

14 years of  
making a  
difference

Walk a mile  
in my shoes

one step at  
a time

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*The RAFT offers a safe place that is free from violence, intimidation, exploitation and drugs and alcohol.*

*One step at a time we are making a difference.*

**The RAFT is born**

1992

"There are kids living under the bridge" someone remarked. "No, we don't have homeless kids in our community, adults maybe but homeless kids, No!" But there were homeless kids living under the bridge and tremendous gaps in youth services.

As part of its bicentennial celebration St. George's Anglican Church organized a task force of the faith communities, service providers, educators and health professionals to look at services for individuals and families. The Task Force concluded that youth between the ages of 16 to 18 were under served

and at greatest risk.

There were gaps in existing services and barriers in others. Troubled and disadvantaged adolescents had the most difficulty accessing the services. The transition from adolescent to adulthood was a particularly difficult time for them. Without a support network school dropout, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, unemployment, criminal activity and homelessness became their reality.

The Task Force recommended the development of a youth resource centre to provide a safe and supportive environment where youth could get immediate assistance and help to access com-

munity services.

In 1994, the RAFT opened its doors as a drop in centre: a gathering place for at risk youth that offered light meals, showers, laundry facilities, and an emergency food cupboard. It provided a place to socialize, crisis counselling and support.

Seven years later, in response to growing community needs the Crisis Hostel was opened.

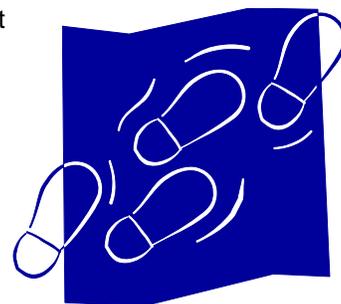
Cindy McClure- Board Chair

**Jamie's Journey**

Jamie is a wonderful young man. He wears a baseball cap and clothes that are too big for him. His fingers are yellow from smoking cigarettes and it looks like he could use a good bath. Jamie spends most of his evenings at the RAFT. He does not appear to trust grownups but he is always very polite and

grateful. Sometimes Jamie will ask for the key to the food cupboard. He'll grab a can of tomato soup and a can of beans, mix them together and heat them up. It looks like he has created this specialty dish a hundred times before. When Jamie has finished he will do up his dishes.

Jamie has touched my heart. I wish that I could pick him up and put him in a safe home where he would receive unconditional love and acceptance. That is not his reality. Jamie has no home to go to. What we can do for Jamie is give him a hot meal, a warm bed to sleep, clean clothes and help to become an independent and self reliant adult.



## Life on the Streets

A Niagara Regional Police Officer brought Mellie to the RAFT late one afternoon. Mellie was 17 years old and she had been working as a prostitute. But she was tired and she wanted out. Her hair was spiked and teased on one side and hung down dirty and loose on the other. Her face was thin and pale and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her clothes hung off of her and it looked like she had not had a decent meal in months. "Good luck Mellie" said the officer as he left.

*Fast forward three weeks later:* Mellie is sitting at the kitchen table doing her homework. A

counsellor from the District School Board of Niagara has gotten her into the Second Chance Program; a credit recovery program for high school dropouts. Mellie is now working towards completing her high school diploma. With regular eating and proper sleeping Mellie lost the thin and hollowed appearance. Our volunteer visiting hairdresser has fixed up her hair and it now softly frames her face.

Mellie is more confident and happy and her future looks brighter. Mellie still has a long way to go, but she is off the street and on her way!



## Anna's Kids

When asked what RAFT youth need the most, Anna responded, "These kids need a place to sit and someone to listen. As I go about my work in the RAFT, I am always followed by a group of kids. Like my own kids, they want to share their day, their ups and downs, their plans, and their

"These Kids need a place to sit and someone to listen."

dreams. We need to be there to hear them and help them on their way! I wish we had ten more stools and ten more listeners, so every kid could be heard. So many of these kids have really had hard times.

They arrive here beaten down, alone and totally disconnected. For many kids, the RAFT is the only family that they have. We listen, we mentor and we encourage. And every day we are rewarded by seeing just how far our kids can go.

*Anna Warner is a member of the RAFT staff*

## Coming Back Home

The reason I started coming to the RAFT is because I was not living at home and had no place to eat. I was 16 at the time. I was very confused and there were a lot of things happening in my life. When I found out about the RAFT I thought it might help me, but I was not really sure. But I took a chance and started going to the RAFT. I was made welcome from the beginning.

The RAFT gave me the support that I needed, but it was the workers that really made it happen for me. When I was upset there was always somebody to talk to. I knew if I ran into any problems, I had a place to come to and someone who is willing to listen. If it wasn't for the people at the RAFT I don't think I would be where I am today.

I have been working for about a

year and a half now and I have a really nice apartment. I made a lot of friends at the RAFT and they help me through the bad times. I still come to the RAFT, but only on Mondays, because I'm working a lot.

