

Civic Spark Zine

Stories of Connection

2025 Edition

Volunteer Toronto

Welcome

In 2024, Volunteer Toronto and the Toronto Foundation piloted a brand new program intervention to increase civic engagement and reduce social isolation.

It worked!

This Zine shares impact data and lessons learned from our pilot microgant program featuring

35 volunteer-run projects

+ stories of community connection

Welcome to the 2025 edition of our Civic Spark Zine!

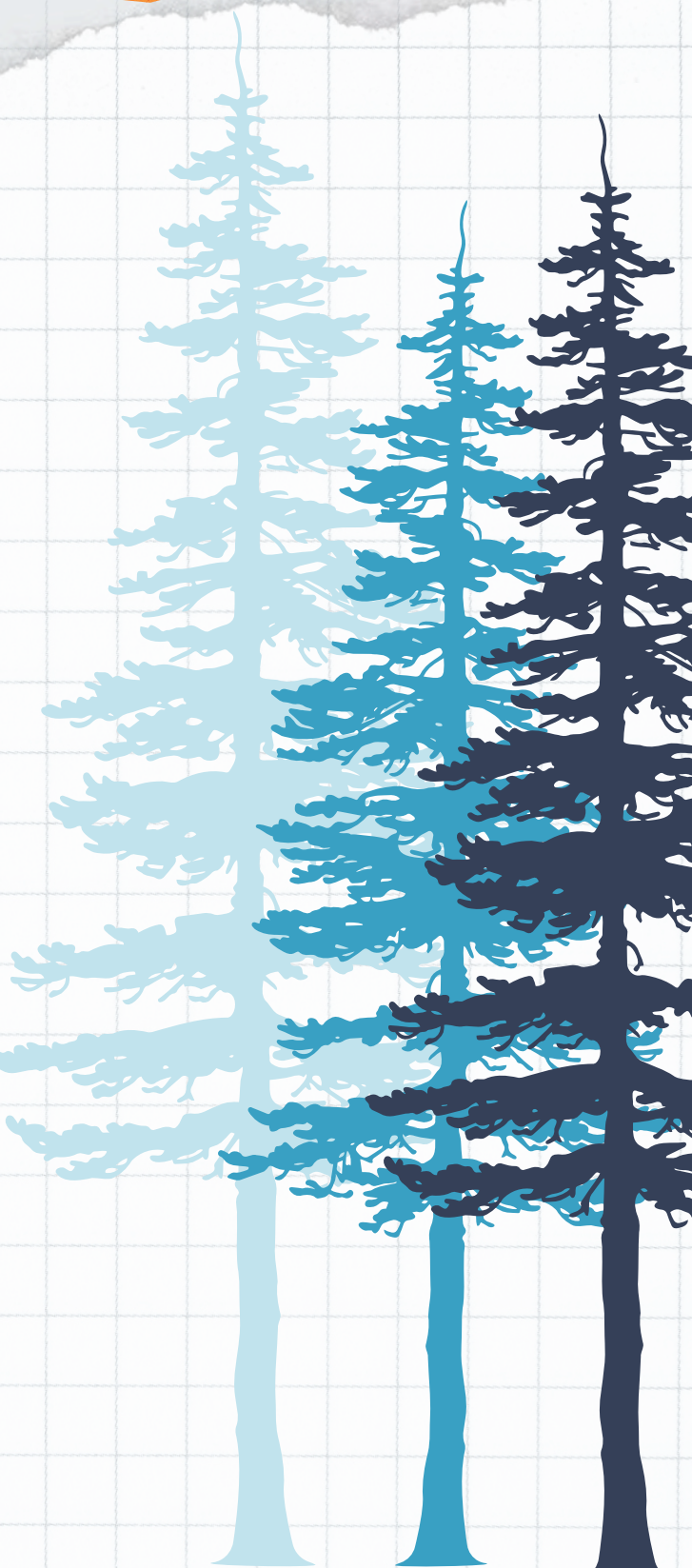
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Land Acknowledgement

Volunteer Toronto has the privilege to build community and work in T'karonto on the traditional lands of the Chippewa, the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy of Six Nations, and more recently, the Territory of Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit, part of the Anishinaabe Nation.

We strive to build communities of empathy in the spirit of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Covenant.

This covenant is a pre-colonial agreement that encourages everyone to only take what they need, leaving enough for each other and our future generations.



"Our Civic Spark Microgrants are a powerful antidote to loneliness—every single project in our pilot helped people make real, lasting connections. In a city still rebuilding after the isolation of COVID-19, this program is reigniting something essential: community."

-Joanne McKiernan, Executive Director, Volunteer Toronto

270+
applications

35
projects funded

210+
volunteers involved

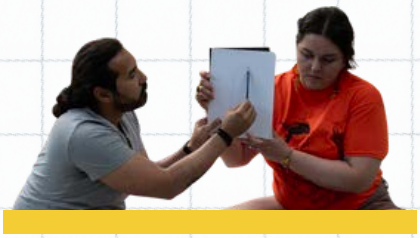
3609+
Torontonians engaged

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93% reported the projects helped people make new friends



42% indicated they strengthened community trust

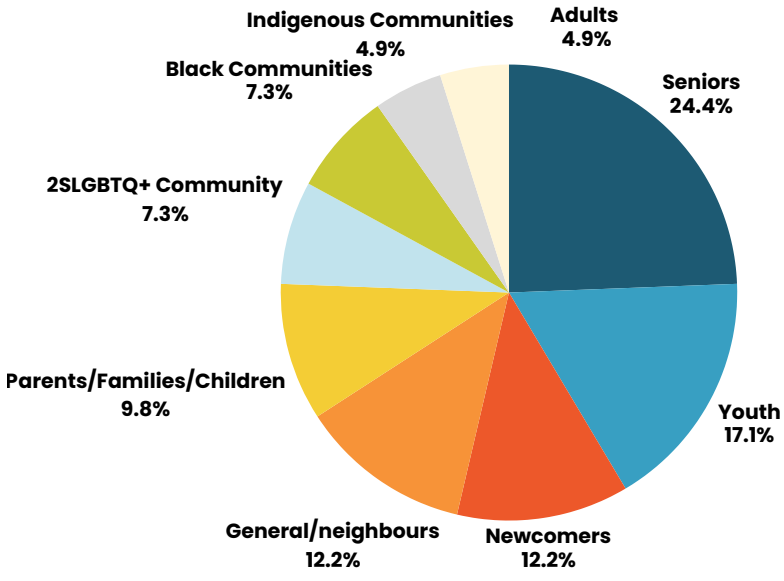


45% witnessed people learning something new, like a skill



27% want to scale up their initiative

The projects reached 3,600+ Torontonians from all walks of life, most significantly connecting Seniors, Youth and Newcomers.



