

## Transcript - Episode 2

[theme music plays]

**Lisa Kowalchuk:** Hi, I'm Lisa Kowalchuk

**Darryl D'Souza:** And I'm Darryl D'Souza

**LK:** And this is St James Town Storeys

[theme music plays]

**LK:** a podcast about building community in Canada's most diverse neighbourhood.

**DD:** I hope you are staying safe and healthy, Lisa, as we co-host this episode by telephone

**LK:** Thank you, Darryl, and I wish the same to you, and our listeners, too! Welcome to our second episode. Of course, we never expected to be starting out our podcast with no face-to-face conversations, either with each other, or with our guests.

**DD:** That's right. But relying on the telephone is a reality for these first few episodes that we're doing, as long as physical distancing requirements of COVID-19 are in place.

**LK:** That's right, and I should mention to listeners that the distancing really interfered with our original plan of interviewing our guests together; only one of us has the recording equipment at home, and we really need that equipment to get an acceptable sound quality when we're recording from a phone conversation.

**DD:** Right, and this means that for now, you are doing the interviews with our guests.

**LK:** Yes, and although that is both a privilege and something very enjoyable, we do look forward to when we can balance that out. For now, why don't we tell our listeners what this second episode is about?

**DD:** Yes, for sure! Well, this is our second of four episodes that looks at how St James Town residents are coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, helping each other in various ways, often with support from organizations. In this episode, we speak with Nyanthi Wijesuriya and Aravind Joseph, who both work at an organization called St James Town Community Corner, popularly known as "the Corner".

**LK:** Yes, and we should clarify that the Corner is a space where service providers, funders and residents collaborate in programs that benefit the neighbourhood, that is basically a thumbnail description of what they do. It exists at two Wellesley St locations: the Corner at 240, and the Corner at 200. They have the same guiding principles, but they do slightly different things.

**DD:** Right, the interview with Nayanthi and Aravind shows how the Corner at 240 has come up with innovative and safe ways to continue offering valuable services to the neighbourhood. What they are talking about is a set of programs and activities that implement the 3 R's: reduce, reuse and repair, which they explain in the interview.

**LK:** Exactly, and what's striking about these programs is that they meet some practical household needs, but they have many additional positive impacts as well.

**DD:** Yes, and in fact the range of positive impacts that were happening before the pandemic is quite impressive, they include residents acquiring or building on various kinds of skills, making new social bonds and friendships, and saving money and the environment.

**LK:** That's right, and many of those impacts are still possible during the pandemic. Now, just before we jump into the interview, I want to make a little correction. In my first few questions for Aravind and Nayanthi, I was calling it "the 240 hub", but it's really called the Corner at 240.

**DD:** Thanks for pointing that out, Lisa. And one more thing, listeners: we are interested in your feedback, including ideas for future episode topics. You can contact us on our website, which is [stjamestownstoreys.com](http://stjamestownstoreys.com), or by email at [stjamestownstoreys@gmail.com](mailto:stjamestownstoreys@gmail.com).

**LK:** Yes, and remember, it's S-T-O-R-E-Y-S, as in the storeys of a building. So, here is the interview.

**LK:** Thank you so much for making time to talk with me today, I'm here talking with Aravind Joseph and Nayanthi Wijesuriya. Would you mind telling me the roles that you have within Community Corner?

**NW:** Thank you, Lisa, for inviting us for today, for this interview. My role is the intake lead for Health Access in St James Town, and also I'm one of the operations members at the Corner at 200.

**AJ:** Hi Lisa, thank you again for this opportunity, and thank you for offering to speak to us, my name is Aravind Joseph, and I work as a program facilitator at the Corner at 240.

**LK:** That's great, and now I'd like you to tell me a little bit about the history of how 240 hub was created, and if it has a fuller name, perhaps you could say that as well.

