

Skid Row CEO brings Push for Change to Brantford

Motivational speaker seeks to inspire transformation of homelessness issues

Joe Roberts has lived two lives: one on the streets of Vancouver, the other as a successful businessman and champion of ending youth homelessness.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS



a disadvantaged upbringing – is low for success, but the possibility is always 100 per cent; every human being has an untapped, unlimited possibility. The challenge with possibility is that it takes other champions to draw that possibility out of you. Unfortunately for some people they don't have those champions of possibility. "I'm a community investment gone well. If I can use my voice to touch, move, honour and inspire ... at any kind of gala where the work they're doing is supporting transformation, I'm down for that."

people who find themselves at the crossroads, at risk. There needs to be a call to action to invest in prevention." Roberts' goal is to raise 50 cents from every Canadian, all money going to charitable partner Raising the Roof to be invested in the Upstream Project, a school-based homelessness prevention initiative. "Our greatest opportunity to intervene in a young person's life is not when they're sitting on Yonge Street asking for change, is not when we find them on a street corner enslaved in the sex trade, is not when they're

sitting in a jail cell having already committed crimes."

Ending homelessness is possible, Roberts said, through Housing First initiatives, the support of the emergency services sector and prevention, "the one I believe which we are failing at in this country."

"This will take years. It may not be a resolution in my lifetime. I hope it will be, but I'm not as attached to the outcome as I am to helping be the champion behind this movement and understanding that we are just one voice behind tens of thousands of other frontline service providers, government employees, policy makers who are moving in this direction. What we bring to the issue is public awareness."

"We want to turn the volume up on the need to invest in Canadian kids."

Tickets to hear Roberts speak at the Best Western on Dec. 3 are free, but there is limited seating. Contact Wayne Branchaud at 519-448-3477 to reserve rickets. The event begins at 7:30 p.m.

KATHY YANCHUS
METROLAND MEDIA

Sometimes Joe Roberts feels like he's lived two lives and, in essence, he has. Known as the Skid Row CEO, Roberts was once addicted to heroin, penniless and living on the streets of Vancouver's notoriously troubled downtown east side. Years later, he was at the helm of an extremely successful multimedia company, earning his first million before he was 35. He authored books, won numerous accolades and became a motivational speaker. As he told his rags to riches story, he was astounded by its massive impact. He decided to tailor transferable lessons from the streets in overcoming "perceived limitations," for audiences of Fortune

500 companies and students alike. "I don't know why my heart moved that way because in the beginning I didn't want to (share my story). I found success in business; I could have quietly gone my way and put my past behind me. This is a story of human transformation, a story of struggle and a story of hope and we can never get enough of that." He may inspire and motivate businesses around the globe, but his deeper unwavering mission is to put an end to youth homelessness. "If I could create change with voice that's what I wanted to do. I've leveraged the story over the last 20 years to reach millions of people, to talk about possibilities, to talk about the need for us to continue to invest in other human beings and the

need to believe that despite what life throws at us, we're not defined by our circumstances." The juxtaposition of his life is acutely apparent to him when he muses about how he can mingle with the wealthy and powerful in a posh downtown hotel and then walk outside and "sit down right beside that guy sitting on a piece of cardboard and identify." Roberts' story begins with what he calls an unfortunate series of events, including the death of his father when he was very young. "My home environment was not ideal so I was a kid who had extraordinary potential that came from a not-so-extraordinary place," said Roberts, who will deliver his inspiring message to an audience at the Best Western Brant Park Inn on Thursday,

Dec. 3. At the age of nine he was sniffing glue, not because he wanted to experiment with drugs, but because he found a place to belong and an escape from the "emotional storm" at home, after his mom remarried. "When dangerous things on the streets for kids have better outreach than parents, schools and frontline services, that's where they end up, and it's just a very predictable thing." What turned it around for him was "a mom who wouldn't quit on me." Roberts speaks often of possibility versus probability. "The probability of someone coming from my environment – living on the streets, addicted to drugs,



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Youth homelessness: We can do better

Why Not Youth Centres community developer shares firsthand perspective



BECCA MCLELLAN
FOR BRANT NEWS

Nothing. You have nothing. If family were an option, you'd obviously be with them, but for whatever reason, that's out of the question.

