

It Happened Here: Places of Community Organizing and Activism in Jane-Finch

Introduction

When I moved into the Jane-Finch community as a single mother with three children and living on social welfare assistance, I did not know that living in Jane-Finch would change my life. I moved into 15 Tobermory Drive, where I became involved with community action that led to securing a job with the Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre.

This report is based on 41 years of experiences working and volunteering in the community and is also based on 40 interviews I conducted, a review of the transcripts from those interviewed for this project, as well as reports and documents I saved over the years. It is not by any means a complete picture of all the activities and accomplishments in the community – there are far more stories to be told. No one person carries all the knowledge of Jane-Finch. Some may not share the perspectives of the stories told here, but I take full responsibility for any mistakes in relating the stories below.

In the beginning

The value of places in the Jane-Finch community starts with a recognition that the Indigenous people lived, and farmed, on the land now called Jane-Finch, and utilized the Black Creek for transportation, food and water. A small part of their story is told by the Huron-Wendat Trail which moves through the hydro-corridor in the community and interprets life in an ancestral Huron-Wendat village whose archaeological remains still exist on the edge of Black Creek.

After millennia of an Indigenous presence here, European settlers developed a farming community in the area in the 19th century. An interpretation of their way of life can be seen at Black Creek Pioneer Village. They too utilized the land and the Black Creek, which they also used as a place of recreation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Jane-Finch was again transformed into a new community. The Second World War was over, families were growing, and immigrants were moving to Toronto to build new lives. This was also the time of the ‘baby boom’, where there was a significant increase in babies being born. As a result, demand for housing was critical. By the mid-1960s, the federal government de-racialized the immigration policy by introducing a merit-based point system to determine admissibility to the country. This meant that immigrants from previously excluded parts of the world—Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and Latin America — were able to settle in the Toronto area. “Jane-Finch, newly developed with a lot of affordable housing, came

to house a proportionately large number of new immigrants, many of whom were people of colour.”¹

Metropolitan Toronto created the District 10 Plan for the west end of the city, including Jane-Finch, and its principles and approach to land use was largely adopted by the Borough of North York, of which Jane-Finch was a part. It focused on land use, population, and transportation with no provision for social factors beyond schools and parks. The plan greatly underestimated how quickly North York would grow in population.

1970s

The 1970s for residents in Jane-Finch was all about developing programs and services to meet the critical and growing needs of those living in the community. The three North York Parks and Recreation community centres (Driftwood, Yorkwoods [now Oakdale], Stanley Road [now Domenico Di Luca] and the community rooms in Metro Toronto Housing Authority (M.T.H.A.) buildings became critically important meeting places. Public housing was initially run by the Province under the Ontario Housing Corporation until the Metropolitan Toronto regional government was created and M.T.H.A. was set up. It was within the community centres and MTHA buildings where programs were established, services developed, and strategic responses were created to fight further development and other negative conditions affecting those who lived in Jane-Finch.

The Jane Finch Mall was also utilized in that way during this decade with the mall becoming a ‘hang-out’ for youth. At the same time, there was a growing incidence of youth-related crime. There were few resources, services, or even safe spaces for youth to gather in the community. Pat O’Neill, a former North York alderman (city councillor), pointed out that there were twenty thousand young people under the age of twenty, but only one pool and one arena.²

The mall management hosted the Youth Action Project (Y.A.P.) in the 1970s with a trailer parked in the back parking lot. Five years later, funding for the Y.A.P. ended, and the mall was not interested in supporting the trailer in that location any longer.

Residents were having difficulty finding out about programs and services, so community activists got the mall to host the first information kiosk rent free. It was a hit and after the first month, they fielded 1,444 inquiries. Some time later, the mall decided that they wanted the kiosk for a paying vendor, so the organizers secured space in the Yorkwoods Community Centre (20 Yorkwoods Gate – now owned by the Salvation Army).³

¹Julie-Anne Boudreau, Roger Keil and Douglas Young, “The In-Between City,” in *Changing Toronto: Governing Urban Neoliberalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, 127) quoted in MacNevin, *BY US! FOR US!* p49

² Wanda MacNevin, *BY US! FOR US! Activism in Jane-Finch, A Working-Class Community*. Toronto, 2018, p82

³ *BY US! FOR US!* p89

Metro Toronto Housing Corporation was one of best sources for space in the community at that time. 15 Tobermory hosted the first Y.W.C.A. Life Skills program for women (childcare provided) and it was so successful that the 'Y' expanded this program to 415 Driftwood, 5 Needlefirway, and 2999 Jane Street. When the Life Skills programs ended, the women formed a network with support from Mary Lewis, the Children's Aid Society community worker. There were seven groups throughout the community with the leaders meeting monthly and engaging on broad issues facing the community. Community spaces in the various M.T.H.A. buildings was critical for developing resident leadership, as well as supporting families.

The Yorkwoods Community Centre, south of Finch Avenue, was originally built as a private community centre for the condominium townhouses and apartments on Driftwood Avenue and London Green Court. This large white, round building was futuristic and unlike any other building in the community. In the late 1970s, North York purchased it for the whole community to use. While children and youth utilized the centre for recreation, it was also used by community groups for activities. One such group was the Ghanaian Women's Association, which subsequently created the Asante Multi-Cultural Association of Toronto. They were new to Canada, new to the community, and wanted to contribute to their new community. At the same time, they were teaching their children Ghanaian languages and customs. Yorkwoods was also home to the Caribbean Youth Connection drop-in program at the time.

