

SITE INDEX

Search Site: 

- Home Page
- News
- Opinion
- Letters
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Travel
- Ad Features
- Restaurant Guide
- Back Issues
- Contact Us
- About Us
- Community Links
- Cover Art Gallery
- Websites of the Week

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Astral Reflections Movie Listings

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NEWS



76-year-old Ed Remedios shoots some stick at the Second Mile seniors centre, which has been operating in the Downtown Eastside since 1958. Photo by Dan Toulgoet.

Giving to United Way helps seniors go the Second Mile

By Sandra Thomas-Staff writer

At 76, Ed Remedios plays a pretty mean game of pool.

His card skills are nothing to sneeze at either, so it wouldn't be wise to bet the family farm on challenging him at gin rummy.

The retired accountant credits his mental-and physical-agility to daily visits to the Second Mile Society's seniors centre, which has been in operation on East Hastings Street at Jackson in the Downtown Eastside since 1958.

Remedios doesn't live alone, as most of the seniors frequenting the centre do-he shares an apartment across the street with his wife. But he still likes the company and the chance to socialize at Second Mile, where he's been going for five years. "It keeps me thinking. And I like the coffee and tea."

Steve Chan, executive director of the centre, says seniors pay 50 cents for tea or coffee in the morning and refills are free. Reasonably priced beverages and meals-60 cents each for soup or a sandwich-is just one of the lures the centre's staff uses to encourage seniors to get out of their homes.

Two Neighbourhood Helpers Outreach programs also operate from the centre-staff and volunteers go out to hotels and rooming houses in the Downtown Eastside and Downtown South areas to knock on doors and invite seniors for coffee in local hotels.

"Some of these seniors have been living in SRO [single room occupancy] hotels for 20 years and never see anybody," said Chan, adding because the life expectancy for many residents of the Downtown Eastside is so low and their lifestyles are often high-risk, anyone over the age of 50 qualifies as a senior and is allowed access to the centre.



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Chan said even long-time board members aren't sure where the name Second Mile came from, but guesses include a reference to the Bible, or the fact the centre's users are starting the second stage of their lives.

Seventy-three year-old Roderick MacDonald, who lives alone in a downtown hotel, calls the centre his second home. It's where he eats two meals a day and spends the better part of his waking hours.

Recovering from recent hip-replacement surgery, a heart attack and stroke, the retired office worker takes comfort in knowing the centre's staff keep an eye out for him.

"I know it's not good to be isolated," says MacDonald, who speaks in a gravelly whisper. "I used to have a busy social calendar a long time ago and now I keep pretty busy here.

One-quarter of the centre's approximately \$200,000 annual operating budget is donated by the United Way, while the rest is supplied by the city, province and private foundations. The United Way is now in the midst of a \$20-million fund-raising campaign and hopes to raise an extra \$1 million for senior' programs.

According to United Way statistics, in 2000, almost 30 per cent of the Vancouver/Richmond area's 85,000 seniors lived below the poverty line and three in 10 lived alone.

Susan Papadionissiou, director of agencies and community services for the Lower Mainland United Way, said most of the Second Mile's patrons live on small pensions. "By the time they pay for shelter, food and transportation, there's nothing left."

To donate to the United Way, call 604-294-8929 or visit www.abettertomorrow.ca.

[back to top](#)