Maybe you grew up in foster care or maybe your mom is an addict. Maybe your dad smokes too much weed or has beaten you up so many times that you can't handle it for another minute.

Whatever. It doesn't matter. But seriously – what are you going to do?

The plight of a homeless teenager can be dark.

I've seen young people trade sex for a place to sleep. I've seen teens stay in relationships where they are constantly being cheated on because at least their significant other has an apartment. I've seen kids sleep in tents,

on couches, on floors, or wherever they can at least stay indoors. I've even seen youth feign pregnancies for the benefits of the compassion they receive.

But I've also seen kids wander the streets for the night, perhaps too proud to sleep behind the bank or too smart to take that risk.

Although there is some shelter for youth, I argue that there is not enough. My appreciation goes out to the St. Leonard's Youth Resource Centre, where many of the teens I mentor find shelter.

But what happens when a youth in the thralls of crisis endangers other youth and is asked to leave? What happens when trauma, hunger, substance abuse and fear compound to leave a young person with a smoking trail of burned bridges behind them? What then?

In the best cases, they use re-engagement with the school system or newfound employment to acquire government financial support to find basic lodgings with

heavy behaviour stipulations.

In other cases, they are shipped out of our city to shelters in other communities, separated from every single support they have and are likely to make unhealthy connections with equally desperate young people in their paths.

But there are still too many youth who find themselves on the sidewalk with only the clothes on their back with only hours to find a place to sleep before nightfall.

I personally believe that struggle breeds strength, but homelessness is a dire circumstance that breeds little more than desperation, and desperation breeds a near-sightedness that leaves tomorrow a myth and today all that ever will be.

You can imagine the misfortune begotten by that perspective.

For young people, who have yet to be ossified by time, experience and wisdom, how much more difficult is it to self-advocate without thorough knowledge of resources,

“We're asking them to grow up a decade before their peers without ever having prepared them to do so.”

BECCA MCLELLAN

their own strength or their rights? We're asking them to grow up a decade before their peers without ever having prepared them to do so.

If perhaps you are thinking, “Why don't they just get a job?” or “Why aren't they in school?” perhaps you have not understood what I am saying.

When you don't know where you're going to sleep, what you're going to eat, who you can trust or if the love of your life might be just about done with you, dressing up in your smartest clothes with a crisply printed resume and good manners

is quite the stretch, not that there are many jobs for teens in Brantford anyway.

Calculus, chemistry and civics don't have a chance at being prioritized over the immediate, pressing needs of young people in this situation. Sometimes, it is a feat to even make it onto school property.

Where employment is an option, the living conditions for “entry-level street youth” are bleak. You can't make rent selling chocolate covered almonds door-to-door.

I see little when I think on the independent housing options for these youth in crisis. Too many landlords monopolize on the impoverished with willy-nilly evictions or unsafe living conditions. Broken doors, inadequate heating, useless appliances and drug-addicted co-tenants are rampant issues.

The thing is, poverty is a cancer that can be beaten, but not easily. When a person enters adulthood on his or her knees in desperation, a difficult precedent is set. They're told to race for success when

the game is about survival.

After nearly seven years of mentoring at-risk and street youth, I'm still learning new things every day from young people who humble me.

A sweet, homeless teen I've known for years walked a dozen blocks in 5-degree weather last week with no shoes. No shoes.

Forgive me for my harshness, but that is embarrassing – not for him, but for us. For him, that's terrible, humiliating and dangerous with the onset of winter. But for us, it's shameful.

It's unacceptable.

We can put shoes on a young man's feet, but can we give him a home? Can we make up for the sense of security that never existed for a teen who has never lived in the same place for more than a few months?

Maybe, or maybe not. But what I do know is this: We can do better.

Becca McLellan is a community developer at Why Not Youth Centres.

SKIDROW CEO



From Skidrow to CEO “The Push for Change”

Learn firsthand about the awareness campaign to help end youth homelessness in Canada in this special keynote where Joe shares his history of homelessness, his transformation and redemption, and then his promise to pay it forward.

