



'WHEN I WAS HUNGRY AND THIRSTY' BY SCULPTOR TIMOTHY P. SCHMALZ.
PHOTO: ROSEMARIE MOSTELLER

THE INTERVIEW

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'WE'RE ALL IN IT TOGETHER'

RACHEL ROBINSON ON POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS

■ Rachel Robinson is the executive director of drop-in centres The Well and St. Luke's Table, two of the diocese of Ottawa's community ministries.

The diocese of Ottawa runs [five community ministries](#), including an affordable supportive housing organization for women. The diocese has also pledged to create 125 new units of affordable housing in the city by 2021, to coincide with the diocese's 125th anniversary.

Epiphanies spoke to Robinson about the function of community service agencies, affordable housing and homelessness, and poverty as a systemic issue. The interview has been edited for length.

What do The Well and St. Luke's Table do?

The Well and St. Luke's are both community services. They're drop-ins and they both provide food. The Well is a women-only program; St. Luke's is for men and women.

We provide basic needs, [including] breakfast and lunch. The aim is to alleviate the impact of poverty on

people's day-to-day lives. We have showers and laundry at The Well, and cots for people to sleep on during the day if they've been sleeping outside at night. Then we try to provide links to other health-care resources. So we have nurses and social workers coming in from the Royal Ottawa Hospital, and the local community health centres have nurses that come in to try and connect people if they've got any health problems.

Then the big thing is about breaking isolation and loneliness for people. We know that loneliness is actually really bad for people's mental and physical health.

Many of the people live on their own, or they live in a shelter. Most sleep outside, especially in the summer time. That can be quite isolating. So they come for community, they come to gather and connect with other people. They have strong friendships in the programs with people.

And then we have spiritual care. We have chaplains in the programs who can help people with spiritual matters. So we try to be really holistic in the way we support people and think about all aspects of their lives.



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What is the importance of having a drop-in space?

One of the things about a drop-in that's different to a lot of other types of social services is, it's very accessible, because you literally just walk in through the door. You don't have to tell anyone your name if you don't want to, you don't have to sit down with a social worker or fill out forms, do intake assessments. When you're part of a system where you access social assistance, it can be very bureaucratic. So [drop-ins are] really supposed to be accessible.

We are addressing crises, in a way. Like I said, we're alleviating the impacts of poverty. But in an ideal world, we wouldn't need drop-ins. In an ideal world, people would have housing—the right type of housing. They'd have enough income to be able to buy their own food. I'm sure [this term] is a bit overused, but it's a systemic issue.

We're just addressing immediate needs, but it's not social justice, in a way. That's not real justice, that people don't have anywhere to sleep. They don't have a home.



Rachel Robinson at The Well. PHOTO: ANGLICAN VIDEO

“ **It’s absolutely impossible, if you live on social assistance, to afford any sort of decent housing. In Ottawa, property and land are so expensive.** ”

What is the climate of affordable housing right now, in Canada or in Ottawa? What are some of the challenges people are facing?

It’s absolutely impossible, if you live on social assistance, to afford any sort of decent housing. In Ottawa, property and land are so expensive. Even people who are working can’t really afford decent housing. The minimum rent on an apartment would be \$1,200 in Ottawa. If you’re on disability support, you have just under \$500 a month for shelter, for rent. And if you’re on Ontario Works, you get \$390 for rent per month.

So people are living way below the poverty line.

For that you could get a really awful room in a shared rooming house in Ottawa, which would have seven people sharing one bathroom [and] would be cockroach-infested.

The properties that people are living in are in neighbourhoods that are being gentrified. The land’s worth so much, the houses are worth so much, [that] it’s not worth the landlord investing any money in them because they could just sell the house and make a lot of money.

So generally it’s very, very hard to find anywhere to live. People end up couch-surfing a lot, over-occupying one-bedroom apartments, sharing rooms, sleeping in



One of the diocese of Ottawa's community ministries, The Well is a drop-in space for women.

