



THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

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A cold night on street, and nowhere to go

SARAH PETRESCU
Times Colonist

Two homeless men in downtown Victoria slept outside in the freezing rain and snow on Government Street Monday night because they had nowhere else to go.

"It was pretty cold out here, not gonna lie," said Darrell McFarland, 62, bundled up in a fur-hooded jacket in his motorized scooter.

Sean O'Donnell, 49, sat next to his friend in a folding lawn chair, wrapped with blankets. A shopping cart of suitcases and a wheelchair were tied up behind them outside the Eddie Bauer store.

Emergency-shelter spaces were open throughout Victoria because of the freezing temperatures and snow.

But McFarland and O'Donnell faced two barriers to finding shelter. First, O'Donnell's wheelchair was stolen Saturday night as he slept in a lawn chair beside it.

"Some drunk guy grabbed it coming out of the bar and ran off ... I couldn't find it anywhere," said McFarland, who helps his friend in and out of the chair and runs errands for them.

O'Donnell has not been able to walk or talk fully since an accident several years ago. He pushes himself around downtown backward in the wheelchair with one foot.

The other issue is finding a suitable shelter space.

"He can't get down on a mat in the shelters," McFarland said. "If we could get a room with a bed and a mat, that would be best. We don't want to be split up."

The men are well known to several agencies who help the homeless, but don't appear to have a consistent outreach worker to find them shelter or housing.

They've lived on the streets together for three years since they were displaced by a fire at



Darrell McFarland, left, and Sean O'Donnell try to stay warm on Government Street on Tuesday. The pair slept outside Monday night after they couldn't find suitable shelter. O'Donnell, who uses a wheelchair, is unable to get down on a mat on the floor. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

their Craigflower-area apartment building. Last winter, they spent a few nights in the Salvation Army downtown, but have not been able to do so this year due to renovations.

A resident at the men's shelter was so worried about them, he found O'Donnell a beat-up replacement wheelchair until he could get something better and alerted the *Times Colonist*.

Rev. Al Tysick from the Dand-

er Society bought a cot to set up next to shelter mats at Cool Aid's Rock Bay Landing for the pair this week, but they couldn't get there.

Dandelion will take it to Our Place on Pandora Avenue, where McFarland and O'Donnell often grab meals and coffee, in the hope the men can make it there to sleep out of the cold.

"Sadly, there are a lot of people like these guys who fall through

the cracks," said Grant McKenzie, communications director at Our Place Society. Our Place is one of the emergency-shelter locations when the provincial extreme-weather protocol is enacted. McKenzie said the shelter is consistently full, as are others around town. It's also taxed by increased demand for meals and services.

By 10 a.m. Tuesday, two people had suffered overdoses in the dining area. Staff used naloxone to

revive the affected persons, who took off when emergency services were called. "It's really stressful because they could overdose again," McKenzie said.

"The big thing for us this time of year is the strain on our resources financially ... but we also need to keep people warm and dry with donated boots, coats, gloves and blankets. We go through lots of blankets." spetrescu@timescolonist.com

Loud and proud for Christmas Fund

LOUISE DICKSON
Times Colonist

On Saturday, Paul Beauchesne will wrestle his gleaming 10-kilogram tuba into his car and drive to Market Square to conduct Victoria's 38th annual Tuba Christmas.

But his struggles will be nothing compared to those the concert aims to help. It raises money for the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, which works with the Salvation Army and the Mustard Seed and provides financial help to Our Place.

"There's a feeling right now because of tent city that people are fed up and have stepped away from that feeling of giving and supporting," Beauchesne said, referring to the homeless camp that was set up on the Victoria courthouse lawn for months before being dismantled in August. "I think it's more important now than it ever has been to try to support and help people who are really struggling."

Beauchesne began organizing the event last year, stepping into the shoes of his former music teacher, Victoria Symphony principal tubist Eugene Dowling, who founded Victoria's Tuba Christmas.

For 36 years, Dowling coaxed a big, beautiful sound from close to 90 tuba and euphonium players, while raising money for a cause dear to his heart. "Gene looked at the concert as a way to help the greater community," Beauchesne said. "He felt very strongly about it and made it happen every year. Over the years, the concerts have raised \$50,000."

Before his death from cancer in June 2015, Dowling passed his baton and his music book to Beauchesne and introduced him to the community of musicians, including current and retired music teachers and current and retired members of the Naden Band, who play in the concert.

Beauchesne expects 86 tuba and euphonium players will perform familiar carols beginning at 1 p.m. with *Adestes Fideles* — *O Come, All Ye Faithful*.

But joy will be tinged with sadness this year as the musicians play a song in memory of



Paul Beauchesne is the conductor of the 38th annual Tuba Christmas, on this Saturday from 1 to 3 p.m. in Market Square, 560 Johnson St. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

Nicholas Watson, who was the youngest player at Tuba Christmas for the past three years.

Fifteen-year-old Nico died in September, days after he had lymphoma diagnosed, said his music teacher Lorna Bjorklund.

