

Toque sales help fight an 'invisible problem' in York Region



By Brock Weir

A toque can be seen as a necessary evil during the winter season, or a beloved symbol of Canadiana, but for Michael Braithwaite of 360 Kids, it symbolises 'warm your head, warm your heart.'

360 Kids, the York Region-based organization providing crisis support for children and youth, was on hand at the York Regional Offices on Thursday, helping raise awareness for February 4's National Toque Tuesday Day. Originally an initiative of Raising the Roof, toques will be sold throughout York Region for a donation of \$10 to help end homelessness in York Region.

Proceeds from 360's campaign will go directly back to the organization to combat homelessness at the source through hot meals, life skills and job skills training, apprenticeship programs, and ongoing work at their youth drop-in centre and funding for individuals in housing facilities.

'This is our third year of being the rep and bringing the program into York Region,' said Mr. Braithwaite. 'In this kind of weather when it is regularly -20 and you can just run inside when you feel the cold, for a homeless person sometimes that is just not an option. When 80 per cent of your heat escapes from your head, a toque can really make a difference. It really symbolizes warm your head, warm your heart.'

In a community like York Region, which is often viewed by people to be a relatively affluent community, that kind of perception is almost a double-edged sword because with homelessness, seeing is often believing.

'When we moved to York Region, my then 12-year-old daughter said the difference with York Region is that there is no homeless people,' he said. 'Because we can't see it, we think it is not there, but there is an estimated 300 on the streets at any given night and there are about 27 shelter beds mostly in the south like Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham.'

'Often youth will wear out their welcome, go from friend to friend, walk around all night and not sleep, and get changed at their school or gas station because it is embarrassing for them. It is invisible homelessness. They don't see the kids. Quite often the face of homelessness we think of is the guy in Downtown Toronto with the blanket over him and that is not what homelessness looks like. A quick blowout with your family and kids says, 'I'm out of here!' and they look like any other kid on the street.'

Mayors and Regional Councillors were happy to don their respective toques at Thursday's launch, while heralding the 360 Kids Program and raising the roof to underscore the problem of homelessness in the Region.

'Homelessness is indeed a problem in York Region,' said Aurora Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. 'We tend to think we don't have 'those kinds of people' [here] but we do have those issues in the Region. We have to have an economy that is strong so that jobs are available but we probably have to be a little bit more cognizant perhaps at the school level. These things tend to be generational, so from the young folks up we have to address these needs.'

King Mayor Steve Pellegrini also highlighted the importance of raising awareness, particularly amongst young residents, and the work this group is doing to combat that.

'They are doing their best with limited funds and this is an opportunity to show support and raise money for this worthwhile cause.'

While 360 Kids deals with 'invisible homelessness', they are also acutely aware that there are no specific demographic trends that can determine where homelessness is likely to arise and to address that, they set themselves a very specific target.

'It reaches across rich, poor, black, white and all cultures,' said Mr. Braithwaite. 'We often say that kids that come from wealth are less equipped because they have never had to have the street smarts to fend for themselves. We have a two year window. If we don't break the cycle in two years, it is a life-long cycle of homelessness.'