Ray of Hope

Harry Whyte:

I got introduced to Ray of Hope at a really unusual time in my life. I was 50. I'd had my first management job working for a Danish company and was the Canadian business unit manager. The company reorganized, and I ended up downsizing all of our Canadian operations over the course of a year. My wife kept going, "What about *your* job?" and I went, "Oh, they need me. I'm the only guy who knows anything about this."

I spent a year crisscrossing the US and doing all kinds of stuff. I walked into a meeting one Monday morning expecting my boss, who was the vice president of sales in the US, to be there, but I wasn't expecting the vice president of human resources to be there. I'd gotten rid of everybody else. I kind of walked in and went, "Oh, it's my turn." I knew I was going to be out of work at 50.

You go through that. "I have to go home now and tell my wife and my kids that I don't have a job." It's a hard thing to go through as a male, as a father figure, as a provider, to come home and share that news. For me it became, "Well, I'll get another job." It was a long time. It was nine months for me. I actually ended up working in my church as the janitor for five months, and then I ended up back in industry.

In that time frame, I had a gentleman come to me whose wife actually had nudged him one day and said, "You should talk to Harry about serving on the board at Ray of Hope." So he went, "You know, you're right. That would be a good idea." He came to me and said, "Would you consider serving on the board of Ray of Hope?" I said, "What's Ray of Hope?" I'd lived in the community for 14 years, gone to some really big churches (Ray of Hope is a Christian program), but I'd never heard of it.

But I kind of had one of those things where, you know, "Any door that opens, I'm going to say yes and walk through and see where it takes me."

Next year will be the fiftieth anniversary of Ray of Hope working in KW, and not a lot of people know about it or what we do. That has been changing a bit over my tenure, but a lot of people don't. That's because it started as a halfway house for young men coming out of prison at Guelph Reformatory. This was before the Young Offenders Act or the Juvenile Delinquents Acts. Young men as young as 16 were serving time in adult prisons.

The gentleman who founded Ray of Hope was a minister in a small church in Fergus, a gentleman called Armand Wright. He started going into the Guelph Reformatory to meet and engage with prisoners there. He had a real heartfelt compassion. "I have to do something to help these young men, because they're coming out of prison, and it is so hard." It's still one of the biggest challenges anyone faces when they've been incarcerated for any kind of crime: coming back into the community and finding your way back into the mainstream. That's why we have high recidivism rates.

So that was what Ray of Hope started about. We had a farmer out in Petersburg donate three acres of land to build this nice bundle out there to be a halfway house. Well, in 1972 they brought in the Young Offenders Act and the province then went, "Oh, what are we going to do? We need to put these young people somewhere, and we have no place to put them." So they came to Ray of Hope and said, "Would you become a transfer payment agency for the province and be a custody facility for young offenders?"

So that's what Ray of Hope started with. We've been a transfer payment agency since those days. We take our good tax dollars and hire good people to support young people while they're being incarcerated or held for trial in our justice programs. We have a facility out in Petersburg that now is actually licensed for up to 20 young men. They would be young men who would serve at least five years for their crimes if they were adults. Most of them would involve assaults, weapons charges, some kind of violent charges.

We've had young men serve manslaughter and murder charges out there. So they're not Sunday school kids, certainly. It's a challenging place for your staff to work with. Youth Justice has expanded into some other areas. We have a transitional education program for kids coming out of custody midterm. To throw them back into a local high school would be a disaster for them, so they can come and work on some educational credits with us in the midst of that.

We also take kids going the other way. It has gotten busier, because the province changed the laws that the schools have to educate young people to 18 now, not 16. At 16 the school boards used to be able to say, "I'm sorry. You're delinquent. Goodbye. We don't have to worry about you anymore." Now they have to look after them until they're 18. It's really hard to, because these are kids who really don't want to be in school. They'd rather do something else.

We'll take young people the school boards kind of tried every potential program with and we'll put them into our school program. In doing that, the biggest thing is to get them to show up. If you drop by every morning, there might be eight or ten kids registered, and there are probably two or three there at 9:00. Then our staff is on the phone. "Where are you? What are you doing today? We'll come pick you up. We'll grab breakfast on the way in."

