

Still a crime to be poor



By Nate Smelle

Since I began reading our local newspapers in 2005, there have been articles and press releases appearing on a weekly basis that directly or indirectly focus our attention on an ongoing crisis of affordability that has been limiting the potential of Ontarians for at least the past three decades. Over the last two weeks I have been sifting through the pages of Bancroft This Week and The Bancroft Times in an attempt to gain insight into the origins of this crisis and the strategies previously attempted to address it.

Having written on this crisis over, and over, and over again, I decided to embark on this investigative journey through the past to see if there were any missing pieces to the puzzle preventing us from seeing the big picture, and finding a solution. However, the true inspiration for this examination of oppression was a conversation I recently participated in with members of the North Hastings Community Trust's team of support workers, regarding the intersection of the opioid and homelessness crises; and, how each stem from the overarching crisis of affordability.

I headed into the meeting with one question scrawled down in my notebook. That query being: ?What needs to be said about these crises that hasn't already been repeated to the point of inspiring indifference??

Upon using this question as a launch pad for the discussion that was to follow, I discovered that I was not the only one in the room feeling a sense of disheartenment regarding the prospect of telling the same basic story yet again. As any reader with a smidgen of concern for our fellow community members faced with homelessness, and/or dealing with an addiction, so far very little has been done by any level of government over the past 30+ years to remove these greed-based toxins from our systems.

I say ?greed-based? because both of these crises could be eradicated with a series of thoughtful investments in a more compassionate social structure. I say ?toxins? because allowing homelessness and addiction to ruin people's lives, by accepting them as an unavoidable type of collateral damage, we indirectly approve of allowing people to suffer and die; so a relatively small group of people can get richer.

For most, with the exception of those who have embraced the notion of a total war on the poor, this is unequivocally a bad idea. However, if you happen to be one of the callous crew of silver spoon-fed criminals who values dollars more than common sense, it might seem like a clever and lucrative plan to take advantage of the loopholes in our legal system that allow polluters to poison our ecosystem and loved ones for profit, without any consequences. Just because the law fails to punish those who would happily trade your life for money, doesn't mean that they have the right to unleash their evil breed of ignorance on humanity. By allowing these crooks to run rampant with our planet's finite resources, we are complicit in the atrocities they commit in the name of their twisted idea of ?progress.?

Nonetheless, back to the reason why I ended up on this tangent.

As always, speaking with the Trust's frontline support workers Nicole Powers, Ashley Flemming, and Victoria Burke gave me keener insight into the state of these crises, and the impact they are having locally. Again, the solutions are not a mystery. We know now, as we have for decades, that housing is the first step in addressing homelessness. It is also not a secret that housing plays a key role in helping people overcome their addictions ? addictions which have contributed to the deaths of 14 people in our community since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also know that we can no longer look the other way.

Enlightening as our conversation was that day, it was a new voice at the table ? that of Bancroft resident John Arnott ? which motivated me to dig in deeper into this story. As one of the many people experiencing homelessness who is in the process of overcoming his addictions, Arnott took time to tell me about some of the systemic barriers standing in the way of him being able to live a healthy, happy life in the community that he and his family have called home for several generations.

With nowhere to go when the sun goes down, Arnott is in danger of losing his life every night ? especially now that winter is coming.

For some evil and venomous monster in our community, it wasn't enough to know that Arnott has to try and sleep each night, worrying whether he might get sick, or even freeze to death. This summer, while he was sleeping in a tent on the outskirts of town, Arnott awoke to someone setting his tent on fire from the outside.

Explaining what happened that night, Arnott said, ?I had my tent lit on fire with me in it. About 3 a.m. in the morning I woke up and my tent was on fire. A couple days later, I was charged with trespassing by the OPP. The town showed up a couple days later and removed me.?

Imagine having to face the fears one faces when sleeping outdoors in North Hastings every night. Now imagine trying to fall asleep knowing that someone tried to kill you in your sleep because you cannot afford to rent a place in your hometown.

No one deserves to live in such a constant state of fear.

As Arnott also said, ?It's a crime to be poor!?

The real crime here, however, is our complicity with a system which steals the basic needs and rights of the least fortunate among us, to elevate the already revoltingly decadent quality of life of those with more than more than enough.