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Poverty in North Hastings

By Nate Smelle

While slurping up a bowl of delicious homemade, locally grown carrot soup at A Place For The Arts last Tuesday, I had the opportunity to sit down for a chat with the North Hastings Community Trust's program co-ordinator, Jane Kali.

Catching me up on some of the most pressing concerns and challenges their clients face this winter, she explained to me how the organization plans to help our fellow community members free themselves from the shackles of poverty.

The biggest issue in Bancroft now, Kali said, is water. Over the last few weeks, Kali said she had been working to get the town to turn the water back on for a single mother whose service was disconnected. Happy that she was able to help this one individual, she said the issue is far from being resolved.

Since the rate increased by 53 per cent at the start this year, she said there are now several families who have had, or are on the verge of having their water shut off by the town. Highlighting the urgency of the situation, Kali pointed out how the majority of the population is now living on a low income, and that a growing number of people cannot afford to pay their water and wastewater bills.

Considering survival without access to clean drinking water is impossible, Kali and I agreed that turning off people's taps and depriving them of such access was not a viable solution to the crisis.

?This is a public health issue,? she said.

Listening to Kali share her encounters with people in the Bancroft area who cannot afford to pay for water, heat, hydro and food, I was reminded of a conversation I had the day before with the manager of the Minden Food Bank, Joanne Barnes. During this discussion, she explained to me why the food bank originally decided to create its Fuel For Warmth program.

Barnes said the idea came to her after speaking with a single mother of five, who told her that she and her children had been wearing snowsuits inside the house because they couldn't afford to heat and eat.

As much as I love winter camping, it is not something I would want to do out of necessity, especially in the ?so called? comforts of my own home. Sleeping outdoors when the temperatures are below zero requires careful thought and preparation. To ensure that one will survive a night outdoors during a Canadian winter one needs to make a list. Such a list includes firewood (heat), water, food, several layers of clothing and if possible a tarp, tent or the knowledge and ability to build a quinzee. Without a roof over your head of some sort ? even with a raging fire ? you are at the mercy of the elements.

Tragically, far too many people in our community are having to make a winter camping list just to survive inside their own home. Fortunately, Kali said the NHCT's Wood Share program, which provides people with an emergency supply of firewood, is helping many in the community strike one essential item off their list.

As we all know, our province's problem of poverty is nothing new. Having straddled the poverty line in terms of income for much of the last decade, in some ways I have been studying the issue from the inside. Though the numbers indicate that I have continuously resided just above or just below what qualifies someone to be an official member of the so called ?poor,?
I would not place myself in this category.

It is not that I resist this label out of shame; I do so because I have yet to go hungry, have my hydro or water shut off, or lack the means of heating my home. That said, I, like most of us reading this, do understand how it feels to live cheque to cheque.

For more information on the support services offered by the North Hastings Community Trust, and/ or how to get

involved contact nhcommunitytrust@gmail.com, or call 613-339-1100.