Driftwood Community Centre (4401 Jane Street) opened its doors in 1974, serving neighbourhoods north of Finch Avenue. While the Centre ran its own activities, there was a need for more programs, particularly for youth. The Black Creek Venture Group was started in 1973 by a resident, with a focus on prevention of unhealthy conditions for children and youth. Their afterschool program was run out of Driftwood Public School (265 Driftwood Avenue). In 1977, Driftwood Community Centre gave them a small office adjacent to their kitchen. They hired local staff to work in the after-four and other drop-in programs, complementing the existing Parks and Recreation programs.⁴ The Driftwood Community Centre also opened its space in the 1970s for Probation Officers to see youth in their own community and for Children's Aid Society to connect with families.

Driftwood Community Centre became an important space for local community organizations and groups to meet. The newly formed Downsview Weston Action Community (D.W.A.C.) — the first community-wide group to focus on issues such as the rapid development and growing population — began meeting there. Residents were struggling with poverty, discrimination, and social isolation and D.W.A.C. was instrumental in assisting in the development of community-based organizations and services. As a result of that early work came many more opportunities for residents to come together to respond to issues that were impacting them, to become engaged in the community, and to organize to fight for change.

⁴ *BY US! FOR US!* p80

One service, supported by D.W.A.C., was Downsview Services to Seniors (D.S.S.) that started as a Meals on Wheels program in 1974. Their home base was located in an office in the recreation rooms at 35 Shoreham Drive, a M.T.H.A. building for seniors. D.S.S. operated out of that location for many years, until the service grew. It developed into Lumacare, a service for seniors with 250 staff serving 3500 older adults operating out of other locations, including the Northwood Community Centre, north of Sheppard Avenue West.

D.W.A.C. conducted two years of research to create the Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre (Jane/Finch Centre), a resource centre that provided three components: the Community Office, the Child/Parent Program, and the Community Development team. The Centre's first six months operated out of a small office in Driftwood Public School, but they needed space to provide programs and services. There were two unused community rooms at 4400 Jane Street, a high-rise social housing building, and with the support of M.T.H.A. staff they were able to work out of there on a temporary basis. The service was found to be valuable to the people who lived in the building, and also to people living elsewhere in the community. The Jane/Finch Centre remains there to this day, while also utilizing spaces in other buildings.

The Community Office component of the Centre provided a place where fledging organizations or individual residents and small grassroots groups could get administrative resources, talk about needs, or get support for self-help initiatives. Through the Jane/Finch Centre's community development work, it was also a space where people could link up with others to create new organizations in the community. The Jane/Finch Centre became the base of support for many organizations in the community.

The Firgrove neighbourhood was the last large public housing development to be built in the community [and the first to be largely demolished]. There were no streets running through it; most of the townhomes faced inwards and were stacked to four levels without an elevator for the families on the fourth floor. But, Firgrove had a recreation centre and a swimming pool in the midst of the townhouses, and meeting space in 5 Needle Firway, a high-rise building that was part of the complex. The Firgrove United Sports and Cultural Club operated out of the Firgrove recreation centre, although with insufficient funding and with volunteers playing an important role. It was also in the Firgrove neighbourhood that the first parent-school association in Jane-Finch was established at Firgrove Public School (270 Firgrove Crescent) by a new resident, originally from Jamaica, who wanted to ensure that her six children were successful in the school system.⁵

Another M.T.H.A. recreation space that was well utilized was located in the Yorkwoods/Grandravine community (23 Grandravine Drive). Their large recreation room, located within the townhouse complex, became the site of Mothers on the Move (1978). This was initiated and developed by a resident, Donna Wilson. This organization became a training program for mothers with limited working skills, and Wilson considered herself to be one of

⁵ *BY US! FOR US!* p125

them. With support from D.W.A.C. and M.T.H.A., she opened the low-priced grocery / convenience store within the recreation space, where women could work for the minimum wage while developing new employment-related skills. M.T.H.A. eventually wanted this space for their own programs, so the group relocated to the Jane Eglinton area.⁶

For residents in Jane-Finch, the 1970s were all about developing programs and services to meet the tremendous needs of those living there. Ward 3 (Jane-Finch) had 2,286 social housing units, compared to Ward 1 to the east, with 142 social housing units, and Ward 5 to the west, with 223 social housing units. Jane-Finch was not a community that was designed or developed with large community-based, multi-service centres such as Dixon Hall, that serves the downtown east end, or the former Central Neighbourhood House. Rather, the community was designed with specific neighbourhoods (Edgeley Village – Shoreham and Driftwood – Gosford, Tobermory, Firgrove, Yorkwoods, Northwoods and Spenvally). As a result, local organizations would have to find their own office space, while services would be delivered within those neighbourhoods, wherever space was available.

It was left up to community residents and their supporters to find and utilize spaces to respond to the implications and impact of poverty, newcomer settlement, racism and discrimination, isolation, large numbers of children and youth, and more.

1980s

Activism in response to the school system issues, policing, negative media coverage, unwanted development, and housing issues dominated the 1980s .

The Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto (now called Social Planning Toronto) released a report entitled, *Suburbs in Transition, Part 1: Evolution and Overview* written by Marvyn Novick In 1979.⁷ (Part Two came out in 1980.) The *Suburbs in Transition* report played an instrumental role in bringing attention to the suburbs. While experiencing similar issues to inner city areas such as Regent Park and Parkdale, the suburbs had been forgotten - especially areas in the northern corners of Metro Toronto like Jane-Finch, Rexdale, and Malvern. This report changed the way in which the City leaders thought about the suburbs and opened the doors to possible funding and increased supports.

