

Ukraine's Homeless Look to the Stars

WORDS | **TANIA ZULKOSKEY, MSW, RSW (CLINICAL)**

As you walk down the cobblestone streets in Lviv, Ukraine, surrounded by Eastern European architecture, your eye may barely glance over the babushka (grandmother) with her hand out in front of the Cathedral. Quietly sitting on park benches and lying in the grass, homeless individuals begin to gather for their one meal a day. Middle-aged and elderly men and women bring glass jars to accept tea and a plastic cup of instant noodles for lunch, four days a week provided by the municipality. One day a week, the local NGO Oselya provides a homemade lunch cooked and served by formerly homeless people.

Steps away, near the stunningly impressive Opera House, families rent little vehicles for their school-age children to drive for five minutes around the fountain. It is easy to observe the disparaging looks at the toothless and disheveled individual stumbling on his way through the city core. Having met a few individuals at the meal handout, I, a Canadian social worker with Ukrainian ancestry, began to wonder: Are the experiences of homeless individuals any different here than in Canada? What about the availability of services? Of course a social worker would want to know; visiting a city is never taken at face value.



homeless shelters in Lviv. There are no food banks or soup kitchens either. Supermarkets are not ready to give food away and will even intentionally sell beyond the best-before date. With a population of 830,000, Lviv is just beginning to consider programs aimed at marginalized groups. Social Work students are mapping out where homeless individuals are in the city, making contact, building trust and creating the path for social inclusion. The students are collecting data on how many homeless individuals there are and where they stay during the winter, for example, besides the local train station. It was surprising that this information is not already known. Yet, the irony brings the whopping punch that, even with this data in Vancouver, we haven't done a lot better. There are more shelters, food programs and detox centres, but the

Social advocate Yuriy Lopatynsky talked about the work that the NGO Narodna Dopomoha is doing with city council and community groups to protect the rights of socially-excluded people. He said that the problem of homelessness was invisible in Lviv until an unusual cold snap in 2005. It wasn't until approximately thirty people were found frozen in the -27 °C weather that the issue came to light.

As a Canadian, I understand what cold weather means and I was confused as to why these individuals were unable to access a shelter. But being from Canada was the first privilege blinding the realization that there are no

contributing social and political factors remain the same.

There is something catching about the enthusiasm of social workers who are on the forefront of making social history in their communities. The passion of student social workers and young professionals is refreshingly encouraging. With this same commitment, social worker Maryana Sokha described a very successful



Tania and residents

program that began five years ago called OCE (Oselya) Community for Mutual Aid. Oselya is a Ukrainian word for 'family home'. Oselya is a house for twenty homeless individuals who are welcome to stay as long as they like. As long as they like? Yes, "they are able to stay until they feel psychologically ready to find a job and live in society", Sokha explains. Sometimes they stay two to three years. The program evolves around a refurbishing project where the clients restore old donated furniture and clothes and resell them, keeping all of their income. Astonishing! For a Canadian social worker, it was the first time hearing that such a program existed — absolutely no time limit and no financial restrictions. Maybe Ukraine isn't so far behind with their vision of working with the social problem of homelessness.

Several visits to Oselya, in the outlying village of Vynnyky, confirmed that this is an exceptional program. Of the twenty individuals living in double rooms, there were three women and three children. Oselya isn't really a shelter for women with children. However, as they are on the forefront of history-making, they made an exception and it is very obvious that the presence of the children brings a hopeful, bright and cheery atmosphere to the home. This isn't the only surprising exception they have made. With no time limit to the residents' stay, it is easy to wonder what happens when the house has reached capacity, yet someone wants to enter their program. Together, the staff and residents decide who should be accepted into their home. If the house is full yet everyone is keen on having the new person, residents often offer to triple-up their small rooms and sometimes people sleep on the balcony or in the foyer. What program do you know that exceeds their sleeping capacity on a regular basis in Canada? There are no WCB rules, fire marshall rules, city bylaw rules or limiting shelter policy rules. They are simply people helping people with the little resources that they have.


