Sanctum Survivor 2017: A 36 Hour Journey into Homelessness

Good morning everyone, my name is Annette Epp. I was asked to speak about an experience that I lived this past June when I participated in an event called Sanctum Survivor.

This event is put on by the Sanctum Care Group, an organization committed to providing a safe home environment for vulnerable people living with HIV. Their mandate is to give care with dignity in a low barrier, high tolerance model. The population they serve is one of the most marginalized in our society today: poverty stricken, homeless, living with chronic disease and stigmatized by the fact that their disease has the name: HIV.

Sanctum Survivor 2017 was designed to raise awareness about poverty and homelessness in our own community and also to raise money to start a unique hospice for pregnant women living with HIV to be able to have a stable environment with access to care before and after the birth of their baby.

HIV is treatable and people living with HIV can live a normal life span. Transmission of the virus to an unborn child is 100 percent preventable; however, the reality in Saskatchewan has been different. It is estimated that 75 percent of people who are unsupported and homeless with HIV will die within 5 years. The cost to the system of one single baby born with HIV is 1.5 million dollars.

The cost to society is much more than just the money….

My 36 hours of homelessness started at 0600 on Friday June 2nd at the Sanctum Hospice by SPH. When I arrived, I was asked to put all of my clothes and belongings in a box. The only thing I was allowed to keep was my underwear, sox, a hat and my cellphone. My cell phone had strict limitations. It was used to track me on an APP called LIFE 360, to send Tweets in order to raise public awareness and garner funds and in case of emergency. I was NOT allowed to contact any family or friends or use the phone in any other way.

Random clothes were hanging on a fence, all used, not necessarily clean and certainly not matching or sized to fit!

I must have some of my mother’s good sense in me because I picked out a pair of sturdy jeans with big pockets…. They were way too big for me and didn’t even reach my ankles but I found an old work boot lying around and stole the lace to tie them up. I grabbed an oversize T shirt and then a sweatshirt and a type of windbreaker and tied them around my waist. The hobo look was pretty authentic and I actually think that highend designers are all over this now – Urban street wear! But I have to say that super expensive jeans with holes all over are NOT good street wear.

Once dressed in my recycled clothes, we were debriefed about safety on the street and then assigned a partner. Mine for the 36 hour challenge was Yann Martel, author of the Life of Pi. We were given a list of tasks to complete before the 36 hours was up. We left the Sanctum Hospice with the clothes on our backs, no money in our pockets and no identification. Initially, the sense of freedom without the responsibility of my pager was kind of exhilarating. Of course, I knew that in 36 hours I would be back in my suburban castle and it was nothing like what I felt 36 hours later thinking about how it would be if my life went on day after day like this with no end in sight.

Our first challenge was to get food at the Food Bank. I had been there before and donated to this worthy cause. But I really had no idea of the limitations and restrictions surrounding this method of feeding the poor.

It is open Monday to Friday from 0830 to 1145. There is NO free accessible food on the weekend in Saskatoon. We walked there from SPH – about ten blocks. When we arrived they asked for my Health Card. I didn’t have one or any of the other pieces of ID that they said would work instead. You can sell those on the street….who knew?

They were very kind despite my lack of identification and agreed to give me some food. People can access the Food Bank 2 times per month but can only get enough food for 2 – 3 days. I was given a box with a LOT of bread, some cold luncheon meat and several bags of salad. I had no fridge and only a plastic grocery bag to carry the food. When I told the worker that I had no fridge or way of keeping perishables, she brought me several cans of tuna. That seemed great, until I realized that I had no way of opening the cans!! And no dishes or cutlery to serve or eat anything with…..

At this point, my partner became a bit distraught, and it was only 0930 am on the first day. What are we going to eat? And how?

Again, I lucked out and realized that my people have a presence on 20th street. I said to Yann, I know where I can get a can opener. He didn’t believe me until I pointed out the MCC Thrift Store in front of us. Although, we had many tasks left to accomplish, I felt that it was worth waiting until it opened at 10 to get supplies to consume our food.

