

Transcript - Episode 4

[theme music plays]

Lisa Kowalchuk: I'm Lisa Kowalchuk.

Darryl D'Souza: 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 plays, then fades out]

LK: Darryl, it's good to hear your voice. I hope that you and your family are keeping safe and healthy as we now enter the 11th week of pandemic lockdown.

DD: It's good to hear your voice too, Lisa, and I wish the same to you and our listeners!

LK: Welcome everyone, to Episode 4 of our 5-part series on coping with COVID-19 in St James Town. One of the things that many people have to cope with because of COVID-19 is difficulty obtaining food and having nutritious meals each day.

DD: That's right and this can be particularly difficult for seniors, and people with reduced mobility and other health issues. Today's episode focuses on an initiative by a group of collaborating agencies, together with volunteers from St James Town and the broader community, to respond to these increased needs for nutritious food.

LK: Yes, the initiative is called the Community Meals and Wellness Check Program, and it started shortly after the physical distancing policies brought a halt to existing face-to-face programs, especially ones that served seniors. Agencies that were offering those programs quickly pivoted so that they could continue providing nutritious meals to seniors, along with regular wellness check-ins with them.

DD: Yes, and we have interviews with three guests who represent three of the organizations that brought this into being. These are Progress Place, Sherbourne Health, which is one of the two anchor organizations of Community Corner, and the women's catering collective called Flavours from our Neighbours. What I found amazing about the catering collective is that the members volunteer their time three days a week to prepare meals.

LK: That's right, and the meals are then delivered to St James Town seniors, and to others in vulnerable situations in the neighbourhood. Two other key organizations are The Neighbourhood Organization TNO, which helps to fund the initiative, and Trinity Life Church. I should mention that Progress Place prepares meals for people in a broader geographic area, not just St James Town.

DD: Maybe we should give our listeners a heads up about a couple of major themes that come out in these interviews. And maybe first on that list is how the pandemic has increased the need of seniors for support in obtaining nutritious meals. Not just seniors but also others who, like you said, have mobility or other health issues.

LK: Yes I agree, and thanks for raising this. One of our guests, Dr. Nalini Pandalangat, is Program and Services Director for Immigrant, Refugee, and Newcomer Communities at Sherbourne Health. She points out that the longer waits and line-ups for grocery stores during the pandemic are just not possible for many people. And another factor is the financial strain due to loss of income. And also, people who normally rely on home visits for various kinds of services, including meal preparation, have seen those visits greatly affected.

DD: Yes, and another of the guests is Norma Khandaker. She is a mental health worker at Progress Place, and Coordinator of the St James Town Senior Mental Health Day Program. Another problem she explains is that many seniors in St James Town do not have credit cards, which means they can't easily just order groceries online.

LK: Exactly. And I'd like to talk about an additional service that was interrupted by the COVID pandemic, which was playing a vital role in helping St James Town seniors to connect. This is the St James Town Seniors' Corner, provided through a collaboration between Progress Place, Dixon Hall, and Community Corner. It's a 3-day-a-week drop-in which features a variety of fun and stimulating activities, including arts and crafts, fitness, and trivia games, as well a hot lunch, and the opportunity to just chat and hang out.

DD: If I'm not mistaken, you were volunteering in the seniors' program, weren't you?

LK: Yes, for full disclosure, I started volunteering one day a week in the program at the beginning of January. I quickly came to see how relaxing, cheerful and friendly the space is, thanks to Norma of Progress Place, and some amazing staff members of Dixon Hall.

DD: So somehow, Progress Place pivoted and adapted to the pandemic crisis for this program?

LK: Yes, a key thing they did was to set up a weekly group video chat. Well, some people can phone in instead of using video. And what's amazing is that the seniors themselves also all managed to get up to speed with the technology of teleconferencing. And as well, these seniors continue to receive meals that they can either pick up at Community Corner, or have delivered, depending on their situation.

