

Transcript - Episode 3

[theme music plays]

Lisa Kowalchuk: Hi, I'm Lisa Kowalchuk

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

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

[theme music plays]

DD: Lisa, it's great to hear your voice, although unfortunately we can't see each other.

LK: Thanks Darryl, and I hope that you, and our listeners, are staying safe and healthy through this COVID-19 pandemic. You and I have not seen each other at all since late February!

DD: That's true, it's a strange way to be co-producing a podcast, but that is what spurred us to think innovatively to get the podcast going.

LK: So true, and these are strange and also challenging times for so many people in so many ways.

DD: That's right. Let's tell our listeners what today's episode is about, how it is different from the last week's?

LK: Last week's episode put the main emphasis on the role of organizations in meeting the needs that have been amplified by the pandemic. Today we're looking at supportive actions that are taking place at a more grassroots level among the residents themselves.

DD: I see.

LK: But that said, by the end of these special episodes that we're doing on coping with COVID-19, I think it will become clear that there isn't so much of a defined split between the actions of service agencies and residents. In fact, there's a lot of collaboration between them.

DD: That's an important point, and in today's episode we are presenting an interview with Amal Kanafani, popularly known throughout St James Town as "Auntie Amal". She created a grassroots organization called the Auntie Amal Community Centre. It has about 35 volunteers, and it supports new immigrants.

LK: That right, and Amal and her volunteers, she says, have provided furniture to over 600 newcomer families throughout the city.

DD: Amal has an interesting story. After arriving from Syria as a refugee in 2013, she started community work, and had a student placement in St James Town. This helped her to deeply understand the neighbourhood.

LK: Right. And because she got to know so many people through that placement, and also through her subsequent volunteering as a resident of St James Town, many people have turned to her during the pandemic, texting her and calling her with questions and requests for support.

DD: In the interview, she talks about many ways that she and her volunteers and other residents have been able to help neighbours in need since the lockdown started. They are texting, calling, door knocking (of course with physical distancing), people are leaving written messages for her in the lobby mailbox to let her know who needs help.

LK: I would actually like to share, now, a comment about our podcast that came in on our website, from a listener named Nalani. Shall I read it out to you?

DD: Sure!

LK: Nalani says, “Kudos on an excellent first episode! It’s been a long-time dream of residents of St James Town to have stories told from within, stories that are authentic and real, about things that the community really cares about and is proud of, or grapples with. Thanks for bringing that to fruition.” So, we want to thank you, Nalani, for that very kind and encouraging comment.

DD: We encourage all our listeners to give us feedback on the website of our podcast, or by our email address, and if you like what you hear, please do tell your friends and others in your networks about it so that we can grow our listenership.

LK: People can contact us either on our website, which is stjamestownstoreys.com, or by email at stjamestownstoreys@gmail.com, and remember, for both of those, it’s S-T-O-R-E-Y-S, as in the storeys of a building. Just before we go to the interview, I need to apologize to our listeners for the sound quality of this interview. This was the second interview that I ever recorded for our podcast, and there were many mistakes that I made in terms of the volume and the quality of the sound.

DD: Thanks for that heads up, Lisa. The good thing is that we are expecting to have a transcription of this and all our episodes as we go along, which should be helpful.

LK: That’s right. So, now let’s hear the conversation.

LK: I want to begin by asking you if you could tell me your full name and also how long have you lived in St James Town?

Amal Kanafani: Hello everyone, my name is Amal Kanafani [spells it], actually I lived in St James Town, I’ve been living since 2013, and I live exactly in 200 Wellesley.

LK: I see. And have you always lived in the same building, since you've lived in St James Town?

AK: Yes, I've lived in the same building and same apartment, and I have lots of friendly neighbours, I know mostly everyone.

LK: That's really interesting, of course, I'd like to know if you could tell me about what is your role in the community. You mentioned that you created an organization, and I wonder if you could tell me the name of that organization and explain how you came to know so many people in your community?

AK: I came 2013 as a Syrian refugee, and I started to study community worker, and then I had a community needs assessment so that I needed to know all the people to do this project for my school, and it took me 4 months to collect information about all my neighbours, you know, with community needs assessment, I needed to know everything about them, and most of the people were very friendly with me, and they gave me even secrets – like, which you can't give just to neighbours, you know, neighbour to neighbour [inaudible]. So I came to know a lot about addiction, about needy people, about people who are working in cash or stuff like that, so I collected good information about my community and from that time I've had a good relationship with everyone in my community. And I started Auntie Amal Community Centre when we started a project with Syrian refugees, first I want to sponsor my kids, who, they were not safe and were outside, abroad, and they were not safe, and to sponsor other families who are in need to come to Canada and feel safe, and to, live a good life here. So I started my services in my community, for that.

