

Community Trust holds gathering for third International Overdose Prevention Day



By Bill Kilpatrick

Around 25 people gathered at the North Hastings Community Trust on Aug. 31 to raise awareness about the issue of drug overdoses and how it is impacting people in North Hastings. This gathering was part of a larger event that was initiated in Australia back in 2001 by Sally J Finn, a member of the Salvation Army in St. Kilda in Melbourne, but since 2012 the event has been convened by the Australian not-for-profit public health organization, the Pennington Institute, according to their web page. The day saw events take place all over Hastings County and throughout the world to commemorate those who have been lost to drug overdoses.

Victoria Burke, the Harm Reduction and Outreach Coordinator for the North Hastings Community Trust, began the day by talking about the theme of this year's overdose prevention day which was, 'Recognizing those people who go unseen.' Burke pointed out that the gathering was meant to remember those who have been lost to drug overdoses, but also to remember those who are still here. Burke then highlighted the current state of drug use within North Hastings pointing out that, 'there are people who are saved everyday because of NARCAN. There are people who are responding to overdoses everyday single day who are not getting medical attention and taking care of each other. There's a huge community in our town that are taking care of each other each day and responding to overdoses every single day.'

Burke went on to point out that one of reasons that so many people are dying is because of a toxic drug supply, adding that, 'People are being poisoned on a daily basis. Folks don't want to overdose and they don't want to die; they want a better life.' Burke is hoping that gatherings like the one on Aug 31 will reduce stigma towards users, help educate people, teach people about the benefits of

naloxone kits and provide a place where people can collectively grieve and support one another. "This is a place where people who use drugs are celebrated," said Burke, "We celebrate each other's value. That's why we're here today."

As part of the gathering the Community Trust provided free NARCAN training and kits, they also had some art projects that those in attendance could participate in. One of which allowed those in attendance to ask questions about the drug using community in an attempt to create dialogue and debunk some of the myths about those who use drugs. There was also a couple people with lived experience who are currently using drugs who bravely got up in front of the crowd to talk about what their life was like and some of their struggles. One of the users named Desmond, or Desi to his friends, stated that he has lost 19 friends in the last 7 months. He went on to speak about the impact that using fentanyl has had on his health, on his relationship with his family, and on his friends, "It's sad. It's hell," muttered Desmond with tears in his eyes, "We are lucky to have NARCAN kits," he says pointing out that he has personally brought back 75 to 100 people who had overdosed. "That's 75 to 100 people that you brought back that were still able to live," said Burke reassuringly to Desmond, "That's huge man, that's really huge."

Desmond went on to point out that they are finding fentanyl in pills and even in marijuana adding that he witnessed a 350 pound man go into cardiac arrest after ingesting the tiniest amount. Referring to fentanyl, Desmond says that because of its potency you'd think it should be expensive and hard to get, but it's not, pointing out that, "It's the cheapest and easiest [drug to find, and] it's everywhere now. It's the most dangerous highly addictive drug in the world," said Desmond. Talking about the many deaths that he has personally witnessed he says, "It's a nightmare. Knowing that it [an overdose] could happen with every puff, but you still do it. We're playing Russian roulette and hopefully we will be able to do something to fix it. It's scary and I hope that none of you will have to deal with that in your family." Burke asked Desmond if there was any message that he had for those in attendance that they could take away and share with others. Desmond lowered his head and paused as he appeared to reflect on the carnage that he has witnessed and the friends that he has lost from fentanyl overdoses and as his tears began to fall, he looked up and through a voice that seemed to be attempting to find the words to express his own regret, pain, and sadness simply said, "Don't let them go near it."