



GOOD SHEPHERD

By: C. Ross Harrison



Good Shepherd Ministries: 60 Years Serving the Homeless and Hungry in Toronto

A History of Charity

Located at 412 Queen Street East, in what was formerly the parish hall for Saint Paul's Basilica, Good Shepherd Ministries is a charitable organization that has been serving Toronto since 1963. With its 60th anniversary coming up this year, Good Shepherd clearly has deep roots in the GTA, evident in the fact that the church it calls home just celebrated its bicentenary; however, the charity's ultimate origins are even older, going all the way back to medieval Spain. Although Good Shepherd's services are open to people of all faiths, it is part of the Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God, a Catholic monastic order founded by a former soldier-turned-saint, who made it his mission to tend to the poor and destitute of sixteenth century Granada.

Today the Order, which is involved in everything from outreach to the homeless, to resettling Ukrainian refugees, to providing safe and affordable housing, is operating in 52 countries with over 500 ministry sites. While some of the Order's international sites are large-scale hospitals, many, such as Good Shepherd Ministries in Toronto, are primarily centres that provide services for the homeless.

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Helmet to Hardhats

Recently, Good Shepherd partnered with another aid organization, Helmets to Hardhats (H2H), with the shared goal of helping homeless Veterans find full-time work. Brother David Lynch, who was Executive Director of Good Shepherd Ministries from 1995 to July of 2022, recalls his elation when this partnership was first formed: “I was standing on the table waving ‘hooray’ when I heard of this program,” Brother David exclaims in his charming Irish accent, adding that H2H, with its commitment to finding jobs for former military personnel, fulfilled the “missing link” in the process of getting homeless Vets back on their feet.

In his nearly three decades as Executive Director of Good Shepherd, Brother David has been at the forefront of outreach to the GTA’s homeless community. His passion for helping the destitute began in his youth in Ireland, where he would occasionally bring food or money to homeless people, but these simple acts of charity would become a full-on vocation when, 43 years ago, he traveled to England with the Order of Saint John of God to do voluntary work with the homeless in that country. In 1995, Brother David came to Toronto for what was supposed to be a three-year assignment with Good Shepherd but coming to love Canada and his work in the GTA, he became a full citizen, joking that he loves his adoptive homeland but still hates the cold winters. During his tenure as Executive Director, Brother David oversaw the growth of Good Shepherd from a relatively small organization to what it is today.

“When I first came,” David states, “we had 50 beds... We served about 250 meals in the drop-in on a daily basis. That has grown to 1,100 meals and snacks a day. We have a drug and alcohol recovery program. We have a residence for people living with HIV and AIDS; a residence for seniors who have a history of homelessness; we do Veteran’s work, gambling addiction, drug and alcohol addiction; we have a very active resettlement department, finding safe and affordable housing for people who are homeless...so, there’s quite a few things we have added over the years.”

It is clear from this impressive list that Good Shepherd Ministries, as it exists today, is not merely a humble soup kitchen but rather a highly organized charitable institution, providing a wide diversity of services. Justifiably proud of the Ministry’s operations, Brother David elaborates on Good Shepherd’s work with the elderly: “We have strategic plans now to add safe affordable housing for seniors. Seniors are one of the rapidly growing subsections of the homeless population.” He adds that, unfortunately, there is often not much provision for homeless seniors because people often don’t want them in retirement residences, due to stigmatization.

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Forgotten Heroes

While seniors are one significant cohort of the homeless population, with people 55 and over making up at least 30 percent of all homeless, another group that is also unfortunately overrepresented in the homeless community is military Veterans. Brother David explains how Good Shepherd first became aware of this particular dimension of the homeless crisis: “This stemmed from a question we received from the Canadian Legion. Back in 2010, they asked us how many Veterans used the services of Good Shepherd and we didn’t have any data. So, over the course of a week, we asked people coming into the overnight shelter and into the drop-in if they had done any service in the Canadian armed forces or the allied forces. That came back a very high number: just under 10 percent. When you considered that less than 1.3 percent of Canadians actually have served in the military, (in comparison) to Veterans making up 10 percent of the homeless population, the percentage was quite high.”

Alarmed by these numbers the Legion reached out to Veterans Affairs Canada, putting them in contact with Good Shepherd Ministries. Brother David describes how no less than the Minister of Veterans Affairs himself came down to Good Shepherd and discussed with them the forming of a new program specifically for Veterans, which was called Leave the Streets Behind. “That was the inception of our work with Veterans, and it has continued ever since. We didn’t get any funding as such from Veterans Affairs Canada until several years later. Initially, we had a couple of embedded workers from Veterans Affairs who would work in the homeless shelter based out of Good Shepherd. (They would provide) outreach to other shelters to make sure that Veterans, who ended up homeless, had access to the service and to their entitlements.”

