



January 14, 2009

## No ride to food bank

By EARL McRAE

Not that Andre "Go To Hell, Yay" Cornellier is struggling in transit-strike penury, or ever visits the Ottawa Food Bank for his vittles, or is dependent on buses to get him around, but Marilyn Dagg fits all three categories, which is why she's adamant that bus service in this city should be designated non-strike essential.

"Absolutely," she says. "There are many people who rely totally on the bus, it's the only way they have to get to work or to important doctors' appointments, many such things."

And to the Ottawa Food Bank or one its 128 support agencies: Peter Tilley, executive director, says there are people in this city in circumstances so dire they need the food bank to stave off hunger but who now are unable to get to the main operation or one of its agencies.

These people, he says, are mostly the elderly in apartments, often alone, unable to afford taxis, without friends or family. If this strike goes on for more weeks and months, when is it we'll read or hear on the news that an elderly shut-in was found dead in his or her apartment from hunger? Believe it, you the privileged and comfortable, there are such alone and lonely people in your city.

Marilyn Dagg is neither alone, lonely nor elderly, but the strike is no discriminator when it comes to its suffering victims, including those to whom the Ottawa Food Bank is a lifeline, and it has been that for Marilyn Dagg, husband Gary, the three children aged six, 14, and 17 who live in a small apartment on Baseline Rd.

Marilyn Dagg, 40, who doesn't know if she is going to be able to make it into work today for her 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. supervisor shift at a Tim Hortons on Merivale Rd. because she has no one to drive her. The store manager has been giving lifts to employees, but can't do it on a constant basis, and a friend of Dagg who's been able to drive her now and then, can't, her car is broken down.

Marilyn and Gary, not able to afford a vehicle, had to take buses.

"I have a friend who lost her job because of the strike," says Marilyn. "It was a good-paying job with benefits, but she had no way of getting to work anymore. She's a single mom with three kids and has had to go on Ontario Works assistance. One of my co-workers, a student, hasn't been in at all since the strike. His shifts are still listed, but with no buses, he can't get in."

Marilyn Dagg needs her job. Gary, 48, has been unable to work since sustaining a serious and debilitating work injury to his spinal cord several years ago. He receives a monthly cheque through the Ontario Disability Support Program and the Worker Safety Insurance Board.

Because she works, his compensation is reduced by half. Their combined monthly income is around \$2,000. Their rent alone is almost \$1,200 a month.

For Marilyn, Gary, and the three kids, there is some \$800 left a month for such things as the phone bill, hydro, toiletries, clothing, and food, and the always-other incidentals -- expected and unexpected -- in day-to-day living expenses. A family of five living on a bleak \$24,000 a year.

Imperative that she keep her job, she's had to at times take a cab to work and back, a hurtful expense. It is why, for the first time, she and her husband missed the rent-due date of Jan. 5. "I don't know how we're going to make it to the end of the month. We've received a termination notice effective the 23rd of January. If we don't pay by then we have to vacate. I don't understand why they'd do this since everybody is having such a hard time now."

Which is why the Ottawa Food Bank is their beacon of sustenance when needed.

Marilyn is a good, responsible, proud person, not one to abuse the service.

With her recyclable bags, she'd take the bus to the food bank agency on Caldwell St. only when the situation was dire. She tries to shop at the supermarket. "Lots of hamburger, baloney for the kids school sandwiches. Pasta. Lots of potatoes. I buy as lean as possible, but I can be very creative."

Peter Tilley of the food bank understands and sympathizes. "We're scrambling to work with our agencies to help people. Even driving care packages to people when we can. If anyone needs help, they can phone us at 613-745-7001 and ask for Melanie. We'll listen, we'll do what we can."

Marilyn Dagg, strike casualty, might not have made it in to work today, but what is known is this: Her husband had to cancel his important doctor's appointment for yesterday. No buses. Hard-headedness? Plenty of it.