



Ivan: A sense of place and purpose

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Ivan turned up at the Homes First's Scarborough Shelter about three-years ago after having lived a transient life. The hale, 70-year-old, affectionately known as "Pops" is originally from Jamaica but has been living in Toronto since the late 1960s. His experience with homelessness had been particularly difficult because it took place late in his life.

"I was living the life when I was younger, having a family, having a job, partnerships in businesses, travelling, and things like that," Ivan says. "So at my age, when I [became] homeless, it was at a time when it was crippling for me. I wasn't young anymore."

Facing the specter of living on the streets in his seventies, Ivan instead spent the next three years at our shelter in Scarborough. "It was very hard for me," he says. "But what Homes First gave me is a sense of belonging, making the best of a bad situation."

With the support and guidance he received from Homes First staff,

Ivan eventually transitioned to a room at Strachan House where he stayed for eight months. But when a bachelor apartment became available at Bellevue in Kensington Market, he leapt at the chance to have his own self-contained space, with his own kitchen and bathroom, and a place for his book collection and other belongings ("Things that inspire me and enlighten me," Ivan says). He picked up the keys to his new place at the beginning of April.

When you ask him how he feels about having his own place now, his face lights up and he starts to laugh. "It's like heaven compared to hell," he says with a chuckle.

"The most important thing, it gives me a peace of mind," says Ivan. "I can make my own decisions and do things of my own accord. I can feel good if one of my kids and my family were to visit me. That was something that I had a big problem with over the years. I felt detached from the family that I had, because I didn't have the courage... for them to come and visit me at the

shelter, even at Strachan House. It's no palace, but it's somewhere acceptable; its livable conditions, and I could feel that lift, that comfort."

Ivan is not one to take his improved conditions for granted. Twice-a-week, on Thursdays and Fridays, when he's not doing small jobs in construction or warehouse work, he makes the one-hour TTC journey back to the Scarborough Shelter where he volunteers his time unloading trucks, cleaning up the yard, working in the stockroom, or assisting in the kitchen. To Ivan, Homes First feels like an "extended family." It's about being part of the community and giving back, and the sense of purpose and confidence it gives him.

"The Homes First experience for me is still happening," Ivan says. "It gave me the opportunity to believe in myself and to believe that there was somebody out there looking out for me."