A ‘Hand Up’ Not a ‘Hand Out’

Despite the best efforts of Good Shepherd and similar charities, there can often be impediments in providing homeless Veterans much needed help; ironically, one of the major impediments is often that the Veterans themselves are reluctant to seek aid. Drawing on his years of experience with homeless Veterans, Brother David expands on this problem: “(Veterans) are a very proud bunch of people and sometimes they don’t like relying on handouts. They think they are very self-reliant, and they can look after themselves but, unfortunately, when you fall down a hole of homelessness, it’s very hard to climb out unless you get a hand up. We take a very firm belief we’re not giving a ‘hand out,’ we’re giving a ‘hand up.’ It’s very important we reach out to those subsections in the homeless population, like the elderly, like the Veterans, who are proud people and say, ‘here’s some doors you can knock on and if you don’t want to, we can knock for you and try and get you what you’re entitled to.’ That’s the safe route.”

Brother David further highlights the difference between the ‘hand out’ and the ‘hand up’ that Good Shepherd provides: “It’s not a handout, it’s an entitlement. These men and women have served our country, so they’re entitled to support when they fall on hard times. If somebody’s coming from a family breakdown or posttraumatic stress, it’s very difficult for them to admit because they think it’s a failure and to get past that can be difficult at times. That’s where we need very skilled caseworkers, who are able to help these men see that it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

THE CASEWORKERS

One such caseworker is Marla Newman, a social worker, who prior to coming to Good Shepherd, had a 35-year background predominately in providing mental health counseling for community-based programs. Marla explains that while Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) initially provided Good Shepherd Ministries with two of its own caseworkers, VAC was still interested in bringing an additional caseworker onboard, especially one with a background in providing counseling for the homeless. “I was definitely attracted to the program. I had done two other pilot projects that had started in the fields of homelessness, so it was right up my alley. That’s how I got to Good Shepherd, and I’ve been here for six years, working on this particular pilot project. It just keeps getting extended, which has been nice. The extension has allowed us to really develop the program to what it is today.”

Marla explains that the pilot project for helping homeless Veterans expands even beyond Good Shepherd, to all the shelters in the GTA. In the past five years, she estimates the project has successfully housed over 200 Veterans, but she also notes that her efforts as a caseworker are not always limited to providing Veterans with housing. There are some Vets, who may be at risk of losing their housing, who just need the help that counseling provides to avoid becoming homeless in the first place.





A Matter of Trust

Just as Brother David noted, Marla observes that many Veterans are resistant to seeking help due to embarrassment about their predicament but, sometimes, mistrust in government systems can also be a factor in their reluctance. Although she notes that this attitude is common in the homeless population in general, it is especially strong amongst homeless Vets in particular: “There’s a lot of that just because of their trauma from the military, or just what they’re dealing with post military, whether it’s alcoholism, addictions, or mental health issues. So, building that trust is key. One of the things that I’m allotted to do is to really spend the time and effort to build that relationship before I launch into solution-based things, like ‘let’s get you this; let’s get you that,’ because it’s overwhelming for anyone, especially a Veteran.”

Marla further states that the fact that she is not a government agent likely helps in getting Vets to accept the support they crucially need. “You’d be amazed how many (homeless Veterans) don’t want to go to Veterans Affairs initially. I take that sort of middleman position and help to get what they need. Before this program, if a Veteran wanted to get support, they’d have to go to a Veterans Affairs office, and they may not treat someone who’s homeless very nicely. It’s a federal office, so they may not look the part, or their hygiene might be an issue. There are so many factors that they just don’t feel comfortable. So, by meeting with just a regular social worker, who is working in a shelter, and feels comfortable being with them, and vice versa, it changes the whole perception of how work is being done.”

Marla points out that another way they have improved the process for getting Veterans in touch with their entitlements is by streamlining the often complicated paper work that is involved. This is done by reducing a 60-page form to a mere one page form: “I send it off, and I do all the leg work. So, all I have to do is say ‘you’re verified and now we can start our work. Come in and let’s just chat. Let’s get to know each other.’”