The woman behind the counter was an angel. We never revealed who we were (against the rules) and she looked at our disheveled appearance and plastic grocery bag and immediately sprang to action. She ran to the back and returned with 2 huge blue IKEA shopping bags to carry all of our stuff. She then told us that we could rifle through the kitchen supply area and if we found a canopener could keep it and also take two forks.

I lucked out and found a decrepit rusty thing. I would NEVER have considered using this and would NEVER have brought it to the Thrift Store – whoever did was a genius! We left that store Elated with our swag.

Something I never thought about until my 36 hours of homelessness was how I took personal hygiene for granted. We had no toothbrush or comb and had to use only public washrooms. We were supposed to wash our hands 9 times per day and that was seriously challenging. We didn’t have a Swell waterbottle to carry with us so had to hydrate from water fountains or taps. We walked over 15 km per day and it was hot and then there was a hailstorm and we got soaked and we had nowhere to put our few belongings to keep them dry. There are very few benches to sit and rest on and our feet were so sore.

We were instructed that we had to panhandle to raise enough money to buy a meal. Breakfast and lunch are served at the Friendship Inn Monday to Friday but there is no supper on the street.

Asking strangers for money was a very uncomfortable and demeaning experience. People looked away and hurried past. One woman that I met in a bathroom while I was washing my precious can opener looked at me with horror and ran away from me. In desperation, I went to SPH to see if I could find a friendly face who might be willing to part with some spare change. I met several surgical colleagues who couldn’t really grasp what I was doing. They were all in scrubs and in the end I got a grand total of 2 dollars and 75 cents from them!

I knew who I was…..this was crazy! People were actually afraid of me. And even if they were nice, no one carries change around or at least they don’t admit it.

I never received any money from a stranger, only people that I actually knew who randomly saw me wandering around on the street. I know a lot of people but I don’t think our homeless have the same social network to beg money from.

We walked to the Friendship Inn for lunch. What an amazing place. When we walked in the manager spotted us right away as newbies. She came over and gave us the drill. We were welcome to stay and eat but we couldn’t cause trouble and if we took food we had better eat it or we were not welcome back. If they were serving something we didn’t prefer, we should make sure that it wasn’t put on our plates.

The coffee was horrible even by hospital standards but I cherished that cup over lunch. The food was fantastic. There were families everywhere and my partner exclaimed with shock that he never thought he would see children at a soup kitchen. Who did we think were the poorest and most vulnerable in our society?? A recent UNICEF report ranks Canada 37th out of 41 wealthy countries in terms of food security for children. More than 22 percent of Canadian children live in poverty. That is almost 1 in 4. It seems unbelievable but true that this is happening today in our own back yard. Indigenous children make up only 6 percent of the total population of children in Canada but they take up the lions share of the number of kids living in poverty.

There were people at the Friendship Inn who were obviously super high just sitting on the couch watching TV. No one paid any attention and they didn’t disrupt the flow or the homey welcoming vibe of the place.

I saw two couples whom I recognized and never thought that they would need to eat at a place like the Friendship Inn. They were students from another country but actually all had professional degrees from their own home universities.

The staff members at the Friendship Inn were so nice and let us charge our phones. And I thought, If I was homeless would I even have a phone, and if I did who would I have to call to help me?

After lunch we had many more tasks to accomplish and although all were in the core area of Saskatoon we walked and walked.

We had to find a place to live for 450 dollars per month. We went to the Public Library Branch on 20th street to see if we could access a computer to look up listings.

There are free computers to use there but you need a library card and I didn’t have one or any other ID for that matter. I gave a most convincing reason why I needed the computer and the librarian kindly let me use one that was close to her so that she could supervise my access.

After combing Kijiji for apartments for rent, I realized that 450 dollars will never come close to getting an apartment: it might get you a room for rent but if you are homeless with no ID or references, no one will even be willing to show it to you let alone rent it.

Just as we were leaving for the next task, a young aboriginal woman walked in and asked the librarian the exact same question that I had. She had no library card or other ID. She needed to find a place to rent but she looked dirty and disheveled. She was turned down instantly and asked to leave. And although I saw the whole thing unfold before me, I said absolutely NOTHING. I just kept my mouth shut and never stood up for her or tried to help her in any way. It was a perfect opportunity to advocate for someone who obviously was in no position to help themself and I totally blew it. It really bugs me today but to be honest, I was intimidated and did not know how the librarian or the woman would react. Neither of those are good reasons but they are the truth.

