

Transcript - Episode 5

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.

DD: It's great to hear your voice Lisa, as we present our 5th episode of our special series on coping with COVID in St James Town.

LK: Thanks Darryl, it's great to hear you too, although I would much prefer that we could sit across from each other for this conversation. I'd also like to wish all our listeners in St James Town and elsewhere a happy Pride month!

DD: Even though the pandemic will change the way Pride is celebrated this year it is not being forgotten. Like you, Lisa, I also wish that we could be conversing face to face. But of course, during this long period of pandemic physical distancing, and we're now in the 12th week, all our conversations have had to be by phone. We quickly discovered that we could not even rely on video calls, because too often the internet is not stable enough to sustain a whole conversation!

LK: Exactly. With a video call, you often end up having to restart the call and you can lose valuable ideas that guests would be sharing. And yes, this is our 5th and last in this set of episodes that we didn't initially plan to do on how residents and organizations are responding to the COVID crisis.

DD: Yes. We had been planning to cover a set of general issues affecting the neighbourhood, but COVID changed our plans. Another thing we didn't anticipate was how important food would be in this crisis response. Food is again a major focus of this episode, which looks at an initiative to deliver donated grocery kits to residents in need.

LK: That's right, Darryl, food was a major focus last week too, and actually it has come up in a couple of the other episodes as well. It's quite pervasive.

DD: It's becoming pretty clear that we will need a more in-depth look at the topic of food insecurity in St James Town, an issue that predates the pandemic but is made worse by it. We want to look at the underlying causes and also the solutions that have been proposed.

LK: Yes, for sure, and in that regard, we'd like to give a shout out to OASIS, which stands for Organic Aquaponic Symbiotic Integrated System. OASIS has its roots in St James Town, and for the past several years, they've been studying urban food insecurity and proposing ways to tackle it in largely vertical or tower-based neighbourhood like this one.

DD: Absolutely. We very much hope to have a future episode that features their knowledge and perspective on this.

LK: Yes, and in our wrap-up today, we'll share with our listeners our plans for future episodes, which we admit, are still somewhat tentative at this point.

DD: For now, let's tell our listeners what this episode covers.

LK: Sure. Well, our guests today are Jennifer, a 5-year resident of the neighbourhood, and Nyanthi Wijesuriya, who is an operations member at Community Corner and also the intake lead for Health Access St James Town. They are talking about a collaboration between Community Corner, and the residents in Jennifer's building, to deliver packages of groceries which include food as well as non-perishables, with the additional vital support of an organization called CREW.

DD: And one thing that Nyanthi and Jennifer explain is how the pandemic created the need for this kind of support.

LK: Yes. We know that when it comes to covering household expenses, many people's incomes in St James Town were already stretched thin even before the pandemic. According to official statistics, the average household income in St James Town is less than half the income of Ward 13 as a whole, and about a third of the average income of Toronto overall. And now with people's employment hours being cut, or people being laid off altogether, making ends meet becomes an issue of some urgency.

DD: Yes, income loss is definitely a big factor when it comes to obtaining sufficient food during the pandemic, and we have mentioned it before. Our guests also explain other challenges that the pandemic imposes, like long lines at the stores, reduced store hours, and shortages of some products, especially earlier in the pandemic period. And in addition, for elderly people, and others with compromised immunity, there is a great reluctance to go out of their apartments.

LK: That's right. You know, in earlier episodes, a couple of our guests have commented that there is a remarkably high degree of compliance with physical distancing in the neighbourhood, like in the elevators and other common spaces. But there are nevertheless many people who need to take all possible precautions.

DD: Another theme we should highlight for our listeners is the fact that pre-existing networks and relationships really made this initiative possible, in Jennifer's building and in other buildings in the neighbourhood. We mean relationships between individuals and between organizations facilitated responding to residents' needs in a time of crisis.

LK: That is so true, and in that respect, in this particular building where Jennifer lives, an organization called CREW played a crucial role. CREW stands for Community Resilience to Extreme Weather. We have mentioned them before, in episode 1. Organizing people for emergency preparedness is just one branch of their work in confronting climate change. But even though their name refers to weather, their impact is more multi-faceted. The fact that they had

already helped to organize people in this building, for example by creating a dedicated group of resident volunteers, very much helped the response to COVID.

DD: It is a truly important and unique kind of role that CREW plays. We also learn in this interview that residents of other buildings were also networked, which made it possible for the grocery kits to be delivered to 19 buildings.

LK: Yes. We know that there are some really strong tenants' associations throughout the neighbourhood. And for sure, there are also important informal networks of friends and acquaintances through which people look out for each other.

DD: There are people who have lived here a long time.

