

# A place to unpack

BY KIMBERLEY FEHR

**Time was running out.** Seventeen-year-old Vanessa (not her real name) had overstayed the limit at a temporary shelter in East Vancouver and her options were dwindling.

Vanessa had left home at 16, depressed and worn down by constant conflict with her eastern European parents. Abuse and impossible rules made leaving seem like the best choice at the time, but since then Vanessa had been in flux.

She stayed at group homes until she started receiving financial support from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Then she found an apartment downtown, but she couldn't afford the rent when school started. She moved back in with her parents, but only lasted 20 days. She went to a Burnaby rooming house with cheaper rent, but still attended school downtown. "I'd leave the house at 6 a.m. I'd get to school right before the bell rang at 8:30 – three buses and a SkyTrain," she says.

The rooming house owners gave her notice to make room for their relatives, and Vanessa went back to a group home, but she couldn't stay indefinitely.

"I was supposed to find a place, but I couldn't find any," she recalls. »



# Safe, decent affordable housing – for everyone

Vancouver Foundation is supporting Streethome, a new organization with a unique approach to homelessness – raising private money to help buy housing units for people without homes.

“Vancouver Foundation believed in this venture when it was still but an idea on paper,” says Jake Kerr, Vancouver Foundation board chair. “We jumped at the chance to provide \$500,000 in seed funding to Streethome. It represented a new approach to an old problem and tied in well to the philosophy we have at Vancouver Foundation, which is that we all owe something back to our community.”

Streethome launched in February 2009, with the goal of providing access to safe, decent, affordable housing with support services for all homeless people in Vancouver. Streethome is the first broad community-based initiative designed to address homelessness in Vancouver, and its work brings together non-profits, community groups, businesses, governments and citizens.

The Province of British Columbia and City of Vancouver matched Vancouver Foundation's contribution. 

For more information, visit: [www.streethome.org](http://www.streethome.org).

Enter the Broadway Youth Resource Centre, which was ready to try a novel approach to youth homelessness, thanks in part to an initial \$114,000 grant from Vancouver Foundation's Youth Homelessness Initiative. Broadway Youth found a landlord willing to take a chance on their project – Amarvir Minhas – and signed the lease on a one-bedroom suite.

Broadway Youth sublet the apartment to Vanessa, set down some rules, helped her deal with the landlord and generally looked out for her well-being. She took one of the organization's courses on landlord-tenant issues, budgeting and life skills.

This approach worked so well that when other apartments became available, Minhas offered them to Broadway Youth. Now five of his eight suites are homes to youth from its supported-housing program.

“If those kids came to me on their own, I wouldn't rent to them because they are quite young,” says Minhas. “But because I know Broadway Youth Centre will take care of them, it's good for me. If there's a problem, I just call the youth worker at Broadway Youth and they deal with it. I don't have to worry about the tenant and the rent. And it's a big help for the kids too.”

With the average bachelor apartment in Vancouver going for \$736 a month, finding an affordable place to rent can be extraordinarily difficult for young people.

“They don't have references, they often don't present well, they don't know how to sell themselves to a landlord,” says Robert Wilmot, director of the Broadway Youth Resource Centre. “In a tight market a young person is competing with someone who is older, who has credit cards and employment. A landlord makes an assessment on appearances like anyone else and will choose someone with less risk.”

He adds, “We try to make it easy for the landlords. We find them tenants. If there's damage, we deal with it. It's a win-win-win: good for landlords, good for young people and good for us.”

And good for the community. In another round of Youth Homelessness Initiative grants, Vancouver Foundation committed an additional \$222,388 to this program to help it expand from 20 to 70 apartments.

“Homelessness is one issue that has not, until recently, received the support it required from our community,” says Faye

Wightman, Vancouver Foundation president and CEO. “For far too long, many of us sat back and let governments and social service agencies figure out what to do. But as homelessness has grown, we have all come to recognize that this is a community problem that requires the efforts and commitment of the entire community to solve.”

Vancouver Foundation focused on youth homelessness because young people aren't yet trapped in the cycle that usually comes with drugs and mental illness, and helping young people get their lives on track can prevent future homelessness. For example, the Watari Research Association is receiving \$330,000 from the Youth Homelessness Initiative over three years to help find housing for young mothers and pregnant women who are dealing with addictions and/or mental health issues.

Sometimes a little help at the right time can last a lifetime. Take Vanessa, for example. Housing support she received from the Broadway Youth Resource Centre came at a crucial point, helping her through her last two years of high school so she could graduate on time with her friends.

She has also “graduated” from Broadway Youth's housing program. Earlier this year, she moved out, and into an apartment with roommates. She is working full-time at a coffee shop and plans to study dental assisting.

Vanessa says if she hadn't received support from Broadway Youth, she doesn't think she could have focused on school as much. Back then it was a struggle, and little things could set her back. In Grade 11, for example, sometimes it was just not having enough bus money to get to class. She'd miss school, fall behind and wouldn't want to go, because it piled up. But she pulled herself together for Grade 12.

“I wanted to graduate really bad, not only because I wanted to prove to my parents that I could do it on my own, but so I could prove to myself that I did it,” she says. “It felt really amazing.” **VF**

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For more information about Vancouver Foundation's Youth Homelessness Initiative, contact Catharine Hume at 604-688-2204. For information on the Broadway Youth Resource Centre, contact Pacific Community Resources Society, which operates the centre, at [www.pcrs.ca](http://www.pcrs.ca).