We spent the rest of the day walking to a variety of free health services that are present in the inner city. The workers are some of the most compassionate people I have ever met.

We went to a building behind St. Anne’s Catholic Church to have “coffee” between 3 and 5. We thought that we would sit down and chat with people and have a little faspa type thing. It turned out to be very different.

There was a doorbell that you rang and a woman peeked around the corner after opening it just a slit. You could order a peanut butter sandwich and a coffee or hot chocolate. There was no place to sit and visit. A colorful variety of people arrived to ring that doorbell including 4 kids who were obviously regulars.

One guy rode up on a bike. He had a hat, a long braid, sunglasses and a backpack. On any other day I might have been pretty terrified of him. But that afternoon I just noticed how incredibly thin he was. And I looked at him for half a second and held out my sandwich. It was gone into his backpack and he took off before my partner even noticed him.

I saw so many people on the street with hand made crutches and other devices to help them get around. I was feeling tired and sore but I cannot imagine what it would be like to have a disability and then spend your days walking in search of food and shelter.

The day disappeared so fast and evening set in. The wind turned cold and I was thankful for my sweatshirt and windbreaker. We walked to the riverbank and joined the other Survivors for a kind of makeshift potluck. Because I could open cans, I became pretty popular. The scenery was beautiful but the reality of homelessness was beginning to settle in, and we didn’t know where we were going to be spending the night…..

At about 8 pm, the organizers asked us to all meet at a location on 20th street where they handed out our sleeping assignments. I was instructed to go to Larson House detox unit for the night. Others went to the YWCA and the Salvation Army but some had to sleep outside at Kinsmen Park. Yann my partner was one of them. His 6am clothing choice wasn’t warm at all so I gave him my sweatshirt and windbreaker. I still had to walk ten or twelve blocks to get to Larson House and it was really cold in a T shirt.

Before going there, I was supposed to go to SPH ER to see what the wait time was. I now know why people hang around the entrance of that hospital. It is warm and safe. There is a bathroom and running water and if you have a bit of money in your pocket, there is a Tim Hortons!

I ran into a patient of mine at the entrance to the ER who was shocked to see me. She couldn’t really grasp what I was doing there looking the way I did. She asked me if I was going to be homeless the next Friday because she had an appointment! She showed up the next Friday with food for me. What a good human.

At the same time, one of my OR nurses spotted me at the ER. She was bringing her son in to be seen for a sports injury. When she saw me she told him to put his head down and walk by really quickly. She thought I had lost my mind and she wanted nothing to do with me. The next week when she and I scrubbed together in the OR, she confessed this. I had not even seen her. She felt terrible but obviously terrified to see me in that state. How crazy is that?

I got to Larson House at about 11pm. The staff was very nice but took everything from me and put it into a bin to collect in the morning. I was given a pair of pyjamas and directed to a hospital type bed with 4 curtains around it. It was in a big open room with about 25 other beds for men and women. The night was busy with people coming in constantly in various states of intoxication. At 2am, I took out the Advil that I had hidden in my sock when my husband Jim dropped me off at 0600. I never confessed that I had it, and for some reason they never took my socks!. The pain in my right hip was killing me…… what if I really had an addiction to something that could throw my life off the rails? It was a pretty sobering thought.

Although I had a roof over my head and a bed, I didn’t sleep. It was noisy and so many thoughts and emotions were going through my mind that I couldn’t settle down.

I collected my things and got dressed and left Larson House at 7am. All I could think about was how I was missing my morning extra large latte. What a ridiculous first world problem!

Yann and I met outside and set off for breakfast. We went to DRIFT because he was desperate for a crepe and I really needed the latte. We blew our entire wad of panhandled money on one small meal..... very poor planning. We were supposed to do our laundry but had no more cash. Luckily, a nurse I had worked with for years was sitting in Drift with her husband so I walked up and begged for 5 bucks. When she introduced me to her husband, I thought he might have a stroke….I hadn’t exactly looked in a mirror and I can only imagine what kind of bed head I had to go with my outfit!

