



A home for Steven this Christmas

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Steven's favourite place to go when he needs a breath of fresh air is the bench just outside the front entrance to Kwayasut (Aboriginal supportive housing) which opened last December and is Steven's new home.



The best Christmases for Steven were as a young boy living with his grandmother and sister in a small social housing complex in Ottawa. He remembers the clinking of his grandmother's china as he had tea parties with his sister and how happy and safe he felt.

Steven's mom was a schizophrenic, in and out of hospitals, and his father was in and out of jail – but his grandmother provided the stability he needed those early years. Unfortunately, Steven's grandmother died when he was nine, setting the stage for a series of traumatic events that would trigger his own mental illness and addiction issues.

Upon his grandmother's death, Steven and his sister were placed in the custody of their father, recently released from prison, and living on the West Coast. Steven says they were left alone for days at a time, without food or supervision, in a "crack house". After going to school disheveled, hungry and morose one too many times, the school took action and called social services. Steven and his sister were placed in separate foster homes: he in Vancouver; she in Mission.

He left the foster care system at the age of 19, with nowhere to go, and a tenuous relationship with his sister. He ended up at Covenant House, but left shortly after being hired as a purser on a cruise ship. For three years, literally, his feet never touched the ground, as he sailed around the world. Unfortunately, after a conflict with his boss, Steven lost his job, and soon began a downward spiral. "It triggered a depression that I just couldn't get myself out of. Then my mother was diagnosed with bone cancer. It made me feel even more helpless and depressed. I couldn't leave my apartment and I stopped being social. I started using drugs so I had the courage to leave the house."

At the time, he was living with a friend to make ends meet. But when Steven started using crystal meth it was a "game-changer" he says. "Nobody wants to be around a 'meth head' and his friend kicked him out of the apartment they shared. The drugs were an escape from the exploitation and bad experiences he suffered as a young gay man. "When I was younger, I would hit my head against

a wall to feel physical pain, because the emotions I was feeling were so bad," says Steven. "Drugs were just another way to harm myself; another distraction."

At first he lived in shelters and then in parks, behind bowling alleys, and wherever he felt he would be safe. He lived like that for six months, but finally had enough.

"Even though I was an addict, I knew that wasn't any way to live. You're never at peace when you're homeless and on the street. You never get a good night's sleep – you're lucky if you sleep for a couple of hours at a time, because you feel so vulnerable."

Community crisis workers connected with Steven, who got motivated to get clean, find a home, and turn his life around.

This is the first Christmas that Steven will spend in his new bachelor suite at the Kwayasut, a 99-unit supportive housing building, located on Fraser Street in Vancouver, which began tenancing in

Kwayasut just one of four building openings this year (cont'd)

December of last year, with an official opening ceremony held this past June. He's relishing rediscovering his Aboriginal heritage – his mother was one-half Algonquin – and his cultural traditions such as drumming, as well as expressing his thoughts through writing. Kwayasut has a Writers' Guild which meets regularly that Steven is part of. "Writing helps me let go of the rage. When you feel that kind of emotion, it's like nuclear waste, it's really destructive; you have to let it go. Now, when I feel like hurting myself – I write."

It'll be a bittersweet time for Steven as this time of year triggers his depression. "It's really a low point for me because it makes me think of all the lost relationships in my life."

But, he's grateful to have a home of his own this Christmas, and to be surrounded by good, kind supportive staff. "I feel like its family here. Staff aren't just punching a clock. They put their heart and soul into making this a healing place."

It's taken Steven a while to feel that Kwayasut is his home. "It took a year to mentally accept this is my home, and no one is going to take it away from me. I feel it's a place I can be proud of and invite people into."

Having a home and stability in his life means that Steven can focus on getting healthy.

"You can't address the other stuff if you don't have a home," says Steven, who is planning on entering a First Nations mental health and addictions program in the Spring. "Now that I have a place, I can think about getting more treatment and counselling, mending the relationships in my life, and going back to work."