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What does it take to reduce social isolation?

Through this program, Volunteer Toronto gained insights on how to activate community participation and connection on the hyperlocal level.

We learned there are four key ingredients to reducing social isolation:

- Outreach
- Community Space
- Partnerships
- Food

66%

of micrograntees indicated they spent significant time on marketing and outreach

33%

struggled to find space/venues for their project

33%

of projects partnered with another non-profit

64%

of all microgrant funds were spent on food as the highest expense budget line across all projects

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35 Projects Delivered Across Toronto in 2024



Each marker indicates the primary location of a project delivered

Connecting People in 6 Different Ways

Teaming Up

- Toronto Queer Swim Club
- For the Neighbourhood
- Tkaronto Football Community
- Ghanaian Canadian Seniors Group
- Queer and Trans Chess Nights
- Unity for Life

Breaking Bread

- Latinas Unidas en Accion
- Connections50
- Odo Woman
- Sista in Health
- We Produce Fresh Food
- Zuwa
- KGO Sandwich Ladies

Learning Together

- Sunrise Tower Seniors
- Member Advocacy Committee
- Taylor-Massey Residents Wellness Council
- #HearThis Black History in the East End

Crafting Community

- Colective Bandita Latina
- Community Matters
- Creative Space Scarborough
- Youth Mentorship Council
- Urban Detectives
- Sistaz in Sound
- Cultural Canvas Art Group
- kin + care collective
- Weaving Threads

Harvesting Friendship

- Sustainable Junction Triangle
- Aanjiktigaan
- The Garden Group
- Kih'ti-gewin

Celebrating Us

- Kids' Pride Parade
- Activity Committee
- Caribbean Community Connection
- Regent Park Out Loud
- True Colors 2SLGBTQ+ Creative Safe Space Group

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Meet the micro-grantees

35 stories of volunteerism and community connection

Teaming Up

Increasing community participation and connection in sports and recreation

- TORONTO QUEER SWIM CLUB
- UNITY FOR LIFE
- TKARONTO FOOTBALL COMMUNITY
- FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
- GHANAIAN CANADIAN SENIORS GROUP
- QUEER AND TRANS CHESS NIGHTS

6 community projects funded



$1,000 microgrant makes safe spaces for queer swimmers possible



Queer and gender non-conforming swimmers often face barriers that cis and heterosexual athletes do not.

Fear of judgement and anxiety over what to wear can prevent them from getting in the water. This means that queer swimmers may be deprived, not only of the practice they need to develop their skills, but of community.

That's where the Toronto Queer Swim Club (TQSC) comes in!

Their goal is to create safe waters for queer, trans and non-binary swimmers, from beginners to experienced athletes.

Last spring, TQSC held weekly practice sessions, facilitated by volunteer Coaches and funded with their microgrant.

They were able to book space at an accessible public pool, one of only three in the city which offers gender-neutral changerooms and scheduled pre-practice meetings, allowing swimmers to stretch, enjoy snacks, and get to know each other. By the time the club's pool party rolled around at the end of June, a sense of trust and **a spirit of camaraderie filled the pool**.

As temperatures rose, the club relocated to Cherry Beach.

By summer's end, two club members decided they were ready to compete in an open water race which offered, for the first time ever, a non-binary category. One of the two swimmers, who identifies as trans, registered and won! As club founders Tai and Ness tell it:

"knowing they [could] compete as a non-binary person without having to do mental gymnastics was incredible. A bunch of people were there – their partner and friends came out to cheer them on. Swimming truly means so much more than just time in the pool."



With the support of TD Bank and their Mindpower Analytics program, we analyzed the **Return on Investment** for the Toronto Queer Swim Club Project.

Even though there were hard costs for each project, many micrograntees used connections, built relationships and secured resources beyond the $1,000.

With $1,000 microgrant, Toronto Queer Swim Club hosted weekly practices and a pool party. Beyond project costs, organizers supplied in kind food and participants coordinated transportation together.

$1000

microgrant

=

$4266

in community impact

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Unity for Life

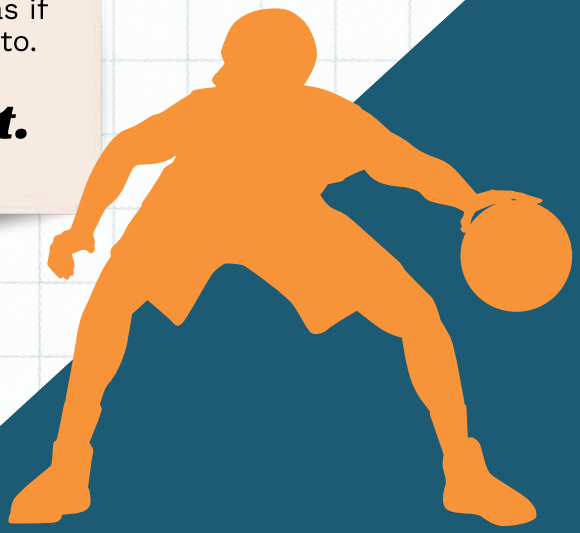
Founded in 2021, Unity for Life is a **youth-led initiative that aims to help racialized Lawrence Heights youth** cope with the trauma of violent crime. They combine recreational sports with workshops on violence prevention, healing and resiliency, mental health and coping strategies, harm reduction, and stress relief.

A microgrant helped sustain their impact, specifically by funding two events in April: a basketball tournament and a workshop on anti-black racism and mental health.

Ultimately, say organizers, the Unity for Life project exists to make underserved youth feel as if they are a priority within Toronto.

They did just that.







Kids might have come for the free pizza, basketballs, and jerseys, but they stayed for the camaraderie and the opportunity to share their challenges with others.

TKARONTO FOOTBALL COMMUNITY



Soccer has the power to bring together people from all walks of life. Sadly, it's not always inclusive or accessible.

