

Hearing the community's voice

By Sarah Sobanski

The North Hastings Community Trust (NHCT) has big ideas. Even their mandate, to provide emergency financial assistance and community referrals to low-income locals is a gigantic undertaking for this community. Looking to provide coverage for rent, heat, hydro, fire damage and groceries to stop anyone on the brink of homelessness is a tiny light for those facing darkness.

Last Saturday, Sept. 24, NHCT gathered with community members from across Bancroft and surrounding area to bring those struggling with poverty into the light. To name a few, in partnership with Put Food in the Budget, NHCT brought forward real faces of energy poverty and hunger. Among them, program co-ordinator Jane Kali shouted, "No more disconnects. Disconnects are inhumane."

This rally however, went deeper than the issues it was combating. There was a sense of camaraderie as Kali spoke of resilience she'd seen in the community, the coming together of the community to help one another, and the projects like Harvest the North that were helping fight poverty but not fast enough. Attendees said they felt hidden. The government couldn't hear them or refused to. While perhaps through NHCT they no longer felt alone, it was far from smooth sailing.

As a reporter, many of the issues facing our community like hunger and poverty are brought to my attention especially as we head into winter. It's unfathomable the fear that comes with wondering if you'll make it through the next season. But as a resident of the Bancroft area, it can be harder to see.

There are no visible homeless on Hastings Street North in the middle of the night, nor are there during the day. No one is begging in front of the grocery stores. If you look closer however, you begin to notice that many of our local businesses are geared toward the staggering numbers of our population living below the poverty line the Heritage Shoppe and the North Hastings Community Cupboard, to name a few, are just off the main street. It would be abnormal not to have a Choices Thrift and Gift Shop, or any of our other establishments geared towards affordable living.

The public doesn't immediately see rural poverty. Maybe because poverty is regularity for our community, it is harder to see. Or maybe tourists don't want to see it. Either way, NHCT made a difference last weekend and it's been picking up steam even in the few short months that I've been here.

For starter, the *Toronto Star* picked up the story of 74-year-old Peggy Mills who couldn't pay back her hydro debt. In the article Kali detailed she received 10 calls a day at NHCT. She brought up the question being faced by many local residents; food or hydro?

Next, *Chex Television* visited Woodview Lane to hear the story of locals who were facing unpayable hydro bills. They quoted the energy minister as saying that the 60,000 Ontario customers disconnected from hydro last year was not a crisis. But North Hastings residents' stories followed quickly behind. One woman asked if she was supposed to sit curled in blankets as opposed to turning on her hydro.

Finally, the Fix Hydro and Put Food in the Budget rally attracted *Global News's* attention. Though the protesters used humour by dressing as garden gnomes to keep their spirits up, *Global News* reporter Sean O'Shea tweeted the rally as #ConsumerSOS.

The point is that it is working. People are beginning to listen. Slowly, NHCT is building up the ladder of voices to be heard by the Government of Canada and by Hydro One. Yesterday, Riverside Park, tomorrow, Queen's Park.