

# From Glace Bay to Williams Lake: Helping Our Seniors in Need

## How many times ...

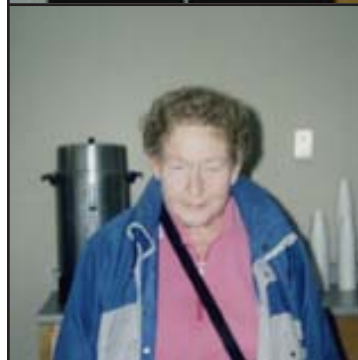
this year have you watched a television program or listened to the radio or read an article about Canadian seniors living in poverty? Probably very seldom or not at all since publicity about the 600,000+ Canadians over the age of 65 who are living below the poverty line is almost non-existent. Because of this lack of public awareness, we understandably forget about older people who are isolated and entirely dependent on social assistance or shelters for the homeless. Many Canadians still picture most of our seniors as being comfortable, happy and financially secure.

A related problem is the natural reluctance of seniors living in poverty to avoid complaining to government authorities or the media about their standard of living. Many are sad, depressed and ashamed about their situation and don't want publicity, particularly if they have children who may resent being blamed for their lack of caring and love towards their parents.

In this newsletter, we focus on the seniors of Glace Bay who represent examples of the problems that many elderly poor are facing throughout Canada. In the years to come, we will endeavour to raise awareness about these problems and continue providing as much direct support as possible to seniors in need.

Thanks for your help!

*Pierre Barbeau, Executive Director*



*Theresa, Eileen, Rose and Sonny are just a few of the seniors you are supporting at the Glace Bay Food Bank.*

## In a Perfect World There Would be no "Helens"

*By Marjorie Milloy  
 Help the Aged*

Helen is 66 years old and her sole source of income is Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. She was an only child and lived with her parents in the Glace Bay family home until their death about 20 years ago. The home she had inherited was in poor condition, but Helen managed for many years to pay taxes, utility bills and feed and clothe herself through social assistance.

However, there was never enough money for repairs to the house and as time went on, the old house became dilapidated beyond repair. Food and fuel prices were on the rise and Helen became a regular at the Glace Bay Food Bank, taking a daily meal with her new friends and the staff, and getting her once per month grocery order. Staff was concerned for Helen's well-being, knowing the condition of her home, and encouraged her to have the house condemned and to move into a subsidized seniors' residence. Helen was steadfast in her belief that it would be an affront to her parents' memory to have the homestead demolished and she could not bear to be torn from the treasured memories of the family times there.

The past couple of winters in Glace Bay have been severe; fuel use and fuel prices rose to a point that Helen had no money left to even partially fill her oil tank. The house was unbearably cold and she began hanging out at a local eatery, which was open 24 hours a day, for longer and longer periods of time, to a point of being there all night. Trying to be as

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# Mabel and Tom: Struggling to Make Ends Meet on \$726 a Month

By Marjorie Milloy  
*Help the Aged*

Once a hard-working, sole provider for his family in Glace Bay, Tom is now unable to work and finds it difficult to understand and carry on a conversation with Mabel, his wife of close to 40 years. In the early '90s, Tom suffered a stroke and a collapsed lung. The stroke has left him with short-term memory loss, no work, and Mabel lost the companion she once had. He worked over 22 years at his position in a local grocery store. He was able to support his family of four while Mabel stayed home and cared for the children. Working as a team, they were able to buy their own home and pay off their mortgage. The children grew and left home to begin their own families and lives. Then Tom took ill and his and Helen's life changed forever. There were no benefits or pension plan at the grocery store and they were forced to go on social assistance. Now, their combined monthly income is \$726.00.

Mabel says that when you have no work and are on social assistance, you become isolated. Family and friends shun you and after a while, you don't even bother contacting former acquaintances. She feels lonely in her own home. She can no longer confide her joys, fears and sorrows with Tom. He either

does not understand or quickly forgets what she has said. Tom relies on Mabel for everything, which she lovingly gives. She is unable to leave him for any length of time, fearing that he may turn on the stove and forget.

Tom has not seen a doctor since his hospitalization in 1990 and Mabel has not seen one for 17-18 years. Like many communities in Canada, local doctors are overwhelmed and are not taking new patients. Mabel is sure she has high blood pressure but this is not an illness that you go to the local hospital emergency department for. She had been treated for this ailment several years ago but the medication she was required to take is not covered by the provincial medical system. So even if she sees a doctor, she cannot afford to buy the medication she is sure she needs. What will happen to Tom if Mabel becomes ill and is no longer able to care for him?

Mabel budgets their social assistance cheque to the penny. This past winter's oil bills have put them over the edge. She must pay the oil bill over the summer because she needs to be able to order more

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*In Ottawa, Help the Aged has been supporting seniors at the Mission, a shelter for homeless men, during the last thirteen years. About 20% of homeless men are aged 55 or over and about 60% have very serious mental or emotional problems. We also assist seniors living in poverty through our Elderly In Need Program. Health workers and social workers inform us about the elderly who are in a crisis situation and we provide small grants to assist them (up to \$500.). We help to purchase wheelchairs, hearing aids, eyeglasses, etc. for them. We also help by providing support services. For example, an Ottawa area woman who is dying from cancer is now being provided with free*



*A special welcome from Ben at Ottawa's The Mission.*

*nutritious meals through our grant to the local Meals on Wheels program at a cost of \$4.25 per meal. This program is being coordinated by Marjorie Milloy (seated in front of the Help the Aged sign in the photo below). Marjorie wrote the articles about Glace Bay seniors in this newsletter and is also involved with the Interfaith Network for Reaching Out to Isolated Seniors. This network was established by Help the Aged to better reach out to poor and isolated older people. Seated with Marjorie (left to right) are Dora Brown, Bhaguan Shah, Satish Bhatia, Marjorie, Helen Smith, Maliheh Mottahedi, and Sylvie Deliencourt. Other members (not shown) are Myriam Jamault, Betty Hamilton and Gail Stone.*



