

## Transcript - Episode 1

**LK:** I'm Lisa Kowalchuk

**DD:** and I'm Darryl D'Souza

**LK:** and this is St. James Town Storeys: a podcast about building community in Canada's most diverse neighbourhood.

**[theme music by Bennett Sobel plays]**

**DD:** It's great to hear your voice, Lisa, even though we are couple of miles apart right now, for obvious reasons.

**[theme music still playing, but softer]**

**LK:** Likewise Darryl! And that's of course because of the physical distancing requirement of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are recording this conversation at the beginning of May, about 8 weeks after the pandemic was declared, and then life changed so dramatically across this city and in much of the world.

**DD:** Exactly. We never expected to be starting our podcast in this very strange new reality. By the way, this is our very first episode of the podcast.

**LK:** Yes, and though I stand to be corrected on this, this is the only podcast we know of that focuses on an urban neighbourhood in Toronto or anywhere.

**DD:** That's right, which makes it pretty unique and exciting. We should tell the listeners about the overall focus and purpose of the podcast, before telling them what this first episode is about.

**LK:** Yes, absolutely. Well, the plan for this podcast came out of a desire to understand and to show the ways that people in St. James Town act together as neighbours to solve problems and improve life. Our goal is to show how people build community, in often difficult circumstances, because we think that people's stories about this can inspire even more neighbor-to-neighbour connectedness.

**DD:** Yes. And we should explain why we're focusing on St. James Town. It's partly because as co-hosts and co-producers, we both have personal connection to the neighbourhood. I have lived here since 2015, and I have worked with various grassroots organizations here since then.

**LK:** And I live outside SJT, not too far from it, but I volunteer there, and have friends and connections here, and am doing some research here.

**LK:** Yes, and in addition to our personal connections to St. James Town, we both feel strongly that this is an important neighbourhood more generally. To name a few reasons, it is thought to

be the most densely populated neighbourhood in Canada, with over 18,000 people in about one tenth of a square kilometer. Many experts even think the population is higher than the official number, like 25,000 or 30,000. And this is a highly diverse neighbourhood too, with about two thirds of the residents being first generation immigrants, and over 100 languages spoken.

**DD:** All true. In fact I'm one of those first generation immigrants. And we'll talk more about the characteristics of the neighbourhood in future episodes.

**LK:** Right. And let me say that we won't shy away from looking at problems faced by St. James Town, such as the reality of low average incomes compared to the rest of Toronto and even compared to Ward 13 where St. James Town is located.

**DD:** Correct. And in addition to looking at problems and their causes and impacts, we will look at the talents, expertise, and ingenuity of St. James Town residents as they deal with these realities. It's a more vibrant neighbourhood than the news media would have you think.

**LK:** So true. There is so much that is positive going on in St. James Town that never seems to get coverage or attention. In fact the media hardly looks at this neighbourhood at all, which is another reason for this podcast.

**DD:** We should explain to our listeners how the COVID pandemic initially affected our production plans.

**LK:** Yes. You remember that initially we thought we should halt our efforts to line up guests and interview them while the physical distancing was going on. We didn't want to start asking people for interviews when their time was so absorbed in coping with challenges caused by the pandemic, like sporadic grocery scarcities, long line-ups for shopping, loss of income, and having the kids home every day.

**DD:** Correct. But then but then we started learning about actions people were taking collectively to help each other in response to the pandemic crisis. And we thought this are actually just the kinds of things that we always planned to cover in the podcast. We just didn't know we'd be looking at them in this kind of crisis.

**LK:** Right, and we decided that it would be useful for people both in St. James Town and outside it to hear about these helpful actions, from the perspective of residents and also service provider agencies doing them. We don't really see too much of that in all the news about COVID in the city. We decided that we could do interviews remotely by phone, as long as we could get a reasonable sound quality, which we have for the most part.

