

Feature Series

Poverty: A hidden reality in Halton

Part 1 of 4

Hundreds of thousands of Canadian children are growing up in poverty. In Ontario, more than 370,000 children lived in a low-income household in 2013, only slightly better than the national average of 14.3 per cent. Halton, perceived as an affluent community, is not immune with one in 10 residents affected by poverty. More than 11,100 children are living in poverty locally.

Studies suggest poverty limits a child's future. It often means food insecurity, an inability to fully participate at school, a lack of positive activities and difficulty accessing services such as eye and dental care, and even post-secondary education.

According to UNICEF, the child poverty rate for industrial countries ranges from 5 per cent in Iceland to 25 per cent in Romania. Canada ranks in the middle.

In 1989, the federal government vowed to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000, yet little progress has been made.

By Jonathan Zettle & Melinda Cheevers
METROLAND MEDIA GROUP

Angela lives in Owen Sound. In 2009, she owned a construction business with her husband, who, one night, after consuming 10 bottles of beer, beat her before downing five more. Then, the police came. "I had no idea he was an alcoholic," she said. "Looking back, I feel so stupid — how could I not know?"

Her dream of escaping the stressful and demeaning cycle of poverty would not be realized.

Angela, who agreed to share her story provided her last name wasn't used, said she never expected to wind up with "three kids on the street, basically looking for the kindness of strangers to help me out."

The local women's shelter had a policy not to allow boys over 12 to be admitted and Angela's son was 15.

That night, in the emergency room, with nowhere else to go, a nurse offered her a basement apartment.

Since then, Angela and her three children have come face-to-face with poverty and have learned first-hand how it undermines precious opportunities to rebuild.

On top of not having money for a car, telephone or food, Angela said a whole host of mental and health concerns began to affect her children.

Stress, anger, anxiety and a sense of isolation, coupled with the poor-quality, processed, high-carbohydrate diet provided by food banks led to asthma, stomach problems and low immunity amongst the children.

"I couldn't figure out why they were sick all the time," she said, adding that because the children were ill, she would be called away from work frequently. This, she said, made it hard to hold down a job.

Each of Angela's three children struggled with school and missed out on school trips and extra-curricular activities because even \$5 for pizza day was out of reach.

Housing was also a problem and the family

has moved frequently.

In one instance, Angela asked her landlord if he could supply her with a letter of residence so that she could apply for social assistance. Instead he handed her an eviction notice because he didn't want "that type of people living there."

She said she would try, each time they moved, to keep the new place along the kids' bus routes, so that, at the very least, they would feel a sense of stability and routine.

And, although Angela gave her best efforts to shield her children from what was going on, each, in their own way, knew.

For one month, Angela's oldest son hid in his room beneath a makeshift tent.

"He would pretend that he wasn't hungry to save food for the younger ones," she said.

...

