



Remarks by Executive Director
Jerry Novack
at the
2019 Annual General Meeting, 2020 June 18

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I join Garth in thanking you for joining us tonight.

My role tonight is to highlight the year 2019 from an operations standpoint. I draw your attention to the 2019 Annual Report that was distributed to you prior to tonight's meeting. It provides you with a bird's eye view of how The Grind responded during the year to the needs of at-risk community members through several of our programs and services. My presentation will try to avoid repeating what is already presented in the report. Instead, I will focus on issues we faced and successes we celebrated. In general, our interactions increased over the previous two years as the statistics included in the report indicate. The one exception was our experience in securing after-hours emergency shelter for the homeless in local motels. I will address this later in my presentation.

Garth's presentation discussed how The Grind has enjoyed phenomenal growth since its inception in late 2015. This growth, while positive in the sense that we've been able to provide people with help in several more ways, has also created stresses within the organization from a financial and human resources perspective. On the financial side, we've certainly been blessed with a cadre of dedicated donors, particularly from the faith community. While every donated dollar is important to us, and we are grateful for what we receive, the funding flow fluctuates making it difficult to plan for the mid- to long-term. The level of funding, as well, prevents us from hiring the skill sets a responsible charity requires for the critical functions like administrative and financial management and planning. As Garth indicated, we are a volunteer-based organization. While volunteers are indispensable to us by allowing us to perform many more tasks as well as bringing valuable life skills and experiences with them, relying on this source of labour almost exclusively is fraught with risks. Because volunteers come and go depending on demands on their personal lives, and because we rely heavily on the vagaries of donations, our programs and services suffer from a lack of consistency.

The Grind Coffee House, the first of our services to help those in need has been blessed with dedicated volunteers over time, but many of them are retirees and some advanced in age. Younger volunteers leave to pursue careers or other interests. Consequently, our volunteer turnover rate is quite high, requiring constant replenishment of the ranks. That is why you see our sign out front each day of operation calling for volunteers.

But we soldier on because the Coffee House plays a very strategic role for us. It



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isn't just a safe place where at-risk adult community members, who have no other option for relaxation and socialization, can go without fear of rejection or judgement. The facility also serves as a platform and an environment from and within which staff and volunteers have an opportunity to “open doors” that have been shut due to the life experiences of our clientele. Once trust has been established among a population that has been traumatized and marginalized most of their lives, we can work on creating an opportunity for conversation. Once channels of communication are opened, we have more of a chance to hear their stories and learn about their issues, to modify or change behaviour through a demonstration of our own behaviour and attitudes and, more importantly, to be in a position to offer help. While our role is not to provide clinical support, e.g. counselling, we can help ensure that the people who need help and are willing to accept it are directed to the right door that once open can provide them with access to professional assistance from a number of available community health and social services. The end result – at least this is our real goal – is to give those who are at-risk a measure of hope that their lives can change for the better.

That goal was the impetus for us to create a separate space within which we could conduct our administrative functions, but also where we could more adequately and confidentially focus on helping clientele with their needs. But early on in the operation of our Client Services Office we realized that we needed help beyond what our volunteer staff were able, willing and legally qualified to give. Chalk it up to our naivete or our reliance on the “heart” to drive the organization as opposed to the “intellect”, we plunged into the effort of trying to help but soon realizing that we were limited as to how much and how far we could go in giving more of a “hand up” than a “hand out”. With this realization, we reached out to the community, as we had from the get-go, first engaging the wonderful offer of assistance from the Social Service Worker program at Algonquin College in the Ottawa Valley. This partnership resulted in two SSW students, usually one first year and one second year student, joining our volunteer staff during the Fall, Winter and Spring terms. These students have been able to take the load off of our administrative staff in manning our Client Services' front counter – welcoming walk-in traffic and establishing the reason for the visit. Whether its accepting or registering donations, providing information on available community services or distributing hygiene products, food or clothing vouchers, or conducting an in-take for individuals seeking more in-depth help, both first- and second-year students can readily perform such functions. For walk-ins who require more in-depth help, however, second year



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students are only qualified to undertake a basic needs assessment following a proscribed questionnaire.

