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YSM
YONGE STREET MISSION

URBAN LIGHTS

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More than a gift

How YSM's Food Bank lets neighbours know they matter at Christmas

As community members visit YSM's Food Bank in the first two weeks of December, in addition to receiving fresh and healthy grocery options, they'll experience an added touch of holiday joy — a Christmas gift bag on offer to each visitor.

Last December, YSM's Food Bank handed out more than 800 Christmas gift bags as Toronto neighbours and families attended their Food Bank appointments. "The gift bags show Food Bank clients we see them, and they matter to us," says YSM Food Bank Assistant Roxana, who begins collecting corporate and individual donations over the summer.

Last year, Roxana and YSM volunteers Lucy and Rae managed to pack all 800 bags in just two weeks. The bags can include a wide variety of items, from toiletries like face cream, deodorant and toothpaste, to nail polish, snacks, socks, and more.

Roxana personalizes the bags as much as possible, with specific Food Bank clients in mind — colouring books are tucked in for those with children, or cat or dog treats for those she knows have pets.

"One woman loved the facial cream so much — she came back exclaiming over how nice it was on her skin," Roxana remembers. "Once I gave a man a dress shirt, and he came back with such enthusiastic thanks. He said he wore the shirt to a meeting, and people complimented him. Usually, he said, at this meeting no one noticed him. He felt he mattered in that meeting, and it made him happy."



YSM Food Bank staff and volunteers pack 800 gift bags to share holiday warmth with neighbours in need.

Volunteers Lucy and Rae are already planning to help Roxana pack the bags again this year.

"So much planning goes into making sure Food Bank clients leave with smiles on their faces, and a bag of goodies they can pamper themselves with to feel the warmth of holiday cheer," says Lucy, a YSM volunteer since 2021. Last year she even knitted scarves for the bags. "That is why I do this — the simple pleasure of knowing I helped in some small way to bring joy and positivity to the community."

Long-time YSM volunteer Rae agrees: "Helping at YSM in any capacity has been very rewarding. I've found it to be an organization dedicated to supporting the community, helping to better and bring positivity to the lives of their clients any way they can, and we live in a world that doesn't always provide that. They are an extremely caring and dedicated staff, and they make it fun."

"I do what I can to help community members laugh and smile — they sometimes come here feeling very sad," Roxana says. For Roxana, the gift bags make her think of her own childhood, of neighbours sharing whatever they had with each other. "Here in the Food Bank, you are not just a client, you are part of a little family."



Together we make Christmas brighter

Through your kind generosity YSM can let neighbours know they aren't alone during the holidays! Here are some of the ways we celebrate with those we serve . . .

"Through the gift cards, I was able to purchase gifts for both my loved ones and myself, which made the experience even more special."

– Evergreen Christmas Eve participant





Families in need

Dec 4: Daycare Celebration
Parents visit their children's classes for a special program and time to connect with teachers and each other.

Dec 14-19: Toy Market
For one week, 450+ families engaged with YSM's programs enjoy a free "shopping" experience, where they select gifts to give to more than 900 children.

Vulnerable youth

Nov 28: Evergreen Nursery Christmas Party
100 young families join us for food, music, free photos with Santa, and deeply appreciated gift cards.

Dec 24: Christmas Eve at Evergreen
200 young people join us for a family-style Christmas Eve lunch, complete with a holiday market offering a selection of gifts for themselves and their loved ones.

Adults in hardship

Church at the Mission (CATM)
CATM will welcome the community to 3 p.m. Sunday Advent services on Nov. 29, Dec. 6, 13 and 20, and a Christmas Eve service on Dec. 24 at 7 p.m.

Dec 17: Bridges Christmas Dinner
Adults experiencing long-term poverty enjoy a hearty community meal, and receive a gift bag of toiletries and a gift card.





"I love to come to the dinner and feel the love of the community and staff at YSM. I live alone so even though the food is good and plentiful, the company is everything to me."

– Bridges community meal guest

The people behind the presents

During one week in December, YSM fills two large classrooms with new toys, books, games and other gifts. More than 450 parents and guardians engaged in YSM's programs make appointments to visit our Toy Market to choose gifts for their children. This event is only possible thanks to the incredible generosity of our partners and donors, who donate everything needed for the market, including the time to help staff it.