Joe's unique style of inspiration combined with his legendary dark humour will have you shed a tear while making you laugh 'til it hurts.

As you walk with Joe through the tough streets of East Vancouver in the 1980's you will experience the depths and degradation of a former homeless derelict, to the heights and triumph of a successful entrepreneur and philanthropist who has taken on the task of pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness to help end youth homelessness. This national trek is partnered and endorsed by leading experts on the subject of youth homelessness; Dr. Stephen Gaetz (The Homeless Hub and Raising the Roof), The Learning Community and Eva's Initiatives.

You will laugh, possibly cry, but never look at homelessness the same.

Participants will leave with:

- The possibility that lives inside each human being vs. the “probability”
- A deep feeling of inspiration
- A connection to a cause and solution
- A call to action

Further briefs and brochures on The Push For Change, it's objectives, engagement strategies, and sponsorship opportunities are available upon request.

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To mark motivational speaker Joe Roberts bringing his message surrounding homelessness to Brantford next week (read more on Page 61), Brant News presents a special Life section. We focused on some of the local agencies who are on the frontline of homelessness in Brant. You'll read about what organizations are doing and how it is helping individuals working to get off the street. Interested individuals are welcome to attend Roberts' presentation. The event is free through sponsorship by Stepright Capital Planning, Brant News and the Best Western Brant Park Inn. It takes place Thursday, Dec. 3, at 7:30 p.m. at the Best Western. Seating is limited. To reserve a free seat contact Wayne Branchaud at 519-448-3477

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Welcome In shelter opens doors year round

COLLEEN TOMS
BRANT NEWS

Brantford has a homelessness issue. And it's far larger than people realize. "A research group in 2007 determined there is between 400 to 500 homeless people in Brantford," Welcome In Resource Centre manager Roger Luton said. "That's people living under the bridge, it's people living in a shelter, in a laundry room or a hallway, or couch surfing – that's fairly significant."

For the past 10 years Welcome In, at 305 West St., has operated a shelter program between the months of November through March, opening its doors to the homeless when cold weather alerts were issued.

The program now runs 365 days a year.

"We see about 350 different guests at the shelter every year," Luton said. "This year 270 of those we had never seen before so there is a constant influx of people."

Welcome In has 29 men's beds and seven women's beds

available through its shelter program. Guests range in age from 19 to 84 or older and some are turned away due to lack of space.

"We never had an issue until about a year ago," Luton said. "Now there are many nights when we have seven women here."

This year Welcome In decided to take a proactive approach to homelessness by looking at ways for people to overcome barriers to housing. With the opening of the resource centre in April, the homeless can access information, support and training to overcome obstacles that prevent them from finding adequate long-term housing.

"We realized that for 10 years we were providing shelter to people and giving them a little bit of food and showers, but we weren't really helping them find housing," Luton said. "With the opening of the resource program on April 1, we are looking at preventing homelessness on the front end and getting people into housing on the back end so it's sort of

the bookends of the shelter." Programs run Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., assisting people with things like mental health issues and addictions. A nurse practitioner provides medical care, while dental and chiropractic care can also be accessed.



Welcome In Resource Centre manager Roger Luton stands in the shelter's bedroom. PHOTO BY COLLEEN TOMS, BRANT NEWS

the bookends of the shelter."

Programs run Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., assisting people with things like mental health issues and addictions. A nurse practitioner provides medical care, while dental and chiropractic care can also be accessed.

"We see about 30 people through our drop-in programs Wednesdays and Fridays through the day and then are averaging just over 30 in the shelter every night," Luton said. "We get

people that walk in the door, that are referred here by agencies, that are brought by police or that are sent by the hospital."

Every morning at 7:30 a.m., a housing worker visits with guests to help them find housing and look at barriers to be overcome, such as addiction, illiteracy, legal or domestic issues.

Clients are then connected to agencies such as ODSP, EI, Legal Aid or rehabilitation programs.

Resource centre clients

and shelter guests can also access clean clothes, coats, shoes, steel toe boots, socks, bras and toiletries like soap, shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant and have showers or do laundry – all free of charge.

Shelter doors open every night at 6 p.m. with lights out at 11 p.m. Beds are dressed with clean beddings daily, a common room provides guests with games, computers, light snacks and refreshments.