Tkaronto FC has set out to change that. With the help of a $1,000 microgrant, they set up bi-weekly games of 10 to 20 people at three locations where they played 2-2 soccer, a version of the game where the score remains 2-2, in the spirit of collaboration over competition.

- **Greenwood Park**
- **Campbell Park**
- **Canoo landing Park**

They welcomed passersby, including a father and his six-year-old son, who were playing on their own. After the game, the son, who had always wanted to play "a real game," asked:

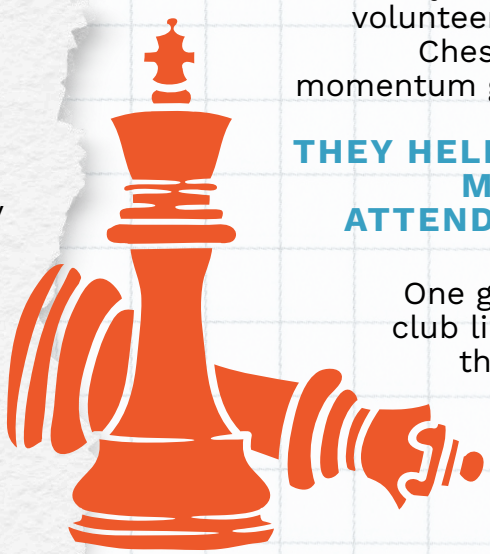
"IS THIS A DREAM?"

Word spread and the group soon found themselves invited to host games at the Geary Art Crawl and the YouthCan Conference, where they introduced youth who had been in the foster system to soccer without boundaries.

Queer and Trans Chess Nights

The majority of in-person chess clubs and events are dominated by straight, cisgender men. While not necessarily discriminatory, these environments can be intimidating for 2SLGBTQ+ people.

Plus, while there are undoubtedly many events which cater to the 2SLGBTQ+ community, most of them centre around the shared experience of being queer and don't allow folks to meet fellow community members who share their unique hobbies or interests.



Already a quickly growing chess club, the volunteer team behind Queer and Trans Chess Nights were able to keep the momentum going by securing a microgrant.

THEY HELD FIVE EVENTS BETWEEN MAY AND JULY 2024, EACH ATTENDED BY UP TO 20 PEOPLE.

One group member marvelled that a club like this even exists and, though they had mixed experiences with chess in the past, all felt welcome, safe, and excited to learn among new people.



Ghanaian Canadian Seniors Group

Financial constraints and cultural norms have meant that some seniors from Toronto's Ghanian community struggle to get in their recommended 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week. **The Ghanian Canadian Seniors Group set out to change that.**

To support seniors getting active, they proposed a series of **five monthly 40-minute walks for 10 seniors** in the Humbermede area. Each walk would be preceded by a half-hour talk on a related topic, such as at-home exercise, walking techniques, or dressing appropriately for physical activity. Thirty minutes of socializing with refreshments followed each walk. Participants were given step trackers to help them make exercise a regular habit.

Many participants formed lasting friendships, and all discovered an inexpensive, fun way to improve their physical and mental health.

FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



PARENTS CONNECTED WITH EACH OTHER AND KIDS MADE NEW FRIENDS. THE DAY ENDED WITH A MASSIVE WATER BALLOON FIGHT!

In 2020, a group of childhood friends came together to form For the Neighbourhood. Concerned about violent crime, they believed the way forward was to create new creative and athletic outlets for Scarborough youth.

With the help of a $1,000 microgrant, they pulled off a free first come, first served barbecue and 3v3 tournament in Adams Park, complete with music and prizes.

3v3 tournaments involve fast-paced versions of traditional sports like soccer and basketball, where teams of three players compete against each other. **60 people showed up!**

Crafting Community

Increasing connection through arts, crafts, and performances

- COLECTIVE BANDITA LATINA
- URBAN DETECTIVES
- CREATIVE SPACE SCARBOROUGH
- SISTAZ IN SOUND
- KIN + CARE COLLECTIVE
- COMMUNITY MATTERS
- WEAVING THREADS
- CULTURAL CANVAS ART GROUP
- YOUTH MENTORSHIP COUNCIL

9 community projects funded



$1,000 microgrant helps newcomers overcome isolation through art



If you were to stroll through Christie Pits Park last summer, you might have seen a small group of diverse people gathered together, painting, drawing, chatting, and laughing. The reason they were together? A series of art workshops organized by Colective Bandita Latina, a group dedicated to engaging newcomers in Toronto through the power of artistic expression.

Through a series of four workshops, they brought together people who had arrived in Canada less than five years ago —in fact, one leader, Antonio, has only been here for two years. Many children and senior participants came from Spanish-speaking countries, including Columbia, Mexico, and Guatemala and most were women.

Each session began with an icebreaker, followed by a mental health workshop facilitated by a psychologist. Participants were then guided by skilled art instructors who emphasized self-discovery in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Colective Bandita Latina

The resulting art reflects participants' experiences as newcomers to Toronto. One woman painted a bus because she was frustrated about so often missing it. By the end, everyone was laughing about it together!



"It was an emotional event, not out of fear, but out of love," says Antonio. **"In essence, our workshop is not just about creating art; it's about fostering a community where participants can connect, share, and thrive together."**

And they did. Organizers were struck by how many new friendships had blossomed by the end. What they didn't expect was that so many wanted to come back for more.

Urban Detectives

A unique organization where kids take the lead, Urban Detectives plans events that aim to make community members reconsider public spaces as venues for play and connection.

Microgrant funds allowed them to plan an event they dubbed "the Swirly Whirly," named after the spiral bridge that connects Prescott Avenue with Innes Avenue.

- The **organizing committee was made up of five kids**, aged seven to 11, plus three moms.
- The event featured a variety show, where **kids showed off their talents**, from rock music to stand-up comedy.
- **Performers were gifted detective** gear in recognition of their talents.
- Post-show, kids had the opportunity to engage in free play and **enjoy a treat** or two.

"The Swirly Whirly" brought these kids one step closer to exploring their community with confidence and curiosity.

Creative Space Scarborough



Creative Space Scarborough was developed by a group of seniors who realized that community members their age needed more mental and social stimulation. So, they began planning monthly creative workshops as well as excursions to local cultural institutions.

When they came across the microgrant program, they had just lost funding. So, they proposed a traditional Indian dance performance and workshop to get local seniors moving and socializing.

