

A Voice for the Voiceless

Sharing Their Stories

One woman's journey into homelessness

Eric Riehl / Oakville Beaver

FINDING COMFORT: Sharon White (not her real name) adjusts the bedding she uses to make sleeping at night in her car more comfortable. The 60-year-old Oakville woman has been living in her car since mid-July while she looks for a job and a new home.

What would it be like to be homeless? How would it feel to go from a normal life to a life where the stuffy insides of a car serve as your living quarters? How would you feel about yourself if confronted with such a situation?



For long-time Oakville resident Sharon White, 60, no imagination is necessary.

White is new to the homeless experience as she only started living in her car on July 19, of this year.

It's a nice car, a Nissan Rogue, which driving down the street does not look out of place in Oakville.

The car, however, is a remnant of White's very different life, and now houses a sleeping bag, clothes, suitcases, books, water bottles and White herself.

"I never thought this would happen to me. Never in a million years," said White, during an interview in Coronation Park.

"If you knew my past accomplishments and where I've traveled, flying on TD jets, and here I am now...it's just unbelievable."

White agreed to tell her story on the condition that her real name be withheld.

She has children who live in the area and said she doesn't want them to be impacted.

She also said there is a great deal of shame, which comes from being in her situation and she would rather people didn't know her name.

A Very Different Life

White said she comes from a pretty normal background.

She was educated at the University of Ottawa where she received a bachelor of commerce, which she used to get various jobs with life insurance companies and banking institutions.

She was married at 34 and adopted two children when it was found she could not have children of her own.

White lived with her family in a large home in southeast Oakville.

In today's market, she said, that house would probably have been valued at around \$1 million.

White's descent into homelessness did not happen all at once, but slowly over several years.

She said it began with a messy divorce and continued when she lost her job as a day trader and most of her savings and investments to the recent recession.

Leaving her home, White eventually began leasing a townhouse in Glen Abbey, which she now realizes was completely beyond her means.

"It was very expensive," said White.

"The utilities and all the extras and food. I guess I was in denial. I knew I was running out of money. I started looking for apartments around May, because my lease was up in July, and I couldn't find anything, they were too expensive and I couldn't find a job."

White said she was also hampered by the fact that someone stole her credit cards, maxed them out and destroyed her credit.

This made finding someone who would rent a home to her even more difficult.

When the lease on her townhouse expired, White said she stayed a few days at the residence at Sheridan College until it got to the point where she could no longer afford that.

On July 19, White spent her first night sleeping in her car and it was only at this point the reality of her situation truly began to sink in.

"It's depressing...depressing," she said.

"The first night I slept in the public parking lot of the local canoe club. I had a hard time sleeping the first

night and I woke up at 9 a.m. and there were cars all around me and nobody saw me.”

White said she was happy no one noticed her.

A couple days after she became homeless, White noticed a vacancy sign at a retirement residence in the area of Lakeshore and Trafalgar Roads.

After being told rooms were \$2,600 per month, White said, she lost it and began tearfully explaining her situation to a member of the staff.

Halton police were called to assist White and it was suggested she attend a facility run by the Halton Safe Beds Program.

A Mental Health Crisis

The program run by the Halton Region provides short-term support to adults, 16 and older, experiencing mental health crisis.

White said she doesn't believe she has mental health issues, but understands where they could come from, describing the process of becoming homeless as a traumatic one.

“It really hits your self-esteem. You can't look people in the eye, you walk with your head down,” said White. “That's not me. It just eats away at you and I can understand now how this can result in mental problems. I don't think I have any now, but I can see it. With women not as strong as me, I can see suicide, depression. I can see it happen easily.”

While White said the living space at Safe Beds was nice enough, she took issue with staff members looking through her belongings and confiscating her diabetes medication, a nail clipper and other things.

The staff told her this was being done so she could not hurt herself or others.

Within 45 minutes, White said, she had a panic attack and after collecting her belongings, left the facility, never to return.

The experience has left White afraid of local shelters.

“I felt this place was for people who were in trouble for reasons other than just being poor,” she said.

“I felt like I was being punished, but it's more than that. I was stripped of my dignity because I didn't have a place to stay. They said, ‘While you can't stay in your car,’ and I said, ‘Well, it's better than being here.’ It was just so degrading.”

Learning How to Survive

Since then White has endured life in her car.

She said she knows the location of just about every public washroom in Oakville and stays clean by paying \$4 every morning to use the showers at local outdoor pools.

She receives some money from the Canadian Pension Plan and from her ex-husband, which she uses for food and other necessities.

White said she has been attending an employment office in Bronte and has been trying to find work, but the fact she has no address has made it difficult for prospective employers to contact her.

She lists an email that she checks regularly at the employment office as her primary contact.

Staying Close to Home

White said she has been told it would be easier to get into homeless shelters in Mississauga or Hamilton, however, this is an option White has flat out rejected.

“I have never lived in these places. I feel comfortable in Oakville because I have lived in Oakville for 25 years,” said White, choking back tears.

“I raised my kids here. They went to soccer, basketball, horseback riding, swimming here. So I know this place and if I leave I won’t be able to have contact with my kids anymore.”

White said she came forward to tell her story not because she wants money or anything like that, but because she wants the people of Oakville to know that women like her exist in their community.

Sharing my Story to Help Others

The Oakville woman is convinced she is not the only one.

“I was in Bronte, yesterday, and I saw these women drive and park for hours and hours and I figured, ‘They must be in the same boat as I am,’” said White.

“I’m divorced, I’ve raised kids, I had an amazing career before... What happens to us now? We’re all so alone.”



Home Suite Hope provides long term housing and wrap around social services for families facing homelessness. For more information on how you can help support the families in our program visit www.homesuitehope.org.

