

Street survival depends on shelters

Growing region needs more shelters, workers, politicians complain

The Human Factor

A series exploring the struggle to provide services for a growing population

Staff writer
Jeff Mitchell
examines
homelessness
among youth.



The way Yolán Chetty sees it, his role as a mentor to an adolescent boy is not defined as teacher, parent, guidance counselor or lecturer; he thinks it's most important just to be the kid's friend.

Mr. Chetty, a 22-year-old York University student who lives in Markham, has for the past seven months been paired with 13-year-old Ryan through the Youth Assisting Youth program. YAY pairs youth who are identified as potentially being at risk — to drop out of school, to break the law, or perhaps even wind up homeless — with role models who will help steer them in the right direction.

"I am a mentor but more than that, I'm someone he can just talk to," Mr. Chetty said. "My role is more of a friend than that of a father figure. It's a give and take relationship."

He may downplay the importance of his role, but Mr. Chetty's one-on-one involvement is probably the most crucial service provid-

ed by the numerous agencies mandated to cater to the needs of young people.

According to YAY Executive Director Sally Spencer, mentoring is the kind of positive, supportive programming that can make the difference between a kid choosing self-destructive behaviour, or finding the will to take a more positive approach to life.

Many of the young people involved with YAY start with obstacles in their way, including unstable home environments, poverty or emotional issues.

"What we are doing at Youth Assisting Youth is helping to break the cycle," she said.

Mr. Chetty thinks he's simply providing Ryan with the support he needs to realize and strive for his potential.

"He's got it in him to achieve," he said.

"He just needs that support."

Youth service providers struggle with huge demands and strained resources, trying to help kids deal with joblessness, homelessness, addiction and educational deficits. The goal is to provide hope. And to break the cycle.

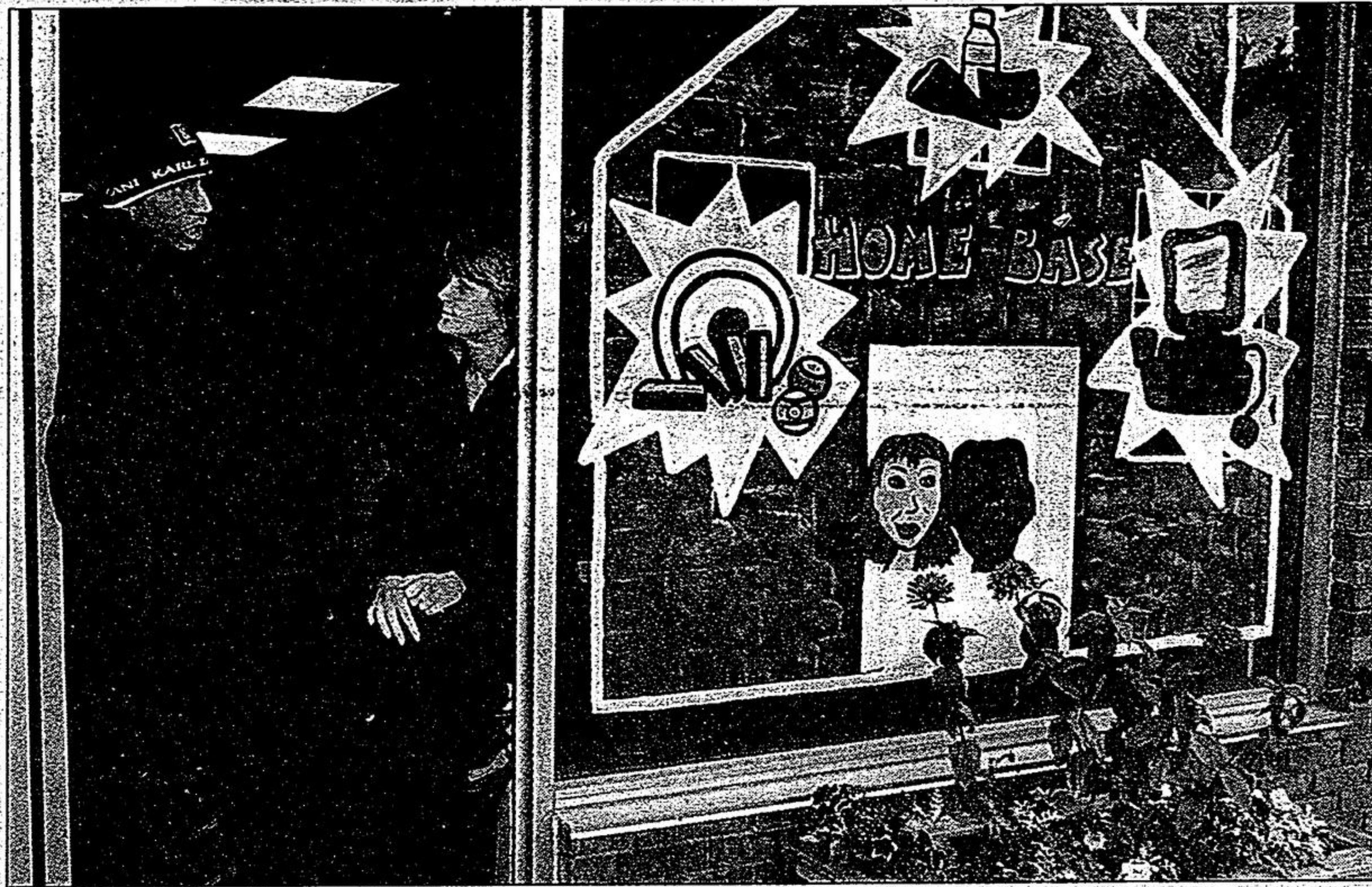
In April 2001, a York Youth Summit report found more than 50 per cent of the region's 500 homeless were under 25.

