Poverty used to look different to me- it was visible in areas of communities that were considered poor. The poor were identifiable- there weren’t necessarily many of them, but in small communities we knew who they were. My mom would say- be nice to that family, they’re poor.

I remember hearing people talk about going to Mexico or Central America and talking about the poor- how difficult it was to see the poverty, how they felt so grateful to come home to Canada.

Today though, the poor are everywhere. Many of us have people in our circle who are poor- extended or even immediate family members, friends and neighbours, those who lost their housing when an out of town company bought the building and evicted everybody to do upgrades, the working poor- holding down two or three part-time jobs with no benefits, recent graduates with the diplomas and the degrees and a huge student loan debt but no experience, adult children continuing to live at home with parents because housing isn’t affordable, single parents struggling to find housing that accommodates their children, hard-working people living paycheck to paycheck, individuals grappling with the impact of illness and disability, individuals struggling with mental health disorders and addictions trying to find their way.

We see the extreme of poverty when we witness the homeless lying asleep in alleys, sitting in front of doorways downtown asking for spare change, pushing their carts around in our little town and we wonder what the answer is. It is overwhelming.

In a culture that strives for wealth and abundance, where do the poor fit in?

The reality of poverty is confronting. We wonder if there is help, if we can, in our own small way be part of the solution. What does it take to alleviate some of the impact of poverty? Is there something we could do as individuals?

The simple answer is yes.

One of the biggest challenges of poverty is the sense that no one ‘gets it’ and no one cares. To show that we care, we need to be willing to look at things that are difficult to look at. We need to be willing to listen to things that are hard to hear. We need to be willing to stand alongside those who have no one. We need to be creative, and brave and patient. Sometimes the opportunity to talk about the struggle with someone who can listen without judging- is enough to remind someone that their lives matter. We may or may not be able to solve every crisis that we are presented with when someone comes to our office- but we can care, we can make a phone call, we can help fill out a form, we can inform people of their rights, we can provide access to a computer and a phone. There are actually many things we can do to help, and some of them are surprisingly simple.

Years ago a client asked me what an advocate was- and I said, ‘An advocate is someone who is on your side.’

Not everyone wants to do this work, and not everyone can, but this is a good place to offer your skills. This work is rewarding. One volunteer said, ‘People are always asking what ACCESS is; what we do… and I finally know what to say now… Access is a place people come to when there’s nowhere else to go’.