**NW:** So, the Corner at 240 is more a separate site from 200 Wellesley location, it is a continuation of the same overarching principles and commitment to a unique model of community building. So for you, to give you a bit of the history of how we started this program and initiatives, I want to give you a little bit of history of the Corner at 200, what we have been doing in the past. The Corner, one of the focuses is to develop and apply green initiatives at our work, we have been doing some community programs, such as community cleanup days, community gardening, also we were trying to apply to our day-to-day activities, apply 3R concepts (which is reduce, reuse and repair) into our work. So with that we started to work hard by reducing our paper usage, increase recycling and sorting out waste at work. We also partnered

with Repair Café on repairs and capacity-building. Because of this continuation on this part, the City of Toronto and us was able to collaborate, and started this new initiative, Share and Reuse Space for the community.

**LK:** And before the pandemic hit, what were the range of services and programs that the hub was offering?

**AJ:** Well, before the pandemic the Corner at 240 was quite a busy space, and we had several programs and services and almost all of them were focused on the 3 R's, as we call it, the 3 R's are basically reduce, reuse and repair, so all the programs are basically aimed at enabling residents to either reduce, reuse and repair items themselves, or to do it at this space with the help of community fixers and volunteers, so some of the programs we had was "Fix-it Mondays", which was basically in partnership with Repair Café Toronto, and this is a mini repair forum that happens every Monday, the whole program is for about 3 to 3 and a half hours, and the uniqueness of this program is that it's not just residents from St James Town that come to attend that repair forum, you will find residents from across the GTA, from North York, from Scarborough, attending the program, coming all the way just to get their items fixed. And one of the other important things about this particular program is the social circle of the friendships that have been formed in this group. There are some community members who are regular to the program, they come even though they might not actually have something to get fixed, but just to engage with the community and the volunteers, and have a good time while the volunteers are fixing items, so it kind of turned into a social group. Some of the other services we offer are computer or laptop repairs, also we have about three volunteers from within community who are offering this service, and all of them are basically newcomers from different parts of the world, one was from South America, one from Asia, one from Africa, and all of them have several years of experience in dealing with computers and laptops. Then we have bike repair happening, it's called St James Town Bike Clinic, and for the St James Town Bike Clinic, the service was offered by one of our volunteers named Denver, and another one, who is a resident volunteer, named Emigdio, so these two volunteers – Denver donates his time, even though he's a fully employed professional, and Emigdio is somebody with many years of experience, in bike repair, he was also part of the city's Tower Renewal Program offering free bike repair at the Wellesley Community Centre. Apart from this we have sewing classes, the sewing classes have been going on for a long time, it was initiated sometime around October, and what has happened is that the group, just like the "Fix-it Mondays", had basically turned into a social group, with the women very well knowing each other and forming strong bonds. It is also a group that is steadily growing, that is increasing demand, to learn sewing, within the community. Most of these women are newcomers from different parts of the world who already have skills that they bring along with them when they move to Canada, but they're here for two reasons, one is to sharpen their skills, and accommodate it more to suit the Canadian market, and the other is to form friendships and to meet people. We also have daily repair that happens 3-4 days every week, so these are, again, led by three or four resident volunteers, two of them who are seniors, so daily repair focuses mainly on home and electronic appliances, and, residents can drop in their appliances for repair and they can either join the fixer to fix the item themselves, at the same time, thereby learning something out of the process, or you are also allowed to drop in the stuff and then later come and pick it up when it is fixed. Apart from that, we have something called "Knitting with Tea", which is, again, a social conversation group where women gather together

