

Randolph hosts hope for homeless

by Ian Froese

THE idea to host a concert started selfishly enough, admits Steve Neufeld. His band RBB wanted a place to play, a venue with a crowd, so they created their own event. It would be their warm-up to the summer fair season.

Months later, that same band is being heralded for their community spirit.

Obviously, a lot has happened since RBB first mused about starting a concert.

When they decided their concert should have a meaning to it, they chose to support Today House, Steinbach's temporary emergency centre. Steinbach Community Outreach was soon on board and before long a concert was held and on Saturday \$16,000 was raised.

Not bad for a band that wanted to sing a few tunes. A little blues, a little country and a whole lot of money.

"It's very selfish, the reason

we wanted to create an event," said Neufeld, who aside from strumming guitar counts being chief executive officer at the Niverville Heritage Centre as his day job. "Adding the cause to it just made all the work behind creating it really worthwhile."

It was about a year ago when RBB was rehearsing at a Steinbach Main Street business when a fellow walked off the street asking if he could sit in and listen. The band gladly obliged.

When the guitars and drumsticks were set aside for the night, the bandmates discovered this new stranger hadn't had a decent meal in days and no place to stay that night.

Concerned, they set off to grab a bite at a Steinbach restaurant. One bandmate knew of what Today House was about, got a hold of Irene Kroeker who dropped by and this individual now had a place to stay for the night.

This story could have ended there, as Simone Penner de-

scribes it. She's the chairperson for Today House.

"They could have moved on from that experience and said, 'Good we helped him for that one night,' but their hearts were tugged at," she said.

The Start to Finish concert was born. The concert's title represents how Today House is the start and Steinbach Community Outreach acts as the finish as homeless individuals work to re-establish themselves.

News spread quickly when the concert was established a few months ago. Dozens of businesses stepped on board to sponsor and just like that there was no need to offer tickets to the public. Everything was sold.

Before the first words were sung by Melanie Bergen inside the vaunted Neufeld Garage, some \$8,000 was raised. Midway through the event, after a 20-minute explanatory video, an appeal for donations was issued. Most in the crowd had complimentary tickets on behalf of a business and they responded by reaching into their pocketbooks. About 140 people wound up donating close to \$8,000.

In total, it was more than triple Neufeld's initial fundraising target of \$5,000.

Penner said the proceeds will be split 50/50. It was overwhelming to count the tally.

"When you go to count the money, and you don't expect to be counting \$7,700 from an audience of 140 people, you know, that's pretty awesome."



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RBB just wanted a concert to play at. They did that, then they helped raise \$16,000 to help local people who are homeless or are at-risk of being without shelter.

Penner said during the video one of the biggest challenges she encounters in gathering public support is convincing people that homelessness is a problem in Steinbach.

It's something Neufeld discovered himself last year.

"I was very much keenly aware of the plight of homeless people in Manitoba, but not being aware, quite as keenly, until we met this fellow a year ago that this exists right in our backyard, in Steinbach," he said.

Penner attributes two expla-

nations for this belief.

The first is affluence. Many are financially well-off. The other component is that the homelessness in the Southeast is not stereotypical.

"[In other places] they're on the street and they're asking for money and you actually sometimes see them sleeping on the park bench, we don't have that here," she explained. The homeless here often bounce from one residence to another but don't have a place to call their own.

Changing the belief that

homelessness doesn't exist will not happen overnight. Penner knows this. Today House started not long ago, in 2012, after a story in *The Carillon* showing two people creating a home at a garbage dump pulled on heartstrings.

Penner didn't recognize most people in the crowd on Saturday night, and that's a good thing. They were sharing their message to a new audience.

"To me, this was creating awareness to 120 new people," she said. "That's huge."