They start their day playing Skip-Bo. It's about building a relationship with these young people to help them get back to the point of, "Yeah, I'm ready to go back to school. I want to go back to school or do something different." Then we have staff that just work with kids no matter where they're coming from to help them from reoffending. That's called a *reintegration program*. So that's the Youth Justice piece of it.

Several years ago in 1996, Ray of Hope merged with another organization in the city called Oasis. It was founded by a church and run by a church, and it was a drop-in center in downtown Kitchener off Market Lane and King Street at Scott. It served meals and had laundry facilities for people. That has become the Ray of Hope Community Centre now. We moved to a new building about six years ago, which is considerably larger.

On any night, Monday to Friday, Ray of Hope is probably serving dinner to 250 people. The drop-in opens at 3:00, so people just kind of come in. In our community you have St. John's Kitchen that's part of The Working Centre. They open at 9:00 in the morning and are open

until 3:00 in the afternoon. Then at 3:00 in the afternoon we open our doors until about 10:00 at night, so it gives people a place to be.

The drop-in is just that. It's hanging out. It's having coffee. It's playing cribbage. We have a pool table. It's giving people a place to be and to belong. Then there are other services there. Part of what's associated with that is a food hamper program. That has really changed a lot. It used to be just on a Thursday afternoon the 100 or so chronically homeless people who were part of the community center would come in and would get a plastic bag with seven or eight food items, and the food closet was smaller than your front hall.

When we moved to our new building, that changed. The dynamics have changed quite a bit as well. Now we have over 1,300 people registered to be part of our food hamper program. Almost 400 of them are children. Seventy-five percent of those people don't come to Ray of Hope for a meal, because they have a family, they have an apartment they're living in, but they're probably working two or three part-time jobs, if they're working, trying to make ends meet, and food stability next to housing stability is one of the biggest pressures they feel.

If you have to choose between paying rent or buying food, you really have to pay your rent first so you have a roof over your head and your family's head, and then you're stuck, "How do I feed my family now?" So that has been an interesting dynamic for us as that has changed. Part of what we do is what we call *community services* and supporting people who are impacted by poverty.

We also run a youth employment program. It's called Morning Glory Café, and we do catering out of our community center. We used to have an old café on King Street that we had to shut down. I don't know if you own a Toyota and you've ever been to Heffner Toyota. There's a Morning Glory Café at Heffner Toyota. They're great community partners. You see them sponsoring and supporting all kinds of things in our community. They've been great partners with Ray of Hope and that program as well.

We're taking young people, probably 18 to mid-20s, who have really struggled to get started in life. Most of them haven't finished school. We have a six-month program for them, where they spend the first five weeks in a classroom setting with an employment counselor learning some life skills like anger management. We talk about drug abuse, budgeting, a lot of different things they probably never learned, like when you have a job you show up to work on time. You show up when you're scheduled to work.

You don't tell the boss where to take off and go because you think you know what you're doing better. Just some of those life skills that make them employable. Then they'll spend the next 10 weeks working within Ray of Hope's Morning Glory program, learning food preparation, safe food handling, customer service, those kinds of skill sets. Then they spend the next 10 weeks with a business partner that Ray of Hope is building to have an additional work experience.

The other youth piece we do is youth addiction services. This kind of happened in my time at the board. It started to transition toward this. What drove Ray of Hope toward this was you would get phone calls from parents going, "I really need help with my son or daughter. I think they're involved with alcohol abuse, drug abuse."

I describe it this way. If we had a room of 1,000 people and we asked them, "How many people have had your son or daughter arrested and you've had to go get them at the police station or they've gone to court and ended up serving time?" if everyone was honest, you'd get maybe three or four hands. It's not a big part of our population who end up that far into the justice system.

But nowadays if you asked a group of 1,000 people, "How many people in your family know a son or daughter, niece, nephew, grandchild who's causing no end of grief to their parents and their family because of their abuse of alcohol and drugs in high school and their early 20s?" half the room puts up their hand. That's how prevalent the drug problem is for families.

