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'They Don't Judge You Here'

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Hilary Weston is coming to their open house next Saturday. Street people Julie Hanna and Robin Young think it'll be nice to see her again.

The province's lieutenant-governor and incidentally the wife of one of the country's richest businessmen will be the one with the scissors at Sanctuary's ribbon-cutting ceremony that day.

This is no token gesture on her part. It was her donation of \$50,000 from the Weston Foundation that put this faith-based drop-in centre for street people and addicts like Hanna and Young over the top in what everyone thought was a quixotic quest.

They had eight months to raise \$750,000 to buy and renovate the old Central Gospel Hall, the red brick building at 25 Charles St. E. where they've been for 11 years.

"We had a professional fundraiser who said that by all rights we shouldn't have been able to raise the money," says Sanctuary's pastoral director Greg Paul. "In fact, she said we should have been bankrupt."

The staff of eight have to fundraise their own salaries. Sanctuary receives no government or corporate funding; it survives on private donations.

But when Paul got wind that wealthy professionals who share the building were being advised to buy the property, he moved fast. With his board's permission, he approached the owners, a missionary organization, asking them to sell to Sanctuary.

They told him in February, 1999 that Sanctuary could have the place for \$500,000 half its market value with one huge proviso: The money was due that November.

On March 26, Paul announced their letter-writing fundraising campaign. It was a bust. Then they decided to ask everyone meaning the homeless and the addicts along with the board members and others who they knew who might know someone with money. One panhandler gave Paul a phone number for Onex Corp. chair Gerald Schwartz.

"Apparently he got to know him because (Schwartz) used to drop change on him in Yorkville. It was the correct phone number, too," Paul says.

Paul never connected with Schwartz, but one thing after another led him to a white, middle-class congregation from Burlington who met in a school because they didn't have a building of their own.

Paul was skeptical. His flock were inner-city bikers, cons, homeless, hookers; this was upper middle-class Burlington they wouldn't care. But in September, they cut Sanctuary a cheque for \$100,000. He says that's when he knew they were going to achieve their goal.

"I bet that was their own building fund," says Paul, still incredulous.

He says it was just one of the "many miracles" which kept Sanctuary's team buoyed and hopeful throughout the campaign. By November, they had the \$500,000 for the building and by February of last year, there was close to another \$300,000 for the renovations.

Along with others, self-styled Sanctuary handyman Mike McKeown has been working on the renos since last October. This week he's prepping, masking and painting some of the outside windows; three years ago he lived under the Bloor St. viaduct, "a raving, lunatic crack addict," he says.

A girlfriend took him to Sanctuary one Sunday. He walked in as they were finishing up a church service.

"People were having desserts and looked up and said 'Hi,' " he recalls, adding that just that gesture made him feel he was home and, finally, safe.

"They **don't judge you here**," says Julie Hanna, who sleeps outside the Metro reference library and often sells herself to pay for her crack addiction.

She and Young were once chosen by Sanctuary to show the street life to Weston, and Hanna has encountered her once or twice since.

"She remembers my name," Hanna says, clearly thrilled.

Illustration(s):

JIM ROSS/TORONTO STAR

RESTING HIS DOG: Jazmin the dog relaxes with his owner at Sanctuary, a drop-in centre that's staged a fundraising drive staffers describe as miraculous.

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