

Portrait of a [formerly] homeless woman

BY GISELE MCKNIGHT

Sandy Robb has fought for everything she has — most especially for her life and her home, because neither has been certain.

She was the guest speaker at the Dec. 6 gathering of the Christ Church Cathedral ACW, which drew a large crowd. Once a client of the Monday outreach mission at the church, she evolved to be a volunteer there — well-known, helpful and respected over the past eight years.

“She moved from being a participant to being a member of the organizing committee,” said Penny Ericson, in introducing Sandy.

The ACW generously supports the Cathedral outreach mission, which offers food, friendship, music, bus passes and professional help to those in need each Monday morning at 8:30.

On the verge of turning 60, Sandy shared stories of her life as a woman who, through serious illness, lost her job and then her home. She has been homeless several times as a result.

Sandy earned her living as an educated and experienced cook, but 14 years ago when she was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease and colitis, she was unable to work. Without an income, she could not pay rent. Sick and poor, she ended up homeless, living in a shelter in Fredericton.

“It’s hard to live in those places,” she said, explaining that residents have to leave after breakfast each day before returning later. “You take everything you have that you value and put it in a backpack for the day.”

From there she moved to Saint John to live in her sister’s basement. But after awhile, feeling better, she went back to work, only to find that serious lung issues would keep her from ever supporting herself. The city’s polluted air bothered her, so she returned to the shelter in Fredericton.

From the shelter, she moved into a subsidized apartment, but was wrongly evicted. That led to the worst housing in the city — a rooming house, where mold, used needles, thefts and noise were the norm.

“Nobody would help me

clean the place,” she said. Her health issues kept her from bending to do all the chores that needed to be done there, even though they weren’t solely her responsibility.

In New Brunswick, single income assistance recipients receive \$537 a month. Rooming house rent here costs \$400 a month. Thankfully, she now has secure, subsidized housing in the building from which she was evicted.

Asked how she was able to return to live in the building, her answer was frank: “I fought!”

Fighting is what Sandy does. She was diagnosed with lung cancer two years ago, but successfully fought to recover.

Now she fights not only for herself but for others. She has become a guardian of the poor in the downtown and she will talk to any decision-maker who will listen, including the mayor and city council. She’s also made a presentation to UNB law students on homelessness.

She sits on MLA David Coon’s Roundtable on Seniors and on an NB Housing board. She starred in a short documentary film called “The Rest Will Follow” earlier this year, a collaboration of DocTalks, the Community Action Group on Homelessness and Housing First.

Recently she was asked to participate in a huge research project headed by University of New Brunswick nursing professor Jason Hickey, whose area of expertise is mental health. The \$2 million federal grant will be divided between four researchers in Toronto, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and Fredericton and will focus on mental health issues in the homeless.

The initiative took her and the professor to Toronto earlier this fall to pitch the project. Her involvement, she said, will probably be to find the people to participate in the research.

During her ACW talk, she discussed the impenetrable red tape that is part of the income assistance system in the province. For example, when she had cancer, her sister wanted to come and care for her during her recovery, but the province would have financially penalized Sandy for having a family member live



MCKNIGHT PHOTO

Sandy Robb listens to a question during her presentation at the December gathering of the Cathedral ACW in Fredericton. Sandy began her association with Christ Church Cathedral as a visitor to their Monday outreach program. She then became a volunteer and acts as an advocate for the poor in Fredericton.

with her.

She also applied for a home-care worker to help clean her room, but that’s not permitted when you live in a rooming house. She has a helper now that she’s in an apartment.

In her building, there are 84 units, 29 of them subsidized. She has helped create a real community there, doing odd jobs and errands for people, baking cookies, telling jokes. She’s even brought the band from Monday outreach to perform in the common room, much to the delight of many residents.

She is grateful for the help she’s received at the Monday outreach, and for the way it’s grown, with the addition of student nurses, law students and social workers there to meet clients and offer professional help.

Both Penny and Sandy have a lot to say about the need for free bus passes for the poor. They point out that, because buses are often empty between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., free passes for those times would not cost the city a cent.

Penny, a retired nursing professor, outlined a scenario where

a person has a medical appointment, but with no cash for the bus, cannot get to it.

Without a phone, they can’t call to cancel, thereby angering the medical professional, who might be reluctant to re-book them. A free bus pass could alleviate the problem and prevent a medical issue from worsening.

“It’s better that they get to their doctors’ appointments,” she said. “And it’s not going to cost the city anything.”

“It’s not just Sandy’s job [to fight for this], it’s our job.”

From Sandy’s presentation and the documentary:

“I made it. Others can make it if they fight. I’ll help them fight.”

“I’d rather be cooking and working, but that’s not something I can do at this time.”

“I’m a good shopper and I know how to budget.”

“Having your own place means you can lay down anytime you want. You don’t have to worry about who’s coming through your door.”

“There are three places to get a shower — the Community Health Centre, the YMCA and the police station, but most people won’t go to the police station.”

“There’s a lot of little things people need help with. There is not enough money at the end of the month.”

“A lot of churches close programs in the summer and there’s no help. But people still have to live in the summer.”

“A lot of street people are happy but not happy. They’re scared of people belittling you. People look down on you because you don’t have a home.”

You can watch the seven-minute film at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbBeV_le52Y&feature=youtu.be