After receiving the microgrant, they learned that Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services' seniors' program had also lost funding. They invited participants from that program, as well as those from the Scarborough Active Living Centre, to join the performance.

For some, the Indian dance, music and snacks on offer were a revelation. Others were transported back to their childhoods.

$1,000 microgrant helps community elders find hope and connection



PHOTO SOURCE: TORONTO STAR

Etobicoke grandmother Lydia Brown was grieving the death of a son during COVID when she decided to join a micro-funded group in Etobicoke, called Sistaz in Sound, which offered tutorials on steel drums, and other activities, including beading and crochet, to encourage people to interact with one another. It ran over six weeks.

"**I was nervous and shy, which I still am**," says Brown. She tried the drums and crochet and stuck around for the beading. She made new friends. She found someone to go to church with. One of the women Brown met introduced her to a grief support group, which Brown also joined.

The microgrants created new social spaces at a time when people are withdrawing from more traditional social activities, like meeting friends at a movie theatre on a Friday night or dining out with them.

"I don't feel alone as much as I did. If I have a problem, I have someone I can talk to," said Brown.

This project was highlighted by the Toronto Star for it's success in reducing social isolation.

TORONTO STAR



Hear from a participant!

Lydia Brown was a participant in the Sistaz in Sound project and is one of four older adults whose stories we've captured alongside Volunteer Canada in hopes of inspiring civic participation at every age.

WATCH LYDIA'S STORY

kin + care collective



Drawing from lived experience, the friends behind kin + care collective set out to create programs that would celebrate Scarborough, challenge discriminatory narratives, and foster the creativity of racialized youth.

A microgrant enabled them to host a community arts showcase, the culmination of their Just Between Us program, in which nine young people, all having experienced mental health challenges, attended creative workshops and were connected with artistic mentors. The pieces on show sparked conversation around systemic racism and mental health.

One participant, initially reluctant to showcase their art or even call themselves an artist, grew in confidence over the course of the program, remarking at its conclusion:

> "As a budding artist in Scarborough, I'm amazed to see that we're now having spaces to grow and showcase our work, right here in the east end of the city."

Genuine human connection can be hard to find in a post-pandemic world dominated by social media and online learning, especially for young people.

Community Matters

Community Matters set out to change this by offering a series of workshops called ArtConnect, where youth would create art while engaging in facilitated, open discussions about social isolation and the importance of face-to-face interactions.

Weaving Threads



Toronto's art scene can be gatekept, unaffordable to participate in, and competitive, say the organizers behind Weaving Threads. Their solution? Provide youth with opportunities to find belonging and explore various art mediums in a safe and fun environment.

A microgrant allowed them to continue fulfilling their mission in the form of a scrapbooking workshop. **Youth were encouraged to create collages based on a special memory, person, hobby, interest, or cause that has shaped, influenced, or inspired them.**





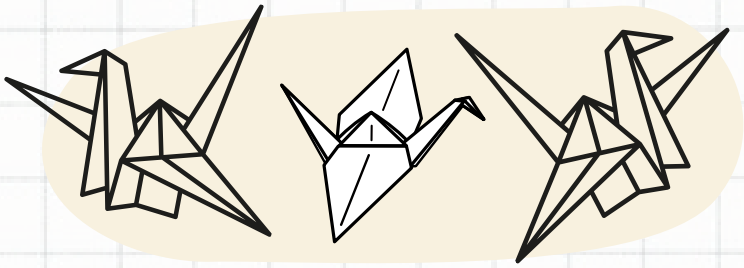
These collages were then professionally photographed and turned into a digital zine! Page by page, they created a **community scrapbook** which gives expression to the priorities and perspectives of Toronto's youth.

SEE THE SCRAPBOOK

Cultural Canvas Art Group

Cultural Canvas Art Group exists to bring together individuals who share a passion for art, creating a space for intergenerational skills and knowledge exchange, rooted in diverse artistic traditions. Members originate from across the globe, including from:

Southeast Asia **Latin America** **Ukraine**



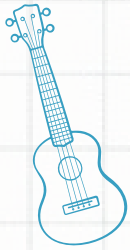
With the help of a $1,000 microgrant, they were able to launch a summer of learning, where workshop participants made **Origami**, decorated **Pysanka** (Ukrainian Easter Eggs), and explored **gardening** as an art form. A local Ukrainian youth organization lent them tools, while students at a nearby Ukrainian school volunteered at the Pysanka workshop. Participants remarked that there are so few opportunities in Toronto to connect with others and enjoy oneself for free.

Organizers were heartened to see youth connect with seniors and newcomers connect with each other.

A CERAMIC ARTIST, NEWLY ARRIVED FROM TURKEY, LED THE POTTERY WORKSHOP.

BEFORE THE SESSION, SHE HAD FELT DESPONDENT AND HOMESICK - HER CREDENTIALS WEREN'T BEING VALUED, AND SHE STRUGGLED WITH ENGLISH.

SHE LEFT THE WORKSHOP WITH A SENSE OF PRIDE AND AN EAGERNESS TO GET MORE INVOLVED IN HER NEW COMMUNITY.



YOUTH MENTORSHIP COUNCIL

Art is universal – a teacher doesn't have to speak their students' languages to make an art class work.

Hence, why members of Fenside-Parkwoods' Youth Mentorship Council thought a series of art workshops would be the perfect opportunity to bring together youth from the **Afghani refugee population** and the area's longstanding **Afro-Caribbean community.**

They tapped into the talents of local community members, who facilitated sessions on drawing, embroidery, and pottery. They even held an ukulele class in Sandover Park and a combined poetry and crochet workshop.