with some tea and snacks, they have conversations while they knit together. We have a teacher who enables them, or teaches them to do knitting and crochet. The uniqueness of this program was that this program was started with the cooperation of the 51 Division police department. They were the ones who donated the necessary yarn and all the necessary accessories that one needs to start learning how to knit. Apart from this, we also have workshops, repair workshops, the aim of the repair workshop is to build skills for volunteers. The repair workshop was a great success, we had one, and that was done in partnership with Repair Café Toronto, we had about 15 residents who were basically involved in repair all their lives, most of them with a passion, so they came in for the repair and we were able to create a team, let's say 10 to 15 residents, who basically become ambassadors for us, they were going out into the community and preaching the word about reduce, reuse, and repair. Apart from all these programs, one of the main programs that the Corner at 240 offers is the "Library of Things". Library of Things is something where you can come and borrow an item and use it and return in once you are done with the use. It includes tools, both hand and power tools, it includes board games, it includes certain kitchen equipment, it includes items that you need to organize a party, party equipment, it has, items like camping equipment, sports equipment. A lot of these items came into the Corner at 240 through a donation drive that we had initially when we were launching the space. And also we had other workshops, like, we had a sewing workshop, we had a gardening workshop in partnership with the City of Toronto's Tower Renewal Program, it was called "Get Growing!", it had a wonderful reception, more than 50 residents attended programs within the span of two days. We continue to provide these services in whatever way it is possible to in this pandemic, like we have moved some of these things online, you know, we want to keep knowledge sharing and skill sharing open, and we want to be able to assist the community as much as is possible even during these times.

**LK:** I see. It's a really impressive array of programs, and what's impressive about it is the multiple functions, it's friendship, it's skill-building, it's practical needs being addressed, and I notice that you're saying newcomers are deeply involved, and there are many ways in which both men and women become involved. What were your thoughts when the pandemic hit, with all the policies of physical distancing, what were your thoughts initially about what you were going to do with the activities?

**AJ:** At the beginning of March, that is, when you know the whole pandemic thing was building up, we did notice that attendance for certain programs was slowly falling, taking a hit, because people were trying to be more aware of the situation and trying to stay home, and on the 17th of March, as you know, Doug Ford declared the emergency in Ontario, but also amid the growing concerns amid our community of fixers, our staff, and our partners, we decided that it was time to make certain modifications to our programs, and also to suspend all the group programs as of now until the whole situation is under control. So all the group programs have been suspended at the Corner at 240, but we want to make sure that we are able to serve residents in whatever way possible, and enable them to stay home, and practice social distancing as much as possible. So we decided it is important that we provide essential repairs at this space, because St James Town is a community with a lot of seniors living in isolation, a lot of people with mental health problems, you know, and just an example, you know there might be certain appliances that you depend on for your day to day activities, a good example is probably your breakfast every day is a smoothie that you make using your blender, and what will happen if the blender stops

working? So that is why we decided that we need to provide these essential repairs. Another example is that we have a case where a mother comes because the TV is not working, and there is no way for her to engage her children, and that is the reason she brought the TV for repair. So we wanted to make sure that we provide these options to people to stay home, at the same time, to practice physical distancing, so we encourage people to make trips to the Corner at 240, along with other essential trips. We have also started providing online support and knowledge sharing, like we have started repair consultations online, and also, realizing that this is a time when people are using their laptops and computers more than ever, we have also started online troubleshooting for computers and laptops, where our fixers basically assist you over a phone call or over the laptop to fix your computers and laptops. WE also have a gardening workshop – as I said, we had a gardening workshop earlier, so we have moved these things online, so that, you know, now people are even afraid to come out and buy groceries, so we wanted to enable people to grow their own food in their gardens, on their balconies, and now in spring this is the perfect time to start these activities, so we also started providing gardening classes online. These are some of the changes that we've made specifically in relation to the program.

**NW:** Also, I want to say that, because like, it's a growing concern of people gathering, and going outside, we also had to think of, creatively, how we run the program. So Health Access St James Town helped us to institute processes and systems to continue the program, which we have been doing. So, like, different things, how we want to do, like, considering the safety of the community members as well as the staff, so we actually implemented different protocols, like screening, health and safety protocols, and such things, and then we started to think creatively how we can, run the program, like Aravind said, some programs we moved to online, some programs still are running on-site, but those are like, repairs, essential items they need at home to function. So we have to think creatively for serving the community, and also we thought, there was a demand for the community for masks, so we started actually stitching cloth masks, which largely got the help from the volunteers, so in a way we started to think creatively how we wanted to serve the community but we also didn't want to stop these kind of essential services to the community, which they keep, that helps them to interact, and also relieve the stress that they've been going through during this difficult time.

**LK:** I see, and, just a couple of quick follow-up questions to what you've explained, so I understand, is the Library of Things still operating and has that been in any way helpful to the people who have been moving back into 650 Parliament?