The Downsview Weston Action Community members were meeting with residents and supporters in local community spaces and continuing to identify service needs. These meetings led to the formation of the Delta Family Resource Centre, initially located in Stanley Road Public School (75 Stanley Road) and Northwood Neighbourhood Services, originally located on the northwest corner of Jane and Sheppard, within the plaza.

⁶ Ibid p93

⁷ Marvyn Novick, "Metro Suburbs in Transition—Part 1: Evolution and Overview," Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1979, in *BY! US! FOR US!* p128

While there are stories to tell about the development of the above organizations, Northwood had an interesting start. The former Northwood Golf and Country Club, just north of Sheppard Avenue West on Clubhouse Court, closed and the clubhouse facility was given to the city for a nominal fee. The facility also included a second building of which people in Jane-Finch wanted to use to serve people in the south end of the ward, as Jane-Finch services were at capacity. Residents in the new homes did not want services in their community, so it was torn down. After research was conducted by D.W.A.C., it was determined that services were indeed needed, and this led to the formation of Northwood Neighbourhood Services, now located at 1869 Wilson Avenue West, Unit 400.

The Northwood Community Centre (15 Clubhouse Court) sits on a beautiful piece of land overlooking the ravine. The banquet hall is unlike any other community centre so as a result, many organizations have held their annual general meetings there and other social functions and celebrations.

Development of organizations meant meeting in community centres and in residents' homes. Once founded, some had to move multiple times over a period of many years before establishing themselves in their preferred location. For example, Delta Family Resource Centre moved from Stanley Public School to Eddystone, then to the Jane Sheppard Plaza (northwest corner), and finally to 2291 Kipling Avenue in the Humber Summit community. Elspeth Heyworth Centre (formerly the Asian Community Centre) moved to an office building at Keele and Finch and are now located at 2350 Finch Avenue West. The Jane Finch Community Legal Clinic, initially located in Norfinch Plaza (2005 Finch Avenue West) eventually moved to 1315 Finch Avenue West. High rents and suitability were factors in their moves around the community and outside of the community.

At the same time, ethno-cultural groups were establishing their own associations to respond to the needs of their populations, with support from established community organizations. For example, Cambodian newcomers formed the Cambodian Association as they were concerned about their youth and integration in Canadian society and received funding to establish an office in the Yorkwoods Plaza (2845 Jane Street). The Jane Finch Concerned Citizens Organization was also established there by Linda Morowei after her brother was shot and killed by police. Office space on the 2nd floor of Yorkwoods Plaza was utilized for over 10 years while their supportive programs and services were offered in community centres, M.T.H.A. spaces, or schools.

Similar to other community-based organizations, the Jane Finch Concerned Citizens moved from the Yorkwoods Plaza and eventually moved into the Yorkgate Mall until the mall could no longer provide them with space.

The York Woods Public Library was built and opened to the community in 1970. A theatre was later built that allowed for larger community events. When Peter McLaren's book, *Cries from the Corridor*, came out in 1980 residents and supporters in the community

organized a meeting there that allowed the author to talk about his book, and for the community to express its objections. The theatre has been utilized over the years as a place for community to make presentations, host large community meetings, sponsor special events and host recitals. It has also been used for plays and events by neighbouring communities.

During this decade, the community mobilized to fight development on the vacant Yorkgate lands and fought with the school system about overcrowding in the schools, securing adequate resources, and racial discrimination within the school system. Black children and youth were more likely to be labelled by the school system, media, government, and the police; they were assumed to be “troubled” children coming from poor families. This racial profiling of children was carried on in different ways throughout the lives of Black people.⁸ Meetings continued to happen in community locations where space was available.

Conversations started in the 1980s about establishing a Women’s Shelter in North York to meet the needs of women and children coming from abusive situations. Peggy Edwards, Community Development Coordinator for the Jane/Finch Centre led that initiative with support from the North York Inter-Agency and Community Council [amalgamated with five other social planning organizations into the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (Social Planning Toronto)]. When the shelter project received funding, their first staff worked out of the Jane/Finch Centre at 4400 Jane Street for two years while the shelter was being built.

The 1980s saw the Mennonite Church come back to the community. Historically, the Edgeley Mennonite Church was built in 1824 on Jane Street north of Highway 7 to serve the Mennonite farmers who arrived from the United States and settled in the area. The original church building was moved to Black Creek Pioneer Village in 1975. The Mennonite Conference of Ontario hired a community chaplain to work with the social housing residents at 15 Tobermory Drive, providing pastoral care and helping residents develop activities to improve their quality of life. The United Church followed this example with a community minister at 5 Needle Firway, in the Firgrove neighbourhood. Both ministries were involved with community engagement and community development initiatives, standing in solidarity with low-income and oppressed peoples on a daily basis. The United Church ministry continues at this time using office space at the Firgrove Public School.

Some of the local churches have engaged with community by responding to issues impacting their congregations while others opened their doors to programs and meeting spaces to the community at large by hosting after-school programs, day care centres, food banks, and more.

