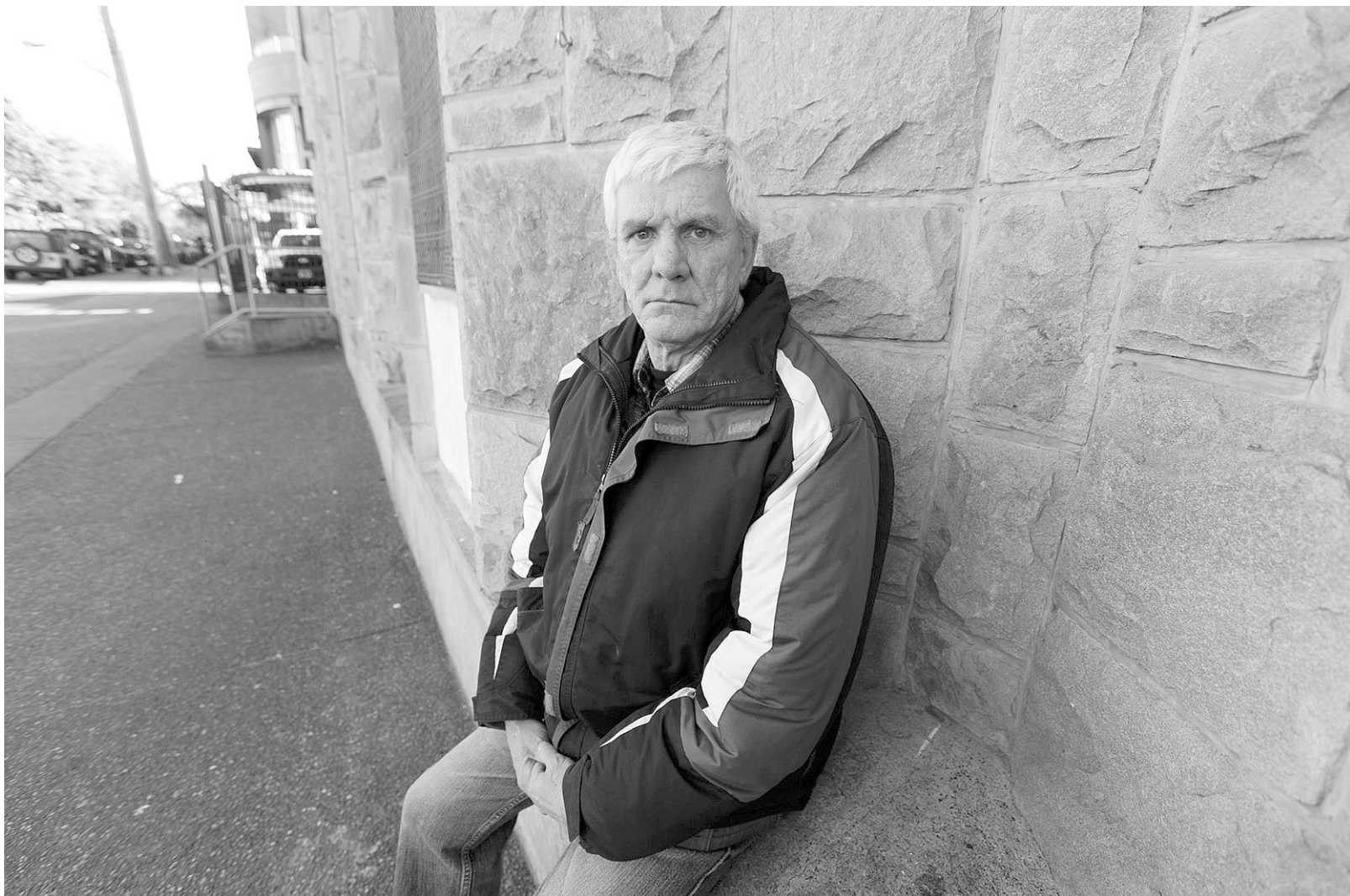




THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

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Just 12 months before he found himself on the street last summer, Ian Wicks enjoyed a normal life, sharing a nice cottage with his U.S.-born wife near San Diego. He now lives in transitional housing in Victoria and volunteers at Our Place. **DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST**

No home, but hope for the future: 'My own key, my own front door'

ADRIAN CHAMBERLAIN
Times Colonist

Ian Wicks found himself homeless last summer. It was the last thing the Victoria man expected.

After all, Wicks was a regular guy who had worked all his life. He spent 30 years doing appliance repair and building maintenance.

Just 12 months before he found himself on the street, Wicks enjoyed a normal life, sharing a nice cottage with his wife near San Diego.

Then it all fell apart.

He returned to his hometown, moving into a rooming house. Last July, a sheriff had bad news for Wicks and his fellow residents: The man they had paid rent to had left town with all their money.

Wicks, living on social assistance, couldn't afford to pay again. He was told to leave.