LK: I see, and it's very interesting, so did you achieve the sponsorship of your kids, were you able to bring them?

AK: Yes, actually I sponsored my kids and I sponsored other families, who they were really in need to come here, and now the same people I sponsored, they are supporting themselves as tailors, carpenters, farmers and most of them, they are doing well in Canada, and they started their own business and their own work. Most of them, they are working. So I achieved my goal, yes. And we did lots of services in our community, because actually, we know who is in need and we know who doesn't need, so, we know everything, so easy to help and easy to knock doors, and they will accept us because they know us already.

LK: That's really wonderful, I'm really pleased to hear that. And I also would like to know – because, as you know, I'm interested in the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the kind of community advocacy and volunteering that you're doing, so I'd like to know, if you could tell me, have people been turning to you for information and support since the pandemic started?

AK: You know, when, people just knew about corona, it was like, it was scary for them, because something they cannot see, they don't know what it is, immediately everybody told them “Stay at home, don't, put masks, use detergent”, what I want to tell about St James Town, mostly people in St James Town, they are low income people, and especially I want to tell you about the [public] housing buildings, most of the people they are on welfare, or disability, or, they can't

actually feed themselves. So this corona actually came with a very bad impact for them. Why? Because they are isolated, and you're saying to isolated people, be isolated more and more, and don't go outside, don't mingle anywhere, or don't do anything. So it was something, especially for addicts and stuff like that, so they need more organization to help them and to support them. How we help each other as neighbours, actually, because we are neighbours, they knew me, immediately I just got some text messages, like "We're stuck at our home, we don't know what is outside, and we don't know how can we protect ourselves, they say for us to stay at our home, so we don't have food. Can you provide us with some food?" Immediately we came to collect some food with other people, and we drove to the same people they asked for food, and then people said "What are we doing? what's next? what is going next, what will we do?" and immediately we brought some detergent, some sanitizer, masks, and we tell, "You do this, and this, and this", but we can't – like, by phone, we were talking, or just, we can knock the door and we stay two metres or three metres away and we speak to them, just to make sure that they are good. And some of them, they don't have TVs, and they're home. Or they don't have internet. So, how they will know? So, we reach out to them ourselves, because we are neighbours and we know about each other. But actually, if we don't know them, I don't think somebody would reach them. It's not easy, no.

LK: It sounds like what you're saying is that if we were to only rely on internet and television and telephone, it would not be possible to provide the kind of help that you're providing, but the fact that you already knew so many of your neighbours, and they came to trust you, and know how to contact you, that seems like it was really crucial for your ability to help neighbours help each other.

AK: Yes, and something really lovely about neighbours, that immediately the tailors started to do everything, you know that they collected from their homes the stuff, and they call me and say "Look, Auntie Amal, we've got some, toothbrush, or sanitizer, from our home so can you give it to others that have none." And what I like most, like, some tailors asked me, "Amal, we have our sewing machines, it doesn't work, do you know someone to repair it for us?" and immediately, we provide them with some pins or some stuff, they started to call and say "Oh, we have five masks, come and give it to anyone in the community they need it", or something. It was like, the humanity inside them, it was really nice. You can't find it in rich people, sometimes. You find, sometimes, humanity more in needy people, because they feel what's in each other. And that's which is, I felt it's, nice, in this community. It's different than any community in humanity because all these needy people, they feed off each other, they know, "Oh, I need this, that thing, my neighbour needs this too," so they divide it between him and his neighbour. They are not selfish, they are not, like, they want, what is good for them, for their neighbours, to divide it between each other, you understand? So that's [inaudible] in this crisis, and that's – I love it, in this crisis, actually.

LK: From what you're saying, there's an extraordinary generosity, and also an empathy, among your neighbours in your building, and perhaps in other buildings. It also sounds like it became possible for them to express that generosity because you were connected to so many people, so that they could rely on you to help them distribute the goods that they had to donate.

