



Ministry worker MaryAnne Connor hugs Wendy, who took in the offerings from The NightShift Street Ministry Society. The fledgling ministry served up hot food and prayer at an empty lot on Bentley Road in Surrey. RIC ERNST — THE PROVINCE

'Without these people . . . I might have gone mental'

VOLUNTEERS: Church group forges ahead, feeding Surrey's homeless

BY KENT SPENCER
STAFF REPORTER

Paul McGrory is living on the edge in downtown Surrey. It's a few nights before Christmas and his life has gone off the tracks.

The 44-year-old has been given a bowl of chili from a soup kitchen, but the bowl is forgotten, cradled in his hands at a precarious angle, threatening to spill.

McGrory is on a rant about his life and his anger — although he feels good about the people who feed him without judging him.

"I've fallen on hard times," he says loudly, jabbing a finger. "Without these people at the soup kitchen, I might have gone mental."

His rambling monologue doesn't make a lot of sense, but then neither does his present life. Once a successful Toronto hairdresser, he's now living in a tent in a park with his dog. Recently, someone "pissed him off" and he came to the soup kitchen rather than "beat him up."

McGrory's despair seems the worst among the three dozen homeless people who have gathered in an alley along Bentley Road.

They've arrived to scoop up sustenance from a Surrey church-based

group called NightShift Street Ministries.

The dinner truck parks under the warm glow of a street lamp. It carries a sign reading: Jesus is Lord in Whalley. Volunteers are heavy on being saved through Jesus Christ. The night is cool and clear.

As everyone comes together munching food, the chatter sounds more like a lively house party than a gathering of the homeless. Acquaintances are renewed, prayers are said and for a few minutes, everyone is inspired by each other.

"These people are hurting. They need people to give comfort to them," says volunteer Carol Webber. "It will go on forever until they get help."

Tonight, the warm mouthfuls of chili will be enough to see the needy hanging through another bleak winter's night.

The NightShift Ministry does not have the official blessing of Surrey council. Business and residents complain there are too many social services already in the area. But Surrey bylaw officers have left the kitchen alone.

Surrey is considering a permanent location at the nearby Philippine Community Centre on Hilton Road.

For now, the volunteers have plunged ahead, even though they don't have a

health licence. They say too much is at stake. With even colder weather in the forecast and possibly snow, NightShift's Irv Hildebrand says lives could be lost.

In response, the needy appear out of the night as if by magic, mostly dressed in triple layers of clothing, but occasionally showing up in bare legs and sandals. They live in tents, cars, dumpsters and bushes.

As one of the workers observed, some will never have a regular job or own a home.

Many, he said, have suffered physical or sexual abuse and others in trouble with the law. Some are just down on their luck, grateful for a helping hand.

Brad Dunn, 37, was laid off from a sawmill in Mission. With his girlfriend almost due with their child, he "realizes he's not the only one" with problems. At least Dunn has been promised a job.

The night comes to an end all too quickly. A final prayer is said as everyone packs up. It feels like the breakup of summer camp. Volunteers suppress their guilt; the others fade back into the alley.

■ For those who want to help the effort, organizer MaryAnne Connor can be contacted at connormaryanne@hotmail.com

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The 'real Santa' still having fun

MAGIC: 'I walk out in the mall, my smile goes on and it stays on'

BY MATTHEW RAMSEY
STAFF REPORTER

For the past 40 days, Val Johnson has been at the centre of the Christmas storm, riding out the flood of children with a quiet word and a patient smile from behind his bushy white beard.

Johnson, 60, is better known to the 12,000 or so kids who have perched on his lap and whispered their Christmas wishes in his ear at Coquitlam Centre this year as "Santa."

"For me, it's almost like magic, in a way. I walk out in the mall, my smile goes on and it stays on," Johnson says.

But this store Santa, a far cry from some of the slouching, slovenly faux-beard versions on display, doesn't have to work at his grin.

Johnson does the job because he loves kids.

"It's nice to get the money, but I hate to say it, I'd almost do it for free," he says.

"When I stop having fun, that's when I'm going to quit. I'm having more fun than the kids are."

So Johnson clammers on to the bus for his daily two-hour commute to the bustling mall. He usually arrives early so he has a chance to relax, get into his suit and settle into his throne. The kids, at times a two-hour line of them, are waiting. Many of them have met him before.

In his time at Coquitlam Centre, Johnson — all five feet 10 inches and 270 pounds of him — has become a perennial rotund favourite. Parents bring their kids back to him year after year. Kids tell him they've met other Santas, but he's the "real one."

"It swells my head a bit," he says of the attention.

He's never been peed on, never been punched, but has dealt with more than his fair share of screamers and squirmers, teenagers asking for condoms and sex in their stockings.

Johnson takes it all in



Haidee Stordy, eight months old, of Maple Ridge visits Santa Claus (aka Val Johnson) in Coquitlam yesterday.

RIC ERNST — THE PROVINCE

stride as the camera flashes and the line moves on. He even believes in the man he represents.

"I haven't stopped believing," he says. "It's more the spirit of Santa that's real. It's inside you. As you believe, he'll always be around. The child is in all of us," he says.

The kids are "99.9 per cent" great, but parents can make the job tough at times. Nobody likes to line up to see Santa, but staff ("the elves," as Johnson calls them) taking and printing pictures don't deserve some of the abuse they get, Johnson says.

It's hard to believe that Johnson can stay so positive on Santa's throne. At home, his wife is battling cancer and undergoing chemotherapy. The couple, their four children and nine grandkids, will have a better idea of her prognosis in the new year.

In the meantime, Johnson has some sage advice for parents who want to bring a little bit of Santa's magic into their homes for their children tonight and tomorrow.

"Love them and treat them like people. Enjoy it and make sure they're safe — there are some things even Santa can't do," he says.

Val Johnson's last appearance as Santa this year is tomorrow at the annual Hotel Vancouver Christmas brunch.

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