Steven is one of hundreds of previously homeless individuals who have found supportive housing this year and will be celebrating a much different Christmas than they would have otherwise. This year, Streetohome Foundation, alongside BC Housing, the City of Vancouver, the provincial and federal governments, service providers and donors, helped celebrate the official openings of 1249 Howe Street (110 units of housing); Kwayatsut (99 units); The Kettle on Burrard (141 units) and Taylor Manor (56 units).

Thank you to Coast Capital Savings and Face of Today Foundation for their generous support of Kwayatsut.

2015 Official Openings & Groundbreakings



Taylor Manor
56 units
March 2015

The Kettle
141 units
March 2015



Kwayasut
99 units
June 2015



1249 Howe
110 units
July 2015



YWCA Cause We Care House
21 units
Groundbreaking: January 2015



One-on-one with Geoffrey Cowper

Geoffrey Cowper has been a director of the Streetohome Board since its inception in 2008. Mr. Cowper is Senior Counsel and Leader of Fasken Martineau's Litigation & Dispute Resolution Group. He has served as council on a number of significant cases, including Commissions of Inquiry into the BC justice system's response to the death of Frank Paul; Indian Affairs policy, and Provincial Securities regulation.



He has received numerous awards and recognition for his work. For a complete list of Board Members, please visit: Streetohome.org/about-streetohome/board

Why did you join the Streetohome Board?

I was attracted to the idea that the best solutions may arise from sharing the skills and insights of government, the private sector and those experienced in serving the homeless.

Where do you think STH will have the most impact this coming year?

I consider this our harvest period as the final projects we committed to building in the early years will open this year and next and provide much-needed housing.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

I came to BC from Alberta to study genetics and got distracted into law.

If you could go back and give your 20 year-old-self one piece of advice, what would it be?

Invest in genomics.

Who's the one leader (living or dead) you most admire and why?

Harry S. Truman because he always remembered the potential of power to hurt people.

What gets you up in the morning, and what keeps you up at night?

The interesting problems on my desk; the people I know who are in pain.

Four unique stories of courage

This year, for our annual Homelessness Action Week story series, we introduced you to four individuals who have experienced homelessness, or have been at risk for homelessness. Whether they kicked an addiction (Shelly), moved into a great new job (Kathy), reconciled an abusive past (Gary), or found that perfect living situation (Kris), they all found that with some friendly encouragement they were ready to change their lives. Read all four stories on our website (streetohome.org/news-events/moving-on)

moving on: shelly's story

As an advocate for women who face issues with addictions, Shelly is an inspiration, because she's walked the talk.

Five years ago, she kicked her addictions with drugs and alcohol to go back to school and rebuild her life.

Having lived in foster care, experienced sexual trauma from a young age and addiction issues as a young adult, then becoming homeless and subsequently living in single room occupancy hotels for many years, she has pushed through many struggles to find her place in the world.

By the age of six, Shelly had been placed in 26 different foster homes. She lived in a home for Aboriginal children with 18 other kids for many years, all of whom had experienced their own share of trauma.

Through those early years she experienced a great deal of abuse but also found her escape through physical exercise such as running, soccer, cross country and track and field, which fed her soul. She excelled at athletics, so much so, that in her late teens she was asked to participate in the BC

Summer Olympics three times in a row for volleyball and track and field.

When she 'aged out of foster care' at 19 and had to start supporting herself, she filled the void and anguish of the past with drugs and alcohol. She sold sex to support herself financially. She felt successful for a while, but over the years, found it harder and harder to keep up the lifestyle.

In 2010, Shelly hit rock bottom – she was only 108 pounds, her body a complete wreck and jaundiced, and she had no teeth. At the time she didn't have any veins on her body that were soft enough to inject heroin, her preferred drug at the time. As Shelly puts it, if she couldn't have her drug of choice how she wanted it, then she might as well either die or make a change. She chose change.

Today, Shelly works as a support worker in low barrier supportive housing with a harm reduction focus for women. Shelly is now able to give back to others what she received when she finally moved into supportive housing.



Homelessness 101: sharing Streetohome's story

Streetohome's success has been the result of partnerships. Since 2008, Streetohome has leveraged private donations with funding from all levels of government to build supportive housing as well as prevent homelessness in the first place. So, it was a very special honour for us to make a presentation to the BC Chapter of the World Presidents' Organization (WPO), comprised of the province's chief executives and business leaders.

