

# Broken lives find new home with 'the Champion'

## Christian housing project offers faith community for mentally disabled



- WCR photo by Bill Glen

**Roy Hahn has lived on various forms of assisted living for 25 years. Last winter, when he couldn't afford to live on his own, he found a new home at Ponoka's Champion's Centre.**

By **BILL GLEN**  
WCR Staff Writer  
Ponoka

Nearby, an acoustic guitar could be heard. Perhaps not concert hall calibre, but certainly worthy of any campfire.

"That's Roy," someone said quietly. "He used to be quite an accomplished player before his stroke. Now he has to teach his left hand where to go on the frets. Part of his brain is shut off."

That stroke 25 years ago changed Roy Hahn's life forever. He says he would be living on the street today if it were not for the Champion's Centre, a Christian-based group home for 16 men in Ponoka.

Hahn was a handsome 20-year-old when one day he was chatting up his favourite bank teller.

Suddenly he felt a twist of pain in his head. It bore in deeper the more he tried to make conversation. Within seconds the pain was intolerable.

The teller asked if he was alright. Hahn was able to say "No" before crumbling to the floor.

The previous five months of his life were erased when he opened his eyes. He had no idea why he was in the bank.

Since that day, Hahn has required some form of assisted living and currently receives \$1,050 a month from the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH).

### No place to live

Today's skyrocketing residential rents and critical affordable housing shortage would have left him with no place to live had he not moved into Champion's Centre seven months ago.

Since June 2002, a 6,000-square-foot, converted medical arts building has been providing low-cost

housing and Christian community for men with health issues, mental illness, economic obstacles or acquired brain injuries.

"This is a good chance to help people who really need help," Hahn said. "It's wonderful because

I would have been in deep trouble last December when I couldn't pay the heating bills."

The Champion's Centre Inc. is a national non-profit Christian charity providing dignity to people on low incomes, many with significant barriers to independent living.

Executive director and founder Klaas Klooster, along with his wife Joanne, bought the 50-year-old building simply looking to invest in a revenue property. It was Joanne's idea to open a rooming house.

### Jesus is the Champion

As the idea blossomed, they chose the name in honour of their love for Jesus - the Champion himself, Klooster said.

A father of four and non-denominational Christian, Klooster spent 20 years in the grocery business before retiring to run the Champion's Centre.

The centre expanded to Medicine Hat in 2006, where it provides a home for eight men. Plans are underway to bring the low-cost housing initiative to Edmonton and Red Deer.



**"We prayed and prayed that we could provide for the disadvantaged,"**  
Klaas Klooster

"Part of the concept of the Champion's Centre is chapel services and the spiritual care these fellows need. The chapel services in Medicine Hat have had a profound effect on the men," Klooster said.

Before buying the Ponoka property, Klooster researched the need for such a facility. That need was enormous.

The Alberta Mental Health Board told him it would provide operational funding for a supportive housing facility for people with mental illness.

The Kloosters bought the building and Klaus called his brother Fred in Toronto who had recently retired from a marketing position with Levi Strauss. Fred moved to Ponoka to act as the resident manager.

The Kloosters began the arduous task of cleaning and painting. Six months on, Klooster contacted the mental health board and was told no money would be coming because the medical system was being overhauled.

Undaunted, the Kloosters continued, even as they became cash-strapped with substantial credit card bills.

"We prayed and prayed that we could provide for the disadvantaged," Klooster told the WCR.

## The last penny

Private donations began trickling in from the community. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation responded to Klooster's application for financial assistance. Contractors were hired to bring the building up to code.

"Month to month, we may get down to our last penny, but God always meets our needs," he said.



- WCR photo by Bill Glen

**A restaurant helps to pay the upkeep of Ponoka's Champion's Centre.**

Sterile examination rooms became bright and comfortable bedrooms. The static nursing station was turned into a cozy television lounge.

Yet, because the site was zoned commercial-residential, they had to operate a business. They turned their love of collecting antiques into a small retail enterprise. They also opened up a public cafeteria that gave the men a place to eat.

"Having two businesses under one roof has helped to subsidize the operating costs of running the centre," Klooster said. They also provide social interaction between the men and the community.

Most of the men have lived in the Ponoka centre since it opened. The maximum rent is \$635 a month. Amenities include a fully furnished air-conditioned building, satellite and cable TV in a comfortable lounge area. There is a recreation room, laundry facilities and weekly room cleaning. Seven meals a week are prepared plus a daily continental breakfast.

General rules for harmonious living apply, but the men are free to come and go 24 hours a day.

One resident volunteers by setting tables in the cafeteria or washing dishes. Hahn is paid when he is able to help with general cleaning on the weekends. But most of the men are unable to work.

"This is first and foremost a home and that's what the men need," Fred Klooster said. "They have mental challenges and most of the guys can't work."

Duane Warren moved in three years ago. Once an aspiring electrical engineering student, Warren received a blow to his head in a scuffle. His brain was permanently injured.

"I have a floor under me," Warren said slowly. "I have someone to talk to when I'm feeling down."

Warren particularly enjoys Sunday service in the chapel.

"We are all God's children. I know with a good spirit, you can find a life that means more, that takes care of my goals."

## Hard to house

Austin Mardon is a board member with Champion's Centre.

Unlike most programs for those at risk of becoming homeless, Champion's is not transitional housing, Mardon said. "Once you get in, you're in there as long as you follow the rules."

Mardon says, "People with a mental illness are hard to house because once a landlord finds out they have that disability, they are usually on the way out."

Klaas Klooster is seeking upwards of \$1 million to start a Champion's Centre in Edmonton that would largely mirror the operation in Ponoka. They are currently talking with the Capital Region Housing Corporation, which was set up in 1982 to build and run housing for low- and moderate-income families, seniors and persons with special needs.

"The only way it's feasible with today's property and construction costs is if somebody like the CRHC gets involved," he said.

## **Dignity and respect**

Klooster said the centre has little impact on the overall affordable housing shortage. But it does make a tremendous difference for the people it serves.

"It's all about dignity, respect and love," he said. "I have developed a love for the populations we serve and they need to have a place where they are cared for. They're just as human as you and I."

A social function is planned for Sept. 8 to introduce the Edmonton proposal. The centre is seeking volunteers to help with the social dinner, set for 6 p.m. in St. Thomas d'Aquin Church hall, 8410-89 St.

"What I ask is that people pray for us. It is so important because we can't do it on our own," Klooster said.

More information about Champion's Centre is available from Austin Mardon at 378-0063, or by email at [aamardon@yahoo.ca](mailto:aamardon@yahoo.ca). The centre website is [www.thechampionscentre.org](http://www.thechampionscentre.org).