

Getting Off the Street

Maggie Tallman talks to Alf Jackson about his work with street people . . . and his own experience as a street person.

How long have you been looking at the housing problem, and what have you seen happen?

Well, I've been around since they were moving people out of the inner city and shoving them all up to the suburbs. And the people didn't care for it. A lot of them have been drifting back downtown, or trying to. That's where most of them were born and raised. Only now there's condominiums all over the place, and there's no room for someone who's working for \$4.55 an hour, who just can't pay high rents.

We had some cold winters. One winter it was twelve degrees below zero, and I was picking guys up off the street; guys sleeping in garages and backs of cars. Sometimes you have to be careful — you wake a guy up, and he's liable to come up fighting. I had a few scrapes myself. I made it to the hospital, a couple of

for the night. Sometimes I'd get them into a flopt. Usually paid for that out of my pocket. There were a few places I knew. Or sometimes I let people stay at my place. I still do that. But what I want to know is, why should people be sleeping out in the street, or in public parking garages? Or freezing to death in a truck, like Drina Joubert? Hostels aren't the answer, either. If you have six, or eight, or ten, or 20 in a dorm, do you want to strip all the way

down, go have a shower, come back, and find your stuff is gone?

I think we should put up a lot of small bachelorette apartments, in a hurry. And give people their own room, with a key, even if it's just for the night.

You've lived on the street yourself, right?

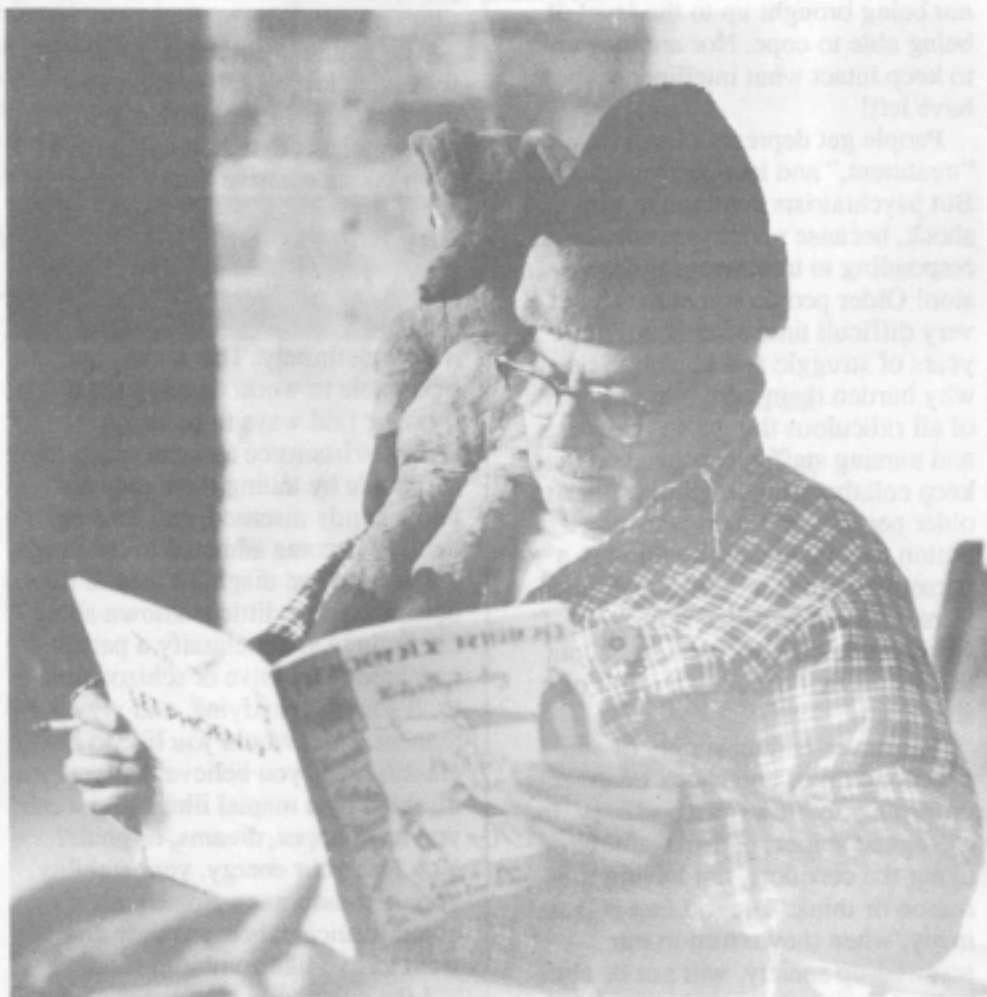
Yeah, sure. In 1954. After the wife died, I kind of got disillusioned. Fed

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times. But it was usually okay once the guy realized ...

Where did you end up taking people?

I'd send them to Fred Victor Mission [a men's hostel]. Keep them warm



up. She'd been in hospital for about seven years. I could have had a job at that time, if I'd wanted to. But I got into the booze. Later I jumped a freight and rode out west, to Winnipeg, where I did get a job.

But before that I was living on the street. And I found out what the other people there were doing. Some people were there by choice — you have to look at that, too. Some people don't want to live in places the social workers find for them.

I once saw a little set-up in Edmonton, which I thought was pretty good. This woman, Helen, would bring people in; mostly Native Canadians. She'd never ask anybody anything till they'd had the coffee and sandwich she'd give them. And then she'd sit and get them talking about the immediate problems they were having, that day.

I was on the bus one day, and I overheard a woman say she'd got a

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roomer in — a man who, I happened to know, had been talking to Helen and had decided to get a room. Helen had talked to the landlord. She liked to get the people room and board, so they'd have something to eat.

One concern that is close to home for us is the problems of ex-psychiatric inmates. I know that some members of On Our Own are homeless. Most are living in pretty sad situations, and paying rent out of their social assistance or disability cheques, which sometimes go directly to the landlords.

Preventing people from going into hospital in the first place, having them stay out in the community, is a step in the right direction. If someone



is stuck and needs a place to stay, there should be people in the community who will take them in.

The Roomers' Association people are very visible. And most of them have probably never spoken in front of more than three people before — usually their kids. But they are the ones whose immediate problem is that they don't have a home. Who will probably never have a house, and will be lucky if they ever have their own apartment.

I've got to hand it to the people who speak up, who aren't professionals. We have to have a place where people can at least go and have a cup of coffee and discuss their problems with someone. And the person they talk to should be another street person, not a professional. Someone who's been through the fire, and knows.

People who own houses don't want places in their neighbourhood where tenants come and go. Certainly they don't want a house that the landlord doesn't care about, that's going to become an eyesore. Groups of people have to be able to buy houses themselves, and keep them up. Then the neighbours know that they care about their own house, and about the

neighbourhood, too.

Right now, people coming out of institutions hardly have anywhere to go, and don't know what to do. They're often in no shape to do anything.

How do people live on the street?

Well, we have one thing in Toronto that's good. There are places people can go to eat. And usually, when you're on the prowl all day long, you're looking for a safe, warm spot to spend the night in. You might go to the Scott Mission in the morning for toast and peanut butter and coffee, then start your daily trek, and end up at the Good Shepherd Refuge for a late feed.

Many of the people living on the street are Native Canadians who come here from reservations, and find themselves shunned by everyone. To me, that's the biggest crime in this country. The people who are comfortable, who have good jobs, don't take the time to look at their brothers and sisters who are on the street.

Alf Jackson is president of On Our Own, Toronto's self-help group for ex-psychiatric inmates, which publishes Phoenix Rising.