DD: That is impressive. Do you have any sense of how they are enjoying these weekly chats?

LK: As a matter of fact, yes, they allowed me to take part which I have just started doing. I was struck by how much they value each other's company and how they miss seeing each other in person. The friendships that they have formed are obviously quite important to them. They really care about each other, which you can see from how they inquire about the ones who aren't on the call, just to know how they're doing. There's a lot of joking and laughter, and I think also, joy in being together for that hour.

DD: That is really lovely to hear. Could we go back to talking about the food component of the Meals and Wellness Check program?

LK: Sure! Most of us are keen to talk about food and eating, even during a pandemic. All the more so in this case, because the meals that these folks and others are receiving are pretty special.

DD: You're so right. Our other guest in this episode is Dr. Priyal Goenke. She is a dentist who practices in India, and for the past year has been a St James Town resident. As a member of the catering collective Flavours from our Neighbours, she explains that the meals are nutritionally balanced, delicious, and visually appealing, as each meal box is made to "look like a rainbow". The food is also diverse in terms of ethnic influence, and they take account of special needs of some individuals, like for food that is vegan or dairy free.

LK: Yes, and we will have mouth-watering photos of these meals in our show notes. I also want to point out that listeners can support the meals part of the Meals and Wellness Check program by donating to The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO), making sure to earmark the donation for St James Town Community Corner. We'll provide a link for that as well.

DD: And we should note that the Women's Catering Collective, whose origins are described in the interview, does the meal preparation at the Corner's location at 200 Wellesley. The other location where the meals are prepared is the Progress Place Clubhouse at 576 Church street, where it's done by Progress Place staff. In both cases all the distancing and safety protocols are adhered to, both in the meal preparation and in the delivery.

LK: And one more thing before going to the interview. Listeners, we are keenly interested in your feedback on how and what we're doing. And if you like what you hear, please tell your friends so that we grow our listenership.

DD: You can contact us either on our website, which is stjamestownstoreys.com, or by email at stjamestownstoreys@gmail.com. and remember, it's s-t-o-r-e-y-s, like the storeys of a building.

LK: Let's go to our first interview, then, with Nalini and Priyal.

LK: I'm speaking today with Dr. Nalini Pandalangat, she is Programs and Services Director for Immigrant, Refugee and Newcomer Communities at Sherbourne Health, and with Dr. Priyal Goenke, she is a dentist who practices in India, and is now a St James Town resident and highly active volunteer. I want to thank you both for making the time to speak with me today, we're talking about a special program to provide meals to seniors, and my first question is for you, Nalini, I understand that this meals program is happening through a partnership between community residents and service providers. Could you tell us which groups and organizations are involved, and how did the initiative all come together?

NP: Sure, Lisa, I'm really happy to speak to it. I would call this a very heartwarming community response involving residents and service providers in St James Town. The initiative is a partnership between Flavours from our Neighbours, which is a catering collective in St James

Town that Priyal is a part of, Progress Place, Sherbourne Health, The Neighbourhood Organization, and the Corner. It's also supported by volunteers from the New Common and Volunteer Toronto, who help with the delivery of the prepared meals. And I just want to say that I'm part of the management of the Corner as well, which is an organic hub, and the Corner really plays a vital role in the coordination of the initiative. You asked me about how it came together, right?

LK: Yes.

NP: So, it actually started as a discussion about how to support a community during these times. As you know, with the pandemic, all of the group programs that offered food as part of our regular programming, and opportunities to come together around food, they had all kind of come to a hard stop because of COVID-19, and at that point we all started, the community and service providers, sat talking about how to support our community around food security. Progress Place initiated this by offering to support seniors in St James Town, with cooked meals, and the catering collective almost immediately came forward to support the community by cooking meals out of the Corner, and then Sherbourne and TNO offered funding and coordination support as they are the two anchor organizations of the Corner. It just started as a very informal conversation, it started one week and before we knew it, we began implementing the initiative, in I would say, less than a week. There was little planning and a lot of commitment that went into it.

