

Rotarians rough it for a good cause

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Push for Change

Photo by J.P. Antonacci

The hardy group that slept outside in Victoria Park overnight on Saturday to raise money and awareness of youth homelessness included, from left, Bill and Ute Schram, Justin Bester, Sherry Kerr and Mark Garner.

Five people chose to forgo the comfort of their own beds and sleep outside Saturday night as a way to help those in the city who are forced to “sleep rough” every night.

“If this were July, I’m sure we’d get a lot more people,” said Rotary Club of Brantford Sunrise president Justin Bester, eyeing the cardboard box that would be his bed for the night.



Bester and Sherry Kerr, president of the Rotary Club of Brantford, came up with the idea to spend the night in Victoria Park as a fundraiser for Why Not Youth Centres and Push for Change, a national organization dedicated to eradicating youth homelessness.

“We just started this little contest between the two Rotary clubs to see who would donate the most money,” said Kerr, adding that the temperature had been a fair bit more forgiving when she and Bester made their plan.

“Today is just a little bit cooler,” Kerr quipped while clutching a coffee, her toque pulled down to her eyebrows.

Bester pointed out that people without a home in Brantford don’t have the option of choosing when to sleep outdoors.

“We can do this for one night,” he said. “Some of these kids do this every night.”

The fundraiser took place on the eve of a visit to the city from Joe Roberts, who emerged from a life of homelessness and drug addiction to become a CEO and entrepreneur, and is now pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise money for youth homelessness programs.

Kerr and Bester hope their efforts and Roberts’ inspirational example will galvanize the community to donate to an anti-homelessness campaign that runs until the end of the month.

“It certainly is an issue in town,” Kerr said of the state of homelessness in Brantford.

“I think there’s particularly a lot of youth. And not necessarily sleeping in the park, but going from friend to friend looking for places to stay, and having some difficult times. You’re kicked out and off to someone else’s house the next night.”

Kerr recruited her neighbours, Ute and Bill Schram, to join her in the park.

“Crazy person says come sleep in the park, and we said sure,” Ute said with a laugh.

“Because that’s what best friends do,” Kerr replied, smiling.

“It’s a really good cause, and I think it’s great to raise money for the homeless, especially at this time of year,” Ute added. “Christmas is coming and it’s cold out, and it’s important that everybody has a warm place to sleep.”

The group had sleeping bags piled inside their cardboard boxes, though someone quipped that it might be a good idea to “borrow” some of the straw inside the nearby nativity scene to use as insulation.

On the other hand, the chance to sleep outside drew Hamiltonian Mark Garner to Brantford to take part.

“This is fun for me,” Garner said, explaining that his wife had noticed the fundraiser and told her husband, who loves extreme camping, to check it out.

“Sleeping in the park in the winter? I’m game,” Garner said.

Kerr was grateful to Lonnie’s, the 24-hour diner on Market Street, for inviting the group to get a coffee and use the washroom when needed overnight.

City councillor John Utley came to wish the hardy fundraisers well. He arranged for the city to waive the usual fee required to sleep overnight in a public park.

“The city’s glad to do its part,” Utley said. “It’s a good cause.”

Kerr said contrary to the opinion that people choose to be homeless, it doesn’t take much for a string of bad luck or misfortune to end up on the streets.

“We want to be able to give some of the kids some positive support, and maybe they will reach out to people who can help them, and turn their lives around,” she said.