



Photo by Alex Filipe
Damon Shea displays the sign he's been using in his bid to find affordable, accessible housing in the region. Shea is currently staying at the Grace Inn Shelter after leaving Loyalist College's residence in December.

Belleville housing crisis hits home

No places available for disabled man to live with wheelchair

By Alex Filipe

Like many in Belleville, Damon Shea is stuck spinning his wheels as he looks for a place to live. However, in Shea's case, the search is harder than normal on account of his need for wheelchair accessibility.

"It's a little different of a story from many that would need a shelter," explained Shea. The athlete and former student has been scouring listings in the area weekly looking for any residence that could accommodate him and his mobility chair along with his \$1,000 a month budget.

"I look around on Kijiji, Google searches. I had a social worker that called a bunch of property managers. We just got the same answer everywhere, 'Sorry nothing right now. We're full,' or nothing affordable or accessible," Shea said.

As someone who uses a mobility chair, Shea has specific needs a residence must be able to fulfill for him to live an independent, barrier-free life. He explained some of these requirements.

"You just need to be able to reach things. That's really important for me. Nowadays, there's a lot more products out there. I had pull down cabinets at one point, to have the kitchen and sink at the right height. The shower needs to be big enough and have a detachable

shower-head. I need the toilet to be small enough for me. I recognize that it's not the same for everyone, so it's hard to come up with one standard."

Shea's search has even pushed him to make a beggar sign, but this one isn't asking for money – it's asking for a place to rent.

"The people that took the time to read it, I engaged with them and told them I appreciated the time they took. Some people would just look at it and immediately look away, due to the stigma it has," Shea said.

For city leaders, the housing drought has been a major issue those sitting at the horseshoe council table are working to solve.

"At the end of the day, the City of Belleville doesn't own housing," explained Belleville Mayor Mitch Panciuk. "We work with Hastings County that does our long term-housing, social housing and affordable-housing. There are accessible suites. There's not enough, but there are also not enough suites in general in the whole community."

In terms of the accessibility requirements, Panciuk explains that those rules are enforced on developers by the province.

"The accessibility requirements of construction and contractors and buildings are the responsibility of the province. As new builds are coming on to stream, there is a requirement for so many of them to have a number of different accessible features, bigger doors to allow for wheelchairs, elevators if there are multiple levels, ramps, pull bars and a number of other things are all included

in that," he said.

Shea said his homelessness first began when he left his student residence at Loyalist College. While the residence was advertised to him as being wheelchair friendly, Shea said he soon found out that the facilities wouldn't be enough to support him.

"Once you got into the main building, there weren't many issues with accessibility there," Shea said. "But my apartment was at the back of one building, down a hill. So to advertise a unit as accessible and for it to be at the bottom of a hill, there wasn't too much thought put into it."

Glenn Dayton, a project management post-grad student at Loyalist, who uses a wheelchair, addressed some of the limitations of the school's residences, saying, "The residences are old. Back when these were built, they were built to standards of accessibility. Unfortunately, to today's standards, things need to be improved on."

But in Dayton's experience, the college will work alongside students and their needs.

"If there is anything brought up, the school will help as best they can," Dayton said. "They've had students come to them saying they need reachable shelves, so the school built shelves for them. Some couldn't get into the washroom, so they actually had them expanded... When there is a need, the school will (address it). But if no one tells them, it's hard to actually subsidize that help."

Shea explained that he did in fact raise concerns regarding his room, but said

the response from school staff made him feel "like I was ignored, and left to deal with a situation I was really struggling with."

Shea had three main concerns: the amount of storage that was accessible to him, the size of the bathroom and the struggle he had maneuvering around his bedroom.

"I brought up these concerns pretty early on. Within the first couple of weeks, I realized that it was going to be a challenge," Shea said.

"I had to pile things on top of each other, and any storage or surface area I had was taken up pretty quickly. I just couldn't do it. No matter what I did, it wouldn't work or fit. I had just hoped I could get a couple extra shelves, where I could put more things so that they had a designated spot that was easy to access and so that it was more organized. I was just hoping that I could work with the school to come up with a couple solutions that would help."

Mark Kirkpatrick, senior director of infrastructure at Loyalist, explained that in the area of modifications for accessibility, the college does "what we can within our existing residence structures to make whatever accommodations are necessary for whatever person happens to use them."