LK: That's pretty impressive that it was so spontaneous, and just to clarify, for the acronym, does TNO stand for "The Neighbourhood Organization"?

NP: Yeah, that's right.

LK: Could you also tell us a little bit about the people receiving the meals? I understand that seniors are very important among those, and I was just wondering if there are any other types of people, and are they just people who live in St James Town, and also how were they identified as people who had the need for prepared meals?

NP: So, like you said, we initially looked at being able to support seniors who are living alone, and also others with no supports who might find it difficult to cook a healthy meal, and those who face challenges in cooking or accessing healthy meals due to a number of physical health and other issues, so this is a broad kind of framework in terms of the residents in St James Town that we would reach out to. We were able to identify these clients who needed this support as many of them had attended groups at the Corner. There was a seniors' day program that happened 3 days a week where meals were provided, and also other groups. We were also able to identify clients who might need such support from information on our database at the Corner, and also the staff at the Corner have great relationships with the residents in the neighbourhood, so that was also another way we were able to identify people that might need this support.

LK: I see, and would you say that the pandemic has really increased the need for prepared meals? One thing you've made clear is that programs that were in existence came to a hard stop,

so clearly people would have no recourse to filling in that need, if it weren't for this special program.

NP: Yes, totally, that was one thing, Lisa, the other was you know, with all of the social distancing and having to wait in lines for grocery and all of that, right? It would be very challenging for some clients to get to grocery stores. The other thing is that the financial strain that our communities face has been really amplified during the pandemic due to loss of income, many other things, and also those residents who are home-bound, who might have had support come in to help them cook and all of that, just because of the reduction in terms of the number of people who could kind of, you know, come and visit, had really gone down completely. Services were closed. So a lot of this really compromised the ability to have or cook a healthy meal, right? So it was amplified because of the pandemic.

LK: I see. Well, you've mentioned an organization called "Flavours from our Neighbours" – I'm intrigued by that, would you be able to give us some background about its origins?

NP: Flavours from our Neighbours is the St James Town catering collective, a group of newcomer women and a few seniors, largely newcomer women. It's very interesting, it has a very rich story and history. You know that St James Town is one of the most culturally diverse neighbourhoods in Toronto, it's rightly called "a world within a block", so we have our annual consultations in St James Town, they're called the Spring Gathering consultations, and they're co-hosted by service providers and residents together, and at these consultations we discuss things of importance and concern to the community. So at one of the Spring Gatherings a theme that came up was newcomer women in the neighbourhood and their need for social connection. And subsequently, another issue that came up was around income generation opportunities in St James Town. So when you put the two together, I'm not sure if you've attended a potluck in St James Town, it's an amazing medley of cuisines, right? From across the globe. And we thought this would be a great opportunity, and so I provided some support to kind of initiating this conversation with residents and service providers, and then there was a dietician from Sherbourne Health, Christina, and the resident leader, who you might have spoken to, Deeksha Gupta, who really came together to actually get this going. So the first iteration was just getting a group of people together, and the dietician is coordinating taking orders from the different programs and organizations, but then we all felt that it should be more that the leadership should come from the community, and so Deeksha took on the coordination, and that's the current iteration of the catering collective. There was a name that was formalized by the residents, Flavours from our Neighbours, the dietician continues to support it in terms of giving support around, consultation around nutritious food and different kinds of food for different sub-populations, but it's now completely steered by the leadership of the local women in the collective. And this situation has been a year old, I would say, from when the collective got its name, and it caters to a lot of local events, to a lot of community organizations, group programming, and it also caters to you know, sometimes businesses and even external to St James Town.

LK: I see. I think they chose a really good name! Priyal, I'd like to know how you came to hear about the women's catering collective. I understand that you are a member of it, and I'd like to

know how you came to know about it, and what the experience has been like for you to be part of it.

