

## Ray of Hope

### Harry Whyte:

It took a few months, but in January I went back to work and resigned and started at Ray of Hope in the middle of February of 2008. So it has been eight-plus years. It's the longest I've ever held a job, to be honest. Not all my fault, but, you know. It has been an interesting experience, because I knew what I was getting into because of serving on the board, but I *didn't* know. For me, the real challenge was the very first week at work...

I was okay with the youth things, because I raised four kids. One of them had been really challenging and stole thousands of dollars out of a bank account. I was smashing bongos and throwing them in the garbage. This is a young kid who at 16 left the house and just couch surfed around Upper Beechwood and Colonial Acres. We'd have parents phone us and go, "I just want you to know where your son is. He's staying with us." And you go, "That's really not helpful."

"He's such a nice kid. He does the dishes. He talks to us. He cleans up after himself. He's nicer than my own son." *For you I'm sure he is.* So I'd been through that part. We'd been through that part as a family, so I kind of understood the dynamics of the substance abuse and potential criminal behavior. I knew nothing about downtown people. I knew nothing about people living in poverty, because I grew up in the suburbs of Toronto. I lived in Upper Beechwood.

I've been to Rwanda twice, and there's as much cultural disparity between Upper Beechwood and downtown Kitchener as there is between Canada and Rwanda. For most of us, we're not familiar with poverty, so we've lived with our perceptions of what the people on the street are like. Many of them, if you talk to some people... "They're just lazy; they need to get a job," and all of those things. "If I give them \$5, they're just going to go spend it on booze." Maybe.

I felt, "I'm going to be the CEO at Ray of Hope. I have to get beyond my thoughts, who I think these people are, and actually get down to meet them." So my first Thursday when they ran the food hampers, and the only afternoon time that we were open serving a meal, I determined I was going to go to our community center every Thursday just to be there to learn. Jon Hill, who's our program director, gave me a great job. He said, "Here, you hold the roll of tickets, and everyone who comes in for a meal, you give them a ticket so they can eat, and then when their number is called they can go up to the food hamper."

So I started to hand out tickets, and I got to smile at people and meet people as they were coming in. The very first day, something happened to me that made it really crystal clear the differences I was going to have to wrap my head around. I had a black guy come up to me and ask to borrow my pen. I instinctively reached into my jacket to pull out my pen, and I paused for a moment because my hand landed on the pen I'd bought myself when I'd graduated from Laurier with my MBA and gotten my first management job.

I'd spent \$85 for a pen, and here's some black guy who I don't know from Adam asking me to borrow it. In that instant, so much goes through your mind, but you don't think you're pausing that long. I did reach in and pulled out my pen. I took the pen and pulled the cap off, thinking, "Okay, you can take the pen. If I never see it again, at least I have the cap." I honestly did this. "I'll at least keep the cap."

The emotional attachment to what I'd achieved was still the value in the pen. Eighty-five dollars was a lot at the time too, but the value for me was in the cap of the pen. So I gave him the pen, and then I watched him. Now our Oasis facility was probably about three times the floor space of this living room/dining room/kitchen area, so it was a big room but not that big. I watched him like a hawk walk across the room. I was really hoping I'd get my pen back, but I was trusting I might not.

He goes over and grabs this piece of paper, and I'm listening. He writes down a phone number and goes to this woman. He goes, "Here, I know you're looking for a new place to live. I saw this place advertised walking down today. Here, give them a call." Then he walked back and gave me my pen, and I said, "Thank you" and put it back in my pocket. Do you know what my lesson was I learned? Always carry a cheap pen. And now we put "Ray of Hope" on them so we want to give them away.

No, I think you know what the lesson was. I was such an ass. I was thinking about my \$85 pen. This guy cared about somebody. That's what goes on. I had the pleasant experience last week of taking our new staff from Welcome Home around Ray of Hope to tour all of our facilities and meet with staff and just see what they've gotten themselves into, because it's not just about refugees; it's about all of these other things.

As we ended up at the café and I was buying them lunch at Heffner's and we got talking, I said, "Hey, what did you see there? What's the common thread?" It came down to this: relationship. No matter what you're doing, you're trying to build relationships. You're trying to bring people together to help one another.

So when we talk about neighbors, we can think about... You're a close group of neighbors. You live close together. When John first asked me about this I went, "How can I talk about this?" Well, I think about neighbors on TV. You go back to *Bewitched*, Mrs. Kravitz. Right? She knew something was going on at that house, could never figure it out, but she was a nosy neighbor looking over the fence, trying to figure out, peering through the windows, because she knew there was something weird going on and she needed to figure it out and get it right.

There's *Home Improvement* with Wilson, the guy on the other side of the fence who you never see anything other than his eyes or the hat or just hear this voice with all this wisdom that kind of pours out. Different type of neighbor. *The Jeffersons* was a classic of all these black people, this family that made it in the dry cleaning business, and they're moving on up. They went into a neighborhood where they just didn't fit, and the whole dynamics of that story was somewhat humorous.

I'm sure you all have neighbor stories. I had a new neighbor story this morning. I'm walking out my front door, and my neighbor next door who is from the Middle East... He teaches at the university in engineering, U of W. Lovely family. They're getting their roof done. I had talked to them a few weeks ago about the guy who had done our roof and were we happy with it. Yeah, we really were.

