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JOHN HOMER CHAPMAN

Orphan found a place to belong

One-time merchant seaman found 'family' as church volunteer, crossing guard

Dec 04, 2008 04:30 AM

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STAFF REPORTER

Twenty-seven years ago, a homeless but stylish man came into Glen Rhodes United Church and asked for shelter. That man's name was John Homer Chapman.

"He was a very dear man, who really wanted to belong," said Lawrence Pushee, his old friend and a retired minister at the church, near Coxwell Ave. and Gerrard St. E.

Chapman, who lived in a small room in the basement of the church for seven months, was a true inspiration.

"He was a constant presence at the church, always looking after things," said Pushee. "We just turned a table today and there was a note he had written that said: *Repaired in Aug., 1985/Homer.*"

Chapman died at 81 in Toronto East General last Wednesday. His memorial service was held at Glen Rhodes United Monday evening.

Pushee said Chapman demonstrated a true willingness to help others, partly because he had experienced rejection in his own life.

After a harsh childhood in England where he was raised in an orphanage, he left at 15 to work as a merchant seaman and travelled the world. He eventually landed in Toronto.

Chapman, who never married, worked at a number of occupations including building farm equipment at Massey Ferguson.

"He sometimes hadn't had enough money to cover his basics," said Pushee.

After retirement, Chapman worked as a crossing guard at Gerrard and Coxwell. He learned the names of the children who used the crossing and became known as the grandfather of the area.

In the last few months of his life, a nurse who was the mother of one of the children Chapman helped keep safe volunteered to be a part of a team that took care of Chapman when he began to fail.

As Chapman started to lose his eyesight, he became more isolated.

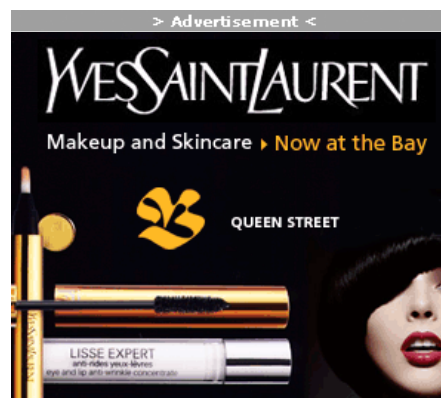
"He was a favourite at the church library and was an expert on the Second World War and read almost all of the related books in the library," Pushee said. "But after he lost his sight, he stopped going to library."

Eventually it became too risky for him to walk outside.

Although he had no family at the time of his death, Chapman did have many friends throughout the city whose lives he had touched.

"He was a big-hearted guy who wanted to help everybody," Pushee said.

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