

Angie's Letter: Room For Light



You know the feeling you get when you walk into a room overflowing with energy? I have been blessed with that feeling multiple times in the past month.

It was the feeling I experienced walking into the room of 8- to 13-year-old students for YSM's *Fish Tank*. The space was buzzing with activity, filled

with young voices excitedly discussing their business ideas and busily working on their presentations. It was a room full of possibilities. It was a room full of hope.

I felt a similar feeling in the room where our **Christmas Toy Market** was held this past December. In a bustling, busy room, our YSM Board of Directors and our senior leadership team volunteered as families picked out gifts for their children. It was heartwarming to see the joy and even delight the parents expressed when choosing gifts they knew their children would love. This too was a room filled with possibilities and hope, but it also was a room full of love.

And then there was the room for the **Bridges' Christmas dinner!** Multiple spaces were overflowing with activity, starting in the kitchen where meals were being portioned by volunteers for serving. In the gym, more volunteers were decorating, setting up tables and getting ready to greet people, all with the staff band rehearsing in the background so the meal would be held in a festive environment.

Here we had the Board of Directors volunteering alongside our #HackPoverty Working Group leaders, which includes the lived-experience leaders who have been shaping our work toward systems change.

As I took in the energy of the event – new and old friends connecting, people sharing food and stories – I experienced a moment of peace amidst the excitement. Debra and Melissa, two of our amazing lived-experience leaders, were connecting with people, answering questions and modelling hope. Senior leaders from around the city working with us on systems change were greeting people at the doors. Board members were packing meals to ensure everyone received a festive, healthy dinner.

As I took all this in, I thought: This is a room full of community, people from all walks of life celebrating one another and demonstrating their love for one another.

It was a room full of light!

There is no greater joy than being part of a community which loves one another. Thank you for your support this past Christmas; you made all of this possible.

Blessings,

Angie Peters

President & CEO

A free service for you, as a YSM donor



As a much-appreciated member of our community, we want you to know about a valuable service available to you free of cost. If you are among the 60% of Canadians who don't have an up-to-date will, read on . . .

YSM remains focused on both serving our community today and planning for the future, to ensure we are always here for Toronto's most vulnerable neighbours.

To that end, we have partnered with **Advisors with Purpose**, which offers access to planned giving specialists available to guide you as you think through decisions regarding your estate plans. Their services are offered with no obligation, and they will never sell you anything. You can learn more at plan@advisorswithpurpose.ca. Make sure you tell them YSM sent you! Your will is the last statement you will make, so make sure it is a meaningful one.

URBAN LIGHTS

TRANSFORMING TORONTO SINCE 1896

YSM's Computer Literacy Centre: a life-giving place



Last December, YSM's Computer Literacy Centre celebrated 54 new graduates.

Today, our computer centre continues to keep its students ahead of the curve — growing to include classes in robotics, coding, graphic design, game development, and more. About 300 children and youth participate weekly, and about a thousand participate annually in the CLC's camps, March break or professional advancement day programs, and school visits.

"The kids love it, and we love to see them interacting with tech in very creative ways," says Coordinator of Computer Education Julian Williams. "They wouldn't have access to the level or variety of these courses anywhere. We have long waiting lists."

Last December, the CLC rolled out the red carpet to celebrate 54 new graduates from their programs, each of whom received a new Chromebook or laptop computer in celebration of their achievement. When a family may all share one computer for work and school needs, a new laptop makes a huge long-term difference.

"The reward of seeing children, youth, and adults gaining confidence in computers, words can't describe it," Julian says. "It's a digital tech world — gaining confidence and competence in a variety of computer skills will increase their likelihood of being successful. The CLC is a life-giving place."

Eighteen years ago, when Yathu was in seventh grade, his mom told him she'd signed him up for a computer club at YSM twice a week after school.

Yathu's parents had come to Canada as part of a wave of immigrants fleeing civil war in Sri Lanka in the early 1990s. They found community in Toronto among fellow refugees from unrest in Yugoslavia, Somalia, the Caribbean, and the Philippines.

"At the time, I didn't understand how important computer literacy was," Yathu remembers. "My mom enrolled me so I would stay out of trouble. Back then, the best things you could do for a child were to keep them out of trouble, to keep them busy, and keep them safe.

YSM's Computer Literacy Centre (CLC) provided safety and computer literacy."

Today Yathu manages portfolios as an investment advisor at the largest wealth management firm in Canada. It was his years of experience as a cross-asset trader that opened the door to his current job, but the foundational computer literacy skills he gained through the CLC helped him both at school and as he sought his first job.

"Eighteen years ago, many schools didn't have a computer lab," he says. "This was an opportunity to play with a computer, and I valued learning something new. The CLC put me ahead of the curve back then."

Cornerstone Students Enter the *Fish Tank*

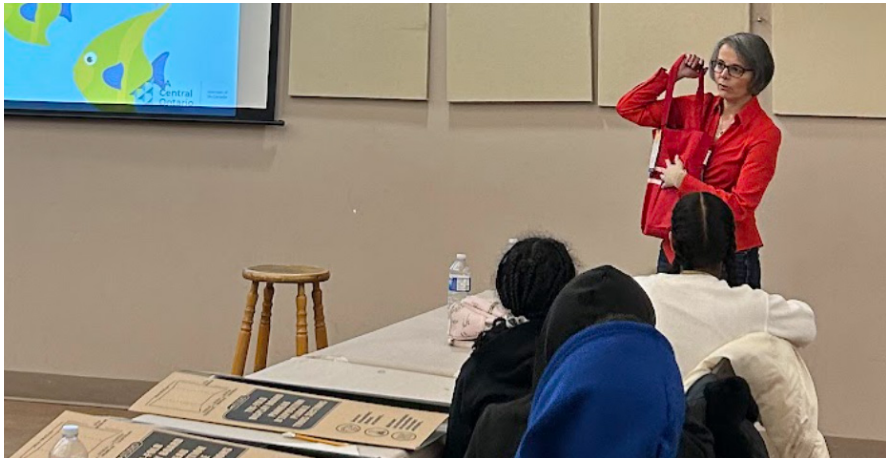
What gets kids thinking as entrepreneurs and diving enthusiastically into learning about money management? A challenge, in January, to compete in YSM's first-ever *Fish Tank*, a business case competition.