*The writer is a former RAFT Client*

## Christmas Socks !!

Every year the Canadian Tire Employee Association donates money for the kids' Christmas. Their direction is simple. Just make sure everyone has a good Christmas. They send money for staff to buy presents, stockings and Christmas dinner. A few weeks before Christmas, staff post the Christmas Wish List and ask each youth to fill in their Wishes. 2006 was my first Christmas at the RAFT and I was wondering what kind of list we would end up with. My thoughts ran to a list full of Nintendo's Wii, CD players, and iPod's and I wondered how we could afford Christmas. But when the list came back I was really surprised. The majority of the kids wanted socks for Christ-

mas. Some wanted socks and underwear. Others requested a warm hoodie and another requested a backpack. Not a single youth asked for an electronic toy or gadget. Life on the streets often means being cold. Having warm dry feet is one of the best gifts these kids can get.

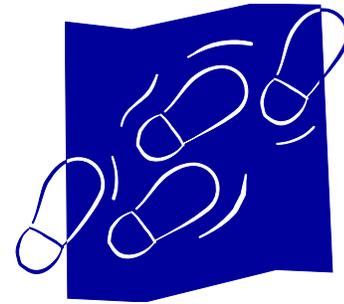
For many of these kids, the RAFT is the only Family they know. Christmas time brings these kids together and lets them know that people care for them.

Christmas is often a time of family reconciliation and sometimes our kids are reunited with their families. When this happens, everyone from kids to staff share the joy.

Thanks to the employees of

Canadian Tire, Christmas at the RAFT is about warm toes, friendship and hope.

*Michael Lethby is the Executive Director of the RAFT*



## Dinner is Ready

The Ladies come in every Thursday night to get dinner ready and teach any youth who are interested how to cook.

Most of the ladies are grandmothers and we affectionately call them our Church Ladies. They are part of the *United*

*When the Ladies are in the building, everyone is on their best behaviour and cursing and swearing is barely audible.*

*Church Outreach Committee* and this is just one of many activities the *United Church* does to support the RAFT.

When the Ladies are in the building, everyone is on their best behaviour and cursing and swearing is barely audible.

Our kitchen is small and overcrowded but the Ladies don't seem to mind. They just make do with what we have. It is obvious that the Ladies care about what they are doing and about the youth. They always have a kind word or quick smile. At the end of the meal, the dishes are done, the kitchen is left sparkling and the lives of the youth are enriched.

## Why Teens are Homeless:

Many young people run away from home in order to escape physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or family violence and conflict. Others run away from a good home because they cannot resolve their family conflict. Although they see running as their only alternative, flight makes them even more vulnerable, placing them at greater risk on

the streets. Some youth have grown up in the system of foster care and have no family and few supports. Others are too ashamed to go home. Many youth mistrust adults and formal services and have learned to trust only themselves.

The probability that homeless teens will become involved with illegal activities increases with

the length of time that they are on the streets. The sad fact is the longer that young people live on the streets without help, the greater their risk of falling victim to substance addiction, prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, other physical health and mental health problems, and violence.



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**14 YEARS OF MAKING  
A DIFFERENCE**

***One Step at a Time***

## **Going Home**

The RAFT is currently located in a rented commercial building just outside of the downtown core.

The building is old, overcrowded, expensive to operate and inadequate for our needs. Due to the increasing demands and limited capacity, the RAFT desperately needed a new home. **Our dream has become a reality.**

The Federal Government through its SCPI Program has helped us to purchase a new home. The new facility includes a 16 bed emergency hostel and drop-in centre providing outreach support services. The RAFT is currently raising funds to supply the new building with kitchen equipment, a security system, and a Life Skills Training classroom.

The new facility will be open in the Fall of 2007.

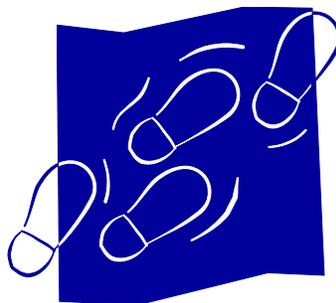
## **Where do we go to from here.**

Everyday, with the support of our community, the RAFT makes a difference to the lives of homeless and at risk youth. One step at a time we help troubled youth become productive, self-reliant and independent members of the community. We are teaching them that they are not alone and that people in our community care about them. The help these youth receive today lasts a lifetime. *Without it, unemployment, homelessness, poverty, isolation, despair and high-risk behaviours like drug and alcohol addiction are their reality.* The RAFT's annual operating budget is \$370,000. The RAFT receives 46% of its funding from the Region of Niagara for the crisis shelter beds, 15% of its funding from foundations including the United Church of Canada, Prevent Challenge and the Toronto Community Foundation, 7% of its funding from the United Ways of St. Catharines & Thorold, Niagara Falls & Fort Erie and Niagara South, 12% of its funding from our local Faith Community and the remaining 20% from the community at large.

### **HOW CAN YOU HELP?**

- 1. Make a donation to the RAFT.***
- 2. Arrange a fundraising event through your service club or association.***
- 3. Volunteer your time.***

## **Community Connection**



Research shows that most homeless adults have their first homeless experience as a teen. If we can address this problem when it first happens, we have a better chance of preventing homelessness in the future. The Niagara Region is fortunate to have some of the best and most innovative community and education programs in the Province. However, connecting youth to

these services is the key to their success.

By connecting youth to the continuum of community services, the RAFT helps these young people to move out of the cycle of homelessness.

Through cooperation and support from our community partners, the RAFT is building sustainable community capacity to address the problem of homelessness. With the help of our partners, at-risk youth can access social support, housing and employment and job readiness services.

***The RAFT is a unique place where clients meet with community service providers to begin the process of community re-integration.***