

SECOND BASE YOUTH SHELTER

NEWS

Young and homeless find haven; Only youth refuge in Scarborough provides 56 beds Most arrive with just the clothes on their back; [MET Edition]

Leslie Ferenc. Toronto Star. Toronto, Ont.: Oct 19, 2006. pg. R.4

Full Text (966 words)

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Tucked away at the back of a church parking lot next to some lowrise apartment blocks, Second Base (Scarborough) Youth Shelter is one of a kind.

It's Scarborough's only refuge for homeless young people aged 16 to 21 and the only one from Victoria Park all the way east to Oshawa.

It's also one of the city's best-kept secrets, though not intentionally.

Most people don't know the 56-bed facility on busy Kennedy Rd., just south of Eglinton Ave., exists. And yet, 24/7, the shelter is taking young, at-risk men and women out of the storm and helping empower them so they can stand on their own.

It's estimated there are at least 10,000 homeless youth in Toronto and, each night, as many as 2,000 sleep on the streets.


There's no way to put a number on how many are from Scarborough, said Second Base executive director Alison Coke, "because homelessness is hidden." Some sleep in ravines or couch-surf until they overstay their welcome and are forced to move on.

"And when they come to us, we're often the last resort," she said. "It's us or the bush."

They each also have their own challenges, said Second Base program manager Owen Hinds. Some have escaped from violent or abusive relationships. Others battle demons brought on by rage or addiction, while still others are in trouble with the law, pregnant or in conflict with families.

They may have found their way to the red-brick building from around the corner or the far reaches of the province - by referral or word of mouth, through the website or Kids Help Phone.

Some are refugees who wind up on the doorstep hours after landing in Canada. Others are dropped off by police - or by parents who, after the latest clash, simply can't cope with



their teen.

No matter who they are, where they come from or what trouble they're in, they all have something in common They're homeless and often helpless. And they need support.

Like Melisha Thomas, 19, they get plenty of it. She came to Second Base because there was nowhere else to go after being kicked out of her sister's house.

"I just can't get along with my sister," she said as she sat in the common room in the basement of the shelter, where a community youth drop-in centre has recently reopened. Thomas is grateful that the shelter is in Scarborough where she grew up, and credits Second Base for helping her get back on her feet. For the first time ever, she's working.

"They encourage you to go out and find a job," she said. "I wouldn't be working if it wasn't for Second Base."

Although there are plenty of rules and strict curfews - "just like living in a family," she said with a laugh - Thomas considers Second Base her home.

"I'm not homeless, because I have a roof over my head. And there's food here, and friends," she said, adding that for her being homeless means living in a park or sleeping on a bench.

What makes Second Base feel like a real home is a sense of safety and security, Thomas added. But she's also looking forward to the day she is able to move to her own apartment. And if it doesn't work out, "I know I can come back if I have to."


A long-time United Way of Greater Toronto agency, Second Base opened its doors as an emergency shelter in 1993. About 700 young people seek a haven within its walls every year, Hinds said. "The idea is to be holistic and provide what an individual needs to be a productive and contributing member of society," he explained.

Most arrive with only the clothes on their backs. Inside they get food, clothing, supplies, a clean, warm bed, a kind word and someone who cares.

Help is focused on three main areas - life skills and life management; education, employment and training; and transition planning. In-house services include legal and medical help, housing information, conflict resolution and counselling.

Among the things Second Base does best is connect young people with local agencies such as Shelters Aid Community Support, which its founder, Derek Woodruff, said links volunteers and homeless shelters. In the past two years, Shelters Aid has helped certify about 60 Second Base residents in CPR. Volunteers at the Scarboro Gospel Temple also meet with shelter youth as part of a mentoring program.

To help raise awareness about Second Base and youth homelessness in Scarborough,



Shelters Aid also organized a highly successful open house that attracted more than 100 people this past weekend. Woodruff said a poll showed that only a handful of those who attended the three-on-three basketball game knew about Scarborough's only youth shelter.

"Homelessness in Scarborough isn't as overt as it is downtown," he said, referring to street people in Toronto who can often be seen sleeping on subway grates, under bridges or in doorways. In Scarborough, a homeless person can be a student attending university or someone working at Wonderland or Goodwill and living at Second Base.

"The face of homelessness in Scarborough looks like any one of us," Woodruff added.

Second Base is helping the homeless find their path with the support of United Way, which funds 200 health and social service agencies in Toronto. This year, United Way Greater Toronto marks 50 years of service to the city with a record-breaking fundraising goal of \$100 million. To make a donation, go to www.unitedwaytoronto.com or call 416-777-2001.

[Illustration]

Michael Stuparyk TORONTO STAR Second Base resident Melisha Thomas, 19, credits the shelter with helping her get back on her feet. She has a roof over her head and is working for the first time. "And there's food here, and friends," she says.

Credit: Toronto Star

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