

Hockey Helps the Homeless hits the ice, Charity tournament raises more than \$100,000 for city's most vulnerable citizens

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Blair Edwards, Metroland

Team 1200 player Ryan Bayford tries to clear the front of his crease as Ottawa Innerscity Ministries forward Jim McGee looks on during the teams' first game of the Hockey Helps the Homeless charity tournament at the Bell Sensplex on March 1.

EMC sports - It's 9 a.m. on a Friday morning at the Bell Sensplex and Barb Gray waits anxiously in the hallway of the Bell Sensplex.

In less than half an hour she and her Freedom 55 Financial teammates will play their first game in the Hockey Helps the Homeless tournament, sharing the ice with Canadian Women's Hockey League players Haley Irwin and Carlyne Prevost.

This is Gray's second year competing in the charity hockey tournament.

"I played last year. It was probably one of the best experiences in hockey in the 10-plus years I've played recreational hockey," she said. "It was a real treat to share the locker room on the ice with two women hockey pros: Caroline Ouellette and Anne-Sophie Bettez."

The players were all treated like professionals as soon as they showed up at the rink, said Gray, with tournament volunteers collecting their equipment bags at the front doors and all participants receiving professionally-stitched jerseys.

It was also nice to know the money raised at the tournament would help some of the city's most vulnerable citizens, with the funds going to the Ottawa Mission and Ottawa Innerscity Ministries, she said.

"It was very worthwhile to get an in-depth understanding of the needs of the community," Gray said.

Amanda Shaw, a defenceman with the CWHL Toronto Furries, greeted participants at the door of the Sensplex for the March 1 tournament, helping organizers with registration.

"I was part of the very first (Hockey Helps the Homeless) women's event, which was in Toronto," she said. "It's an amazing cause."

The tournament helps educate people about some of the causes of homelessness, such as mental illness and abusive home environments, she added.

"I think it's really important to get the word out about homelessness in the community."

THIRD-ANNUAL EVENT

Hockey Helps the Homeless is an annual event played in major cities across Canada. It allows hockey enthusiasts to play three games on a team with National Hockey League and CWHL alumni, such as former Ottawa Senators Laurie Boschman and Brad Marsh.

Eight men's teams and six women's teams suited up for the third-annual Ottawa tournament.

For a \$150 registration fee, participants received a team jersey with their name on the back and an invitation to a dinner and a silent auction.

In addition, every participant was expected to fundraise a minimum of \$150.

Every year, the event raises between \$150,000 to \$200,000 in each of the participating cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, with 35 per cent of the money used to pay cost of running the tournaments.

At the Ottawa tournament, each team played three games with a championship final at the end of the day for both the men's and women's sides.

The event also featured a game between the NHL alumni versus the CWHL pros.

The Ottawa tournament almost didn't happen last year. Organizers were forced to postpone the event because of a lack of interest from participants and volunteers.

But interest in the tournament picked up after the media reported on the charity's organizing problems, with several volunteers stepping forward, including Kanata's Dave Edgecomb, co-chairman of last year's event.

This year's co-chairperson is Judy Thompson, a former chairwoman of the HOPE volleyball charity tournament and several other charities.

Thompson said she decided to volunteer when she heard about the tournament's organizing difficulties in the media.

"Ottawa's a very generous town," she said. "We have a lot of volunteers."

This year, Thompson and co-chairman Mike Coughlin headed up a team of eight core volunteers to organize the tournament and 25 event-day volunteers.

This year's tournament is expected to raise more than \$110,000, said Thompson. The final numbers weren't immediately available.

Most of the money is collected through registration fees and individual fundraising, with a smaller amount coming from corporate sponsorship.

"We're certainly over the \$100,000 mark," she said. "It's a great day for a great cause."

HOMELESSNESS

Organizers were hoping to raise \$150,000 at this year's event, with the money going to support the Ottawa Mission and Ottawa Innerscity Ministries. Last year's tournament raised \$106,000.

Almost 8,000 people used Ottawa shelters in 2011, said Ken MacLaren, executive director of Ottawa Innerscity Ministries.

Organizers of the tournament estimate there are between 150,000 and 300,000 homeless people in Canada, with children and young families comprising a growing segment of the homeless population.

"It's going up," he said. "There's been an increase in the number of youth, the number of children and the number of single-parent families. I think the economy has something to do with it."

Ottawa Innerscity Ministries received \$8,000 last year from the tournament, using the money for its Passion for Youth art program.

A group of 20 youth - many with experience living on the street - participated in the program and their work was put on display at an art show and auction.

"We're looking to build self esteem in kids," said MacLaren. "We also work with them with volunteer mentors."

The mentors help the youth participants realize personal goals such as completing high school or getting a job.

The Ottawa Mission used its share of the funds raised by last year's tournament for its food services training program, buying classroom supplies and textbooks.

Hockey Helps the Homeless also raises awareness about the problem of homelessness in Ottawa, said Shirley Roy, a spokesperson for the Ottawa Mission.

"It draws in people who might not come down to the shelter," she said. "Hockey Helps the Homeless is a great community event to educate people about some of the issues surrounding homelessness."