



**“That will never be me”**

## **Unforeseen Homelessness**



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Homelessness is often something that can seem very distant from our own lives. Perhaps we imagine the transition to houselessness like a long ladder with many rungs, each step towards finding ourselves on the streets linked with poor choices, lack of effort or the use of an addictive substance. It is easy to think that you would see the warnings signs coming, picturing ourselves at the top of the ladder with lots of room for error before we ended up houseless. For most of us, the idea seems inconceivable, or as I frequently hear: “That will never be me”.

The reality is somewhat more stark. For a great portion of people who have ended up homeless, the transition was both sudden and unpredictable. Once someone finds themselves on the street, without the luxury of clean clothes, steady meals, access to a shower, transportation and a place to get good rest, taking steps to improve your own situation becomes daunting at best, and impossible at worst.

I once worked with a woman who was happily housed with her children. She suffered from a permanent disability which prevented her working, and while life was sometimes tough, it was stable. That changed one night when her rental house caught fire and burned to the ground. While she was able to stay in a hotel for a few days with some emergency resources, she did not have the money to come up with rent and deposit on a new unit and the waitlist for disability housing was over a year long. With the shelters at capacity and without a support network, she ended up sleeping in an abandoned garage. She lost custody of her children during this time, and along with it the hope of the future she had always imagined. She never dreamed she would have ended up homeless.

A man I once worked with had it all: a great job, a home, and a family. After an unexpected, sudden separation with his spouse, he found himself without anywhere to stay. Due to the unforeseen breakup, his resources were tied up, and he was unable to secure himself a temporary place. He ended up staying in a shelter when there was space, and outside when there was not. His attendance and appearance at work immediately suffered. He lost his job. This began several years of homelessness for this man, something he never imagined he would experience.

Another single man I knew worked as an independent contractor in the trades and

had always worked hard. He rented an apartment in town he would stay at when he wasn't in the field. One day, pains in his chest escalated into a heart attack. Although he survived, his health deteriorated leaving him unable to work. After missing a few pay cheques, he couldn't afford his rent. Now on social assistance, there was very little suitable housing for him in town. He moved, alone, to a city he could afford to rent in. Having no connections, he ended up tangled with the wrong crowd. He was quickly evicted due to his guest's misbehavior. He remained homeless for many years. He never thought it would be him.

The reality is, many of us are one paycheque away, one fire away, one divorce away, or one diagnosis away from potentially facing homelessness ourselves. Those experiencing homelessness are not a separate category of people. They are our parents, our siblings, our children our childhood friends. Many of them would have said: "that will never be me". The silver lining in all this, is if its one rung down into homelessness, as a city we can support people climbing one rung up. Our collective collaboration, cooperation and compassion can and will change lives.