He continued, "We are dealing with relatively old buildings and there is only so much you can do in those structures right now."

Kirkpatrick said that in the past, there have been similar concerns the school has dealt with that was raised by Shea.

"I know that in the past, we have made

accommodations for students. We made modifications to the showers... changes to some of the cabinetry to make it more accessible, if you happen to be in a wheelchair. I know that the team in residence has in the past brought in additional shelving that is accessible," explained Kirkpatrick.

But for Shea, the timeline on getting those modifications made seemed to be dragging along.

"No one followed up very quickly, I had to keep bringing it up with people in the hopes that eventually someone could tell me if anything could be done," Shea said. "It was taking too long to find out if anything could or would be done. I just didn't get many answers."

In December, one semester after moving into the college, Shea decided it was time to leave.

"My health was declining. It was really hard to get food and use the kitchen to cook it," Shea said. "My first day at the Grace Inn Shelter was Dec. 21. That was my birthday, actually, and I've been there since."

Shea said he isn't looking for sympathy, he's just looking to rent.

"I have a passion to work. I want to integrate into the community and be a part of it," Shea said. "I feel like it's kind of a mission. I have this experience, knowledge and ideas, so I try to be a part of as many discussions as I can. That's how things happen, is by people talking about it. I kind of combat ignorance through my perspective. I don't blame them. You can only think about things that are brought to your attention or that affect you in your life."

Community celebrates Chinese New Year

By Jessica Munro

Many of Belleville's Chinese community members came out Sunday evening to enjoy the Chinese New Year at Centennial Secondary School.

Usually home to the Centennial Chargers, the school's auditorium was home to approximately 20 performers who presented 14 different musical acts and around 70 guests for the night, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. The event was hosted by the Quinte Chinese Canadian Association, or QCCA.

The outside of the auditorium was decorated with Chinese lanterns hanging from the ceiling, decorative New Year paintings hanging on the wall, and the stage was lined with red lanterns as well.

President of the QCCA, Shawn Kao says, "It's the biggest festival in China, and tonight there's a lot of people."

The celebration was hosted by Li Fan, and Mike Zhang. The auditorium was filled with folk singing, festive dancing, with food to follow in the cafeteria.

"We have a small Chinese community over here, but we try to make a voice," says Kao.

The spring festival celebration begins on Jan. 25 and lasts until Feb. 4, 2020. The Lantern Festival preparation begins on Feb. 5, and the festival is held on Feb. 8.

This year is a celebration of the year



Photo by Jessica Munro

During the Chinese New Year celebration at Centennial Secondary School, the Quinte HuaCai Dance Studio dances to Country Roads to ring in the Year of the Rat. Thirteen other musical acts performed during the night of celebration.

of the Rat. The Rat is the first zodiac in the 12-year cycle, with 12 animals.

"We just completed one cycle; we start from the beginning again. 2020 is western culture. We use 12 zodiacs to

record our years," says Kao.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued a statement on Saturday for Chinese New Year, "The Spring Festival is a time to reflect on the past and look forward

to the future with hope. Family and friends will gather to give thanks for the blessings of the last year, exchange gifts, and share a reunion dinner."

According to the Chinese New Year

website, the myth of the Rat is said to have tricked the Ox into giving him a ride until the finish line, where the Rat jumped down and crossed the finish line before the Ox, becoming the first.

"Last night was New Year's Eve. You're supposed to eat with your family, with plenty of food, just like Christmas in western culture," Kao continues. "Last night, my wife worked, and she got off work at 7:30 p.m. so we waited for her to come home to have dinner together because it's New Year's Eve dinner."

"For all Canadians, this is a chance to recognize the important contributions Chinese Canadians have made, and continue to make, to our country. We are stronger, more prosperous, and more inclusive because of this vibrant community," says Trudeau in the statement.

Recent years of the Rat have been 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996, 2008 and of course, 2020.

Those who are born in the year of the Rat are considered likeable by all. They are sensitive to other emotions; they are also kind but because of poor communication skills, they may come across as rude and impolite.

People born in the year of the Rat are most compatible with people born in the year of the Ox, Dragon and Monkey, but least compatible with those born in the year of the Horse, Goat and Rabbit.