



***“Home is like a force field”***

***Speech to Ongwanada Board of Governors  
Kingston, April 16, 2008***

Thank you, Miigwech - for welcoming me to Ongwanada, which I now know means “Our Home” in Ojibwa.

I realized, after I reviewed your Annual Report and watched the DVD ***‘This is Ongwanada’***, how perfect it was that a Street Nurse from Toronto be invited back to her home town to speak at an organization whose name means “Our Home”.

I often refer to Kingston as ‘my home town’ even though I grew up in Cobourg, I was here for high school – LCVI, and then left to go to nursing school. And of course a lot of my family are still here. Some of you will know my brother Bill Crowe who worked for Ongwanada for a number of years and helped scout out and recommend various homes to purchase as part of your community development.

I can only imagine that was challenging. I have newly found respect for him now since my experience being on a Board of Directors of a non-profit housing provider. I decided that after 20 years as a Street Nurse, for my own sanity, I had to help develop affordable housing. We recently won the RFP to develop two new buildings for social housing. At a recent community meeting for one of those projects, many concerns were raised: Were there enough parking spots? How would we police the number of people that would live in each apartment unit? How would supports and staff be provided for people with special needs? Then, a parent asked how the children who might be living in our building would interact across the fence with the children in the private schoolyard just behind our proposed building. Let me add that ***there was a tense undercurrent to his question***. The City planner chairing the meeting, to his credit, suggested that perhaps the school and parents should concern themselves more with the impact of increased shade on their property from our building, rather than how the children might interact. We call the tone and approach of a community that

shows fear and resistance to people coming into a community 'NIMBY' (Not In My Backyard). Although, the resistance is not about all people coming into a community – rarely is there a community meeting organized to fight off people moving into a condo, or to ask questions about their special needs.

So, I suspect my brother during that period when he was trying to find properties and you at Ongwanada, over the years, have faced your share of NIMBY. It is obvious you changed NIMBY to YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) and isn't it great that it is now not acceptable to discriminate against people based on their abilities, their health, their race, their sexual orientation, their religion.

***It still happens but we are closer to making it history!***

But Bill's job title back then was Coordinator of Support Services including responsibility for purchasing, risk management, radiology, housekeeping and dietary. I'm sure I never fully grasped his talents!

My sister-in-law Lynn Crowe is here tonight too and one of many RBC bankers in my family, I also want to acknowledge that she too has contributed a lot to housing and social issues: fundraising for Almost Home, the Kingston Food Bank. Who knew you could raise \$25 thousand in a golf tournament!

I'm the non-golfing Crowe in my family.

***Everyone wants a home.***

I could spend hours telling you about how bad homelessness is across the country, how and why it got bad and what we all should be doing to build housing and home. But it's not often I'm talking to people or groups that have 'talked the talk and walked the walk'. You've actually done it and your work has created a strong example of the infrastructure, the building of home and community in our country that prevents people from becoming homeless.

In many, many communities there are examples of people who have fallen through the cracks and would do well if there was an Ongwanada in their community. I have seen them in my career on the street. People with developmental disabilities, with birth injuries, head injuries, childhood injuries including infections like meningitis that left them cognitively impaired. They often end up being taken advantage of, injured, bullied or assaulted. The system doesn't work for them and there has been no new housing being built for them for many, many years.

I thought I would share with you a couple examples of projects I've worked on that were a positive, winning experience with a Kingston connection and then tell you about my current project – I am producing a documentary film!

## ***The first example: Disaster declaration and disaster relief – SCPI and HPI monies.***

In 1998, we formed the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and we declared Homelessness a National Disaster. I'll spare you the gritty details of why we did this but it included a massive increase in the numbers of people homeless, horrific and worsening conditions, disease outbreaks such as tuberculosis and my colleagues and I were going to a lot of funerals.