By the time the year 2019 rolled around, we realized that this process had inherent deficiencies. Once a needs assessment was done the students had to then reach out to those in the community more qualified to review the findings and to make recommendations. This often-entailed delays which wasn't the most helpful situation when dealing with individuals who were often impatient or in crisis. The location of The Grind in downtown Pembroke with the presence of many who suffer from mental health and addictions issues, not to mention those casually or chronically homeless in addition, combined with the traffic volume, created frustrations among clientele and volunteers alike.

Again, in recognizing a need we couldn't meet internally, we reached out into the professional community for help. This action resulted in the formation of two formal partnerships that entailed embedding professional staff in the Client Services Office from two of the largest health and social service agencies in Renfrew County. The first M.O.U. signed in 2019 was with the Adult Developmental Services Division of Family & Children's Services of Renfrew County (FCSRC), and the second was with Mental Health Services of Renfrew County (MHSRC) through its Crisis Team.

These partnerships, in addition to bringing needed professional resources to Pembroke's downtown core, also opened up other opportunities for The Grind and its clients. The first opportunity arose from the need of FCSRC's adult Developmental Services Program to have Pembroke-based accommodations available for clients who were domiciled outside the county due to a lack of appropriate short-term facilities. The Grind offered the use of its Emergency Refuge, a three-bedroom, self-contained facility that had been built in 2016 to provide temporary shelter for the homeless. While The Grind's Refuge was closed in the Fall of 2018 for financial considerations and homeless clients were subsequently housed in local motels with financial help from Ontario Works, the facility was still available for use. FCSRC took up The Grind's offer in 2019 and took over exclusive use of the facility for its clients, including homeless youth as part of the Renfrew County Safe Shelter for Youth initiative that the agency administered in partnership with three other agencies. In return for the use of the Emergency Refuge, FCSRC contributed monthly toward the cost of keeping the facility open.



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With the only homeless shelter between North Bay and Ottawa closed, homeless clients have been placed at greater risk. Despite the temporary sheltering option offered by motel stays arranged either by Ontario Works during weekday office hours, or after-hours sheltering arrangements made by The Grind seven nights per week through the use of an emergency crisis line paid for through a grant of \$35,000 from the United Way East Ontario and from some of the \$38,700 funds raised during Coldest Night of the Year 2019 walk-a-thon, there are now fewer opportunities for wrap-around services available to the homeless through The Grind as we lose contact with many clients once their motel stays are arranged. With limited provincial funding available, motel accommodation is limited in terms of length of stay. Beyond this, there has been, unfortunately, no other housing option than to provide the homeless with a bus ticket to Ottawa in the hope there is shelter space there. For those who are connected to Renfrew County communities through family or other ties, this has been a challenge for them as well as for The Grind and the community-at-large as many return to Pembroke eventually because of these connections or because the Ottawa shelters are full or the client doesn't feel safe in a large urban environment.

For The Grind, since many land back on its doorstep, we do not have the ability or the resources to carry homeless clients indefinitely. While The Grind can and does provide some emergency food and clothing assistance, and can refer homeless clients to other community resources, it cannot provide additional shelter time in motels. Thus, the homeless eventually melt into the landscape again and you see this now on the streets of Pembroke. When The Grind had the Emergency Refuge operating we at least had a few days interaction with the individual during which there was a chance we could wrap them with other services. This is why our statistics we believe (e.g the number of shelter nights of accommodations) dropped significantly from 2017-18 to what the numbers were in 2019.

