

## With a little help from his friend

### Mentorship program gives homeless man the tools to turn his life around

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The Ottawa Citizen

*Monday, September 29, 2008*

Frank Barnaby's new room is simple. He has no bed. Instead, he sleeps on a knot of sleeping bags. The cramped 10-by-12-foot den has no closet. But beyond a radio, some clothes and a handful of photographs and mementoes of his old life, Mr. Barnaby has nothing to store.

"I've never been a collector of things, you know. Not a materialist," he said.

Still, the room marks an important step for the 44-year-old First Nations man. After two years of enduring hellish weather and violent attacks while living on the streets,

Mr. Barnaby, who is blind, can now sleep in a dry, safe place. What's more, the room has renewed his ambition to work and go back to school. It's renewed his ambition to go on.

"I wouldn't be here without his help. I owe him a lot," he said, gesturing across a coffee-shop table to Frank Reid. The men first met in April through Citizen Advocacy, an Ottawa-based organization that pairs a volunteer with a person with disabilities who has no nearby family support.

The two meet three to four times a week. Some days, Mr. Reid drives Mr. Barnaby across town for a doctor's appointment, or they fill out important government paperwork. Other days, they find a table at nearby café and talk.

"When people get into trouble, my God, they just need somebody. It's one thing to donate money. But the real change happens when you donate time, when you become a friend," said Mr. Reid. "That's what we are. Frank and I are friends."

As both men readily admit, they make an odd pair. Mr. Reid, now in his early 60s, still has the intimidating physique of a former CFL lineman, his bald head resting on broad, strong shoulders. Although his city council days are behind him, Mr. Reid speaks as if he's talking to a crowded room.

In contrast, Mr. Barnaby is quiet. He wears large black sunglasses, protecting the



CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen  
Frank Barnaby, foreground, and his Citizen Advocacy mentor Frank Reid, former CFL linesman and onetime Nepean councillor.

six-per-cent vision he still has in his right eye. When he does speak, his words are underlined with optimism, each sentence bookended by a joke or a laugh.

"For a guy who's gone through hell, he sure smiles a lot," Mr. Reid said. "He doesn't let bad things in the past get to him."

Mr. Barnaby grew up on the Listuguj Mi'gmaq reservation, a Quebec community that scrapes the border of New Brunswick. Learning trades skills from his father, he became a dedicated carpenter. However, his professional aspirations outgrew the reserve, and in 1991, he moved to Ottawa, where he built his own success story. He owned a construction company, in which he was in charge of million-dollar, custom-made homes. He married and had two children. He was prosperous and more important, happy.

Then everything collapsed.

A severe case of glaucoma set in around 2003, forcing Mr. Barnaby to abandon his trade. Meanwhile, a messy divorce led to alcoholism and drug abuse, a vicious spiral that ended with Mr. Barnaby living on the streets on the east side in late 2005.

"Everything became a struggle. I was always on the move, always stressing where I would get my next meal, where I would sleep," he said.

But escaping the bone-cutting cold didn't always mean escaping the violence that falls on the city come nightfall. And with his eyesight even more reduced in the dark, Mr. Barnaby became a prime target.

Mr. Reid remembers seeing Mr. Barnaby one morning after he was robbed. Days earlier, Mr. Reid and his partner, Louise Matte, had given the man a backpack for his medication and identification cards. It was gone.

"He's a street-smart guy, but I meet him and his face is all swollen. The eye drops he takes for his eyes were taken, so his eyes are sore as hell. He was in a lot of pain, but he couldn't get T-threes (Tylenol with codeine) because people on the streets can't get those from doctors."

Both men knew Mr. Barnaby needed to get off the streets. They secured funding from the Ontario Disability Support Program, and Mr. Barnaby got a job picking up needles and other drug paraphernalia in downtown parks. Two weeks ago, he moved into the boarding room in Centretown.

The ultimate goal for Mr. Barnaby -- and many of the 1,000-plus people Citizen Advocacy has helped since forming in 1974 -- is to get into subsidized housing.

"But I'm just going to take it one day at a time. Keep things going up, you know," Mr. Barnaby said.

He also intends to give back to the program that empowered him to get off the streets. He has already become an ambassador of sorts between Citizen Advocacy and the Aboriginal Drop-in Centre on Rideau Street, with the hope of connecting more volunteers with those who need help. It's an important position, considering more than 150 men and woman across Ottawa wait on average three years to be matched with a Citizen Advocacy mentor.

As well, Mr. Barnaby is flirting with the idea of returning to school to become a

counsellor.

"Most people on the streets don't want to be there. It's a misconception ... They're kind people, and they need a friend who can help, like I was (helped)."

Mr. Barnaby hopes to one day be that help that someone else needs.

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