Last year, 236 volunteers gave 854 hours to the Toy Market, many serving as personal shoppers to assist parents in locating just the right gifts for more than 900 children.

One dedicated team has helped kick off the first day of Toy Market for more than a decade.

"It is by far our company's favourite day of the year," says Jeremy, the President & CEO of **Resource Group**. "We've actually organized our December sales meetings so that our team can fly in from across the country, have meetings, and then help at YSM's Toy Market!"

With giving back as a core value, Resource Group even invites their corporate partners to donate goods to the market and join them in volunteering.

"There is something special about being there," Jeremy explains. "It's amazing, when you help someone select gifts for their kids, how much you learn in a short amount of time. Parents share their stories, their hopes for their children. Their eyes light up when they talk about how much their son loves baseball, or daughter loves drawing. There is something really tangible in providing this little bit of joy. It's just as much a gift to us as it is a gift to them."

"What stands out at Toy Market is the freedom to make thoughtful, personal choices. It's not something I often experience, and it matters deeply."

– Toy Market participant



A team from Resource Group kicks off the first day of YSM's 2025 Toy Market.



A safe haven at Evergreen

On a cold and wet Tuesday, Luke* walked through the doors of YSM's Evergreen Centre for Vulnerable Youth, in search of a warm meal.

When YSM Drop-In staff member Shawn began talking with Luke, he didn't realize the conversation would change the trajectory of Luke's life. Luke confided he had nowhere to sleep that night, so Shawn brought him to YSM's Youth Housing Specialist, Madison. As Madison listened, Luke began to open up. Every day he felt more afraid and hopeless. He was ready to give up. As Care Manager Cheasnessa joined the conversation, Luke shared even more deeply. The team urged Luke, with Madison alongside him, to visit Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and were relieved when he agreed.

"You are so brave, and I'm proud of you for asking for help," Cheasnessa told Luke. "Coming forward and being vulnerable take an immense amount of strength, and this is only the beginning; it's the first step toward recovery and healing." Watching the young man's eyes fill with tears, she asked if he would like a hug. As she wrapped her arms around him, she heard him say, "I can't remember the last time someone hugged me."

"You are loved," she said to Luke. "You crossed our paths for a reason." After Luke was safely discharged from CAMH, he returned to Evergreen with renewed hope for his future. Every time the team sees him, they are reminded of the courage it takes to reach out, and the quiet, strong power of being there when someone does.

Thank you for helping YSM provide compassionate care for neighbours in crisis.

**Name is changed to protect the community member's privacy.*

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Presence matters



Sometimes, the most meaningful thing we can do for a neighbour in hardship is to show up, and then keep showing up, in whatever ways we're able.

During the holidays, when isolation and complex family relationships may be even more keenly felt, presence becomes all the more important. Yonge Street Mission is about more than the services we provide — we are a community of support, open to all.

You can see that in YSM's Food Bank, where staff members and volunteers are giving extra time right now to prepare hundreds of gift bags so that vulnerable neighbours receive added treats and the message that they are seen and valued.

At YSM's Toy Market, we see dedicated partners like Resource Group showing up through gifts of time, financial support, and donated goods so that families in need don't have to go without the simple joy of giving and receiving gifts this Christmas.

Sometimes, as in Luke's story, presence translates into something even more profound. Luke first entered the doors of our Evergreen Centre for Vulnerable Youth seeking a meal. But as he experienced the caring presence of Evergreen team members, he felt safe enough to share the heavy burdens he was carrying. In that compassionate connection, Luke found the courage to seek life-saving help.

I hope you also see how *you* are present in all that happens across YSM.

Through your commitment to help, we can show up for community members when they need us most and walk with them on a pathway toward stability and thriving. You are an important member of a community that cares.

Thank you for your gift of presence in 2026!

Blessings,

Angie Peters
President & CEO

Help Yonge Street Mission end the experience of poverty in Toronto!

YSM Winter Walk FOR NEIGHBOURS IN NEED

Register now to join us at our **Winter Walk for Neighbours in Need** on **Saturday, February 6, 2027**. Walk and raise funds for Toronto neighbours who will be struggling this winter: **ysm.ca/winter-walk**.

