

And they would help him again

He was nearly the subject of a police brief in the newspaper last week.

Man, potential threat, escorted from Canadian Mental Health Offices on Kent Street.

There is, of course, more to this story.

To be sure, when he presented himself to the first CMHA staff member he saw in our office that day, a cloud of anger seemed to be chasing him as he paced feverishly back and forth.

His gnashing teeth and clenched fists – oft times shaking agitatedly – seemed to belie his tears and his fragmented utterance of “I can’t take it anymore.”

The staff member calmly asked if he’d like to sit and talk. He towered over her – he of at least six feet, she of considerably less – seemingly uninterested in her genuine concern.

If we’re being honest, some of us in the reception area that afternoon were a bit nervous around him – the stench of alcohol on his breath and his 200 pounds of frustration would, surely, induce that in even the steadiest of mental health care practitioners.

We implored him to share his story – his pain, his sorrow, his anger. We wanted to help; he wasn’t forthcoming. Still, here he was, with no desire to leave.

It was pure coincidence – serendipity, even – when a younger man walked in and they hugged. We all breathed a sigh and figured the reasons for this man’s anguish might quickly unfold. Instead, the younger man – here only to meet up with a buddy – was equally puzzled and remarked, “I only know him from downtown.”

Downtown, of course, in this case is code for that world that most of us barely notices or pay attention to – or choose to. It’s that community of troubled and angry and struggling souls (and, yes, maybe even a bit unnerving), ostensibly

killing time as it migrates from one end of our main streets to the other. This community is where people like both our unscheduled visitors on this day often find kinship and comfort – until they can’t. Or, as the younger visitor so eloquently put it to the older one, “Hey, I wanna help you but I’m also trying to get my own (stuff) together.”

Our older visitor – thanks in a large part to the younger one who selflessly agreed to literally stay by his side – did,

eventually, open up to his misery. We listened. We offered help. And when it became clear that there was potential for physical harm – to others but also to himself – we also got a bit uneasy. So, we followed procedure. Police were called, the building



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was evacuated and he was taken away.

In a debriefing later that afternoon, the CMHA staff discussed, at length, everything involving this incident – (and, to be fair, ones of this gravity are extremely rare). We examined our own standard measures as well as police protocol. In the end, we felt reassured that we’d acted in everyone’s best interest.

And then I queried about the near future, should he return to our offices – but this time sober. Do we owe it to him – and the community – to offer assistance? Could he still be a threat?

Truthfully, there was some discussion on this last point – not only about the importance of our staff’s safety and that of the community; but the safety of this individual, as well. But it was a brief discussion.

We would help him, we all agreed. It’s our responsibility.

But it’s also our job.

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