PHOTOS: ANGLICAN VIDEO

shelters—some chronically homeless people live in the shelters.

And the thing I think is really important is, there are some people with disabilities [who] are not going to be able to live independently. They need to be living where there's support, and there is a real shortage of supportive housing.

In Ottawa, there's not enough public housing [or] community housing that's affordable. The waiting list is 10,000 people. And that's a fairly stable number, it doesn't tend to go down. So it's really difficult to get affordable housing through the public sector, through the community housing sector. And then if you're going into the private market, you're really at the mercy of slumlords. Not all of them—there are some good landlords that do provide decent accommodation. But in the private market, it's very easy for profit to become the main motivator.

For people who haven't experienced that level of poverty, what kind of misconceptions might people have?

I think some people perhaps might think that [homeless people] haven't tried hard enough to find work or that they've had opportunities that they've perhaps turned down because they have addictions. What you tend to find with chronically homeless people is, there's often a number of intersecting factors, such as a health problem or a disability. So that immediately puts them at a disadvantage trying to find employment.

Many of the people who are chronically homeless have experienced real trauma in their childhoods or in their lives. [They may] have come out of foster care. They haven't had the same opportunities. They're almost at a disadvantage right from when they're children, really. They've got some sort of challenge like a mental illness or a disability, they haven't got family support, and more importantly, the system is against them. Employers aren't going to employ people that perhaps can't work five days a week, nine to five. They can't accommodate people with disabilities easily. [It's hard to] find housing that you can afford on social assistance. And if you haven't got anywhere to get up in the morning and get dressed and have something to eat, it's really difficult to work.

I think there's a real stigma attached to being

homeless or having a mental illness or having an addiction. There's this real sense of "them" and "us," whereas I think we're all in it together, and we really need to work out a way where we all can have a decent standard of living and everyone can have some employment and have an income that enables them to buy food and shelter.

I think some people also struggle with this idea of, *should I give to someone on the street asking for money?* What's your take on that?

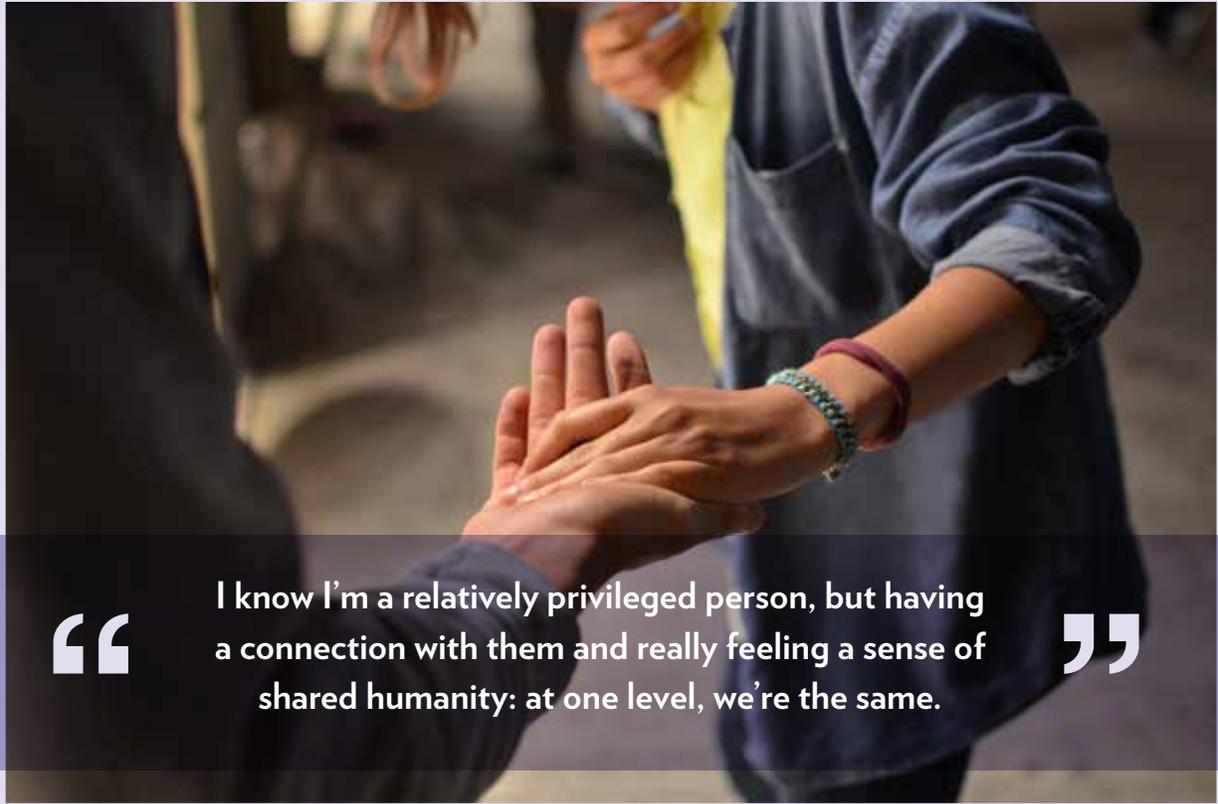
It's really difficult, and I think in the end it has to be an individual choice on how you want to be in the world, how you want to relate to people in the world.