The York Finch Hospital [now Humber River Hospital at 1235 Wilson Avenue] was very important to the community. In 1984, York Finch had the busiest emergency department of any hospital of its size in Ontario.⁹ For many years, there were tensions, complaints, and issues

⁸ *BY US! FOR US!* p177

⁹ Michael Spensieri, “York Finch Updates Equipment” (*Jane Echo*, Feb. 1984)

raised about the hospital by members of the community, and in the 1980s attempts were made to improve communications and build bridges between the hospital and the community residents. Community discussions happened in community spaces and away from the hospital. When it was time to meet with representatives from the hospital, it was sometimes at the hospital and sometimes in a neutral space in the community.

The North York public schools also offered space for community activities, after-school programs, and daycare. For example, a community forum of over 100 people was held at Firgrove Public School in 1982 to identify areas of concern. They included youth employment, social services, education, recreation, housing, and municipal concerns.¹⁰ In many cases, the principals set the tone for how schools were utilized, with some being very open to community activity and some more reserved. Brookview Middle School (formerly Jane Junior High) was utilized more for north of Finch community meetings as the school was located on Jane Street and easy to access (4505 Jane Street) by the community as a whole.

Affordable housing continued to be a dominant issue in Jane-Finch. In the late 1980s, a housing co-operative development organization wanted to build housing on an empty lot at 2750 Jane Street. They recruited residents who wanted to live someplace where they had more control over their living environment and that was more affordable. Rent subsidies were still available in those days. With residents joining, a Board of Directors was established and after an intensive, but successful fight with neighbours and North York politicians over a re-zoning amendment, the construction went ahead. Residents began moving into the new Glen Gardens Housing Co-operative in 1989.

Since its inception, the co-op became another site for community events and organizing. For example, it was the home base for a number of years for the construction of *Serious T'ing* "float", the only reggae float in the annual Caribana parade in the 1990s.

1990s

In the decade of the 1990s, government cuts to services, increasing drug use, education issues, and continuing housing issues became larger. It was also a time of increased organizing of Jane-Finch residents and groups.

The Network of Community Based Organizations was formed in the early 1990s. D.W.A.C. had dissolved, and the Network continued some of its work. This network brought community-based organizations together on a monthly basis to discuss issues facing the community and to develop strategies to respond to the issues of the day. The Network did not have staff, nor have their own space, so the members shared the work collectively in their own spaces.

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10 Pat O'Neill, "Youth Hiring Headaches" (North York: *Jane Echo*, May 1982).

Their meetings were held in various community organizations' locations such as the Jane/Finch Centre, Black Creek C.H.C., Delta Family Resource Centre, and Northwood Neighbourhood Services. The Network was deliberate in moving their meetings to different parts of the community, so that members became familiar with the service provider locations and their programs and services. It was also easier to book a space with a local community organization rather than the school board or the Parks and Recreation department, both requiring a permit that took time, and sometimes cost, to process.

In 1992, the Network learned that Seneca College wanted to consolidate its west-end campuses into one location. The community fought vigorously to have the college locate on the vacant York Gate land, located behind the Yorkgate Mall. Meetings were held in various spaces and, while the community did not win, Seneca College eventually located a small satellite campus in the Yorkgate Mall. This space became another option for community to use for meetings or gatherings.

During this period of time, the community was dealing with increased drugs and alcohol problems. Discussions occurred in the community and by 1993, the Black Creek Anti-Drug Focus Community Group, known as FOCUS, became incorporated with a mandate for anti-poverty, anti-drug, and anti-alcohol initiatives.¹¹ Their work brought them into schools, community centres, and M.T.H.A. buildings. Dr. Ruth Morris, a resident, led this organization with innovative outreach and programming. In 1998, the board changed its name to Promoting Economic Action and Community Health and later to Promoting Education and Community Health. They had limited office space in the community, and over time, moved to 127 Eddystone Avenue where their location is known as a safe and positive space for youth.

Media played a role in sensationalizing the challenges facing Jane-Finch. In 1994, the concept of "neighbourhoodism" was introduced between two areas in North York, Jane-Finch and Lawrence Heights, and they established the Coalition Against Neighbourhoodism (C.A.N.). Both neighbourhoods were portrayed negatively in media. Meetings were held between both neighbourhoods in community spaces; and meetings with the media were held downtown with the Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail. Training was held for residents on how to deal with print and broadcast media in their respective communities.¹²

Neighbourhoodism drew the attention of academics. A three-year research project out of the University of Toronto called, "Toward Indicators of Community Capacity: A Study in Four Toronto Communities" included Firgrove and 15 Tobermory. After extensive research in the community, Firgrove was referred to as, "the community that flies," and Tobermory, "the community that cares." A new definition spoke to the communities' ability to build on the strengths of the residents in order to achieve its goals.¹³

¹¹ *BY US! FOR US!* p219

¹² *BY US! FOR US!* p222

¹³ *Ibid* p224

The newly elected Conservative Government under Premier Mike Harris in 1995 brought cuts to social services and to recipients of social assistance. Welfare was reduced by 21.68% and residents in the community were deeply affected by drastic cuts to government programs. Spaces (M.T.H.A. and community organizations) were utilized for residents to meet and to develop responses (e.g., letters to government and organizing protests). A local protest was organized at the corner of Jane-Finch, where protesters joined hands and formed a human chain, first across Finch Avenue, then across Jane Street. Traffic was halted for five minutes until police arrived to force the protesters off the street. The Jane/Finch Centre space was often used for the planning and organizing. Other protests followed at York University and one on Arrow Road.¹⁴

Also by this time, the Jane/Finch Centre had expanded its space to include four social housing units on the main floor of 4400 Jane Street, leaving their initial two rooms open for meetings and small events.

