



Warm people confront freezing streets

By GORDON KROFCHICK

In 1998, I was invited to participate in the organizing committee for an 'Out of the Cold' program being launched by Beth Sholom, a synagogue I attend in Toronto. A city-wide initiative, Out of the Cold provides refuge, hospitality and emergency shelter to the homeless in Toronto by partnering with local community centres and faith groups.

I had no idea that I would make a 13-year plus commitment to the organization.

Initially my wife Deborah and I expected to see homeless people with mental health or drug problems. But we found they were just ordinary people who had been disadvantaged in one way or another.

I'll never forget my first night of volunteering with the program — helping people get settled for the night on floor mats and with blankets we provided; dealing with various personalities, as well as some complaints about our initial disorganization; greeting our late arrivals and providing them with whatever

food we had left.

It was an extremely humbling experience.

During those first few years, not too many people were aware of the services the Out of the Cold program offered but, as time passed word started to get out. Our overnight guests began to see the Out of the Cold program as their temporary home and often preferred our refuge to other shelters because it provided a warmer, safer and more hospitable environment.

Over the last 13 years, Deborah and I participated as members of the organizing committee, then supervisors of the 9 p.m. to midnight shift, and finally as co-chairs of the entire program, from 2007 to 2009. We have had the privilege of working for a truly amazing volunteer-run organization and watching it grow.

We started with feeding 80 people and sleeping 30 to 40 overnight. Today the program provides dinner and a take-away bagged lunch for over 200 and shelter for more than 60 each Tuesday night during the winter. It also runs a



Gordon Krofchick, a chartered accountant and chartered business valuator, has been with the Out of the Cold program for 13 years. He is shown with his wife Deborah, who also participates in the program.

well-stocked clothing bank. Providing these services takes the efforts of more than 150 volunteers who work eight shifts from early Tuesday until Wednesday morning.

A lot of the work that makes the program possible is done behind the scenes: doing our food shopping,

ordering supplies, picking up donations of kosher baked goods and going to the Ontario Food Terminal for fruit.

On a typical night, dinner is cooked by the synagogue caterer and includes roast chicken, a hearty soup, fresh vegetables, potatoes or

barley, baked deserts, fresh fruit, buns and rolls. We also cook a filling breakfast for those staying overnight: French toast, pancakes, eggs, hash browns, grilled cheese, cereal, toast and hot drinks to see them on their way in the morning.

We have had occasions when volunteers wait until the last moment to inform us that they can't come or just do not to show up, forcing the organizers to fill the void. Staff at the Out of the Cold site have called my office saying that they were missing something and asking if I could help them with whatever was needed.

However, seeing people enjoy the meals we have cooked and organized makes those challenges worthwhile.

During each shift, I can look forward to meeting visitors and volunteers who I have befriended over the years. I know many of their life stories. There's the 90-year-old gentleman who joins us for dinner, cherishing the meal and the oppor-

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Visitors don't fit stereotypical profile

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tunity for genuine human contact it provides. He has told me about caring for his mentally ill disabled son and his worries about what will happen to the son when his father is gone. And a homeless guest with a disability that prevents him from communicating verbally; his speech is garbled, which understandably causes him tremendous social anxiety and frightens those who don't know him. And then there's the disabled mother who cannot work and brings her two children for dinner. She appreciates the opportunity for social interaction our program provides, and the takeaway lunches we give her children.

Not all are homeless; many are poor. It's hard to imagine having only a small CPP and Old Age Security pension on which to live, or trying to stretch a welfare cheque to pay for rent and put food on the table. But it's a challenge many face, and that can leave them feeling isolated, afraid and alone.

For one night each week, Out of the Cold helps make their lives just a little bit easier, providing a venue where they can spend a dinner socializing and connecting with people in their community, even if only for a few hours.

We've also added innovative services, including a nurse to attend to certain basic health issues and counselling. In the last several years, we have also had live performers entertain during dinner and we now provide art classes along with a year-end art show, with a majority of the proceeds going to the artists. Some of our homeless guests have turned out to be exceptional talents who find a great outlet through art.

As a chartered accountant and a chartered business valuator, I am able to apply the professional skills and knowledge I use in my work to the Out of the Cold Program. For example, every change in the program has financial consequences which we must consider before proceeding. I was responsible for developing our budgets and submitting them for approval. We also have to be aware that this program needs the financial backing to provide its services.

Some of our best ideas have come about as a result of someone suggesting a new way of proceeding that challenged the status quo. Often these new solutions helped us bridge the gap between our growing demand for services and what we were capable of funding internally.

Yet for all the challenges of balancing work and volunteering, I'm sure every Out of the Cold volunteer would agree that for as much as we give of ourselves, our guests provide us with more in return. This is

especially true for our younger volunteers and families. It also provides an opportunity for families to volunteer together. My wife, two of my sons (Matthew and Evan) and I have volunteered for this program for well over a decade.

