

Intro:

**Marion Kane:** What did she give you?

**Scott:** She gave me some hot soup ma'am, while I'm sitting on the street in the cold today. That was a very nice gesture.

**Marion Kane:** Most Canadians have adequate food and shelter. Thousands of homeless people suffer on the streets every day. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®, and welcome to "Sittin' In The Kitchen"®. Haven Toronto is a downtown drop-in for older homeless men. It provides hot meals and a welcoming place to get out of the cold. I spoke with Lauro Monteiro, Haven's passionate Executive Director. Listen to the end and challenge your beliefs about those trying to survive on the street. But first Scott, a panhandler, shares his story.

Interview:

**Marion Kane:** Scott I see you every day almost when I go to the gym. Why do you panhandle?

**Scott:** Well ma'am, I do have a bit of income through a disability plan but it's not enough to cover all the expenses I have, like rent, food, and so forth.

**Marion Kane:** How do you fare by panhandling?

**Scott:** It's very degrading. You get really weird looks every day and people judge you as if you're a drug addict or an alcoholic which I'm neither. It's just very degrading emotionally and spiritually.

**Marion Kane:** It's very cold outside. It's December and it's sub-zero today.

**Scott:** You tend to do things just to get by and do what you can. It's either this or I may not eat. I'm trying not to end up on the streets permanently. I do have a place to live right now but like I said, money is very scarce and I have to do what I can to survive.

**Marion Kane:** Do you see more and more people panhandling on the streets of Toronto?

**Scott:** There are a lot of people that are struggling in this city and it seems like those that are willing to help are few and far between. Not that there aren't any. There are people that will stop and give care packages and what-have-you, but Toronto really has to deal with this situation and provide more in the way of affordable housing, better benefits. A lot of people don't choose to be on the street. They're like me. They start out, they may have a disability and, due to their situation, they may get involved in other things but it originally starts – everybody has a story. That's the thing that people gotta remember. Everyone has a story. Don't judge just on appearance and what you see. Maybe stop and actually get to know that person.

**Marion Kane:** Scott, thank you.

**Scott:** Thank you, ma'am.

**Marion Kane:** I'm at Haven in downtown Toronto, a drop-in centre for homeless men. I'm with Lauro Monteiro in his office at Haven. Please introduce yourself.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Hi Marion. I'm Lauro Monteiro, Executive Director at Haven Toronto. This will be actually my 10th year working here. It's the best 10 years I've ever spent in my working life.

**Marion Kane:** Please fill in my audience about the history of Haven. It's existed for decades.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yep. This will actually be our 87<sup>th</sup> year in continuous operation. It was founded by an amazing woman named May Birchard, who was appalled that she was seeing men lining up at soup kitchens who were veterans of the First World War. With much resistance from many, many people, she established what was then called The Good Neighbours' Club, which is still our current legal name. We operate as Haven Toronto. She permanently established us physically in the location that we're currently in on Jarvis Street in 1966. She's amazing for many reasons. She was actually one of the first women to become a municipal politician. She became a city councillor after founding The Good Neighbours' Club and also was quite an innovator. She was the actual inventor of subsidized child care in Canada.

**Marion Kane:** Oh my goodness.

**Lauro Monteiro:** So, this was an amazing woman and she's left a tremendous legacy 87 years later we're still operating. Now we don't see as many veterans as we used to, although we still do get veterans. We honour her legacy of trying to help older men who find themselves in situations that are unfortunate in downtown Toronto.

**Marion Kane:** Is it for men only?

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yes. For the entire 87 years it has always been for men and men over the age of 50. I often get asked, "Why men?" My answer is always the same: "Why not?" Men over the age of 50 are actually the largest cohort of people that are homeless in Toronto and now all across Canada. Over one-third of the people that are homeless tonight in the city of Toronto will be single men over the age of 50. We are the only agency in the entire country who is dedicated to the needs of these men.

**Marion Kane:** How do you help the men find homes and how do you help them in general?

**Lauro Monteiro:** In terms of housing specifically we have a counsellor here who's full-time. The majority of his work is trying to help men find decent accommodations. For most of the men that we see they will not be going into subsidized housing because the waitlists are astounding. In Toronto, if you were to be put on the waitlist today for subsidized housing, you'd be waiting a decade before you ever came up to the top of the list. We work with private landlords. We work with wonderful organizations like OCAP who provide lists of deeply affordable residence that landlords are willing to rent to people who are homeless. We scour the internet, whatever we can do to try and find

these men a suitable place to live. That's how we help them in terms of housing. In general, it's a physical space, it's a community where men can come and get meals.