**DD:** Absolutely. So why don't we now tell our listeners what this first episode is about.

**LK:** Sure. I spoke with a woman named Emily, who lives in a 24-storey building in St. James Town. Since September, people in her building had already been organizing to strengthen social ties and communications to be better prepared to respond to emergencies, and they were doing this with support from an organization called Community Resilience to Extreme Weather

(CREW). It is sort of ironic that the pandemic halted many of the activities they had planned because the physical distancing makes face to face gatherings impossible.

**DD:** That is so lamentable. What have they done?

**LK:** Well, the networking and communication channels they had already established have proven helpful in several ways, including coordinating the sewing of masks.

**DD:** That is interesting. It suggests that working to build community ties can pay off in an emergency.

**LK:** It sure does. And Emily also talks about how technologies have been helpful for people in the building to maintain distancing, but there are limits because not everyone has home internet. Also, things are hard for people in this high rise because even though people are being really conscious about distancing in the elevators and other common areas indoors, they have quite minimal access to good outdoor space for taking walks and getting fresh air. She worries that when warm summer weather arrives, this will be a problem.

**DD:** Is there anything else she says that is kind of noteworthy?

**LK:** Yes. She talks about the importance of independent businesses on the streets adjacent to St. James Town, which serve some of the food needs of the neighbourhood. That is important considering the threat that small businesses are facing in this time, and the fact that the pandemic has aggravated problems of food insecurity. They deserve to be kept alive.

**DD:** thanks for that summary Lisa. And just before we share that interview, we should let listeners know that we're interested in feedback on the episodes, ideas for future episode topics, etc. They can provide feedback on our website, which is <https://stjamestownstoreys.com> .

**LK:** Oh great point Darryl, thanks for remembering that. And by the way listeners, that's s-t-o-r-e-y-s, as in the storeys of a building. And you can also get in touch with us by email at [stjamestownstoreys, all one word, at gmail.com](mailto:stjamestownstoreys@gmail.com)] Now let's hear the interview.

**LK:** I want to start by asking you, Emily, how long you've lived in St James Town?

**Emily:** I have lived in St James Town since 2002.

**LK:** That is quite a long time! Have you always been in the building that you're living in now?

**Emily:** Yes, I have. My partner and I, we used to live in a one-bedroom apartment in this building, and then in 2006, I think, we moved higher up, to a 23rd floor two-bedroom apartment.

**LK:** Oh, I see, so you moved within the building.

**Emily:** Yes.

**LK:** So, I'm wondering – as you know, the main theme of this interview is how the COVID-19 crisis is affecting life for people in St James Town, so if you could tell me a bit, how does life look in and around your building since the physical distancing measures started?

**Emily:** Well, one thing that I've really noticed is how strictly people are adhering to physical distancing, and really not going out. So, you know, this is a large, very dense community of about 20,000 people and normally when you go out to the park (because I have to walk my dog, so I still have to go out), you see quite a few people sitting around and walking around, and going about their daily business, but now you don't see anyone on the streets, hardly anyone. I've ridden down by myself in the elevator more times than I've ever done that since I've lived here, since the distancing measures. I think people are taking it very, very seriously, so I'm happy to see that.

**LK:** That is really interesting, and I did want to ask you, given that you live on the 23rd floor, and that you have a dog, I was wondering if you were worried about maintaining distancing in the elevators, and, it sounds like it hasn't really been a worry at all for you.

**Emily:** No, it really hasn't been bad. I guess, maybe the first week or two, when some people were still commuting – in fact, my own partner was still commuting to work until March 17th or something, so there would still be a cluster of people in the lobby sometimes, waiting to get in the elevators, but now everyone's staying home, and so the elevators are really not crowded. My only worry with the dog is – I have to take the dog out four times a day, and I have not trained the dog to “go” on the balcony (like, some people in the building have done that). So my only worry is that if I were to be really quarantined, like if my partner or I were ill and we both had to be actually quarantined, I don't know what we would do with our dog, because we wouldn't be allowed to take her, we wouldn't be allowed to physically leave the apartment, so we don't really have a plan for that. That's my biggest worry right now. My sort of, my desperate plan would be to just sort of try to force her to “go” on the balcony, but I don't know how to train a dog to do that, especially while I'm sick! [laughs]

**LK:** Oh, we sure hope that it won't come to that, that would be quite a challenge. I'm wondering, how are things in the lobby and laundry room, you know, people have to do their laundry, so how does that work?

