# Through the Eyes of a Young Person

Intro Announcer: You're listening to Under One Roof, a Covenant House of Vancouver production. Under One Roof is your opportunity to hear conversations with subject matter experts on a variety of social justice and public policy issues. Covenant House Vancouver is dedicated to serving all youth with absolute respect and unconditional love, helping youth experiencing homelessness and protecting and safeguarding all youth in need. Please note that the views [00:00:30] of our guests do not necessarily reflect the board, management, or staff here at Covenant House Vancouver, and now... Under One Roof.

Jen Hall: Welcome to Under One Roof, a Covenant House Vancouver production. My name is Jennifer Hall and I'll be your host for today's episode. This month, Covenant House Vancouver is thrilled to be speaking with representatives of Island Pacific School on Bowen Island who have just participated in a student edition of Sleep [00:01:00] Out. I'm joined today by Jennifer Hendrickson, Assistant Head of School, and by grade nine students, Hannah and Caelan. Welcome to all of you. To set the stage before we start our conversation, I'd like to just take a moment to share with our listeners what the Sleep Out is, and to explain a little bit about what the experience last night entailed. Through the Sleep Out: Student Edition, Students across the Lower Mainland are taking a stand against youth homelessness. [00:01:30] The event involves students giving up their safe and comfortable beds for a night so that young people can find one at Covenant House Vancouver. Designed to teach students about the issues that lead to youth homelessness, the Sleep Out helps raise awareness in our community, and it also raises funds to support the programs and services that are offered at Covenant House Vancouver. Last night, students at Island Pacific School slept outside as part of the Sleep Out movement. And each one of the students took on the challenge [00:02:00] of raising funds for Covenant House. For this year's Sleep Out, you raised $8,397 as a group. And over the past year, eight years, IPS students have raised an amazing $75,047 to support the young people at Covenant House. It's just incredible. So with that context, let's dive into our conversation. Jen, I'm going to start with some questions for you. I wonder as an [00:02:30] educator, if you can share with us what your objectives are for your students who participate in the Sleep Out and what you hope that they'll take away from the experience.

Jennifer Hendri...: So at our school community service is a big part of the package of what we teach. It's a small middle school on Bowen Island. So grade six to grade nine. So our grade nine students, really it's their capstone year. So we want them to have an experience that's really meaningful to them. And part of our community is Bowen Island, but also [00:03:00] Vancouver. So we hope to build, an idea of what students who are the same age as them or a little bit older, would be experiencing, coming from different backgrounds or different circumstances than they are. And we really try to build on empathy so that they can understand that, uh, with all different backgrounds, you're going to have different challenges and that we, as a group of people can help each other through those challenges.

Jen Hall: I know that Island [00:03:30] Pacific School has participated in the Sleep Out since the student edition began eight years ago, this was your eighth Sleep Out. And I wonder why you continue to do this year after year.

Jennifer Hendri...: It was actually our students that wanted to have more of a direct impact. They wanted to also deal with issues that are bigger than helping out with gardens or a child centre on Bowen and things like that. So it was their idea that they wanted to work, uh [00:04:00] , somehow in the Downtown Eastside. We partnered up with Covenant House because they're a youth organization and our youth wanted to help other youth. So this has become, um, a tradition really for our grade nines and they try to out fundraise each other and they hear stories of the years before them and build on that experience, and then, what it means to them.

Jen Hall: What value do you think that the experience brings to the students in particular [00:04:30] and to your school, in general?

Jennifer Hendri...: Uh, there's so much value in, for one, opening their eyes to something that they usually just drive through the Downtown Eastside with their windows up and their locks down. So to have our students walk around in small groups in the Downtown Eastside, really seeing the people that are there and it's the really seeing that's important to us. So they're looking people in the eye, they're talking to people, [00:05:00] they're maybe getting a small glimpse of what it would be like if they had to spend a night, a week, a month out on the street, what the challenges would be for people that would be in that situation. So it's really valuable for them. Um, and I think that awareness brings compassion and hopefully action for change.

Jen Hall: And what about for the school as a whole?

Jennifer Hendri...: Mm-hmm <affirmative>, it's our, it's our grade nines. And when [00:05:30] they graduate, we like to say that they have a head on their shoulders from the four years that they've been at IPS, but it's also about the heart. And I think this is a big part of our program and graduating. Young people who are ready to make change in the world. So it's a big part of what we hope to see in them in four years of development.

