

URBAN LIGHTS

TRANSFORMING TORONTO SINCE 1896



Left to right: Cristal Hines, H.O.P.E Care Management Specialist, Emily O'Brien of Comeback Snacks and Angie Peters, YSM President & CEO.

ADVOCATING FOR SECOND CHANCES

Emily O'Brien's name is well-recognized around YSM, both for her passionate support of YSM's Helping Offenders on Probation (H.O.P.E) Program and for her delicious popcorn. Emily is the founder of Comeback Snacks, a popcorn company on a mission to make a difference for people with criminal backgrounds who are trying to make a comeback. For Emily, the company was a way to create her own second chance after her incarceration, "I wanted to work on the mistakes in my life. When I was arrested, I had personal issues and was dealing with substance use."

"In prison, I met many people who just wanted a second chance and felt so unsure as to how to get that because of the stigma of having been to prison. Many of them were subject to significant traumas in their lives that may have led to addiction, bad relationships or financial pressure situations."

Inspired by those she'd met and with a desire to take ownership of her life, Emily decided to turn her favorite snack into something more purposeful, "I wanted

to advocate for employment for those who were formerly incarcerated, and provide a space where people could share their stories."

"People reach out to me all the time now. Once people see someone build their life up again, it gives them comfort and hope."

Emily is a firm advocate of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for people in conflict with the law, "That's why I love YSM's H.O.P.E Program for youth on probation, because of the focus it places on rehabilitation and holistic support – connecting them to job training and community involvement opportunities."

As Comeback Snacks celebrates its 3 year anniversary, Emily reflects on all those who supported her thus far, "From the first store owner who bought our popcorn, to those who invited me to speak and share our story – there are so many pieces to the puzzle."

Emily and her business inspire those on probation to have hope for their post-prison futures.

Thank you for all the ways you support YSM!

Philanthropy is a fundamental component of our mission to end chronic poverty, a way for an individual, or even many people, to help YSM achieve its vision. YSM donors and supporters come from all walks of life, and no matter how big or small their gifts, lives are changed every day because of their intentional acts of love.

Messages from our donors:

"I wish to extend some gratitude to the workers who continue to service members of Toronto's homeless population through this pandemic. As someone who lived in a shelter as a child, I understand the necessity of workers and volunteers who help those experiencing homelessness, especially when they are at their most vulnerable."

"I am a student myself but I am lucky enough to still have my internship. I want to help support those in need who are not as fortunate as I am. I hope this money is used well and thank you for all the work you do."

Learn more about ways to give at www.ysm.ca/Get-Involved or learn about our **GIVE 6IX** initiative on the back cover of this newsletter.



JOY & HOPE SHARED THROUGH YSM'S CHRISTMAS TOY MARKET

At YSM, our annual Christmas Toy Market always marks a special time of the year. In December 2021, as lockdown restrictions lifted, we were both excited and thankful to invite families back into our Toy Market space to enjoy the familiar personalized shopping experience as in the years before COVID – with social distancing, masks and proper sanitation, of course!

The success of our 2021 Toy Market wouldn't have been possible without the support of so many – from volunteers, organizations holding toy drives, and donors who donated toys through Genees and elsewhere. In total, 482 volunteer hours were given, over 25 different organizations either did a toy drive or donated money or goods, to provide over 2,800 toys, 3,600 books, and 1,000 knitted items!

For the first time, we were also able to have a draw for a number of video



Santa's YSM elves made the Toy Market joyful while helping hundreds of families pick out sure to be loved gifts.

game consoles including a PS5, PS4, and an Xbox One for a few very lucky draw winners.

In a year of continued challenges, we were thankful to end 2021 helping 391 families and 862 children receive Christmas joy and start the new year filled with hope. Thank you to all who made our 2021 Christmas Toy Market such a notable success!

CHRISTMAS CARE PACKAGES

During the month of December, our program staff worked tirelessly to ensure community members had a special – and hearty – holiday season.

With the support of generous donations from numerous churches and organizations, 800 gift bags containing toiletries, winter accessories like mittens and socks, and Christmas treats were distributed to community members who frequent our Food Bank. Additionally, during our annual Bridges Christmas Banquet, 270 community members were served turkey dinners with potatoes, vegetables and gravy, while 100 Christmas hampers stuffed with choices of turkey, chicken, ham or vegetarian options, as well as canned soups, cooking oils, jams, pasta, veggies and fruits, were distributed to YSM program participants.

As well, our Evergreen Centre for Street-Involved Youth hosted a "10 days of Christmas" event which transformed a room into a product showroom. During the event, youth were able to book a time to 'shop' and gather whatever clothing, hygiene products and other essentials they needed from the space.

