

How can a city so rich have so many poor?

Hume (chume@thestar.ca) | Toronto Star

How can a city as rich as Rosedale be as poor as Parkdale? How can a city have almost as many millionaires as it has kids living in poverty? How are such disparities even possible in a city that prides itself on being open, inclusive and prosperous?

The answers, though complex, are simple. Children go to bed hungry because we allow them to. Preoccupied with our own personal struggle to stay afloat, we have little time or emotional energy to devote to people whose lives are invisible and whose neighbourhoods we avoid. Why can't they just be like the rest of us — work hard and carry on.

We talk now about "compassion fatigue," but never has compassion been in such demand. In Toronto, the figures tell a disturbing story. According to the annual Vital Signs report, released in October, nearly 29 per cent of kids in this city — almost 150,000 — live in poverty. In some neighbourhoods such as Parkdale and St. James Town as many as half the young people are poor.

The same document also pointed out that the waiting list for affordable housing has ballooned to 90,000 families. Even worse, fully 90 per cent of families with kids in low-income apartment towers live in inadequate conditions and are at risk of becoming homeless.

Food banks, once unknown in Toronto, are now a fact of life in this and other cities across Canada. For the past six years, food banks here have received more than 6 million visits annually.

In the face of such desperate need, the Star Santa Claus Fund can offer nothing much beyond a gesture of compassion and care. But even though Christmas presents can't raise incomes or lower rents, the simple act of reaching out can change lives.

"There's been an outpouring of support from volunteers," says the Toronto Star director of philanthropy and charities, Barb Mrozek. "Nothing is greater than the smile on a child's face when they realize Santa didn't forget them. It's really positive and empowering to help get these gift boxes out to kids. But if we don't get the dollars, we can't make the deliveries. There are so few days left and we haven't reached our goal of \$1.6 million. A box costs \$35 each; that's pocket change for most Torontonians, a mountain for others."

Cities, the cultural, economic, social and intellectual engines that drive our lives, can also create conditions of loneliness, isolation and alienation. For many Torontonians, especially those in the inner-suburban highrise communities, this disconnection begins with the physical circumstances of the towers they inhabit. Cut off from many of the amenities more affluent neighbourhoods take for granted, including decent public transit, the poor are marooned in the city in which they live and are all too easy to forget.

Besides, the problem of poverty seems overwhelming, insoluble, eternal. In Toronto, poverty is entrenched, generational. Over the course of decades, an elaborate institutional infrastructure has been established to deal with it. The cost is in the billions. Still it is not enough. Nor is it spent in ways that address causes rather than effects.

The system we have created, a result of the best of intentions, deals with numbers. It depends on forms, formulas and figures to define and identify need. People are reduced to statistics and poverty becomes a theoretical, almost abstract, concept that can be counted and quantified, measured, like some mathematical equation.

The Santa Claus Fund is an occasion to go beyond the policies and prescriptions and see the people, a lot of them young, they are intended to help. The fund reminds us of the human cost of poverty. These kids, we shouldn't forget, are the future. Like it or not, it will be up to them to lead us to the better world we have failed to deliver.

No act of kindness goes unnoticed. Neither does something given without expectation of receiving anything back in return, even when unacknowledged. The fund provides not just an opportunity to be generous, but the chance to extend a hand to a kid and remind him or her that someone does care, someone is paying attention and feels their pain.

We shouldn't forget that a society isn't judged by how much wealth it creates but by how many share in that wealth.