

URBAN LIGHTS

TRANSFORMING TORONTO SINCE 1896

A pathway to hope in a tough job market

When Liam* moved to Toronto for a university program in urban planning, he felt the same excitement for the future as any first-year student.

But as he progressed through his program and began trying to secure an internship, he was dismayed to find that, even after graduating, no one was hiring.

“I thought Toronto would be a cornucopia of all sorts of planning jobs, but all I landed were volunteer roles. I joined a lot of community groups to keep building my resumé. I wasn’t getting student loans anymore, and Toronto isn’t cheap. I was in a huge amount of debt without a job.” Liam began selling his belongings so he could use those funds to cover his rent.

Daily, he applied to a dozen jobs, everywhere he could think of — the pharmacy, the library, restaurants — anything. “I kept expecting to find a job,” he says, “but after this went on for three years, I became deeply depressed.”

One of the groups Liam joined was Regent Park’s Employment and Economic Working Group. In response to rising unemployment, the group partnered with YSM to apply for a grant to run a pilot Workforce Integration Program, connecting job seekers with employment service providers in the community. With the support of YSM’s



After completing university, Liam experienced 3 years of unemployment.

trusteeship and leadership, the project fosters collaboration among diverse employment-sector partners and supports the development of an inclusive employment pathway.

When a friend told Liam he was eligible for the program, he immediately applied.

Within days, Liam was selected to participate and, as part of the program, was connected with YSM’s Integrated Employment Services Program and the retailer Zara, a YSM employer partner. When Zara invited Liam to interview for a sales position, he first met with a YSM Employment Counsellor for interview training. A few days later, Liam got the job.

“Everything happened over the course of maybe a week and a half!” Liam says. “When Zara offered me the job, it was an absolute lifesaver.”

For the first time in years, Liam felt himself breathe easier. The job provided not only income to live, but also gave Liam the schedule and routine he’d lost while he was unemployed. He quickly built new friendships at work and valued feeling part of a team.

Liam is now helping shape the Workforce Integration Program’s future for others struggling in the current employment climate, explaining, “We’re not just leaving everyone to cope on their own in really difficult conditions.”

YSM embarks on phase 3 of our 20-year strategic plan

In a country with one of the highest standards of living in the world, it’s difficult to accept that we still haven’t cracked the code on poverty.

Toronto continues to experience a higher rate of poverty than the rest of Ontario, as well as the country. Four in 10 people report they are struggling to get by,¹ and 3 in 10 single parent families in Toronto are living in poverty.² Equally concerning is the widening poverty gap — those who are experiencing poverty in Canada today are further below the poverty line than before the pandemic.

YSM is on a mission to end long-term poverty in Toronto by working in partnership to support life change, develop healthy communities and remove systemic barriers. We are midway through a 20-year strategic plan that is (1) people-centred, because each person’s experience is unique, and (2) data-driven, as we build and share measurement tools with partners for expanded impact. YSM envisions a city where everyone works collaboratively to end poverty; where we learn and change together, and where people, not poverty, thrive.

Here’s what has happened so far, and what we plan to do next:

Part 1: Lay the Foundation (2015-2020)

We developed a **theory of change**, applied our **RISE** – Respond, Invite, Support, Engage – Model of Care across our programs, and built a system to measure and evaluate our work – **TIMES™** – that was designed to be shared with other social service providers.

Part 2: Modelling & Early Expansion (2020-2025)

Even as we faced a significant increase in community needs during and after the pandemic, we began to implement data-informed improvements to our programs and forged early partnerships toward shared solutions to poverty.

Part 3: Expanding Impact (2025-2030)

In the coming five years, we see doors opening for heightened collaboration among those working to create a Toronto where everyone thrives. YSM is ready to expand sought-after impact by continuing to apply learnings and engage in solution-focused partnerships.

To read a full report of our stage 3 goals, visit ysm.ca/strategic-plan-update.

Grateful for every step!

Thank you to the 234 walkers who registered to join our 3rd annual **YSM Winter Walk for Neighbours in Need** in February! They walked 2 or 5K in extreme cold this year to raise \$141,836 for YSM’s vital programs and services – our highest Winter Walk total so far! Thank you also to all of our Winter Walk sponsors: **Logan Wealth Management**, **Harvey Kalles Real Estate** and **André Kutyan, broker**. The event was also generously supported by donations of needed goods and services from **Salad King**, **St. Paul’s Bloor Street**, **Tim Hortons**, **Resource Group** and **Elevation Church**. We are deeply grateful to see so many come together to help make Toronto a city where people, not poverty, thrive!



Winter Walk participants raised \$141,836 to help vulnerable Toronto neighbours.

When retirement becomes a new beginning



Elaine’s contributions as a volunteer greatly benefit YSM’s thrift store.

It was always Elaine’s retirement plan to spend as much time as she could helping others.

