

First Things First

Fall 2008

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First United - A Place Where Things Are Happening

Duane could see no point in going on with life. He cut both his wrists in the upstairs toilet at First United. He was found just before he bled to death. Some weeks later, Duane apologized for the impact of his actions on others in this building. He explained that not wanting to die on the streets where no one would know or care, he had decided to end his life in **“a place that felt like home – where people would care and maybe understand”**.

Gail sat in her wheelchair at the end of the Wednesday night Celebration Service she had just attended. As the crowd of about 100 people were leaving around her, she took the hand of one of the folk at her table. With a tearful smile she said: *“Thank you for telling them it was my Birthday. It was so very special when everyone sang “Happy Birthday” to me. **You have no idea how long it has been since***



anybody even knew, let alone cared, that it was my birthday”.

Two simple stories that say so much about First United. It is neither a charitable agency nor is it a conventional church. It is a community – a community committed to the marginalized. But it is not a marginalized community. It recognizes that the best way to meet the needs of the marginalized is to be a community in which there are no margins. So First United deliberately transcends the strata of society. It is an exciting place – and it is going places!

The articles that follow are windows into the exciting unfolding life of this community. Randy Zimmer, member of the Advisory Council (a developing intentional group of 12 people essentially from the Downtown Eastside itself, that advise and support the Ministry Leadership Team) puts it this way:

“Something very exciting is happening here: previously people coming to meals would be looking down at their plates, eating their food and leaving as soon as they are done. Now I see them sitting down around tables looking at each other, being with others over a meal and choosing to stay to chat – and often to help clean up”.

Randy says that he sees these as significant signs that we are being and becoming a new kind of community in old town Vancouver. He believes that efforts such as the art workshops have helped to make the difference. *Continued on p4*

Changes to Our Food And Clothing Ministry

Food and clothing has long been an important aspect of the work at First United. It continues to be so. And at the same time there is an urgent need to refocus this part of the ministry. Best intentions often become real nightmares. Ric Matthews (Minister of the Mission) says simply “we deeply appreciate the commitments and contribu-

tions that have sustained this ministry in the past, but when we take an honest look at our massive effort around clothing and food, we have to acknowledge that there are some genuine problems”.

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Community Art Workshops Connecting Communities

Our community is blessed with many gifts one of which is an incredible talent for the arts. First United is working at creating ongoing opportunities for people to have the tools, space and inspiration to explore their artistic talents and connect with each other and outside communities in the process. We have offered four community art projects last spring that were very successful and well attended. Some of the pieces created during the afternoon are hanging in the

chapel and we invite you to come and enjoy their visions all 200 of them!



Participants in recent art workshops proudly showing their art



Youth Ambassador ensures a Community Meal Every Friday Evening

Hailey Froese, a grade 11 student at Kitsilano Secondary School, has mobilized a group of young volunteers to provide a meal for community residents on one Friday night a month. This means that now we are able to provide meals each Friday thanks to our partners.

Hailey is already an experienced volunteer at the monthly meal provided by

Ryerson United Church. She was challenged by a United Nations Association Program seeking 10 Vancouver students to be Youth Education Ambassadors.

Hunger is the global issue Hailey has selected, and she has set about educating her community and encouraging other youth to volunteer and become involved.

Hailey and her group will be taking charge of preparing, serving and cleaning up after the meal. The first meal was served on September 26th.

Hailey says "I am very passionate about this program." and we are proud to announce that Hailey has been selected as one of the 10 Youth Ambassadors! Well done! Hailey!

Shopping For Your Wider Family

As a new owner of a SMART car, I have been curious to know exactly how much stuff you can fit into the trunk of such a little vehicle?

Recently I had an opportunity to find out. With some careful packing you can put in the following:

3 jumbo boxes of Tide,
4 large bottles of conditioner,
12 boxes of tampons, 300 tubes of toothpaste!

Each day we give out toiletries like shampoo, conditioner, diapers, toothbrushes and toothpaste, combs and brushes, deodorant and soap to the countless people who come to our reception window seeking the basic necessities of life. We are able to pay for these toiletries through the generous gift of Optimum Shopper's Drug Mart points that supporters of First United donate. It is

a gift that makes a difference. Thank you!

Sandra Severs

To donate your points

go to

www.firstunited.ca

and click on "DONATE your SHOPPERS Points"

We can do your shopping for you!

Mark it in on your calendar now

Miles for Mission . . .

A fun fundraiser for First United Church in conjunction with the Vancouver Sun Run

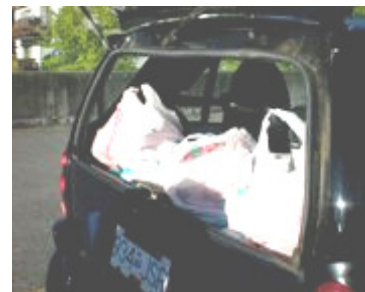
Sunday, April 19, 2009

More information to follow

Interested in being involved?
Contact Jen Cunnings
At jen.staw@telus.net
or at 604-574-0827

The grand total raised by our runners in 2008 was an amount of \$20,004.19

Thank You!



Changes to Our Food And Clothing Ministry

From Page 1

He points out that rather than spending quality time with individuals, the community support workers spend large parts of their day simply producing food and managing clothing. He adds that “to make matters worse, we spend large amounts off money paying for unused items to be taken away, we enable hoarders to deepen their problems, and a significant portion of the goods get sold on the street to feed addictions”.

