

Homeless kids sleeping in parks, on friends' couches

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Posted December 12, 2016 in Front Page | News

12/12/2016



Cathy Dobson

Megan Nahmabin is courageously – and tearfully – putting a face to the difficult issue of youth homelessness in Sarnia.

“It was hard, really hard,” she says, describing her decision to leave home at 18.

Megan grew up an only child living with her single mom who had a Fentanyl addiction.

“I couldn’t help my mom. I tried and she wouldn’t listen,” she said, her voice faltering.

So she left home with nowhere to go and wound up living in various places, first with a boyfriend who had no hot water or heat; then to her father’s, and finally with a friend.

The isolation she felt was desperate. She had to try to pay the bills while attending Lambton College. She didn’t know where to turn for support until, finally, she confided in some of her teachers.

When Megan’s mom died from an accidental overdose in 2014 she was heartbroken but had no choice but to fend for herself.

Slowly, things turned around. She and a friend rented a place together. She continued her studies, taking four years

to complete a three-year Child and Youth Worker program.

Today, at age 24, she is employed at both Rebound as the aboriginal liaison and the Children's Aid Society in children's services.

Megan shared her personal story with about 100 people in attendance at a special event at Lambton College, where national activist Joe Roberts brought his cross-country Push For Change campaign.

Roberts told the crowd he too was a homeless youth on the drug-infested streets of East Vancouver 30 years ago and is now a successful businessman trying to bring public attention to a rampant problem.

Roberts applauded Megan for speaking and said she represents the 35,000 youth in Canada who face homelessness every year.

"In this country, we address homelessness by investing a ton of time in emergency response," Roberts said. "We need to spend time supporting at-risk youth and making supports accessible."

Homelessness is often preventable, he added. But the right kinds of programs need to be in place for young people.

"I just want people to know that it doesn't matter how far you fall, there's always a way to get back up," said Nahmabin.

"You can't be scared to ask for help. We all have our stories, some worse than others."

In Sarnia, Lambton County provides a townhouse on Kathleen Avenue called the Haven where youth ages 16 to 21 can find short-term shelter.

The Haven accommodates four to five youth every single night, said Myles Vanni, executive director of the Inn of the Good Shepherd, which operates it. "I can't recall a time when we've had no kids."

Haven staff teach life skills and give support to about five other youth at any given time who have left the Haven and are living on their own.

Youth homelessness is frequently linked to family conflict and the Haven can provide a "cooling down" period.

Megan said that she knows many youth in Sarnia who "couch surf," sleeping from house to house with friends or family because they are homeless.

"They also sleep in our parks, under overpasses and in bus stops," said Michelle Shelswell, project manager of The Hub, a new initiative to help youth at risk.

"Joe's words are validating in a very sad way for me," said Shelswell. "He had a wonderful message that no one should ever quit."

The Hub is a collaboration of 21 agencies and will be a one-stop, multi-service location at St. Luke's United Church on Indian Road. It's expected to be operating in about two months.

Megan, who knows what it's like to be young and without support, said The Hub could be an answer for many.

"It is a fantastic idea," she said. "I'm so happy it's going to happen."





Michelle Shelswell