After completing a career in data management, Elaine applied for an ongoing volunteer role in our Double Take thrift store.

Double Take is a thriving social enterprise that supports YSM’s mission by providing access to affordable goods, and investing all thrift store proceeds to benefit YSM’s programs.

This February, Elaine celebrates two years as a Double Take volunteer, where she’s had an enormous impact. She spends two days a week sorting and checking donations for quality, pricing goods, and watching for fabrics that could be used by Double Take’s Upcycling Studio.

Through her work at the thrift store, Elaine explains, “Fewer things will end up in a landfill. It’s much better to give them a second life. And people appreciate it and benefit from it, because the economy is not good. Sometimes, when I’m hanging up clothes, I pray about the people who can benefit from them.”

But Elaine’s favourite part of volunteering is the people she encounters.

She loves when regular customers recognize and greet her, as well as all the friendships she’s formed with other volunteers.

“Talking with customers, there are some pretty lonely people who just want to talk with someone. When I’m working in the back, I meet many different volunteers and they all bring different stories. I love that they share their lives with me. I’ve built so many friendships, I don’t feel like I’m at work — I feel like I’m lending a helping hand to the family. To know I’m contributing so this runs smoothly or so I’m lightening up the workload — to me, that makes me happy.”

Did you know, in a typical week, Double Take requires the support of 112 volunteers? Our thrift store is looking for more ongoing volunteers like Elaine, including backroom donation sorters, retail support to greet and assist shoppers, and Upcycling Studio support volunteers. Visit ysm.ca/ongoing-volunteer to learn more.

Thank you!

As we step into 2026, we want to celebrate what your generosity made possible throughout 2025! You helped provide:

31,083

meals for vulnerable youth at our Evergreen Centre

8,732

community dinners for adults through our Bridges’ program

17,045

Food Bank visits, providing relief for **42,610** individuals

4,280

healthcare appointments and **952** hours of group mental health therapy

Each number represents a neighbour who received compassionate care.

As one mother, whose children were among the **989** children to receive gifts through our December Toy Market, expressed, “Although I’ve been part of similar programs as a single parent, this experience felt different. Having the option of choice and freedom to choose what is right for them is not something I often get to experience, and it matters deeply to me.”

Thank you for offering dignity and meaningful support to struggling neighbours by kindly giving to YSM.



More than 300 community members attended our Bridges’ Christmas dinner.

¹ 2024 Toronto Census Metropolitan Area

² 2021 Census

Breaking it down and making it happen – together



Founded in 1896, YSM has witnessed nearly 130 years of change. We have served through two global pandemics, wars, depressions, recessions, you name it. And through all of these challenges, we have been there for struggling neighbours.

It might seem odd that we have genuine hope and a plan toward a city where people, and not poverty, thrive. You would think that we would be more “realistic,” because after all — we will always have the poor among us . . . right?

And yet, as you have read in this issue, we get the enormous privilege and joy of working with so many people every day who simply choose to do their part. And, because of that, lives are changed, communities are strengthened and even positive systems changes occur.

It is easy to get overwhelmed by the statistics and the stories, but there is another way. And it is the same means through which any big problem gets addressed. Break it down into small steps and just get going.

That is why our 20-year strategic plan was broken into four segments with corresponding goals for each. By the grace of God and with the help of many incredible people, we have met our goals for the first 10 years. And in the same way, we believe that we will meet the goals of the next five years.

When we break down a big goal, any sense of overwhelm is removed — and the way forward becomes simple. If 40% of our neighbours are struggling to make ends meet, that means that 60% are not. It also means there is huge potential for those in the 60% group to choose to help one person take their next step out of poverty. There are so many people who care, and everyone has a role to play.

Our team is well-versed in helping you see the role you can play. As we head into the next five years, I encourage you to consider how you can elevate your impact or invite someone else to join this work with you. There is absolutely no reason for people to suffer in a city this wealthy. Let's work together to help our neighbours in need.

Blessings,

Angie Peters
President & CEO

Fundraise for YSM

We can all contribute to making Toronto a city where people, and not poverty, thrive! Here are just a few recent examples . . .

During their 2025 Charity Week, **Leaside High School** raised nearly \$4,000 to support vulnerable young people through YSM's Evergreen program.

Beth marked 30 years as a medical volunteer in YSM's Evergreen Health Centre by setting a bold birthday goal — she invited friends and family to help her raise \$30,000 in support of the Health Centre.

Last fall, YSM board member **Kin** ran a marathon in honour of his mother, setting and far surpassing his YSM fundraising goal to support neighbours in need through our programs.

We are so humbled to witness these and other efforts, which make such a difference. **If you'd like to fundraise for YSM, visit ysm.ca/fundraiseforysm/.**



Leaside teens raised support for YSM's Evergreen Centre for Vulnerable Youth.