Jen Hall: I love that idea of focusing on the, on the head, but also the heart as you send these kids off Bowen Island and into the world. I know that there [00:06:00] are some students who, having graduated from IPS, maybe continued on with some of the work that they've done for Covenant House. And I just wonder if you've seen any lasting experiences of the, or lasting impacts of the experience of participating in the Sleep Out.

Jennifer Hendri...: Mm-hmm <affirmative>, a lot of them, when I see them, when they're in high school, they come back and talk to me about their Sleep Out experience, but they also go on to start clubs where they get involved in the Covenant House backpack program, or do organizing other [00:06:30] sleep outs. Also, there's one student who, she was one of the first groups that did it so eight years ago. And since then she has done a fundraiser every year on her birthday for Covenant House. So that's, um, one of the things that makes an impression, but I think just in opening their eyes to the broader community and giving them an awareness, but also a willingness and a way to participate in making lasting change [00:07:00] for youth that may have been in a different circumstance than they have.

Jen Hall: Is there anything else that you want to share before we invite our student guests into the conversation?

Jennifer Hendri...: Um, yeah, I think it's a super valuable program, the Sleep Out, because it does give them just a one day immersion into what it might be like to be homeless, to be feeling unsafe and to have nowhere to go. So that Covenant House gives that opportunity to youth that have that, [00:07:30] that are in that circumstance, so that our students feel it for a day. Uh, there are other youth out there that are feeling this over and over again, night after night. So it's really important for us that we've teamed up with Covenant House to be able to provide the funding so that people like that can get the help that they need.

Jen Hall: And we are certainly grateful that you have teamed up with us. You've been wonderful partners. So I'd like to turn now to our student guests, Hannah, and Caelan. [00:08:00] I'm certainly looking forward to hearing directly from both of you. I understand that yesterday, prior to your Sleep Out, you spent some time walking around the Downtown Eastside as a way to gain some understanding into what some of the young people facing homelessness might be experiencing. And I'd love you to tell us about what that was like, Caelan. Was it what you expected?

Caelan: Not at all. I I'd been through there before, but it was [00:08:30] always, I'd always look down. You don't look at the people. They're scary. You try to get through there as fast as you can. And this time it was different. I force myself to look at, look at people. So you smile say hi, and you really see the people, you see their souls. You see they're hurt, but they're also, they're there, they're real. And there were so many more people than I expected when you're just driving through there walking. You don't really notice the crowd. There's [00:09:00] crowds of people that, like, clump together around, like, services. And some of them look very sad. Some of them look happy. Like there's so, so many people, I can't believe it.

Jen Hall: What was most surprising to you?

Caelan: It was crazy how close everything was. That was, I was not expecting, it felt very close to home. It's so close to places I go every day and you see these people that are hurting and everyone just walks past. [00:09:30] You don't, you try to ignore them, but I'm not gonna be able to do that again. Just felt very close to home. And the people on the streets are... could be people I know. It can happen to anyone.

Jen Hall: And Hannah, what about you? What was the experience like for you?

Hannah: Um, it was very overwhelming. I didn't realize there would be so many people who are homeless [00:10:00] and it was very eye opening for me because I don't go into town very often. And usually when I do it's just to visit grandparents. So I didn't expect to see so many people just essentially on my front doorstep and I was intruding on their front doorstep as well.

Jen Hall: Was there a specific moment or situation that impacted you?

Hannah: Yeah, there were some older [00:10:30] men hanging out on the corner and like, one of their buddies came over from like walking down the street or whatever, I guess. And they were like laughing and joking around. They greeted him. They seemed like friends hanging out. It's like what I do with my friends. And it just sort of struck me as how, like, normal it is to see people like having fun and like bonding with each other, I guess. And I never, I always thought of homeless people as more of a label, I guess. [00:11:00] I didn't see them so much as people themselves, but as the general idea.

Jen Hall: So that experience helped you connect? Almost on a human level.

Hannah: Yeah.

Jen Hall: Caelan. What about you? Was there a specific moment or a situation that impacted you from the experience yesterday?

