



Book tries to help young learn about homelessness

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Published on Jun 28, 2007

Living in the suburbs, it might be easy for you to dismiss homelessness as someone else's problem.

But education is an important part of battling this and other misconceptions about the issue, and a new book tackles the situation head on.

The Cardboard Shack Beneath the Bridge, written by Tim Huff, is aimed at helping parents and educators explain homelessness to children.



Tim Huff (right) and children's show host Fred Penner (center) meet with children at a promotion for Mr. Huff's book, The Cardboard Shack Beneath The Bridge. The book takes aim at the homeless issue and presents it in a manner for children to understand.

The seed of the book was planted when Mr. Huff's daughter asked him about a homeless person living under Toronto's Gardiner Expressway as they left a basketball game.

Despite 20 years of experience working on the streets as a support worker and advocate, Mr. Huff found himself stymied when he tried to make the complex issue understandable to a child.

"I kept thinking, man, I knew the answers and I'm having a hard time. I would imagine there are a lot of parents who deal with the same thing and don't know where to take the dialogue," he said.

Mr. Huff was able to combine his knowledge and a background in illustration to create the book himself. Because the issues surrounding homelessness, such as sexual abuse and mental illness, can be complicated and even political, finding the right tone was a challenge.

"I was interested in trying to write a book that made sure I didn't come across like a bleeding heart," Mr. Huff said.

Understanding how people end up on the street and nipping the problem in the bud is a large part of Mr. Huff's work.

It is also a strategy at work in York Region, where the perception we are a wealthy suburban community can mask the problems that do exist.

"In York Region, the homeless are largely invisible," said Sylvia Patterson, the region's director of housing services.

"As York Region grows and urbanizes, we see the numbers shifting."

A key finding in a 2004 report by the region on its homeless problem was that more effort needs to be concentrated on helping those at risk.

At the time, the region was participating in 22 initiatives, offering everything from education to shelter services. Most of these programs are done in concert with agencies such as Out of the Cold and the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness.

A prevention program run with the Salvation Army, for example, provides one-time assistance to those on the verge of losing their home or shelter.

The report said measuring the number of local homeless people is difficult, particularly because many use shelters or stay with friends rather than sleeping on the streets as they might in Toronto.

Nonetheless, our 110 shelter beds were at capacity and the numbers were not slowing down.