

Toronto Sun, February 2, 2007

Looking down on others

By MARK BONOKOSKI

Before long, the construction cranes will begin moving in and, by year's end, the Gateway hostel at the lower end of Jarvis St. -- "The hand of God in the heart of the city," as it bills itself -- will be dwarfed, and virtually surrounded, by luxury high-rise condominiums.

This is not lost on the Gateway's director, Dion Oxford.

The symbolism, after all, is somewhat profound.

Once those condominiums go up, what will then exist will be a picture postcard example of this city's well-to-do looking down on its poor.

Both literally and figuratively.

In order to reflect that reality, Oxford has had a new slogan etched on the Gateway's service van, and has ordered one, as well, for the hostel's wall at the rear of the building before the condos block it out.

And the slogan reads as follows: "A hundred people live here. We are NOT a condo. Get involved."

For Oxford, who has been with the Gateway all of its seven years of existence, the slogan is designed as a statement to the urban planners and the city's politicians who, in his words, have "decided it is okay to glut the downtown core with condos."

"If the city prioritizes people with money over those without, then it is not just," he says. "If the city is hoping to push out people who are poor by making housing that is only affordable to the rich, then it is not just.

"And if the city is willing to sacrifice anything, including those who are poor, for the sake of adding new property taxpayers in order to get out of debt, then that, too, is not just."

It is windmill tilting, for sure.

But maybe, just maybe ...

"We simply want to remind people that those who live in our shelter are real people," says Oxford. "Real people with real hopes and dreams and skills and gifts, and that they deserve to be treated as human beings -- equal to everyone else despite the fact that they are poor.

"Our people do not deserve to be forgotten or overlooked."

Over the years, I have been critical of how the city politicians have allowed the core-city blocks bordered by Gerrard to Queen, and from Church over to Sherbourne, to be over-saturated with social service agencies and their accompanying hostels, roominghouses, drop-in centres, substance-abuse clinics and domestic shelters.

In other words, there's a "glut" there, too.

Build it and they will come applies to more than just a field of dreams. It also applies to the chronic abusers of the social service system.

But the Gateway, in my mind at least, has always been an exception. And it has therefore a warm spot in my perceived heartless soul.

It is called Gateway for a reason, of course. It is there as an entry point to open other doors for those men out there who find themselves facing a desperate predicament, and who need a little support, and a little time to regroup. And, despite what the public might think, it is not rife with crackheads and chronic alcoholics, at least not to the same dark depths as Seaton House to the north.

Of the 1,600 different men who passed through Gateway in 2006, 65% stayed less than two weeks, their homelessness short-term.

"Most of the men here have been forced to humble themselves for a short period of time," says Oxford. "They lost a job, or they lost their marriage, and then just need some time to get back on their feet -- just three 'hots' and a cot.

"That's all they need."

The Gateway's annual overview always speaks volumes, and the overview of 2006 is no exception.

"The average age of those who came here last year was exactly 41," says Oxford. "This is clear evidence that middle-aged men in our society have a very difficult time finding gainful employment and have been declared by our culture to be unemployable.

"This is the new modern-day famine."

As far as Oxford is concerned, the facing change of homelessness in this city should be looked upon as a "startling statistic."

"The housing and job markets are so fragile that most people experiencing homelessness in Toronto today are those who simply can't find the means to pay rent," he says. "They are working-class men who are trying to get by but need to humble themselves for short periods of time by living in a shelter long enough to get back on their feet.

"This flies in the face of the picture of homelessness that most of the media would have us believe."

Through the Gateway's housing workers, 174 men who arrived at Gateway were found safe and affordable housing -- "a record for us," says Oxford.

And that, in itself, goes against the stereotype.

In 2005, during the notorious Year of the Gun in which 52 died by bullet, Dion Oxford lost 10 "friends" who had passed through his door at the Gateway. None were shot, but all are just as dead nonetheless, just as they were homeless.

They did not die, however, from winter's cold. Summer can lay claim to being the prime perpetrator in the killing of the homeless, aided and abetted by heat and dehydration.

No, as I wrote back then, rather than dying from winter's cold, these 10 men died instead from a human coldness that runs from the cold heart to the cold shoulder, and to all the coldness in-between.

There was Paul Crutch, for example, a 59-year-old paranoid schizophrenic who was beaten to death as he harmlessly lay in his sleeping bag on his favourite bench near the Moss Park Armoury -- allegedly by two army reservists now facing first-degree murder charges.

Last year, however, there were no violent deaths, but there were 12 men familiar with the Gateway who did die -- mostly from what Oxford calls the "wear and tear of the streets."

There was a memorial ceremony held two weeks back for one of those 12 -- "Johnny," as everyone called him, although his real name, Aston Romance, was much more exotic.

He had been found dead late last year in a George St. roominghouse, natural causes being the catch-all reason for his demise.

The 44-year-old Jamaican immigrant never took drugs, or drank or even smoked. But he could play street chess, and play it well.

For as long as anyone can remember -- and Sun columnist Thane Burnett wrote about it well -- Johnny lived on the streets until he strolled one day into the Salvation Army's Gateway facility, which opened the door to opening the door that one day found him a home he could afford, even if it was only a room in a roominghouse.

The Gateway, for Aston Romance, was indeed the hand of God in the heart of this city.

Soon, however, it will be surrounded by what it is not.

It will be surrounded by condos.