Ric is keen to make the point that “This does not mean that we should stop providing meals and clothing – it means we need to rethink what we do and how we do it. We have an opportunity to do it more effectively”.

Providing Food or Being at Table with others

Sandra Severs (Minister of Programmes and Hospitality) points out that “we need to do more than simply provide food; people need food that is nutritious, prepared within stringent health regulations and is shared around a table with friends”. To that end First United will be employing a Food Services

Manager with the sole responsibility of ensuring best-in-class food. As the previous Food and Hospitality Programme Manager, Linda Ostrom says “This will leave us, as trained community support workers, free to do so much more in direct relationship with members of the community”.

The real need is to address *alienation*: alienation from self, from family, from community and from the earth. The basic need for food should be met in ways that build self-respect, community belonging, and inner sustenance that goes beyond the physical. In Linda’s words “by spending more time alongside people and less on preparing meals, we can better meet those needs”.

Providing Convenience or Providing for a Desperate Need

The Downtown Eastside is well served to meet the general need for clothing. Of course more can always be done. Frank Delorme (Supervisor of Host Security) speaks from experience: **“People need better access to urgent and immediate clothing rather**

than a ‘free-clothing’ store. We need immediately to continue to offer emergency clothing and should eventually also be providing cheap clothing (as opposed to free clothing) while generating income for the workers who run the store”.

First United is soon going to move to focusing exclusively on “emergency clothing”. Sandra Severs indicates: “We are exploring ways in which we can continue to get the support and effort of congregations who generously provide clothes and other items, while asking them to bring us only what we need for emergency provision. This will mean asking people to separate their contributions into two groups: what we need at First United and what they should drop off elsewhere in the Downtown Eastside (where other agencies are better equipped to distribute those gifts). Frank will be leading the new initiative. He is confident that based on his extensive experience in the Downtown Eastside “this will significantly improve our ministry to the community”.

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Brief Therapy Initiative at First

During his sabbatical from his position as Lead Minister at West Vancouver United Church, the **Rev. Don Collett** found that among the community members who visit First United Church Mission every morning, there are people who have found themselves in the Downtown Eastside be-

cause they have run out of hope and believe that they have run out of options.

A year later, having left West Van and pastoral ministry, Don is using the therapy training he obtained from the Family Therapy Institute in Calgary to found a new pro-

gramme called “The Brief Therapy Initiative”.

The task of the Brief Therapy Initiative is to help people discover or rediscover their personal agency– their ability to help themselves.

Don will be available at First United for *anyone* who would like to use his services.

To make a donation to this innovative initiative go to

www.firstunited.ca/donor.htm

and click on the

“Canada Helps” icon.

Be sure to designate **The Brief Therapy Initiative** as your fund choice.

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Living Without Teeth or Glasses

Most people with jobs and bank accounts, and perhaps even extended health plans, take for granted that their dental and optical needs will be met without too much pain or suffering.

Imagine having to go to work every day without being able to see street signs, read documents, chew your sandwich or smile at your office mates.

Our world takes for granted what many people in the community that First United is a part of regularly go without: a

full set of teeth and glasses. Frequently, when people get fully launched into their recovery from addiction, one of the first things they try to accomplish is to repair or replace teeth and to fix their vision. It is part of regaining self-respect and of integrating into mainstream society.

It is often the case that our social services ministry does not help these folks with such basic needs for a variety of reasons. What is encouraging is that there are now low-cost dental clinics in this community,

as well as an occasional agency that is prepared to help fund such things as dentures. It is also encouraging that one optical company has a 'gift of sight' program which provides free glasses to individuals referred by organizations like ours who have no other way of filling their optical prescription.

Thanks to such efforts individuals are able to regain, after months or years, what many of us could not imagine living without even for a week.

Stephen Gray

First United - A Place Where Things Are Happening

From Page 1.

He points out that "the presence of young affluent teenagers interacting side by side with traditional members of this community brought a whole new energy to the place"

First United is in many ways a microcosm of the Downtown Eastside. This is an area in which a tremendous amount of energy and attention is being given. Across numerous political persuasions and many different disciplines there is an inspiring collective effort to build a diverse attractive community.

The City is supported by Provincial and Federal Government as it embarks on developing a continuum of housing (including supportive housing, social housing and market housing). Ambitious plans are being implemented to make the area attractive, economically vibrant and culturally distinctive.

There are good reasons to believe that the historic birth-

place of Vancouver will soon again be a world renowned model for 21st century city life.

First United has the same momentum towards being a place of hope and inspiration – while always also being a place of comfort and refuge.

Ric Matthews (Minister of the Mission and Community Life) says: "We continue to build on our legacy of providing for the basic needs of those who are otherwise left on the margins of society. And at the same time we are extending our ability to encourage and support growth towards greater wholeness". Ric points out that "To do this, we need to make adjustments to some of our existing patterns and expectations. These will be disruptive but also life-giving – and that is the way of a Gospel that reminds us that a seed must die for new life to be set free".

Keely Hale is a community support worker on the staff at

First United. Her response to the new developments is that "this is all great news; it will give us the ability to do so much more for those about whom we care the most – more importantly it will deepen our interdependence and mutuality so that we can truly reflect the difference between charity and community".

First United invites all who share the vision to be part of this emerging future. The developments will place great strain on resources (financial, human and otherwise). With your help, we can be a truly new kind of community in old town Vancouver. You can be a vital part of helping the journey unfold.