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#### TORONTO ARTS FOUNDATION

Toronto Arts Foundation's vision, Creative City: Block by Block<sup>1</sup>, is to connect every Toronto neighbourhood with the transformative social and economic benefits of the arts.

Toronto Arts Foundation's research and corresponding initiatives enable it to identify and build capacity in areas of the city that will benefit from increased arts activity.

Toronto Arts Foundation initiatives include the Neighbourhood Arts Network<sup>2</sup>, North York Arts<sup>3</sup>, East End Arts, Toronto Arts Foundation Awards and Toronto Arts Research.

In 2011, the Toronto Arts Foundation received funding from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council<sup>4</sup> to lead a research partnership with Art Starts, OCAD University, and York University. The goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of how residents engage with the arts at a community level, to explore barriers to arts access and to identify ways to strengthen local arts engagement.

The insights and suggestions brought forward in this report will build on previous research findings and be used by the Toronto Arts Foundation and the Toronto Arts Council to inform future policy and funding decisions.

**Transforming Communities Through the Arts: A Study of Three Toronto Neighbourhoods** written by Margo Charlton with Deborah Barndt, Katherine Dennis and Rosemary Donegan.

<sup>1.</sup> www.torontoartsfoundation.org/Our-Programs/Block-by-Block

<sup>2.</sup> www.neighbourhoodartsnetwork.org

<sup>3.</sup> www.northvorkarts.org/

<sup>4.</sup> www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca

<sup>5.</sup> http://cap.apps01.vorku.ca/

<sup>6.</sup> http://www.ocadu.ca/programs/art/criticism-and-curatorialpractice.htm

<sup>7.</sup> www.artstarts.net/

#### **RESEARCH PARTNERS**

At York University, the faculty of Environmental Studies and the Faculty of Fine Arts have cooperated in the development of the Community Arts Practice (CAP) certificate program.<sup>5</sup> CAP has made significant contributions to the training of community arts practitioners and the study of the field. OCAD's growing interest in community arts combined with their examination of public engagement in the arts through their Criticism & Curatorial Practice<sup>6</sup> program provided another perspective to the team. Art Starts' commitment to the hands-on practice of community arts in various neighbourhoods helped to ground the inquiry. A pioneer in the Toronto community arts scene, the organization celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2012.<sup>7</sup>



Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada Canada









#### CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Neighbourhoods are filled with creative energy, from local festivals bringing people into the streets and parks, to art classes for children, and knitting circles for adults; from showcases highlighting fashion design and urban dance, to community gardens festooned with colourful fences, to graffiti artists using buildings as canvases; from people meeting up to make music together, to individuals quietly working on their calligraphy; from plans to open cultural hubs to enterprising people finding a way to sell their art - there is no shortage of vibrant expression in the research communities—thekeyishowthework can be supported and encouraged and how residents can become more in touch with the creative potential of their neighbourhoods.

This report provides a brief overview of our research plans, an introduction of the three research communities and an overview of the larger socio-economic factors that affect them. In addition, there is a discussion of how the arts are perceived, what attracts residents to engage in arts activities, the impact of the arts on personal and neighbourhood well-being, an examination of the

barriers to accessing the arts, and a vision of what can happen in Toronto's neighbourhoods if there are more resources for the arts.

We hope this research will assist residents, arts organizations and community groups in telling the story of the importance of arts in neighbourhoods and that the research findings will support efforts to strengthen arts engagement throughout the city of Toronto.

Working with community organizations and community liaison workers 17 researchers made 300 connections and conducted focus groups, interviews and surveys with close to 200 residents, artists, arts groups and social service organizations working and living in three communities - Malvern, St. James Town and Weston-Mt. Dennis.

#### **PLANNING**

A planning period to define terms, set research questions and develop a system for conducting the research was necessary and one critical decision was to use community-based research methods. This entailed incorporating community feedback, hiring residents as research guides and planning to return the research results to the community.

Once the team of researchers and community liaison workers from each neighbourhood was in place, a process of training and community outreach was started.

