

Documentary puts spotlight on homelessness

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"Homelessness starts way before you don't have a home," an auto parts worker says in Laura Sky's just-launched documentary, Home Safe Toronto.

"You feel like you're falling into a pit."

Part of a series on Canadian families struggling to stay together in hard times, the film shows padlocked factory gates and implies any wage earner not backed up by a strong union - the Canadian Auto Workers appears in that role - is in big trouble.

Even so, Sky finds Ontario's auto industry jobs are disappearing and that "working people are being told they expect too much" and must settle for a lower standard of living.

Or, as Scott Taylor, an underemployed industry veteran in York Region puts it, "The days at being hired at over \$25 an hour are now over."

Sky first heads to the Family Residence shelter in Scarborough - the only place in Canada's largest city that offers emergency housing for families, with overflow on the Kingston Road motel strip.

There we meet Rose, sharing a single room with a husband and three children who aren't shown, waiting for a place they can afford. There's stuff on every surface, one window and little privacy.

Yet Rose (her last name's not given) works a day or two each week for a temp agency that takes a cut of her pay and gives no benefits. "I try not to depend on the government," she says.

"My son said, 'Mummy, I'm ashamed of here.' I say, 'Shelter's not a disgrace.'"

But Home Safe Toronto - the title seems tinged with irony, since no one in it seems safe from the threat of homelessness - doesn't stay long before Sky heads to Toronto's 905-area suburbs, where there's poverty and a scarcity of resources to deal with it. She spends time in Aurora and Brampton with the families of auto workers behind in their rent and struggling to stay out of a shelter.

We also meet Debbie Frampton, cleaning large York Region homes for less than minimum wage in a T-shirt that says "Bite Me," before heading to a CAW Action Centre for former employees of Progressive Moulded Products, a non-union auto parts plant in Vaughan which abruptly closed last Canada Day.

Finally, we're at The Stop Community Food Centre on Davenport Road in west Toronto with volunteers Myriam Canas-Mendes and Rene Adams.

Adams is a community advocate at The Stop who jokes she obtained "a Phd in the (Mike) Harris and (Dalton) McGuinty School of Hard Knocks." Rents are high, she says, and people relying on welfare or disability pension can't pay living expenses.

"They have to choose between paying the rent or buying the food," says Adams, adding she's "tired of hearing excuses" for not doing the right thing - building affordable housing.

Working in the drop-in kitchen, Canas-Mendes is a university graduate from Costa Rica, denied a chance to work as a teacher here. She finds her family often has \$100 to live on until her next pay cheque.

Like many of those interviewed, she joined Sky at the front of the Revue Cinema last Thursday to a standing ovation after a screening. "I cried through the whole thing," Canas-Mendes said.

Rose stood shyly behind the filmmaker, until Sky thanked her for inviting the public into her shelter room, adding, "It was a very gutsy thing to do."

Later, Rose said she moved her family out of the Family Residence in August, after 14 months there, to a townhouse near Jane and Finch. "I'm doing much better now."

Sky said the goal of the series (available from Sky Works Charitable Foundation at 416-536-6581) "is to generate conversations about what we're all facing and what we're going to do about it."

Victor Willis, executive director of Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC), said it should be used as a tool for creating change. "Show these stories because people will respond to them as you have tonight," he said.

Free screening of the film include an encore 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 15 at Revue Cinema, 400 Roncesvalles Ave. and one at 9 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 24 at Scarborough Bluffs United Church, 3739 Kingston Rd.