AK: Yes. Yesterday one of the ladies told me, she was 75 years old, that means she was old lady, she's a senior, and she called me and she said "Oh, I'm doing some masks for other neighbours, and I need some, pins." So I went to Dollarama and I bought for her some pins, and I brought for her, and immediately she was preparing some masks for me, and she said "I know that you are [inaudible], just go and give it to others." It was the kind of cooperation between neighbours, even this lady, I know that, she is very low income, and she is isolated woman, but immediately she thought of others, she was very generous to do masks and to contribute, even she didn't tell me "Ok, sell them", no, she said "Give them to others, give away". And I love that from her. I know that she was in need, and I know that she was not rich to give away, but she gave it away, like, maybe this will protect people, give it. And I love it from her, really. I saw in this crisis a lot of generous and empathy between all people in St James Town.

LK: And what's extraordinary is, like you said, she could probably use the additional income, but it did not occur to her to sell the masks, rather, she wanted to give them to other people who needed them, so it's impressive.

AK: I told her, you know, she text me "I need some pins", I told her, "Ok, I'll bring for you", I thought, she is very old lady, and she wants some extra income, but when I came to her and I told her "Do you want me to sell them?" she said -- even her house, she told me she had bed bugs long time, and she cannot afford to buy some furniture, even for her home, if you come to her home she will find, like, she has nothing, just one chair or something like that, and she told me "No, don't sell them, it's give away". [sighs with emotion] In my heart, I said "This lady, she needs somebody to give her, not to give away", but she was very generous and she was very, I loved what she did. I was like, how much I respect her.

LK: For me, it's very humbling to hear that. And it sounds, also, from what you're saying, that despite the physical distancing, you're able to work around the distancing so that, if you do go to someone's door, you stand back from the door, so that you're still able to communicate with them, and you're also using texting and other internet-based methods.

AK: Yes, yes. Like, even, as I told you, some people they come to my door, and they send me some papers, like "Auntie Amal, we need this", or when I'm down in the lobby, they send me, and they say "Look, this neighbour, he is in need, just ask about him", or, we ask about each other, which is something really nice. But a lot of people now, they lost their jobs, small income for them or something like that, they cannot afford to, buy the food, the lack of food is something here in our community, that's what I think.

LK: So that seems to be a pretty important unmet need that persists, due to low income and due to the loss of income. I wonder if your neighbours are able to apply for some of the programs that the federal government has created, for example the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, or CERB.

AK: WE are trying to educate them about this kind of stuff, but unfortunately, you cannot knock every door and say "Oh, can you hear about that?", and I can tell you, it's not easy because most of them, they don't have 'net, or they don't have TV. So how do they know? There are lots of

people in my community, they don't have laptops, or they don't have computers. So it's not easy like, this kind of information is internet, you know?

LK: Yes. It seems like your own life is so intertwined with the sense of the fact that you love helping other people, and your own life is very entwined with that, and that's kind of limited right now, because part of what you're doing is providing furniture to newcomers, and that's not as easy right now.

AK: No, it's not easy at all. Even like, if we want to go outside, we want to use a car, our car, the hands we are washing our car, we are doing everything to protect ourselves here.

LK: Of course.

AK: So it's not easy here, no.

LK: Since you're mentioning the role you play in helping to settle newcomers, would you say that there are particular impacts for newcomers, people who have only been in Canada for a few months, or perhaps even less, how would you say the pandemic is affecting them?

AK: Yes, this is another story, which is, I know a lady, she came maybe one day before the pandemic, [inaudible] the quarantine and stuff like that, and she came to Canada and she thought, Canada, it's an open country, she will go to school, her kids will go to school, and now she's stuck in one bedroom, and she always calls me, because she cannot do anything, you know? She doesn't know the country, she doesn't know – and now, she has depression, like, she has two kids with her in one bedroom, and she's stuck in it, always she calls, "Come and help us". I don't know how I will help her during this, you know? Especially the kids, they want to go to school, it's not easy. It's not easy to stay in one bedroom, you don't know the language, you don't know the country, and she doesn't know anything, she's a newcomer, and now she's stuck in one bedroom. Sometimes [inaudible] I bring some food for her, that's what we can do, as you say, everything is limited, we can't trust everything, we can't take the kids at least, like, to the park, because even parks may be infected, we can't do anything, just besides visits from outside the door, leave some food, and go away not more than this. [inaudible]. It is not an easy life for newcomers, now. Another thing, like, they say, now teaching everything online, but they didn't know that most of the people they don't have laptops, one of the neighbours, she has 3 kids. She has only one laptop at home, and now the school's promise of laptops, but actually, I don't know, I didn't hear that any school has distributed any laptops.