In the morning they are offered cereal, fruit, juice and coffee. Guests must be out the door by 8 a.m.

The support Brantford Welcome In Resource Centre provides to the city's most vulnerable residents is invaluable.

"We hear all the time 'I feel like a new person,'" Luton said. "People feel better, they feel better about themselves and they are healthier too. They're not running around the streets in wet clothes ... the self-confidence is huge."

When plans for long-term housing start to be developed, many clients gain a more optimistic outlook on

life.

"You see people get work, they get an apartment and then they come back to visit us," Luton said. "They are all average folks with dreams and pasts and problems and hopes. We help build them up a little bit to give them some self-esteem and some direction and some goals. And we eventually get them into housing."

Brantford Welcome In Resource Centre is always in need of volunteers, donations of food, clothing – specifically winter boots, beddings, toiletries and funding. It recently partnered with the national Raising the Roof campaign to sell toques, mittens and socks.

Fifty percent of funds raised through sales at community partner locations goes directly to Welcome In.

"If we can get community partners to sell for us half of the money goes directly to us and the other half goes to national homelessness initiatives. It's win-win," Luton said.

For more information call 226-250-0120, ext. 1.

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From homelessness to hope with St. Leonard's

Two men living in supportive housing program share their stories

BRIAN SHYPULA
BRANT NEWS

St. Leonard's Community Services supportive housing program keeps 15 apartments in the City of Brantford where it helps people transition out of homelessness. Paul and John are two of the clients.

PAUL'S STORY

Paul shows an X-ray image on his cellphone of two titanium rods and 16 titanium screws in his neck and spine.

"On the 27th of September of 2013 I died," said the 50-year-old Brantford man. "What you see is just a remnant."

Paul – he did not want to give his last name – suffered the debilitating injury in a fall brought on by a heart attack. He attributes the heart attack to stress brought on by an abusive relationship with his drug-dealing former



Paul, who used to be homeless, stands with Michelle Noiles, supportive housing counsellor at St. Leonard's Community Services.

PHOTO BY BRIAN SHYPULA, BRANT NEWS

girlfriend.

"Things were just spiraling right down the crapper," he said.

After surgery and rehab the former factory worker found himself living in a seedy hotel, which wasn't good for his fragile health post-accident. There were always "shady" people coming

and going.

"I had a steel pipe by the door – it was the last line of defence," he said.

A referral from the courts put Paul in contact with St. Leonard's Community Services.

St. Leonard's found him a subsidized apartment through its supportive hous-

ing program.

Michelle Noiles, a supportive housing counsellor at St. Leonard's, said doctors didn't think Paul would ever walk again.

"The passion and the strength that he actually does have inside got him to be where he is today," she said.

Paul said he won't ever be able to work again due to his injuries, which leave him in constant pain.

"I can't sit, lay or stand for any period of time," he said.

He must take prescription medication to manage the pain.

"I don't like drugs," said Paul, who is troubled when he sees people with less severe injuries and pain abuse the system and sell their extra painkillers on the street.

When he doesn't use his cane to walk, people think

he's drunk because of the awkward gait caused by his injuries. He doesn't like the cane, he said, because he feels it sets him up to be mugged.

"People still judge because Paul struggles with walking straight," Noiles said.

Despite his troubles – Paul calls himself the "epitome of bad luck" – he's grateful to have a roof over his head.

"St. Leonard's is very supportive. They got me a place. I have a hard time accepting help because I'm very independent, but I've got to take it," he said.

JOHN'S STORY

John says he used to carry a gun.

"If you pissed me off, I'd deal with you, and not in the nicest way," he said.

John, who didn't want to give his last name, ended up living on the streets of Sudbury due to struggles with drug addiction.

"I have one of these personalities that if you want to go out and buy something and I've got the cash, 'hey let's go splits on it,'" he said.

But that's not who he wants to be.

"I wanted to change. I wanted to get out of what I was doing because what I was doing was screwing up a lot," he said.

He showed up unannounced in Brantford, where he has family members. But it's awkward between them and he wasn't able to live there, putting him back on the streets, but this time in Brantford.

