

## 50 Years of Changing Lives in Windsor-Essex

In 1972, a group of caring neighbours chose to make life a little better for men and women in need. 50 years later, our incredible community is still pouring its heart and soul into serving the homeless, hungry, and hurting in Windsor-Essex County.

It all started with a simple gesture of kindness. Nestled in Windsor's downtown core, members of the Central United Church saw the need in the community firsthand—men and women in search of a hot meal, and a safe, warm place to gather.

In 1972, the Open Door Lounge was born. For a few hours each day, these caring volunteers welcomed neighbours in for a cup of hot coffee, a sandwich, and some much-needed companionship. Little did they know, they were starting a long legacy of caring, compassion, and changing lives.

### 1970's: A Mission on the Move

Over the next few years, the Mission grew to serve the needs of the community. Having outgrown its original home at the Central United Church, it moved several times, serving neighbours in need from the back of Bennett Pies on McDougall Street, the basement of the U.A.W. Hall on Chatham Street, and at St. Alphonsus Church on Park Street East.

### 1980's: A Home of Our Own

A decade after its doors first opened, the Mission fully came into its own, becoming a registered charity and convening its first Board in 1982.

And in 1986, the Mission finally found a home of its own—the former

Volcano Pizzeria on Wyandotte Street West. The building's former purpose seemed fitting, given the thousands of hot, nourishing meals that the Mission would serve to hungry neighbours in the decades to come.

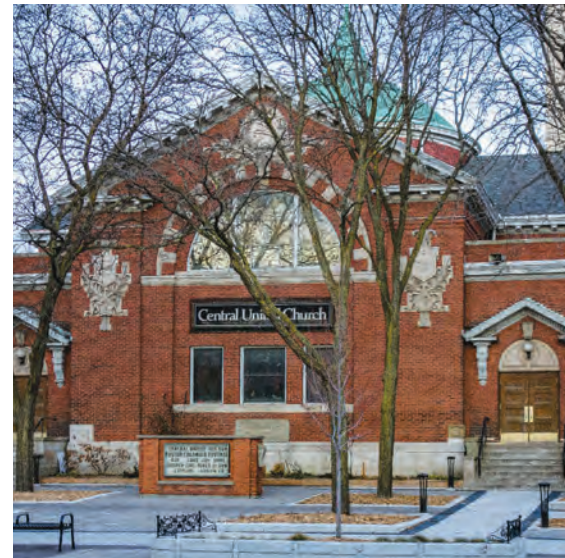
### 1990s-2000s: Meeting the Growing Need

Following deep cuts to the social safety net in the 1990s and the catastrophic recession of the 2000s, poverty, homelessness, and hunger soared. More neighbours than ever turned to the Mission for help. With our caring community behind us, we answered the call.

The Mission moved into a larger location at 664 Victoria Ave. The Emergency Crash Bed Shelter was born, giving a safe place to sleep for 40 men on the floor of the Mission's Dining Hall.

### 2010s: A Safe Haven — and a Hand Up

As the need in Windsor-Essex County continued to grow, so did the Mission, with the community's unwavering support. In 2016, the Wellness Centre at 875 Ouellette opened its doors, becoming the new home for the Mission Food Bank. In 2017, the Mission's Sanctuary Program opened a 103-bed shelter for men, women, youth and families experiencing homelessness with



separated dorms and allowing all needing shelter to sleep on a bed instead of the floor.

The Mission's team also started to look beyond meeting guests' basic needs. New programs were launched to give people the opportunity to heal and rebuild their lives.

- **The Mission's Enterprise Program and Social Enterprises Charities and the Do-Good Deli** were launched in 2017 to help vulnerable neighbours gain valuable job skills and re-enter the workforce.
- **The Phoenix Recovery Program** also opened its doors in 2017, supporting men and women struggling with addiction on their path to recovery.





I like to imagine the very first neighbour who was welcomed into the Open Door Lounge all those years ago...The hope and comfort that came from that first cup of coffee, or a simple meal served with a smile.

**It is truly humbling to think of all the lives that have been touched since then, over half a century of service to the community.** First, by compassionate members of the Central United Church, then, with growing passion and momentum, by

## 50 years of service — with the community by our side

our incredible staff, volunteers, and supporters just like you.

Your steady support has allowed the Downtown Mission to be a safe haven for people in their time of greatest need — even through some of the greatest crises of our lifetime. From the 2008 recession to the Covid-19 pandemic, you never stopped opening your hearts to neighbours struggling with poverty and homelessness.

**I'm so incredibly grateful to be a part of such a giving community. A community that always takes care of its own, no matter what challenges stand in front of us.**

The difference you've made in Windsor-Essex County is so enormous, it's hard to even imagine. Every hot meal...every safe night's sleep...every warm winter coat...every moment of support and connection...each

and every one of these small acts of kindness has meant so incredibly much.

**Add them all up over the course of 50 years, and together, we have changed and saved thousands of lives.**

**When I look to the next 50 years, I'm full of optimism.** There's no doubt, there are new challenges and plenty of hard work ahead of us. But I know that with our incredible team of staff, volunteers, and supporters by our side, and God's love at the helm of all we do, the Mission will always be there for the men, women, youth and families who need us.

With my heartfelt thanks,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Rukshini".

Rukshini Ponniah-Goulin  
Executive Director

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- **The Al Quesnel Community Dental Centre** launched in 2018, connecting vulnerable neighbours to crucial dental health services.
- **The Windsor Youth Centre** joined the Mission Family in 2018, providing young people with the support they need to build a brighter future.