Breaking Bread

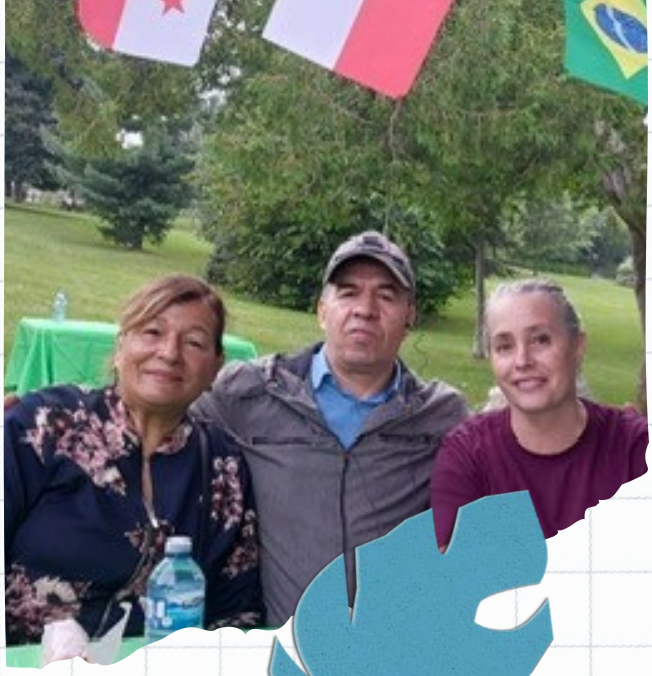
Bringing people together through the power of sharing food

- LATINAS UNIDAS EN ACCION
- CONNECTIONS50
- ODO WOMAN
- WE PRODUCE FRESH FOOD
- K.G.O SANDWICH LADIES
- SISTA IN HEALTH
- ZUWA

7
community projects funded



$1,000 microgrant helps Scarborough's Latino community make life changing connections



Building a new life in an unfamiliar country is hard. What makes it bearable? Community! Newly arrived immigrants must often depend on those who have been in the country a while longer for advice, connections, and opportunities. But how do you facilitate networking without making it feel overwhelming?

You hold a FIESTA! in the park!

With financial support from a microgrant, **Latinas Unidas en Accion** brought Scarborough's Latino community closer together.

In August 2024, they hosted a picnic in Thomson Memorial Park.

Nearly 100 people came out.

Families shared food and were given access to free clothes and books. A raffle was held. Jobseekers visited information booths and exchanged contact information. Kids got their faces painted, played soccer, and enjoyed story time.

One kid even concluded: "**this was the best event I've attended in my life!**" The event was not only impactful for attendees, but for volunteers too. Organizer Mercedes nominated one of the volunteers, Elra, for the Hispanic Canadian Community Award. Elra was thrilled to be recognized for her contributions and, ultimately, to win!

For the organizers, a community cannot be strong and prosperous if its members remain isolated and excluded. The connections made at events like these can be life changing – after one child shared with another that they were upset about not being able to attend school, a new family friend stepped in to help that child enroll. Mercedes says:

"we are learning how to live in this part of the city. It doesn't matter what country you are from; we all want to come together for the community."



Connections50

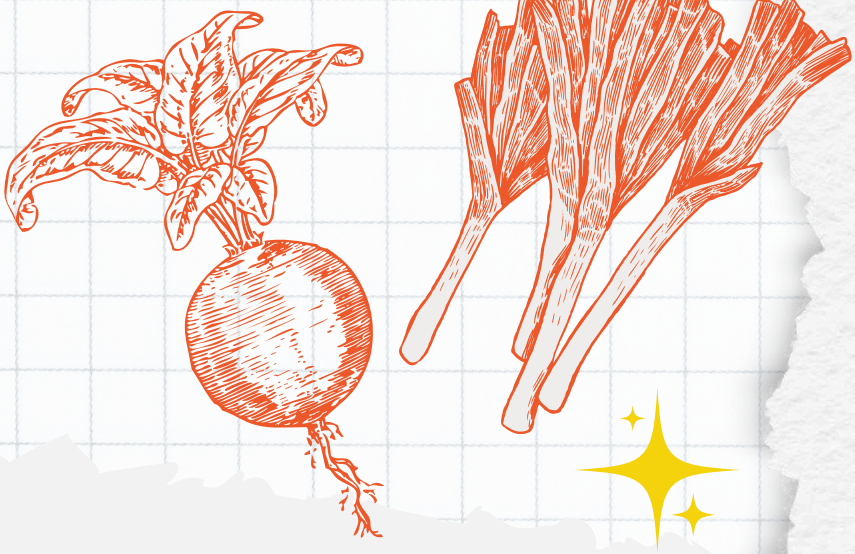
Connections50 is part of the University Health Network's Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC) program, which supports residents in maintaining independence and well-being as they age in place. **Based at a condo on Quebec Avenue**, the volunteer-led group works to build a vibrant, inclusive community where neighbours feel connected, and look out for one another. The group recognized that **some residents were not eating regular, nutritious meals and were missing opportunities to connect socially.**

With the support of a $1,000 microgrant, Connections50 invited Feed It Forward's Chef Jagger Gordon to lead three interactive cooking workshops.

Residents—including some living with mobility challenges or other health concerns—were able to participate fully. Each session ended with a delicious meal, prepared and served by the chef, and enjoyed together. Organizers reflected that the program not only encouraged healthier eating but also created meaningful opportunities for social connection and belonging.



> "Not very much money can have such a huge impact"
>
> – Project Organizer



"EVERYONE LEFT FEELING FULL – PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY."



Odo Woman

Odo Woman creates safe spaces where African, Caribbean and Black women can connect and embrace their cultural roots through food. Their microgrant-funded event was a farm-to-plate luncheon, held at Black Creek Community Farm.

20 participants learned about and harvested vegetables, prepared a plant-based meal, and then enjoyed it together.

As they sat on the floor, eating with their hands, they shared memories from back home. One senior was thrilled to be harvesting okra and callaloo, produce that was very familiar to her but can be hard to find in the city. One young woman, whose regular diet didn't include many vegetables, was excited to be able to eat something she had picked herself.