The 49-year-old spent one night at the Welcome In homeless shelter but said the scheduled hours weren't for him. Welcome In referred John to St. Leonard's Community Services. He's been in St. Leonard's supportive housing program for a few months now.

"I went through a six-week course that got me to think a little better than what I was," John said.

Michelle Noiles, a supportive housing counsellor at St. Leonard's, said John "excelled" at the course.

Instead of being homeless, John has an apartment and freedom to come and go as he pleases.

"There a lot of Tim Hortons," he said, trying to keep his addictive ways to caffeine only.

Right now, with help from Noiles, John said he feels like he has his drug addiction under control one day at a time.

"I really stress one day at a time. Sometimes when (we) look too far into the future we panic, and when we panic sometimes our old habits come back," Noiles said.

John describes himself as a "jack of all trades." He changed a starter and alternator as a favour to someone earlier in the day of the interview at St. Leonard's. He's also artistic. He draws dragons. John said he used to give tattoos.

"They're beautiful," Noiles said of the artwork.

Asked to pick a word to sum up where he is, John said "proud."

"I'm trying," he said.

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John, who used to be homeless, stands with Michelle Noiles, supportive housing counsellor at St. Leonard's Community Services.

PHOTO BY BRIAN SHYPULA, BRANT NEWS

Preparing at-risk youth for the future

St. Leonard's revamps Youth Resource Centre with focus on life skills

BRIAN SHYPULA
BRANT NEWS

After 16 years and helping hundreds of young people in crisis, St. Leonard's Community Services took the big step of revamping its Youth Resource Centre program earlier this month.

The 20-bed Dalhousie Street facility provides a safe space for youth aged 15 to 19 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, but there was a feeling St. Leonard's wasn't doing enough to prepare the teens for the future. "The kids were telling us: 'We want to learn how to be independent. We want to learn how to take care of ourselves,'" said Sue Lefler, director of justice and housing services at St. Leonard's. "There's a much greater emphasis on what we call hard and soft life skills," she said.

The hard skills include communicating, addressing

substance abuse, forming healthy relationships, problem solving and decision-making.

Soft skills include learning how to cook, grocery shop, clean, do laundry and hygiene basics.

Lefler said St. Leonard's organized focus groups with about 45 current and past clients and asked them about their experiences at the Youth Resource Centre, including ideas for programming and suggestions for improvements. The consensus was more recreational opportunities, more time to talk and problem-solve with staff, as well as more structure and routine.

At the same time, St. Leonard's visited other programs in Ontario serving youth. Toronto-based youth homeless shelter Covenant House offered some valuable advice about engaging kids versus policing kids.

"We want it to be about relationships, we want it to be about working with our youth to be able to get them



Staff of St. Leonard's Community Services.

PHOTO BY BRIAN SHYPULA, BRANT NEWS

where they need to be. They don't need to be policed and they don't need to be chased," Lefler said.

The Youth Resource Centre now offers life skills programming four nights a week. The clients earn points for attending and positive actions, like checking in with staff daily and not succumbing to peer pressure.

They can use the points to "buy" things like overnight visits away from the program, later curfew on weekends, sleeping in on weekends and extra quiet time.

They can "bank" the points

for special things like a dinner out or movie night with family and friends.

"It's going over extremely well - we're only in the first week," Lefler said.

Prior to the change, St. Leonard's primarily taught the soft life skills. But Lefler said it was ad hoc and sometimes took a back seat if there was something else going on, such as a behaviour problem in the house.

The youth now have more input into scheduling, planning and activities, instead of trying to fit programming around other things in their lives.

"That's probably the biggest switch: 'You're here, let's make the most of your time you've got with us to get you ready to where you want to be from here,'" Lefler said.

Those goals can be to live independently or move back home once family or other problems are resolved.

Youth can spend up to one year living at the Youth Resource Centre.

St. Leonard's offers a continuum of social housing related to homelessness, including two transitional homes.

The eight-bed Sally Laidlaw House, for young women aged 18 to 24, and the five-bed Renwick House, for young men aged 18 to 24, are geared to young people who aren't ready to live on their own yet but don't require 24/7 supervision. They can stay for up to a year.