"For the first time in my life, I actually spent two nights on the street in the pouring rain," said the 63-year-old.

Things are better now, although Wicks still lacks a permanent home. He lives in transitional housing with other homeless people at Mount Edwards Court.

Wicks is grateful for Mount Edwards, which provides him with a bed, a bathroom and food. Before that, he slept on mats at First Metropolitan United Church.



HOW TO DONATE

The Times Colonist Christmas Fund continues to accept donations because the need is high. Since 1956, this newspaper has collected money to benefit the less fortunate.

We work with the Salvation Army and the Mustard Seed, which handle the disbursement of most of the funds, and also provide financial help to Our Place.

To donate, go online to: timescolonist.com/donate. You will be directed to a Canada Helps donation form; once you make your donation, a tax receipt will be provided immediately. Or mail a cheque, payable to the **Times Colonist Christmas Fund Society**, to the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, V8T 4M2.

In his free time, he volunteers at Our Place. He works the snack bar, handing out food and coffee.

"I didn't want to sit at home and feel sorry for myself," Wicks said.

One of 11 children in an Irish-Catholic family, he graduated from Victoria High School before training to be an appliance repairman. His father was an alcoholic. Wicks said he has also had "issues with alcohol," although he's never done drugs.

He and his American-born wife, Susan, had made southern California their retirement home. They lived on an income of \$3,000 US a month. They weren't rich, but life was good.

Susan died in June 2015 from a viral chest infection. The funeral costs — \$7,000 US — wiped out their savings. Two weeks later, their daughter was killed in a car crash caused by a drunk driver. Shortly afterward, his sister died of cancer.

"It was a lot of things in a short time," Wicks said, choking up at the memory.

Coping with these tragedies was difficult, and Wicks spiraled downward. After he returned to this city, California cops notified the Saanich police that Wicks "might be distraught" and in need of assistance. Wicks was contacted by victim services, who put him in touch with Our Place, the Pandora Avenue community shelter that provides counselling as well as meals and transitional housing.

One might think his siblings would help him out — but Wicks

said he's estranged from his family and has been ostracized by a daughter in Vancouver.

The future isn't without hope. Assisted financially by Our Place, Wicks took a janitorial training at Camosun College. He's been offered a job as a cleaner in Langford. However, Wicks said he wants to find a permanent home before he commits.

Such an attitude may seem odd.

But Grant McKenzie, communications director for Our Place, said it's not unusual for people in temporary housing to be reluctant to accept full-time work.

"That's the thing that a lot of people don't understand," McKenzie said.

"When you're in transitional housing, you don't have a place of your own. Your everyday life is about survival. It's about getting through the day. So it's very difficult for these people to make long-term plans."

Despite all that he's been through, Wicks is cautiously optimistic about the new year.

"I just want my own little apartment," he said. "My own key and my own front door. That's the life I had before."

As for those who think homelessness could never happen to them, Wicks said, think again.

"It could happen in a New York minute to a lot of people." achamberlain@timescolonist.com

Chess, anyone? Games pitched for square

BILL CLEVERLEY
Times Colonist

Victoria council is hoping to serve up some fun at Centennial Square by installing table tennis and chess tables.

Councillors have agreed to allocate up to \$11,000 for table tennis and chess in the square adjacent to city hall — provided it can find a partner to match the funds.

"So essentially it's up to the community to step up if they want their table tennis tables and their chess tables," said Coun. Ben Isitt, who proposed making the funds available.

"So the trigger to expend that would be the 50 per cent matching being in place from philanthropic or external organizational source."

Councillors also agreed to spend up to \$50,000 on a moveable, temporary children's play feature in the square.

Isitt said the children's feature would essentially be a climbable piece of art and play feature not unlike Cadborosaurus in Saanich's Cadboro-Gyro Park.

"The direction council has given is we'd like the RFP [request for proposals] process to put an emphasis on works of art that incorporate either Chinese-Canadian or First Nation themes to reflect the cultural heritage of that area," he said. Isitt said there is a "wellness benefit" from the chess and table tennis activities.

"I think the wellness benefit shouldn't be underestimated both in terms of physical activity — ping pong can be quite good exercise — and the wellness for seniors and others playing chess and the social interactions that doesn't currently take place in the square," he said.

Mayor Lisa Helps, who originally proposed the idea of the chess and table tennis tables, said she supported the spending "with a sigh."

"I raised it because I was curious and I think we can do simple, fun things to make that space more engaging," Helps said, adding that she's also well aware of the fact the city is undertaking a planning exercise for the square "so presumably anything we install there would be temporary and moveable."

Helps noted that the games tables and the play feature can be used elsewhere if it is ultimately decided they aren't a fit for Centennial Square.

"I don't consider one dollar of the play feature or these things, should they go ahead, as wasted because they can be picked up and moved somewhere else in the city and enjoyed there," Helps said. "I can think of lots of parks where table tennis and chess would be welcome if they don't end up staying here in Centennial Square."

