

# Porter Place is welcome haven for York Region's homeless men

The rambling Victorian mansion on the outskirts of Newmarket is a faded reminder of the elegance of a bygone age. Inside, only the ghosts of that age remain. Thrift shop furniture and threadbare carpets predominate. The striped wallpaper in the stairwell near the entrance is peeling. Used office furniture is crammed into a well-appointed front room that once served as a parlor.

Although Porter Place, a men's hostel at the intersection of Mullock Avenue and Young Street, has seen better days, most of its inhabitants don't seem to care.

Since it opened in 1982, in the 23-bed facility has been a haven to more than 800 homeless and transient men — men like "Louis", a 76-year-old war veteran; "Ernie", an elderly gentleman who wife asked him to leave their home; and "David", a young day patient in the psychiatric ward of York Central Hospital.

The need for a men's shelter in

York Region was first identified eight years ago. It was put on the back burner, while concerned citizens and social service agency representatives directed their efforts toward setting up emergency accommodations for women and children. The result was Yellow Brick House in Aurora, which opened in 1979.

In 1981, people in the Region began again to pursue the idea of opening a men's hostel and a year later Porter Place finally got off the ground.

Since then, it has welcomed men of all ages and backgrounds who are faced with eviction, unemployment, and family problems. Some are as young as 16 — teenage runaways who have been on the streets since early adolescence. Others are middle-class students who are unhappy with their home lives.

Approximately 25 percent are psychiatric day patients like David — Porter Place is the only available accommodation for

them in York Region.

Most of the men are from Newmarket and surrounding area, but some come from Toronto and other Ontario cities. A small minority are from out of the province.

Their diverse backgrounds suggest that homelessness is becoming a problem for a growing segment of the male population, says Sylvia Leader, Executive Director of Porter Place.

"Homelessness is not an aberration, but something that many different men may have to cope with at various points in their lives. Our men are not the stereotype transient seen in many large cities. A lot of men we welcome are victims of today's economy," she comments.

Getting back on their feet can be the toughest and most important challenge they have ever faced.

It was for David, who came to Porter Place almost nine months ago. Diagnosed as a manic de-

pressive, he needed someone to give him his medication four times a day. He could not cope with many basic tasks and in his own words, "wasn't able to handle the outside world."

It wasn't his first time at Porter Place. An earlier attempt to live here, while attending psychiatric daycare at York Central Hospital had ended in failure and David had been committed to an institution.

This time, David was successful. Under the guidance and encouragement of the Porter Place staff, he learned to pitch in with household chores, take his medication by himself, and assume responsibility for getting himself to day hospital.

His progress was so great that three weeks ago, with the support of his therapist, David left Porter Place to live on his own.

Staff Supervisor June Rose observes that not all men who come to Porter Place have the same difficulties as David. "Last

week we had a gentleman who got sick, lost his job, and was evicted," she says. "But it wasn't long before he found another job and moved out. He really only had to stay until he got a paycheck."

But she also notes that many residents lack this motivation. Often they suffer from apathy and low self-esteem. They may not know how to cook, shop, or handle a budget. Plus, they don't have any idea about how to get a job if they become unemployed.

At Porter Place seven staff members and one student trainee teach the men these basic life skills and help them find employment. They direct them to other useful agencies in the area, such as Youth Employment, a job recruitment service for 16 to 24-year olds run by the YMCA. They also send men out on requests for casual labor from Canada Manpower that often lead to permanent jobs.

Perhaps most importantly, the staff go out of their way to make

Porter Place feel like home. They organize recreational and social activities for the men.

Even so, not all the men who pass through Porter Place are able to rebuild their lives. Some, like the 76-year-old war veteran Louis, end up back on the streets. But many more get back on their feet and lots of them keep in touch with the staff, either in person or by letter. It's an indication of the strong bonds that often develop between staff and residents.

For David, this kind of contact is what made Porter Place special.

"The staff treated me with respect, not pity," he says. "By being at Porter Place my self-confidence went up."

The hostel is funded by the United Way of York Region, Canada Manpower, the Region of York, and the Ontario Ministry of Corrections. About 20 percent of its budget comes from the United Way and "we really rely on it," says Sylvia Leader.

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