PG: So, Lisa, actually, I came here in Toronto in July 2019 with my husband, for a year, as he was awarded a one-year clinical fellowship in the Department of Anaesthesia in St Michael's Hospital. So basically, I'm on a probation? leave for a year, and I'm a dentist by profession, and I was running my clinic since 2009 in India. So, being a workaholic, and not authorized to practice here, it was becoming difficult for me to survive here, so that's why I joined the St James Town Community Corner, and I started volunteering there. So from Community Corner I came to know about the catering collective group, so cooking being one of my hobbies, I decided to join this group. So, I'm with this group since 2019, September 2019. And my experience now is great, Deeksha is very supportive, and I've made so many good friends, you know, of different cultures, because of this group.

LK: That's wonderful, and it's also amazing that in addition to being a dentist who runs her own clinic, you also have cooking as a hobby! Are you taking part in the meal preparation each day?

PG: Yeah, I cook meals on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for this program.

LK: How is it affecting you and the members to be able to volunteer your time in this way?

PG: You know, I know it's time of hysteria now, but you know, not everyone has people to turn to, and it's not always money with which you can help others. We can put our own skills to work, so that's why I decided to volunteer for this program. And now when people are calling us and when they are appreciating us, they are loving the food, it feels like helping others is a blessing.

LK: So you get the direct feedback from the people receiving the meals?

PG: Yeah, people are calling us at the Corner.

LK: Wow.

PG: On Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 o'clock they start calling us, they are excited about the menu, so yeah. It feels so good.

LK: I must admit that I had the privilege of being able to taste some of the food being prepared by the collective a couple o months ago, before the pandemic started, and I thought it was amazingly delicious.

PG: [laughs] Thank you so much.

LK: I have a couple of other questions about the collective, but since you mentioned the menu, how is the menu decided, and I guess that question could be for either one of you. I understand that certainly a dietician has been involved in supporting the collective, I'm just curious, how it

gets decided what gets prepared each day, and if there's any ability to customize the meals for people's dietary needs.

PG: We are making meals tasty as well as healthy is extremely important, so we're making sure that the food is yummy, but keeping in mind that nutrition is very important, especially during this time, like, we make sure that we give carbs, proteins and fibre, we use less oil for cooking, we don't add any sugar, and we try to make our lunchbox look like a rainbow, and basically we focus on taste and nutrition. We give a different menu for all three days of the week. On Wednesday we give non-veg platters, we try to give food of different cuisines, like Asian, Italian and Mexican, and we customize also, if somebody wants vegan or dairy-free or vegetarian, we provide that.

LK: Oh, I see.

NP: I must shout out to Progress Place, because they actually do support the broader community as well, beyond this initiative, so we, with this particular initiative, we actually bring, they deliver the meals to the Corner, and then we have volunteers who distribute them as well, and some people do come and pick up the meals from the Corner.

LK: I want to thank you both for your time, and for sharing your knowledge and experience of this program, and I wish continued success to it, and I'm looking forward to hearing more about it as time goes on. I also wish you both to stay healthy and well as you're doing this, stepping forward to be involved for the good of the community.

[both say "Thank you"]

DD: That was an interesting interview. It's quite moving to hear from Priyal that the recipients call Community Corner every day just to thank these women. And her story of involvement in the catering collective is very interesting. Did you happen to find out how many people they are serving through Community Corner with these meals?

LK: Yes, Nalini told me that the meals are provided to about 60 people, and that they are hoping they can expand that number in time. Twenty of the 60 receive it Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and the rest receive it 5 days a week. And as we mentioned earlier, Progress Place serves a broader area that includes St James Town but goes beyond it, thus their numbers are higher. They've already prepared over 5700 meals as of May 19, the date on which we spoke with Norma Khandaker.

DD: Is there anything in particular you want to say about our 2nd interview, with Norma Khandaker of Progress Place?