LK: Is there anything else that you would like to add, that you think I haven't asked you yet, that we should be talking about?

AK: St James Town needs some support. I don't know how, or, like, because no matter the institutions are not working nowadays, and most of the people are, everybody is caring for themselves, but we need support – people in St James Town really they need help. It's not an easy life, no.

LK: I think that is really important for people outside St James Town to understand.

AK: Now, even the food bank, they closed. So, like, they need help, financially, emotionally, everything, they need help, these people. It's not easy at all for them.

LK: The only thing I can say is, I'm very glad there are people like you in St James Town, but your point is well made, that other forms of support are really required. I just wanted to thank you very sincerely, for taking the time to share with us today, your experiences and your knowledge of the neighbourhood, and telling us about your role, and the kinds of things that you're witnessing.

AK: Thanks a lot for your heart, because you are taking care of us, and you are caring for St James Town and what is going on.

LK: So, Darryl, what did you think of the interview?

DD: I think that Auntie Amal is a truly impressive person, very kind-hearted and very selfless. And I noticed a recurring theme with one of our earlier episodes. It seems there were already strong social connections among people throughout the community, partly because of Amal. That made it possible for her and others to channel support to those who needed it, by collaborating to make masks, and identifying people who needed food.

LK: Good point. And I'm not sure how clearly this comes out, because of the way we edited the interview, but Amal really emphasized people's need for food in the neighbourhood. She says that many people just don't have enough right now.

DD: Yes, and the topic of food insecurity, and how people are trying to address it, is going to come up again in future episodes.

LK: It will, and in fact the next two episodes are very much about that.

DD: We found out that the food bank that was serving the neighbourhood prior to the pandemic had to close because it wasn't the right size to allow physical distancing. But not long after that, a food bank opened again, thanks to a collaboration between several organizations including Community Corner, New Common, and Our Lady of Lourdes Church.

LK: Yeah, thanks for that information Darryl, and we'll provide links to that in show notes. And Darryl, there's another point that I wanted to draw attention to, in Amal's observation of the current situation.

DD: And what is that Lisa?

LK: Well, you could see how Amal herself is really moved by the generosity of neighbours who are poor and struggling. She sees that as a poignant and beautiful aspect of the present crisis.

DD: Yes, that really struck me too. And she observes how that kind of mutual support among neighbours helped to compensate for a drop in services that was caused by the pandemic.

LK: Exactly. This mutual support and solidarity is really something to celebrate, but as Amal herself points out, the community really needs external resources and support, and I don't think she just means now, during the pandemic. These are needs that predate the pandemic.

DD: Right. You're saying that no one should expect St. James Town residents to supply their own social safety net. That really should be coming from things like: stronger government services, better paying jobs that are also more secure, and economic development in the neighbourhood, to name just a few.

LK: That's exactly what I'm saying. Those are systemic problems.

DD: it's hard to disagree with that.

LK: Yes. And Darryl, do you mind if we finish on a lighter note? I have a sort of amusing story to share.

DD: that would be fine!

LK: Ok, so, we were really lucky that Apple Podcasts took very little time to approve and index our podcast, it only took them about 4 days. But I noticed that they grouped our podcast together with other podcasts that they considered similar, but that are not really similar. And the reason that happened is because of the keywords I chose when I was submitting the podcast for Apple. Should I name some of those other podcasts?

DD: Sure

LK: Ok, here's the names of the other podcasts that our podcast was initially categorized with in Apple: Death, Sex, and Money; Dating Diaries; Why Won't you Date Me; Breakup Boost, Love Letters; the Love Drive, I could go on.

DD: How did that happen? What did you do when you were choosing the keywords?

LK: It's because when you're getting the podcast ready to submit to Apple, the keyword list gives you a set of choices, one of which is the word "relationships". I thought, well, our podcast is about people building community, so that's about relationships isn't it? But that's not the way Apple understands the word "relationships"!

DD: I see, well no harm done. You managed to fix it, I take it?

[theme music begins to play]

LK: I think so, otherwise we might have to think of renaming the podcast to something like Dating in St. James Town.

DD: That would be perfectly fine for a separate podcast! Or maybe a future episode of our podcast.

LK: Maybe! We could consider it. Well, to wrap up, we hope people will tune in next week when we will explore a collaboration between service provider agencies and residents, to support seniors who have had difficulty getting hot nutritious meals during the pandemic.

DD: St. James Town Storeys is produced by me, Darryl D'Souza.

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

DD: Thanks for listening, everyone!