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For the better part of 18 years, Andrew Buchanan lived and slept on the streets.

A little help from his friends changed everything when Buchanan walked into the Good Neighbours' Club. It's not one most would aspire to join. The criteria to get in are too onerous. Good Neighbours' is open exclusively to men 50 and older living on the margins of society. Joining turned Buchanan's life around.

The Jarvis St. agency has been a fixture in Toronto since 1933, when it began helping older, unemployed, homeless men, many of them veterans. At Good Neighbours', they were more than the labels society had placed on them. They were respected for who they were.

Then, as today, membership at the United Way Toronto agency has its benefits. Hot meals are served daily. Members have access to phones and computers. They get mail delivered to the club. There's a place to take a shower, do laundry, get a haircut and receive medical attention. When the time comes, there's also someone to give them a dignified burial. In the meantime, their GNC card is a lifeline.

Many members don't have family support and the club offers them a safe haven, said Kelly Downs, coordinator of development and volunteer services. At GNC, there are no worries about being beaten up by younger men, as is the case at some shelters or on the street.

These days, the 55-year-old Buchanan, a native of Barrie, feels pretty good about himself. He volunteers in the kitchen, helping to serve up to 200 meals a day. It gives him a reason to get up in the morning.

"I want to give back," Buchanan said. "It's a two-way street. You get, you give. It all works out. Here, I'm part of the crew and we count on each other. That's the beauty of it."

Sunset MacDonald enjoys the camaraderie among members. Friends aren't easy to make on the street. He's also been a volunteer in the kitchen and drove the club's van to collect donations from supporters such as Whole Foods Inc.

MacDonald describes the club as "a beautiful organization helping the vulnerable."

Many more are joining as they struggle to survive the turbulent economy. Last year, an average of 17 guys joined a month. This year, the number hovers around 30, Downs said. As the population ages, more will turn to the agency – reportedly the only one in North America working with older men.

Bill Downe hasn't walked in their shoes, but he knows the difference front line agencies make in the lives of the needy. The president of BMO, he's chair of this year's United Way Toronto fundraising campaign and has visited dozens of agencies. Though Bay Street, not the mean streets, is where Downe lives, he's seen the great need of so many in the city. He's asking those who can to donate and change lives.

"We've got a big challenge this year," he said, adding the \$107.5 million target must be reached. "To fall short is not in our vocabulary."