**AJ:** With the Library of Things, we have basically stopped the tool sharing process, because we want to contain the contamination as much as possible, but we are supporting the residents of 650 Parliament who are moving back on a case to case basis, because a lot of them need tools to, you know, assemble their furniture and to fix up their furniture and what-not. So yes, we have continued to provide those services to the residents of 650.

**LK:** That's really impressive. And do volunteers come in, then, to Community Corner and provide repair services and mask-making and so on, you still have people from the community coming in and doing that?

**AJ:** So, with respect to the mask-making, what we have done is we basically take the essentials, the essentials here in this case are this tightly-knit cotton, elastic and the thread, and the sewing machine, we get them to the volunteers' house, so that they have the comfort of working from home. We don't necessarily – whoever is involved in being a partner, or a resident, or a volunteer, we want them to be absolutely comfortable working, you know, in a situation like this. But we do have other fixers who come to the space on a daily basis, so every day we are open Monday to Friday, 12-6pm, where residents can come in and drop off their items for repair, and then we have fixers who come in for two hours every day, and try to fix the items, basically, for the residents.

**LK:** I see. Another question to follow up on that, when people bring their items, are you concerned at all about, sort of, sanitizing the items, or, how do you handle that?

**AJ:** As Nyanthi mentioned, we have established a very systematic protocol with the help of Health Access St James Town, so we have made several modifications to the space, basically to accommodate this current crisis, so what we have done is, we have installed a camera buzzer outside the space, through which people can buzz us before they come in, and the person inside the space can have a conversation with the person outside, and screen the person, and when we say screening, we just ask basic questions like, you know, "Do you have any symptoms like cough or cold? Have you been in touch with somebody who is COVID-positive, and then based on their answers we let them into the space. And even after they enter the space, the first thing they are asked to do is to sanitize their hands, and we have one area designated where the person can drop off their items that need to be fixed, and explain to the person in charge what exactly is wrong with the item, and what needs to be fixed, all this happens while maintaining the necessary physical distancing. And we leave the item aside for a minimum of 48 hours before we actually go and touch it for repair, and even when we touch it, we only start after we sanitize it using Lysol wipes, and we also have a disinfectant that is approved by Health Access St James Town, that we use to spray and clean the space every morning and evening as we open and as we close. So we follow a complete procedure to ensure that everybody inside feels safe, and also we don't allow more than 4 people inside the space, which is including the staff and the fixers.

**NW:** So, adding to Aravind again, before, we used to fix things quickly, now because of this lengthy process, it might be taking more than a week, or two weeks, to fix the things because you need two days to be kept aside, and then disinfect, and then the volunteer trying to look at it and trying to fix it.

**AJ:** Also, it's a challenge for us to find parts right now, you know, it's not possible, it's a very big process to order something online, most of the things get delivered up to a month or so, and we're not able to receive donations as we used to receive before, so earlier, how we used to do it, we used to use used parts from the donations made, to repurpose it and fix items for others, but as donations have fallen down, we're not able to do that, so it's difficult for us to find parts too, on a timely basis.

**LK:** What are the challenges for doing outreach now, during the pandemic, and how are you dealing with those challenges?

**NW:** So, I'll explain about what we have been doing previously for outreach and community engagement. We have actually community ambassadors which we have had for the last five years, we're working with the community members, and identify community ambassadors and they're the ones, they're actually working as outreach and also other initiatives. Also, what we did using the outreach methods, we've been calling people who are registered with us to check, we call it a "wellness check", how they have been doing, what are the challenges they have, and also we are updating what programs at this point we are running. So that's one way that we've been reaching out to people. Previously, of course, we had a different way of doing things, like 19 buildings have bulletin boards, so our outreach team goes to those buildings, including ambassadors, go and update the bulletin boards every month, if there's a new program, so our calendars, they posted those things, and also we were pretty active with social media, even now, I can see that we try to reach out to people through social media, and also including using WhatsApp groups, like community WhatsApp groups, and we're trying to pass the message through those WhatsApp groups. Also, what we've been doing also, we are partners with different landlords in St James Town, we have also been giving them what we've been doing, like even previously, we actually communicate with them programs that are happening at the Corner, and then at the Corner at 200 as well as 240, so they are largely communicating to their residents about the program. And we also had pop-up outreach events, previously, where we find out there's lots of community gatherings, where people go, we go there and have an outreach event. We were thinking creatively on those activities and also we reach out to different faith groups, different community groups, and try to also, tell them what we're doing here. And also try to get their help, and reach out to many groups, diverse groups in the community.