**Marion Kane:** What hours and days are you open?

**Lauro Monteiro:** We're actually open 365 days a year. We never close. Ever. It doesn't matter the day. It doesn't matter the weather. You will find our door open at 8:00 a.m. every single morning and we are open until 5:00 p.m.

**Marion Kane:** You don't do overnight.

**Lauro Monteiro:** No. Drop-in centres were actually created to fill a void because shelters, generally speaking, will provide you with a bed for the night and then at 6:30 or 7:00 o'clock in the morning they will kindly ask you to leave and you're left to find how to fill your day. Drop-in centres all across the city of Toronto - there are about 53 in the city of Toronto - try to fill that void.

**Marion Kane:** How many men on average use your drop-in on a daily basis?

**Lauro Monteiro:** On a daily basis 365 days a year we will see over 400 men come through our doors every single day.

**Marion Kane:** Oh my God. That brings me to food, my special interest. You do meals during the day. How many meals?

**Lauro Monteiro:** In a course of a year we will serve 55,000 meals here. We serve a hot breakfast in the morning. Lunch we serve from noon 'til 1:00 every single day.

**Marion Kane:** It's now being served.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yes, it's being served and the men quite look forward to it. Food is very important. It's a gateway for getting people to come here. If you're kicked out of a shelter or you're sleeping rough, food is critically important. We know the two most important things for a person who's homeless is obviously shelter and being safe, and then food. Our ability to serve meals really draws people in here. Once we have people here, we can build relationships and trust with people. We also serve a hot meal at 3:00, and then we have a 3:30 what we call is a snack. We have a wonderful relationship with Whole Foods and every morning we go there and we pick up their prepared foods that have expired at the end of the day. They're still great meals – chicken Caesar salads, all kinds of prepared sandwiches, fruits. What we get is really actually quite good. We try do it with the 3:00 and the 3:30 meals is to kind of bridge the gap because in Toronto, in the downtown core especially, during the week Monday to Friday daylight hours there are lots of places where folks can access meals. But it becomes a real, real problem in the evenings for dinner. Most agencies are like us, they operate until 5:00, they don't serve dinner. Often what you find in downtown Toronto is a local church will serve a meal on a Tuesday. Another church 20 blocks away will also. You have to learn "Where are these meals?" and then you have to travel which is already a huge barrier for anyone who is homeless but particularly if you're an older person. On average our men here will walk 15 miles a day.

**Marion Kane:** Oh my God. Walk 15 miles?

**Lauro Monteiro:** You have to walk from the shelters, to here, to go get food in the evenings, to go back to the shelters, to go meet workers. There's a lot of travelling on your feet because you can't afford TTC, so our ability to provide the 3:00, 3:30 food will often be the last meal some of our clients will have until breakfast the next morning.

**Marion Kane:** This is a cruel state for people who are homeless. How do you face them every day?

**Lauro Monteiro:** Well, it's challenging work, there's no doubt about it. But you know what? I think I speak probably for everybody who works here and I certainly feel this way. We get much more than what we give here. I have been struck for every day that I have worked here with resiliency, the strength of the people that we're privileged to work with. I often tell people, "I'm over 60. I don't think I could spend one day sleeping outdoors. I don't think I could spend a day in a shelter at my age." I'm amazed at how our men can survive some of the conditions that they're forced to be in and do it day in and day out. They are strong, they are resilient and, most importantly, I think an asset that most people don't really see is they're generous.

**Marion Kane:** You say that the men who come here call it their home.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yes. We've received that feedback many, many, many times. The men will actually call it their home. I personally refuse to call it their home. This is not anyone's home. I think what it illustrates is having a community, having a safe place, having relationships, having those basic things that all of us have in our lives.

**Marion Kane:** Having good food.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yes. Having very good food and being able to enjoy it. Some people might be startled to listen to this but, in some places, they actually put a time limit on how long you can eat because they have to move so many people through. We don't do that here. I absolutely will never do that. I can't think of anything more undignified than rushing a person through their meal. Meals are meant to be enjoyed. Being around others.

