

United Way tour can be real eye opener



By [Michael Lea](#), Kingston Whig-Standard
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Three times a year, a busload of Kingston residents get to see a side of the city they likely never even knew existed.

That's when the United Way holds its Seeing Is Believing tour, a daylong visit to several of the agencies that receive the charity's dollars.

One aspect of the tour is to give a busload of campaign workplace leaders the chance to see where the money goes that they are helping raise, explained Bhavana Varma, president and CEO of the United Way of Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington.

"But also for many people it is an introduction to the not-for-profit world, this incredible network of agencies that have such a broad scope and range in what they do and how they do it with such shoestring budgets but, more importantly, with passion."

She said many people may know of friends or neighbours who may have run into financial problems, have substance abuse issues or mental health concerns. But they don't know there is a network of agencies out there that are helping such people through their troubles on a daily basis.

"You go to work, you go home, you are so busy, you don't have time to really notice all the things out there," she said. "We work in the business. We know our agencies. We know what they do. But it's amazing how many people have no idea."

The Seeing Is Believing tours have been running for the past 16 years. They started out with a single tour and now have two in the fall and one in the spring. Specialized tours, such as for Queen's University students or individual companies, are also held.

Some agencies even request a tour, Varma said.

It can be challenging to fit the tour in around their day-to-day activities. Client privacy has to be considered when a couple of dozen people suddenly show up on the doorstep for a visit.

It can be quite an education for those on the tour, Varma said.

“And it is quite emotional for some people.”

They get to listen to heartbreaking stories from some of the people the agencies have helped.

And they suddenly feel lucky they live the sheltered lives they do.

“Some people go away and feel quite humbled with what they have.”

A few are so impressed with what they have seen that they come back to the agencies they just visited as volunteers. At the very least, they go back to their workplaces and talk about what they have seen.

The 20 people on Thursday’s tour represented the City of Kingston, Canadian Forces Base Kingston, the provincial government, the Bank of Montreal and the Kingston Community Credit Union.

They got their first glimpse of one of the agencies funded by the United Way before they even boarded the bus.

Representatives from Girls Inc. discussed how their organization helps girls with such issues as mental health and body image.

The first stop on the tour was Dress For Success on Princess Street. They provide appropriate workplace clothing for disadvantaged women who need to look their best for interviews or jobs. Business clothing is donated and staff do one-on-one fittings for the women, not only to dress them appropriately but also to empower them and encourage them to strive for success.

Jacque Costron, chair of the Dress For Success board, was glad to see the tour come to their site.

“They are at the beginning of the web that connects us to the whole community because they are going to go back to their own workplaces and talk about what they have seen,” she said.

The tours help get the word out about what they are doing to help women.

They see advantages on several different levels, she added.

“We always find there are one or two new volunteers that we hear about, that have heard about us.”

Plus, donations of clothes may spike because now they know where to send any clothing they want to donate.

And some of the tour participants may work for agencies that can refer potential new clients to them.

“It’s all about spreading the word,” she said. “Engaging people is what we need to do to continue to grow the organization.”

Costron agreed with Varma that the tour could be a real eye-opener.

“Having been one of those volunteers that went on a tour, you don’t actually understand what you are going to see. You think you do, but you don’t actually see it truly clearly because your world is quite different from the world of the people that we actually serve.”

The tours also give the agencies the chance to prove they are doing their jobs well, she said.

“When you give a dollar, you want to know that it is being used well, so we want to be able to talk to people about how we are stewarding their donations, how important it is to us that we do that well.”

A second stop was at Rise, a youth shelter on Kingscourt Avenue that provides housing, counselling and outreach services for homeless young people.

A young resident was willing to share her story with the tour, telling them how she had been taken from a mother unable to look after her, spent time in a foster home and finally ended up in the shelter where, she believes, her life is finally on the right track.

“It’s very important for the community to see what we do here,” Tara Everitt, program manager at Rise, said.

It is easy for people to try and describe it, but until you see it in person, it is hard to see the positive effects they have on the lives of the young people they help, she said.

“It’s great when we can have young people come and speak to people as well, because then they can get the full impact of what we are trying to do.”

Everitt said tours like Seeing is Believing help them get better known in the community.

“We are well known within the social services sector,” she said. People know about them in schools and counsellors know about them as do mental health services.

“But the general community doesn’t know about us, so maybe that’s an error on our part,” Everitt said. “So it is great to have the support of the United Way that can help get that message out to the community.”

The tour also visited the Youth Diversion program and Loving Spoonful before stopping for lunch at St. George’s outreach program.

The United Way currently funds 40 different agencies and recently kicked off its 2016 campaign. The goal is to raise \$3.451 million and so far \$629,983 has been donated.

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