**Emily:** Well, I've noticed that the laundry room isn't very busy, we have sort of an app, people can have an app on their phones, or there's a computer program where you can actually look to see how many washers and driers are free, so it's quite easy to check to see, “Oh, it looks like a lot of them are busy so there might be a lot of people down there, so I don't want to do my laundry right now”, so I think a lot of people are doing that, because I haven't noticed it be very busy there. The only thing that I'm concerned about is that I haven't seen the landlord taking any extra measures of cleaning – I haven't seen any evidence of, more cleaning in the laundry room, and there's no sign on the laundry room door saying “Here's how many people should be in here”, or, “Practise social distancing while you're in the laundry room”. There are signs on the elevators saying that, but not in the laundry room, and the lobby, I don't see any evidence of extra cleaning or wiping down the door handles, or anything, so that's something I'm a little

concerned about. I actually contacted my landlord about it last week by email, but they didn't reply, and so I'm going to follow up with my city councillor, just to make sure.

**LK:** That is really interesting, because isn't there an expectation that building managers should perform this kind of sanitizing actions in the buildings, but, in your case, you're saying it doesn't seem to be taking place.

**Emily:** Not that I can see. And there is actually a City of Toronto guideline, so what I did was, when I wrote to my landlord, there's a City of Toronto guideline for COVID-19 cleaning for commercial and residential buildings, and it outlines what they're supposed to do, it says, put hand sanitizing stations in the lobby, do extra cleaning of exterior door handles and high-touch surfaces like elevator buttons, put up signs in the laundry room saying how many people can be in there, so it outlines what they're supposed to do, so I sent them the link to that. But they didn't reply or do anything. But I'm not sure how enforceable that is, this is one of these things where, is it a "guideline", or is it a "public health directive", like all of these words have different meanings that means, are they enforceable, are they fineable, or are they a suggestion to keep people healthy – which they should want to do, but they're not forced to. That's the issue that I'm up against right now, I don't know if they have to, or not.

**LK:** That's interesting, and it sounds like perhaps they won't unless they're prompted more than once by residents of the building.

**Emily:** Exactly. By residents, or, I mean, more likely, by a by-law officer or a city councillor, this is why I'm getting my city councillor involved, because things happen faster that way.

**LK:** That's terrific, and I'd like to follow up later with you to see how that goes in the end.

**Emily:** sure.

**LK:** You mentioned, for the laundry room, I find that really interesting, the technology usage, did that app always exist or was it created just recently?

**Emily:** No, they've had that app for about, gosh, at least a year, maybe even two years. We have these laundry cards, they converted the machines from being coin operated to being laundry cards that you can load with a debit or credit card, so I believe you can actually load them online or on this little machine that's in the lobby, and that way you use your card number to log into this website that will show you what machines are free. So that actually existed before, but I feel like more people are using it.

**LK:** I see. I also was wondering if you could comment on what has it been like to shop for food and other essentials in the stores around St James Town since the physical distancing started.  
**Emily:** Sure, yeah, it's been a really kind of evolving situation, so the first couple of weeks – I shopped on March 13th, I think, which was just before they really announced, that kids weren't going to go back to school after March Break, and the heavier distancing measures, and it was like, I don't know, it looked like a scene from like, rationing in England during WWII or something, all the bins were empty in the store, there was no meat in the cooler whatsoever, just