A Path to Employment

Once a homeless Veteran's status is verified by Marla, if the Vet is capable and interested in finding work, she puts them in contact with her coworker, Ryan Graham, the project's Veterans Training Employment Worker. Formerly a journalist in the west, Ryan started working with Marla, roughly two years ago. Serving as a liaison to Joe Maloney's Helmets to Hardhats, Ryan is responsible for helping Veterans find work in the trades. He does this by identifying a Vet's particular skill set, aiding them in filling out job applications and helping them in writing their resumes. Though Ryan notes that the pandemic temporarily slowed down the Helmets to Hardhats program, it is now up and running again, with Ryan currently working with four to five different Veterans to find them employment.

Preparing homeless Vets for employment, Ryan discovered that many potential candidates were foreign-born Veterans who served, not in the Canadian Forces, but in the militaries of various allied nations. Conferring with Helmets to Hardhats on the matter, he discovered that the charity could help these individuals find job placements too. While Ryan's main goal is to provide jobs for homeless Vets through the Helmets to Hardhats program, he explains that this process isn't always immediate, often because of various personal issues some Veterans might have: "When we get a referral, the first thing is we have a meeting, talk to them, get their history; where they come from; what they're doing; what are some things they need some help with. Unfortunately, due to a number of health issues, a lot of guys aren't suitable for the program, which is unfortunate, because they have to first take care of their other issues, and then maybe swing back into employment after they've worked on themselves."

To help get these Veterans, and the homeless community in general, back on their feet, Good Shepherd has a wide variety of services. This includes a shelter, which prior to the pandemic, provided up to 97 beds; a drop-in and take-away meal program that feeds between 700-800 people a day; a medical catch team made up of psychiatrists and family doctors from Saint Michael's Hospital; and an on-site D.A.R.E (Drug and Alcohol Recovery Enrichment) Program that provides help and up to 25 beds for people struggling with addiction issues.

A Purpose to Life

Obviously, given the size and scope of its operations, funding is a major issue for Good Shepherd Ministries. Reflecting on this, Brother David explains that 54 percent of the charity's money comes from government agencies and that the remaining 46 percent is generated through private donations and fundraising activities, such as gala dinners and golf tournaments. It was at one such event, run by ISCA (Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario), that Brother David first came into contact with Joe Maloney, a boilermaker-turned-union leader, who first brought the Helmets to Hardhats organization from the United States to Canada. Brother David shared with Joe some of the Veterans that Good Shepherd had discovered when they carried out the survey back in 2010, prompting Joe to ask how he and H2H could help. Brother David recalls his reply to Joe's question: "I said 'Joe, we can get these guys stable lives, we can get them in to see psychiatrists, we can get them the medical help they need, we can get them the addiction help they need, we can even find them housing. What we can't find them is employment. It's one thing to take someone out of an institutional environment and put them in their own accommodations, but when they first go in and the caseworker leaves and they close the door, they're alone with no friends. At least in the services they had colleagues and comrades, but when you go back to your apartment, you're alone, and that's when the demons come back. So, we have to give them some purpose and something to get out of bed for in the morning... otherwise it's a revolving door. If they lose interest, they start drinking; if they start drinking, they commit petty theft or run out of money; then they don't pay the rent and they don't pay the bills and they're back on our doorstep again.'"



Overcoming Hurdles

Brother David explains that this is why he was so excited when Good Shepherd first formed its partnership with Helmets to Hardhats; by finding jobs for homeless Veterans, the revolving door could be closed by helping Vets become self-sufficient and purpose driven. However, unfortunately this productive relationship between H2H and Good Shepherd was dealt a blow when the pandemic began, reducing many of the charity's services by 90 percent. Despite the setbacks of the past two years, however, both organizations strived to work around issues that the pandemic created. For example, even though Good Shepherd was required to reduce its shelter's capacity to meet physical distancing protocols, they were able to acquire use of a nearby hotel to take on any overspill of people needing beds. However, now that the pandemic is hopefully fading into history, Good Shepherd and Helmets to Hardhats are continuing their relationship by finding gainful employment for Vets, who have fallen on hard times.

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A Legacy of Service

Since interviews for this article were first conducted, Brother David Lynch, after serving 27 years as Executive Director of Good Shepherd Ministries, has switched positions, now serving as Provincial Superior for the Hospitaller Order of St. John of God's Province of the Good Shepherd in North America. Despite his new role, it is certain that the legacy that Brother David built during his nearly three decades as Executive Director of Good Shepherd Ministries will be a continued force for good in the lives of Toronto's most marginalized people. This will ensure that both Veterans, and the homeless community in general, continue to receive a much-needed helping "hand up."

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