I know that our younger volunteers are gaining valuable insights into a segment of society they might otherwise never know — the needy

and the unfortunate — and this provides them with some valuable life lessons about charity, humanity and respect.

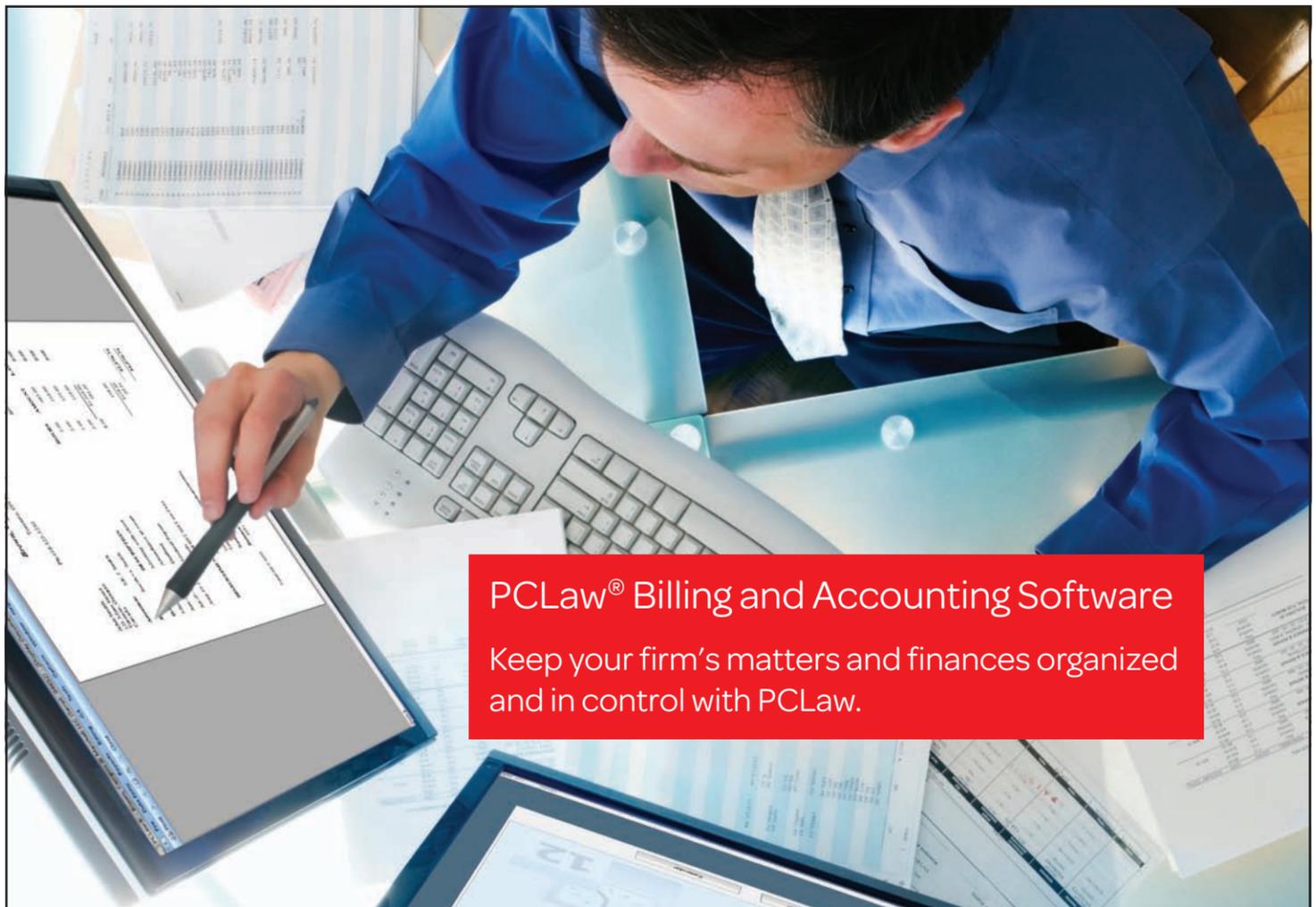
At the end of our Out of the Cold season, guests and volunteers are visibly moved to see our program ending for another year. The community that comes together each year for the Out of the Cold program at our synagogue provides

comfort and support for those in need and provides the volunteers with the satisfaction of really contributing to something that makes a difference.

However, we can only do so much. This is a self-funding program and, of course, resources are limited. The Out of the Cold Program faces challenges. They are certainly not unique, but they are

ones that we — like all charitable organizations — must continually strive to overcome.

Gordon Krofchick, CA, CBV, is president of Krofchick Valuations a forensic accounting business valuation firm. Contact him at 1-877-250-6682 or visit online at www.kval.ca. For more information about Out of the Cold, visit www.ootc.ca.



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