nothing there, and nothing in the frozen vegetables, just empty shelves, so that was really scary. And of course toilet paper, there was no toilet paper, there was no pasta, there was no rice, all those things. But then after a couple of weeks that really calmed down and it seems like, you know, also, they're limiting how many people can go into the store, so I shop at the No Frills (there are several stores in this area), I shop at the No Frills, and you have to wait outside the No Frills at a distance from one another, and they only let certain numbers of people in at once, so it's actually kind of good for them, I think it allows them to restock more as well as everything else, and it keeps their staff safer. And they've put up sneeze guards, like, these plastic sheets, that the cashiers stand behind so that they're safer, because you can't really distance yourself from a cashier when you're paying, you're really only a foot away from them or so. So it's safer for them. But yeah, in terms of produce, it's coming in more, meat still tends to sell out, so I've actually started going to a butcher on Howard Street, where I live, a halal butcher who is a lot more reliable than the grocery store, and has excellent meat, so he is my new friend. [laughs]

**LK:** That's really interesting, and I did want to ask you if any of the smaller businesses around are still open, and if they can sometimes be a good alternative to the larger grocery chains, so that's very interesting to learn.

**Emily:** Yeah, definitely, the butcher, and there's also a small, like a green grocer's on Wellesley Street, that always was a really great alternative to the grocery store, they seem to always have really good prices on fruit and vegetables, and really fresh, I assume what they do is they go down to the Ontario Food Terminal and just buy it for their shop, and so we often would shop there and we still have shopped there a couple of times. I believe they're just letting one or two people in at a time now, to the store, because it's quite small, but they're still going. And on Howard Street as well there are several Filipino cuisine, like there's a lunch counter store, and there's a dinner restaurant, and that shut down for a little while, but I just saw that it's back open for take-out and delivery, so I'm going to try to support them when I can.

**LK:** That's really good to know, and I'm familiar with the produce store on Wellesley, and it's good to hear that they're implementing distancing measures as well, because it's such a popular store.

**Emily:** Yeah.

**LK:** I understand that you've been volunteering with an organization called CREW, which stands for Community Resilience to Extreme Weather, and you've been doing that for a few months, so I was wondering if you would comment just briefly first on what CREW aims to do in your building, and also if you could comment on how that work has been affected by the pandemic crisis.

**Emily:** Sure, so the CREW project, I mean, the name of the organization says "extreme weather", but really the focus in this building was more about building community resilience and sort of stronger social networks amongst people in the building so that when an emergency arises, no matter what kind it is, whether it's, you know, a weather-related emergency, or a power outage that's not caused by weather, any kind of emergency, so that each household is prepared, has set some food and water aside, but also so that people on the same floor sort of

know who on the floor might need help, and just sort of doing more of a face to face initiative with residents of the building so that people feel more comfortable asking for help, so just strengthening those social networks a bit, I guess, because there's many, many people that you recognize, or you see all the time riding the elevator, or you have the same commute as them, you know, and you sort of talk about the weather and everyday stuff, but you might not feel comfortable asking them for help, but the idea is that we're all living here together, we all do kind of know each other, so maybe we should strengthen that network a little more, build a little more resilience so that we could help each other feel more comfortable asking for help in an emergency. So that's the idea, so, unfortunately, that initiative is very much based on face to face contact, not so much on social media or like, email or bulletin boards or anything like that, so that's basically had to pause during the COVID-19 pandemic because we're not really allowed to, we were gathering in the lobby, and sort of talking to people about emergency preparedness, so we're not really allowed to do that anymore. But on my floor, I had already been in touch with several families just to say "Here's what the project is, and ask me if you have questions about emergency preparedness", so I've still kept in touch those neighbours, just to check in every few days to say hi, and "Do you need anything?", especially seniors. But the CREW project is basically on hold because of this.

**LK:** Yes, I understand, it's not that you can easily convert your work to internet or social media, to substitute for the face to face work you were doing.

**Emily:** Yeah, not so quickly, and also, you know, I think a lot of people, for example, some seniors are not – either they're not connected to the internet or they don't use social media in the same ways, so it's hard to reach out to them through those channels, and then also younger people too, like I don't use social media very much either [laughs], so that's not a good way to reach me, so I think that's why we started face to face because at least we're all physically here a lot of the time.

