

## Champion of the homeless

Wayne MacNaughton has fought homelessness at a private and public level

By KELLY SHIERS Staff Reporter | Five Questions

Fifty-six-year-old Wayne MacNaughton found himself without a roof over his head for the first time when he was 40. For much of the next decade, he cycled in and out of homelessness — a drifter who slept on benches, and spent days wandering city streets searching for something to eat and a safe place to get warm and rest. Virtually blind in one eye and with limited vision in the other, jobs that were hard to come by before his disability became non-existent.

He left Montreal for Halifax in 1998, searching for a fresh start.

In 2002, he found it. Through Metro Non-Profit Housing Association, he finally moved into a decent apartment, giving credence to a housing-first philosophy that suggests that after people have a place to call home, they can then begin to deal with the other issues that are troubling their lives.

The once-homeless man has become an outspoken advocate who co-chairs a committee for a federal project called Community Action on Homelessness. Last week the committee released a comprehensive look at the issue of homelessness in Halifax, touted as the most accurate picture of these individuals ever produced. The committee expects to produce similar reports yearly.

Q: It's been a long time since you were homeless. Do you fear becoming homeless again?

A: It remains a worry. It comes from the fact that there's nothing certain in the world. I fear it could happen again and the fear is magnified by the fact that you remember what it was like when you were homeless.

Q: You say the factors that lead to a person becoming homeless are complex. But you say the solution is not complex?

A: There's really three things that are needed: adequate housing, adequate income and adequate support services. The part that becomes complicated is the adequate support services because that's the part where you have to have a whole continuum of services available at the community level, which we don't have now in most Canadian cities and we certainly don't have it here. There's big gaps.

Q: There's been much debate about passersby giving money to panhandlers. Should they?

A: I think it's really up to the individual. I've never been a panhandler, but I've talked to them and I know there are instances where people will go in and buy them something (for a panhandler) to eat from a fast food place instead. That's fine, too, if that's what you feel like doing. I think what's most troubling is when people take it upon themselves to start insulting somebody or preaching to somebody who's panhandling. I don't know what they think they're doing, but they're not doing anyone any good. . . . I think most of the people who are (panhandling) are doing it out of real, dire necessity and the thing that needs to be exploded is the myth that people can make a tonne of money doing this. That's simply not the case. A person can stand there and beg for money all day and they may be lucky to get \$20 or \$25 at the end of that. It's never been an easy way to make money. Also, I encourage everyone (not) to try to avert your eyes, don't ignore the person. Acknowledge they're there.

Q: Was there one thing from the research that struck you as surprising?

A: What it's done is confirmed what a lot of us already knew. (But) when you go to present to government (and) private organizations, when you're trying to make a case for action, they want to see some hard facts, understandably. We haven't always been able to do that. This, I think, will allow us to have that information that we can bring forward — not just now, but annually.

Q: Is this issue just too big for us to fix?

A: No it's not. We live in a G8 country and we tend to forget that sometimes. Even though we

A. No it's not. We live in a 3rd country and we tend to forget that sometimes. Even though we live in what we like to call a have-not province, that doesn't mean we're poor. I remember there was a woman who was a social worker doing an internship with one of the programs here and we were talking about the poverty-reduction strategy. She said "What are you talking about? There's no poverty in Canada." She was from Africa. . . . So it's relative. What that points to is, yes, we have the means in Canada. We have governments that can easily . . . spend a billion dollars here and a billion there to bail out different companies, (so) it's not that we lack the resources. We've got to get our act together and start figuring out how to use those resources better.

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