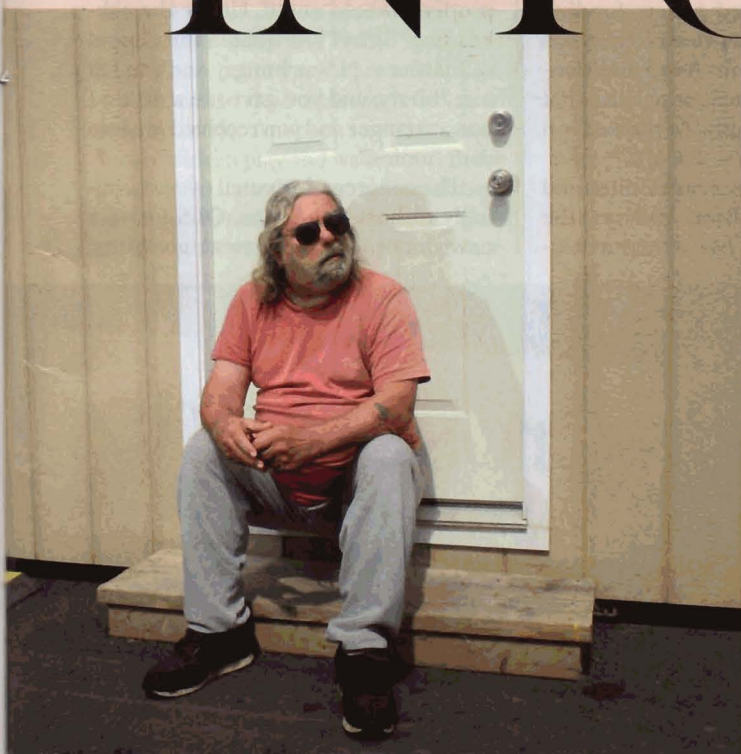


The United Church INFOCUS



Left: Ron Durston liked the privacy his cabin provided. Right: Chrystal Wilson, whose non-profit ran the cabins, is optimistic about the future.

LIVING IN LIMBO

A church's plan to support the homeless is shelved, along with the homes

By Anne Thériault

FOR THE LAST two and a half years, Ron Durston lived in a nondescript beige building in Kingston, Ont., that is roughly the size and shape of a backyard shed. One of 17 individual sleeping cabins for the unhoused that the City of Kingston co-managed, Durston's tiny home sat at the city's Centre 70 Arena in the summer and was moved to a marina in the winter.

Before moving into his cabin, the 69-year-old was living in his van. He had lost his job and fallen into debt due to COVID-19 restrictions. In spite of these hardships, Durston was reluctant at first to participate in the sleeping cabin initiative, believing that he would have to share a living space with other people. But each resident got their own cabin, which Durston referred to as a "fortress of solitude." He liked

that he could lock his door and shut the world out whenever he wanted.

Durston also said that he'd come to see the other residents as family. The area around the cabins had a community feel: residents had planted a vegetable garden, decorated the spaces between the cabins with potted plants and outdoor lights, and even set up a patio area with some salvaged Muskoka chairs and a barbecue. It was a small, if unconventional, neighbourhood.

Unfortunately, at the end of September, Durston, along with all the other sleeping cabin residents, once again lost his home.

Like many other Canadian cities, Kingston is experiencing a homelessness crisis. As of August 2024, 633 people were on the city's By-Name list, a registry for unhoused people, but experts estimate the actual number is well over 1,000. >

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN MACALPINE

By contrast, only 166 shelter beds are available.

A local United Church congregation stepped up to help by offering to host the sleeping cabins on their property, but learned the hard way how many housing projects fail due to lack of funding. Amid the news that the program is delayed indefinitely, Crossroads United is hoping to share some of the lessons they've learned with other communities of faith.

As far as they're aware, they're the first United church to take on this kind

Baer believes that everything his church has done to prepare to host the sleeping cabins has had an impact, even if the opening of Crossroads Village is delayed indefinitely.