The concept of the Caring Village emerged in Jane-Finch in the early 1990s. The Caring Village was not a program, rather a “forum to do and promote advocacy for systemic change. Lasting change can only happen when you organize and inspire people to imagine a positive change that we all want and deserve.” Their focus was on the areas of Shoreham Drive and Driftwood Avenue.¹⁵ Most of their meetings were held at Shoreham Public School (31 Shoreham Drive) as many of the participating parents had children attending Shoreham School.

In 1998, the Jane-Finch community won the Caring Community Award. The Ontario Trillium Foundation invited communities across the province to submit a proposal identifying why their area should receive this award. The Network of Community Based Organizations highlighted five accomplishments, including when the Firgrove neighbourhood increased voter turn-out for the 1995 provincial election from five percent to fifty percent through the hard work of two residents. Another accomplishment was when residents at 15 Tobermory established welcome tables in the lobby of the building, run by volunteers, to discourage people from selling drugs in front of their building. A sign was posted along Jane Street to celebrate this win, but it was eventually taken down. The Ontario Trillium Foundation prepared a news release that said, “Perhaps one of the most significant accomplishments of this community is the tenacity of the residents to transcend adverse circumstances and to create a community that continues time and time again to inspire hope in its members.”¹⁶ This was indeed an amazing compliment to the residents and workers who continued the work in community spaces across the area.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p240

¹⁵ *Ibid* p254

¹⁶ *Ontario Trillium Foundation (1998) BY US! FOR US!* p247

When the Province downloaded social housing to the newly amalgamated City of Toronto in 1998, the Metro Toronto Housing Authority became the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (T.C.H.).

The end of this decade brought the shooting of young Brianna Davy in 1999 at the Yorkwoods Toronto Community Housing Corporation (23 Grandravine Drive). She was hit by one of the four bullets intended for her father. Prior to the shooting, a steering committee of residents and service providers had been meeting at Yorkwoods Community Centre for the purpose of developing programs and services for that area as there were safety concerns with a high number of youth hanging around with nothing to do along with some drug trafficking. After many meetings it was agreed to do a feasibility analysis to improve the physical infrastructure on City and T.C.H. lands through a pilot capital project, an assessment of community needs, and a community-based art project. The art project went ahead first with the intent for a design that would honour the death of Brianna. Space could not be found at Yorkwoods, rather the design can be found on the north side of Driftwood Community Centre. An artist from Montreal worked with residents to design and install *The Garden of Thought*, a design that includes boulders with inscriptions of one or several words and a circular bench backed by birch trees.¹⁷

The shooting of Brianna Davy galvanized community organizations to come together to create a reference group to address some of the concerns within the community at available community spaces. Their focus was to build on the area's strengths by placing emphasis on building on assets and capacities, prevention, community involvement, diversity, and community well-being. Funding was secured, and space was shared. Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services was the trustee for the grant, Delta Family Resource Centre provided the office space and Black Creek Community Health Centre provided the supervision of the staff.¹⁸ The reference group became the Black Creek Community Capacity Building Project that began its work in the early 2000s.

2000s

The Black Creek Community Capacity Building Project (B.C.C.C.B.P.) started with five priority objectives for the community: economic independence and stability; development of services; healthy, safe, and aesthetic spaces and facilities; enhancement of information and services; and showcasing the Black Creek (Jane-Finch) community. There was also a coordinating committee and a resident advisory committee set up for this project. For each objective there was a working group that met in various spaces within the community –

¹⁷ *BY US! FOR US!* p262

¹⁸ *BY US! FOR US!* p264

community centres, T.C.H. spaces, and within the offices of local community organizations.¹⁹ The B.C.C.C.B.P. continues to meet today under the name Black Creek Collaborative.

The largest private development in the community was on the northeast corner of Jane-Finch, then called the Palisades, which was built in the 1970s despite resistance from the community. It included two high-rise condominium towers and a thirty-three-storey rental building, where twenty-five percent of the units were subsidized. It became known as San Romanoway, after the name of the street that runs through the development. A recreation centre with a day care centre was built for the residents.

Over time, there was an increase in violence on this corner – 128 per cent above the national average in 2000. The San Romanoway Revitalization Association was established in 2000, with Stephnie Payne, a former North York school board trustee and Black activist who lived in the community, at the helm. Space for the association was made available at 10 San Romanoway and in the recreation centre. Through a variety of programs and support services for children, youth, adults, and seniors, they were able to bring down the crime rate in this neighbourhood.²⁰

The Building Hope Coalition, a coalition that started in the community and was supported by Councillor Maria Augimeri, began to respond to violence impacting members of the Black community. After countless meetings and advocacy efforts, this group played a significant role in getting the City to create a \$4.45 million dollar strategy to promote a safer Toronto for youth. Three grants came to Jane-Finch. One was for the Jane-Finch Khmer-Cambodian Youth Drug Prevention Project, another for Project Y.O.U. (Youth of Unity) to do glue sniffing awareness utilizing ten peer youth workers to provide eight skill-building sessions and a conference for youth, and a Jane Finch Gang Prevention Project. Each of these projects utilized various spaces throughout the community while attempting to deal with long-term youth issues with a combined total of \$53,062.²¹

The Jamaican Canadian Association (995 Arrow Road) is located west of Highway 400. There were various meetings and occasional public events in their space. For example, a Youth Forum was organized in 2001 in hopes of improving communication between the police and youth in the community. Youth spoke about their negative experiences including officers being transferred from one station to another, so relationships could not be built.²² Places like the Jamaican Canadian Association allowed for a freer discussion on the issue of discriminatory police practices at the time.