**LK:** yeah, I can see that situation, and I also understand that there's been an effort to sew masks, and that you've been doing a bit of that, do you want to talk a little bit about that?

**Emily:** Sure, so, a resident of another building, I think it's a TCHC building, had posted, we do have a sort of community WhatsApp group with CREW, where we had some community activists that we had added into the group, so that we could all keep in touch with what each other were doing, so she mentioned that she was going to have some people sew, she wanted to start sewing masks, and I had already started sewing some masks, I thought for a local hospital drive, because the hospital, I forget what it's called now, but it used to be called East General, in the east end of Toronto, was asking people to sew masks for community members that they could give out instead of using their own PPE equipment for their nurses, like for people who visit the hospital, so they wanted to give them cloth masks instead of using things that nurses should be wearing, basically. So I had already started sewing some masks, so I thought "Oh, why don't I give them out in the community, that would be even better!" so I got in touch with her, so I've sewn about 10 adult size masks and then 8 child size ones, so when I've sewn about 20 then I'm going to put up a sign in the lobby just saying "Do you want a mask? Text me" and then I'll probably just put a box outside my apartment with the masks in them. I've got Ziploc bags, I'll put each one in a Ziploc bag so it's safe to handle, and then, we can distribute those for

people to just feel a little bit safer. But I do think it's important to stress to people that wearing a mask, you know, they should still do social distancing even though they're wearing a mask, but people are pretty serious about it around here so I'm not too worried.

**LK:** That's really nice that you're doing that, and I think it shows a lot of, I don't know, neighbourliness, and a lot of caring on your part as well. How long does it take to sew a single mask?

**Emily:** [laughs] So, I'm not like a professional seamstress, I learned to sew in school, I used to sew a lot of my own clothes, but I haven't sewn in a long time, so it takes me about half an hour to sew a mask, and that includes like, so there's two layers, it's got a lining layer, which is made out of a sheet fabric, and then the outer layer is like a nice, I try to make them bright and colourful, because part of the idea too, is that, if they're a little more fashionable then people will wear them, especially children, or it will be more fun and less scary to wear it if it's got flowers or bright colours on it, so I have a bunch of fabric like that. So then you sew it together, and I press it with the iron, I probably do steps that are not necessary, but that are sort of, you know, if you know how to sew, you don't like to see things that aren't pressed, so I press them out, and my only problem right now is that I'm running out of elastic, so you use this sort of 1/4 inch wide elastic to put around the ears, and I've pretty much run out of that so I'm trying to figure out where I can get some more. So I'm going to liaise with some other community members to see if they've got some.

**LK:** Yes, I hope you can re-supply. Can you talk a little bit about how the pandemic crisis has affected your own life?

**Emily:** Sure, so, I mean, I was in a funny situation right before the pandemic hit, in that I had been unemployed, or sort of semi-employed for several years, I was working freelance as an editor, and tutoring, and teaching some university courses, and I just got tired of doing that, so I was actually in the middle of a government hiring process just before the pandemic, and I'd gone almost all the way through this one hiring process, I'd been interviewed, they'd asked me for references, they'd asked me for a security check, I had done all the French language testing and passed it, and so, sort of, the week before March 13th, I was celebrating, I was thinking "Ok, I'm going to be hired for this job, and maybe we're going to be moving to Ottawa!", because that's where the jobs I was applying for were. And then two weeks later, it's like, now everything's on hold. They are hiring in the federal government, for, different areas than what I applied for, but this particular hiring process is kind of on indefinite pause, and they're going to let me know, they'll let me know when they start it up again, but I really feel like I'm on hold. Because I really felt excited to start something new, and, start earning some real money, but now, we're back on "pause". [sighs] And my other freelance employment has basically dried up. So that's another reason that I've been sewing the masks, because it feels like something productive that I can do, and something to focus my mind on too, so I'm not just sitting around feeling worried, or reading the news too much. Yeah, but luckily my partner is still working and is able to work from home, so for now we're doing ok.

**LK:** I'm very sorry to hear that the employment process ground to a halt, and I really hope that it picks back up again when things go back to so-called "normal" again.



