

Focus on the people of 'Camp Hope'

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The outside perimeter of the new city shelter on Barton Street West looks forbidding, surrounded by a chain-link fence, and protected by a security guard.

The place has recently been criticized for its expense. How can cabins cost that much? But perhaps what's needed is more reflection on the site's occupants, who are no longer living in tents. There is something inside that place that is more valuable than the cabins. It's hope.

My friend and I, fortunate enough to have homes, went to the new shelter recently to learn more about homelessness. There's been much discussion about its cost but not so much about its value. The place is full — more than 150 people

are living there. Since we weren't allowed inside for privacy reasons, we talked to the director of the as-yet-unnamed emergency shelter. He works for Good Shepherd, and he's been there since the shelter opened to Hamilton's homeless in February. He gave us hope.

As anyone who has talked with a homeless person knows, the causes of homelessness can be complicated, or they can be simple. Everyone has their own story, and everyone's story is important. The shelter's team can help someone submit a tax return to receive promised credits. They can find a lost document, or arrange a health assessment. Their goal is to solve problems, lift barriers and transfer residents from the temporary shelter into long-term housing. It's the first step

in getting someone off the street.

A common element among the homeless is loss of hope. Spring is a time for hope. Birds hope for mates, squirrels hope to find their hidden nuts, and people hope their gardens have survived the winter. But what about those who don't have much hope? Those who are not only homeless but hopeless.

Dr. Jane Philpott, Canada's former minister of health, talks about hope in her book "Health for All." She observes that physical health and mental health may not bring health to all. She writes about spiritual health as central to holistic health — and hope is at the heart of it, along with belonging, meaning and purpose.

As a surgeon, I have sometimes wondered where hope

resides in the body. Is it in the heart? The mind? The hands? Could it be transplanted into someone who's missing hope? Perhaps a prescription: "Rx Hope. Take twice a day on an empty stomach."

Having hope is an essential human virtue. You may have heard the Greek myth of Pandora's Box, which released evil into the world. The only thing remaining in the box was hope. In today's world, hope sometimes seems in short supply.

Where does hope come from? Philpott asks, "What gives a person reason for optimism, reason to believe that something positive will happen?" For her, and for many, it is a personal belief in a higher power. For others it is the hope of humanism and the essential goodness of most people. Philpott also

writes about what we can learn about hope from First Nations peoples. Hope is a core part of our spiritual wellness, and if we have some, we can share it.

You may be fortunate enough to have some extra hope. If you do, you're probably sharing it. Like a magic penny, hope seems to grow when you give it away. Another wise man said, "Strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers ... Bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute."

So maybe those shelters on Barton Street did cost too much, and someone does need to be accountable. But let's not lose sight of what we, as city neighbours, are providing for our brothers and sisters. We're giving a home to the homeless and hope to the hopeless. Let's hear more from them and about them.

Maybe the place should be called Camp Hope. The name has a spring ring to it.

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