

DREW HEWITT

EDITORIAL EXAMPLE

NON-PROFIT EDITORIAL

SHELTER: AN ARTIST JOURNEY OF COMPASSION

Art has the power to communicate, evoke emotions, and bring attention to pressing societal issues. Aleda O'Connor, a talented charcoal and pastel artist and painter, is utilizing her artistic skills to shed light on the experiences of individuals facing homelessness in our communities. In her upcoming exhibit at Earl's Court Art Gallery, which runs from Saturday, May 20th to Saturday, May 27th, Aleda presents her personal drawings of shelters and encampments across the city. Through this exhibit, Aleda invites us to reflect on the realities of homelessness, the inspiration behind her work, her decision to donate the proceeds, and the broader role of art in fostering social awareness and change.

From a young age, Aleda had a natural inclination toward art. Growing up in a household where her parents valued and collected art, Aleda was exposed to the world of painting from the start. Her father's friendship with Charles Comfort, a renowned Canadian war artist, further deepened her connection to the art world. Spending time with these prominent painters during her teenage years left an indelible impression on Aleda, fuelling her passion for artistic expression.

Aleda's artistic journey initially centred around naturalized landscapes, but over time, her focus shifted to the urban landscape. Exploring the streets, she found herself face to face with the realities of homelessness and the struggles faced by those displaced. While walking along the rail trail in Corktown, Aleda's attention was captured by the sound of an alarm clock, "an old-fashioned, wind-up clock. It occurred to me that somebody was in there trying to keep their life together, somebody who had a routine, somebody who needed to get to work, maybe." "Where are they going to get cleaned up? Where do they do their laundry and use the washroom? This is so hard. This is so much work."

This experience sparked her curiosity, leading her to photograph and draw the encampments she encountered. Through her observations and a deep sense of empathy, Aleda felt compelled to draw attention to the humanity of people living in these shelters. She shared her initial drawing on her Instagram page, expecting mixed responses. Instead, she received an outpouring of concern and understanding from people who shared her worries and frustrations about the complexity of the homelessness issue. Encouraged by the positive feedback, Aleda continued to create more drawings, which developed a life of their own.

As interest in her drawings grew, Aleda decided to showcase her work in an exhibit. She approached Earl's Court Art Gallery with a unique proposition: a nonprofit show that would make the artwork affordable for a broader audience. Earl's Court Art Gallery not only waived their usual commission but also provided the exhibition space free of charge. Aleda's intention was to give back to the community through her art, and the gallery's enthusiastic endorsement made this vision a reality.

Determining which organization to support was not an easy task, given the numerous impactful programs and grassroots initiatives across the city. However, Wesley, known for its extensive range of frontline support services and collaborations with other organizations, caught Aleda's attention. Impressed by Wesley's work on multiple fronts, she felt compelled to contribute to their efforts.

Aleda's journey as an artist and her decision to bring visibility to individuals experiencing homelessness exemplifies the significance of using our talents, interests, and gifts to support the community. This exhibit is not about her as an artist. Rather the drawings serve as a reminder to notice the humanity of those living in encampments, highlighting their resilience and daily struggles. "It's about witnessing, listening, and learning from the people in encampments, asking what is needed and how can help be delivered."

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VOLUNTEER CHAMPION: MARY MCCRACKEN


During most of Mary McCracken's life, she has served the Hamilton community as a teacher, inclusion advocate and long-time volunteer. Mary's contribution to Wesley began because of her church, which had an outreach-minded culture—recounting how the caring adults in her family and church community demonstrated generosity simply as a way of life.

After Mary retired from teaching, she began to help Wesley's after-school program by tutoring children with homework. McCracken's expertise as a teacher helped the program immensely. She fondly recalls one of the children she guided improving their grade from a D to a B in math and how much that meant to the family. This success story underscored the importance of bringing one's time and talents into volunteering. In her words, "All he needed was some one-on-one focusing."

While speaking about Mary's lived experience in teaching, she recalled her career at Hess Street Elementary School during the Vietnamese refugee crisis and the influx of child newcomers. "I had a little girl in my class who said she wanted to be white so she could be a teacher." The weight of her words reflected a heartbreaking reality—one where she had never seen someone who looked like her in a position of leadership. It was a stark reminder of the barriers children face when they don't see themselves represented in the world around them. Speaking truthfully to school administration about the importance of visual representation for young learners. "I said you've got a very high Asian population of students. And what is your staff ratio for visual representation?"

Mary also volunteers at the Christmas store every year, and she has become part of a tight-knit group of volunteers who have been working together for years. Mary enjoys volunteering with Wesley and believes in the organization's mission to help those in need, including newcomers to the community. "When you give, you get two fold back".

Mary McCracken's story is an inspiring example of how demonstrating generosity to the younger generation can inspire them to adopt a mindset of caring for others as adults. Thank you, Mary, for all you do to shape this community for the better.

If you want to be a part of positive change in the lives of the region's most vulnerable, check out our volunteering opportunities.  [Get Involved Today](#)