This was also the time when the Humber River Regional Hospital (2111 Finch Avenue West) was considering a move from its Jane-Finch location to another one further away in Downsview, along with a merger of the two other local hospitals. This would mean building a

¹⁹ *BY US! FOR US!* p265

²⁰ *BY US! FOR US!* p293

²¹ *BY US! FOR US!* p271

²² *BY US! FOR US!* p278

new and bigger hospital. The community mobilized and organized a protest at the Finch Avenue site dubbed, “Save Our Hospital”. A group of concerned residents utilized various spaces to meet and established the Coalition to Save Our Hospital. One of the spaces used for these meetings was the Community Room at the 31 Police Division building at 40 Norfinch Drive. They also held a town hall meeting with a public forum at that location. The police division did provide space for community meetings over the years, but due to tensions between police and many community members, it did not get used as frequently as other spaces in Jane-Finch.

The Jane/Finch Centre utilized Toronto Community Housing spaces for programs and services: 4400 Jane Street for its offices; 415 Driftwood recreation room for its Getting-In-Touch Mental Health Program; 15 Tobermory Drive, 2999 Jane Street, and 5 Needlefirway for its children’s programs. The Jane/Finch Centre’s newest initiative was developing The Spot: A Place Where Youth Wanna Be and they secured storefront space in the Yorkgate Mall, across from the Black Creek Community Health Centre, and down the hall from Seneca College. Yorkgate was considered a neutral safe space for youth to come together, receive support, participate in programs, and build their skills and capacities.

With long-standing systemic issues facing the Jane-Finch community, activities by social justice action groups of residents continued during this decade. For example, Jane Finch is Getting On organized a conference at Oakdale Community Centre (350 Grandravine Drive) focusing on access and equity. Jane Finch On The Move (J.F.O.T.M.) emerged from the conference to focus on issues impacting residents. That group organized another community conference that had over 300 people attending. It was held in a community centre, with prestigious guest speakers: noted educator, George Martell and University of Toronto professor, J. David Hulchanski. J.F.O.T.M. continued to meet in various spaces while focusing on poverty and social justice work.²³

Jane Finch Action Against Poverty later emerged from these initiatives to fight poverty and to act on issues impacting the community. Some of their early actions included the Jane-Finch Save our Schools Campaign, Jane-Finch Community Forum on Immigration, Right Food/Food Right campaign, May Day rallies, advocacy for expanding the Ontario Special Diet program, all-candidates election meetings, and Raising the Rates for social assistance. While they were supported by the Jane/Finch Centre, Black Creek Community Health Centre, and Community Legal Aid Support Program (C.L.A.S.P.) at York University, the residents led and actively participated in all the initiatives, utilizing various community spaces to meet, plan, and mobilize.

Space for community-based services and programs continued to be a serious problem in the 2000s for non-profit organizations and grassroots groups in Jane-Finch, not unlike the difficulties faced in other former suburban communities in North York, Etobicoke, and Scarborough.

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York University got funding from the T.D. Bank and opened the Y.U.-T.D. Community Engagement Centre (C.E.C.) in Yorkgate Mall. They invited the community to work with them and to utilize their space. The C.E.C. is also connected to the Seneca College facility at Yorkgate, whose classroom spaces were occasionally used for larger meetings or events. The C.E.C. became a hub of activity for the community.

Action for Neighbourhood Change was a new initiative of the United Way of Greater Toronto in 2007. The Jane/Finch Centre was successful in securing ANC funding, but again space had to be found for an office and activities. They initially had space on the 2nd floor in Norfinch Plaza, but without an elevator some residents could not access the office, so they moved into 415 Driftwood's recreation room, where they stayed until the funding ended. Affordable space is challenging to find in the community so, once again, space within T.C.H. enabled the A.N.C. initiative to carry out its activities and achieve its goals.

New services for youth continued to be developed by residents with locations within local schools and outside of school facilities. Friends in Trouble was started by a young man who attended Westview Centennial Collegiate (755 Oakdale Road) with the intention of providing programs that would engage youth and assist them with the court system. Success Beyond Limits was started by parents and community agency staff meeting at Westview to deal with high school drop-out rates. This program led to a relationship with York University that ensured a better transition from high school to university for youth who may not have considered post-secondary education as an option. Belka Enrichment Centre (120 Norfinch Drive) was started by two teachers outside of school hours to help youth move beyond anger and despair by providing positive alternatives.

Lastly, the Jane Finch Mall has provided some much-needed space for community organizations. Many years after hosting the Downsview-Weston Information Post, the Jane/Finch Centre was able to obtain storefront space in the mall for the Early Years' Centre (now referred to as Early ON Child and Family Centre). This program started out as the Child/Parent Centre at the 4400 Jane Street site, then utilized various spaces, including Gosford Public School (30 Gosford Blvd.) to provide early childhood programs. The Jane Finch Mall is also a site for the JVS Toronto employment support services.

2010s

Residents continued to access community spaces to meet and organize in the 2010s. York University-T.D. Community Engagement Centre at the Yorkgate Mall was utilized frequently by networks and grassroots groups, as were spaces next door in Seneca College's classrooms. Meetings also took place in spaces within local community organizations (e.g., the Jane/Finch Centre [various locations] and the Black Creek C.H.C. at Yorkgate Mall, across from Y.U.-T.D. C.E.C.).

