

A Success Story

Fondation Mgr Léonce Bouchard Inc. Saguenay, Quebec

More help for homeless people at the Fondation Mgr Léonce Bouchard

In the region, as in the big cities, the street is the last resort for disadvantaged persons. To help them, Mgr Léonce Bouchard from Saguenay established a foundation that is a hub for six organizations working to restore their dignity. The area is vast and the needs are great, but hope and generosity never flag.

With its picture-postcard scenery and warm-hearted people, the “Royaume du Saguenay,” as it is called locally, has many special features. However, when it comes to homelessness and poverty, it has the same problems as any other place. “People are always surprised when they hear that we have many homeless people here,” says Sylvain Plourde, Co-ordinator of the Maison d’Accueil pour sans-abri de Chicoutimi, one of the six organizations created by the Fondation Mgr Bouchard. Now 74 years of age, Mgr Bouchard is to the area what Father Emmet Johns is to Montreal: an extraordinary person who has devoted his whole life to disadvantaged people and who has been able to move mountains on the strength of his convictions. His dedication was acknowledged in 2003, when he won the Hommage bénévolat Quebec award.

From used clothing store to soup kitchen serving over 40,000 meals a year

Mgr Bouchard set off on his mission because he wanted to help fellow citizens who were down on their luck to meet their basic needs: food on their plates, a roof over their heads and clothes on their backs. He began by opening Les Fringues, a used clothing store, in 1989. A year later, in May 1990, he founded a soup kitchen called la Soupe populaire, and he wanted to help homeless persons, so he rented an apartment for them in downtown Chicoutimi. This hospitality set-up, for which he collected food and various household items, was relocated several times before formally setting down roots in 1998 on Lafontaine Street in one of the city’s oldest neighbourhoods. Mgr Bouchard also created the Atelier de récupération Saint-Joseph, which collects furniture and other items for recycling and re-use. The foundation was thus gradually established, and has been administering Mgr Bouchard’s good works. Local needs continue to increase, and today, the soup kitchen has three locations serving over 40,000 meals a year.

Custom lodging

The Maison d’Accueil pour sans-abri de Chicoutimi, a shelter for homeless persons, offers many types of lodging and residents may stay for up to 90 days. They also receive support to help them get back on their feet again. This was such a successful formula that in early 2000, the house became too small. In 2002, a two-year project involving major expansion work and repairs to the foundation was undertaken. Thanks to the help of people and organizations in the region, along with a \$140,000 contribution from the SCPI,* the facility now has 20 beds instead of 18, three hide-a-beds, offices and a common room. The foundation and its services, which are now well known in the region, enjoy the support of some 300 volunteers and 15 full-time professionals.

A vast area with tremendous needs

The clientele of the Maison d’accueil pour sans-abri de Chicoutimi consists mostly of men aged 18 to over 65 from the vast area between the tip of Lac St Jean (Dolbeau-Mistassini) all the way to the mouth of the St Lawrence at the edge of the Charlevoix region. There is no shortage of heart-breaking stories: “Last year, we lodged a respected businessman who came to us for help after his business went bankrupt, he and his wife divorced and he declared personal bankruptcy. He is now

staying at the Pavillon Augustinien and is trying to put his life back together.” Nearly 1,000 people a year use the various services provided by the Maison d’Accueil pour sans-abri in Chicoutimi.

The road to self-respect

The Pavillon Augustinien is a shelter offering community support aimed at helping disadvantaged persons learn how to cope in society by pitching in with chores, trying to get back into the job market and so on. “Each individual signs a contract with himself, and for many, this has proven a real success,” explains Sylvain Plourde. Inaugurated in November 2004, the Pavillon Augustinien, located in the former Christ-Roi church presbytery in Chicoutimi, which was purchased by the foundation, has space for nine residents; renovations were funded in part by a second SCPI* contribution of \$40,000. Agreements with school boards and an environmental and recycling training centre, the CFER (Centre de formation en environnement et recyclage), give residents an opportunity to do woodwork and continue their studies if they so desire. For many of these people, this is a ticket back to a normal life. Sylvain Plourde and his team have every reason to be proud. His main concern now is to ensure financial stability for the foundation. “We have become an indispensable resource in the region.”

by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

June 2005

*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative