

Beyond Toronto's borders, homeless means living in the woods

Camps of men without any place to go are situated on Newmarket's fringes

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Vance Patterson knows the secret places where men who aren't ready to get help with their problems hide.

He knows these desperate places, located in wooded areas outside Toronto, because he used to hide there as well.

Patterson was part of the geographic shift of poverty and homelessness, moving out of the downtown core into the suburbs. As housing costs in Toronto drive people out to the suburbs, Newmarket, within commuting distance of Toronto, has become a hub of homelessness, but with few services to keep up with growing social problems.

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Today Patterson has a place to live — he says he's turned his life around. But he knows what lies in Newmarket's numerous wooded areas: Camps of homeless people are hidden from the town's bustling surface prosperity, struggling with addictions.

The area's only homeless shelter, Blue Door Shelter, is constantly packed.

But Patterson was able to get in. And he was thrown out. In total, he was in and out of the shelter for 18 years.

There were times he was too high to be allowed inside. Two giant evergreens that sit side-by-side right outside the shelter provided shelter to him on those nights.

"Many times I've been up in those trees," he said.

He credits the shelter with his turnaround.

"If it wasn't for them, I would be dead. They were relentless," he said of staff at the shelter. "There's always somebody here to help you."

He now is a volunteer at Blue Door. He brings men from the shelter to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and other addictions counseling groups.

But many don't stay at the overcrowded shelter. They prefer to stay out in woods.

From abuse to addiction

Patterson's life is more colourful and painful than average. He grew up in Newmarket in a violent home, severely beaten by his father.

One time, as a form of punishment, his father dropped him off on Highway 50 near Bolton.

"I remember standing there and thinking it was all a joke," he remembered. "I drank my dad's last hot chocolate, he beat the living shit out of me, black and blue, and made me pack up all my stuff in a box."

He walked for kilometres, finding his way to his aunt and uncle's house.

There was worse to come.

At 13, Patterson was sent to a particularly infamous reform school, the Brookside Training School, an hour east of Toronto for children deemed unmanageable.

He was sexually assaulted for more than a year by two of the staff. He was left sometimes for two or three days in solitary confinement.

"I didn't realize that was the root of all the drugs and alcohol that I did. It was masking everything," he said. "It was just burying it, burying it, burying it."

As an adult, Patterson cycled in and out of prison. When he wasn't incarcerated, he worked in precarious jobs, usually involved in nightlife. For a while, he worked as a stripper at Zanzibar and the Brass Rail downtown. Then he ran an after-hours bar, also in the city.

"The alcohol just suppressed everything, the drugs suppressed everything. It was me broken as an individual, and that's what happens with guys who come to [Blue Door]. We're broken here. No two stories that are exactly the same," he said.

Hiding in plain sight

When he returned to Newmarket, he went into woods for shelter — secret places where men like him could find shelter from the wind and rain.

Men camped out all day and night, throughout the winter.

"I camped two whole winters there," said Patterson, pointing to a wooded area where men could be seen with sleeping bags.

These men can come into the Blue Door Shelter anytime for food, shelter and help. But not all of them are ready to ask for help other than food.

Patterson too went back and forth between the shelter and the camp.

Telling his story

It took 18 years before Patterson finally told his story about the training school to a counsellor at Blue Door Shelter. They eventually supported him through a class-action lawsuit brought by dozens of students against the former Brookside Training School.

The lawsuit was settled out of court.

One day Patterson loaded up his girlfriend's jeep and drove out to the training school on a mission. It would be his last offence in a long criminal career. He brought two wheelbarrows of the paperwork from

the court cases and burned them in front of the school's administration house, where he said the abuse occurred.

"I went back as a healing part of my life," he said. "I had a 50-gallon drum, and the top was removed, I threw all the paperwork in there, I poured lighter fluid on it and I lit it on fire. I got in trouble for it. They called police, called the fire department, but by the time they got there, everything was burned. I got a fine. It was \$250 dollars but the judge dismissed it the next day."

The proceeds from the class action lawsuit gave Patterson enough money to make a down payment on a house in Newmarket. He's now engaged to be married.

But he still goes out to the woods where he used to live.

"There's one gentleman, Tim, he's a mental health patient. He can't live with anybody. He doesn't do drugs, doesn't drink," he said. "I'll buy him breakfast, give him five bucks. Every morning, five days a week."

But like many in Newmarket's homeless camps, Patterson's friend Tim refuses to come in out of the cold. He prefers his sleeping bag.

Counting the hidden homeless

In January, United Way Toronto and York Region will do what researchers call a point in time count of people who hide in Newmarket's woodlots and abandoned barns to capture a picture of homelessness that goes beyond traditional surveys.

Patterson figures there are at least 20 secluded camps outside the city limits — at Tom Taylor Trail or behind the Holiday Inn at the 404 Plaza, on the edge of this suburban city.

People can still disappear in there, in a way that's becoming harder to do in downtown Toronto.

CBC Toronto's Sounds of the Season (SOTS) is our annual charity drive in support of local food banks. Please visit our [website](#) for details on the December 4 event, and to find ways you can donate.

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