

Homeless disabled youth have long road in York: student



By Brock Weir

On Sunday, local high school student Ben Williamson returned home from a fruitful trip to Timmins.

As a member of Premier Kathleen Wynne's Council on Youth Opportunities, he and his fellow council-members were there to listen to young adults on their needs in the community and the province, but Ben returned home to uncertainty.

For the past month, Ben has been living in a youth shelter in Richmond Hill through the non-profit 360 Kids. He says he found himself homeless earlier this year after leaving what he describes as an "unhealthy and toxic" relationship at home, but setting out on his own was easier said than done.

While it is hard enough for homeless teens and young adults to find shelter with a limited number of shelter beds in York Region, it has been doubly hard for Ben who was born with cerebral palsy.

"A lot of the shelters within the GTA are not accessible or won't let me come into the shelter because when I come in with my [personal support worker (PSW)] they are worried about the confidentiality of other residents," says Ben. "The Region of York will only allow me to stay in a York Region shelter for up to four months, so I will have to find another place to live. The wait list for subsidized housing in York Region is 15 to 35 years long and young single men are not usually a priority for that wait list because there is a more pressing need for women and children."

Ben nevertheless persevered. First coming into contact with 360 Kids in 2015 when he was laying the groundwork for his summer company which was aimed at helping local businesses achieve standards outlined in the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Their work in providing resources to homeless youth was brought back to him through in-school counselling at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

"I started to call 360 Kids every night at midnight because I found out waitlists for beds start at midnight," says Ben, who began this cycle of phone call, followed by disappointment, last June, before finally snagging a spot three weeks ago. "I thought, 'I am never going to get in' and I wouldn't be able to have a better future. But, giving up has never been an option for me in my life in any aspect. I knew I had a vision for my life 'I want to become a lawyer' and I wanted to keep focus on the bigger picture."

Ben says he was "shocked" when he eventually secured his temporary space with 360 Kids, but this shock was followed by a degree of trepidation.

"I was also scared because now I had reached a stepping stone, but I knew there was a long road ahead," he says. "I knew this was temporary and I was scared 'and I am scared' for what will come next. I estimate my chances of eventually finding an accessible place at one in a million."

Meanwhile, for Ben and his PSW, it is almost business as usual. He gets up every morning at 6.30 a.m. and his PSW comes in to help him get ready for school. He takes the bus in from Richmond Hill, attends either classes at Williams or spends the day at his co-op placement at the office of MPP Chris Ballard, then back to the shelter to repeat the journey over again the next day.

And while he might have some unique challenges of his own, he is certainly not alone.

"I think society needs to remember that we are just kids and don't need to suffer in the way that we do," says Williamson. "I applaud

360 Kids for the services they provide to youth who have gone through the trauma. The Region has done a great first step in providing the 14 beds that they have for youth, but they need to expand that and lift the restrictions of four months for youth because it is not long enough. I went public with this because I have nothing to lose. I don't have a home, but I want to show people that we don't have to suffer in silence.

?I think people think this isn't possible, that government will really pick this up, but we, as a society, need to change our viewpoint when it comes to accessibility in this country and move forward with accessible design. My journey is not over and I think that alone needs to be recognized. I honestly think there needs to be a movement in the way we handle these situations.?