**Marion Kane:** You're Portuguese.

**Lauro Monteiro:** I am.

**Marion Kane:** And the Portuguese enjoy their food.

**Lauro Monteiro:** We do very much and it's not about the food only. In our culture, it's also about being around the people that you love and sharing of that food. To me it's totally contrary to ask someone, "Hurry up, you only have 15 minutes to eat." We like people to take their time. We like people to enjoy their food. We like people at the tables to have conversations and enjoy each other's company while they're eating. They have such an undignified existence everywhere they go. They're just numbers. They wait for everything. They line up for everything. They're at everyone's mercy for everything that they need. Just being able to sit in a nice clean environment with a good meal with three or four other people who you share similar experiences can be a very, very powerful positive aspect in your day. I would never think of taking that away for people. We put a great, great value on the experience they have around the food and translate that to our

other things that we do here. It's a great thing to see and we always invite people here to come and serve a meal. Come here and experience it for yourself.

**Marion Kane:** Let's go down to the dining room.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Dante, this is Marion.

**Marion Kane:** Hello Dante. You're the chef?

**Dante:** No chef here, I'm just the cook.

**Marion Kane:** Just the cook?

**Dante:** Yeah, just the cook.

**Marion Kane:** That's an important role.

**Dante:** Important role? Yeah, well we're trying to do our best to serve people.

**Marion Kane:** What is this? Vegetables? A vat of vegetables.

**Dante:** Yeah, we've got some vegetables. Also we've got some beef. We're going to make a beef stew. Getting ready for tomorrow for lunch. That's for lunch.

**Danika:** My name is Danika.

**Marion Kane:** What's your favourite thing to cook?

**Danika:** Mostly protein. It's mostly meat items because it's very challenging as we don't know what ingredients we are getting. But, as a cook, I'm ready to accept that challenge so that we know what we can do and always keeps your mind running to what creative items we can do every day.

**Marion Kane:** What's your most creative dish?

**Danika:** One of the most popular that they always come back for was chicken meatloaf, actually. It was very famous and they were very disappointed that is just got finished with so quickly.

**Marion Kane:** I like meatloaf. Can I go out there and see what you're serving?

**Danika:** Sure.

**Dante:** Today you can see we've got rice, roasted potatoes, we've got some meatballs with a homemade tomato sauce. We've got some barbecued chicken, as you can see, and we've got some mixed grain. We've got some chicken soup.

**Marion Kane:** It's a full room.

**Lauro Monteiro:** I'm looking at a room full of people who are enjoying a good meal. What could be better than that?

**Marion Kane:** It's a balanced meal nutritionally.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yes, and I'm sure most people listening to us right now would be surprised if I told them I spend virtually very little money on purchasing food. Most of our

food is donated from Daily Bread Food Bank and Second Harvest. I'm very proud of the quality of the food that we put out here and the cooks.

**Marion Kane:** It looks good.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yeah, it looks excellent. We always have nice people. Like today, we have folks here from the CIBC serving.

**Marion Kane:** Women volunteers. Four women.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Yeah. Almost every day now we have corporate teams here of folks. We like to bring them here into the kitchen and into the dining room to serve the men. One – so they can see the good quality of the food that we serve, but also they can interact with the men and it's a very, very powerful thing to see. And they enjoy serving people. What could be better than serving another human being food? I can't think of a thing.

**Marion Kane:** I like it.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Unlike many places we're not very big on portions here. If you run an institutional kitchen it's all about portion control – four ounces of this, five ounces of that. We don't do that here.

**Marion Kane:** It's big portions.

**Lauro Monteiro:** It's healthy portions. If you'd like a little extra we're happy to provide it. Our philosophy here is that food should not be a battleground.

**Marion Kane:** It's love and peace.

**Lauro Monteiro:** It is. It's an atmosphere that's not really created by us so I can't take credit for that. That's created by the men themselves. You'll see here – there are men here who are clients here volunteering currently. They're cleaning, they're doing the dishes, they're helping serve. These are men who are actual clients here but they want to give back and they want to contribute because they're so appreciative. That vibe comes from the men, it doesn't come from us.

