

Poor beautiful Bancroft



March 19, 2019

By Nate Smelle

To define the last week as an emotional roller-coaster worldwide would be a gross understatement. With some 1.4 million youth across the globe skipping school last Friday to protect the planet from government inaction on climate change, one could not help but feel a sense of hope for our shared future. At the same time, the energy shifted in the wake of the terrorist attack by a white supremacist in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15 that left at least 50 people dead. While there is still much to be said regarding each of these tragic circumstances we face as a species, since listening to the presentation by Hastings County's director of community and human services, Erin Rivers and assistant manager of affordable housing policy and partnerships, Michelle Ogden at the Hastings Highlands council meeting on March 6 my mind has been focused on the crisis of poverty in North Hastings. In their presentation there was a great deal of information shared about what the county is doing to fight poverty through its variety of programs and services. Though Rivers and Ogden did an excellent job of educating the room on what is being done to help reduce the impacts of poverty on individuals and families, for me, more questions were raised than answers by the information presented on this day. For instance, why is it that Ontario is the only province in Canada where municipalities are responsible for homelessness prevention? While Ogden did make it clear that this was part of former Ontario premier Mike Harris's so-called "common sense revolution," I could not help but wonder how downloading such a grandiose responsibility on municipalities "especially municipalities in North Hastings where our income is 30 per cent lower than the provincial average" made any sense at all. Nevertheless, the more I think about it, the more I realize how little is being done to address the root cause of poverty "greed. In fact, the majority of those in power at all levels of government in Ontario and across Canada at the moment, and throughout most of our country's history for that matter, seem more interested in feeding greed than in feeding the basic needs of the people they are meant to serve. Why does our government think it is OK to use billions of our tax dollars each year to provide unneeded subsidies to the fossil-fuel industry, when more than 80 First Nations communities do not have access to clean water, and millions of Canadians are living in poverty? On Monday morning as I was preparing the first newspaper of the week for press, I was pressed by the public to think a little harder on how poverty is manifesting locally when I noticed my phone lighting up with more email alerts than usual. The reason for this sudden bombardment turned out to be an article by Zi-Ann Lum in the HuffPost entitled, "Welcome To Bancroft, Ont. Where Residents Are Charged \$2,400 Water Bills." While Lum did a decent job of explaining how the Nutrient Management Act passed by Ontario's Progressive Conservative government under former premier Ernie Eves placed this burden on Bancroft, there were a couple major pieces of the puzzle missing that only someone who was in the room when the Gnomes for Social Justice and Equality strolled into the council meeting on Jan. 9, 2018 would know. Looking back at the photos I took on that day of the moment the Gnomes came knocking, there is no evidence that Joyce Dale, the Anishinaabe woman who symbolically cut off her braids to protest council's decision to raise the water and wastewater rates by 53 per cent, was brandishing scissors. Considering I

watched Dale remove the scissors from her purse before she cut off her braids; and that council, with the exception of former councillor Bill Kilpatrick, fled into the kitchen before hearing what their constituents had to say, I don't see any way Mayor Paul Jenkins could have, as Lum's article states: "caught a glimpse of scissor blades in the hands of a protester named Joyce Dale." On many occasions since I began reporting here I have written on how Bancroft and North Hastings greatest strength resides in the power of the people. Some of the unwanted developments the community has banded together to fight include: the armoured vehicle testing site on Benoir Lake proposed by Armatec; the quarry in Faraday proposed by Freymond Lumber and Fowler Construction; and the nickel, copper and cobalt mining project proposed by Pancontinental Resources and Hastings Highlands Resources. In each of these cases I have witnessed an energy that is far more powerful than that wielded by any individual elected official, council or governmental institution. On Jan. 9, 2018 the Gnomes brought this same energy to the council table to fight poverty in Bancroft, and were sadly ignored by the majority of those elected to represent them. It does not make sense to blame the current council for getting Bancroft into this mess. What they are guilty of however is not standing up for the people of this community ? the people who chose to live here despite the low wages and high cost of living. Last year, when I was going door to door on Woodview Lane in Bancroft to speak with people about the water and wastewater rates, I felt firsthand the frustration and anger these individuals were experiencing every time they opened their water and wastewater bills. As long as the rates keep climbing this energy will only continue to grow.