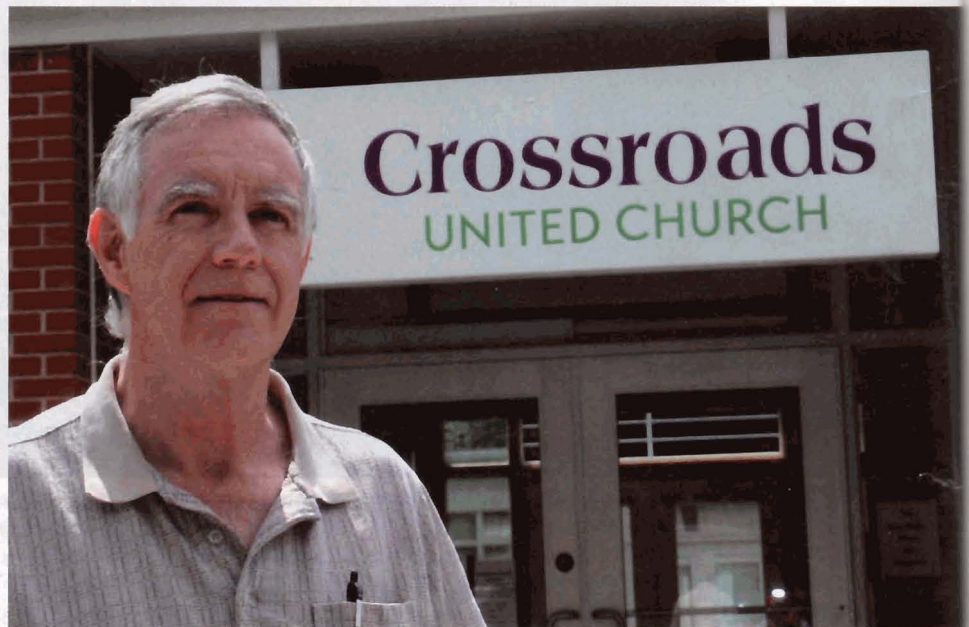
late 2023, city council voted to wind down the program, citing costs, and served the residents eviction notices for Sept. 30, 2024.

For the sleeping cabin program to survive, OLS needed a new funding partner to cover day-to-day costs, as well as a new location. As an additional wrinkle, city council stipulated that the cabins could only be hosted on private land.

That's where Crossroads United and Allan Baer came in. Baer, who is on the church council and has served as a li-

their lot. Ahead of a vote on the matter at their congregational meeting on June 2, Baer drafted a document to provide parishioners with information about what moving the cabins to the church's property would entail. Under the sub-heading "Why?" he quoted the Gospel of Matthew: "I was hungry and you fed me; thirsty, and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me into your homes."

The congregation voted overwhelmingly to host the cabins. OLS found a new donor, a development company,



Allan Baer has been a driving force for the project at Crossroads United in Kingston, Ont.

of initiative, but they hope they won't be the last.

In 2021, the City of Kingston partnered with Our Livable Solutions (OLS), an organization dedicated to addressing homelessness in the community, to launch the sleeping cabin program as a pilot project. The city hosted and paid for the cabins and covered their expenses, while OLS managed day-to-day operations; cabin residents accessed city facilities at the arena and marina for services like washrooms, kitchens and laundry.

OLS founder and acting executive director Chrystal Wilson describes the program as a success, noting it has led to permanent housing for several former residents. However, in

a person for the project, has been one of the driving forces behind the church's plan to host the cabins.

Part of his inspiration for taking on this project came from United Church Moderator Rt. Rev. Carmen Lansdowne. Lansdowne spoke at Crossroads United just three days after Kingston city council voted to wind down its partnership with OLS. "What is one positive thing, one imaginative thing, that you can do in your faith communities?" Baer remembers Lansdowne asking the congregation.

When a second vote by city councillors in mid-April reaffirmed the conclusion of the program, Crossroads began to think seriously about hosting the cabins on an underused portion of

and city council approved the plan on July 9, pledging \$500,000 to prepare the Crossroads United site — including constructing a building with washrooms, showers, a kitchen and laundry facilities — and offering to sell the cabins to OLS for a token fee of \$1. They dubbed the new community Crossroads Village.

