

# URBAN LIGHTS



## BRINGING HOPE TO OFFENDERS

Aaron is very open about his past. “I was arrested for possession of a firearm when I was at university,” says the 27-year-old, who was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail and two years of probation, as well as a lifetime firearms ban. But Aaron decided to turn things around, starting with going back to school. He’d wanted to be a teacher, but that was now out of the question with a criminal record. So, with an eye to giving back and helping others in his position, Aaron enrolled in a Community and Justice Services program.

By all accounts, things were going well. But there was one problem, he had to complete a work placement to graduate and the criminal conviction was closing every door on which he knocked. It didn’t matter that his original crime was six years in his past or that the very experiences that might help Aaron relate to clients kept him from finding a placement. He was considered a risk. It was starting to look hopeless — and then Aaron found Eddy.

Aaron was scrolling through Instagram when he saw Eddy in a video, being interviewed about YSM’s HOPE program. HOPE — which stands for Helping Offenders

on Probation Excel — supports rehabilitation and reintegration of youth and young adults, ages 16 to 29, who are on probation, parole or bail programs. The aim of HOPE is to promote community involvement and help those on probation access training and jobs. “I was like, if someone’s going to give me a shot, hopefully it’s this person,” Aaron recalls. So he sent Eddy an email.

It wasn’t exactly a difficult sell: Aaron was an ideal candidate for HOPE. He’d already taken positive steps in going back to school — all he needed was some support to get that crucial work experience. Aaron ended up doing his placement at YSM, supporting the HOPE program. “As a student, it helped me complete everything that I needed to — case management, how to do intakes, everything I would need in the social services field,” says Aaron. “As a person, as a human, as somebody who has a record, it’s also bettered me, because it empowered me and put me in a position that I can now help others.”



*To learn more about YSM programming or the impact of your support visit [ysm.ca](https://www.ysm.ca)*

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## YSM'S HELPING HANDS



**Claus Lenk**  
Bridges Volunteer



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[ysm.ca/volunteer](https://ysm.ca/volunteer)*

It's not easy to pinpoint just how much Claus has contributed to YSM over the years. The Chief Financial Officer, whose company sponsors YSM's walk-in counselling clinic, has personally carved turkeys at Thanksgiving, sorted toys at Christmas, and taught life skills and employment classes in YSM's Bridges program. Most recently, he began mentoring a young man, meeting with him every two weeks.

"I'm an older person, so I have life experience — but that doesn't mean I don't learn from the people at YSM whom I engage with. I've learned how to mostly listen. Coaching often means that the person has to discover for themselves what the solution is. And we have to learn to accept where people are.

But there is encouragement, too. I was teaching classes about getting a job, and when Allison\* burst into the group and told us she got a job, I was just elated! You can share those wonderful moments with other people who may think, 'Well, maybe I should be doing something.' I know of people we've inspired to get involved, who are volunteering at YSM now, independently of me or anyone else. Time is a non-renewable resource, and if you donate your time, you're actually doing more than just giving money. And that's really a legacy I want to leave — that people volunteer, because anybody can do it."

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## FIRST PERSON



**Cristihan Rios**  
Community Capacity Builder



*To learn more about working with YSM and  
latest opportunities visit [ysm.ca/careers](https://ysm.ca/careers)*

When Cristihan was growing up in Scarborough, there weren't really any community programs to support and empower youth—something he feels strongly he could have benefited from. So after studying Child and Youth Care in college, he jumped at the opportunity to run YSM's Our Voice Out Loud (OVOL) program, a youth-led initiative that supports young people, aged 13 to 17, in Regent Park who are experiencing bullying and victimization.

"This is something that works. Youth from the last OVOL cohort are leaders, supporting the after-school drop-ins and working at summer camps. They're known as the youth that were part of OVOL, so they're very involved in the community now.

I believe teaching youth leadership skills and showing them their intrinsic value will reduce bullying and victimization, which will allow them to stand up for others. What I'm teaching is also what I'm living. I give them words of encouragement and tell them I believe in them. And I show them that, as a male role model, we're allowed to show our feelings.

The goal is for OVOL youth to see themselves as leaders and live it out. Little by little, I'm stepping back and just supporting them. That's the kind of person I want to be — helping youth out."



# CELEBRATING OUR NEW EVERGREEN CENTRE!

On Thursday, May 30 YSM welcomed staff, volunteers, donors, members of YSM's Board and community, as well as youth, to a ribbon cutting for the new Evergreen Centre.

The newly-opened and renovated site on Spadina Avenue provides expanded services to accommodate the needs of Toronto's street-involved youth.

Evergreen offers free confidential counselling, barrier-free health care, food services, substance use and probation support, legal counsel, life skills training, employment programs and arts-related workshops and programs, for downtown youth.

"Evergreen is regarded as a safe space for homeless and street-involved youth to drop in, enjoy a healthy meal, get some rest from being on the street and, if they wish, receive assistance to plan out their next steps and accomplish their goals," explained YSM President & CEO, Angie Peters.

Guests at the ribbon cutting were treated to a welcome from Angie, speeches by Toronto Councillor Mike Layton and MPP Jessica Bell, entertainment by Evergreen youth, tours of the centre and a variety of foods from nearby Kensington and Chinatown restaurants.

YSM donors were notably in attendance and also represented by kind messages of hope for the future of Evergreen youth, mailed in for the celebration.



## YES, I WANT TO LEND A HAND!

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## TAKING RISKS THAT CREATE HOPE

Have you ever felt hopeless? Like the challenge that lies ahead is just too much, either because you don't have the energy to fight anymore or because you have come to believe you just can't win?

If that situation turned around for you and you were able to pick yourself back up to keep fighting, what made the difference?

For many of us, there are a number of factors that help us get back up again. Sometimes it's just much needed rest, sometimes it's the perspective of a good friend, sometimes it's in realizing that we are not alone and letting others join us in the fight.

Getting a chance to rebuild your life after a criminal offence is a path filled with barriers that most of us cannot fully understand. It's certainly not hard to understand why so many give up, feeling like they simply can't win.

No matter how sincere, or how hard working, the world is just too frightened to give people another chance. People like Aaron are told that they are just too much of a risk. Can you imagine if someone told you, I'm sorry, I see your qualifications and all the effort you have made. You are clearly qualified, but 6 years ago you made a bad decision and, though you have made your restitution and served your time, it's just too risky for us to hire you. Can you imagine being in Aaron's shoes. What would you do?

I don't know about you but I think I would feel hopeless. It's in situations like Aaron's that people need an Eddy, YSM, and **YOU!** Because of your support, YSM can have a program like HOPE and a leader like Eddy who can be the listening ear, the valued perspective, and the tangible support to help people overcome barriers in establishing a new life.

Thank you for taking risks, thank you for seeing value in people like Aaron, and thank you for creating hope!

Blessings,



Angie Peters (Draskovic)  
President & CEO



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## DID YOU KNOW . . .

■ This fall we are celebrating 20 years of our TD Computer Literacy Centre! Our computer lab offers a wide variety of courses, for kids and adults, such as MS Office, Robotics, Programming, Website Design, Video Editing, Graphic Design, Game Development.

■ A new semester of courses at Bridges begins this fall, helping adults develop healthy boundaries, build self-esteem and interpersonal skills.

■ Evergreen will begin serving dinners again this fall, running through the winter. This is a great opportunity to volunteer. Visit [ysm.ca](http://ysm.ca) for information.

**Thank you! Your support makes all of the important programs at YSM possible!**  
**We are grateful for your kindness.**

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