

After many years of drug abuse and criminal activities Ron makes a fresh start by learning how to carve out a living.

In partnership with the Grey Sisters of Immaculate Conception - a local order of nuns, Sandy Hill Community Health Center (SHCHC) has embarked on a unique program for homeless clients. Putting into action their belief that many factors affect a person's health - including food, shelter, safety, social support and employment - outreach team members implemented a program which addressed this philosophy.

Staff members saw that they were able to support homeless clients in different ways including helping them become clean and sober and finding housing for them through other agencies, but they also realized more was needed. These clients were not ready for employment and in the course of getting off the streets, they left behind their old friends and any social support systems they had developed. In the words of one staff member: "Essentially we had helped them by taking away their lives."

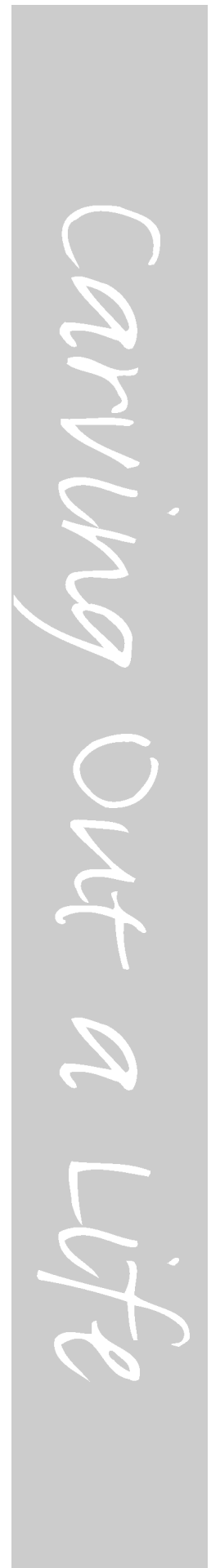
In order to address some of these issues, a woodworking program was established. Housed in a building owned by the religious order with other non-profit groups, the program is co-managed by the sisters and SHCHC. The program allows the clients the opportunity to learn new skills, make new friends, and gives them the opportunity to spend their days in a productive and gratifying way. Through the program, a new sense of community is established and an atmosphere of mutual support is created in a safe, welcoming environment. The woodworking program is self-funded - the money made from refinishing, repairing and constructing furniture is divided between those who do the work and the rest is funneled back into the program.

*"People say I am a nice guy now"*

Ron is a graduate of the woodworking program and now the live-in custodian at the centre where it is housed. Along with another custodian, he is responsible for the maintenance, repair and cleaning of the building. Before starting with the program, Ron had only been in Ottawa for a few years. After many years of drug abuse and criminal activities, he moved to Ottawa from Montreal, for a fresh start.

This proved to be a false start as he was drawn to old habits in his new city. He spent some time in a detention centre and eventually moved into an apartment hotel where he woke up one morning to find his room in a shambles. He was asked to pay for the damages and leave, which he did.

Soon after he was picked up by an undercover police officer for doing a hit in an alley. He was taken to a rehabilitative detention centre outside of Ottawa, where out on a day pass he was able to make a connection and secure more drugs. After spending six months in rehab, Ron returned to Ottawa and found a place at the Shepherds of Good Hope, where he met Joanne, a nurse at SHCHC and a sister with the religious order. At this stage in his life, SHCHC staff members were looking into finding him palliative care and Ron himself says he was pretty sick. But he describes this as a turning point in his life. "Everything since this time



has been changing, even if I did something wrong Joanne was there to get me on the right track again.”

Ron started at the centre as the part-time custodian and was a member of the woodworking program. He says the program helped him get his self esteem back, taught him new skills, gave him the opportunity to make new friends and meant that at the end of the day he was able to go home and feel good about what he had accomplished. This represents a big change in his lifestyle as he went from making a lot of money through illegal means, to barely getting by on welfare once he had stopped the illegal activities.

He looks back on his life now and sees a positive change. “People say I am a nice guy now,” he laughs, “when I tell people they can,t smoke in the centre and they have to smoke outside, I ask them politely - before I would have just tossed them out by the scruff of their neck, but I have changed.”

A year later Ron still spends time in the shop when he is not attending to his other duties as custodian of the centre. This job has allowed him to earn a living and given him a safe, environment in which to live - away from drugs and crime. He credits SHCHC and the sisters with supporting him to get back on his feet, and surmises that if it weren't for this opportunity he would be back in Montreal doing what he was doing before - or dead - one or the other.

*“Now I have no worries about cops and I don't have to worry about taking off my jacket anywhere”*

When asked how different the life he was leading in Montreal is from the one he leads now, Ron uses a story to illustrate the change. “I remember going to my mother's house once for dinner in Montreal years ago. I took off my jacket and forgot I was wearing a gun. My poor mother saw this and she was so upset. She said if I live by the gun, I will die by the gun. Now I have no worries about cops and I don't have to worry about taking off my jacket anywhere.”

Ron has plans for the future now. He would like to stay with his job at the centre, as he enjoys both living and working there. He would also like to get his driver's licence back and buy a truck. And there are a few things from his past which he misses. He hopes to start camping like he used to in Quebec, throwing his tent up by the water and watching the boats sail by.