

The story behind the Friends of University Ave:

The Friends of University Ave initiative is an ambitious citizen-led city-building initiative spearheaded by Christine Ralphs who describes the initial impetus best in her own words:

"My name is Christine Ralphs, I am the Founder of The Friends of University Avenue. Reimagining University Avenue is a very personal initiative. I've spent much of the last 8 years of my life on University Avenue. My husband, Peter, was a patient at Princess Margaret for 4 years. A year after Peter passed away, I was diagnosed with lung cancer. I've been a patient at PMH myself for the last 4 years. When I'm in the hospital I see people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and stages of illness. I see many who may not have the support system I have. I see patients, families, and caregivers. I see people who need Inspiration and hope.

I've been wanting to give back for the life I've been so lucky to live. One evening in October of 2017 when I was leaving the hospital, I realized what I could do. (I am President of a commercial/retail design company.) University Avenue was in darkness. I realized that I could illuminate University Avenue. I could make University Avenue a beacon of light, a symbol of hope for patients, their families, doctors and health care professionals, and all the people who use University Avenue as their north/south route through the city.

I discussed this with my friends, a group of highly talented and civic minded professionals from the worlds of art, design, architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, and communications who quickly became The Friends of University Avenue. This personal initiative has grown into a project that can be transformative for so many. In fact, there isn't one person who I've told about Reimagining University Avenue who didn't say that it was a brilliant idea and long overdue. The next thing they do is go to University by car or public transport and walk the boulevard.

After media coverage in the Globe and Mail, the first e-mail that I received was from a nurse in the OR at Toronto General. Here is what she wrote...

'Dear Ms. Ralphs, I just read the article this morning in the Globe and Mail about the lighting project and I'm very excited! I'm a nurse in the OR at TGH and we overlook University, quite pretty in the summer. I know a few people like to sit there on a break but by evening there are homeless hanging out and tents erected so not possible. It really is quite dark at night. I too have been a patient and a visitor and sometimes you just need a change of scenery if possible. How lovely it would be to have a gorgeous light up there, something patients could look out at, take their minds off things for a moment, to give a break from the business of the hospital. I think people would enjoy the park feel, to be able to stroll any time of day. This lighting project would open up a beautiful street for all to enjoy. Yes, we need more sitting areas too. Thank you for your fabulous idea. I'm looking forward to seeing it.'

- Sincerely, Maureen Wood

As a central corridor in our city our hope is that the Friends of University Ave project resonates far beyond the hospital district and brings inspiration to all Torontonians".

The people behind Friends of University are:

Friends of University Avenue is a growing group of citizens and organizations, coming together to make something extraordinary happen on University Ave.

The Friends of University Board of Directors

Christine Ralphs - Founder and President (President Lloyd Ralphs Design)

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Launch Team (bios follow)

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Paul Boken - Vice President Mulvey and Banani Lighting

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Rebecca Carbin, Art + Public UnLtd

Justin Young - Partner, Idea Workshop

Christine Ralphs - Founding Director

Marsha Rovani - Creative Director

