

Shelters help get homeless back on track

BY CAROLINE GRECH
Staff Writer

They may have taken very different paths to get to a homeless shelter, but they all have one thing in common: They never thought it would happen to them.

Pauline Thompson still remembers the day three years ago when she finally had no choice but to go to Leeder Place in East Gwillimbury.

The taxi driver dropped her and her five young children off across the street. With children in tow, the youngest being two-year-old twins, she began to panic when she looked around and only saw men, not realizing she mistakenly walked into the men's shelter, not the family shelter.

Prior to coming to the shelter, Ms. Thompson, a single mother, and her family were living at her friend's subsidized housing complex.

She was only able to stay there a

month before her friend's rent would rise, leaving her no choice but to go elsewhere.

By the time Ms. Thompson reached Leeder Place, she had already been on a waiting list for subsidized housing in both York and Toronto for about seven years.

"I would call them every day and they would say, you are at the top of the list," Ms. Thompson said.

The Markham native got a job at Tim Hortons but couldn't keep it because she could not get subsidized daycare for her children, who, at the time, ranged in age from two to 11.

Arriving at the shelter, Ms. Thompson felt shame.

"I figured I'd let my kids down. Not being able to provide for my kids? I'm the one that's protecting them. I felt that I let them down," Ms. Thompson said, adding she didn't



BRIAN DOUCETTE: Porter Place client has been at shelter for more than a week.

know where else to go.

Letting her children down wasn't the only fear Ms. Thompson carried when she walked through the doors of Leeder Place.

"I was worried that Children's Aid would take my kids away," she said.

Two weeks after arriving at the shelter, Ms. Thompson received news she would receive subsidized housing, but not for another two months, leaving her no choice but to stay at the shelter in the interim.

Three years later, she is employed by Molly Maid and is able to provide a home for her children.

Looking back, Ms. Thompson doesn't know where she would be today had she not sought the shelter.

Similar to others who use shelters, Ms. Thompson never imagined she would need the services.

"You never think in your wildest dreams that it could happen," she said. "You see it and feel pity but I never thought it would be me."

While Ms. Thompson's story recollects, for 44-year-old Brian Doucette, the story is his reality.

Residing at Porter Place, Mr. Doucette has been at the shelter for 10 days. No stranger to the battles of alcohol and drug addiction, the former stone mason's ability to work came to a crashing halt with a car accident in 1995 that left him with numerous injuries.

Losing 85 per cent of the sight in his left eye and enduring spinal injuries, Mr. Doucette is trying to get disability insurance.

"You're nothing without your health," Mr. Doucette said.

Coming to Porter Place from Toronto, Mr. Doucette is hoping to get into a life skills program in the city in the New Year, but can't afford a place to stay now.

He, like Ms. Thompson, never thought he would need the services of a shelter.

"It never came to my mind. I couldn't even imagine it."

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