

URBAN LIGHTS

TRANSFORMING TORONTO SINCE 1896

A journey toward healing and employment

When Kirk* and Manny* enrolled in YSM's **Opportunities Fund (OF)** program, they didn't realize all they had in common. Both came from difficult family backgrounds, and both felt a lot of anxiety about finding work.

How did the OF program provide meaningful support?

OF is an employment program focused specifically on supporting community members with mental health challenges to get into the rhythm of work. Participants take part in **mental health workshops** together, while attending 12 individual sessions with a YSM mental health counsellor.

At the same time, the group completes **a training course** to develop important soft skills like communication, conflict resolution, goal-setting, and financial literacy. They learn how to search for and retain employment, how to build a résumé and prepare for job interviews, and they receive 1:1 job coaching.

Finally, participants begin a **short-term paid job placement** with a YSM partner employer, gaining valuable work experience and added training.

Since the inception of our OF program 19 months ago, we've placed the majority of 56 participants with partner employers. Among those participants, so far nearly 40% have secured permanent employment.



YSM's Opportunities Fund program provides one-to-one holistic support for community members with mental health challenges as they seek to re-enter the workforce.

Both Kirk and Manny entered the OF program feeling an absence of supportive relationships. Both felt there weren't many people who could understand their experiences. They felt like outsiders.

But a key component in the OF program is the **time spent building trust among participants**. Kirk and Manny quickly let their guards down as they regularly sat together. When Manny said he felt seen and a part of the group, Kirk agreed. The two became fast friends, continuing to meet outside the program.

At graduation, each participant receives a certificate and a

Chromebook tablet. This helps ensure our graduates won't face technological barriers, while also celebrating their commitment to the program and the steps they're taking to address challenges and rejoin the workforce.

"For the first time in three weeks, when Kirk's name was called, I saw a big smile on his face," says YSM Employment Counsellor Thomas Morrison. "It's a remarkable thing to be able to help a person address their barriers and get back into a work routine. But being able to see the change pour into their personal lives and see communities being created is beautiful."



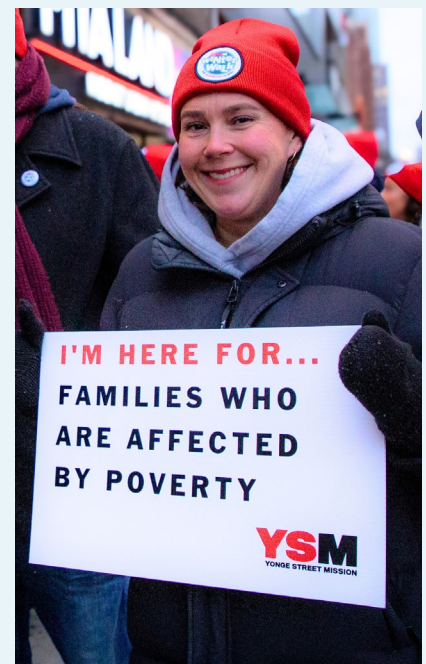
Adrian, left, and his Tuesday donations of bread and treats, alongside YSM Shared Administrative Services team member A.J.

Winter Walk for Neighbours in Need

On Saturday, February 8, during our second annual **YSM Winter Walk for Neighbours in Need**, 218 participants braved the snowy weather to complete a 2 or 5 km walk and helped raise more than **\$127,000** to support vulnerable community members during the freezing winter months through YSM's programs.

"I really liked raising money to help others," one 12-year-old 5K walker said, "and also the hot chocolate!"

Special thanks to our Route Marshal Sponsor **Logan Wealth Management**, our venue partner **St. Paul's Bloor Street**, **Tim Hortons** for Rest Stop refreshments, **Salad King** for the wonderful post-walk meal, and **Chick-Fil-A** for kindly donating children's and youth meals.



Adrian's Compassion

by Chinyere, from YSM's Shared Administrative Services team

On a windy, rainy day in November 2024, just before the Bridges community meal was to be served, our attention at reception was drawn to the entry of an unfamiliar face who had just been dropped off by a TTC Wheel-Trans vehicle. He introduced himself as Adrian, and he was visiting Yonge Street Mission all the way from Scarborough with the singular objective of donating bread and baked goods to members of our community.

Since then, every Tuesday Adrian comes through our doors — rain, snow or high water — to share his offerings with YSM. He says if he could, he would bring food every day, but Tuesdays are the only day Wheel-Trans can bring him.

If compassion or resilience was a person, Adrian would be that individual. Adrian is quadriplegic and is always willing to be of service, despite the challenges and constraints of his physical condition.

When I asked Adrian, "Why not donate to other organizations close to you? You do not need to travel this far." Adrian said, "It has to be YSM. I asked my church, OneChurch, to, where can I be of use to help people the most. They sent me here. I am excited about all you do. I love people."

Every week the food Adrian brings is either included in daily snack packs for neighbours in need of food who visit the Bridges Drop-In, or shared through our Food Bank. His bread is always a fan favourite!

After the Christmas holidays I asked Adrian how he'd spent it, and he shared he was all alone and missed his usual Tuesday visits. But then, grinning from ear to ear, he quipped, "Every time I visit on Tuesdays, it feels like Christmas."

