

Homelessness

by BRIAN LOCKHART

I read an interesting but rather sad story recently penned by a Toronto Star reporter.

It detailed the life and sad ending of a man who struggled with homelessness his entire adult life.

He finally died at age 62, having been located in the Don River after once again finding himself on the street.

His life was plagued by mental illness, addiction, and the resulting homelessness that too often accompanies people who suffer from such maladies. He was in and out of jails for years.

He was buried with a simple service and a handful of social outreach workers in attendance. No members of his family were present.

Homelessness is increasing across North America.

It wasn't all that long ago, that seeing a person sleeping on the street in a large Canadian city would have been a shock to anyone walking by. However, over the past three decades it has become commonplace.

In several U.S. cities, there are homeless tent cities now located on downtown streets. Certain cities are more popular because of the warm weather year-round.

Los Angeles has a sizable tent city population with San Francisco now home to a huge number of homeless street dwellers.

In Las Vegas, tunnels running underneath the city are inhabited by so-called 'mole people' who set up homes under the casinos where tourists gamble oblivious to the makeshift town several feet below.

Many of the people living there are drug addicts, some mentally ill, others just got lost and fell through the cracks of life.

The mole people lead a dangerous life. They are vulnerable to crime, and in case of rain or flash flooding in the desert, they can be caught in a torrent of rushing water. The tunnels were designed to divert flash-flood water away from the city.

In large Canadian cities, there are shelters for the homeless to get in out of the cold and find a bed or the night. Unfortunately, many homeless people would rather stay outdoors than risk a night in a shelter. As one homeless man put it in a recent interview, in the shelters there is a risk of violence and a very good chance any belongings you have will be stolen.

There seems to be four categories of homeless people.

There are those that choose to be homeless for various reasons. There have always been people who prefer a nomadic life of vagrancy. For some, riding the rails and camping where they land is just their way of life.

I saw an interesting interview with a girl of about 19, who was living under a bridge with her homeless boyfriend in Toronto, in spite of the fact that she was from Scarborough and her family lived there in a normal house and wanted her to come home. For her, life under a bridge was an adventure.

There are those that become homeless through life circumstances. A job loss, traumatic event, or domestic violence, can sometime leave people with nowhere to turn.

There are those who have a mental illness and have become lost members of society. There was a good documentary on a person in Toronto who suffered from schizophrenia. Life on the streets was torture both mentally and physically and the story did not end on a happy note.

Drug addiction is a big factor in the homeless world. When getting your next hit is the only important thing in your world, holding a job and maintaining a residence becomes secondary.

There was a time when rules were in place to control certain types of homelessness. Vagrancy laws existed in most countries. Many people with severe mental illness were required to be in a hospital of some sort.

Over time, many vagrancy laws were taken off the books. Mental health institutions took a different approach to helping people. Unfortunately, that also resulted in far too many people with mental health issues being left on their own to deal with sometimes overwhelming problems.

It may be time to re-examine the entire situation of people living on the streets.

Sometimes a society just has to take control of a situation when people are not capable or unwilling to help themselves.

Shelters may provide a short respite from the cold but they do not provide a long-term solution.

Living in a tent city along a highway, city street, or in a park, is an invitation for more abuse to people who have already found themselves marginalized in society.