It is often the case that people panhandling do have an addiction. But, equally, people really have no money. They don't have a single cent. If they're panhandling they're living almost from hour to hour.

I think it's easy to be judgmental and say, "Well they're just going to spend it on drugs." Well, we all choose to spend our money on whatever we're going to spend it on. We always want to have a choice, for example, about what food we eat. Often people don't want to be given a stale bit of pizza or a sandwich that they've not chosen themselves. It can feel like people are being ungrateful. But you know, we want to choose our own food; most people do. So it's a bit paternalistic. I know people do it with the absolute best intention; they're really trying to be kind and not give people money because they think it's going to be spent on drugs, and it may be.

I personally don't give money to people, because I'd rather get people into a support agency or a social, community services agency like St. Luke's Table or The Well. I'd rather try and encourage people to go and get support at programs that are organized. But I would never tell someone not to give someone else money when that person's sitting on the street and hasn't got a cent. If someone is sitting on the street, I think they're pretty desperate. I think we need to show compassion.

It's difficult, that one. I've actually struggled with that [question] myself. I think you tend to find most workers don't give money because they want people to get into services and programs.



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PHOTO: NINA STREHL/UNSPASH

As you said, this is all very systemic. What can people do if they want to help? Where should they give or get involved with?

Well, of course you can support community agencies that provide services to homeless people. We can't function without donations. We do have tax dollars that support our programs, but they never cover 100% of the operating costs. We're always trying to get donations.

You can also volunteer with organizations. In the same way we always need donations, we always need volunteers to help in operating the program.

There's a number of ways you can [help], but I think it does have to be political at some level. You do have to speak to your MPs and [city] councillors and tell them that you would like some change. Unfortunately, that might mean you have to pay more taxes, it might mean you have to say, I would be prepared to pay an extra \$10 a year in tax or something to enable more

public housing. I think it has to be public housing and non-profit housing rather than private landlords. It's a generalization, but I think generally it's more effective if it's non-profit or public housing.

In your own experience, what are the best moments of being involved in this ministry? What gives you hope?

I think it's actually having a real connection with people who are very different to me and have very different life experiences. And I totally "own my privilege"—I know I'm a relatively privileged person, but having a connection with them and really feeling a sense of shared humanity: at one level, we're the same. We've got the same needs. We need love, we need food, we need shelter. I think that is quite profound, really, when you experience that—to really feel a connection with people like that. ■