The second partnership opportunity arose from our growing relationship with MHSRC. Ever since The Grind began assisting the homeless, it was evident that providing emergency shelter of one or more days was only the first step in a long road to recovery for those willing to accept help to change their life style. With limited appropriate and affordable housing of any description for low- to no-income community members in Renfrew County, the challenge for the homeless has been almost insurmountable. From The Grind's perspective and experience, sending the homeless to a larger urban centre wasn't the answer. So we began to



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examine options for providing transitional housing as the next stage in keeping with the federal government's homelessness funding philosophy that without stable housing and source of nutritional food, the homeless who are willing to change their lifestyle cannot focus first addressing their issues. Unfortunately, despite a determined effort to find a financially viable solution, nothing became apparent until one day in late 2017 when The Grind was offered the ownership of a house that belonged to the estate of a deceased community member. This was the beginning of one more initiative to help the homeless – transitional housing.

Transition House as we call it will provide a short-term assisted independent living option for homeless men who are connected to a health or social service agency while working actively on a life stabilization plan. When we agreed to assume ownership of the house, we had no idea where the resources would come from to undertake the extensive renovations required. Another "leap of faith" if you will. But as luck would have it (many within the Grind organization would chalked it up to Divine Providence), Algonquin College came to the rescue in 2018 to start us on a long journey of putting together the required resources with the help of college students fundraising under the banner "Project Hope" that was successful in raising the initial \$11,000 plus dollars required. With help from some Grind volunteers, including members of our board, the renovation project was off and running. The year 2019 saw this effort accelerate when we received a grant of \$10,000 from the Sisters of St. Joseph out of London, Ontario, and then to crown our success a very generous award of \$100,000 from Pembroke Regional Hospital through Mental Health Services that represented to us an acknowledgement that the Grind's work with our community's at-risk population was indeed recognized and valued by two of the largest institutions in the County. Renovation work continued on the house throughout the year, also with help from 30 student volunteers from the Construction & Renovations Program at Algonquin College.

Perhaps the biggest issue The Grind faced in 2019 was when, on a Monday morning visit to the Grind Client Services Office in late March, a representative of the Salvation Army's headquarters in Scarborough, Ontario, paid an unannounced visit to advise us that its operations in Pembroke, including its lunch-time Soup Kitchen, would be shut down the following day. Following the short visit and after recovering from the shock of the worrisome news, Grind forces mobilized to ensure that lunch would be available from the Grind's Coffee House the next day. From that point on over ensuing days, The Grind brought



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together community and church leaders to discuss the situation and the way forward, realizing that this critical food service somehow had to be continued no matter what. A Community Kitchen Task Force was ultimately formed and chaired by Deacon Adrien Chaput of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the St. Columbkille Cathedral Conference.

The objective of the Task Force was two-fold: (1) to find a location equipped with a viable commercial kitchen, since the Grind's Coffee House did not have adequate equipment or designated space for such an operation on a sustained basis; and (2) to identify a sponsoring committee to manage the operation. In the meantime, The Grind's management committed to provide lunch service in the interim providing it received assistance from the community at-large. And for the remainder of 2019, the community indeed rose to the occasion. Local restaurants, churches and organizations mobilized to sponsor hot lunches that were prepared offsite and delivered daily between Tuesday and Friday. This was in addition to the support already provided by these entities for the bi-monthly Grind Saturday Community Dinner program.

From the get go it was recognized by both The Grind and the Task Force that this generosity and approach to providing lunches wasn't sustainable for the long term. Many meetings and visits to potential building space that could accommodate a Community Kitchen. By the end of 2019, with no success in finding such a space, or for that matter, a sponsoring group, The Grind made a decision that it would take on the responsibility for the Community Kitchen on the understanding that the Task Force remain in place to continue the search for an appropriate space into the New Year. The Grind also said that such space must now accommodate not only a Community Kitchen operation but the entire Grind operation as it could not operate from two different locations.

So, ladies and gentlemen, you can see from my operation report that the year 2019 was a busy and somewhat complicated one from the perspective of a small, volunteer-based charity without the luxury of sustainable funding from government. Looking back over the year, as a man of faith, I am convinced that there was divine intervention. But certainly, it is clear that we couldn't have achieved and overcome what we did without the generous contribution of community individual and organizational time and funding.

On behalf of those within The Grind who serve and of those to whom we provide service, thank you for your continued support and prayers.