LK: Yes! I know an older gentleman who has lived in St James Town for 40 years. A shout-out to Nick, if he's listening! I hope he is!

DD: I think we can go to our interview now. And just before we do, one more thing. 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, and they too, can profit from this podcast.

LK: 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.

DD: Let's go to our interview, then, with Nayanthi and Jennifer.

LK: Well, I'm here with Jennifer, who is a five-year resident of St James Town, and also with Nayanthi Wijesuriya, who is the intake lead for Health Access St James Town, and also one of the operations members at St James Town Community Corner. And, I want to thank you both very much for making time to speak with me today.

NW: Thanks for having us, too!

LK: Thanks. And my first question is for you, Nayanthi. Would you be able to describe what the "food kit" delivery program is, and how it came about, and which organizations are involved in it?

NW: Thanks for having me, Lisa. I just want to – before I jump into the answer to the question that you asked, I would like to give a brief background to St James Town Community Corner and the nature of its operations.

LK: Sure.

NW: In May 2011, St James Town Community Corner started its operation after consulting with the community and it is the result of more than 5 years of effort by local residents, volunteers, in partnership with a number of service providers. All are committed to improve access for St

James Town residents to services, support and opportunities to meet, plan, and build a strong, healthy neighbourhood. As a result of that, St James Town Community Corner, “the Corner”, has been operating in St James Town for 9 years. Just to answer your question, we in the community working along with the community, St James Town Community Corner is able to understand and come to know some of the gaps in the community, especially during this pandemic, St James Town Community Corner is operating, working along with residents to respond to the crisis. So as we were working along with the community and providing and providing essential services to the community, during this pandemic we also learned that food security is one of the most important areas that we need to focus on, getting resources to the community. That’s how the food kit delivery started. First, delivery was taken place April 16th, and we were able to provide 160 kits to the community members. For this first initiative, St James Town Community Corner partnered with the neighbourhood office that’s The Neighbourhood Organization, or TNO and the Dream Mind group, who started Operation Ramzieh, and also that was the first initiative that we started to respond to the food crisis in the community. And then we also realized that we need to expand the capacity of food delivery to the community, so to meet the need in the community, the Corner also partnered with Lady of Lourdes church, who was running a food bank in St James Town in the last few years. The food bank, which was operating at 275 Bleecker building, that was moved to the New Common at 225 Wellesley. The Corner staff is helping to book appointments and also coordinating the program with Lady of Lourdes and the New Common. That’s how the food kit distribution and the food bank resources came into the community and responds to the need of the community.

LK: A quick question about the food bank: did it close for a little while after the pandemic struck?

NW: Yeah, it was closed because the place that was operating before at 275 Bleecker, the space was kind of a small, tiny space, that was difficult to kind of...maintain the social distance, and respond to the like, operating the food bank, so it was closed for a while, but then we reopened in another location where there is a small space but you can also maintain social distance and also can distribute food to people.

LK: That makes sense. And is that other location it’s not the Corner at 200, correct? It’s a different location?

NW: It’s an agency called the New Common at 225 Wellesley.

LK: Is it by appointment?

NW: The food bank distribution happens Tuesdays and Thursdays, but it goes by appointment. And we also try to be flexible, if you don’t have appointment, you just want to come in and get the food because you are in need, of course we also provide food to people that don’t have appointments. But we also encourage people to come to the Corner, get an appointment, it’s also actually making it more safe for people who are coming in to get the food, and also maintain the social distance among people who are coming to get the food from the food bank.

LK: Certainly, that makes sense. And, Jennifer, I'm curious to know, how did you come to learn about the meal kit delivery program, and what has been your role in this initiative.

J: Well, I'm a member of CREW, Community Resilience to Extreme Weather, and I met Nayanthi through Lidia, who is CREW's coordinator, so Lidia called me April 15th and said that Community Corner were receiving a food donation, so she asked me if I had any ideas of how can we deliver this food, or help delivering this food to isolated tenants living in my building during this pandemic. So, at the next day, Nayanthi came to the lobby, and that's how I met her, and so what we did, as members of CREW, volunteering in my building, is creating signs and putting it around the building, by the entrance, in the elevators, we quickly made some little notes that we delivered in each mailbox so people can be aware that there are help available, and they can contact Lidia so we can create a database of people that were in need, so we can deliver that food the next day. And we did, and we were able to do this in only one day! From one day to another.

LK: That's pretty impressive, and it sounds like the fact that you were already organizing with – as a member of CREW, that that really helped you to respond to the opportunity to provide food to residents.

