From skid row to CEO

Second Cup co-founder speaks in Halton

By Dennis Smith
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Frank O'Dea recalled his journey from skid row to CEO for affordable housing supporters last week.

"It was a dirty, lonely and sometimes violent existence," he said. "A day in the life involved going to Yonge Street to panhandle for nickels and dimes. For 99 cents you'd get a bottle of wine for the alley." The co-founder of Second Cup spoke at the Be A Hero awards at the Burlington Convention Centre.

More than 100 high school students entered the Halton Region contest to raise awareness about the need for affordable housing. Visual arts, multimedia, design, writing and music entries were encouraged, with gold, silver and bronze awards of $1,000, $500 and $100 provided.

"This has been going for five years and think of all the kids this has touched," said O'Dea. "The parents and kids have all been involved in making this community a better place."

A teenage alcoholic, O'Dea was kicked out of his family's Montreal home at 21.

His father got him a sales job in southwestern Ontario, but O'Dea resumed drinking. "I lost that job and a few others," he said. "I went from an apartment to a basement apartment to a rooming house to a flophouse." While stocking paint shelves in Toronto for $5 a day, O'Dea heard an ad that ended "If you have a problem with alcohol, call us, we're in the book."

One day, he finally did.

"It was December 23 and I was cold and miserable," said O'Dea. "I got to the point where I had to change or die."

That was more than 30 years ago. He has since become an Order of Canada recipient. "Don't tell me you can't make a difference and don't tell me you can't change the world," said O'Dea, whose philosophy is hope, vision and action.

He and Tom Culligan started The Second Cup in 1975, when coffee stores just sold ingredients.

They installed a coffeemaker and charged more per cup.

"We changed the relationship between coffee and the customer," he said. "We created a treat."

He helped found Street Kids International, War Child (Canada) and the Canadian Landmine Foundation.

"I have travelled all over the world and have seen some horrible things and seen some wonderful things," said O'Dea.

With Peter Dalglish, a United Nations worker in Sudan, he formed Street Kids International.

"Peter was finding food, shelter and education for the kids," said O'Dea.

A cartoon was a hit with youngsters there,