Streetohome Chair John McLernon (middle) and Sherri Magee, Vice-Chair of the Vancouver Police Board (second from left), were joined by an expert panel including Dr. Bill MacEwan (far left), Constable Ali Gailus (far right), Rob Turnbull, President & CEO, Streetohome Foundation (second from right) and founding Streetohome board member, philanthropist and businessman Frank Giustra (third from left), for a wide-ranging and informative discussion on homelessness in the City. On behalf of WPO, Streetohome also donated \$1,000 in Save-On-Meats lunch tokens to the Vancouver Police Department. The tokens help build bridges between front-line officers and marginalized and homeless individuals.



A Message from Rob Turnbull

In this issue we brought you stories of Steven who was homeless and slept outside for six months, and Shelly who was at risk of homelessness. But, what's it's really like to find yourself without a safe, clean place to call home, and be at the mercy of the elements and unscrupulous individuals who may steal from you, or want to cause you harm?

Well, Covenant House's Sleep Out Vancouver event – held in November – gave 53 brave individuals, including Vancouver Police Department (VPD) Inspector Howard Tran with the Youth Services Section and Mental Health Portfolio, a chance to find out in small measure the answer to that question.

In addition to raising awareness, the event raised more than \$700,000 for Covenant House's crisis program for youth 16 to 24.

Streetohome is a proud supporter of Covenant House's youth programs. We also work closely with the VPD as well

as community organizations to share knowledge, identify challenges within the system, and advocate for change.

For this year's Christmas message we'd thought we'd ask Inspector Tran about his experience with the Sleep Out event. I know hearing from Howard, gave me pause to remember how very lucky my family and I are, and to remember that there are others who are not as fortunate this time of year.

What was the highlight of the evening for you?

The highlight was really hearing from three youth who were impacted by the programs at Covenant House and speaking in earnest with the staff and seeing how much they care about the youth, the work and Covenant House.

What was the lowlight of the evening?

It started to get quite cold as the evening went on and probably reached its zenith at about 4 a.m. when my body started to shut down.

Where did you sleep? What did you have to keep you warm?

I had a piece of cardboard, a toque and a sleeping bag – and that's all! I had staked out a spot in an alcove which was covered, but it then occurred to me that this was probably an area that people used to relieve themselves, but that's the reality youth face when they're searching for a safe place to sleep. However, it appeared that the alley had been cleaned up.

Was this the first year you participated? Would you do it again next year?

This was my first year and I would do it again, if asked, but I think it would be important for other members of the VPD to experience this as well.

Would you encourage others to participate next year, and if so, why?

Yes, because we need to raise as much money as possible for homeless youth, but more importantly to really get a sense of what many youth endure each and every day in Vancouver. We are all so blessed, yet we often take our situations for



Howard Tran, VPD, participated in Covenant House's Sleep Out Vancouver event to raise awareness about youth homelessness.

granted and forget about those less fortunate than ourselves.

Did you actually get any sleep?

I felt compelled to stay awake to safeguard those who were trying to sleep. We were 'sleeping' in the laneway behind Covenant where cars and pedestrians had free access all night. I think the participants and staff appreciated a uniformed police officer staying up to keep them safe.

How much money did you raise?

I raised \$5,530 (my goal was \$6,000).

Did the experience change your perception of what it's like to live on the street?

No, because it is only seven hours and you know there is an end and you can go home. Hope is a very powerful emotion and homeless youth often don't have hope that their situation will end in seven hours. Also, because a large chunk of my 19 years as a police officer was spent working with vulnerable, marginalized and people in crisis, usually in the middle of a cold or wet night, I know how much homeless people have to endure.

Thank-you, Howard, for sharing your experience with us.

**Rob Turnbull, Ph.D., CHE
President & CEO
Streetohome Foundation**

Happy Holidays



We hope you have time to enjoy the spirit of the holiday season. Joy Villanueva, Bookkeeper; Papinder Rehncy, Communications & Project Manager; John McLernon, Board Chair; Lloyd Craig, Vice-Chair; Tracey Harvey, Administration, Donor & Project Manager, and Rob Turnbull, President & CEO.

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