J: That was an advantage, a very, very huge advantage, because we were at home, Lidia contacted us through WhatsApp, and everybody volunteering gave an idea of what can they do – some of us, we posted signs in the main areas, some others take little notes, others helped distributing it in the mailboxes, so it was a team effort and it really helped, and we were able to do this very fast. It was an advantage.

LK: And did you have to carry boxes up to the doors of residents? I'm assuming these are residents who probably don't leave their apartments during the pandemic.

J: First, Lidia called us, we came together, then the next day, Nayanthi brought the boxes, she left the boxes in the lobby for us, and the volunteers took each box and brought it to tenants' doors, and we tried to keep a safe distance, so we just knocked at the doors, or called them, and saying that the box were ready outside the door.

LK: Did you get a sense of how the residents, how the recipients responded? Did you get a sense of what they felt about this?

J: Yes, people were so happy and thankful, you can tell because their faces were just blooming, they were smiling.

LK: I have a question that could be for both of you: from what you're seeing, has the pandemic made it harder for people in St James Town to get necessary food items, and what exactly is going on with that, how is the pandemic making it harder, if it is?

J: Yes. Mainly because most people were afraid of going out, and somehow being in contact with the virus. So it was also a challenge due to the very long lines that we had at the stores, and the shortage of products available. Plus, the operation hours, because they reduced the operation hours at the stores, so first people couldn't really go in and buy, and then the long lines, and once

you get to the door, and you are able to get in the store, they were already closing, or they didn't have any products to sell.

NW: I also want to add in to Jennifer's, so I just want to say that there are groups of people such as seniors, people with compromised immunity, who are also vulnerable to this virus, that won't be able to go outside and get the food from the grocery stores. And also, I think there are groups of people who are able to go to the grocery stores and get the food but they don't have money, so there are low income households, and resident who is dependent on daily wages, or regular jobs, and resident whose work being cut are most affected by the situation. So there was a constant struggle to put food on the table, so that's how, actually, I think this pandemic has affected many groups of people in the community.

LK: How did people let you know that they needed food, and was it based partly on the prior knowledge you had, because of the work you were doing with CREW?

J: Well, what we did is, just being honest and asking people that if they need help, the help is available, and they can reach us and let us know, and we would be happy to help.

LK: Nyanthi, here's a question for you, are there additional buildings in St James Town where the food kits are being delivered other than the building where Jennifer lives?

NW: Yeah, so I just want to add more from our side, how we figure it out how to respond and how also to reach out to many people in the community. So, as I mentioned, how St James Town Community Corner is operating in the community, we already have set up, like, relationships with various stakeholders, such as service providers in the community, community grassroots groups, residents' associations in the community, and community groups, like community ambassadors. So St James Town Community Corner already had this established partnership or relationship with those community groups, so it was easy for us to kind of identify the members who are in need, like, getting food. So then we were able to reach out to many other buildings, so in that way we provided food to 19 buildings in the community, along with the rooming housing Toronto Community rooming housing residents too. So, that way we were able to identify many residents, and also working along with residents' groups, so, the grassroots community members, they have actually a kind of sense of who really needs this, and some if we were not able to reach out, they were able to reach out to those community members. That way we were able to identify members in the community, the building, that the residents lives, and so we were able to provide 19 high-rise buildings as well as the other rooming housing in the community.

LK: I see. So, it sounds really like it's a strong collaboration between Community Corner and then grassroots groups of residents in the various buildings.

NW: Yes, yes. And it's a very effective way of working, I would say.

LK: I'm not sure if you mentioned, who is providing the food, who is donating the items?

NW: So, the first initiative started with Operation Ramzieh, and they are the one actually donated food to the neighbourhood office that is called TNO, and through them, having the

partnerships and the partnership, we were able to get these food kits to St James Town Community Corner.

LK: I see. And so far, have there been two of these delivery operations, like you mentioned one on the 16th of April, I understand there was one more recently as well.

NW: Yeah, that's to the food bank that we reopened at the New Common location, at 225 Wellesley, that's the food bank, yes.

J: The first time we delivered 40 boxes, and those boxes were for families or whoever was in need, because this pandemic was just starting, so people didn't really have the chance to go to the stores, they didn't have money, the programs that the government had in place weren't really delivered the money yet, so many people needed. But at this time, we found that the people that still are in the most need are seniors, so what we did is we delivered those boxes to seniors and people with disabilities living in our building.

LK: I also want to ask you is there any way that members of the public who are listening to this, if they wanted to support these initiatives, what would you suggest that they should do?