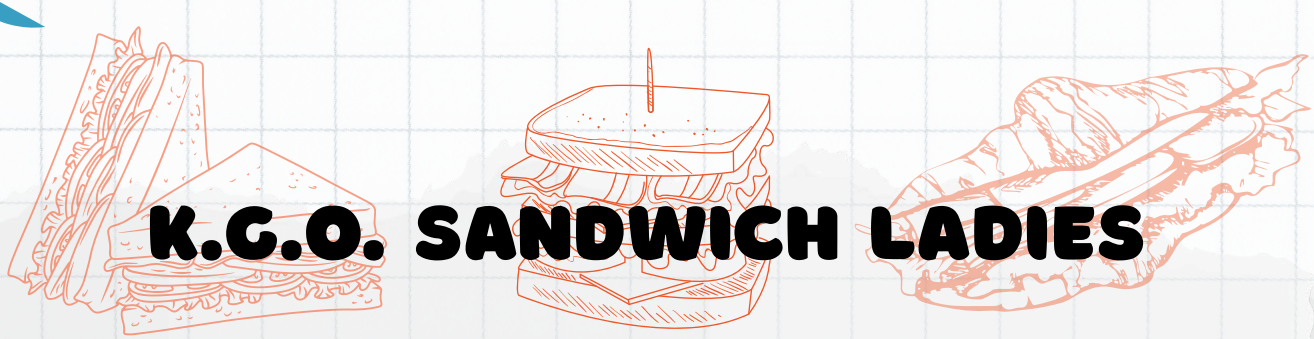
We Produce Fresh Food



The three senior Caribbean women who make up We Produce Fresh Food, and who are gardeners at the Littles Road Community Garden, have seen firsthand how a lack of access to fresh produce can contribute to food insecurity. Senior immigrants typically have smaller pensions to live on than their Canadian-born counterparts. And, while they may have grown their own vegetables back home, many don't have their own gardens in Toronto.

This reality prompted the group to host Malvern's first "for elders, by elders" garden party. Local elders would be invited to tour the community garden, learn about growing vegetables, and take home potted herb seedlings. Plus, they would be treated to Indigenous, African, Caribbean and Asian food and entertainment.

Even though inclement weather forced the event indoors, the 75 people who came out had a blast, with one attendee saying: "I hope you guys have this thing every year!"



K.G.O. SANDWICH LADIES

Mother's Day should be a time of celebration, but it can be a hard day for many.

In light of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis and Toronto's housing crisis, the K.G.O Sandwich Ladies set out to ensure that the mothers in their Scarborough community felt special. By planning a **Mother's Day Barbeque**, complete with gifts and flowers, they hoped to show that all mothers deserve to feel appreciated, including Indigenous and unhoused mothers.



These workshops gave women the opportunity to discuss their health in a safe, supportive environment and share pride in their traditions with other members of the African diaspora.

Research suggests that Black women are disproportionately affected by chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. Sista in Health Founder Sherldine Tomlinson told us that, while traditional African dishes are rich in flavour, they can also be high in salt and sugar.

Through a series of three workshops, she set out to help African women in Rexdale modify their cooking. Participants learned the basics of nutrition, how to read nutritional labels, and how to make healthier versions of traditional African dishes.

As participants integrate what they've learned into their everyday lives, organizers believe that their friends and family will likewise benefit.



Zuwa

According to Statistics Canada, feelings of loneliness don't necessarily decrease the more time someone spends in their destination country. Interventions are therefore necessary. So, the three women that make up Zuwa put their microgrant to good use by planning a **picnic for newcomers in the Long Branch area.**

Unfortunately, bad weather meant they had to move the event inside. That didn't stop the **nearly 50 people who showed up** from making some potentially life-changing connections. Recent immigrants received settlement advice from those who had been here longer. They talked about big things, like finding work and housing, as well as seemingly smaller things, like where to shop for specialty groceries.

Following the event, some of the attendees spent Thanksgiving together. Others were invited to play football. One woman made a new friend who was later able to help her husband land a job. **It's amazing what one indoor picnic can do!**

Harvesting Friendship

Connecting Torontonians through sustainability initiatives and gardening

- SUSTAINABLE JUNCTION TRIANGLE
- AANJIKTIGAAN
- THE GARDEN GROUP
- KIH'TI-GEWIN

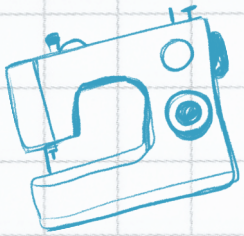
4 community projects funded



$1,000 microgrant bolsters sustainability movement in the Junction

What could be better than meeting neighbours who share your passion? That's exactly what happened in May 2024, when **Sustainable Junction Triangle** hosted a series of free upcycling workshops and a clothing swap.





At their first event, volunteer Shannon, armed with patches and a sewing machine, **repaired participants' jeans**, giving the garments a new lease on life. Throughout the event, community members were welcome to drop off textiles that were beyond repair for recycling, an option that isn't easily accessible in Toronto.



A week later, organizers Celeste and Radha were at their local community centre, **teaching workshop participants how to turn old t-shirts into stylish bags**. Nikki of Saponetti, Toronto's zero waste soap store, stopped by to gift attendees ecological cleaning products and chat about living sustainably.





This workshop was quickly followed by a **drop-in clothing swap**, attended by nearly 60 people. All of the leftover clothing was donated to the Toronto Cares Initiative, a charity which provides low-income and unhoused people with essentials.

One clothing swap attendee turned out to be an upcycling expert and was thrilled to be asked if she could facilitate a future workshop. Several of the attendees also expressed interest in starting a sewing group, to volunteer their time and sewing machines in exchange for lessons. **As a result of the grant, Petek—a volunteer leader—has gone on to organize 10+ additional events focused on skill-sharing through the Sustainable Junction Triangle community group.**

"These events are an investment into our city and in our future wellbeing."



With the support of TD Bank and their Mindpower Analytics program, we analyzed the **Return on Investment** for the Sustainable Junction Triangle Project.

Even though there were hard costs for each project, many micrograntees used connections, built relationships and secured resources beyond the $1,000.

With $1,000 microgrant, the Sustainable Junction Triangle project brought together sustainability experts, in kind donors and neighbours to learn from one another.

$1000

microgrant

=

$10,536

in community impact

Volunteer Toronto

Aanjiktigaan

The caretakers of Aanjiktigaan, an indigenous-led garden in Toronto's Little Portugal neighbourhood, were funded with a microgrant to carry out a series of community member-led skill-sharing workshops.



Tragically, six weeks into the project, the neighbouring church caught fire, leading to the garden's destruction.

Undeterred, organizers held a condolence ceremony in line with Mohawk traditions, rescued the native species they had been growing, and reached an agreement with the Dufferin Grove Community Garden which allowed for **weekly gardening meetups and three workshops**.

Community members learned about making lilac cordial, sketching gardens, and pickling local produce. Moreover, they forged both intergenerational relationships and a deep connection to the land.

Kih'ti-gewin

Gwai-yuk Gih'nendahmoen is the Indigenous land stewardship initiative behind Kih'ti-gewin ("gardening"), a project established in St. James Town.