With that declaration, we called for two things:

First, that ***federal emergency relief monies*** be released to communities across the country so they could provide disaster relief for their rapidly growing homeless populations. This type of effort is what should have happened in the Gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Second, we called for a long-term solution, the ***1% solution***, where all levels of government would spend an additional 1% of their budgets to build affordable housing. Tomorrow night, here in Kingston I'll be talking about how the federal government continues to deny this demand, reject even reports from the United Nations that they should kick-start a national housing program, yet are able to allocate more money for the military budget since World War II.

The first item we called for – the federal emergency relief monies, essentially occurred. Homelessness in Canada was catapulted on the national and international scene and shamed by UN condemnations of Canada's record on homelessness.

In 1999 Prime Minister Chrétien appointed Claudette Bradshaw as the Minister Responsible for Homelessness, the first of its kind in Canada, and the world. By the year 2000 a federal homelessness program was initiated. It was called 'SCPI' pronounced 'skippy' (Supporting Community Partnerships Initiatives) and monies were rolled out across the country - hundreds of millions of dollars! With the Conservative government SCPI was renamed 'HPI', pronounced 'hippy' for Homelessness Partnering Initiative, which I think sounds like a dating service. I prefer to simply call the funds what they are - ***'disaster relief monies'***. These hundreds of millions of dollars have funded new shelter beds, renovations to drop-ins, shelters and food banks, programs that target homeless youth, identification replacement programs, even some transitional housing.

What is the Kingston connection? In at least one of the SCPI/HPI rollouts you received over \$500,000 funding projects like Home Base Non-Profit Housing, Fresh Start and Ryandale Shelter.

## ***The second example: Tent City***

Tent City is a success story about homeless people, the Tent City community they created and the housing they finally won. It's about one of the biggest struggles in our country's history involving homeless people since the Great Depression. Do you remember Toronto's Tent City? These were people who could not longer stand to be in crowded and unhealthy shelters. Some had been homeless over 10 years.

So, around 1999, they began an encampment for their own dignity, health and survival. They began pitching tents on an empty stretch of land on Toronto's waterfront – land that happened to be owned by Home Depot.

The people encamped there asked for our support after City Hall threatened them with eviction. Part of my work with the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee at Tent City involved bringing in pre-fab houses, trailers for housing, portable toilets, portable showers, propane and generators, woodstoves (which by the way we purchased from an outlet in Ganonoque), coordinating insulation and roofing work parties, and always Kentucky Fried chicken for our regular meetings. That community by the end of 4 years, had over 50 houses (no tents were left), approximately 130 people, probably a dozen dogs and cats. There had been a birth, several deaths, many meetings and the development of architects' plans to relocate to a less contaminated stretch of land. There was even a shack for inter-faith worship that unfortunately was blown down in a windstorm. Perhaps a sign of worse things to come!

Then in 2002 the brutal eviction occurred even though TDRC and Tent City were working for a planned relocation to another waterfront site. A convoy of trucks arrived to demolish Tent City, supported by police and security who installed a barbwire fence around the perimeter. People and their animals were escorted off the property with less than an hour and no means really to evacuate their entire home of belongings.

The eviction was seemingly endorsed by then Mayor Mel Lastman who said what Toronto politicians still say to this day - that there were hundreds of empty shelter beds that night that "those" people could go to.

Well we didn't accept that and we protested. The first thing we did within hours of the eviction was to go to the downtown Holiday Inn where Home Depot was attempting to explain in a press conference why they had evicted over 100 people with less than an hour notice. They had to cancel their press conference. Then we went to City Council and demanded a response. We got one.

The City was forced to enact a critical incident protocol and that night opened an emergency shelter in a community centre. They were forced to be kind to people, to feed them, to give them bus tickets and to find a place for their dogs.

Then, huge public pressure, including from national and international media, influenced the leverage of federal money that the province was just sitting on for an emergency rent supplement program. One hundred Tent City people are now successfully housed, thanks to this program. Not one of the Tent City people said “no thanks – I’d rather live outside” when offered housing, because as you know “Everyone wants a home”. They have gone on with their lives. Some are now on ODSP, some are working or in school, some are reconnecting with families and friends. It’s as simple as that.