Caelan: So we'd walked through Chinatown, we'd gotten food and we were on the way back. We were going down, uh, Hastings. And we, there was this, there was a soup kitchen and [00:11:30] the rest of the street, the block, was empty and everyone was crowded around this door. And some of them were like on the ground and you could see how much they need services and like how little there are. There was, like, I think that there was like the only place I saw that would provide for people who are living on the streets. And I realized how little support there is for them.

Jen Hall: You were all given [00:12:00] $2 each to try to find dinner while you were walking around, what did you spend your money on Caelan? I'll start with you.

Caelan: So with some hints from a teacher, we figured out that Costco has best cheapest, the cheapest food. So we were able to get, you can get a hot dog and, uh, a pop for a dollar 50 cents. We got down there and we realized [00:12:30] you can't use cash cuz of COVID. So we had to approach someone at check at the automated checkout and give them money and ask them, uh, if they could buy us the food and it worked. But I, I can't think it would've worked if we had been living on the streets and maybe not as presentable, you can't, you don't feel comfortable talking to people. They might not want to help you. And that was like, yeah, it [00:13:00] was the only option at that time.

Jen Hall: Was it hard to convince them to help you?

Hannah: No, they, it, mostly, we just went up to someone and said, Hey, can you, can you buy this for us? We don't have, we don't have cards. And they were like, sure. But yeah, it could have, could have worked out differently. Yeah, it was mostly because we were, we were in a group, we looked like normal kids. We just out didn't have card. We have a credit card, whatever.

Jen Hall: [00:13:30] Hannah, what about you? What did you end up doing for dinner?

Speaker 5: Well, it was basically the same as Caelan. We went to Costco as well, but there was another group who, um, went to Dollarama and bought, they had like a two-for-one ramen sale. So they, they got four bowls of ramen noodles. And then one of my friends is a picky eater. So they had to go to a different store for Fruit Loops because [00:14:00] he didn't eat anything else in either store. So they got a box of Fruit Loops and then they went to this other store for hot water and spoons. And the, the person at like the hot water station was like, sure, take some hot water. Here you go. And they also got like two of like the big juice things for cheap. And they did pretty well. One of my friends who is vegetarian though was basically [00:14:30] had like a small thing of fries for 1, $1.99 and a bunch of relish packets for his dinner. So,

Jen Hall: And in both of the stories that you're illustrating, you had to work hard to get the food. You had to ask people to help you. You couldn't just go and, you know, do the transaction on your own and then have a meal. So if you had to do that all the time, what would that feel like?

Caelan: I can't imagine doing that every day. It would get exhausting. If you go to the same place over and over again, people [00:15:00] might get suspicious, might kick you out. And especially if you have some diabetes, if your vegetarian, if you have some, if you're picky, not, not many options. And also with like eating Costco food, that's not that it's not healthy. Mm-hmm <affirmative> like eating, you eat that for a week, month, year. Even not, not gonna be good for you. Like, yeah.

Jen Hall: You mentioned hot dogs, [00:15:30] ramen noodles and Fruit Loops. None of those things are particularly healthy, right? [students: No, no. <laugh>] and you didn't have any money left over to buy fruits and vegetables or, or healthy food.

Speaker 5: Well, we bought Timbits for dessert, which I guess also is basically just sugar and carbs. So yeah, I guess if you're trying to stay like healthy or whatever, it's harder, cuz everything's more expensive.

Jen Hall: Did you feel like you had enough to eat? Were you hungry?

Hannah: [00:16:00] Well, for me I've, I'm on medication that suppresses my appetite, but I could feel it wasn't satisfy it. Wasn't satisfying. Like I could tell I needed more food. It like wasn't gonna be enough and eat that for an extended period amount of period of time. You would get very hungry and very exhausted very quickly.

Jen Hall: So as you left Vancouver [00:16:30] and you're on your way home to Bowen Island, what were you thinking? What were you feeling about the experience? Hannah, I'll start with you.

Hannah: Um, we had like, we had a bit of a chat at like the ferry terminal about like what we'd done, but the whole plan was like to come back to the school and start the bonfire and talk there. So on the ferry, it was more like hanging out with friends. We were kind of goofing around and chatting about stuff [00:17:00] and getting upset at each other. I don't know. And then because all of us had had way too much sugar. We all ran up the hill and just got to school as fast as we could cuz we wanted to beat each other there. I don't know. And then when we started the bonfire just suddenly everyone was serious. It felt more like close knit, I guess. Like there was a heaviness or like tension to the air and it was serious time. [00:17:30] It was, we needed to, but put the child aside and be able to talk and figure stuff out.

