



Dying for a Home!!!!

Rotary Club of Toronto-Forest Hill
March 22, 2007

Thank you so much for inviting me, to meet with your members today.

I've learned a lot about Rotarians in recent years. I have been invited to Rotary lunches many times and I have seen firsthand the work of Rotarians.

You should be proud. Rotarians are often linked to real responses to homelessness and our housing crisis. For example, Rotary support for Habitat for Humanity homes in Toronto, the Rotary Centre at St. Michael's Hospital Emergency Department, the Health Buses operated by the Sherbourne Health Centre where I am based, and support for the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, just to name a few of your projects. I know your club is directly involved in supporting the drop-in program at Church of the Redeemer.

I **had** planned to begin my talk today by outlining what was in this week's federal budget, but I see that Rotarian Marvin Graf had already beat me to it. In the Toronto Star, the morning after the budget, he effectively decried the lack of effective anti-poverty measures in this government's budget, and at the same time he got a plug in there for the Rotary Club and a full colour picture by one of the Star's top photographers – not bad.

Well I will only add that there was nothing, absolutely nothing in this budget to help solve the homelessness and housing crisis in this country. Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's budget speech was entirely silent on

homelessness and the hundreds of pages of budget documents barely even mention housing, except to repeat some previously announced spending. Perhaps more frightening for me, is that no one seems to have noticed – there were **no** headlines in the papers saying “Harper ignores housing.”

How can that be? Once again, in the year 2007, this budget leaves Canada as one of the few countries in the world without a national housing program.

There are 1.5 million households in this country, more than 4 million women, men and children officially classified as being in "core housing need", and there are hundreds of thousands of Canadians facing homelessness each year!

The budget leaves First Nations people living in third world housing conditions with no re-housing program. Do we need a tsunami, an ice storm, or an earthquake for that to happen?

This budget leaves families and children stuck in shelters, and in most communities, like Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Kingston and Calgary, there are not enough family shelters. Families with children are the truly hidden homeless in this country and that must be exposed. I am currently working with filmmaker Laura Sky to produce a documentary film on this subject.

After my lunch here with you today, I will be walking a few blocks over to Queen’s Park to be in the provincial budget lock-up. Almost 2 million Ontarians are looking for housing relief from Finance Minister Sorbara, so I am hoping that the word housing with an attached dollar sign will be appearing more frequently in today’s budget.

So you might want to ask, and I know I do on rare occasions, why is a nurse like me so interested in housing and government budgets?

Well, my mother was also a nurse, so I know about the days before Medicare. I know that we could **not** rely on donations, volunteers or the private sector to provide life-saving services to all Canadians needing health care. I also know that we cannot rely on donations, volunteers or the private sector to provide Canadians with housing. Like our national health care program, we need a national housing program.

It is abundantly clear to me after 18 years of nursing in shelters, drop-ins, in squats and outdoor encampments like Tent City, that social housing – supportive housing with enough money left over to survive, is the first and foremost solution to our national homeless disaster.

We can have the most highly skilled and dedicated homeless outreach workers, the most experienced street nurses and innovative homeless health programs, but if a person is ultimately left homeless, left in a crowded shelter for too long or left living outside without adequate survival supplies or left on a social housing waiting list, their health will worsen. Their nutrition will worsen. Their self-esteem will worsen. Their life span will shorten. People need housing if they are to re-establish themselves.

We once had a national housing program. Most Canadians don't seem to know that or the story of how it was developed, which is as exciting as the more widely known fight for national health insurance.

Returning World War II veterans facing a housing shortage fought for their right to housing in Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver. Womens' groups joined in. It led to empty military buildings being freed up for housing; it led to a federal agency 'Wartime Housing Ltd.' that built 19,000 temporary rental homes over 4 years. It led to the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and what came to be our national housing program.

Our housing program was taken from us in 1993 and we have to get it back. Why? Because people are dying for a home. Literally.

That is the title for a book I have written that will be released next month. It's called 'Dying for a Home. Homeless Activists Speak Out.' In the book I provide an overview of what I've seen and what I believe the solutions are. More importantly I feature 10 homeless activists, people I've known well and been close to, who have been part of this struggle for housing.

Let me read an excerpt:

No one should be dying homeless in this country, even of natural causes. In this book you'll meet Melvin Tipping, who has made this point on the witness stand....

We witnessed unprecedented public support for Toronto's struggling Tent City. The public generally viewed it as a community simply trying to survive, and a group of people with a pioneering spirit that should be supported. The Tent City squatters were able to articulate why shelters were dangerous to their health. In the face of government inaction, they became respected for creating their own solutions. Tent City became the largest and longest form of civil disobedience by homeless people in Canada since the Great Depression. They won a huge political victory, led by **Dri, Nancy Baker, Marty Lang** and the **Colonel**.

I could tell you a lot of stories about individual Rotary members on site at Tent City. I remember Rotary members with their sleeves rolled up standing on top of dumpsters on our clean-up days, a Rotary member bringing his catering business down to the site to cook a meal for the hundred volunteers and squatters, and Rotary members fundraising with us to help bring in the DuraKit pre-fab homes. It was quite a scene!

People do not choose to sleep outside. I'll read again from my book:

Over the years I've watched the labelling get worse. They are called "the homeless", or worse the "chronically homeless", or the "chronics", "guests", "street people", "addicts "winos", even "squirrel eaters". We are told that they "choose" to sleep outside. An artist chooses to be an artist, a doctor chooses to be a doctor. No one chooses to be homeless. In this book you'll meet **Bonnie and Kerre Briggs**, who lay all the myths and assumptions to rest.

Homeless people are frequently portrayed on the grate, on the ground, prostrate, depersonalized. In this book you'll meet **James Kagoshima**, who taught me the necessity of engaging homeless people in outreach and advocacy, and showed me the potential for involving them in a substantial way to effect change.

Most cultures have had homelessness. It's an old concept. But for the most part, society was able to find a way to counter that age-old problem – with food, with social programs like income assistance and housing. Sadly, we seem to be reverting backwards. People who are poor are increasingly marginalized and stigmatized. This translates into prejudice, hate crimes and hate legislation. Our language about

homelessness reflects this. We label people who are homeless and that allows us to depersonalize them. Instead, we should try to understand the real nature of the problem. People who are homeless are not “street people” and the solution we proffer should not symbolically be that of a broom, sweeping people off the street or laws criminalizing it. In this book a number of people touch on policing but **Kevin Clarke’s** voice is most poignant and determined regarding his experience.

I really appreciate your interest in this issue and I know that you will continue to follow-up in our fight for justice and a national housing program.

I hope you will have a chance to have a look and read what the real experts on homelessness are saying in ***Dying for a Home!*** It’s an eye-opener.

Thank you for having me here today.

Check with delivery