About 20 to 25 young people a year from the Youth Resource Centre go on to live at the transitional homes, where they're responsible for things like cooking their own

meals and buying their own groceries while continuing to work with staff on issues like substance abuse or mental health.

St. Leonard's also has eight one-bedroom apartments with private landlords in Brantford under its addictions program and seven one-bedroom apartments under contract with the city for homeless people, as part of its supportive housing program.

Clients sign a lease and, with help from St. Leonard's, set up utilities, acquire furniture and other things just like a person living on his or her own would have to do.

Most clients are on Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program. St. Leonard's receives funding through the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to subsidize their rents.

Supportive housing counsellor Michelle Noiles works with the clients.

"They make up a service plan on goals that they want to work on to be successful," she said.

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Youth find respite from housing challenges at Why Not

Colborne Street centre a stable influence for teens

MIKE PEELING
BRANT NEWS

Jack has lived in about 16 different places over the last eight years.

The 17-year-old is currently bunking at a friend's apartment in Brantford because he was tired of putting up with his mother's addiction-fuelled behaviour.

"I evicted myself from my mom's place because she is involved with some bad people," Jack said at Why Not Youth Centre, asking to not have his real name published. "We've moved from



Raven Dargie hangs out at Why Not Youth Centre, a constant in her life for the last four years when her housing situation wasn't consistent. PHOTO BY MIKE PEELING, BRANT NEWS

house to house because of my mom's drug problem."

Jack was one of dozens of youth spending the evening

at Why Not Youth Centre in Brantford last Thursday – playing games, socializing, doing arts and crafts and watching TV, as they often do on weeknights. Every Thursday Why Not hosts a get-together with food for up to 100 people.

Jack said the places he has lived with his mom have gotten worse, she has grown more frustrated with his behaviour and there were always people coming in and out of the places they lived, often stealing from them.

While he hasn't had a stable home since he was nine years old, when his mom's drug problem got out of hand, Jack says one of the lowest points was when they were "living on the streets" three years ago.

His mom had spent rent money on drugs and they

were kicked out.

They slept underneath the Lorne Bridge on a cement pad, yet Jack managed to recall the positive aspects of the situation.

"The view was so soothing," he said. "Hearing the water as you're falling asleep and looking at that view was so relaxing.

"The bridge is my fondest memory and my most brutal."

Jack said his mother has scammed people into helping them out, but he got frustrated with her manipulative behaviour.

"She's trying to be a good mother," he said. "She tried to spoil me into keeping quiet, but this time she went too far."

Jack has a brother who no longer lives with his mother or him because he was placed in foster care.

Still visibly upset with being separated from his brother, Jack says he is happy to know his brother is being cared for by a good family.

For now, staying at his

"It's not awkward. Everyone is not all looking at you when you walk in."

RAVEN DARGIE

friend's apartment, Jack says he feels safe going home after school, to rest his eyes and not worry about someone stealing from him.

After school each day, he visits Why Not Youth Centre at 368 Colborne St., a trip he has often made over the past four years.

"It's a nice place," he said. "It feels like home here."

He has made plenty of friends at Why Not and plans to volunteer at the centre when he is older.

Jack has plans to go to college, although he isn't sure what he will study just yet.

A shy, kind of soft-spoken young man, Jack doesn't hesitate to describe himself as "multi-talented."

Why Not community developer Becca McLellan says he is "a pretty incredible artist" with an interest in 3-D digital modeling.

"People tell me I turned out pretty good for what I've been through," Jack said.

RAVEN'S STORY

Eighteen-year-old Raven Dargie is back living with her father after several ill-fated attempts.

She's had a problem with making pot smoking a priority over high school and couldn't get along with her father because they are so similar – stubborn and

always butting heads, she said.

Raven recently spent some time in London and before that Hamilton to help sort out some of her issues, which include extreme anxiety and oppositional defiant disorder. Even though the facilities in those cities offered more resources to help her, she felt the overall environment wasn't good for her, particularly because of the availability of drugs.

She's lived several times at St. Leonard's Community Services Youth Resource Centre, but has always been allowed to return home if her behaviour improves.