Jen Hall: Sounds like you're drawing a distinction between being a kid and having fun. And, and maybe then thinking about the experience that you'd had and, and having that really sit with you.

Hannah: Yeah. Uh, I find that I have like a lot of energy and I goof around a lot and I'm [00:18:00] kids are kind of oblivious to this stuff, but when you really draw attention to it, when you're old enough to like recognize it for what it is and put the pieces together kind of hits you and it's like, this is going on in the world and we need to help.

Jen Hall: Caelan, what about you? What were you feeling as you, as you came out of Vancouver and headed home to Bowen Island?

Hannah: Uh, yeah, we were sitting on the ferry, uh, joking around. It felt normal and that felt bad because we’d [00:18:30] gone through so much. How is it that we, how is it that we can just go back to normal after experiencing so much pain like that? And it feels terrible that other people have to go, go through homelessness being shut out, outcasts and we just get to live our lives like normal.

Jen Hall: I know when we were chatting earlier, you said something about feeling overwhelmed or not, not feeling like you could help or knowing how to help.

Caelan: [00:19:00] Yeah. It felt like when you look up into the sky, you see so many stars and you're so small, it was overwhelming, but in the wrong way; where there were so many people and I didn't know how to help. I didn't know if I could help. Would it make it worse? Like there's so much uncertainty, you're out there and you see people just pass those people by because they don't know what to do. They don't know how to help. And I felt [00:19:30] terrible for that.

Jen Hall: Hannah, you also talked about feeling a little bit overwhelmed in, in that same vein.

Hannah: Yeah. Our teachers took, took us like right to the hub of it to Hastings and Main. I believe it is. And it was, it was so much more than I was expecting. There were all these shops that were like boarded up and they had like bars across the doors and stuff. And you don't see that in every neighbourhood it's only really down there where they feel like they [00:20:00] need it. And it was just, it was, I have this like overwhelming sense of like needing to help and wanting to help. But how? Like, will they even accept my help? Or is it more of like one of those moments where like I'm trying to save you and they don't mm-hmm <affirmative> they don't really, they don't need that. They need support.

Jen Hall: I think one of the ways that you're both trying to help is by raising [00:20:30] funds for Covenant House, through your Sleep Out. And last night, when you came back to bow, you slept outside, outside your school. And I wonder what that experience was like for you. Did you have a good sleep? Do you feel tired? Tell me about that, Caelan.

Caelan: Yeah, so we were all sleeping on thin insulated mattresses on gravel or concrete and sleeping. Like I didn't bring a pillow, so I had to sleep on a sweater and it wasn't. I mean, I felt safe. [00:21:00] I knew I wasn't in danger, but it wasn't pleasant either. I didn't get a great sleep, uh, got a few hours on and off. And I can't imagine what that would be like sleeping on the streets where you don't know if you're safe, you've got noise all around you. There's people, you there's a constant pressing danger. I don't think I would be able to get any sleep on the street.

Jen Hall: And Hannah, [00:21:30] what about you? What was the experience of sleeping outside like for you?

Hannah: I, I was kind of worried as I was falling asleep cuz one of my friends had told like it scary story and stuff and I have an imagination that kind of runs away with me. So I was, there was all these things going through my head, like what if this happens or what if this happens? And suddenly I thought of what it would be like if I was downtown sleeping, it [00:22:00] was like, the list just got so much longer of all the things I had to worry about.

Jen Hall: And that's even when you're, you're here on Bowen. But you were thinking about maybe some of the places where you've been walking around earlier in the day.

Speaker 5: Yeah, I know. I wouldn't really, I don't think I would've been able to sleep either and I don't know how people do it.

Jen Hall: You both mentioned that you didn't get that much sleep and you're going to, after we chat, you're going to go and have a full [00:22:30] day of school. Do you think you'll be at your best?

Caelan: No.

Hannah: Oh no. Nope.

Caelan: Very exhausted. And I can't imagine sleeping on the streets with danger, getting very little sleep, being exhausted, overwhelmed, tired, and going to school where the teachers expect you to do your best, even when you can't and it would be [00:23:00] so overwhelming and exhausting and can't, I don't know how anyone would do that.