## Mabel and Tom ... (continued from page 2)

before the winter. If the house is too cold, she knows that Tom may be susceptible to pneumonia because of his weak lungs. She now relies on the daily meals and once a month grocery order from the Glace Bay Food Bank when she is out of food. More than this, however, Marilyn, Sandra and Patty at the food bank have become Mabel's lifeline. She is able to share her concerns with them and they provide the caring friendship that she no longer has in her life from anyone else. The staff has worked with Mabel to attempt to get Canada Pension Plan benefits for Tom but Mabel knows that what money he gets from CPP will be deducted from the monthly social assistance cheque. She is trying to keep her home until Tom is 65 and able to draw Old Age Security and CPP. She feels if she sells then, she will have a little money to move them into a senior citizen's building. The house is in need of



Seniors socializing after a hot meal at the Glace Bay Food Bank.

## In a Perfect World ... (continued from page 1)

unobtrusive as possible, Helen would sit inside for awhile and then move outside. When she became too cold, she would move back inside. Often, she would bring a tin of beans or some other tinned food she had received from the food bank and eat out of the tin on one of her trips outside. Staff at the food bank was more and more concerned for her welfare, offering her encouragement and assistance. They walked her through the process for subsidized housing when she was ready to make the choice. Understandably, the local business could not continue to have Helen sleeping in their premises and she had to leave. She began to sleep outside. The caring, friendly staff at the food bank kept in touch and finally, one day, Helen came to them saying she could no longer stay in her home.

repairs but, they have no extra funds for this. Mabel just hopes that things hold together for the next two years until she can sell. Rightly or wrongly, she believes that if she sells now, social assistance will take the money because she was told her house is an asset.

When asked what she misses most from her past, she says it is the normalcy of having Tom working and her taking care of the children. Her wish is to have her husband back to his former self and to take painting classes. Many of us don't think twice about taking one class or another, but for Mabel, it is an elusive dream. She just wants to pay her bills and have enough money left over to feed herself and her beloved Tom.

**You can help Mabel, Tom and many others like them by giving generously to Help the Aged.**



Help the Aged volunteer Tammy Richer is shown presenting a cheque to Oscar Vasquez, coordinator of Operation Friendship in Edmonton. Your donations are used to assist homeless seniors through nutritious meals, housing, medical and social programs. We have assisted Operation Friendship for the last nine years.

She asked for their help to find other housing. Her house was assessed and condemned, a demolition company called in and a one-bedroom subsidized apartment was secured for her at the local seniors' residence. Helen had no money to pay the \$1,500 demolition fee, so the municipality took over the small piece of property her house had stood on as collateral. Marilyn, Sandra and Patty from the food bank got busy and set Helen up in her new apartment, finding her used furniture, filling her cupboards with food, helping her with the laundry, even putting up a Christmas tree to make her feel welcome.

Marilyn, Sandra and Patty said this was their best Christmas ever knowing they had been able to do

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## **In a Perfect World ...”** *(continued from page 3)*

this for Helen. As for Helen, she is as happy as a clam in her new apartment, taking part in some of the activities in her building and of course, still coming to the food bank as often as possible just to see her friends, the staff. For the most part, Helen is self sufficient and best of all, living independently in her “cozy little nest” as she calls it. When asked if she could have one wish granted and what it would be, without hesitation, Helen replied “to have my mother and father with me again.”

**In a perfect world there would be no “Helens”, but unfortunately, there will always be more than a few. Not all of us are in a position to help directly as were Marilyn, Sandra and Patty, but we can do our part by giving generously to Help the Aged. We have provided both financial and food assistance for many years to the Glace Bay Food Bank in order to help people like Helen. With your support we hope to help out for many years to come.**

**Note: The poverty “line” in most major Canadian cities is \$15,000 per year. In small cities, towns and rural areas the poverty line is lower.**



*We have provided financial support to Les Petits Frères des Pauvres in Montreal for the last five years. Les Petits Frères created le P.A.S. de la Rue to specifically assist Montreal area homeless seniors and elderly people in crisis. Your donations will be used for their basic needs.*



*Our association with Abraham’s Lodge in Williams Lake goes back to 1991 when the Ottawa Citizen printed an Associated Press article about Sarah Spring-Stump and husband Danny’s work with the homeless. Descriptions of “third world conditions” in the Chilcotin reserves were and continue to be quite shocking with many native people living in tiny shacks with no electricity or clean water. In this photo, Sarah and Danny are shown preparing donated food for distribution to the poor. Your donations have paid for the shipping of this donated food to fifteen area reserves. Also, you are supporting the homeless at the lodge as well as providing medical assistance. Both Sarah and Danny were presented with the Caring Canadian Award by the Governor General of Canada during 2001.*

## **St. Christopher’s Meals on Wheels Program (Toronto)**

Due to budget restrictions, most meals on wheels programs must charge a fee for each meal delivered by volunteers. Many seniors living in poverty cannot afford to pay the \$4.25 fee on a daily basis. Starting with St. Christopher’s, Help the Aged hopes to gradually support more and more Meals on Wheels programs throughout Canada. Through your donations, we will be providing free meals to as many needy seniors in Toronto as possible. In anticipation of your generous support of this program, we have just mailed a cheque to St. Christopher’s for 500 meals.

**Your generous donations to Help the Aged will be our main source of funding for all of the programs described in this newsletter.**

***Thank you!***

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