NW: From St James Town Community Corner, we are also looking for volunteers that who would like to go and deliver this food basket to vulnerable residents, seniors, who might not be able to come out, we are looking for volunteers. You can also connect with St James Town Community Corner, if you go to our website you can find where you can connect, there's email for info at stjamestown.org, and also you can call us 416-964-6657. And also, if you like to do a financial donation, you can go to The Neighbourhood Office website, TNO, which is www.tno/toronto.org, and also when you are donating, you can also mention "this is for St James Town Community Corner", that way we will be able to get the support from volunteers as well as, if you would like to do financial donation, that way we can also get more food baskets for people who need.

LK: That's excellent information. Is there anything else that I haven't covered that either of you would like to mention about this experience?

NW: Lisa, I just want to add that it's very exciting, and very interesting to work with the community, because not everyone is on social media, so these days everything has pushed to going, like, online or social media to reach out to people, but I want to say that not everyone is on social media, so this model, like, working with the community members and grassroots level organizations, so we are able to actually physically go reach out to those members who need it, so it's really kind of a great model to work, and I feel that during this kind of pandemic you can actually reach out to people who really need the help. So I want to thank all these grassroots level organizations, community organizations like CREW, who comes and wants to help residents, it's really great to work with those community and residents' associations. It's great, just the experience, even during this difficult time, it's very, I want to say phenomenal. And I really enjoy, and the Corner itself enjoy working with these providers and the community organization.

LK: Thanks for that. Jennifer, I realized there was a question I meant to ask you, and the question is, based on your experience in this initiative, and also just living in St James Town, are there some lessons that you think we should all be learning about being prepared for emergencies?

J: [laughs]. Yeah. I would say, definitely get prepared. We never know what might happen. So having a team of neighbours helping neighbours within your building gives us a huge advantage to respond and act quickly in case of an emergency or something that might happen. So get prepared, is what I recommend.

LK: I think that's excellent advice. I want to conclude by thanking you very much for taking time out of your busy weeks, to speak with us for this podcast, and it's excellent information, it's a very admirable initiative. And I wish you continued success with it, although of course we wish that the needs wouldn't be so great, but it's amazing to see as well that you're responding to these needs.

J: Thank you, Lisa!

NW: Thank you, Lisa, for having us today. Thank you so much.

DD: So Lisa, that was a good story about neighbours caring for each other during this time of increased need, and going to great lengths to help each other.

LK: I agree. We have some great photos of the volunteers to share in the episode notes on the website. I also think it's also great that the food bank re-opened at the new location at 225 Wellesley, making it possible for Community Corner to focus the grocery donation and delivery more narrowly on seniors and people with disabilities.

DD: For sure. But it goes without saying that everyone involved in this initiative wishes that food banks were not necessary, and they understand that there are systemic, underlying problems that need to be addressed in the long run.

LK: Absolutely, which is why we need an in-depth look at food security in St. James Town, which we can be sure will have relevance for many other urban communities. One important fact about food insecurity throughout Canada is that it correlates with race. A study last year by two collaborating organizations, Foodshare and Proof, reveals that Black Canadians are 3.5 times more likely to face food insecurity than White Canadians. But overall, one in 8 households in Canada are food insecure, which means they can't always afford the food that they need.

DD: Those are disturbing but important realities. We should mention that notwithstanding the need for systemic answers to these problems, listeners who wish to support this vital emergency initiative in St James Town can either volunteer with Community Corner, or they can donate to The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO), making sure to flag the donation for St. James Town Community Corner.

LK: Thanks for that information, Darryl. Now, we should tell our listeners what are our plans for the podcast over the next few months.

DD: Yes. Well, we are going to take a pause in order to plan the production of a fall season of episodes, that will focus on issues that predate the COVID crisis, but will certainly intersect with it. Issues like the safety of aging buildings, the problem of isolation in high-rise communities, the creation of tenants' associations, and food security.

LK: Correct. And we're also hoping to take a look at music and other arts production in the neighbourhood, also small family-owned businesses that serve the neighbourhood, and the aspirations of young people.

DD: All of these are topics in which it is possible to hear the stories of residents acting collectively to solve problems, and make life better for themselves and the next generation.

LK: Yes. And I think it's good to be very honest with our listeners: we're hoping for a bit of funding to be able to produce those episodes. Many of the tasks involved in making the podcast, such as editing, are quite time consuming and we have to pay people to do them. If the funding we applied for does not come through, we are not sure what we will do, but we have to look into other possible sources.

DD: We certainly hope to be back with exciting and important topics that feature the voices of St. James Town residents.

LK: Yes absolutely. I feel optimistic that we can do that. For now, we wish our listeners a safe and healthy summer . We welcome your feedback, and we hope to be with you again in this fall. And please, if you like what you hear, let your friends know about us.

[theme music begins to play in background]

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

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

DD: and this has been STJ Storeys, a podcast about building community in Canada's most diverse neighbourhood.

[theme music grows louder and plays until the end]