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Our Place executive director Don Evans: "Going through the interview process, I felt a call to be here."

ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Three years in, Our Place director helps himself by helping others



LOUISE DICKSON
ldickson@timescolonist.com

He has experienced illness, abandonment, loneliness and fear.

He has struggled with divorce, single parenting and addiction. He has sought meaning and purpose in his life and found it among Victoria's poorest and most vulnerable.

Don Evans smiles as he looks back on his first three years as executive director for Our Place Society. "I love it more today than ever," says the 53-year-old father and grandfather. "It's the best part of my day when I can sit down, have lunch and engage with family members. I listen to their stories. I see the gifts and wonder in everybody that comes here."

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Don Evans in the My Place temporary indoor tent city at the former Boys and Girls Club building. The idea for the shelter came from Evans meeting with the campers in the outdoor tent city near the Victoria courthouse and finding out what it would take to get them to come indoors. BRUCE STOTESBURY, TIMES COLONIST

> FROM D1

Our Place is changing lives for the better

Evans' own substantial gifts are making a difference in the lives of those he calls family. Like many of them, he experienced pain and trauma at an early age.

Evans was abandoned by two mothers. His biological mother gave him up for adoption at birth. Just three months later, his adopted mother gave him up when he was diagnosed with hydrocephalus or fluid on the brain.

"I was expected to die," Evans says. "It's not a big deal now, but 50 years ago, it was a life-threatening condition."

He spent five years in foster care before being adopted by a middle-class family in Alberta. He grew up with three sisters in a family that loved him and cared for him, but the early years had taken their toll. "I don't remember anything before 12 years old," Evans says. "I think there is a lot of pain back there that I've just pushed back. There's a lot of trauma in my childhood."

"I grew up very afraid. I was pretty well afraid of most things — afraid of people, afraid of loneliness, afraid of being abandoned. I had huge fear as a child, and even in my adult life, I was ruled by fear."

Evans escaped by excelling at school and working hard. He had a paper route and odd jobs, even selling nail polish door-to-door. In Grade 12, he worked full time and went to school. By 22, he had made and lost his first million. He owned a body shop, gas station, tire shop, car wash, but went broke trying to keep two restaurants afloat.

At 26, he became the single father of a three-year-old girl after a relationship ended. In 1990, he moved to Vancouver — "for love" — and became a successful stockbroker with a waterfront home, a couple of Jaguars and a powerboat.

Evans loved the fast pace and the intensity of his work. But cocaine was part of the lifestyle, and addiction almost destroyed him.

"It took everything from me — except my daughter."

In 1998, the 36-year-old enrolled his daughter in private school and went into recovery.

"I was willing for something more in my life," he says. "I just needed some meaning and purpose. It came from hitting bottom, from a place of shame and low self-worth. Struggling with addiction takes you to a pretty low place. It's a difficult place for people to get out of."

He began to volunteer on the front line at First United Mission in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, at a time when female sex-trade workers were disappearing

and rice wine with its high alcohol content was blamed for several deaths.

Evans says he found the work similar to being a stockbroker.

"You're juggling all sorts of huge needs and it's really fast-paced. I fit in well. I thrived on that challenge and intensity."

Rev. Ruth Wright was the leader of First United when Evans began his volunteer work.

"He was a phenomenal presence in the mission and we all enjoyed him," Wright recalls. "He was comfortable with people on the street. He had compassion for everybody and was willing to go that extra mile with somebody who had a bad story."

After 18 months, Evans returned to the corporate sector, but continued his volunteer work. He raised money for projects, sat on the board of a Gastown soup kitchen and became actively involved in social issues of homelessness and poverty. In the end, his passion for social justice was stronger than the corporate dollar and he returned to the Downtown Eastside, accepting a job in senior management at First United Church.

In the fall of 2011, at church with his parents in Victoria, someone told him Our Place needed a new executive director. Even though he had just been appointed executive director at First United, Evans decided to apply.

"Going through the interview process, I felt a call to be here," he says. "It felt like Our Place knew what they wanted to do. They just needed someone to take them there."

Evans took a one-year leave of absence from his job in Vancouver and went to work.

The society had been running deficits of more than \$300,000 and had spent \$1 million in reserves in the previous four years. Evans balanced the budget right away.

He was also concerned the building, which opened in 2007, was closed on weekends and holidays and wasn't offering enough programs.

