

# Community, workshop help

## Ken Harris be independent

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By Gary Nyp

This week is National Week for the Mentally Handicapped.

To mark the week, various associations dealing with the mentally handicapped hold their annual Flowers of Hope campaign.

Flowers of Hope is the major fund-raising campaign put on by these associations.

ST. MARYS—Ken Harris is his own man.

Each morning he gets out of bed, eats breakfast and, "rain or shine," walks to work where he does such things as wood-working, ceramics and cooking.

After his work day is over, he returns home—to his own apartment.

Ken Harris is 46 years old and has only been living on his own for the last year or so.

Elizabeth Pearson says he makes an excellent cup of tea while Barbara Cooper is impressed with his homemade apple sauce. Al Bennett, on the other hand, is fascinated by his CB receiver.

All three are extremely proud of him—and just as surprised.

Ken Harris is mentally handicapped and attends the James Purdue Workshop for the Mentally Handicapped. He can neither read nor write and has a definite speech problem which makes him extremely difficult to understand at times.

Yet he has coped with his new situation. He has coped better

than anyone really expected and he functions with minimal supervision.

For a man who just recently printed his own name for the first time and is just learning to say his address, Ken's achievements have been remarkable.

Both Mr. Bennett, manager of the workshop, and Ms. Cooper, Ken's life skills instructor, admit they did not think he'd cope as well as he has.

"But we were both obviously wrong," says Mr. Bennett.

Mrs. Pearson, his landlady, calls Ken "an excellent tenant" who keeps his apartment clean, doesn't bother the other tenants and always pays his rent, \$135, on time.

A number of factors have led to Ken's present position as a responsible citizen in the community.

First there was misfortune. When his mother died about two years ago, Ken was faced with the task of tending to a large house by himself.

Out of that grew necessity. Mr. Bennett realized Ken needed to find a smaller "more workable" accommodation.

And then luck entered into it. Mrs. Pearson used to work at the workshop on a Local Initiatives Program. During her six-month tenure, she came to know Ken quite well and found him to be "an exceptional and gentle person."

Mrs. Pearson has been of

great assistance to Ken, both morally and financially. Because Ken receives very little money she lowered his rent.

Ken has needed a lot of help, both from his instructors and the community. But Mr. Bennett says, although he probably couldn't make it without the training he has received at the workshop, "the onus has to rest with Ken."

"This is something he wanted and worked hard to achieve. He hasn't let anyone down."

Both Ms. Cooper and Mr. Bennett can talk for hours about some of the little problems Ken has encountered along the way.

For instance there was the time when Ken, who recognizes food by looking at the pictures on the can or package, bought beets which he thought were raspberries.

"Do you remember that?" asks Ms. Cooper. Ken nods and smiles.

The community has assisted

Ken in those situations, says Mr. Bennett.

"The downtown merchants have been especially supportive and helpful. They don't hesitate to spend just that little extra

### Flowers of Hope

Beside his black telephone is a list of names and telephone numbers. Although he can't read, he has managed to tell the names and numbers apart somehow.

While Ken is showing us the apartment there is a knock at the door.

"Come in," he hollers. Then he looks at us to see if we acknowledged his invitation. We did and he smiles proudly.

Al Bennett enters and immediately Ken goes to the corner of the livingroom where he reaches for a portable shopping cart, something he bought on his own to carry home his groceries.

Ken waits for Mr. Bennett's reaction and sees that his instructor is impressed. So he smiles and shows him how it works.

We've talked for about 45 minutes and Mr. Bennett indicates that it is time to go.

Ken grabs his green baseball cap, puts on his jacket and reaches in his pocket for his wallet which holds his key. The wallet is attached to a chain so he doesn't lose it.

He then turns off all the lights and follows us up the stairs.

As we head outside, we can see Ken lock the door of his apartment.

recently modernized.

All the furniture he has is from his mother's estate, including a couch and a chair set, a kitchen table and four chairs, a coffee table, an end table, a bed, a dresser, a color television and a stereo.

One seeing the apartment for the first time would have to describe it as neat.

Although there are a few items out of place, it would take no more than a minute to straighten out. Mrs. Pearson says Ken vacuums daily, although he does have to be reminded to clean out the vacuum bag.

The top of his television is cluttered with pictures of his family, including a sister, Joan Ridley of RR 7 St. Marys. Mrs. Ridley helps Ken deposit his money in the bank. The fact she works in the Province of Ontario Savings Bank here, helps. Ken also has two other sisters, Jean Easton of Exeter and Mary Tuckey of Owen Sound.

He has two pictures of himself on the wall. One is a shot someone took while he was working on a wooden animal puzzle at the workshop. On top of the stereo are about 40 records ranging from Johnny Winter to Joan Baez.

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time with him so he gets what he wants."

Mr. Bennett says that help is one reason he was able to price and eventually buy, his own CB receiver.

Unfortunately, Ken's newfound independence is not a common one among the mentally handicapped. There are various factors.

First of all, some of these people are not interested in living on their own, partly because there is not the

necessity or because they simply don't wish to.

A lot has to do with society's attitude towards these people as well, says Mr. Bennett.

"When you look at it, we've taken awesome strides in this particular field. But we've still got a long way to go."

He says there are several people in the James Purdue workshop alone who are probably capable of living on their own. But getting landlords to accept them is another thing.

"We often write to those box numbers in ads and get no reply. Or we call and the landlord says the apartment has just been rented."

Mr. Bennett says landlords are afraid these people might damage their property or scare off potential tenants.

"And I'm not about to say that all mentally handicapped people are model tenants. That would be lying. But many of these people certainly deserve the chance."

Mrs. Pearson's gamble with Ken has certainly paid off.

"I've had far worse tenants," she says.

What's more, Ken realizes what she has done for him. And quite often, he'll invite her over for a cup of tea.

"He makes a great cup of tea. Much better than mine," she says.

Ken loves to entertain. Mrs. Pearson says he has people over there all the time. But it gives him a chance to show off his new apartment.

It's a small one-bedroom basement apartment in an old building which has been