Jen Hall: Does it give you some insight into how hard it would be to break that cycle, if you didn't have the supports you needed?

Hannah: I think it gives us some, but we, we only did it for one night. We haven't seen the full picture. We haven't seen the like long lasting effects of not having enough food or being in an maybe [00:23:30] not necessarily safe place to sleep or trying to get to school and pass or pass our grade and keep being able to move on.

Jen Hall: What, what do you think that you've learned about the challenges that youth experiencing homelessness face through this experience?

Caelan: I think I there's so much bigger than anyone realizes.

Jen Hall: Can you tell me more about that?

Caelan: Going through this for one night was exhausting. [00:24:00] Doing that every night for an extended period of time, you would lose your will to live. And I don't know how, I don't think I could. I couldn't do that. And it makes me feel terrible.

Jen Hall: Hannah, what about you?

Hannah: I think the youth on the streets are resilient and have a lot of courage and experience that we can learn from and help

Jen Hall: [00:24:30] I think you're right. Yeah. And I know you've both only had one, one night of this, but it's heartwarming to hear how it's opened your eyes a little bit and, and maybe makes you think differently. Caelan, you said a minute ago that you'll never look at people the same way when you walk down the street. And uh, it's just heartwarming to hear that. I know that both of you committed to raising funds for Covenant House as part of this [00:25:00] experience. And I just wonder what that was like the, the process of, of raising money for Covenant House. Did you find that people were willing to give, was it uncomfortable to ask them, tell me about that Caelan.

Caelan: So for me, I couldn't mark up the courage to ask a bunch of people. So I asked grandparents, asked some teachers and they, they gonna gimme money? Are they not? It was fine. But yeah, I feel like I could have, could [00:25:30] have pushed my limits a little bit more.

Jen Hall: Do you think now that you've had the experience and you know, you know, maybe how, what the impact of the support would be that it motivates you to do that?

Caelan: Yes, I would definitely do this again.

Hannah: Yeah. Most of our classes going to West Van next year. So I'm hoping I can get a group together to do this again next year. Cuz West Van doesn't do it and I'm hoping most of my class will join me again next year.

Jen Hall: Well, that's great. That would be amazing. [00:26:00] So as a final question for both of you and Caelan, I'll start with you. When you talk to your family and your friends about the sleep out experience, what is one thing you want them to know about what you learned?

Caelan: Just how much we don't realize about what people go through. Like most people shut, close their eyes to it. They try to walk past without, without seeing what's really happening. [00:26:30] And I think it's important for us to open our eyes and see the people behind, people behind. And then realize how much they've been going through. And that they're people too. I hope everyone realizes that.

Jen Hall: Hannah, what about you?

Hannah: I want, I want them to realize that homelessness is something that can happen to anyone. It's not just something [00:27:00] that is an accident. It really just fate gives us a certain hand of cards. And it's how those cards play out. That really determines where we are. And I wanna help.

Jen Hall: Is there anything else that either of you wanna share before we conclude?

Caelan: I would, I would recommend for anyone who's listening to try raising money, doing a Sleep Out, just it's a [00:27:30] profound experience.

Hannah: Try seeing the people as well. When you're walking around, don't keep your face down, look them in the eye.

Jen Hall: Thanks Hannah. We are really grateful to you guys for being part of this. And um, I think you're both wonderful leaders for other young people and it's, um, it means a lot to hear it from young people, as you said, it could be anyone, right? And to carry [00:28:00] that with you, as you leave Bowen, as you go into high school and as you go on to do other things, it really can help make a difference. So thanks to both of you and thanks Jen, for being their leader and teacher through all of this as well. That brings us to the end of this episode of Under One Roof. I'd like to thank my guests for joining me, Jennifer, Hannah, and Caelan. Thank you so much for being here. [00:28:30] If you have feedback on today's episode or suggestions for future topics, please email us@publicaffairsatcovenanthousebc.org until next time I'm Jennifer Hall. Thanks for listening.

Announcer: You've been listening to Under One Roof, a Covenant House Vancouver production. If you have questions or comments about today's episode, please email us@publicaffairsatcovenanthousebc.org. For more information on Covenant House Vancouver, or to make a [00:29:00] donation, please visit our website at triple w dot covenant house bc.org. Until next time, thanks for listening.