"I felt Our Place was relying a lot on how many meals they were serving," he says. "Their goal needed to be how many lives were changing."

Evans reached out to the faith community, asking for their help to keep Our Place open on statutory holidays, the hardest days for people in poverty to find a meal.

For the first time, on Good Friday and Easter Monday in April 2012, Our Place was open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Our Place is now open every day of the year. Between 800 and 1,000 people drop in each day.



Volunteers serve a Thanksgiving dinner to the Our Place "family." Staff serve between 1,800 and 2,000 meals a day to Victoria's less fortunate. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

Staff serve between 1,800 and 2,000 meals a day. The building is open from 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. during the winter. It is open during the day in summer, but closed in the evenings, something Evans hopes to change.

Evans has also increased the number of programs offered by Our Place to 60 from 12.

"When it comes to transforming people's lives, we're doing it through employment programs and educational opportunities, health services and spiritual needs," Evans says. "We have a doctor one day a week and nurses twice a week. There's computer training, there's math classes — all that stuff is happening."

A First Nations elder is on staff and helps address the needs of aboriginal clients.

Our Place is doing more to help those in recovery, Evans says. The fifth floor is a recovery floor for people who are addressing substance-use issues. About one-third of those in the transitional housing program are addicted, he says.

"Now we move them to the fifth floor so they can support each other in recovery and we can bring specific programming to deal with their needs," Evans says.

Evans also started the sponsor-a-breakfast program with the business community. For \$500, the Our Place family gets a special breakfast, and businesses learn about poverty, Evans says.

"People who participate just love it," he says. "It changes perspectives. The business community often think of the street community as a nuisance. When they come in and serve them and see how grateful they are, they are looking through different eyes. It's helping connect people and raising understanding of poverty and homelessness."

During the past few years, there has been a growing aware-

ness of the work Our Place does. In the fall, the society partnered with First Metropolitan United Church to open an out-of-the-rain, 50-mat shelter. In January, after the province provided \$400,000 for a new shelter for people living in the tent city outside the Victoria provincial courthouse, Our Place began operating the new My Place transitional housing facility.

Evans has been in the news almost every day, photographed in the sea of tents in the gym at the new facility.

"Don has really built the profile of Our Place Society in the community as a place that cares for our most vulnerable, so that's a huge accomplishment," says Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps. "He does the work through relationship-building and coalition-building and through really listening to what people's needs are. He's very unique in that way."

Evans spent time every day talking with the campers at the tent city about their housing needs.

"What Don did with My Place is one of the things he does best. He went and he listened to the people down in the tent area and asked what would make them come inside," Helps says. "I was the one who said: 'How about we set tents up inside?' which seemed like a wacky idea. But he said: 'Why don't we explore it?' He takes people's wacky ideas seriously."

He also listened and acknowledged the concerns of parents and neighbours of Central Middle School, which is across the street from the shelter, says Helps, who attended a parent-advisory council meeting with Evans a couple of weeks ago.

"I think the reason My Place has been such a success ... Don is largely responsible for that," says the mayor.

After his first six months on the job, the board asked Evans if he would consider staying on. He

did. This year, he committed to staying on for another three years.

Professional fundraiser Laura Walsh joined Our Place as director of development after offering to help. Like Evans, she fell in love with the place and his leadership style.

"He's done an amazing job turning Our Place around," Walsh says. "Don is very, very businesslike, plus he has very deep compassion and passion for what he does. I think that's a rare combination, and a particularly unique one that Our Place needs. He's also very open to ideas."

The leadership teams buy into his vision to better serve the family. They also want to engage the business community, who are more than willing to help if they know a charity is well-run and stable.

"Then really great things can happen," Walsh says. "There'll be an even bigger vision."

Evans is already at work on that. He wants to expand the employment opportunities for the homeless.

He is also exploring the idea of building a 40- to 50-bed therapeutic community to help people after they are released from jail.

"People have time to think in jail, and they often want to change their lives. They're often off drugs and they want to do things differently when they get out," Evans says.

"But trying to find a place to live in this city is impossible, so it's back to the street, back on drugs and back in jail."

Much is being done in the area of harm reduction, but very little about treatment and prevention, he says.

"We want to start addressing the prevention side."

At the end of the day, Evans has found his place in this community of hope and belonging on Pandora Avenue.

Those he is helping are helping him.