Doing laundry on 20th street is nearly impossible. There are no Laundromats in the immediate vicinity. We had phones so googled locations – total and complete cheating. But we were desperate and had kicked into survival mode. We ended up walking to a Laundromat on Broadway and then realized that we each had only one set of clothes. Yann was a champ and stripped down and wrapped himself in a flimsy fleece blanket that he had managed to find overnight. It costs 6 dollars to wash and dry a load. But if you only have one set of clothes, it really doesn’t matter….you are just going to wear them dirty.

The second day involved so much more walking and after a sleepless night for both of us, we were feeling worn out. Finally, at around 4pm we wound up back at the HIV hospice. We debriefed with other survivors for a few minutes and then we were allowed to change back into our clothes, go home and shower and be at the GALA wrap up event dinner by 6pm. The Survivors were expected to march in with bagpipes playing ,eat dinner and then answer questions in front of 300 guests.

All I wanted was a long hot bath and 36 hours of sleep!

I must admit that since the experience, I have been a bit more cynical and not my bubbly rose colored glasses self. Poverty and homelessness is ugly. It should NOT be happening on our own streets but it is. I have been exposed to the medical aspect of this social problem for many years and thought I had a pretty good grasp of it. I didn’t’.

Participating in Sanctum Survivor forced me to see the human side of poverty and homelessness and the consequences that it has for the soul. Being invisible and voiceless in a country like Canada seems impossible to believe but it is real and I have seen the faces and I cannot forget them.

Ever since my experience, people have asked me what they can do to help. The problem seems so insurmountable and I have not been very good at giving tangible answers. But today I have constructed the Annette Epp top 10 list of things that I think could make a difference.

1. Don’t judge. When you see a homeless person, just remember that they are human beings just like you and you don’t know their story. They are someone’s brother or son or mother or daughter.
2. Treat others with dignity. When someone asks for a handout, you don’t have to give them money. But you also don’t have to run away or rush by like they don’t exist. In the words of the Dali Lama: Be Kind Whenever possible and it is always possible.
3. Feed people. Hungry people cannot effectively do anything else but survive. What if we took one of our fantastic NPMC potlucks to the Friendship Inn or out onto 20th street and Ave P for a Friday night or Sunday noon? I wonder how many people would show up.
4. Tim Hortons cards – there is a TH at SPH and on 22nd street that at least has shelter and somewhat nourishing food. I give this out instead of cash. I actually randomly hand cards out to people before they ask me and their reaction is invariably positive.
5. Keep giving to local shelters like the Salvation Army and the MCC Thrift Store and Crisis Nursery and others. People really do need our worn out or out of fashion items. Things that I never thought about were socks and practical shoes – wow that is important and also back packs to put things in and a good jacket to block the wind.
6. Speak up. There have been many atrocities in this world and poverty is one of them. We cannot solve this overnight but we can provide a voice for the voiceless.
7. Walk down 20th street and see it for yourself. Do it in the daytime with a buddy but get out there. You will see the homemade posters of missing women instead of the ones of missing pets that are in our own neighborhoods.
8. Never give up hope. It will take a lot of positive energy, courage and money to turn this ship around but hope will anchor the effort
9. Get educated about the situation. Take a course on cultural sensitivity. Learn more about residential schools and their impact. Learn about the foster home situation in Saskatchewan.
10. Play to your strengths. Everyone can contribute something. I will continue to practice medicine and use my influence where I can to bring awareness. You will have other attributes and things to contribute to the situation that are equally valuable.

And I want to end on a positive note. I know that this congregation is full of people who believe in making the world a safer and more just place. I have delivered blankets and toques and baby clothes from the box in the Education wing for many years. You would not believe how these items are appreciated and what a bridge it makes when trying to build a relationship with people in the inner city and in the northern community of LaLoche.

I would like to end with a quote from Nelson Mandela who gave a famous speech to MAKE POVERTY HISTORY in 2005. It still hasn’t happened has it? But this is one of the things that he said:

**Overcoming poverty is NOT a gesture of Charity. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.**