Coun. Jeremy Loveday, who ultimately supported the games expense, said he had "some hesitancy" about doing it prior to the completion of the master plan for the square.

"It seems like a lot of money to be spending on the square on a temporary basis," Loveday said.

City staff say existing security staff or recreation staff could be used to make sure chess pieces or table tennis paddles and balls don't go missing.

Coun. Geoff Young was opposed to the games spending saying "there were too many practical and operational issues." "As it is we're in the process of demolishing our public chess board up on the top of Beacon Hill almost at this moment," Young said.

Councillors also approved up to \$75,000 to be spent to create and install a symbol of the Lekwungen people somewhere in the vicinity of city hall.

Coun. Marianne Alto said the type of installation would be determined through consultation with First Nations and is part of the city's commitment in relation to its declaration of 2017 as the Year of Reconciliation.

Council's budget deliberations are to continue in the coming week. bcleverley@timescolonist.com

In wireless world, pay phones fading out



JACK KNOX
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Walking briskly through chilly Chinatown, my head bowed against the biting wind, I would have passed him without noticing had he not spoken: "Buddy, can you spare 50 cents?"

I stopped and turned to the unmoving figure on the sidewalk: "Don't you mean 'a dime,' like in the song?"

"No," he replied. "It was a dime until 1984, when it became a quarter. Then it was raised to 50 cents in 2009, not that anyone noticed. Most people had cellphones by then."

I peered closer. You don't see many pay phones like him anymore, not in Canada, where we have almost as many cellular subscriptions (30 million) as people (35 million).

You certainly don't see many full-length booths like this old-timer, one of two pagoda-topped phone boxes that sit sort of kitty-

corner on Fisgard at Government.

"You must be starving," I said, jamming a coin in his slot. He gulped it down greedily, emitting a series of happy clicks and dings. Canada's telecommunications regulator says some pay phones can go months — even years — without being fed at all.

In consequence, they are vanishing both from public places (Telus has 10,000 pay phones in B.C. and Alberta today, compared with 37,000 in 1999) and from popular culture. No more Superman peeling down to his leotard or Tippi Hedren hiding in a booth to escape Alfred Hitchcock's birds. No more cop shows with an impatient Starsky or Hutch ripping the handset away from a phone hog. No more David Letterman calling the phone on the street outside the Ed Sullivan Theater, live, and inviting whomever answered to be on his show.

Several years ago, people took to posting pictures of Victoria's remaining pay phones online, but the website they used went dormant in 2010. A cruise around town last week found that some of the phones the site listed, such as the one at Head and Esquimalt and another at Sooke and Goldstream, have quietly faded away without a trace, just like Pogs or Michael Richards. Others have become Hillary Clinton, reduced to a gutted, empty shell.

One phone outside a row of funky little shops on Craigflower still works, but sits in a kiosk with more tags than a Boxing Week sale. Another in the Tillicum mall looked as lonely as Matt Damon in *The Martian*; a clerk in a nearby store said she actually did a double take when somebody used it the other day.

Pay phones are most commonly found in places like corner stores, hospitals and transportation hubs such as airports and bus depots.

They're not that easy to find downtown, though, particularly outside. The Bay Centre has just one bank of five Bell phones left, tucked down a side corridor. There's one in the downtown courthouse and two more in the central library branch.

"Oftentimes, it's challenging for us to find an agreeable landlord to place a pay phone," says Telus's Liz Sauvé, whose company has 200 of the devices in Victoria.

"For example, business owners oftentimes ask us to remove a pay phone that is seldom used so that they can put something more profitable in its space, such as a new coffee bar.

"Over the past few years, we've received requests from the city, police and local businesses to remove certain phones which were either used very rarely, or perhaps attracted vandalism."

Right, vandalism. There's something about pay phones that brings out people's inner drunken Bieber. Fixing them isn't cheap, either, as it's getting hard to find replacement parts.

In 2005, it was reported that one fifth of Vancouver Island's 1,700 pay phones had been vandalized. There's a provincial park in the Interior where a kiosk was trashed half a dozen times before Telus, having spent \$30,000 fixing a phone that only burped out a few bucks worth of quarters each month, simply gave up.

That's too bad, because such phones are still a lifeline to some. Low-income people need pay phones. So do those west of Sooke or north of Campbell River, where cell reception ranges from sketchy to non-existent. Telus has 135 pay phones on the north Island and another 18 between Sooke and Port Renfrew.

Traditionally, pay phones have been popular among drug dealers, too. Several years ago, to curb illicit activity, some downtown Victoria phones were "curfewed" so that they couldn't be used between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. for anything except dialling 911 (which is free, by the way).

To most, though, the once-ubiquitous pay phone has become irrelevant. And when people don't even notice you're gone, you get shown no quarter(s).