

Stories from the Stacks

"Homeless in Libraries"

Library Director, Doug Whistance-Smith

One of my earliest memories of public libraries involved a homeless person when I was five years old. It was a positive and formative experience... and it didn't take place in, but on my way to, the library. My mother had taken me and my sister shopping at the farmer's market on a Saturday before walking to the library a few blocks away to feed our minds for another week. My mind was already skipping off on some journey of imagination when I let go of my mother's hand. My attention was drawn to a man huddled in a doorway half asleep and I stopped to talk to him.

I don't remember his name or what we talked about, but I do remember that he seemed nice. We talked for quite a while before my mom noticed my absence and walked back to get me. I didn't feel threatened by this man; in fact, I recall that I gave him the apple that my mom had bought as a snack from the farmer's market. My mom wasn't phased at all. Rather, she seemed more concerned that the man was okay.

That care and concern for the well-being of others is the glue that holds a community together. I'd wager that my mom doesn't remember this event, but it sticks with me as a life-lesson that the vast majority of folks we encounter in life are good people. I believe this is true of everyone, including those who struggle with homelessness.

I nearly became homeless when my life imploded at the age of 32 from PTSD from years of work as a paramedic. "There but for the grace of God go I." My life would have spiralled off on a much different course had it not been for the love and support of family and friends who helped me get back on my feet and set me on the path to become a librarian.

After graduating, I worked as a Community Librarian in Edmonton connecting marginalized people with services, programs and supports to improve their quality of life. EPL's community engagement team focused on First Nations, newcomers

to Canada and the homeless. One might think that these issues are 'big-city' problems, but homelessness affects rural communities too. With fewer resources to draw on, many people fall through the cracks and become society's lost children.

It takes a community to raise a child, and when that child doesn't look or smell or act pleasant, it requires patience and indiscriminate love to reach out and lift them up. It takes the kind of love that a parent would show to their own son or daughter.

Like bigger urban libraries, Drayton Valley Library has its share of displaced denizens. People sometimes doze off and that's okay. We don't want people flopping out on the floor or sprawled across furniture, and we ask these folks not to use the library as a daytime shelter to sleep. But the fact that some folks occasionally nap in our library means they feel safe here. They are not a threat. And if they look or smell like they haven't showered in a week or like they've been huddled next to a fire all night to stay alive when the temperature is dangerously cold, that is very likely their reality.

Public libraries are both the heart and the hearth of society. They are a space where everyone is welcome to warm themselves in the security and safety of community; a place to share stories and connect to others. So, rather than being offended at homeless people using the library as a haven, I urge you to stop and talk to them. They are people too, with hopes and dreams, each with a story to tell, and each worthy of compassion.

"When you have done this for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me."

February is the month of Valentine's and Family Day when love brings warmth in from cold depths of winter. So, I leave you with this quote from Millard Fuller (founder of Habitat for Humanity): "For a community to be whole and healthy, it must be based on people's love and concern for each other." Check the Drayton Valley Library website under the Community tab for a list of services and resources for marginalized, isolated and vulnerable people.