The team organized public meetings to announce the research project and to start our conversations with the community. Before launching into the field work we asked community members and organizations for feedback on how the research can contribute to local initiatives, and the best wording for our surveys and interview questions. The interview questions were modified as a result of community input.

We encountered "healthy cynicism" about researching in areas that have been subjected to many studies. We were urged to find a better way of merging the academic/research world with the needs of people and to avoid taking people's experiences and stories without returning benefits to the community.

#### **FIELD WORK**

The research team's job was to find out what arts activities are going on and who the local leaders are. They attended community meetings, gallery openings, museums, community dinners, design sessions and bazaars to meet as many people as possible. In addition, the teams organized events to link local artists and arts groups to the Toronto Arts Foundation's Neighbourhood Arts Network and the grants programs of the Toronto Arts Council<sup>8</sup>.

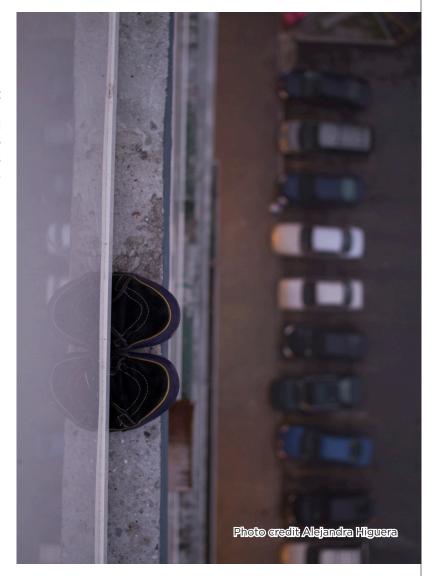
Through interviews, focus groups and surveys, we learned how people participate in the arts, what they consider arts activity, how new ideas and groups are emerging, why arts are important at a neighbourhood level, what barriers limit participation, and how community agencies are working with the arts.

The research team met regularly to report on their work. The researchers noted the energy and dedication of the interviewees, the pride they have in their communities, and their desire to connect with one another and support new endeavours.

<sup>8.</sup> www.torontoartscouncil.org

#### **ANALYSIS AND REPORTING**

After the field work a lengthy period was spent analyzing the information, identifying neighbourhood resources, developing reports and crafting future directions. The research findings were returned to the communities via report launch events created with input from local arts organizations and artists. The report is available through the Toronto Public Library system and on the research website at torontoartsresearch.org



### ACCESS ACTIVITIES ADULT

# ANOTHER ARTISTIC ARTISTS BENEFITS BETTER BUILD BUILDING CANADA CHANGE

CHILDREN COMMUNITY CREATE CREATIVE

CULTURAL CULTURE DANCE DEVELOPMENT DIFFERENT DIVERSITY

ENGAGEMENT EVERYONE EXPERIENCE FAMILY FOCUS FOUNDATION

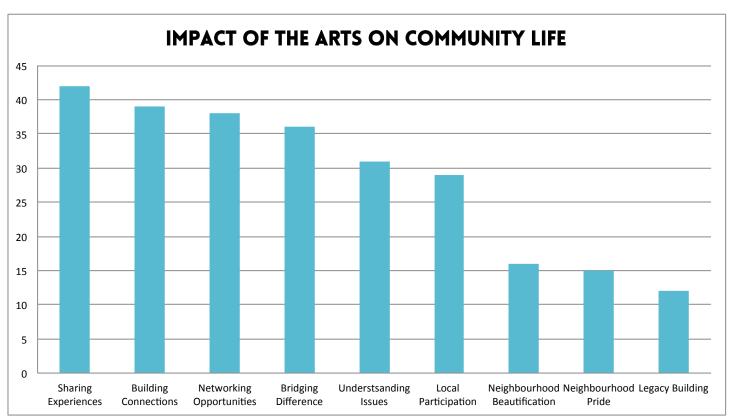
FUNDING GENDER GETTING GREAT IDENTITY IMPACT IMPORTANT

INDIVIDUALS INFORMATION INTERESTED INVOLVED LANGUAGE LEADERS

LOCAL LOCATION MAKING MANDATE MISSING MONEY MURAL MUSIC NEEDS

NEIGHBOURHOOD NEWCOMER OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE PARENTS PARTICIPATE PHONE PLACES POSITIVE PRACTICE PROGRAMMING PROVIDE QUESTION RESEARCH RESIDENTS RESOURCES SCARBOROUGH SCHOOL SENIOR SERVICES SHARE SKILLS SOCIAL SPACE STILL STORY STREET SUPPORT TERMS THEATRE TIMES TOGETHER

