

SPECIAL REPORT

SEEKING SHELTER:
John McLernon
joined by homeless
youth Mary Briggs,
Josh Frechette and
Hannah Pettinato



In the Business of Reducing Homelessness

One corporate leader is spearheading efforts to solve the housing crisis

Helping the homeless? Business used to leave that to government and non-profits. But that's changing, at least in Vancouver, where the business community is increasingly becoming a partner in efforts to solve the city's homelessness crisis. "Business is realizing homelessness is a community problem – we're all being affected and we're all paying for it," says commercial real estate executive John McLernon of Colliers Macaulay Nicolls, one of a number of high-profile business types who have recently started contributing their time, energy and in some cases money to help solve the issue. "The business community is finally seeing it has something to offer. It's almost like we've been the missing piece of the puzzle."

by **Dorothy Bartoszewski** photos by **Johann Wall**

McLernon, the former chair of Colliers, is emerging as a leader in the arena: heading up two community initiatives tackling homelessness, and being joined by other corporate types like mining executive Frank Giustra and condo king Bob Rennie.

With clear blue eyes and a direct gaze that belie the fact he is in his late 60s, McLernon can vividly recall the first time he saw a homeless person, back in 1962 when he was living in Grenoble, France.

"I walk a lot; it really gives you a feel for what's going on in a place. One day I walked by this older woman sleeping in a doorway, and I realized that was where she lived. It was a real shock; I had never seen anything like it in Canada."

"I spoke with her, and gave her some money. She was just a regular person, except this doorway was her home. I never thought it could happen in Canada, never mind become completely commonplace."

Today, McLernon walks to work from his home in Shaughnessy to his office in downtown Vancouver, and sees many people without homes along the route. It still affects him: "I guess some people get used to it, but I never have. It's just not right, and it's getting worse. So I started to wonder – what is going on here? And is there something I can do?"

Answers to those questions came from an unexpected corner: McLernon's long-time business associate, forestry tycoon Jake Kerr. "Jake chairs Vancouver Foundation, which as a community foundation funds a lot of different things, so he's up on what's happening. Jake showed me how bad the problem was getting and told me Vancouver Foundation had decided to make tackling homelessness a top priority." (Despite its name, Vancouver Foundation funds projects across the province.)

Kerr, who heads up Lignum Investments and also co-owns the Vancouver Canadians baseball team, is a numbers guy, and what he saw in the numbers didn't make sense. "I wanted to recruit John to head up the Foundation's homelessness work. So I showed him this report from Calgary that said the average street homeless adult with serious mental illness and/or addictions can cost the public more than \$140,000 per year for services like trips to emergency, law enforcement, the courts and so on," recalls Kerr. "The report showed that housing that same person, with all the proper supports and everything, costs only \$37,000 per year. Plus you help that person get stabilized so

money to help build more units of housing along with support services for people who are chronically homeless.

"My first venture into this area was leading Vancouver Foundation's work," McLernon explains. "We decided to focus on youth because that population was underserved." He points to stats that show an estimated 300 to 700 people between the ages of 16 and 24 experience homelessness or risk becoming homeless every day in Vancouver. Meanwhile, in early 2008, there were only 169 beds dedicated for youth.

Furthermore, McLernon argues that helping this group potentially has an enormous "return on investment" in a social sense. "If you can help young people before they get what is called 'street entrenched,' you can usually prevent a lot of misery. The longer kids stay on the streets, the more health problems they have, the more addictions, the more trouble they get into, the more costs are incurred by society."

"As well, the longer a young person is homeless, the more disconnected they become from the larger community. If you feel like an outsider, if you don't have the same opportunities as everyone else, if every day is a struggle to survive, then you don't have much invested in the community in which you live. You don't care, and that leads to behaviours that

create problems for the larger community. So everyone, the individual and society, pays for not addressing this issue."

As an example of the kind of transformations youth are capable of, McLernon describes Marlene Bolton. A 22-year-old First Nations woman who lives with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, Bolton spent her teen years struggling with addiction and homelessness. She was a couch surfer: moving from one inadequate residence to another with babies in tow.

"I remember trying to find a place with my girls. It was awful. People didn't want young people, people on welfare, peo-



A BRIGHTER FUTURE:
John McLernon and formerly
homeless Marlene Bolton

they can contribute to their community. And you help the community feel safer."

