

## History of Inn Out of the Cold, St. Thomas-Elgin by Founding Member Ken Brooks

January 2010 was proving to be a cold winter. The Executive Director of CMHA, Elgin Branch, Heather DeBruyn, received an email one day from the Red Mitten, a wool shop in St Thomas. They were asking their customers if they would knit mittens for young people, they had encountered who were homeless and out in the cold. What struck her was that she wasn't sure what else was being done to help those on the streets.

The YWCA took in some homeless women, but in the past, men had relied on the old YMCA hostel. It had been torn down and replaced years before but without rooms to let out as many YMCAs were now doing. As a result, the question arose as to where they might go if homeless. Heather connected with Elizabeth Sebestyen at Ontario Works who advised that if a homeless person contacted them, they would provide transportation to London so that the person might go to one of their homeless shelters.

Heather felt that the community probably didn't realize the extent of homelessness in St. Thomas and Elgin County and if given a chance, might do more than just knit mittens for them. Additionally, even while homeless, any possible supports they might have from family and friends would be here. To ship them off to London could make them even more isolated from the community.

She began to look around to see if there were funding that could be found for some sort of shelter. Her partner, Ken Brooks, the Executive Director of the Elgin-Oxford Legal Clinic, had been part of a group at Operation Sharing in Woodstock that had set up an Inn Out of the Cold for the homeless of Oxford County. They connected with the Chaplain of Operation Sharing, Stephen Giuliano, who filled them in on how it was going, how they were operating and provided information on other Inns in the region such as the Inn in Cambridge. This model saw community groups or churches provide shelter during the winter months as well as meals to the homeless. Most of the operations were operated by volunteers.

The model seemed sound and a good start to helping the homeless, particularly during winter months when they were at risk of freezing to death. Heather started to look for funding opportunities as she was experienced in looking for grants. The Inn was incorporated as a non-profit entity as that would facilitate some funding opportunities. She did find funding for homelessness operations that were available from a federal government program that was available through the United Way of Greater Simcoe. They would provide seed money to start the program but then it would have to find funding from there. The seed money would probably cover the program over the winter of 2010-11. Ken started to approach churches in the downtown area to see if they would provide the space for the homeless. Ideally, they were looking for one place to handle it all but knew that other models saw several churches share the workload by providing either several nights every week or a week out of the month. After approaching several churches, the Pastor at Central United, Troy Van Ginkel, responded enthusiastically and agreed to take it to his parish council. They agreed to take on the project fully, providing their gym for a sleep space and the kitchen to make meals.

The first employee, a social service worker, Don Hopkins, was hired to help find volunteers and develop the programs. Ken spent most Sunday mornings in the fall and winter of 2010 going to St Thomas churches to talk about the Inn and to canvas for volunteers. The community was surprised to hear about the need as homelessness in St Thomas and Elgin was largely invisible at the time. But they jumped on board. Volunteers were found. One of the parishioners at Central United worked at a large hotel in London and was able to provide bedding that the hotel no longer used. People were

supportive, and the Inn opened in late October 2010 at Central United. It didn't take long before the homeless started to find their way to the Inn for a hot dinner and a warm place to spend the night before getting breakfast and out the door in the morning.

The funding was only there to start the project, so Heather continued to look for grants and donations. Elizabeth Sebestyen at Ontario Works advised that there were provincial funds available to provide a per diem for homeless shelters. While the provincial program covered most of the grant, some would have to come from the municipality. She took it to the St Thomas City Council, and they agreed to provide the necessary additional funds to allow the Inn to access the per diem grant. The grant would provide \$50,000.00 annually for operation funding. That wouldn't be enough to run the program but provided a solid foundation. Donations started to come from the community to help with the rest. Besides money, individuals and groups provided food, clothing, and other supplies. The Inn was operated primarily by volunteers. Employees were needed to ensure a consistent presence overnight but during the following seasons, up to 100 volunteers per year would help with meals, overnight supervision, and "hospitality" during the evenings. That first season saw just over 50 individuals use the services of the Inn.

Others in the community came on board to help. The Y allowed the Inn guests to go to their facility to use the showers. A member of Central United saw the need for showers and he provided the money to install showers for the guests of the Inn. Computers were provided by a government program that provides free refurbished computers so that the guests could access the internet to look for jobs or apartments. The following year a group started the Shamrock Shuffle. This was a walk/run in the downtown area that would raise money for the Inn. That first year it raised about \$10,000.00 for Inn operations.

During that first Shuffle, a young man approached Heather to tell her how he and a friend had stayed in the Inn that first season. They had lost their jobs and then since they couldn't pay the rent, they had lost their apartment. They had ended up on the streets. They heard about the Inn and became guests. It allowed them a safe and warm place to sleep and provided healthy meals. They were able to use the computers to apply for jobs. When they went for interviews, they presented much better since they were no longer living rough. They found jobs, and then had enough money to get an apartment. The Inn had not only given them a safe place to stay off the cold streets but provided the respite needed to get back on track to becoming contributing members of the community. He was at the Shuffle to give back.

The Inn had found its place in the community and the community provided the support needed to provide this necessary service for the homeless. It wasn't all good stories. There were ups and downs, stresses, and tensions in addition to good things happening. Each season seemed to bring its own challenges as the make-up of the guests seemed to change each season. The first season comprised almost all men as guests but then women would start to show up as guests as well.

In one of those early years, an 84-year-old woman showed up one evening needing a place to sleep. While she had a house, it had been condemned. She was living in her car in the driveway, but it was proving to be too cold. So, she came down to the Inn. When Heather and Ken were advised, it was realized that more would need to be done as it didn't seem an appropriate place for her to stay. Heather made some calls, and a place was found for her to move in. The elderly lady resisted, however. She didn't want to be in a senior's residence. Heather asked her what she could provide for the woman to agree to move into the apartment. She responded that if Heather could provide her with a pheasant

dinner, then she would move into the apartment. No doubt she thought that couldn't happen. Heather phoned around however and found a restaurant in London that did pheasant dinners. She ordered one for takeout and drove to London to pick it up. The woman was clearly surprised when Heather presented her with a pheasant dinner, but she kept her part of the bargain and moved into the apartment. It was later discovered that this elderly woman had been an outstanding psychiatric nurse at the St. Thomas Psychiatric Hospital during her working life and at one point had received the Order of Ontario for contributions to the community. This was an example of how the homeless can be anyone.

After a couple seasons, others in the community heard about the healthy meals being served to our guests. Those living in poverty often don't have the money to both pay the rent and buy food, let alone health food. Some started to show up to see if we had any extra meals. It seemed wrong to turn away the hungry who had a roof over their head but no money for food. The community was generous in donating food for those in need. A decision was made to provide dinner to any who showed up, not just the overnight guests. While the community churches were approached to provide community meals to those living in poverty who were hungry, a viable program couldn't be started. By the 2019/20 season, the evening meals often fed about 15 overnight guests as well as an additional 40 to 50 others, sometimes including children.

There were many success stories along the way of those who were able to use the Inn to find their feet and get back on track. There were also those who remained in homelessness as they were unable to overcome the challenges of addiction or mental illness. The ultimate success story will be at the point when the shelter is no longer needed as viable housing is found for all those in need of a roof over their head.

Ken Brooks