Late 2009 and into 2010, the Toronto District School Board, suffering from continuing funding cuts by the provincial government, did a review of school populations. They determined that several Jane-Finch schools, among others in the system, were under-enrolled and therefore targeted for possible closure and sale of the property. Led by community activists, residents in Jane-Finch formed a coalition to stop the closures and held meetings of up to 300 people in spaces such as Brookview Middle School. As a result, none of the schools in the area were closed.

The Centre for Green Change, a new component of the Jane/Finch Centre, was developed in late 2009 into 2010. Space was secured at the rear of 2999 Jane Street, a high-rise Toronto Community Housing building, but the space needed renovation to create offices and a community meeting space. A Green Gala fundraising event was organized and held at the Oakdale Golf and Country Club; a private club not accessible to Jane-Finch organizations in the past [Oakdale was the site of the 2023 PGA Canadian Open golf tournament]. As well as proceeds from the gala, a proposal was submitted to Volunteer Canada for renovations for the Green Change centre. The proposal was successful, and with sponsorship from Starbucks, approximately 750 volunteers came to help with the make-over. Further funds were also obtained from the City of Toronto and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

For many years, events and festivals and protests utilized the northwest section of the Jane Finch Mall's parking lot. More recently, the newest initiative that has significant value for the community is the Corner Commons, a program of the Centre for Green Change. It is located on the southeast corner of Jane Street and Finch Avenue West and operates from spring to the fall. It was created to bring residents and workers together in a very visible, public space for a wide range of programs and activities including community events, educational workshops, artist residencies, live music, and much more.

In the early 2010s, work was begun to establish the Black Creek Community Farm (B.C.C.F.) at 4929 Jane Street by residents and staff in the area. This eight-acre property on Jane Street just south of Steeles Avenue West and next to the Black Creek Pioneer Village, was held by the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority (T.R.C.A.) and included a heritage farmhouse, a barn, and enough acreage to grow food for the community. Meetings and negotiations resulted in the establishment of this newest community-based organization in 2012.²⁴

The Black Creek Community Farm set up its office in the original farmhouse on the land and production began. Their purpose is to improve food security, reduce social isolation, and improve employment and education outcomes. This also became a space community organizations could utilize for relevant meetings.

Once the farm was established and functioning, they grew sustainable and organic food and led a fight for food justice by establishing the Black Creek Food Justice Network. Meetings were held at the farm to organize action for food security and food equity with their partners:

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the Jane/Finch Centre and the Black Creek C.H.C..²⁵ Several initiatives were organized that mobilized more residents to act on their own behalf and for the needs of the community.

Another source of resident-led community activism was the York-West Community Action Planning Group (C.A.P.G.). C.A.P.G. was established to address the issue of poor planning in the community and to ensure community voices were heard in any future planning by governments or private developers. Consisting of long-time community activists, they held their initial meetings in their homes. As they grew in number and wanted to be more visible to residents, they negotiated regular meeting space at the York Woods Public Library. They held their first public forum on the transit crisis and solutions for the community in the library. C.A.P.G. later held their meetings at the Green Change offices at 2999 Jane Street.

While working on building support for a Light Rail Train to run from Keele and Finch to Humber College, and beyond in Etobicoke, C.A.P.G. learned that the Province was actually going to build the L.R.T. When they found out that Metrolinx intended to build a maintenance and storage facility (M.S.F.) on the empty lands across from the Yorkgate Mall, they took it upon themselves to ensure some of that land was given to the community for social purposes. Some members remembered the fights with developers who wanted to build condos on that land and felt the community deserved something better that would benefit the community.

C.A.P.G. was invited by their partners, the Toronto Community Benefits Network, to speak at a meeting of Metrolinx and the developer consortia bidding to build the L.R.T. and the M.S.F. After compelling presentations from three C.A.P.G. activists, Metrolinx and the developers agreed to a minimum of a 32-metre setback.²⁶ Many meetings were held at 2999 Jane Street to discuss this process and to plan the presentation. Some years later, when Metrolinx reneged on its offer for the 32-metre frontage along Finch – thus taking this land from the community to sell on the private market – community residents and supporters organized and mobilized a sizable demonstration at the Yorkgate Mall parking lot across the street from the site. The media picked up on the protest and numerous columnists criticized the provincial government for this reversal, making the Ford government look bad. Metrolinx reversed course and relinquished the land to the City for use by the community.

When the City announced the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy (T.S.N.S.) in 2013, the City planned to hold consultations across Toronto, but the Jane-Finch community was not included. Jane Finch Action Against Poverty wrote a letter to the City reminding them that Jane-Finch was the priority community with the worst livability scores and insisted that the community be part of the consultations. The City agreed to this, so residents and community staff worked hard going door-to-door—visiting youth, seniors, and parent groups – and as a result of this local outreach well over two hundred residents attended the consultation. It was

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the largest consultation meeting the City held, larger than all the other consultations on this issue combined.²⁷ This meeting with the City happened at the Driftwood Community Centre.