But the plan began to unravel. For a start, the church had trouble getting neighbours on board with the idea. Baer organized a public meeting on June 25, two weeks ahead of the city council vote, with speakers from OLS and residents from near the arena and marina; they would also take questions and comments from the floor. Until that point, Baer says that all of the feedback the

Church had received about the project was positive, but he wanted to let those who felt apprehensive about the sleeping cabins have their say.

Some attendees were supportive of the project, but others voiced concerns. One asked if a traffic study had been done, believing Crossroads Village would lead to an increase in vehicles on nearby roads. Another said that many local children play and walk through the area where the cabins would be located, and she worried about their safety. Several neighbours brought up the potential of drug use and crime, while others thought the cabins should go elsewhere in the city.

Baer said that he understood the neighbours' worries, but that churches have a mandate to push past those fears. He cited the Gospel of John, which says that God is love, and in love there is no fear. He also noted that for the two and a half years the program had been running, there had been no issues in the residential neighbourhoods where the cabins were located. In hindsight, Baer does think it would have been helpful to visit the apartment buildings surrounding Crossroads United to speak with people one-on-one ahead of the public meeting, but also says that would have been difficult to organize given the compressed timeline.

Local opposition wasn't the only issue. Several weeks of onsite work were needed to prepare the property for the cabins ahead of the city's Sept. 30 deadline, but that couldn't happen until a lease was created so that Crossroads United could legally have OLS as their tenants. Baer said the biggest obstacle in creating the lease in a short period of time was that it had to be done over the summer, when many of the people who needed to draft and approve it were on vacation.

On Sept. 7, The United Church of Canada's East Central Ontario Regional Council ratified the lease agreement — the final step needed before construction could begin. But just as momentum was building, the development company's funding, which would have paid for, among other things, 24-hour on-site staffing, fell through less than a month before the eviction deadline.

"Without operational funding, we

won't be able to proceed with construction of the site," says Chrystal Wilson of OLS. "There's sunshine in the future, though. We have a couple of opportunities we hope will come through so that we can open in time for winter. It would be heartbreaking to have a site available to house people and no way to operate it, leaving people out in the cold."

As of publication, the cabins have been put into storage by the city and will be held for up to two years while OLS tries to find new funding. On Sept. 20, the city released a statement saying that staff are continuing to offer housing solutions to residents ahead of the program's end. Wilson says most of the residents are being folded into the city's existing transitional housing programs, though a lucky few have been able to get permanent housing.

JIMMY ARMSTRONG, 47, worries that the loss of his cabin will set him back in his efforts to overcome substance abuse. "It's been a long process," says Armstrong. "It took a long time to admit that I'm an addict. And then it took probably about a good two months before I could say I was an addict all in one sentence and not cry. I can do it now."

Thanks to support from OLS, he recently completed treatment at a facility in Sudbury, Ont., and has been working on staying clean ever since.

But he worries that without the supportive environment of the sleeping cabins, he might wind up back on the streets. And if that happens, the possibility of relapse increases exponentially. It's hard for any addict to stay sober, but even harder for those dealing with the stresses of homelessness. Many unhoused people use substances to help numb their feelings; they also sometimes use them to help stay awake. Falling asleep means running the risk of having your possessions stolen.

For Ron Durston, the current situation just adds to his cynicism about

how the city has dealt with homelessness. "I...trust my ability in surviving [more] than...the people that say [they] will help you survive," he says.

Baer is working to stay positive about the continuation of the sleeping cabin program, even though there is seemingly little hope to be found. Now, he says, is when the really hard work begins.

Still, he believes that everything his church has done over the past few months to prepare to host the sleeping cabins has had an impact, even if the opening of Crossroads Village is de-



The sleeping cabins offered residents a lockable space of their own. A communal vegetable garden, outdoor lights and a patio area created a neighbourly feel.

played indefinitely. For one thing, the public meeting started a much-needed conversation in the church's neighbourhood. For another, Baer believes the congregation's work could serve as a guide for other communities of faith interested in taking on similar initiatives.

Finally, Crossroads' offer has given city council members a glimpse at possible solutions to homelessness that they previously had not considered, showing churches as more outward-looking than they might have assumed.

"What our church's involvement has shown is that we're willing to work with community partners where we are able," says Baer. ■

Anne Thériault is a writer in Kingston, Ont.