Olesya Sanotska, Executive Director of Oselya, and Sokha note that their program has had an indirect influence on societal perceptions, at least in their oblast (district). The community sees that with support the circumstances of



Oselya visit

during the week and return to Oselya on the weekends and for summer holidays. The four year old little girl, who was clearly the apple of everyone's eye, said that they didn't get many visitors these days. She was used to being photographed, having appeared on the cover of the first issue of POCTO HEA (Prosto Neba, which cleverly translates to 'to sleep under the stars'), a new street magazine being sold for 3 Hryvnia (\$0.66 CDN) by homeless people to raise money and to educate the public.

Despite these positive changes, Lviv has also had its share of common barriers such as NIMBY (not in my backyard) protests. A new shelter was expected to open in the city centre but following complaints from neighbours that it would bring homeless people to their neighbourhood, the front doors remained closed. There is a belief that shelters will increase the numbers of homeless people. Social worker Ludmila Aliyeva, from the nation's capital, Kyiv, spoke about a public opinion survey that suggested that a paradigm shift is needed in order to address the social problem of homelessness. Public opinion is that these people are lazy, that they like living on the streets, and at the best, with pity, that they have not been lucky in life. Aliyeva also stated that social workers are the most useful in working with this problem because they use an individual approach based on the needs of the person but also have an awareness of socio-political issues that are contributing to the problem. With Canada 'celebrating' Homelessness Action Week in October, perhaps it is also time to look beyond our borders to innovating yet simple successful programs abroad. With programs like Oselya, we can all join hands and star-gaze together.

Special dyakuyu (thanks!) to Maryana Sokha for arranging and translating interviews. 

Tania Zulkoskey will be presenting on international Social Work opportunities at the BCASW Fall Conference in November.

a homeless person can change and now members of the public want to offer their help. The antique and discarded furniture that is refurbished is now in high demand. In fact, sometimes the former homeless residents are asked to improve a poor refurbishing job done at another shop.

The school-aged children attend a boarding school



Around the Province



Some of the attendees at the recent branch meeting included
Top L-R: Ellen Robertson, Nancy Baker, and Leslie MacLennan
Front row L-R: Fran Jones, Carol Hale, Kathy Smith, and Georgette Whitehead

VANCOUVER ISLAND BRANCH MEETS UP-ISLAND

Members of BCASW's Vancouver Island Branch met in Campbell River on June 28th providing an opportunity for social workers in the northern Vancouver Island area to come together. Several BCASW members who reside in Victoria travelled to Campbell River for this meeting, and we were also joined by some interested community members. The meeting provided a venue to meet and socialize with other social workers as well as an opportunity to hold a focussed discussion on the topic of housing and homelessness on Vancouver Island. Presentations and discussions on this topic were led by Kathy Smith, a social worker from Victoria who works at Pacifica Housing Society, and Leslie MacLennan, a social worker who is the Rehabilitation/ Residential Program Coordinator with Campbell River Mental Health and Addictions Services, VIHA. This engaging discussion led the group to form a statement on housing and homelessness that will be forwarded as a letter to local, provincial, and national levels of governments as suggestions for raising awareness on this very important issue. From the lively levels of discussion, it seemed evident that we all enjoyed having this opportunity to meet and connect with other social workers for this very empowering and exciting experience. We hope to have more opportunities to meet in the future.

Georgette Whitehead, RSW

PROFESSOR GRAHAM RICHES STEPS DOWN AS DIRECTOR, UBC SOCIAL WORK

June 30, 2008 marked the departure of Professor Graham Riches as Director of the UBC School of Social Work and the beginning of his well-deserved year of administrative leave. Professor Riches assumed the directorship of the school in September, 1998, following a distinguished international career that included social work directorships at a number of universities including UNBC, James Cook University of North Queensland in Australia and the University of Regina.

continued on page 13