### 2020s: Staying Strong Through a Crisis

When the Covid-19 crisis hit, it hit our city's most vulnerable neighbours the hardest. From Day 1, we jumped into action, adapting to continue serving those in need while keeping both staff and clients safe.

Through every difficult moment, the community was there beside us, helping us keep pace with the soaring need for food and shelter as more neighbours than ever struggled.

### Looking Ahead to the next 50 Years

Today, we look to the future. With our Kitchen and Dining Hall moving to 875 Ouellette, we will be able to serve our guests' different needs all in one place, while we search for a new home that will better serve our guests and fit the needs of our community. We look forward to building and growing our partnerships with the City of Windsor, service providers across Windsor-Essex



County, and our incredible supporters. **We are all stronger together.**

**Wherever we are, with you by our side, the Mission will be a place of solace, shelter, and opportunity for all who come to our doors. ■**

## 50 years of transforming lives — Chris' story

Beyond food and shelter, your generous support has helped thousands of neighbours find the strength to change the course of their lives. Neighbours like Chris Thibert.

**“I love my life now. Eight years ago, I didn't love life — or myself — much at all.”**

Trapped in a vicious cycle of addiction, Chris spent years struggling on the streets, and spent time in and out of jail.

“I used to wake up in the morning and wish I never had,” he says. “I felt like I had nothing left in the world, no one who cared about me.”

**“The only salvation I had was the Downtown Mission,” Chris says.**

“The only salvation I had was the Downtown Mission,” Chris says. Finally finding a safe haven, the security of daily meals, and the unconditional support of the Mission team, Chris gained the strength and resolve to turn his life around.

**“I finally decided to do something. And the Mission team was with me from the start.”**

Chris jumped into his recovery with the support of the Mission staff. As he started to heal from the darkness of addiction, he was finally able to look to his future with hope instead of fear.

He went back to school to open up new opportunities. He got

married to his girlfriend Katie, who had gone through her own recovery journey alongside him.

### A New Path

**The Mission's former CEO, Ron Dunn, set Chris down the path he has walked since the start of his recovery.**

“I knew I wanted to help people who were going through struggles like I had. Ron took me in his office one day after I'd been sober for about two years, and told me if I kept making progress, he'd offer me a job.”

Chris poured his heart and soul into achieving that goal. “It was a long journey, a lot of hard work,” he says.

But in 2016, Chris realized his dream of becoming part of the Mission team.

“The day before Christmas, Ron brought me in his office and told me he was going to hire me. That was a huge, huge turning point in my life.”

Since that day, Chris has become an integral part of the Mission family. For three years, he provided support to guests at the Sanctuary, working his way up to Team Lead.

Chris graduated from college as a Certified Addiction Counselor during his time at the Sanctuary. When he and his wife welcomed their baby boy in 2020, he moved to Team



Lead of the Mission's housing and addictions programs.

**“It's so rewarding to be able to help people, especially since I've been in the same position,” he says. “I see so much of myself in our guests. And I see so much potential.”**

“I hope I can keep growing and keep helping people in the community,” Chris says of his plans for the years to come.

**“I hope I can keep growing and keep helping people in the community,”**

**By helping Chris change his life, you are helping him change countless other lives through his incredible service to the community. Over 50 years, just think about how many people have been touched by your generosity. Thank you! ■**

## Bill and Sue Snider: Decades of Service to the Community

When asked what first compelled him to help those in need, Bill Snider's answer is clear.

**"It was my wife, Sue. When she retired, she was looking for a way to give back. I retired 18 months later, and there I was beside her."**

Sue and Bill started volunteering at the Mission's very first dedicated home — the old Volcano Pizzeria. "The first pizza place in Windsor. Good pizza," Bill says.

The couple poured their hearts into feeding hungry neighbours, helping out in the kitchen in the basement of the former restaurant.

"We'd prepare the food. When lunchtime came, Sue would go upstairs and help serve the guests. After, we'd wash up the dishes, ready for the

next day."

Bill also helped with the Food Bank alongside its passionate founder, Kay Punter.

**"Kay was a real fireplug," Bill says. "She could really get things done."**

Kay wasn't the only familiar face that Bill worked with during his years at the Mission. He fondly remembers how Barry Furlonger, the Mission's long-serving Executive Director, would go from person to person in the dining hall, checking up on everyone. Barry was also well-known for coming down to the kitchen for a snack. "You'd know he'd been there because he always left a knife in the peanut butter jar," Bill says.

"It was a great team of people,"

he says.

Bill, now in his 90s, is very humble about the difference he and Sue made in the community over the years.

**When asked how it feels to know that thousands of hungry people got the comfort of a meal with his help, he simply replies, "It feels good."**

In recognition of the Sniders' incredible legacy, the Mission named its award for exceptional volunteer service the Bill and Sue Snider Award. Bill is proud of this recognition and of his longtime partnership with the Mission.

**Thank you from the bottom of our hearts to Bill, Sue, and all our loyal, longstanding supporters. We simply couldn't do this important work without you.**



## Thank You for 50 years of hope!

To those first caring neighbours at the Central United Church who had the compassion and vision to make the Open Door Lounge a reality...

To our past Executive Directors Barry Furlonger, Chandra Dass, and Ron Dunn, and our incredible Board members, staff, volunteers, and donors over the years...

**You have made the Mission what it is today. Each and every one of you has been an invaluable part of our story. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for your part in writing it, and for giving hope to so many in our community over the past 50 years!**

