

Battling the stigma of Red Car



By Brock Weir

Chances are, you know her face.

And, if you have lived in Aurora for any length of time, chances are equally good you have caught a glimpse of her making the rounds in her otherwise ordinary old red sedan or parked around Town.

But, there was something extraordinary about her wheels; with her passenger and back seats piled well beyond the window line with clothes, toiletries, papers and bottles, this was her home for over 17 years, or as she says, a whopping 207 months.

Being in an accident which leaves your car totalled would, for most people, be a personal disaster and, indeed it was for Janet. But, it was also something of a clean break ? and a chance to break a stigma she has lived with for the better part of two decades.

?Every three or four months, I would run into someone nice who would slip me a \$20 bill or someone like that, but there is a stigma with the general public and I still have that stigma to this day with people saying, ?Oh, you're the one who used to live in that red car,?' says Janet, who asked that her real name not be used in this interview for her own safety and security. ?I still get that all the time. Now, I won't because my car was totalled and when I can finally afford to buy a new car, it won't be red and I won't have the stigma attached to it.?

Last year, her 207 month battle as a single homeless woman came to an end through the Housing First program with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) which found her a new place to live in Bradford.

The fact that life was tough on the streets for a single woman, of course, goes without saying and, along the way, Janet endured multiple assaults, arson in the garage she was living in earlier in her journey, and now lives with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

With the help of her CMHA worker, she made her way to the York Region Municipal Office last week to speak out on behalf of people who have had to walk a similar path.

For Janet, 59, that long walk began when her father died. She says after his death, she had a disagreement with her mother, and that was the start of Month One. Homeless in Pickering, she made her way to York Region in 2003, carving her way through the system before spending the last three years in Aurora.

?When I first came to York Region, I was told there was an approximately 12 year waiting list, so there was basically no use of putting my name on that list at all,? she says. ?After about five years after that, Inn From the Cold (a Newmarket-based service for the homeless) helped me with my application. I was renewing it every year for the subsidized housing and then, when I went to Aurora, I went to do a change of address and suddenly [the office] said they had no record of me ever handing in my application.?

Despite affidavits from Inn from the Cold outlining when she filed, Janet says she was back at square one. This was in 2013 and at the time she was told there was a waiting list of between 10 and 12 years, but this wait list could be shaved by two years when she turned 60 in 2017.

?Most people die before [they get to the top of the waitlist] and that is not acceptable,' she says.

But, there was something of a lifeline with the opening of Newmarket's Belinda's Place shelter for single women, which opened eleven months ago. Janet says she was there the night it opened.

?Until November 15, there was not a shelter in all of York Region for single women,' she says. ?You go to so many towns the size of Aurora or even Bradford and one of the first things I get is, ?There are no homeless people in this Town,' ? and you're even getting that from politicians. How can you see a light at the end of the tunnel?

?I have heard, ?You're kidding! There's no homeless people in this Town' and these are from politicians, not accounting agencies. Then, I have had accounting agencies saying, ?It sounds like you're educated and could probably run this agency.' I ask for a chance to at least volunteer and steer them in the right direction and they say, ?No, we don't take clients as volunteers.'?

Janet shared her concerns with local politicians at last week's roundtable, which was hosted by York Region Members of Parliament. Following the meeting, Janet's message was clear.

?Never judge a book by its cover. I have had people in places just running down homeless people because of the stigma and I have to say, ?take your shoe out of your mouth, I am one.' I attend these things to get the message out. Think of the little person. Part of eliminating homelessness is accountability and making [the money we receive from the government] something we can live on.?