

## Homeless Aurora teen begins university journey



**By Brock Weir**

Surreal and extraordinary.

Those are the two words that come to Benjamin Williamson's mind as he tries to sum up his week.

Teens from across Aurora are hitting the road this week, bags packed, ready to begin the next journey of their lives as college and university students fulfilling what is, for most, long-held dreams and ambitions.

Williamson, a former student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, shared those dreams and ambitions but, until very recently, they were just out of reach.

Then, last Thursday, his world shifted.

Williamson is no stranger to seismic shifts in his world.

Born with Cerebral Palsy, he has faced adversity from a very early age. These challenges, however, came to a head earlier this year when, due to what he describes as a 'toxic' environment at home, he found himself homeless on the streets of York Region with few shelter beds available to youth, much less teens with mobility challenges.

Eventually, he found a place at 360 Kids, the Richmond Hill-based youth service.

It was a lifeline for Ben, albeit for just four months as per policy at the Region of York, and his struggle to find a place to live made his post-secondary goals seem like impossible dreams.

But the community was not about to let that happen.

After starting a Go Fund Me page looking for help to fund his studies, money began to trickle in and, thanks to some timely exposure by CBC Radio, he faced a deluge of support, well surpassing his \$20,000 goal by \$9,000 ? thus securing him his tuition and expenses for his very first year at Carleton University.

'My whole life changed,' says Ben. 'The community of Aurora has supported me for many, many years, but also more throughout the last couple of months. After having such a hard time, I guess you could say I felt defeated. I was ready for a change, but I didn't know what it would be. When this happened, I was in shock for a little while, then it was all about the planning: planning logistically and planning financially. It was exhausting in one regard, but rewarding in another.'

For the past week or so, Ben has been immersing himself in the undergraduate life.

He is enrolled in Carleton University's Enriched Support Program, which is essentially a transitional program. In Ben's case, he was unable to finish his studies at Williams. By the end of his first year in this program, he will be able to dive right into his full undergraduate degree, in which he plans to focus on law and human rights.

Life has already dealt him his fair share of lessons when it comes to human rights.

When he became homeless, he was shocked by the lack of resources he found in the York Region community not just for youth with physical challenges, but youth across the spectrum.

While he has always had an interest in politics, the experience turned him into an advocate for homeless youth, a cause for which he pledges to continue fighting.

"I have been homeless now for six months and it has been quite the roller coaster ride all the way through," he says. "The Canadian public has come forward now and chosen to support me, but this issue is a lot bigger than one individual case; it speaks to a shattered system that the government is turning a blind eye to. My advocacy work is about systemic change at all levels. The Ontario Government has committed to ending chronic homelessness by 2021 and I am here to tell you as an advocate that that is not going to happen."

In York Region there are only about 14 beds for homeless youth, he contends, which is doesn't come close to meeting the demand. Ben came to the end of his four months at 360 Kids on June 22 which, as it turns out, was the same day he was scheduled to have surgery related to his cerebral palsy.

Initially, his doctor had him scheduled to leave the hospital within 48 hours ? but leave to what? Explaining to the doctor he had nowhere else to go, he was accepted into an in-patient stay, where he remained until August 10.

"It was a struggle," he says. "It was a very clear example to me of how badly the system is broken."

His turning point came when he was accepted into Carleton's program. As it stood, he would have had, despite his age, three more years in high school because due to his disability he was not allowed to be in a full mainstream program. He was prepared to stick it out for those three years, as required, but fate, Carleton, former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario David Onley, and the donating public had other ideas.

"This is only a Band-Aid solution to a bigger problem," says Ben of Carleton. "I will be housed for 10 months of the year at university, but the other two months, including the Christmas break, I have a lot of work to do. My road in homelessness is not over. I continue to battle systemic change and continue to do so. We need to recognize as a society that clearly the system needs overhaul, that the government needs to step up and step forward in addressing this issue and I think it is part of the public's responsibility to hold our elected officials to account in this."

"I think I have demonstrated that the common perception within society is if you're disabled there is enough support ? things like ODSP and Ontario Works, Housing ? to be able to accommodate people with different abilities but I think the real tragedy of the story is it is not true. Homeless youth is not something that is simply because of an unruly youth or someone who doesn't follow the rules at home and chooses to leave all the time; it happens for a variety of reasons. Sometime it happens as a result of, in my case, a toxic environment at home. Other people become homeless because they are part of the LGBTQ community, some people have issues with addictions, and I think what people have to realise is it can happen to anyone at any time and I think it is one of the only things in our society that doesn't discriminate."

"Aurora has raised me, it is my home, it is where I live, and it is where my heart is. I love Ottawa, but Aurora is home. I think I have done my best to support the community and support initiatives around the community to the best of my ability and I intend to remain strongly connected there and eventually return."