

An industry 'Hi-I'm-Bob' session with our homeless

Surrey mayor's panel pursues local solutions



PETER SIMPSON
SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES
CONSTRUCTIVE THOUGHTS

Dirty, threadbare clothes hung loosely from the short man's skinny frame. His few teeth appeared rotten. His oily, thinning hair was combed back, revealing a deeply furrowed brow.

The man stopped fidgeting with his collection of plastic cigarette lighters, threw out his hand and said: "Hi, I'm Bob. Nice to meet you."

The object of Bob's courteous greeting offered his hand without hesitation. He smiled, then responded.

"Hi Bob," he said. "I'm Jake. Nice to meet you, too!"

This exchange took place during a recent information session at a homeless shelter in a particularly rough-and-tumble area of Whalley.

Two prominent members of the home-building and development industries — Jake Friesen of Qualico Development and Steve Kurrein of Progressive Construction — had joined me, Surrey Coun. Judy Villeneuve, senior city staff and other members of the business and social services community on a tour of Surrey's homeless shelters and transition houses.

We were all part of an advisory committee put together last year by Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts. Our goal was to work together to create made-in-Surrey solutions to homelessness and housing-related problems. The development of a homelessness fund was to be at the core of our efforts. Home builders Kevin Shoemaker of Polygon and Gary Friend of

South Ridge Developments also served on the committee.

At last count, more than 500 people were homeless in Surrey. Astonishingly, city officials believe there are 25,000 additional men, women and — sadly — children who are at risk of becoming homeless in the City of Parks. Current services are not keeping pace with the complex needs of the growing population. "Bob" — not his real name — is in his mid-50s, but appears much older.

He told us his story. When he opened his cracked lips to speak, Bob revealed an intelligence and articulate manner of speaking that caught us off guard. His delivery was calm, his choice of words, thoughtful. He did not ask for anything; he simply wanted us to understand why he and others live the way they do.

Bob, the son of a Prairie farmer, normally prefers to live outdoors. But last winter, he became more aware of the potentially lethal combination of the frigid weather and his advancing age. He said he has issues with responsibility and — like others in his position — is battling many demons.

Bob, who looks to the nondescript Whalley shelter as a safe refuge when he needs comfort, kept eye contact with everyone at the table and held our attention until he'd spoken his last word.

The health care and welfare systems have likely assigned labels to Bob, but we didn't ask. We also met "Lisa" — again, not her real name — at a well-managed Surrey transitional housing facility.

Lisa, who is dealing with physical and mental challenges, invited us to visit her small, sparsely furnished apartment. She told us how proud she was to finally have a place to call her own, a place where she can look after herself, cook her own meals and stretch her meagre monthly income.

Her furniture, old and worn, came from garage sales and flea

markets, but she beamed as she told us every piece was purchased with her own money.

Lisa drew our attention to the only picture on the wall, a faded image of a mother bear and her cub. The cheap metal frame was coming apart at the corners. She said the mother-cub image made her happy, a feeling likely connected to her only son, who died trying to save a life many years ago.

As we started to leave her apartment, I told Lisa she had beautiful red fingernails. She smiled, then proudly showed them to the others in our group. For a brief, delicious moment, Lisa was the centre of positive attention, a world apart from her past experiences on suicide watch.

Lisa used to live in a cardboard box. She'd painted flowers and happy scenes on the box, and had cut out small openings — windows from which she could view the outside world.

Lisa folded her box and carried it with her on her daily jaunts, afraid someone would steal or destroy it if she left it behind. She called it her home-to-go.

We visited other facilities and met teenagers and men and women coping with family strife, physical ailments, depression and dependencies. Although all members of the advisory group are well aware of homelessness issues, the face-to-face meetings had a profound impact on us all.

At its June 11 meeting, Surrey council unanimously approved the Surrey Homelessness and Housing Fund, transferring \$9 million from the Affordable Housing Reserve Fund. The assets will be managed by the VanCity Community Foundation, which has a record of commitment and experience in addressing social, homelessness and housing issues.

"The fund will raise money from individuals, businesses and organizations that want to be part of a solution. The fund will

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From the previous page

my great friends live here as well. The unexpected chain of events that eventually put my face on a billboard at Broadway and Maple started in the Smoking Dog Bistro.

While still a nanny, feeling isolated in West Vancouver, I decided I might improve my chances of meeting new people by working as a volunteer in the Campoverde Social Club, near the Smoking Dog.

When I came over to Kits for the interview, I saw the man I was then dating and his dog sitting on the Smoking Dog patio.

The dog recognized me immediately; his master pretended he didn't. For good reason: He was on a date with somebody else.

My heart pounding, I took a deep breath and walked into the ring of fire to say hallo to the lovely couple.

The scene that followed could be described as serene and peaceful. We introduced each other and started casual small talk, a calm scene crackling with intensity.

All of a sudden, my then dating-object excused himself and went off to the bathroom ... never to return ... leaving his 'other' girlfriend and me to ourselves.

Another Smoking Dog patron noticed our discomfort and invited us both to a party in his nearby apartment, his motive more or less to see what would be the next chapter of a very real reality show.

Of course, we passed the rest of the evening drinking and comparing 'our personal diaries' — and creating a lasting friendship. Through this bond I was introduced into the Bastion orbit.

Life happens when you open yourself up to it, no more so than in Kitsilano.

To the question — What happened to the boyfriend's dog? — Lubi Parilakova says, Buy the Book!

Surrey's efforts improve the 'dashes' of the troubled

PETER SIMPSON
From K7

also provide a vehicle for creating partnerships and for leveraging contributions from senior levels of government," said mayor Watts.

Coun. Tom Gill also represented the city on the advisory committee, but Coun. Villeneuve — for many years a passionate champion for the disadvantaged and homeless in Surrey — was the heart and soul of this initiative.

Cemetery headstones have two dates carved into them: a date of birth and a date of death. Between the two is an obscure connecting symbol — a dash.

I was told many years ago that it is not the two dates that hold the most significance; it's the dash. That dash is our entire life. What we do with our dash is what truly matters on this Earth.

There are many men, women and children whose dashes will be enhanced significantly



DIANNE WATTS

by the Surrey Homelessness and Housing Fund, and I applaud Mayor Watts and council for their leadership in creating a community solution to a community challenge.

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