"It was hard to argue with those stats," McLernon adds. "And it convinced me that the faster we get moving on this, the better it'll be for everybody."

McLernon is certainly walking his talk. He now chairs two new homelessness initiatives: Vancouver Foundation's Youth Homelessness Committee, as well as the recently created Streetohome Foundation. The latter brings together a broad cross-section of business leaders as well as government and non-profit types. Their goal, among other things, is to raise private

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ple with kids. I really felt discriminated against," recalls the soft-spoken woman, while her 17-month-old daughter Neveah (Heaven spelled backwards) sits calmly in her lap.

Getting into housing, with the help of Vancouver's Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC), proved to be a turning point for Bolton.

"I finally felt normal, like everyone else who has a home to go to," says the mother of three. Bolton got help not only with putting a roof over her head, but she also received counselling and learned basic life skills. Now Bolton spends most of her weekdays "giving back" at BYRC, where she's spent a lot of time over the past seven years.

"They helped me out in the rough times. They'd give me food if I was running low, all kinds of things. They really go the extra mile for me, so I go the extra mile for them," says Bolton, who helps co-ordinate special events at the Centre and sits on the organization's hiring committee. Today, she also co-chairs CHARM (Creating Healthy Aboriginal Role Models), where her work improving the relationship between aboriginal youth and the Vancouver Police Department led to her receiving a City of Vancouver award.

Bolton proves that, with a roof over their heads and the right supports, young people experiencing homelessness can not only be successfully housed, they can become impressive, productive members of society.

"That's the thing: we know how to help people like Marlene," says McLernon. "We just have to do a lot more of it, if we want to have a real impact on the numbers of people who are homeless. It's like we're dealing with a flood. It's not rocket science; you need sandbags and you need people to stack them up. Well, with homelessness right now, we know what we need to do. But we don't have enough money or people to do it all."

McLernon hopes his efforts, and those of his business colleagues, can raise more private money to address these gaps.

He cites the example of how homeless youth cannot rent apartments on their own: with no jobs and little finances, they usually don't have enough money for a damage deposit.

"The solution is that organizations like Broadway Youth Resource Centre will lease

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the suites in their agency's name, and then provide that housing to the youth they are working with. Eventually, the kids get stabilized and even take over the lease."

Vancouver Foundation, using money from its private donors, decided to give BYRC \$336,000 over three years to expand the organization's capacity to rent units for homeless youth. McLernon and the Foundation want to do more of this kind of work.

"Housing is the most basic thing people need. It is the building block for getting their lives back on track. But putting a roof over their heads is not the only ingredient for long-term success," notes McLernon. "To prevent people from getting back on the streets you need to take a holistic approach to homelessness."

What he has learned is the importance of providing additional supports to those who have been chronically homeless: drug and alcohol counselling; life skills

training such as budgeting, time management and cooking; medical services; and job training.

The experience of cities like Portland or Calgary – places where business leaders were invited to the table to help solve the problem and where homelessness is declining – show that corporate leaders can play an important role.

As Kerr points out, "the business community has been willing to donate money and give time to the Art Gallery, the Symphony or to children's issues. To date they haven't been known for giving to the cause of homelessness. We hope we can change that."

That's why McLernon is pleased other high-profile business people are enthusiastic about Streetohome Foundation. Besides Kerr, Giustra and Rennie, corporate leaders such as *Vancouver Sun* publisher Kevin Bent; VanCity CEO Tamara Vrooman; and BC Hydro's Bob Elton have joined the board of the new foundation.

These business leaders are working side by side with the likes of former premier Mike Harcourt; Vancouver Coastal Health's Ida Goodreau; Shayne Ramsey of

BC Housing; and other non-profit and government types in a new enterprise that will raise private money to secure more units of social housing. As well, Streetohome's goal is to ensure there are funds for the additional on-site supports chronically homeless people need in order to address addiction and mental health issues.

McLernon hopes even more business people will get involved, high-profile or not. "There are so many things they can offer to solve this community issue. They can commit resources to non-profits that are on the frontlines. They can do advocacy. They can use their connections with other business leaders to raise funds. They can volunteer on boards and help these non-profit agencies develop business plans. They can get people together and collaborate on projects."

Will adding the business community's clout end homelessness in Vancouver? The results will speak for themselves, but having some of Vancouver's most successful business people on the team tackling one of Vancouver's most visible and intransigent social woes is certainly a promising – and welcome – development. ■

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