**Marion Kane:** What is your name?

**Bogdan:** Bogdan.

**Marion Kane:** Bogdan?

**Bogdan:** Yes.

**Marion Kane:** Where are you from?

**Bogdan:** I'm from Poland.

**Marion Kane:** Do you work here?

**Bogdan:** I work here as a voluntary and I have pleasure for many different reasons why I'm here.

**Marion Kane:** Name some of the reasons.

**Bogdan:** Therapy from eviction last year. Another reason is after living in a shelter, I have to pay back what I've got so that I could survive not on the street with roof and food.

**Marion Kane:** Do you cook here or do you dishwasher?

**Bogdan:** I like dishwashing.

**Marion Kane:** Why do you like it?

**Bogdan:** It's stress-free. But of course I want to be busy. I have to work. Doesn't matter for salary or as a voluntary worker. But now I see much deeper problems with homeless people here. That it's not a marginal thing in this city especially. Many people need shelters, they are hungry.

**Marion Kane:** Yeah. You speak from your heart.

**Bogdan:** Yes. I speak from my heart.

**Marion Kane:** Thank you Bogdan.

**Bogdan:** Mmhmm.

**Marion Kane:** How do you see it as a problem in the big picture and what is the solution?

**Lauro Monteiro:** Excellent question. One of the many things we know here is many of the men who come here did not become homeless because of their addiction or their mental health. They will though, eventually, if they're in the system that we've created here in Toronto. Many of them will start to get depressed and develop mental health, and unfortunately sometimes they will develop addictions because it is so hard and it is such a burden and there is so little hope that they have that anyone is going to help them get out of homelessness. We have to stop perpetuating this myth that people become homeless because of addictions or mental health. That is not the reality. Most people now are becoming homeless for economic reasons. For years now we've been thinking it was a crisis in Toronto in terms of homelessness, but many of us now are articulating that we're in a full-blown emergency in the city of Toronto. I started working here February 1<sup>st</sup> 2010. There were just a little over 4,000 homeless people in the city of Toronto back then. Tonight, we will have over 10,000. We have more than doubled and those are only the people that we know of. One of the challenges we have in the city of Toronto is there are many invisible homeless people that the city does not capture. Many of us know that the number is much higher than 10,000. We're in a full-blown emergency in this city and now as I speak to you on Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, we're in the worst weather conditions of the year – wintertime. There are real burdens for folks during this period of time. As we speak, this will be the worst year since the city of Toronto has tracked the number of deaths of people that have died.

**Marion Kane:** How many people die in a month?

**Lauro Monteiro:** The last stat that the Toronto Public Health put out was 2.2 people a week are dying. I have articulated for many years that that number is considerably low because there are challenges in how the city collects that number. There are many more people than 100 in our city dying here every year who are homeless.

**Marion Kane:** What is the homeless person's life like in three words?

**Lauro Monteiro:** Tremendous hardships. You have to struggle every inch of the way. As I said to you before, they walk 15 miles a day. You're dependent on other people. The system is a grind. It's a bureaucracy. You're just a number. We don't humanize people. We dehumanize them when they're homeless and that doesn't help getting someone out of the situation that they're in. People often say homelessness is a complex issue. Well, maybe. But the solution is actually pretty easy. Give somebody a key to a house or an apartment and you'll solve their homelessness and then maybe you could support them if they need help. It's not that hard, really.

**Marion Kane:** That's more than three words (laughing).

**Lauro Monteiro:** Sorry. You can't ask a Portuguese guy not to talk. I'm sorry.

**Marion Kane:** (laughs). I often end my interviews with a question. What gives you hope?

**Lauro Monteiro:** What gives me hope is what I see here every day, is the strength of character of the people. We have a failure in the systems that we have here in Toronto. You do have to have a certain steely determination to do this kind of work and there are many like me. There are hundreds and hundreds of people out here doing this kind of work. I see the good every single day. I see tragedy, I see sad circumstances but, mixed in with that, is some incredible, incredible examples of the human spirit. That gives me hope that one day our systems, our politicians, our public policy makers will finally get this right and we will not live in a community where we have 10,000 people who are struggling every night just to have a place to sleep.

**Marion Kane:** I hope you're right Lauro. Thank you.

**Lauro Monteiro:** Thank you.

Conclusion:

**Marion Kane:** That was my conversation with Lauro Monteiro of Haven Toronto. Thanks to everyone at Haven for speaking with me. To support their excellent work visit [haventoronto.ca](http://haventoronto.ca) and click "Donate Now". I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at [marionkane.com](http://marionkane.com) and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.