LK: Sure, I'll just say that I asked her to explain what Progress Place is, and what it does for mental health and wellness in Toronto. She outlines its innovative approach to recovery from mental illness, and we'll provide informational links in our show notes about that. After the interview we'll say a few more things about the vital services Progress Place continues to provide, and has in fact strengthened during the pandemic.

DD: Okay that's great. Let's hear the interview.

LK: I'm speaking with Norma Khandaker, she is a mental health worker at Progress Place, and she is the coordinator of the St James Town Senior Mental Health day program, and she's also on the operations team of Community Corner. So, thank you very much, Norma, for making the time to speak with me today about this new collaborative initiative. Now, for listeners who may not know, could you tell us what Progress Place is and how it serves the community generally?

NK: Sure. So, Progress Place is dedicated to improving the lives of people living with mental illness, and at Progress Place we believe that recovery from mental illness is possible when it involves the individual in a community, a community that offers hope, respect and opportunities for personal development. At Progress Place we offer programs and services which provide opportunities for recovery through friendship, employment, education, housing, recreation, and all done in a welcoming and accessible environment of support and dignity. Mental illness need not be an obstacle to fulfilling one's dreams. We are committed to helping people stay out of hospital, achieve their personal goals, and contribute to the communities they live in. So that's, in short, about what Progress Place does.

LK: In regular times, how do members contribute to meal preparation?

NK: So, in regular times, members assist with every aspect of the meal preparations, from planning the meals, to ordering the supplies from our bulk order, to preparing and even serving the meals during lunch time, and then selling the meals too, so we charge a very, very nominal price of \$2 for a lunch, and then the members also do the banking. So, they do the counting of how many meals were sold, and it tallies with the money we brought in, and then that money is taken to the bank for a deposit. So all this is done by members and staff working together in partnership.

LK: I realize that Progress Place has played an important role in supporting seniors in St James Town for quite a while. Could you tell us a bit about that?

NK: Sure. Progress Place has shown great leadership in collaborating with agencies that support seniors in St James Town and other communities by offering a day program which enhances the physical, emotional and cognitive abilities of seniors. It provides a range of holistic services including leading a seniors' program at St James Town called the Seniors' Day Program. This program runs in collaboration with Dixon Hall, the Corner that provides us the space, Hospice Toronto, and Toronto Public Health. The Seniors' Day Program, as I said, is located at 200 Wellesley Street East, a Toronto Community Housing Building, in a safe, cheerful, and friendly environment. The program operates right in the heart of St James Town community, where members or participants live. This program currently runs 3 days a week, Tuesday to Thursday, and is attended by seniors that are 55 plus, that are exceptionally vulnerable, isolated, and without much social connection.

LK: We know that this pandemic kind of upended all kinds of face-to-face activities that were happening. Could you tell us how Progress Place became involved in this new meals program that we're talking about?

NK: Yes, as soon as COVID-19 pandemic was declared, Progress Place asked the members of our clubhouse what services were important to them, and to continue to have access to, and everyone said food was the most important thing. Progress Place was nimble and quick, changing from our regular programs to virtual programs for our members. We understood the need and the tremendous support it would be to provide a home-cooked meal for our most vulnerable older adults, people with disabilities, and community members with multiple health issues. Within days of identifying these needs, we were able to start to roll out a rapid response to preparing about 100 meals a day along with delivering them to seniors' buildings in St James Town, and even as far as North York. Providing meals to our seniors gave our community a sense of hope that we are going through this period together. And so, Progress Place really feels that this is helping our seniors a good deal.

LK: You mentioned a little bit earlier that there's quite a positive reception on the part of those receiving the meals, do you want to say a little bit more about how you're hearing from the people who receive the meals, and what kinds of things they're saying?