Several of the Tent City heroes are featured in my book ***Dying for a Home***. They were activists then, and a few remain activists now. In 2001, while still living at Tent City, one of Tent City’s first residents - Dri came to Quebec City to join us in a protest outside the Chateau Laurier. He gave perhaps the shortest speech in history on housing – but in my opinion the most profound:

“We are all we.  
We need to convince the other we,  
That we need help.

We need housing. We need housing.  
Merci!”

***What’s the Kingston connection?*** Well, I met at least two Kingstonians living at Tent City.

### ***A hopeful project: Home Safe – a documentary film about homeless families with children***

For most of my career I’ve been a Street Nurse working with adults although I was once the nurse in a family shelter and certainly looking back I realize I saw many moms with children in particular who were in a shelter or so precariously housed they needed to come to our nursing clinics for supplies or food.

Over the years, media would routinely call on me to help find them a homeless family with kids in a motel shelter who would for some reason be willing to talk to them live on camera. Like most of my colleagues, I would say “no I don’t think so” and politely explain why.

Know that over the ten years after the disaster declaration, hundreds of people across the country kept frantically working. There were meetings and research and lobbying and advocating, and many years of protests and rallies and mobilizing communities. We would have small wins, important wins, but still governments and housing ministers (with the exception of Quebec) rejected solving the problem.

Then one day something shocking happened.

CITY TV journalist Adam Vaughan said to me: “Cathy, they (the politicians) aren’t going to do anything until a child dies.”

I was so mad at him. His words stayed with me. I thought he was wrong but the more I thought about it I realized that I had been part of keeping homeless families and children hidden and it was clear to me that I had to change that, before another child died. I say before, because we have had children die homeless.

So, that is the seed planted in my mind that means that now, as a nurse, I am Executive Producer of a documentary film on homeless families and children. Laura Sky is the filmmaker and as friends we had always wanted to do a project together. We are filming in Calgary, Sault Ste. Marie, Toronto and 905 and Hamilton. We began the research in 2006 and we have started filming, in fact I have just returned from a week of filming in Calgary.

In November we brought together children from Calgary, Hamilton, Bradford and Toronto for a forum with Miloon Kothari, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Affordable Housing, at the close of his cross-Canada investigation.

There are some remarkable learnings from the children that I want to share with you. They sat with him and discussed human rights, children’s rights and the horror of homelessness. They note told him:

- it’s not very good being homeless and it’s nothing to joke about
- it’s not good to have to wake up at 5 in the morning every day and take a long bus ride to school, and the same bus ride home and have to do your homework on a bus, and not have an after-school life
- homelessness is tiring and exhausting
- it’s embarrassing to be though of as poor and living in a shelter and when the other kids find out
- they need privacy
- it’s hard to live with your family, maybe with brothers and sisters in a tiny room
- it’s dangerous
- they worry about people out on the street who might get sick or die because of the cold

But the kids were also political and direct.

- “Why are all the rents rising?”
- “I’m wondering exactly how the government is going to solve this, or whether it’s going to help at all?”

- “It’s ridiculous that in a country with so much wealth there are so many people that have to live in a shelter.”
- “the minimum wage is \$8 dollars an hour. So you can be working full time and....still be homeless.”
- “Canada should be building more houses, affordable housing, now”

“So when you have a home, it’s exactly like a protection, it’s sort of like a force field from stuff that are dangerous. And so, sometimes when you are homeless....if you know that you’re getting a decent home and you’re going there like really, really soon, you kind of get overwhelmed with happiness.”

*nine year old.*

These were young children and youth. In every city we are filming we will have an advisory group of young people. If homeless they are suffering, if once homeless they are now housed they remember, and for those taking part who have not experienced homelessness they care, very, very deeply about the issue.

I think we all should.

I hope Laura, some of the kids in the film and I will be able to bring Home Safe for big gala screening in Kingston – perhaps as a means to support Kingston building pressure for more housing dollars here at home.

*Check with delivery*