Those working with youth see a collaborative approach as the way to tackle a huge issue with limited resources.

Deborah Headley is project coordinator with Lifeline, a program for youth launched in the spring of 2002 with the backing of York Region, Human Resources Development Corp., York Region Neighbourhood Services and the Boys and Girls Club of York Region.

Lifeline is a community-based project that assists youth aged 16 to 24 who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless.

The goal of the program is to help young people gain control of



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Bonni Harkness, program director at Home Base, a youth drop-in centre in Richmond Hill, speaks with a young man.

their lives by helping them address life skills, including education, employment, budgeting and personal safety.

The majority of the program's funding comes from an HRDC grant, which runs out at the end of next March.

As a youth worker, Ms Headley has attended a number of forums at which youth have described the services they require.

"We have heard clearly, once and again, that youth need a voice; they need access to education, not just schooling; they need a place to hang out and they need centralized and collaborative services," Ms Headley said.

To achieve that, a concerted effort is required of service providers, she said. Lifeline has established a presence in each of York's municipalities but, rather than dictate a course of action, program organizers are looking to local service providers for guidance.

They are, after all, the people most familiar with the community and its youth, Ms Headley said.

"For us, this is about community mobilization," she said.

Imposing programs that do not resonate with youth — and which will have no credibility among them — is doomed to failure, she said.

"We can't get (youth) to come in the door; we have to entice them in the door," Ms Headley said.

"Our philosophy informs and underscores our practice: We will interact respectfully and positively with young people. And they will do the rest of the work."

Bonni Harkness and Marg Campbell know all about establishing credibility on the street. At the Home Base drop-in centre for youth in Richmond Hill, they deal with young people often living on the fringes of society, alienated from their homes and a regulation-laden society which, from their perspective, seems designed to shut them out.

"The first thing kids are looking for is totally non-judgmental support," said Ms Harkness, program director at the centre, a Yonge Street storefront in the heart of Richmond Hill.

"There are huge trust issues," she said. "And that's the big thing: being able to interact with an adult with unconditional support."

Ms Campbell, executive director with Pathways For Children, Youth and Families of York Region, said establishing credibility with street kids was essential to the drop-in centre's success.

"For a lot of them, they have been let down by the adults in their life," she said.

At the same time, the response that met Home Base when it opened in June 2000 was a strong indication of the desire among youths to obtain services geared toward them, Ms Campbell said.

"As quickly as the youth heard a service was here, they began to access it," she said. "No one dreamt we would be so successful."

Now the centre, which offers kids a place to hang out and make efforts to connect with their fami-

lies, is packed during its operating hours, 1 to 8 p.m.

Ms Harkness estimates the centre is in contact with 100 different kids a month, some 70 per cent of whom are or have been homeless.

"Obviously we knew of the issues, or it (the centre) wouldn't have come about," Ms Harkness said.

"But we had no idea how many kids there were."

Tell that to Richmond Hill Councillor Lynn Foster. At the outset of the current term of council, the new rep for Ward 4 lobbied hard to head up the town's Youth Action Committee, assuming its mandate would centre solely on creating recreation opportunities for youth.

"I thought I was going to be looking at creating skateboard parks and fluffy things like that," she said.

But getting acquainted with local youth agencies and their clientele introduced Ms Foster to a grim and surprising reality: every night across York Region, there are young people with nowhere to go.

They're sleeping on the streets, in parks and woodlots and flopping in abandoned buildings.

Youth seeking shelter from the streets of York Region have two choices: A 12-bed shelter for young men in Newmarket, or the hard-scrabble shelters in downtown Toronto.

Many kids, terrified at the notion of taking their chances downtown,

See HOMELESS, page 10.

YOUTH SERVICES AT A GLANCE

Here are some of the services available to youth at risk of homelessness in York Region:

- Transitional and Supportive Housing Services of York Region: 1-905-898-1015
- Leeder Place Family Shelter, Newmarket: 1-905-898-1658
- Drop Zone Youth Day Program, Newmarket: 1-905-830-0121
- Youth Assisting Youth, Maple: 416-932-1919
- Lifeline, Newmarket: 1-905-895-0809
- Kinark child and Family Services, Newmarket: 1-888-454-6275
- Pathways For children, Youth and Families of York Region: 905-471-7877
- Home Base Drop-In Centre, Richmond Hill: 905-884-3070

Warmest Wishes for a Happy Thanksgiving,
enjoyed with family & friends

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105 Main St. N., Markham Village 905-471-7820 Closed Monday, October 14