NK: So, the community is so grateful for the meals they receive. Our seniors tell us how the meals provide them with comfort and connection to know that they haven't been forgotten, and that all of us are in this together. One of our seniors told me how anxious and fearful he is to go out grocery shopping, to be exposed to the virus. Seeing the empty shelves in the stores reminded him of wartime. Every day, I hear gratitude from our members, how the meal is of tremendous help, as they are on a limited income, while the prices of groceries have all gone up so much. Some of our seniors do not have credit cards to pay for their groceries, and cannot afford delivery charges for groceries to be delivered to their home.

LK: Is there anything else that you would like to add about this, that I haven't covered in my questions?

NK: I'd just like to explain a little bit more what Progress Place is doing these days, for our members. So, Progress Place has always been a hub of stability and support for members, supporting mental wellness, social inclusion and food security. During this COVID-19 period, Progress Place has adapted programs and services and are accommodating our members virtually to continue providing inclusive and accessible service. So we have extended our "Warm Line" hours, this is a peer support group, it's now operating 7 days of the week. For the seniors, we have been outreaching them daily, primarily during the general wellness check, but also providing community resources, organizing a meal plan if needed, taking care of medication supplies, connecting them to food banks, providing information on pet food banks, and just general information on COVID-19 virus. And connecting seniors that are homebound, and have mobility issues, with the Community Corner. Over 30 seniors in St James Town connect on a Zoom chat over video or phone every week, and are thrilled to connect with their peers. We celebrated Cinco de Mayo and Mother's Day over the Zoom chat, and each week we engage our seniors with trivia, music, and a group game. Activity packages are also provided to seniors each week, and the seniors are very appreciative and feel the connection to the program, and to other seniors. It's like a little thread linking our program together.

LK: It's really lovely to hear about these additional initiatives, and not just the meal provision, but also these outreaches and the weekly Zoom chat, I'm so pleased to hear that these things are still taking place. I want to thank you very much, Norma, for sharing this information, and your experiences, with us, thanks for making the time. It's really valuable for our listeners to know ways in which seniors are being supported, of course with nutritious food, but with these other important social connections and this caring initiative.

NK: Thank you, Lisa! I really enjoyed chatting with you. We're looking forward to you joining us back when we get back together.

LK: What did you think of this interview, Darryl?

DD: I think that Progress Place plays a critical role in the community as well as for the seniors of St James Town. And there are a couple of other forms of support for mental health they are offering during the pandemic that we should mention.

LK: Yes, because of the pandemic, the Progress Place site called the Clubhouse is closed to the members for now. That is why the meal preparation is just being done by the staff right now, instead of by the members. But Progress Place was already providing something called the "Warm Line" before the pandemic, and they have extended the hours of that service.

DD: Yes, and a "Warm Line", as listeners might guess, is both similar and different to a "hotline". A hotline is for an urgent, crisis situation that someone is experiencing, whereas a warm line is for when a person is feeling lonely, distressed, isolated, having a bad day and just really moved to talk or text chat with someone.

LK: That's right, and what's great is that the "Warm Line" hours have been extended so that they're now operating 7 days a week from 12 noon to midnight. We're going to provide information in our episode notes about that, but we can pass on the "Warm Line" phone numbers right now to our listeners. If you want to call the "Warm Line" between 12 noon and 8 pm, then the number to call is 416-323-3721, and if you're calling between 8 pm and midnight, then you should call 416-960-9276.

DD: That's great, Lisa. And doesn't Progress Place also get into podcasting?

LK: I'm glad you mentioned that, Darryl! Yes, they produce a podcast called "Radio Totally Normal Toronto", RTNT, which I encourage listeners to check out, it's very good!

DD: That's a great title for a podcast!

LK: I agree. Well, thanks everyone for listening, and please tune in next week for our fifth episode, which will continue to look at food-related needs that are caused by the pandemic, and also an initiative to deliver groceries to residents in need, again through a collaboration between resident volunteers and service provider agencies.

[theme music plays in background]

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

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

[theme music plays louder until the end]