Nurturing young entrepreneurs

In January, 55 Regent Park children developed their own unique pop-up business ideas, which they then presented to their peers and a panel of judges.

This was the culmination of a financial skills training series for students in grades 3 to 8 led by YSM's Family Education program and **JA Central Ontario** over 3 school PA days. Students grew as budding entrepreneurs as they learned budgeting, innovation and more.

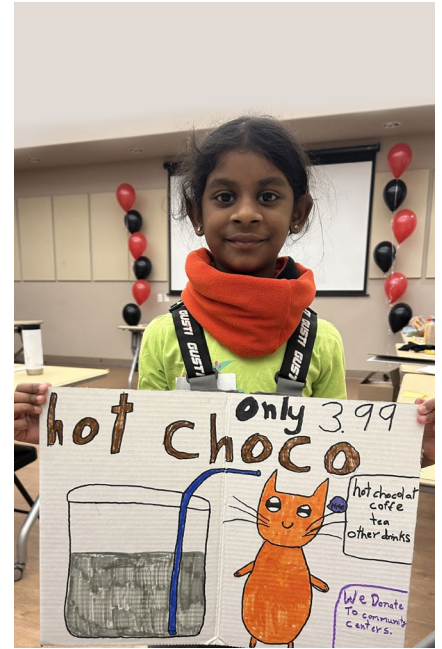
"The students demonstrated incredible creativity and a commitment to giving back to their community," says Michelle Belanger from JA Central Ontario. Their business ideas included a smoothie shop, cat café, shoe store, spice shop, bookstore and music store! Many focused on how they could make a

positive impact, whether by creating jobs or supporting others through donations.

The students grew not only in their entrepreneurial skills, but perhaps most importantly in their self-confidence.

"One participant was extremely shy and requested my assistance with his presentation," says Tritcha-Anne Ruddock, from YSM's Cornerstone Family Services team. At first the student was hesitant to speak, but as Tritcha warmly encouraged him, soon he had confidently selected an idea and began beautifully illustrating it.

"I discovered he is a really good artist," Tritcha says. "This showed me what support, patience and care can manifest in others. He came out of his shell and shined brightly — I was so very proud of him."



Students presented ideas for businesses with a positive community impact.

Angie Peters honoured by World Vision Canada



World Vision Canada has named YSM's President & CEO Angie Peters as one of the recipients of its 2025 **Heroes for Children Award**. This award acknowledges her leadership at YSM, her work alongside strategic partners to help build communities in which everyone can thrive, and for being an important voice for those in need: "Angie's leadership in the social profit sector has inspired so many to join the mission of investing in people and working towards the end of poverty." Congratulations, Angie!

Community development training series

Gain practical tools and strategies to enhance your local impact through free seminars available online and in person through YSM.

Yonge Street Mission is leading **three free seminars** you can attend either in person or online.

February 25, 5-7p.m.

Empowering community ownership

April 29, 5-7p.m.

Measurement & evaluation

June 24, 5-7p.m.

The key to effective facilitation

To learn more or register, email Stella at schao@ysm.ca or scan the QR code.



Challenge or opportunity?



We live in challenging times with increasing income disparity, rising poverty, homelessness, political polarization and challenging economic pressures for our country.

It is natural to feel these pressures and lose sight of the incredible opportunities we have to bring light to a dark situation. At YSM we have spent our entire history seeing

opportunities where most people would see challenges and hopelessness. **And what we are seeing is beautiful, as so many people choose to see and take the opportunity to make life better for neighbours in need.**

This issue highlights just a few of the ways people are overcoming the darkness in our society with their light.

This looks like Kirk and Manny finding friendship, hope and confidence as they seized the opportunity to build their skills toward long-term employment. Adrian, seeing a weekly ride as an opportunity to share treats with neighbours who are hungry. More than two hundred friends and even whole families refusing to despair at the scope of the need

and choosing to fundraise and walk together to show our struggling neighbours they are seen and they truly matter. JA and YSM's Cornerstone program opening doors of possibility and opportunity to 55 brilliant and precious young people. And YSM's Community Development team training churches and organizations all across the city to see the opportunity they have to make a lasting difference in their very own community. And in doing so mobilizing even more people across the city for an even greater impact!

Things are difficult right now for too many people, and yet there are even more people who see the great value of every neighbour and seize the opportunity to make a real difference in their own way. And this, in Thomas's words in our cover story, is a beautiful thing to behold.

Thank you for seizing the opportunity to bring light and hope through your support to the people in this city who need us the most.

Blessings,

President & CEO

Your \$200 Ontario rebate can help struggling neighbours . . .

If you received a \$200 Ontario taxpayer rebate, and can afford to do so, would you consider sharing some or all of that windfall income with neighbours experiencing poverty?

With record numbers of community members currently living in hardship, and reduced holiday season revenue due to the Canada Post service strike, Yonge Street Mission values every kind donation which helps us to provide warm meals, keep our Food Bank stocked, offer ongoing mental health support, employment services, and so much more.

Thank you for considering this possible means of lending your support!

