



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

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Poverty awareness week launched Oct. 17 with rally on the future site of Station 20 West

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

A number of organizations joined together Oct. 17, 2009 in Saskatoon to observe the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and to launch Poverty Awareness Week in the city.

The Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition, CHEP Good Food Inc. and Station 20 West supporters held a rally and an outdoor “loonie lunch” of vegetable chili on the future site of Station 20 West, which will include a full grocery store to serve the core neighbourhood.



Members of “The Raging Grannies” were singing satirical songs during the anti-poverty rally Oct. 17 in Saskatoon. An annual Poverty Awareness Week is coordinated by the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition - Co-chair Sydney Bell, MC of the Saturday afternoon launch, is standing at the back, right.

“Poverty is a serious problem in our beautiful city,” said Saskatoon Anti-Poverty spokesperson Vanessa Charles, asserting the problem is getting worse, not better, with almost one in five people in the city living in poverty. “If we bear in mind the ever-increasing cost of food, for example basics such as flour, pasta and bread, have doubled in price over the past year, together with horrendous increases in rental accommodation it is very likely that the numbers have increased.”

Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition is a coalition of concerned persons and organizations dedicated to addressing the causes and effects of poverty, she described. “Our goal is to reduce and eliminate poverty and the effects of poverty amongst residents of Saskatoon by increasing community involvement and input in the development of a long term integrated anti-poverty reduction strategy.”

Charles explained the origins of the United Nations declaration of Oct. 17 as an international day to stand up for the eradication of poverty and to ensure the respect of human rights, before inviting the crowd to observe a minute of silence in solidarity with all people who live in poverty around the world.

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Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural, Charles said, quoting Nelson Mandela. “It is man made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.”

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, Charles asserted. “It is an act of justice. It is a protection of a fundamental human right – the right to dignity and a decent life.”

The theme for this year’s awareness campaign is “season of hope,” she said. “For many of us living in poverty, hope is what keeps us going. But no matter how dark our situation, the work that we do to make change is not in vain.”

It is time for Canada to honour the human rights declaration that guarantees all people the right to adequate food, clothing and shelter, Charles said. “This is a right, not a privilege. No family or individual should have to go hungry. This is an injustice.”

Two or three families sharing accommodation in order to pay the rent; people seeking shelter under a bridge, in a doorway or in a back alley; individuals compelled to “couch surf” from one relative’s or friend’s house to another because of a lack of affordable housing are all injustices, Charles asserted. “No one should suffer the effects of ill health due to a lack of a nutritious diet or poor housing conditions, not to mention the negative effect that living in poverty has on one’s mental health. This is an injustice.”

Now is the time to speak out and put an end to the silence around the issues of poverty, said Charles.

Members of the coalition are circulating a petition addressed to the provincial legislature, asking that the government act as quickly as possible to develop an effective and sustainable poverty elimination strategy for the benefit of all Saskatchewan citizens, said Sydney Bell, co-chair of the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition. Copies were available for signing at the Saturday afternoon event.

John Parry and Debbie Frost also spoke during the rally, encouraging all those present to sign the Make Poverty History “stand up” pledge. The Saskatoon event was one of some 5,142 across the globe Oct. 17, in which people were standing up to end poverty, Parry said.



Vanessa Charles

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Sheila Pocha, Station 20 West board member

“We are standing now with millions of people around the world on this historic day, to show our commitment to the fight against extreme poverty and inequality. We only have six years left to the 2015 deadline to realize the Millennium Development Goals. Today, we stand up together to say to our leaders: act now to achieve and exceed the Millennium Development Goals,” the crowd repeated after Parry. “We commit to, and we expect them to commit to continue to stand up, not just today but every day, to say: no more excuses, end poverty, end hunger, end inequality - now!”

Sheila Pocha, teacher, school principal, and representative of the Station 20 West board, also spoke at the rally, calling for an end to poverty and to racism.

She described the importance of the Station 20 West project that will give people in the community the ability to walk to a grocery store to buy healthy food, and find support services, including employment services. She described the need for continuing support from the community to raise funds for the construction project, and described plans for a groundbreaking in May 2010.

“The mission of Station 20 is to end poverty, and to build healthy communities,” Pocha said. “So it is fitting that we are meeting today on the Station 20 West site, in the lowest income neighbourhood of Saskatoon, one of Saskatoon’s five core neighbourhoods.”

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Racism is alive in our communities, said Pocha, calling for a new spirit of understanding and community to provide support to people who are trying to improve their lives. “This is not just going to be a food store, folks, it’s going to be a place where there is going to be health opportunity, where there is going to be employment and training opportunities, where there is going to be businesses and people from the ivory tower at the university in the hood, helping our community, saying you can do it.”

Pocha questioned why the best the provincial government has been able to do in the core neighbourhood is to provide funds to replace an existing elementary school. She also questioned why rent increases are not regulated, and why there is no leisure centre in the core neighbourhood. She called for comprehensive community service programs for young people who have dropped out of school and who see no alternative to gang membership and life on the street. “Why do we not at least help these young people obtain birth certificates and a Social Insurance Number so they have a shot at obtaining a job? Station 20 West will do that when we build.”

Research shows that more equal societies always do better, at every level, Pocha added. “Greater equality improves the life of those who are better off, as well as those persons who are no longer living in poverty,” she said.

Songs by the Raging Grannies and other local musicians were also part of the program. Members of Grosvenor Park United Church handed out strawberries, which are also known as “heart berries” and are a symbol of Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition (SAPC), said SAPC co-chair Sydney Bell. “The heart berry is special among the aboriginal people for its very essence: the way it smells, the way it looks, the way it tastes... even the way it sends out red runners along the ground to reproduce itself, inspires us to think of the outreach and renewal of our own community,” Bell said.

Other events during Poverty Awareness Week include a community supper, an artistic gathering “Empowering voices” Oct 22 at St. Mary’s parish hall; and a “hands across the water” march from the downtown side of the Broadway Bridge in Saskatoon, with people joining hands to span the bridge to the other side, to show that poverty affects people on both sides of the river, Bell said.



A representative of Grosvenor Park United Church (right) hands out strawberries.