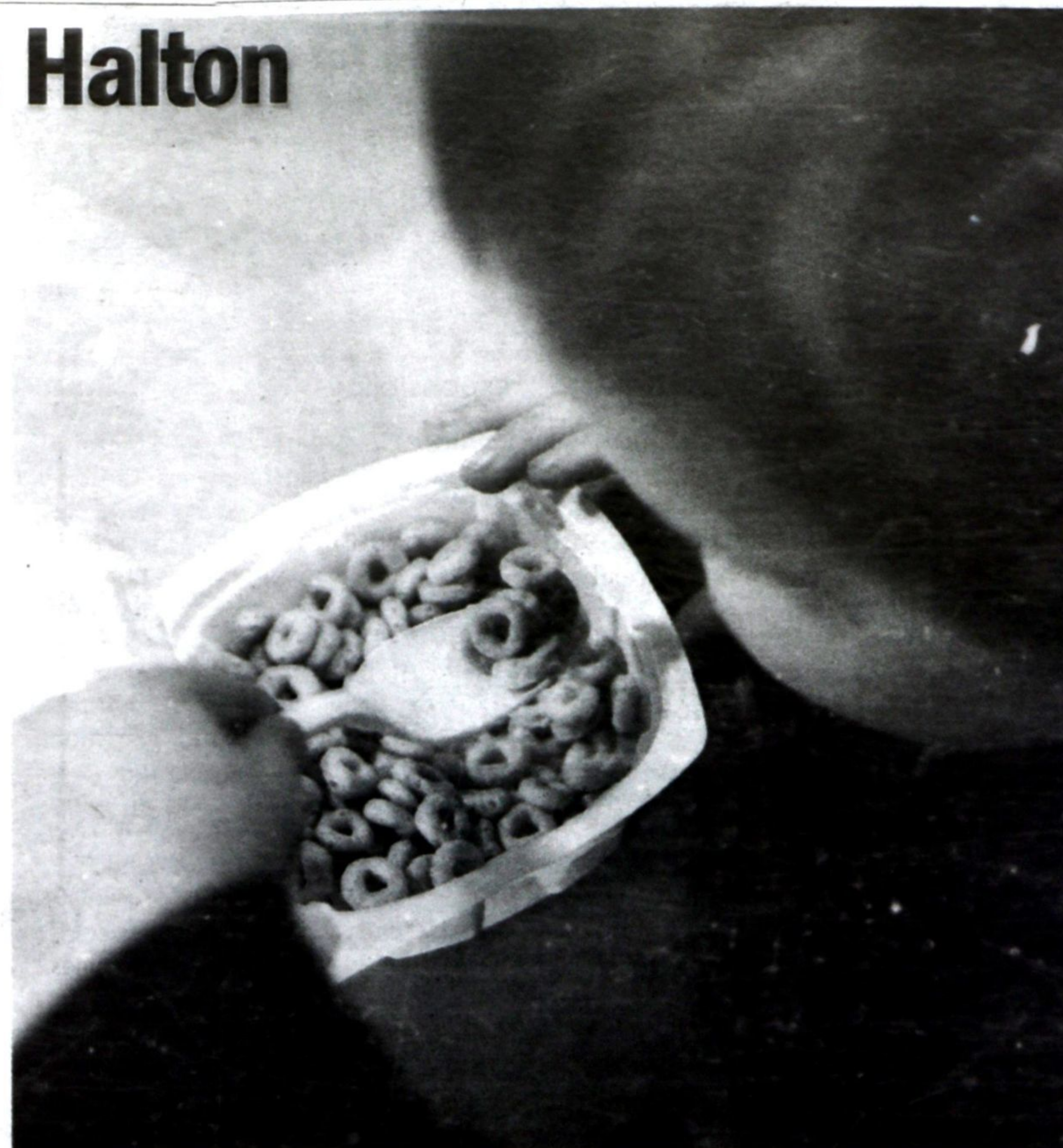
Lesley Mansfield is the executive director of the Halton Learning Foundation, one of the many on the ground fighting child poverty in Ontario.

She works directly with the Halton District School Board, which has 60,000 students in 102 schools. It is estimated that 10 per cent of those students live at or below the poverty line.

While Halton is among the more affluent regions in Ontario and home to several corporate headquarters that call its municipalities, Oakville, Burlington, Milton and Halton Hills home, Mansfield said the poverty level is unbelievable. And on many levels, it remains hidden.

"Poverty is here. It's right around the corner from you. We have kids who share a pair of shoes with their parents. We have kids who the father is not around and the mother has some mental issues of her own and then you have two kids, basically taking care of themselves and coming to school with a can of Coke for lunch," she said.

One of the main activities of the foundation is



In Canada,
4.9 million
people live in
poverty
SOURCE: Statistics Canada

Poverty
affects 1 in
10 Halton
families
SOURCE: Halton Learning Foundation

11,120 children
in Halton are
affected by
poverty
SOURCE: Halton Learning Foundation

to provide students in need with Walmart gift cards so they can buy anything from groceries to shoes, toiletries or clothing. From the end of August to the first week of December, the Halton Learning Foundation provided almost 400 students with \$34,000.

"But what happened today was that we ran out of Walmart cards because the need has been incredibly intense," she said.

Mansfield has had to convince Walmart to override the corporate policy of only selling \$500 in gift cards per day; she had to convince them she needed \$2,000 worth and that she needed it right then and there to help students heading into the Christmas break. "I felt horrible because the assistant manager started to cry," she said. "It was very emotional."

...

About 200 kilometres north of Halton in the rural town of Hanover, Bev Gateman works out of what used to be a supply closet at the local high school. From her cramped office she, alongside an army of volunteers, is

responsible for feeding 12,000 students a day through 73 school breakfast programs under the provincial banner, Ontario Student Nutrition Program.

The program offers nutritional meals developed to fit the needs of individual schools and receives about 14 cents per student, per day.

"We do as much as we can, but we just don't have enough money. I'm the only paid person in the whole of Grey-Bruce and everybody else volunteers their time," Gateman said.

Over the years, Gateman said the stigma of poverty has slowly lessened. When she first started in the late '90s, some schools wouldn't let her in because they claimed they did not have children coming to school hungry. Likewise, some parents would not let their children into the breakfast programs.

"But your kid is hungry," said Gateman. "So, we stopped hearing from moms and any kid that is hungry is welcome."

The key, she said, is that although the programs are aimed directly to combat child hunger, they run under the pretense of nutrition.

It's what parent volunteers do here in Milton, where snack programs, including a once weekly breakfast, help fuel learning at JM Denyes Public School.