So we would get phone calls to Ray of Hope, and they would go, "Can you help us?" The answer that Ray of Hope had at the time was, "Only if you have your son or daughter arrested," because we were at the end of the road, not somewhere along the road. That was very intentional. To be honest, I've sat in my living room with a police officer asking that same question about one of my sons. "You could have him arrested, but do you really want to do that? It really changes the dynamics of your relationship forever."

It's a hard place to be as a parent. We really felt we needed to do something more proactive, so we ended up approaching our ministry of health, and a number of things came together (this was before my time) where Ray of Hope got funding to start a residential youth addiction treatment program. In our city, in Kitchener, we have a six-bed facility where we have young men age 13 up to 17 and 18 who will spend four to six months with us in treatment. We got additional funding to expand the program to be more community-based as well.

I describe it like this. I had a stent put in my heart. If we think about it, we all get told, you know, ParticipACTION, eat well, exercise, keep your heart in great shape. Not all of us do that. Right? So one day you're sitting home and you tell your wife, "When I go up and down the stairs at the office and I sit down at my desk, I feel like someone is pushing on my chest, but it goes away. It's not pain, but it's just pressure."

My wife, being the OR nurse… Her eyes go out like *this* and she goes, "Is your insurance paid up? You need to go see the doctor right away." That led to me going to St. Mary's and, "Oh wow, you have an artery that's 99 percent blocked," and ending up with a stent. I probably should eat better than I do and exercise more than I do, but for some people even a stent doesn't work and you end up with having bypass surgery. For other people, their heart disease is so significant they need a heart transplant.

What you're really doing if you look at the continuum of care for families with substance abuse issues in their family… Residential treatment is the heart transplant. You're taking a young person out of the context of his family, his peers, and everyone else, because nothing else has worked, and you're putting him into this isolated therapeutic community where people are going to try to help him make some better choices and changes for his life. That's what residential treatment is.

We also run something called *day treatment*. I don't know if you've ever driven by the corner of King and Ottawa in downtown. You'll see this nice old building that was a bank and it has

"Ray of Hope" on it. That's our day treatment facility. Young people will come to that facility. They'll not be in school. They'll come there through the day Monday to Friday.

It's really challenging to work with those young people, because they can go home at night and use with their friends. They can do it on the weekend, but they're there at least, because they recognize they need some help. You're working with them in the midst of the struggle. So that's what that's about. Then we have community-based treatment workers who just go and meet young people and their parents anywhere.

We have a parent support group as well, because sometimes the parents are much more anxious to deal with this than a 13- or 14-year-old. A 13- or 14-year-old just goes, "Hey, I'm just having a good time. All my friends do it, so go away. Don't bother me." That's challenging. So we will work with the parents and help them to help their children recognize what's going on in their lives.

The latest thing we've started… In September we opened Welcome Home Refugee Housing. We were a landlord to that program for 10 years at our old café. When we sold the building, they lost that space as well, and then we worked with the community to go, "Is this a program that's really needed? How does it really fit?" So we started in on that. We have a 15-room house in Waterloo over on Allen Street that was a former student residence.

One of my sons actually lived in there when the guy built the addition on it, so I'm somewhat connected to the house. That's really just starting out. Most of the people we serve there are single refugees who arrive in the community. Most of the Syrian refugees who have come to our community have come as large families.

The isolation you feel as a family… There are a lot of challenges when you speak no English. It's really hard to find work. There are a lot of challenges when you come as a family. When you come as a single person, those are multiplied time and time again, because now I don't even have a family to relate to. I've left that family or that family has maybe been killed. So we really focus on taking and helping individuals.

We have a family unit, but then we have these two five-bedroom units where we have four single males and four single females who will live in that unit with an intern who actually lives 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with refugees. It's a really interesting and changing dynamic for us. We got into that because we recognized that most of the people coming to our food hamper were former refugees or immigrants who are still struggling with poverty.

We recognized in our youth justice programs that if we looked through the history of the global conflicts and crises in the world, we ended up with young people from those areas who were refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, refugees from the Sudan, refugees from Ethiopia. They ended up in our community, they ended up in gangs, and they ended up in our justice system. So our focus is, "How do we change that? How do we maybe be more proactive and intervene?"