The project gained access to a plot on Toronto Community Housing land, where Indigenous Land Stewards prepared a garden bed and propagated 43 native species.

As the most densely populated neighbourhood in Canada, St. James Town was in great need of beautiful public green space.

The garden was designed to be accessible, allowing locals to enjoy the space. **The project fostered a two-way exchange:** Land Stewards shared knowledge through pamphlets, while locals expressed appreciation and shared their own insights about native species. By the end of the summer, seeds were saved, and residents could look forward to perennial flowers blooming in the spring.

THE GARDEN GROUP

For many seniors at this Humewood-Cedarvale building, gardening had long been a thing of the past, whether due to physical or mental disability. **Those using wheelchairs or walkers weren't able to access the building's existing garden.**

But with the help of a $1000 microgrant, organizers were able to purchase four raised planters, as well as the necessary tools, soil and plants.

Another community member matched the grant, allowing the group to purchase two additional planters.



planting together



the fruits of their labour!

Over the course of the spring and summer, 10 residents actively gardened, while many more stopped by to chat or share treats with the gardeners. The group believes this project will have a lasting legacy, as they plan to nurture the garden for years to come!

Learning Together

Building connections through learning skills and sharing experiences with others

- SUNRISE TOWER SENIORS
- MEMBER ADVOCACY COMMITTEE
- TAYLOR-MASSEY RESIDENTS WELLNESS COUNCIL
- #HEARTHIS BLACK HISTORY IN THE EAST END

4 community projects funded



$1,000 microgrant kick-starts connections for the seniors of Sunrise Tower

We all know that the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly hard on older adults. The residents of **Sunrise Tower in Victoria Village** were no exception. Typically a vibrant community, the pandemic left residents isolated.

"COVID-19 really left a bad dent on our community and our ability to get together to socialize. Without community events, there is less trust with neighbours. We want the ability to help each other when things happen..."

The sessions they held were reflective of residents' expressed interests and concerns. In April, they heard about personal safety from local paramedics. In May, they received instructions on balcony gardening. In June, residents participated in an arts and crafts workshop, led by one of their neighbours. In July, they welcomed a guest speaker from Toronto Firefighters and, in August, a representative of the Lift 360 Foundation taught them how to build an emergency kit.

Residents were treated to takeout from a local restaurant, as well as home-cooked dishes. Organizers also hand-delivered food to homebound residents, ensuring that they felt included.

This first series of workshops created momentum and gave residents the motivation they needed to keep gathering, learning, and engaging with communities beyond their front doors.





Just the opportunity to gather for a good meal meant a lot to the 60 participants.



Taylor Massey Residents Wellness Council (TMRWC)

Taylor-Massey is designated as one of the City's "priority neighbourhoods." It's an area that welcomes many immigrants and refugees every year.

In an effort to increase public awareness of available supports, the TMRWC hosted a **neighbourhood block party** in September with the theme "back to school." A whopping **600 people showed up right after school**. Kids were gifted school supplies, had their faces painted, and enjoyed snacks. Parents had the opportunity to chat with representatives and grab resources from local community and social service organizations, as well as Health Access Taylor Massey Teams.

One of the volunteers who helped out at the event, a newcomer himself, remarked:

"THIS IS THE BEST DAY IN CANADA FOR ME – THIS IS WHAT I EXPECT FROM CANADA IN WELCOMING NEWCOMERS"

A mother of three said:

"This event is more than school supplies - a day of joy, dignity and connection."





1/3

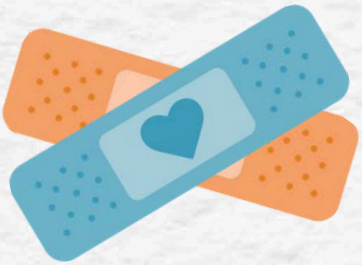
of residents are low-income and struggle to access health, social and community services.

Member Advocacy Committee (MAC)

HEAL TOGETHER

The Member Advocacy Committee organizes to reduce the gap between rich and poor. It was formed in 2008 and is made up of a rotating group of six **Kensington-Chinatown community members with lived experiences of poverty and disability**.

The pandemic exacerbated inequality and reduced access to social services, leaving many isolated or grieving the loss of loved ones, whether due to COVID-19 or overdose. So, in the spring of 2024, the MAC set out to plan a healing circle to help community members process this trauma.



More than 35 people attended the circle, which included performances by Indigenous drummers and singers, as well as culturally specific food. **MAC members shared their own experiences, which allowed new or nervous folks to express what they needed to and begin to heal.**

SUMMER #HEARTHIS 2024

Black History in the East End

$1,000 MICROGRANT BRINGS TOGETHER RESIDENTS FOR WALKING TOURS IN THE EAST END

In 2020, the Ontario Black History Society launched **#BlackedOutHistory** to push for the inclusion of more Black history in Canadian school curricula. Three years later, Lanrick Bennett Jr., Urbanist in Residence at School of Cities, got tired of waiting for that to happen. With the help of his 13-year-old son and a few friends, Lanrick launched **a series of free local Black history walks in the east end, allowing folks of all ages and backgrounds to discover Toronto's 400 years of Black history**, outside the confines of February.





Walking tour hosted by #HearThisBlackHistory

With the support of a microgrant, community members now had the opportunity to join a group walking tour and discover the history of their very own neighbourhoods.

In **March**, residents were invited to walk and discuss Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, whose property was the first Underground Railroad site ever excavated in Canada. In May, residents learned about City Alderman William Peyton Hubbard, the first Black person to be elected to public office in Toronto. **June's walk** focused on Mary Ann Shadd, the first Black woman in North America to helm a newspaper. And, **in July**, they featured the remarkable life of Lincoln Alexander, Canada's first Black Member of Parliament, federal Cabinet Minister, and Lieutenant Governor.

None of these walks ever ended without someone coming up to Lanrick to say: **"I didn't know, and now I need to tell someone else!**



Newspaper Founder Mary Ann Shadd

But the learning didn't stop there! Digital maps were created so that members of the public and school groups could explore these routes. So, why not grab your phone, a few friends and take a guided walk? You might just learn something incredible!

With the support of TD Bank and their Mindpower Analytics program, we analyzed the **Return on Investment** for the #HearThis Black History in the #EastEnd Project.

Even though there were hard costs for each project, many micrograntees used connections, built relationships and secured resources beyond the $1,000.