"The real Christmas present were the big plump oranges I saw [in the hampers]. You know what a treat it'll be to eat them. I'm really happy to see the oranges! Your hampers are really like very special care packages." – A YSM community member



With the support of generous donors and supporters, community members received hearty care packages for the holiday season.

A PLACE TO CALL ONE'S OWN



YSM's Housing Services team supports families seeking safe and stable homes.

Stable housing is a foundational aspect in one's journey out of poverty. A home provides not only refuge and shelter, but also a space for healing and empowerment – a place to call one's own. Huda* first connected with YSM determined to find a secure sanctuary for herself and her three children.

She and her kids had been staying at her sister's apartment for a few months. "When I first met Huda, I actually met with her and her whole family during those meetings – all of her siblings would come with her," explains Hailey Merten, a student placement within YSM's Housing Services team, "She has a very community-based support, which is amazing."

But for a family of four, living communally meant space became tighter and tighter. "She was really stressed because she was pretty much living in her sister's apartment with only two rooms for her and her children."

For a month Hailey worked with Huda, looking for a shelter with available space, "Trying to find shelter was stressful and exhausting. We were having no luck, especially because of the COVID situation. The whole process can be overwhelming. There's a lot of paperwork, and having to relive all the trauma she's gone through was difficult."

But Huda remained focused and steadfast, "She was calling the central intake two times a day, the people there knew her by name."

Then, one fateful day, they got through! "We were working on her application and we decided to just try one more time. We called and they did an intake. She had an hour to get to the shelter, but she was accepted. She cried with relief."

Huda and her children were finally able to have a place of their own. "They were living out of luggage bags, but now she was able to have her own room with her children in their own space."



Hailey Merten, YSM student placement

With a more stable living situation, other areas of Huda's life started to change for the better, "When I first met Huda, she had little ability to advocate for herself. She was coming from an abusive relationship and she wasn't able to go anywhere by herself. She didn't know how to navigate the city, even though she'd lived in Toronto for a couple of years."

"But now she's taking the bus by herself, she's going to appointments alone and we've built that trust. She keeps saying, 'Thank God for Yonge Street Mission' – she keeps praying for us, praying that we can help other people like her."

Hailey remains in contact with Huda on a regular basis, and they are now working to find Huda a more permanent home, "We applied for special priority for Toronto Community Housing and she was accepted. This too has been stressful but she's excited. It's just another positive thing that she could see – a light at the end of the tunnel."

*Name and image changed to respect community member's privacy.

NEVER GIVING UP

Letter from Angie

President & CEO

There is a song I love that contains the lyrics, "If I were you, I would have given up on me by now, I would have labelled me a lost cause, cause I feel just like a lost cause." The songwriter, Matthew West continues, "Somehow you don't see me like I do, somehow you're still here."

I love this song because it speaks of a person whose hope is being rekindled even though they would label themselves a lost cause and expect others to do the same.

At YSM we see hope rekindled in hearts like Emily's and Huda's all the time.

It would have been so easy for Emily to say, what difference does it make what choices I make? I'm a lost cause! But Emily didn't do that, she decided to do something to benefit herself as well as others who have been in prison. Through her care and that of our HOPE program, people have started to see themselves the way that we see them, as people who are definitely not lost causes and are of great value and worth.

Emily didn't give up and neither did Huda with her three children. The system is so outdated and we know that we are in the midst of a housing crisis that will take years of intentionality

to dig out of. In the meantime in order to survive, people like Huda need to be persistent. With the support of Hailey, she stuck to it, calling repeatedly until the day she was given a spot in a shelter and a chance at an apartment with Toronto Community Housing.

Can you imagine the persistence that it would take to keep calling to get a unit to live in, rejection after rejection? Can you imagine what it would take to keep looking for a job knowing that once you disclosed your criminal record your application would be set aside? I think it would be pretty easy to think that it was a lost cause.

But we know the truth, that each person living with poverty has a whole life story. And that all they need is someone to see beyond their circumstances and into their hearts.

We just want to say thank you. Thank you for not giving up on Emily, Huda, and the many individuals and families that we are privileged to know at YSM. We are so grateful for your belief in each person and we hope that this issue will encourage your soul.

Blessings,

Angie Peters



GIVE 6IX TO HELP YOUR COMMUNITY

GIVE 6IX is a "do-what-you-can, wherever-you-are" movement to inspire everyone in our city to take action to grow our collective potential for impactful change.

- Give 6 informational interviews for neighbours looking for a second chance.
- Give 6 bundles of fruit and vegetables for community members who may not have access to fresh produce.
- Contact your government representative to advocate for more affordable and safe housing in Toronto. Access our **GIVE 6IX** advocacy toolkit at: ysm.ca/advocate/

The possibilities are endless! So what's your 6IX? Get inspired and learn more at ysm.ca/GIVE6IX



Offer hope to those in need by joining and inviting your community to

GIVE 6IX.