Some social action work in Jane-Finch was done on the street, some at a desk, and some in a community space. For example, when Jane Finch Action Against Poverty (J.F.A.A.P.) tackled the issue of precarious jobs, they spent time talking to temporary and precarious workers on their way to work in order to learn more about this issue. More than one hundred exploitative temporary employment agencies operated in the community at that time. J.F.A.A.P. held workshops, advocated by telephone, and handed out flyers at the four corners of Jane Street and Finch Avenue (or wherever people congregated) to inform workers about their rights.²⁸

Jane Finch Action Against Poverty prepared a report for an all-candidates meeting for the municipal election of 2019. They found that residents continued to feel the impact from the lack of affordable housing, increasing rents, and insufficient income to pay their bills. They also found that the Humber River-Black Creek riding (including neighbourhoods from Keele to Highway 400) had the highest number of families on the waiting list for subsidized housing. The households in the area had the highest number of children waiting for a child-care subsidy and the highest rate of poverty among racialized and Indigenous people than the rest of Canada. JFAAP also found an increasing number of seniors living in poverty. Their document concluded that there was substantial demographic information documenting Jane-Finch as having enormous challenges, scarce resources, and insufficient social supports to address the systemic issues that have impacted the community since its beginning.²⁹

Mural and graffiti artistic design

Over the years, community staff and residents have invited artists, local and from outside, to paint murals and graffiti art in the community. Those artistic designs can be found on the walls of community centres (Driftwood), apartment buildings (4400 Jane Street, San Romanoway), Black Creek Community Farm and in the Yorkgate Mall (beside The Spot). [*Note: there are additional murals in the community.*] Each has a story to tell and brings character to the community. One specific mural, painted by people in the Firgrove community, depicts 12 youth who lost their lives due to violence over a fifteen-year period called *Towards a Higher Journey*. The mural hung outside the former Firgrove recreation centre until the centre was demolished.

Community Minister, Barry Reider, read an article in the Toronto Star around that time that compared the youth who died in Toronto to the Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. In a ten-year period, approximately 53 youth in Toronto Housing had lost their lives to violence. During that same period of time, 55 Canadian soldiers lost their lives in Afghanistan. Rieder saw

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the violence against youth in the community as another war “. . . that we don’t talk about, and that’s called poverty.”³⁰ Most recently, the mural was displayed at York University’s Art Gallery show and is being kept by a professor at York University who has been working with youth in Firgrove and PEACH over the past six years.

Summary

For those who call Jane-Finch home, or work with the residents, there continue to be major challenges facing the community, challenges that have been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the construction of the L.R.T. Despite this situation, the people of Jane-Finch and their supporters have managed to mobilize and fight against negative conditions imposed on them, creating community-based services in whatever spaces they could find. This is a very diverse community with people from around the world, with their cultures, skills and experiences that add to creating a better community. What Jane-Finch has in abundance is social capital.

People volunteered a great deal of their time and knowledge, working with others to build the community they wanted and deserved. In Jane-Finch, there is a very deep and valuable legacy of community-led organizing, advocacy, and action. While that legacy is primarily about people acting collectively, it is important to acknowledge that the work would not have happened without the community spaces that were provided, where meetings were held, where events took place, and where memorials were constructed.

Spaces in both Toronto Community Housing Corporation buildings and in city community centres were instrumental in community development. For example, the work of residents in developing community services could not have been done without utilizing space within the following TCHC locations:

- *4400 Jane Street*: Jane/Finch Centre (office and program space), programs for youth groups, community meetings
- *415 Driftwood Avenue*: Y.W.C.A. Life Skills Group, Action for Neighbourhood Change, Getting in Touch, community meetings
- *15 Tobermory Drive*: Life Skills Group, moms and tots programs, Mennonite Community Ministry (had a thrift shop, food bank), meeting spaces
- *2999 Jane Street*: Life Skills Group, Centre for Green Change, meeting space
- *5 Needlefirway*: Life Skills Group, Women’s Group, United Church’s Community Ministry utilized 5 Needle Firway and then they had one of the townhouses – now demolished
- *San Romanoway*: programs and services, community meetings

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Meetings, celebrations and events were mostly conducted in the following community centres:

- *Driftwood Community Centre*
- *Oakdale Community Centre*
- *Northwood Community Centre*

The following malls had, or continue to have, community services in their spaces:

- *Jane-Finch Mall* – formerly had the Downsview Weston Information Post and continues to have Jane/Finch Centre’s Early ON, J.V.S. Employment Services and Corner Commons
- *Jane-Sheppard Mall* – (northeast corner) Black Creek Community Health Centre was there for about 6 years when they were established
- *Jane-Sheppard Plaza* – (northwest corner) Northwood Neighbourhood Services was there for several years as was Delta Family Resource Centre
- *Sheridan Mall* – Black Creek C.H.C. has a site there
- *Yorkgate Mall* – formerly had the Jane Finch Concerned Citizens Organization and continues to have the Black Creek CHC as second site; York University-T.D. Community Engagement Centre, Jane/Finch Centre’s The Spot, and Seneca College

Submitted by Wanda MacNevin

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Biographic information about Wanda MacNevin:

Wanda MacNevin grew up in Downsview on the former Canadian military base. While living in Jane-Finch, she started work in 1976 at the Jane/Finch Centre and then in 1991, she worked at the Black Creek Community Health Centre. She went back to the Jane/Finch Centre in 2003 until she retired in 2016 as the Director of Community Programs. MacNevin dedicated time volunteering on boards, committees, and in political action.

In 2017, York University awarded her with a Doctor of Laws degree for her lifework. MacNevin has authored three books, *From the Edge - A Woman’s Evolution from Abuse to Activism* (1999), *Teen Moms: If I Only Knew* (2008) and *By Us! For Us! Activism in Jane-Finch, A Working-Class Community* (2022).

[All documents saved by Wanda MacNevin can be found in the archives at York University.]