With $1,000 microgrant, #HearThis Black History in the #EastEnd volunteers scouted walking paths, hosted tours and created a new evergreen tool to keep people and students connected to Black history.

$1000

microgrant

=

$4093

in community impact

Volunteer Toronto

Celebrating Us

Building people together through events that celebrate the community

- EAST END KIDS PRIDE
- ACTIVITY COMMITTEE
- CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY CONNECTION
- REGENT PARK OUT LOUD
- TRUE COLORS 2SLGBTQ+ CREATIVE SAFE SPACE GROUP

5 community projects funded

$1,000 microgrant allows LGBTQ+ kids to show their PRIDE in Toronto's East End

Kids made friends and took on leadership roles, parents saw their children grow more confident, and neighbourhood allies stepped up to show support.

In early 2024, a small group of eight-year-old kids and their parents began meeting to discuss hosting a second **annual kids' pride parade at Maryland and Dentonia parks**. The kids were members of their school's Rainbow Club and knew it was important that LGBTQ+ students had the opportunity to feel celebrated by their community in a public way.



The organizing committee soon grew to nearly **50 members** and began establishing partnerships with local, values-aligned non-profits and businesses to support the parade. **East End Arts** helped facilitate three workshops, during which kids created t-shirts and signs to display during the parade. A queer-owned thrift store offered to set up a dress-up station in the park.

"Events like these [are] why I continue to stay [in Toronto]."

Using microgrant funds, organizers were able to hire Shadowland Theatre, an outdoor puppetry and circus group, to lead the parade. Waving their pride flags and banners, with their faces brightly painted, around 500 people walked behind.

Luckily, the Maryland Children's Pride Parade isn't going anywhere. As a micro-funded group, they joined in a CBC interview and received an offer from The Green Line to produce a TV documentary about the next parade. **We can't wait to watch!**



"I feel safer after seeing my neighbours step up to support my queer kid."

CARRIBBEAN COMMUNITY CONNECTION

For many in the community of West Hill, Scarborough, Toronto's mainstream Caribbean Carnival had become too expensive to participate in.

So, the folks behind Caribbean Community Connection decided to organize their own!

With the help of volunteers, and a donation of kitchen space from the Storefront Community Centre, they cooked up a storm. Local businesses pitched in food as well, plus giveaways for attendees. Volunteers helped get the word out on social media and by distributing flyers.

Hiring a professional DJ was a major expense, but one that was well worth it – they played for an extra hour because everyone was having so much fun!





An incredible 270 people, of all ages and a wide variety of backgrounds, came out to eat, dance, and celebrate Caribbean culture for free.

Seniors' Activity Committee



60 people came out to the community birthday party and many got up to dance - including a 94-year-old!

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many seniors into isolation. This was true of the 150 seniors, mostly women, at a below-market **seniors' rental building in Humewood-Cedarvale**. The Activity Committee there was disappointed that only about 15% of residents were coming out to their monthly coffee socials. With only $50 budgeted for each social, they weren't able to bring in any outside entertainment.

A $1,000 microgrant allowed them to engage a local Drag Queen to come in and lead **BINGO**. The turnout was better than expected, with many of the attendees excited to see their first drag performance.

Their second event of the summer was a **massive birthday party**, complete with a DJ playing familiar tunes.

Regent Park OUT LOUD

The organizers of Regent Park OUT LOUD had heard anecdotal evidence of rising homophobia within their community for years. So, with a microgrant in hand, they decided to plan a **family-friendly Pride celebration**. Leading up to it, they collaborated with Nelson Mandela Public School students to design t-shirts and a logo for the event.

People who never imagined themselves attending a pride event came out. One attendee reflected:

"I realized that gay people are just like you and me, and I really need to be more open minded."

The event also allowed queer folks to celebrate themselves for the first time. **One woman, having come out later in life, was thrilled to be there. Because she used a wheelchair, she was especially grateful to be able to attend an accessible pride event in her own neighbourhood.**



$1,000 microgrant funds Queer senior storytelling project in St. James Town



In recent years, backlash against the 2SLGBTQ+ rights movement has intensified. Queer newcomers are doubly impacted, facing the rising tide of homophobia, transphobia, and racism. Meanwhile, the pandemic drove queer seniors into further isolation.

The True Colors 2SLGBTQ+ Creative Safe Space Arts Collective, based in St. James Town, arose in response to this reality. Co-Founders Pepper and Randy, along with dedicated members Mayo, Spencer, Noreen, Michelle, Reese, Laura, Phoenix and Owen realized that the **queer seniors in their community had fascinating forgotten stories to tell and valuable advice to pass on, particularly to young queer newcomers.**

With the help of a $1,000 microgrant, True Colors 2SLGBTQ+ Queer Creative Safe Space Collective facilitated a series of events where seniors could share and newcomers could record.

Their first event was hosted at **Wellesley Community Centre**. Facilitators took a trauma-informed approach, chatting with each storyteller before they shared or, if they preferred, on paper. Pepper, newly arrived from Mexico, performed drag, inspiring several participants to form a Mexican arts collective.

After overcoming significant bureaucratic hurdles, **the collective successfully held their second event at the Toronto Community Housing building that many of their members call home**. Participants decorated the room with colours that reflected their diverse cultures and enjoyed home-cooked food.

As the summer drew to a close, organizers brainstormed ways to bring the stories they collect to a wider audience. The important thing, they agreed, was that these stories, told by a group of people often ignored by history, now existed as a community resource, to be cherished, generation after generation.



Hear From an Organizer!

Randy Alexander, a member of the True Colors Collective, is one of four older adults whose stories we've captured alongside Volunteer Canada in hopes of inspiring civic participation at every age.

WATCH RANDY'S STORY

thank you

Volunteer Toronto would like to thank the **Toronto Foundation** for making the microgrant program possible and for their partnership + mentorship in delivering this pilot in 2024.

We look forward to continuing the work of sparking community participation and reducing social isolation through volunteerism.

TORONTO FOUNDATION

Thank you for reading!

Volunteer Toronto

Our Mission

Volunteer Toronto increases the positive impact that volunteering has on the City of Toronto through innovative initiatives that inspire, inform, and connect volunteers and the organizations that need them.

Our Vision

We envision a Toronto that is caring, inclusive, and engaged where volunteering is an important avenue through which everyone has the opportunity to participate and contribute meaningfully.

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