

WHY DO THE ODD FELLOWS OPERATE A HOMELESS SHELTER?

In 2020 the Vancouver Odd Fellows lodge opened a cold weather shelter for the homeless in their heritage hall at 1443 West 8th Avenue in partnership with the City of Vancouver. Three years in and having sheltered over 400 people it has proved a success. However, operating a shelter that serves a group of people who are experiencing the difficult situation of homelessness, some of whom are also suffering from mental illness or drug addiction, has understandably resulted in some challenges. With these challenges the members of the Odd Fellows often find themselves debating about the value of the shelter and discussing the future of this program. In response to some of this debate, member Nick Vaughan responded with the following essay:

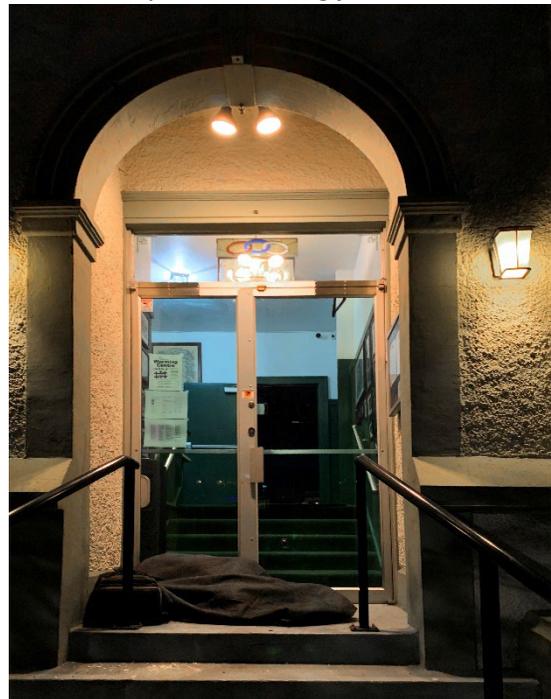
"With the recent debates regarding the future of our warming centre, I prefer to be an Odd Fellow who stays out of that kind of soul destroying (in the most literal sense) type of argument, but most of what I have seen written seems to affirm that you guys, in a kindly act of love for your community and fellow humanity, by a vast majority are in favour of continuing this noble project; my hope is that we do.

Those of us with a background in education and social care know that the lodge has saved lives with this act of providing shelter to the homeless. I warned Brother Wells when we first opened that one of these days we would have a guest who wouldn't wake up one morning, that our lodge hall would be the last place on earth that they would have a hot meal, a kindly word and a warm night's sleep, that the weather we offer shelter from is what kills the homeless, that the rest of the day when they have to be out wandering the streets in -3 or -4 it puts an immense strain on already weakened bodies. This is why I take cooking for the shelter so seriously, I know at some point I will, probably already have, fed one of our guests the last meal they ever eat and so I will do my utmost to make sure it is the best meal I can give them. I am a foster parent and have adopted a son, I like to think I have been and am a pretty decent man in most of my life but cooking for the shelter is one of the things I consider my 'best work' in a small way and the reason I have chosen not to be reimbursed for my expense is because it is my personal act of charity and as such feels good for my soul.

The shelter is easily the most noble thing our Odd Fellows' lodge does, something you members should be proud of, it hasn't and won't be without its problems and little difficulties but something this good is worth that effort and to be frank I am surprised at how smoothly it has run. I understand, in fact shared the sense that a 100-year-old heritage building might not be the best place to open a warming shelter but it is the only place available in our community and has worked out wonderfully. Our Odd Fellow members should be so proud of themselves for making it the success it is.

When a population as ignored and despised as the homeless are offered help it is an act that literally parallels the story of the Good Samaritan, a tale we as Odd Fellows aspire to, as stated in our valediction to 'visit the sick, relieve the distressed...' The Vancouver Odd Fellows lodge possibly alone in all of Odd Fellowship has been given the privilege of literally living up to this ideal, it is something that we as members of the lodge should be proud of, it is also something we have all sworn oaths to do, it is our best work, worthy of our modest pride, an act of faith and loyalty to our fellow men and women and our community that relieves distress. I cannot think of a better act a lodge, an Odd Fellow could do to fulfill the valediction we swear every meeting we attend.

I shared the concern some of our members had before the shelter opened, and I with my experience operating a group home and fostering kids probably had better knowledge of the problems and pitfalls it could bring - but it has been an outstanding success. It has brought us new members, higher profile in our community, a sense of purpose; for me more importantly our shelter guests have told us that we offer the best shelter in town, that they feel safer with us, that we offer better food and show more concern for their well-being than the other centers. I like to think this is because we are Odd Fellows and that is our nature, that is why we joined an organization that promises little more than an opportunity to help serve humankind. I apologize if this missive is full of biblical parallels, Samaritans and Last Suppers, but it is impossible for me to see the shelter as anything less than a profoundly spiritual act that does us credit as a lodge and as individuals. In Friendship, Love and Truth,



- Nick Vaughan"