

Volunteering with “Out of the Cold”

By Elizabeth Block

I am a volunteer with the Bloor Street West Out of the Cold programme, which is supported by seven local congregations, including Toronto Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends. The various Out of the Cold programmes are mostly run by churches, synagogues, and mosques. They operate independently, for the most part one night a week during the winter — offering dinner, a place to sleep, breakfast, and sometimes other things such as showers, a clothing bank, nursing care.

I help cook breakfast, partly because I live a couple of blocks away from the programme site, so getting there at 6 a.m. is not a problem, and partly because it is a practical job. It is something I can do.

After my first season (I think) I was asked to be the breakfast shift supervisor, probably *faut de mieux* (there is someone who would be at least as good as I am, but she doesn't want to do it). At the age of 54, it was (and still is) the first supervisory position I had ever held. Since people keep signing up for the breakfast shift, and many come back from year to year, I guess I must be doing a reasonably good job.

Cooking breakfast for forty to sixty homeless people once a week is not what you would call fun, but it is satisfying. It is a pleasure to watch people eat the food you have cooked. I love to dish up oatmeal, hot out of the pot, and see the guests come and get it.

My contact with the guests is

friendly but superficial. Steven, who scrambles the eggs, is better at this than I am: if someone comes looking for seconds before everyone has had firsts, he recognizes them. Incidentally, he addresses the male guests as “sir,” which, although contrary to the letter of Quaker practice (mind you, he is not a Quaker), seems to me to be perfectly expressive of its spirit.

Our guests can occasionally be difficult, although real trouble is far less likely at breakfast than it is at dinner, when there are twice as many of them, and they have not had the benefit of a night's sleep, or at least some rest. Some are not entirely sober; some are not entirely sane. They want what they want when they want it, no doubt because they fear, for good reason, that if they don't get it right away they won't get it at all. I do my best to give it to them.

We are told that homeless people like the Out of the Cold shelters, in spite of their deficiencies (mats on a gym floor don't meet U.N. standards), because they are among the few places where the people who deal with them are not being paid to do so.

Are we contributing to the problem? I expect we are. The problem — the problems — are not enough affordable housing, and a minimum wage so low that some people cannot support themselves on what they earn. It comes as a surprise to a lot of people that some of our guests have jobs. I don't know how many;

but often there are people who have asked to be awakened early so that they can get to work. I'm sure we are taking governments off the hook.

Several years ago, at a steering committee meeting, someone suggested that we — all of Toronto's Out of the Cold programmes — announce a “sunset clause,” that is, tell the government that we will do this work for a few more years and then stop. Of course we didn't do this. There is no point making a threat that you are not prepared to carry out, and as long as we can find the money and the people to do the work, we will do it. It is something we can do.

My work with Out of the Cold has led to political action which may, perhaps, be more useful in the long run. I write letters; I go to demonstrations; I speak from the audience at public meetings. As an Out of the Cold volunteer I have something to say, and credibility when I say it.

Or sing it. I sometimes quote from Grit Laskin's song, *Lucky Man*:

*I had no say in being born,
In when or where it happened to me;
T'was only chance that turned the
wheel
And made my living easy.
O I am a lucky man,
Favoured by good fortune's hand
Far more than I'm deserving. **

Elizabeth Block is a member of Toronto Monthly Meeting.