After less than a week back home, Raven said her relationship with her dad has improved.

"I'm trying a lot more this time," she said.

"I'm not ready to live on my own. I may be 18, but I'm not ready for that. A lot of the stuff, most of the necessities, have always been done for me, but this time is different."

Raven said she will be paying her dad rent and she was due to start taking work through a temporary staffing company on Monday. Unfortunately, she has yet to get a shift.

She has been coming to Why Not Youth Centre for four years for the friendly, encouraging environment, "to just chill and to get out of the house."

"It's not awkward," she said. "Everyone is not all looking at you when you walk in."

McLellan said the age limit for Why Not is 19, but the centre will continue to help clients if they still need it past that age.

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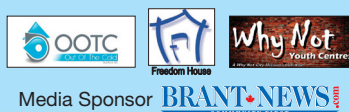
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MOTHER'S

Why Not like a second home for youth without one

MIKE PEELING
BRANT NEWS

For most of the youth who frequent Why Not Youth Centre in Brantford, it's the only place akin to a stable home they have.

Every day kids without a stable home life or a consistent, safe place to live walk through the doors of 368 Colborne St. to hang out with other teens who feel adrift in life.

"Most of the kids don't have the comfort of always living in the same place," said community developer Becca McLellan.

The youth centre is open Monday to Thursday from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. in a house purchased in 2012 by Why Not City Missions founders Charlie and Sue Kopczyk.

On a recent Thursday night, the main floor was jammed with teens talking, creating art, eating burgers, watching TV, playing video games, playing pool, darts and just being well-behaved kids. The centre doesn't have beds, but the kids can do

their laundry at Why Not. McLellan said typically the kids who visit Why Not are not strictly lone teens without a home, but often only have one parent who is unemployed and may suffer from addiction or mental illness, making it difficult to keep an apartment and a job.

"There's not a lot of stability in housing, their parents are on drugs and they end up getting evicted quickly," McLellan said.

Charlie Kopczyk says that's not always the fault of the parents because there are many "exploitive" landlords who recognize unstable tenants, take first and last month's rent from them and then quickly find a reason to kick them and their kids out of the unit.

"Sometimes the reasons are pretty lame," Kopczyk said.

So the staff at Why Not try to teach the youth about tenants' rights, at least in an informal way to help them keep a place to live.

"A lot of them don't fight back or have the wherewithal to speak up," he said.

Yet through all of their



Andy White, Andrew Beaver, Becca McLellan and Charlie Kopczyk are the staff of Why Not Youth Centre. PHOTO BY MIKE PEELING, BRANT NEWS

struggles with housing, McLellan says Why Not remains a regular home base for kids in Brantford and the County of Brant. St. George has a Why Not Youth Centre as well.

"We are consistent," McLellan said. "It doesn't matter how many times they get evicted, we are still here."

Many of the kids who visit Why Not have lived at St. Leonard's Community Services' Youth Resource Centre (YRC), which is just a few blocks away on Dalhousie Street, but often have to leave if they misbehave and don't obey the rules.

Andrew Beaver is a full-time crisis peer support worker for St. Leonard's YRC and has made "a great

bridge" between the organization and Why Not, where he is a part-time youth worker.

Beaver said working at Why Not gives him an opportunity to know and help the kids in a less formal way, by talking and helping them access the resources they need.

Youth worker Andy White is another member of the Why Not Brantford team and serves as liaison to the Brant community response team, which brings together 25 local agencies twice a week at the Brantford Welcome In Resource Centre for the homeless to work together to solve problems for those in crisis. White has been part of intervention meetings

with youth in need following the response team meetings, where a smaller group talks with the youth to find out how they can better help.

"When I first started with the crisis table, I thought I would hear a ton of names we know at Why Not, but I have been surprised to only have a couple," she said.

"They were not cases we've known for some time ... That tells me this centre works. We listen to them and help them deal with their problems in the moment."

White said it's important to treat each youth as an individual and address their needs personally.

Some of the youth collect Ontario Works, which can help them pay for a place to live, but White says the places they can afford are often not suitable living spaces.

"They have so many things to deal with they don't have time to just enjoy being a kid," she said.

