

Victims of the system



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As Panhandler Union organizer Andrew Nellis sits at a picnic table behind Centre 454 in the ByWard Market outlining how the problem has blossomed, a group of street people hang out nearby at what's referred to as the "crack corner." It is their group that seems to have grabbed the attention of the public, raising the level of fear and leading to this most recent campaign against panhandlers. Yet theirs is but one of many stories from Ottawa's streets. Next to Nellis sits 25-year-old Jesse Vallillee; his elbows resting on the table, his sunburned and peeling shoulders hunched over as he takes a drag from his cigarette. He's been on downtown streets since he was 16.

"Me and my stepfather didn't get along," he says matter-of-factly. "Of course once I hit the age of 16 where I was of age to get the boot, he told my mother 'well it's either him or me' and I just played it easy on my mom.

"I said 'don't worry about it mom' because I saw her go through days and days of depression trying to make up her mind and I just made it up myself so I didn't ruin her marriage."

Vallillee chose the streets, which soon adopted him into their family. Being a follower at first, he sold pot, but found it too dangerous and switched to panhandling in an effort to pay for the three prescriptions he had to take for his epilepsy. After an old friend offered him some crack, he became an addict like those hanging out at the nearby corner and ended up using for two or three years.

He says he went clean a few months ago.

"I see a bunch of people sitting there getting into fights over the stupidest things, I see people getting ripped off and I see people going off it and sketching out and I just thought I don't need to look like that,"



While a downtown coalition stages a fight against aggressive panhandlers they've labelled as crack heads, citizens forgotten in the rhetoric are finding themselves caught in the middle of a threatening war. For 25-year-old Jesse Vallillee, it's a battle built on misconceptions in a world that oppresses its most vulnerable people.

Photo by Darren Brown

Vallillee explains.

For the past two weeks he's been volunteering at Centre 454, where a worker is helping him get back on his feet. According to Vallillee, she helps him remember his appointments (his memory isn't the best since he had brain surgery in 1998), and she's helping him cut through the red tape so he can get Ontario Disability.

Nellis calls the young homeless man lucky. While Vallillee has someone helping him, there are many more on the streets lost in the system.

"As an organizer, what surprised me most is that most of our members are not homeless," Nellis says. "In fact, the reason they're panhandling is because they can't afford to pay their rent."

He estimates welfare provides recipients just over \$500 a month to live on, which often isn't enough to cover rent and food. The food bank can help, but it only provides three days' worth of meals per month.

"You can certainly go to the soup kitchen for the other 27 days of the month, but then you have to wade through a cordon of police and a cordon of crack dealers," Nellis says.

Battle lines drawn

Downtown businesses and even the city are mounting a battle against panhandlers, and it's an indiscriminate fight that has left some worried too many innocent people will be victimized by a war that knows no distinctions.

A coalition of businesses, social service providers, downtown residents and police recently launched a campaign urging people to stop giving money to beggars.

"I want to educate the public on the reality of a direct link between aggressive panhandling, addiction, and drug dealing in our community," Downtown Rideau Business Improvement Association executive director Peggy DuCharme said at the kick off to the campaign, calling on residents to redirect their money to social agencies.

It is this simple branding of beggars as crack heads and the call to stop handing out cash, along with Mayor Larry O'Brien's recent remarks comparing panhandlers to pigeons, that is leading Ottawa into a class war, according to Nellis.

"It is certainly true what they are saying. There is a tremendous crack problem in the city," Nellis says, adding the problem started to get bad about two years ago.

According to the street kid-turned-activist, the crack on the street is mixed with other drugs, like methamphetamines, so addicts are hooked to more than one substance.

"Someone has done this very intentionally," Nellis says. "They want these people hooked and hooked hard.

I'm not a big fan of crack dealers. They hurt my people. And yet, it's hard to blame them when what's the alternative."

The alternative, it seems, is to eke out an existence on downtown streets where beggars are subjected to ridicule, forced to stop vending goods in exchange for cash, are harassed, or even beaten.

Complex problem

Gerry Lepage, executive director with the Bank Street Promenade BIA, suggests the growing homelessness problem is the end result of a fractured social system that won't be solved until all levels of government cooperate.

"As more and more people slip through the social cracks, consequently a lot more are ending up on the street," he says, adding the crack is going to get larger as time goes on and the cost of living increases.

Refusing to hand out money isn't necessarily the answer, Lepage indicates, explaining a person's addictions won't go away because they have no money. Instead, they'll find other avenues to feed their need, including turning to crime.

"These are individuals we are talking about and obviously a lot of them are very troubled and really, we can't just treat the symptoms."

But for some, it seems treating the symptom is a necessary first step.

Rideau Centre general manager Cindy VanBuskirk says panhandlers don't present a positive face to tourists and create an uncomfortable environment for people who live and work downtown. Although she indicates she makes a distinction between aggressive panhandlers and those quietly sitting with their hat out, she'd prefer to see neither.

"From a business perspective, a band-aid solution is a good solution," she says, adding stakeholders still need to get to the root cause of the problem.

Over the last 20 years Lepage has seen a number of initiatives, some not unlike the recently launched campaign. He explains there seems to be a level of tolerance that runs its course, and then there are periods of aggressive panhandling and the public grows intolerant, calling for tough measures or the social route.

"Again, we'll probably end up treating the symptoms and the public's ire against this will subside," he says, predicting the cycle will repeat itself in five or six years unless society comes up with a comprehensive solution.

The trick, though, is finding a solution that includes a number of elements such as affordable housing, and social services consistent with the homeless lifestyle.

As Lepage points out, it's a formidable problem with two sides to the equation. On one side are those who fear what appears to be abnormal behaviour, so they are discouraged from frequenting certain areas of the city and business suffers. On the other side are the disenfranchised and marginalized members of society. Somewhere in between is a balance where individuals can acquire a meaningful existence, whether that means leaving the streets or choosing the lifestyle of a beggar.

"We have a lot of misconceptions about panhandlers," Lepage says. "I think the first thing we can do is educate the public to try to understand rather than criticize, and in doing so I think that perhaps all of us can reach a more meaningful state of existence with regards to being comfortable."

After all, as Lepage says, there will always be beggars who are a part of society – people who are citizens of this country and are afforded the same rights as everyone else.

That's a sentiment echoed by Nellis, who argues this recent war against panhandlers won't rid the city of them.

"The only thing they can do is make it more difficult, like when [Mike] Harris cut welfare," he says. "It's not like he's going to get rid of people on welfare, all he's going to do is make those people on welfare suffer."

Instead, he suggests, this recent initiative will put more people in jail and cost taxpayers more money. "That's the worst thing about this, that when all is said and done, it's not going to have any affect at all."