

David's Story

David has been working at Alpha House for over 25 years, witness and orchestrator of major operational and administrative changes at the agency as Alpha House worked to adapt to new substance and homelessness trends. We tracked down David to hear his thoughts and insights on homelessness, housing, and the holiday season.

We asked David how his perception of homelessness has changed from when he was younger. David shares that it wasn't so much homelessness, but poverty that he was exposed to when he was younger. He tells a story of when he had a job surveying data from house to house, and he stopped by a miner's workhouse, "There was bare flooring that looked as if it had been uncovered for a while, and it was also shocking to see how many people were residing under one roof—the workers that worked the mines, some of which also housed their wife and children under that same roof." he says. David also noted that many of the children seemed "dirty", most likely resulting from the parents being too busy trying to keep food on the table.

He recalled another story from his childhood where he learned how other people were treated and labeled unfairly due to their economic status. He recalls a time where one such woman in his neighbourhood was labeled a witch by his and other kids' parents, and being told to stay away from her. He jokes saying "well, now she just became the most interesting person in the neighbourhood!". He then shifts back to a serious demeanor, and shares that instances like these build distrust between parents and their children, "those children will soon find out that she is not a witch and there isn't anything particularly wrong with the person—they are just less well off financially than the rest of the community."

As the conversation continued, we were curious to hear what misconceptions of homelessness David has come across in his over 25-year tenure in this field. Truthfully, there are too many to count, so we asked to hear what came to mind first. “Well I saw a guy the other day and, notably, I smelled him before I saw him. Being with Alpha House for 25 years, your nose gets desensitized to most smells, so it was quite notable. I went over to talk to him, and saw that he had the kindest eyes, and, after talking to him for a short while, I could see how kind this man is. However, no one wanted to sit next to him. The lack of access to showers and hygiene supplies can even further impact how estranged the unhoused population can feel.” David offers passionately.

Another misconception David shares his thoughts on is the idea that because someone is homeless, it means they are less intelligent, “Homelessness and addiction can happen to anyone— people use drugs for lots of different reasons.” The use of drugs doesn’t suggest a lack of intelligence, in other words. It suggests trauma. David uses the example of grieving, He met a gentleman sometime back who had fallen into homelessness and addiction after the passing of his wife, “It took him 3 years of drinking on the street to grieve his wife. He refused to go to Detox [during that time] but, once he was ready, he did, and he came back to say thank you, and shared with me that he was able to reunite with his family.”

As the conversation shifted to the holidays, we acknowledge that the holidays can be a particularly difficult time for people struggling with finances, housing security, food security, or personal upheaval.

David nods in agreement and adds, “some have nowhere to go, while others are invited home and have to grieve being apart from their families all over again once the festivities are done.” David recalls one Christmas where a bus full of children stopped by to hand out holiday gifts and supplies to the clients. “It was a very stressful experience for the clients to receive gifts and to watch gifts being given, likely due to being reminded about earlier holidays that they’ve spent with their families.” David continues “People think that homeless people living in emergency shelters should be grateful that they have a place to stay but, in reality, they feel estranged from their families and society as a whole.” It’s a reminder to us all to be grateful for the things we have, but also to never assume you know how someone is feeling or what they are going through.

On a more positive note, David adds, “clients love decorating the Christmas tree. They put a lot of time and effort into making and decorating the tree together, so much so that they’ll complain when it gets taken down early.” David’s finger quotes around “early” tell us staff leave it up for a while. “Additionally, haircuts are a big deal and very much appreciated by the clients. This is especially true around the holiday season where many clients may have the opportunity to see their loved ones again and want to look well.” David adds.