people stay outside.

Mayor Tory might do a photo op at 2 or 3 pm when things look relatively calm but at night it is a different story with wall-to-wall bodies.

We now see warehousing and dangerous conditions with 200 people crammed into one big site such as down at the Canadian Exhibition building.

The city is now relying on the Sprung Dome structures that are supposed to look like the diagrams on their marketing brochures but end up looking like the images in secret video footage taken in January. Wall to wall people.

Increasingly squats are growing, sometimes in very public locations like under the Gardiner because they are deemed 'safe' and sometimes in more hidden locations. So too are the evictions of those squats increasing. I am thinking of calling for donations of tents for people.

There still is no housing. Remember we had a national housing program. That was in part due to the advocacy of World War 2 vets and their families, and when we had that program we built 20,000 new units a year. We are still fighting to win back a program like that—not just a 'strategy'.

And there is more to say but the important thing is to know that while we push for housing we must keep fighting for shelter and housing. That will be the work of the Shelter and Housing Justice Network.

City council is voting today that housing is a human right. The film 'Push' outlines the importance of this.

Please also consider attending the monthly Homeless Memorial. On average we might add 4 names per month. Today it was 12 and one of them was one of your well-known clients. People are dying too young and from preventable causes.

There is much work to do together. Let's stay in touch and again thank you for inviting me to speak today.

Check with delivery

Note – photos also accompanied this presentation