Over three days, sixty students between the ages of 8 and 13 participated in Junior Achievement's *More than Money* program led by JA Central Ontario and YSM's Cornerstone Family Services.

First, the students learned how to create a business plan. One student (pictured, right) wanted to launch a restaurant offering South Asian cuisine. Another imagined running his own year-round hot chocolate and lemonade stand. One young girl outlined an idea for a winter wear shop that would keep people warm in the cold weather.

Then, during our *Fish Tank* competition, students presented their unique business ideas through display boards and PowerPoints to a panel of judges.

"I learned how to be confident," one participant wrote afterward. "It was my first presentation in front of people and judges, and they were nice, and I got confident." Another said, "I liked when we were working on presentations. I liked hearing the other presentations, too."



YSM President & CEO Angie Peters shared her own experiences as an entrepreneur with *Fish Tank* participants.

The judges selected two winners—the older winner earned a camera and the younger winner won a build-your-own computer. Both received \$100 gift cards for a celebratory family meal thanks to House on Parliament restaurant.

More than just an event, *Fish Tank* was about providing kids with the space and opportunity to showcase their creativity.

"At JA Central Ontario, we envision a world where all young people have the tools, confidence and connections to shape a bright future," says Jennifer Holmes Weier, President & CEO of JA Central Ontario. "We were thrilled to work with YSM to empower students with real-life skills that unlock their true potential – as future entrepreneurs, changemakers and community leaders."

"It's amazing," says Dania Sands-Blake, YSM's Care Management and Education Specialist for Cornerstone. "When kids catch a vision for something, they can run with it faster than we can as adults. They just grab it and run."



Our older *Fish Tank* winner developed a plan to start her own restaurant.

February is Black History Month!

This February, YSM staff members are continuing to learn from one another and to celebrate together the rich heritage of the Black community.

In 2020, YSM formed its **Agape Committee** to help us become more mindful of the legacy of barriers faced by the Black community and how we can acknowledge and work to dismantle them. Agape is a Greek word for an unconditional, sacrificial love. We want to do this work so that we can live out an agape love for one another and the members of the community we serve.

Learn more about our Black History, Black Futures activities by visiting YSM's social media.

Walking for neighbours in need



Imagine facing a harsh winter in Toronto while living on the street, or trying to make ends meet. You realize your income won't cover the rent, or pay for heat, or buy enough food. Imagine trying to resolve those problems alone, without a community of support.

On February 10, more than 200 **Winter Walk** participants from 30 teams gathered to be that community of support. We met at St. Paul's Bloor Street church – which kindly welcomed us into their space as one of their charity partners – to walk 2 or 5 km and raised over \$107,000 to help Toronto neighbours in need.

By launching our own walk this year, YSM is able to apply 100% of event proceeds to benefit our community members. We want to thank all those who walked, as well as our very generous sponsors **Meridian** and **Logan Wealth Management**. We also thank Tim Hortons and Salad King, for donations of drinks and food during the event, and the CN Tower, for lighting up with YSM's colours on the night of the walk.

Why walk with YSM? "Because we support this walk in teams, we get to encourage one another in our fundraising while learning about the issues faced by our community," Lisa Milligan explains. Lisa never would have guessed that her decision to join a walk in support of YSM a decade ago would lead to her captaining the St. Paul's Bloor Street walking team, and eventually joining YSM as a full-time employee. "Joining the walk is a great entry point for people who want to try volunteering, but might not know where to start."

We hope you will walk with us next year on Saturday, February 8, 2025!

You helped bring Christmas magic to life!

For some, Christmas brings financial pressure, loneliness and the weight of unmet expectations. Through your generosity, YSM was able to bring extra joy and transform holiday expectations for our community members in the following ways.



YSM's Toy Market brought holiday joy to 950 children.

- The 2023 **Toy Market** distributed 7,000 gifts, bringing holiday joy to 950 children and giving parents a release from holiday stress. The generous donation of five new tablets served as raffle prizes for Toy Market families to win. When one mother of three found out she was a raffle winner, she burst into tears of joy, sharing that this was one of the best Christmases her family had ever had.
- The **Bridges' Christmas dinner** welcomed over 350 community members for a delicious holiday meal, thanks to the generosity of Andre Kutyan and Robert Greenberg of Harvey Kalles Real Estate, and Pusateri's Fine Foods. Together they donated the meal and served it, bringing holiday spirit and community connection to Toronto neighbours facing hardship.
- At the **Evergreen Centre for Street-Involved Youth**, 110 youth used 30-minute appointments to select from a wide array of new, donated clothing, accessories and hygiene products, as well as grocery and other gift cards, to take home as gifts for themselves or to give to others.

With rising need, your kindness impacted a record 1,410 community members over Christmas. Thank you for helping us offer Christmas joy to so many!