

Cathy Crowe's presentation to the 'Make Housing Happen' panel at Toronto Summit 2007 Making Big Things Happen

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Will the Conversation be Alive?

Thank you for including me in this year's Toronto Summit. I want to begin with two *very* different success stories which remind us that everyone can and should be housed.

The first. In 1985, a former fashion model, Drina Joubert, was found frozen in the back of a truck at Sherbourne and Dundas. There was a huge public outcry. In 1986 the Ontario government created a program called *Project 3000* - 3,000 new units of **affordable and supportive housing**. The program was designed to ensure that housing money was twinned with support funding from one of the ministries such as Health. As writer Austin Clarke wisely said 'You can't just give a man a warm place to sleep and think that all the pain he has experienced will go away.'

That money was well spent. People still live in those units – I could show them to you. If some of you have not seen such housing it would be good to see.

The second example. People desperately want housing – and this is perhaps best illustrated by the actions of the 100 plus people who, tired of shelters and waiting on housing lists, settled at Tent City. They built a community that had: 50 shacks (no tents), pre-fab and portable housing units, generators, 6 portable toilets, running water, a shower, even streets with names like 'Billy Lane'. It was perhaps the one time that business, service clubs, labour unions, construction companies, architects, caterers, the film industry, media and advocacy groups came together to do something so real. It meant that when Home Depot evicted the encampment, even though Mayor Lastman suggested the people should just go into some 200 empty shelter beds (which wasn't true) – there was a huge public outcry – because people knew, people knew first hand that *these people* deserved housing. And they won it. Guess what? Federal money just sitting at the province, (does that sound familiar?) was leveraged by the City and an emergency rent supplement program was implemented. People were housed!

The money for that program was also well spent.

I have just completed a book called 'Dying for a Home' which will be released in April. The book profiles 10 people who have been homeless who have been fighting for a national housing program. This is what Marty Lang, who reminds me 'he's the expert!' has to say. First he describes people's absolute delight when they won housing after the brutal Tent City eviction. He recounts visiting fellow Tent City resident April's new apartment.

April says “*I know what you’re gonna do first. You’re gonna flick lights on and off and flush the toilet.*” Marty: “*And that’s exactly what I did.*”

Thankful for his own home, Marty persists to describe the ongoing reality for others not so lucky:

“To the politicians who think they can force people to sleep in a shelter, I would say: ‘Have you ever walked at 11 PM at night and talked to the people who are out there in their sleeping bags and asked them why they aren’t inside?’ Well, it’s because of tuberculosis, and other new epidemics, like bedbugs. And Out of the Cold spaces are for one night only. They might have eighty people for the evening and there are no shower facilities. People coming in, just lying down in their clothes.”

“I’d like to take the federal minister of housing out for a tour to show him or her where so many people are sleeping because they’re homeless. Toronto is the worst in all of Canada.....I know all the hidden outside sleeping places. I would like to talk to him ... and show him these places. I’d say ‘Did you see some people under just a little grey Salvation Army blanket? It will be cold tonight, it might snow. I’ll tell you what, I’ll get two blankets, if you want to sleep out tonight.’ On Day 2 of the tour when we woke up, I’d take him to the City Hall washrooms when they open. Then maybe show him 2 Murray Street – an example of the type of housing he should be building.”

I want to name six dangers that continue to cause inexcusable harm to homeless and underhoused people since ‘Enough Talk’ was released in 2003.

1. ***Shelter options have worsened.*** Since ‘Enough Talk’, ‘planning by omission’ means that the City continues to rely on close to two dozen ‘Out of the Cold’ sites for emergency shelter (in the winter months only), forcing hundreds of people to move nightly (the United Nations would call these people internally displaced persons). The cost should a SARS like illness, let alone tuberculosis hit this shelter sector is unimaginable.
2. ***Outdoor sleeping conditions have worsened.*** Homeless people who are still unable to access shelter now have to hunker down and forage further a field for food and survival supplies.
3. The year following your last summit (2004-5) a ***tuberculosis*** outbreak in the homeless population involved more than a dozen active cases of TB; in addition 16 shelter staff converted to a positive skin test. The direct costs – \$. 5 million.
4. ***Bedbugs*** have spread from the original dozen shelter and supportive housing sites to infest the majority of Toronto shelters including drop-in centres. Bedbug infestations lead to worsening mental health, skin infections and huge costs both for pest-control, relocation and replacement of personal belongings.

5. ***People are dying.*** Since 'Enough Talk' 220 names of men and women have been added to the Toronto Homeless Memorial at the Church of the Holy Trinity beside the Eaton Centre.
6. ***Hate and discrimination grows.*** Consider the recent by-law proposed by Councillor Ootes to ban panhandling in tourist zones in the City. Consider the homeless man beaten to death in Moss Park. Prejudice remains one of the biggest obstacles, defining who is deserving and who is not deserving of housing.

Ursula Franklin says: "If a conversation can lead to action then the conversation is alive."

Marty died on February 14 this year. He was buried this morning. He would want me to ask you to do everything in your power to make your conversations these two days come alive, perhaps in ways you have not yet thought of.

Thank you.