

## Winter Warmth: Shirley Holcomb and The Warming Cross

### How A Nightmare Became A Force For Good

Written by Ainsley Munro



Shirley Holcomb awoke in the darkness, shaking with fear. She had been woken by the force of her arms pressing her back into the wall behind her, finally freed from a nightmare that stayed with her long after dawn. Shirley, a 90-years-young long-time advocate and activist for marginalized people living in Orillia, had dreamt that she had lost her name, her family, her sense of place and direction, and anything that identified her. She had wandered the streets asking passersby for help but was only met with disregard, ignorance, and aggression. She had finally sat down beside a fence, despondent, pushing herself into it and wishing she could disappear.

Having worked with health and aid agencies in the Orillia area for decades, Shirley has helped the city's most marginalized people get back on their feet and is no stranger to stories. However, she had difficulty understanding what her clients meant when they described themselves as "nothing":

"A 'nothing' is not even human – these people I help are not choosing the word 'nobody' to describe themselves. A nothing is even worse than a nobody, because it doesn't even recognize them their own humanity."

This nightmare brought that term into focus, and Shirley finally understood what it meant to be truly discarded by society. Deeply disturbed, Shirley went to church and spoke to Martha Tatarnic, former priest at St David. Martha assured her that God would find a

way to use her haunting dream for good and Shirley bundled herself up to face the winter weather and head home.

On her way out of the church, she stopped to take in the sight of the garden and grounds surrounding St David. In the summer, the space was a riot of colour and greenery, hosting a community garden that provides fresh vegetables to the Orillia Sharing Place food bank, and “God In The Garden” outdoor church services. The surrounding community used the space as a pass-through on walks, and people often stopped to chat with one another on the garden benches. In the winter, the space looked barren and dead, devoid of life which slumbered under the snow and ice. She looked just beyond the fence to the neighbourhood St David church calls home. The south ward of Orillia is one of the most marginalized parts of the city, and the people here deal with disproportionate levels of poverty. *Where does God go in the wintertime when so many people need Him?* Shirley wondered. As she drove home, the idea for a project started coming together.

The following Sunday, Shirley stood up at the end of the church service to make an announcement. She told the church about her dream, and her desire to see the outdoor space around the church continue to be a welcoming space for all year-round. “I need everyone who knits and crochets and has a bit of time on their hands to help me with an idea,” she said. And so it began.



Within a month, the Warming Cross was built and installed in the garden facing the church. It was adorned with Ziplock bags full of hand-knitted hats, scarves, mittens and socks, all free of charge for the community. Anyone could come to the cross and take what they needed to keep warm and feel loved by someone they had never met.

It did not take long for the project to grow and enamor the people of Orillia. Shut-in elders volunteered to make items for the Warming Cross, and they told Shirley how this initiative helped them feel deeply connected to the community outside their doors by giving back with their time and skill. A retired minister mailed Shirley crochet items from his home in Winnipeg. A wool company heard about the project and donated bags of wool to keep the project going. Other Orillians placed their knitting on the cross overnight when the church doors were locked to ensure no one went away cold, and Shirley began leaving thank-you notes on the hooks to exchange with the anonymous knitters. When more knitting arrived than could be placed on the cross, Shirley began dropping off items to local schools, shelters, and food banks throughout the city to ensure no one endured the cold without comfort. A bad dream had evolved into a life-giving initiative that involved the entire city.

When the cross was vandalized and the arms torn down one spring night, the community sprung into action. The local newspaper picked up the story and offers flooded in from as far away as Tottenham of people wanting to help rebuild the cross. Shirley accepted the offer of the Grade 12 woodworking class from Patrick Fogarty high school, and a new sturdier cross was built and installed.



Today, the Warming Cross still stands in the garden at St David, dressed in banners during the warmer months and covered with knitting when the snow flies. It continues to build community between the people of Orillia and beyond, and provides warmth and comfort to those seeking it during the darker months. As for Shirley, she is still

volunteering her time to help Orillia's most marginalized people and collecting knitting year-round for the Warming Cross.

If you would like to donate money, wool, supplies, or your crafting skills to the Warming Cross project, we would love to have your help! Please reach out to St David Orillia via Pastor Lori: [pastoratstdavid@gmail.com](mailto:pastoratstdavid@gmail.com) or by phone at (705) 325-1421.