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Suburban haven for homeless teens

'Desperate need' spurs Durham House to offer at-risk youth a place to rebuild their lives

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Two and a half weeks ago, Chris was sleeping in cold stairwells in downtown Oshawa. The unwitting victim of his parents' sudden split, he felt abandoned, scared and hopeless.

But Chris is one of the lucky ones who found their way to Durham Youth House, the region's only shelter for homeless youth. Inside the dove-grey walls of the five-bedroom house, he found a warm bed, good food and people who care.

"It's everything to me. It's helping me get back on my feet," says Chris, who plans to go back to school and find his own place to live once his social assistance payments start.

His only complaint is "girls – we could use a few more around here," he jokes, clearly on the emotional mend in his new surroundings.

Durham Youth House has saved dozens of kids from the streets since it opened last April. Before that, the region's homeless and at-risk 16- to 24-year-olds had nowhere to go, unless you count friends' couches or adult shelters.

Executive director Mary Dunlop finds that shocking in a region with the largest youth population in Ontario. The shelter, which she runs like her own home, was so "desperately needed" that teenaged boys and girls lined up at 6 a.m. on opening day for a chance at one of the 10 beds.

Marcus Jacobson is typical of the residents who stay anywhere from one night to several weeks at the renovated house on a quiet residential street in south Ajax.

The 16-year-old got kicked out of his Port Perry home for skipping school and arguing with his parents. Without the shelter, "I'd be in a bad position," he says. "I'd probably be at a friend's house and getting into bad things."



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Marcus Jacobson, 16, right, fills his plate with food delivered by Lyris McIntosh and Hyacinth Pickering. Fellow resident Philip Prentice looks on.

Dunlop describes a common scenario that puts kids on the street:

"Single mom meets a new guy, he doesn't get along with the child, mom picks the boyfriend over the child and the kid gets kicked out."

"I can't imagine the pain that child goes through," she adds.

One youth, whose mother got him hooked on prescription drugs, found his father's body after he had committed suicide. Another, a high achiever in school, left home to escape an abusive, demanding father.

"We have kids with absolutely no one to turn to," says Dunlop.

The shelter, which operates under the umbrella of Durham's social services department, helps residents with many needs, including counselling, health care, life skills, school and job issues.

But despite the obvious need for its services – Dunlop and her staff of eight youth advocates have had to turn away as many as they've helped – the shelter struggles to pay the bills because provincial and regional funding covers only half of operating costs.

Recognizing that people these days can't easily write out a donation cheque, Dunlop is taking fundraising in a more affordable direction by putting "toonies for teens" collection tins at information booths and business locations throughout the region.

"Toonies add up in a big, big hurry. Everyone has a toonie to spare," explains Dunlop, who's also looking for volunteers to offer up spots to put the tins.

The community embraced Durham House after she spent hours knocking on doors to explain the program to neighbours.

"Once they understood that the kids come here voluntarily because they didn't have anywhere else to live, that changed everything," Dunlop says.

One elderly couple brought gifts. Another neighbour hires the young residents to do odd jobs. And the women of Agape Seventh-day Adventist Church in Pickering cook an old-fashioned family dinner for them every second Wednesday.

"We all have our own kids that age," explains Allison D'Oliveira. "What threw me is the fact there are young people in Pickering, Ajax, Whitby – right on our doorstep – that are out there with nowhere to go and nothing to eat."

The kids do most of the cooking, cleaning and other household chores in exchange for room and board.

"It gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance," staffer Tim Arkell says of the arrangement.

When they leave, stronger and healthier in mind and body, it's either to return to their families or to a place of their own.

The shelter can be reached through www.durhamyouth.com, or by calling Mary Dunlop at 905-239-9377.