**Emily:** [sighs] Yeah. If we believe that, yeah. Who knows? [laughs] Who knows what it will be like, or when that will be?

**LK:** It's true, there's a lot of uncertainty.

**Emily:** I think that's one of the challenges too, right now, is, now we've sort of been keeping this social distance and staying home for almost a month, and you know, looking forward you just start thinking "Ok, well, how much longer can I do this?" even if it's been sort of ok up until now, it's been stressful and hard, but you know, we've done it, and we're doing really well, but how much longer can we really do this? Especially when the weather gets warmer, and a lot of people in this neighbourhood don't have air conditioning, and many people just sit in the park in the afternoon, just to cool off, in the shade, and we're not going to be allowed to do that. I also found out last week that our local cemetery, St James cemetery, it's a really big, this huge cemetery where I often walk my dog, and it was another sort of quiet place, to get away, they've locked down the cemetery as well. So you can't walk in the cemetery anymore. So it's sort of like, there's fewer places where you can sort of walk or be outside. I feel like that's going to be harder as the weather gets warmer.

**LK:** Absolutely, that does present a new kind of challenge. So far we've had fairly cold and uninviting weather, but, as you're saying, when it gets nicer, I can see it being a worry, that it will be harder to keep people indoors.

**Emily:** Yeah.

**LK:** Is there anything else that you would like to add about the situation, and how you're experiencing it, or what you're seeing around you in the neighbourhood?

**Emily:** I guess I just want to thank my neighbours, because I just feel really, really proud of this community, you know, it's a very, very dense area and at first I was really worried because I thought "Oh, people have all different schedules, and different needs", you can't just ask, people in an apartment building, asking them to stay home means something different than people in a house with a yard, you know, because we even have to go outside of our apartments to throw our garbage away and our recycling, so, I was sort of concerned, I wasn't sure if people would all really stay home, but you know, we are. And it makes me feel really proud of us as a community that we realize how important it is and we're all doing this for each other. Every night at 7:30 a lot of people go out on their balconies and make some noise for the health care workers, to thank them, but I also like to think that it's for each other too, just to thank each other, and remind each other why we're all doing this. So I just want to thank all my neighbours.

**LK:** that is really important, and I definitely think we need to recognize the specific, particular challenges of physical distancing in high rises, that it's so much more challenging, and like you're saying, people are really rising to the challenge.

**Emily:** Yeah, for sure.

**LK:** Well, I think those are all my questions for you, Emily, and I'm really grateful that you took the time and you've shared your perspective on how the pandemic is affecting yourself and how it's affecting the people around you.

**Emily:** Thank you, Lisa.

**DD:** That was an interesting interview, it had many issues to look at, and the resilience of the community as well.

**LK:** I agree, Darryl, and just before we wrap up, I have a little bit of follow up on Emily's own situation, which she said she didn't mind me sharing with listeners, and it taps into a bigger issue that I'm sure many people are experiencing right now.

**DD:** Does it have anything to do with employment and income?

**LK:** It does. Her partner's work hours were cut by 50%, which was a government-sponsored alternative to laying people off completely, so her partner applied to EI but has found that it has not gone smoothly at all. And just yesterday I read a news report that people across Canada have been having trouble with this very same thing, just when people really need the income support.

**DD:** Thanks for that rather disturbing information, Lisa. Maybe you could link that news item in the episode page?

**LK:** Good idea.

**DD:** St James Town Storeys is produced in Toronto by me, Darryl D'Souza

**[theme music begins to play]**

**LK:** And by me, Lisa Kowalchuk. Our theme music is composed by Bennett Sobel.

**DD:** So, listeners, thanks for joining us for this episode, tune in next week for the second episode, which will look at how residents collaborate with an organization called St James Town Community Corner to respond to some very practical needs in the neighbourhood, while practicing the 3 R's – reduce, reuse, and repair.

**LK:** Thanks for that, Darryl, and thanks for listening, everyone!