



## Tapping into her power

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Helen Boyd overcame a sense of powerlessness and hit the road to help the homeless in her community



Teckles Photography Inc.

Much of the homelessness in British Columbia's Comox Valley is hidden, says Helen Boyd: "You have to know where to look." In its lush forests, nestled between the Strathcona mountain range and the sea, some hundred people live year round in dilapidated campers or tents. In its picturesque towns, young families stake out space in the living rooms of sympathetic friends for a night or two, then move on to the next temporary dwelling.

These are people who may not have a health card, a family physician or a fixed address. But they have access to health care through the Care-A-Van, a mobile health clinic housed within a refurbished 1987 Ford RV.

Boyd is the founder of the Care-A-Van, operated by the Comox Bay Care Society, and is its driving force. Three times a week, the clinic on wheels makes the rounds of shelters, soup kitchens and campgrounds. Boyd works with eight volunteer drivers and a staff of 23 volunteer health-care professionals, who have assessed, counselled, treated or provided referrals to more than 800 clients, many of whom are now regulars.

"If you heard the stories of how people ended up where they are — sometimes it's following a relationship breakup, and the person became profoundly depressed and got into alcoholism and such," Boyd says. "I often think, that could be me. I'm reminded every single day that we're all fragile in some respect. It's humbling."

Boyd grew up in Shawinigan, Que., where she earned a nursing diploma at the local community college. After graduation, she developed expertise in medical-surgical and critical care nursing, in hospitals in Canada, Switzerland and New Zealand.

In 1989, she put her career on hold for a year to travel with her husband, visiting Africa and Southeast Asia. "My travels are really what informed me," she reflects. "I saw so much poverty. I guess I've always been on a quest to overcome my powerlessness to change things."

After returning to Canada, Boyd obtained a BSc in nursing at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and stayed on as a clinical instructor in the program for six years. She also started a family (she has a son and a daughter) and completed a master's degree in counselling psychology during this period.

In 2000, the family relocated to Vancouver Island when she accepted a job as a mental health and addictions therapist in the Comox Valley. "Lots of my clients were homeless," she says. "How do you get your life in order when you're living on the streets or couch surfing? How do you find employment or have a normal eating routine?"

Boyd began to focus her energies — and all of her free time — on finding a practical way to help. First, she wanted her community to recognize the extent of the problem. A survey she helped organize and conduct put the number of absolute homeless at 250; another 3,000 were “insecurely housed.”

Boyd pulled people in the community together to adopt a model of mobile health care she knew was working in Toronto and other urban centres. A Rotary Club member helped her set up a non-profit agency. An RV dealer donated a vehicle. RN colleagues committed to volunteer shifts. Soon, physicians asked to join the initiative, and dentists, pharmacists and an optometrist wanted to offer free services, too.

Boyd proudly recounts some of the success stories: the woman who was supported in getting sober and finding housing as she struggled with a newly diagnosed cancer, the teenager whose dental repairs gave him the confidence to apply for a job, the man living on the streets who agreed to be referred to mental health services and is giving back to the community he now lives in.

The Care-A-Van receives no provincial or federal government funding. Boyd runs the program on an annual budget of \$30,000, gleaned from the donations of individuals, churches and local community groups. A typical day sees her involved in case management, ordering medications and supplies, scheduling and fundraising. “Lots of fundraising,” she laughs. She has been able to maintain a small private counselling practice and says she appreciates the balance it provides in her life.

Her dream is to see the program replicated in other areas. “And there is interest out there. I’ve received queries from within B.C. and from as far away as Bolivia.”

Boyd’s commitment to a vulnerable population has been recognized by her nursing regulatory body (a 2012 CRNBC Award of Advocacy) and her province (a 2013 B.C. Community Achievement Award). But she measures her true achievements in the feedback she receives from her clients.

“I remember asking one guy why he came to us instead of going to a walk-in,” Boyd recalls. “He said, ‘Look at me; I’m all dishevelled. When I go into most clinics, I feel judged. On the Care-A-Van, there is no judgment; I feel cared for.’”

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## **10 questions**

### **What are you most proud of having accomplished?**

Raising my family and giving back to the community by starting the Care-A-Van

### **What is one thing about you that people would be surprised to learn?**

I am actually quite shy

### **“If I had more free time, I would...”**

Resume travelling, play more ukulele and become fluent in Spanish

### **Name one place in the world you’d most like to visit.**

Bhutan

### **What is your biggest regret?**

Taking so long to realize I could make a difference by addressing homelessness

### **What was the last good book you read?**

*Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom* by Rick Hanson

### **Who inspired you to become a nurse?**

My mother — and she was so right

**What is the best thing about your current job?**

Having the autonomy to make a tangible difference in people's lives

**What do you like least about being a nurse?**

The limits of the profession's power to effect change

**Name one change you would like to make to the health system.**

I'd enhance services for those living with addictions and mental health issues

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