**AJ:** We are also trying to make use of technology to address the issue, so right now one of the ways we do outreach is we have staff who make wellness calls with clients, just to enquire about their well-being, whether they need something, whether they're ok. During these wellness calls, they also let them know about the services that are available in the space, and we're also making use of social media channels, as Nyanthi said, we've been partnering with landlords, faith groups, and also resident groups, for example, we had a Tamil seniors group, we had a Rwandan women's group, so we're trying to get in touch with these groups as well, we let them know that the resources are available to them. And on the technology part, we are trying to reach out to landlords and develop a partnership with them to set up digital signage in the apartment buildings, basically in the lobby, so that not just Community Corner, but also the landlords can put up their essential messages, and we can also put up messaging about social distancing, and how people can contribute in whatever way possible towards containing this whole crisis.

**LK:** These are really amazingly creative ways to surmount the challenges presented by physical distancing policies, I think it's very impressive. I wonder if you have anything to say about whether anyone in the public, who is listening, are there any ways that people could support the work that you're doing, the Corner at 240 and the Corner at 200?

**AJ:** We are looking for skilled volunteers, people who subscribe to the ideas of reduce, reuse and repair, to help us create DIY or do-it-yourself material, or videos, as you call it, basically, to be put online, which will enable residents to learn and help and fix items themselves, so now that, as I said, we want to enable residents to stay at home as much as possible, so we want to be able to move online with our capacity-building initiatives, and support residents in building their own

skills and capacity, so that they don't necessarily have to come out for a repair or for any of their needs, just be at home and they can fix things themselves. When we're back to normal, back to our life as it was a month ago, we want individuals to help us design systems, which will enable us to effectively reduce, reuse, waste and waste reduction.

**NW:** And also, anyone who comes across our materials or the programs, also share widely with community members, because this is the time everybody looks to interact with others in different ways, so we have actually amazing programs which were running online, and we're also looking for volunteers at the Corner at 200 as well as 240, so if you're willing to be a volunteer please contact us, because we run different initiatives with both locations, so we would like to connect with you, if you like, to do volunteering.

**LK:** That's good to know, and we can include in episode notes on our website the contact information, so that people can get in touch with you.

**AJ and NW:** That's great, Lisa!

**LK:** I'd better conclude by thanking you very much for taking the time out of your busy lives here on a Saturday, a beautiful spring day, with all the work you're doing, that you gave time to speak to me for our podcast, so thank you very much Aravind and Nayanthi.

**DD:** That was an interesting interview Lisa. I find it shows something similar to what we saw in the first episode: that when people are already connected to support one another and build community, it seems to help the community's resilience in a time of crisis.

**LK:** That's so true. The fact that the Corner at 240 was already functioning when the pandemic struck was important for being able to offer these programs now. And of course, the other crucial ingredient is the energy and dedication of these two frontline professionals, who have continued working at an intense pace to serve the community.

**DD:** Exactly. And we'll provide information in the show notes about ways that people can utilize what the Corner at 240 is offering, such as the online gardening workshops. We'll also provide information on ways that people can support or get involved.

**[theme music plays quietly]**

**LK:** Thanks, yes. We will close by saying that we hope listeners tune in next week for episode 3, which will look at grassroots effort of residents to support each other during the pandemic. It features an interview with a very well known, very energetic community activist in St James Town named Amal Kanafani.

**DD:** Great. I'm looking forward to that. St James Town Storeys is produced in Toronto by me, Darryl D'Souza.

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



**[theme music plays]**