

Friendship, dialogue key to helping the poor avoid homelessness

It's been a year of change for Valerie-Lynn Petit.

For nearly two months Petit was completely alone, living out of an old beater car packed with her belongings. Every night she drove to a different parking lot to rest before another day of isolation and uncertainty.

"It was a devastating loneliness; I didn't know where to go," recalled Petit, who moved to Edmonton from Saskatoon to get away from a difficult home life. "I didn't know anybody. I had absolutely no social network, not a friend I could open up to."

Eventually Petit decided she had to find help and she mustered up the courage to call a homeless shelter. From there, she got in touch with Catholic Social Services' Welcome Home Program and the George Spady Society for support.



Valerie Lynn Petit went from living in her car to her own apartment thanks to the Welcome Home program. Valerie Lynn Petit

Petit was able to move out on her own at the end of 2017. Today she not only has her own apartment, she has the social life and friendships for which she so desperately longed.

“Welcome Home has been my saving grace,” Petit said. “I refuse to sit back and wallow in self-pity, because I was there before this. It definitely gets me out of my bubble, and now I’m not afraid to ask people to go out for a coffee or come over for a visit.

“They’ve given me just what I’ve needed.”

The CSS Welcome Home program connects formerly homeless people with volunteers who help them develop friendships and prevent social isolation. It’s a mission that reflects the message Pope Francis gave for the World Day of the Poor, which falls this year on Nov. 17.

“Meet others, enter into dialogue with them, listen to them with humility, gratuitousness and poverty of heart,” Pope Francis said in a homily leading up to World Day of the Poor, which he first established as an annual event three years ago.

The Holy Father’s words could easily serve as a mission statement for the Welcome Home program.

For the past year Petit has routinely met with two volunteers from Welcome Home. They go for coffee, meals and often to the Royal Alberta Museum. The friendship has inspired Petit to give back. She will visit the homeless population of downtown Edmonton and offer them her friendship.

In Edmonton, more than 100,000 people live in poverty, and 30,000 of them are children. According to a 2018 report funded by the federal government, there are nearly 2,000 homeless people in the city. In Red Deer, there is a reported 144 homeless people in a population of 103,000.

While Petit has spent periods of her life in poverty, she now receives medical benefits for several health conditions including osteoporosis, brittle bone disease and hemiplegic migraines. It’s been a crucial help with her daily expenses.

Building relationships is key to helping people permanently get out of a life of homelessness, she says.

Welcome Home’s unique approach of fighting poverty through friendships and building confidence is also seen in its St. Zita program offered in Edmonton, Wetaskiwin and now in Red Deer.

In its case-by-case approach, the St. Zita program provides help to the poor and marginalized. That can be anything from a bus ticket for a person who needs to make an urgent doctor’s appointment, to long-term efforts helping people gain confidence, advocate for themselves and access government funding.



Susie Kasawal

“A lot of what we do is help people navigate the system, and advocate for them so they can find the help they need,” said Susie Kasawal, intake coordinator with St. Zita in Red Deer.

“Many of our homeless people don’t have the confidence or assertiveness to try and access services. But if you have someone who can guide you and go with you side-by-side to that appointment or reach out to that group, it can make a big difference.”

For Kasawal, each day is dictated by the needs of her clients. In recent months she has helped a senior access medical and affordable housing services after he suffered a sudden stroke.

More recently, a woman who hitchhiked from Saskatchewan to Red Deer had all of her belongings stolen. Kasawal stepped in and helped her get the personal identification material she had lost and arranged a flight home for her.

It’s an experience that’s proven mutually beneficial, as Kasawal has gained a greater sense of purpose in life through her work.

“It’s anything and everything. Each day is different,” she said. “I’ve definitely grown as a person because of the people I serve.”

To mark World Day of the Poor, Catholic Social Services is partnering with the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples in Edmonton to host an annual free lunch on Nov. 23. They expect to serve as many as 700 people.

It’s one of many continued efforts by Catholic Social Services to help the poor and marginalized, whom Pope Francis sees as the very heart of the Church’s mission.

“You who are poor, fragile – you are the Church’s treasure,” he said in his Nov. 9th homily. “God listens especially to your prayers.”