

JUSTICE: Residents call public meeting after man convicted of assault moves into their community

Sex offender panics neighbourhood

BY DAWN LIERSCH
STAFF WRITER

For many residents, the streets of Bradford will never be the same. Their sleepy, quiet town is home to a convicted sexual offender.

Linda Vilon says she can't bring herself to go out at night since learning John Joseph Stewart moved to town almost a month ago.

"I do not go out after 9:30 p.m. I will not go out the gate of my yard because I am terrified," Vilon told residents who packed the Bradford community centre Wednesday night to discuss what to do about Stewart's presence.

"I showed my daughters what he looks like and now my one daughter talks about the bogeyman. Now he's in our community I'm an adult and I'm scared because the bogeyman is out there."

"If you're watching John Joseph Stewart, will you please

move out of my community?"

But Stewart — who has served a full 9-and-a-half-year sentence at Kingston Penitentiary for several counts of aggravated sexual assault and assault causing bodily harm — regained his rights upon release and is entitled to live unsupervised in town.

However, South Simcoe Police went door-to-door in the James Street neighbourhood to warn residents Stewart is living there.

Deputy Chief Neil Sturgeon said police were not required to inform the community of Stewart's presence, but felt it would be a safe measure.

"It's good practice — we usually do it," he said.

Police are also seeking to restrict Stewart's freedom under a year-old amendment to the Ontario Police Act because Stewart has been assessed as having a moderate to high risk of re-offending.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Linda Whiteside, left, a friend of convicted sex offender John Joseph Stewart, in a passionate discussion with community forum panelist Linda Vilon.

Police have requested a 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, mandatory psychiatric counselling, a restriction on alcohol and non-prescription drugs, reports of any change of address, and an order preventing Stewart from travelling outside a 100-kilometre radius of Bradford.

Sturgeon said police are expecting the Attorney General's reply to the request within the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, residents are circulating a petition lobbying for changes to the federal government's approach in giving the parole board authority to detain offenders for a full sentence. As a result, they're released with full rights instead of early release with supervision.

Evan Heise, a community worker with the Circles of Support community reintegration project, said he worked with Stewart in Toronto upon his release, and believes Stewart is trying to be responsible.

"He has said that he needs someone to talk to. He needs help when he's in a dark mood," Heise said, explaining Stewart has entered into an informal agreement with police, friends and community support workers that he will call for help if he feels he could be a risk to society.

He added Stewart's offences usually occurred when he was high on drugs or depressed, factors that those monitoring him would easily spot.

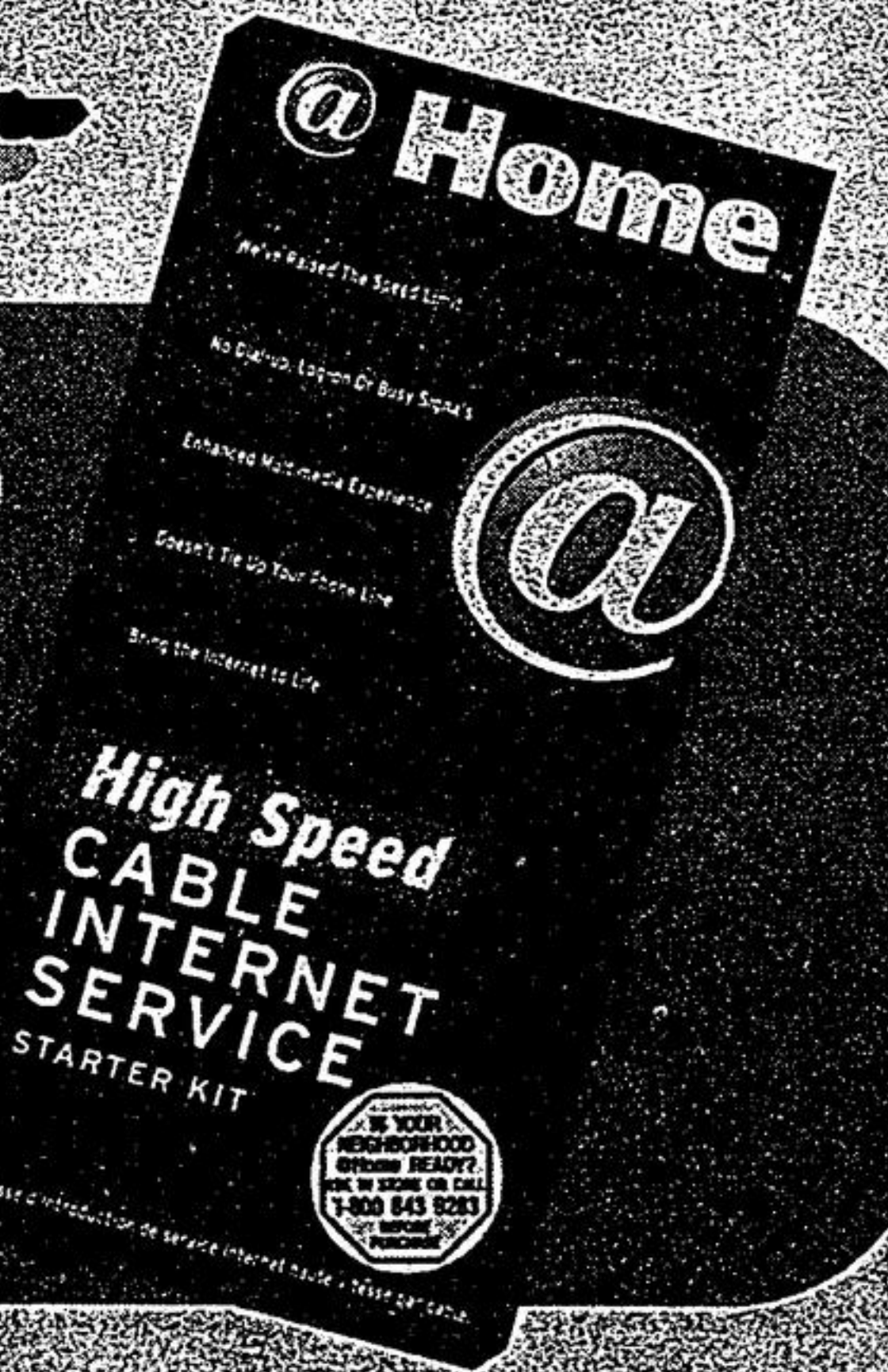
Stewart's friend Linda Whiteside said he has been faithfully attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and Circle of Support sessions in Bradford. "He wants to turn his life around. He wants to stay in Bradford. He has nowhere else to go — this is his home."

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