Because so many of them have had little parenting, nurturing, support and few supportive authority figures

in their lives, the youth who don't qualify for Ontario Works need to get jobs, but often they don't respond well to having a boss and find it difficult to hold a job.

McLellan has helped many youth create resumes and keeps them on file for them because quite often they don't have regular access to a computer.

Kopczyk said the problems many of the kids deal with, such as defiance of authority and lack of discipline, aren't any different from what most teens struggle with, but they are put at a considerable disadvantage because they come from homes lacking structure and support.

Ironically, he finds many Why Not youth develop a sense of responsibility when they start their own families, and create an environment they rarely found anywhere other than the youth centre.

"When they have their own kids, often maturity kicks in - later than expected - but it does," Kopczyk said. "And you're there to see them succeed in a way that brings great joy to us."

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Stop youth homelessness before 'crucial crossroads'

Branchaud challenges Brantford to raise \$1 a person for Skid Row CEO's national campaign

BRIAN SHYPULA
bshypula@brantnews.com
BRANT NEWS

Municipalities like Brantford don't have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to solutions for youth home-

lessness, says advocate Joe Roberts.

"Long-term, if we're to create any kind of sustainable change we need to take a look at either side of emergency services, which is housing-first initiatives and prevention," said the man known as the Skid Row CEO.

Housing-first is a recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that centres on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into independent and permanent housing and then providing additional supports and services as needed.

Roberts said he's seen good examples in the Niagara region with its RAFT program.

In Kamloops, B.C., "they've flattened the silos," he said. Children's aid, educators, police, probation, mental health services and other stakeholders have come together on homelessness issues.

Internationally, the hous-



Youth homelessness advocate and motivational speaker Joe Roberts addresses an audience at the Best Western Brant Park Inn last Thursday.
PHOTO BY BRIAN SHYPULA

ing-first Geelong project in Australia and Reconnect in the United Kingdom have seen a 20 per cent to 35 per cent reduction in youth homelessness, he said.

Roberts is a one-time teenage heroin addict who survived by collecting cans on the notorious streets of East Vancouver. He was able to get his life together. He went back to school and made his first million before he was 35. He left the corporate world more than

a decade ago to become a motivational speaker and author.

Roberts was in Brantford to speak at the Brant-Brantford Housing Forum on Nov. 30 and again on Dec. 3 at a talk presented by Stepright Capital Planning, Brant News and the Best Western Brant Park Inn.

He will be back in Brantford again next year on Dec. 14 and 15, this time on his national Push for Change campaign.

Beginning in St. John's on May 1, 2016, Roberts will spend 17 months pushing a shopping cart – the symbol of homelessness – 9,000 kilometres across the country raising money and awareness for youth homelessness.

The goal is to raise 50 cents from every Canadian, with all money going to charitable partner Raising the Roof to be invested in the Upstream Project, a school-based homelessness prevention initiative.

Wayne Branchaud chal-

lenged Brantford to raise \$1 a person – double what Roberts hopes to collect – when Push for Change comes to Brantford.

The Brantford businessman, managing partner in Stepright Capital Planning, is also working behind the scenes on Push for Change after meeting and being inspired by Roberts at a Rotary meeting.

According to A Way Home, a national coalition dedicated to preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness, about 20 per cent of homeless people in Canada are between the ages of 13 and 25. On any given night in Canada, there are over 6,000 young people who either sleep out of doors or access emergency shelters. A greater number are part of the hidden homeless population and "couch surf" by temporarily staying with family or friends.

Roberts said a question to answer for Brantford or any other municipality is

how many kids are couch surfing.

"That's where it begins. You don't see somebody couch surfing on the street asking you for change," he said.

When couch surfers run out of goodwill, what's next? It could be sleeping under a bridge or circumstances of predation where they're victimized or exploited because they need food or housing.

"At that crucial crossroads is where we can see a young person's trajectory of their life change forever. But it doesn't need to be that way, because there are pieces that we can put into place that help prevent some of that from happening," Roberts said.

About 100 people attended Roberts' talk at the Best Western.

"I believe the elixir to a great life is to find something that you're passionate about and to pour your time and energy into it," Roberts told the audience.

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