

HUGH ADAMI THE PUBLIC CITIZEN

After 4 1/2 years, she cracked

Mary Granger can't take any more crackheads and drug dealers on her back step in the Market



A Toronto columnist created quite the furore two years ago for calling Ottawa a "national disgrace" because of drug problems in the By Ward Market and other parts of Lower town.

Christina Blizzard of the Toronto Sun wrote that she saw "dozens of drug deals happening in broad daylight. (and) countless people sitting around smoking crack." Blizzard was also dismayed that she and her son, eating on the patio of an expensive Market restaurant, were repeatedly interrupted by addicts begging for money.

While Ottawa police say the numerous homeless shelters, treatment centres and other social-service facilities in Lowertown are magnets for much of the drug woes, they believe they are making progress in attacking the problem.

Staff Sgt. Uday Jafwal, who oversees the force's central east district, says "one of the challenges ... is managing the open drug markets we have here. It's really a question of management as opposed to resolving those issues."

Mary Granger has a hard time believing that police are making inroads in Lower town. She lives on Clarence Street, just east of King Edward Avenue and not far from the Shepherds of Good Hope, a shelter for many people with addictions, mental-health issues or both.

Granger, 32, says she's awakened at all hours of the night by crackheads who gather on a stoop leading into the side door of her home. There, they shoot up, smoke up and make drug deals.

She moved to her neighbourhood 4 1/2 years ago. "And it's getting worse," says Granger, who is preparing to sell her century-old house and move. "I've just had it."

The other night, after being roused from sleep by slurred chatter outside, Granger went to a second-floor window and spent 10 minutes arguing with the three men below that they had to leave. As she persisted, one of the men replied: "Do you want us to come up there, bitch?"

Granger, a ministerial liaison adviser in the federal government's Human Resources and Skills Development office, says now that the good

weather is here, they will be on her stoop regularly, sometimes several times a night and even during the day.

The small stairway is at the end of a narrow pathway between Granger's home and her neighbour's, and partly concealed by a big bush. Spotting intruders would be difficult in the daytime, let alone at night.

With so many nooks and crannies in Lowertown's residential streets, crackheads and drug sellers can find privacy almost anywhere, even if police are patrolling. Many lots are narrow but deep, with driveways giving drug users easy access to the back of the properties.

Granger has given up calling the police, she says, because when she did regularly report the problem, it would take officers forever to arrive — if they showed up at all. And when they did come, the druggies were long gone. "So what's the point?" she asks.

Granger says she also called the police following a break-in at her home two years ago, and was soured by the experience. She says she felt police showed "little interest" in making an arrest — despite the information she was able to give them about the culprit — and that the officers "left after about half an hour of pointless chit-chat."

Though police say Granger should call them whenever the crackheads appear and that they would even monitor her home if they are a constant problem, other residents with similar concerns say the force would have to be on the street virtually around the clock.

And not just Clarence. Residents on Murray and Nelson streets, for example, say they face the same problems.

One man, who didn't want to be identified, says the crackheads often go behind his house. It doesn't matter how often you scare them

away, he says, "they keep coming back. I'd be calling the police four times a night."

He adds that he doesn't like to confront the trespassers for fear that they would "come back and break a window. They have nothing to lose."

Brigitte Gregoire says crackheads and hookers collect behind an abandoned rowhouse, part of which backs onto the side of her home on Clarence. Her husband will shoo them away, he says, but they eventually return. Besides the syringes and other drug paraphernalia they leave behind, Gregoire says one morning, she found a condom on her steps.

Sandi Lawlor moved to the neighbourhood two months ago from Aylmer and wonders if she was ready for such a change. Twice already, she's found intruders on her deck going through her garbage bin. "There's a constant (movement) on the street," says Lawlor. "At all hours —

one, two, three in the morning. It's non-stop."

Says Granger: "I fully realize that living downtown comes with its share of problems and abnormalities, but this is really getting out of hand. Nothing is changing."

While Rideau-Vanier Coun. Georges Bédard admits the drug problem in Lowertown is serious and not about to go away, he stresses the community has to get involved, too, in helping police. Residents have to be vigilant, particularly with drug pushers who are the root of the problem, and report any suspected crack houses.

Bédard notes the success that Vanier residents have had in reclaiming their streets and parks from druggies and hookers. It's similar to a Neighborhood Watch program, with residents contacting police at the first sign of trouble, and being visible so that intruders are less likely to return.

Says Bédard: "It's amazing the number of calls we're getting, and the police are saying: 'This is great because we are able to actually pinpoint the areas that we're getting complaints from and then we then look for a drug dealer in that area.'

"(Calling police) may be a burden because people say, 'Oh, well, I'd be doing it every third day,' says Bédard. "(But) if it's done every third day, it will be registered, and it means more resources will be applied to ensure those areas are covered."

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Jafwal says a recent roundup that resulted in more than 100 arrests, many of them drug pushers, brought "temporary relief" to the area immediately. There were fewer minor crimes, such as theft from vehicles, he says. Jafwal notes a Vancouver study determined that a drug user commits as many as eight to 10 crimes a day to fund his habit.

The staff sergeant says police will continue to make their presence felt with their bike and foot patrols, and will monitor the drug trade in an attempt to thwart as many pushers as possible. Control is the key, he says.

And Bédard remains optimistic that the situation will improve despite the high concentration of shelters, rehabilitation centres and subsidized city housing in Lowertown. There are more than 550 beds for the homeless in the Market area, but the city now has a moratorium preventing any more from being made available there.

As well, Bédard says Ottawa Community Housing recently received provincial approval to purchase two apartment buildings, one in New Edinburgh and another on Merivale Road. One building will house single people, some of whom now live in shelters in Lowertown, and the other will be for homeless families. These people will also have access to support and treatment services, such as those available for tenants at other Ottawa housing facilities.

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