So there's some banging going on on the roof in the morning. I look out, and there's the bin in the driveway and they're starting in on their roof. That's great. The bylaw officer drives up and stops, and I see him walk up to the house. I'm going, "What on earth is going on?" I was

going to Zehrs to get cough medicine, so I didn't hang around, but when I came back I had to ask the roofers, "What was the bylaw officer about?"

"A neighbor complained about my car being parked here for more than three hours yesterday."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's against the bylaw. You're only allowed to park up to three hours on the street."

"So even though you couldn't park in the driveway because there's a bin there, you had a neighbor who was doing his duty." We have those experiences. When we lived in Toronto, there was a lovely family next door. Gus was a Greek chef. His English wasn't that great, but they were a lovely family. Their son got a great job driving a tractor trailer, and he thought it was fine to park it overnight between our houses and start up at 6:00 in the morning to go off to work.

"You know what? You guys need to be good neighbors. You can't park those vehicles in a residential neighborhood." We have bylaws to help us be good neighbors. Good fences make good neighbors. There's some point of, "It's good to see you, but this is my property." Have you ever borrowed something from your neighbor and lost it or broke it? It's challenging being neighbors with people we're familiar with.

When they're people who have the same culture, kind of basic socioeconomic... Part of our youth addiction program was we had a group of philanthropists in the community who donated three acres of land to us. They gave us about \$1.9 million in cash to buy this land and to do some stuff. I had to deal with these guys. It's intimidating when you're sitting in a room filled with millionaires. You really get the sense they're pretty sure they're smarter than you are.

They never said it outright, but you really got the sense of, "We have the money, so we know how these things work and we'll figure it all out and make it happen." We'd get in situations, and it's not all about color. It's not all about culture. It's not about race. It's not about religion. But we're not comfortable with the unfamiliar. That's one of the biggest challenges we face as a community: to get beyond the familiar and put ourselves into situations where we might feel a little uncomfortable.

Ray of Hope really works at inviting volunteers to come down and embrace the community, to get involved in serving meals or to sit and play cribbage with somebody while we're in a drop-in or to go out and play sports with youth in a custody facility, help them see there are other exposures in life than what they've been accustomed to that have gotten them to where they are. Right at the heart, that's what we're about.

I think as a community there are a lot of things that go on. If you look at the KW Community Foundation, their real focus on raising and sharing money around the community is around an issue they call *belonging*, wanting people to feel, "I belong here." Whether it's the person who's struggling with mental health issues or whether it's the person who has just landed from another country and is a refugee claimant, doesn't speak a word of English, and is going to try...

We have a lot of people come to KW, because we're known as a community that embraces people. It's a giving community. Maybe it's some of those old Mennonite, German, Lutheran roots we have that still are very much part of the fabric of KW. We see it all the time. We're just one agency in the city that's doing a piece to build community and to engage people and to provide support, but there are so many others.

You have House of Friendship that has been around for 75 years. You have The Working Centre that has been around since just after it, so 40-some odd years. There are a lot of people. We really try to work collaboratively and collectively so that we're not duplicating services or that we can work together with individuals to provide support or even as a community to create a network of support for people.

So there are a lot of things going on that way. Kitchener as a city has a real focus on communities and building community, and they have community centers. We don't have that in Waterloo, to be honest. It's really interesting to see the different pieces of it. So that's kind of a bit of who I am. I'm trying to be a neighbor to people who for the most part I didn't know.

I'll just tell a story about one of the other things that really cemented it for me. There are two things. One is I met a gentleman named Bill. We have Bill's picture that was taken when he got his 25-year service award from the *Record*. Bill has now worked for the *Record* for 34 years as a paper boy. Most of us give up our paper routes at 14 or 15 and get a real job, but that's what Bill is capable of doing.

This is a hardworking guy. He gets up at 6:00 every morning to go out and deliver 100 papers before 7:00. He probably gets up earlier than that. He lives in a rent-geared-to-income apartment with House of Friendship. He comes down to our place to play cribbage and engage with people and have a meal. Our community is filled with people like Bill. Yeah, there are the chronic alcoholics and there are violent people, but everyone is an individual with an individual story.

You only get to know that when you meet them, when you break down that barrier of I'm just looking at them and making perceptions and decisions as opposed to I'm willing to go and meet them and talk to them and hear their story. That's one of the things we really try to do: to share those stories with people.

So thank you for your time this afternoon. I hope I've given you something to stimulate a conversation about what it really means to live in community and to be a neighbor, not only just in the context of over my fence but in the context of I live in a broader community. The globe is shrinking. Life is changing for us, and it's because technology has shrunk the world. Transportation has shrunk the world.

Before when there were war-torn situations hundreds of years ago, people just died. They had nowhere to go. They could flee so far, but they couldn't get on a plane and try to come to the States or come to Canada or get to Europe or get on a boat in the Mediterranean and try to get across to Greece or Italy. Life is changing. There are something like 53 million refugees right now displaced in the world, and they're displaced by war.

They would prefer to be at home. They would prefer to still live in the house that used to be there but has been bombed and blown up. I know listening to all the rhetoric around the US election over the last few weeks, listening to even some of the rhetoric locally, there are no simple answers. There are always going to be challenges and we're going to face a different world and different situations, but I think we're called to do that.

We're called to live generously within the world, let alone just within our community. Think of yourself. When have you felt closest to your neighbors? It's probably when somebody has been sick and they heard about that and brought some soup. When we tend to be most neighborly is when I know somebody needs something and I can help. We need to have that same spirit of generosity with our larger community as well.