Music and Christmas were two of Nico's favourite things. Bjorklund, hot chocolate in hand, would pick up Nico at dawn on the day of the concert and drive him to the University of Victoria for the morning rehearsal. The afternoon was spent entertaining the crowd at Market Square with the magical sound of Christmas.

"He was always asked to stand for applause as the youngest player. It was always a big deal for him," Bjorklund said.

Donations at the concert are collected by volunteers and in a tuba near the stage.

The public is also invited to the Tuba Christmas reprise recital at 8 p.m. Sunday at the Phillip T. Young Recital Hall at the University of Victoria. Admission is by donation to support tuba and euphonium projects throughout the year. Donations will also be accepted for the Eugene Dowling Scholarship. ldickson@timescolonist.com



HOW TO DONATE

Since 1956, this newspaper has collected money to benefit the less fortunate. Last year, through the Christmas Fund, we raised and distributed about \$320,000, and we hope to beat that total this year.

To donate, go online to: timescolonist.com/donate. You will be directed to a Canada Helps donation form; once you make your donation, a tax receipt will be provided immediately.

Or mail a cheque, payable to the **Times Colonist Christmas Fund Society**, to the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, V8T 4M2.

You can use your credit card by phoning 250-995-4438 between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., Monday through Friday. Outside those hours, messages will be accepted.

Snow in Victoria? Heaven help us



JACK KNOX
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I watched *The Revenant* on Tuesday. Wait, no, that was the view from my front window. Snow (some of it piled ankle deep!) smothered much of the capital like a blanket of White Ebola.

Our verdant world had turned savage. Vans on tires as bald as the top of my head pirouetted past like drunken ballerinas. Commuters wise enough to leave the car at home trooped to unfamiliar bus stops, only to discover they were on the wrong side of the street.

Bedraggled schoolchildren stumbled along icy sidewalks like the frostbitten Wehrmacht retreating before the Soviet Red Army in 1944. Dogs turned feral and roamed in packs, taking down letter carriers and bill collectors. I felt bad about the letter carriers.

The sounds of winter warfare were terrible: The moans of the fallen, the angry whine of spinning wheels, the gravelly rasp of garden-spades-as-snow-shovels, the rifle crack of credit cards snapping while scraping windshields.

I looked to the heavens. What's next, God? Locusts?

No, but we are supposed to get more snow on Thursday. (Ed Bain and Astrid Braunschmidt, having broken the news on television, were taken into protective custody.)

Oh, Victoria isn't good at this stuff at the best of times, and we're particularly bad after a long, snowless period like the 2½-year stretch that just ended in such Xanax-grabbing fashion this week.

To Victorians, snow is something that happens somewhere else, just like tornadoes, hockey riots or late-night dining. Even when the flakes flutter as close as Vancouver or Nanaimo or the Malahat, the capital usually remains as bare as Wreck Beach in a heat wave.

When the snow does arrive, we are as surprised as the Americans at Pearl Harbor (by coincidence, 75 years ago today). We have had only five white Christmases in

the past 70 years. That's fewer white Christmases than earthquakes — not that we're prepared for those, either.

After a shaker centred on Sidney Island rattled us last December, we all vowed to be ready for the Big One (a resolution as sincere and quickly abandoned as the "Oh God, I'll never drink again" prayer). Some even flocked to buy earthquake kits, which flew off the shelves as quickly as salt, shovels and snow tires did Tuesday.

Others just went into panic mode. Note that among the many people who called VicPD's emergency line after last year's (minor) earthquake was one who said "OK, I have my kids in the car and we're evacuated. Where do you want us to go?"

It wasn't much different after this week's (minor) snowfall. On Tuesday, the West Shore RCMP felt compelled to say on Twitter: "Please DO NOT call 911 to get an update on road conditions. Check out @DriveBC instead."

Imagine how people would react were this another Blizzard of '96, a legendary calamity that Victorians rate alongside such disasters as the 1917 Halifax Explosion or the 1999 Vancouver Canucks. (Do you remember the Blizzard of '96? If so, just have someone stroke your head and sing *Soft Kitty* in a soothing voice until the flop-sweats and waking nightmares stop.)

In 1996 the snow was chest-high, not ankle-high, and stayed for days on end, just like your in-laws. By day four Victorians were ready to go *Lord of the Flies* on one another. (My wife, perhaps overstimulated by my constant presence, decided to escape the house and go for a walk — only to have a neighbour phone with a warning of a cougar on the street. "Yeah?" she replied. "It had better stay out of my way." True story.)

Right now the *Times Colonist* is collecting readers' recollections of the Blizzard of '96, to be published over the Christmas period. We would like to include memories and photographs from our readers. Send a submission of up to 300 words and photographs in JPG format. Please send to snow@timescolonist.com. Put "snow" in the subject line.

And then remember this: In a real disaster (that is, one that won't melt by lunch), you'll be on your own. So will your neighbours. Prepare accordingly.