TORONTO URBAN WEBSITE WESTON WITHIN YOUTH



 $\%\,of\,people\,interviewed\,identified\,these\,top\,impacts\,of\,the\,arts\,on\,community\,life$ 





#### CHAPTER TWO:

#### THE NEIGHBOURHOODS

The research studied three neighbourhoods from different geographic areas of the city – suburban and downtown. Although differing in appearance, the communities shared some commonalities and challenges. They are destinations for new immigrants, have high populations of children and youth, and because of socio-economic challenges have been targeted for community development initiatives.

The culture and history of each neighbourhood factored into the way in which residents participated in the arts. Research teams discovered over 90 distinct examples of creative activities within the three communities showing a wonderfully rich mosaic of arts practice at a neighbourhood level. These included sewing, theatre, gardening, poetry, storytelling, drawing, painting, photography, henna art, ink brush drawings, computer graphics, reggae music and mural-creation, to name but a few. Undoubtedly our research only scraped the surface.

#### MALVERN

Founded in 1857, Malvern Village has transformed into a suburban community, in the most north eastern part of the city. The neighbourhood's grassy boulevards and tree-lined streets stand in contrast to the nearby multi-lane highway. The Malvern Town Centre houses a shopping mall and the area's social service organizations, community centre and library are close by. The neighbourhood has a number of parks and is close to Rouge Park, Canada's only urban national park. Compared to the rest of Toronto, Malvern has a much higher number of visible minorities and a higher number of recent immigrants, mainly from Southern Asia, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean.

#### ST. JAMES TOWN

St. James Town, centrally located in downtown Toronto, was first developed in the 19th century as a community of single family dwellings but was transformed in the 1950's to "Towers in the Park" style apartment buildings. The target population of middle-class professionals briefly lived there in the 50's and 60's, before moving to the suburbs. Much of the neighbourhood green space has been lost and features, such as swimming pools and tennis courts, have been

neglected. Less than a square kilometre in size, the rental tower community is Canada's most densely populated neighbourhood with a high number of recent immigrants mainly from Southern Asia and South East Asia.

#### **WESTON-MT. DENNIS**

The Weston-Mt. Dennis area was first settled at the turn of the 19th century, initially as a farming community, with farms later supplanted by industry. Located in north-western Toronto and bordering the Humber River, it has faced hardship since the shutdown of area manufacturing. Historical and conservation societies help retain some of the feeling of a small town. There are affluent homes along the river that stand in contrast to rental towers along the main roads. Within the neighbourhood 70 different languages are spoken. The area, located close to the airport, is a landing spot for newcomers, primarily from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

Note: information about age is taken from 2011 census data; immigration and visible minority information is taken from 2006 census data.







Community Café is a volunteer-run group that organizes social evenings featuring affordable, healthy food that is locally produced and/or fairly traded. Nancy Slamet, one of the café organizers calls it "an alternative island where everyone belongs...and an opportunity for residents to take ownership of how they access their food."

Seeing the value of community building and the need to address hunger in the neighbourhood, these events provide more than just dinner. They offer meaningful engagement by bringing people from diverse backgrounds and experiences together at communal tables. The group is committed to providing a venue where people feel welcome and there is an opportunity to learn about, discuss and work together on issues affecting the community and wider society. Dinner gatherings are regularly attended by upwards of 100 people in an evening. They hope the café will breakdown some of the "preconceptions and stereotypes" about St. James Town by bringing people together over conversation and food.

Community Café connects food, food education and art, nourishing the body, mind and soul. Each event features the work of a local artist or group presenting anything from visual arts to music. Local blues musician, Cliff Martin, has performed at a number of events. Café organizers told the story of their first café event where "an older man was singing some traditional Spanish love songs and people just got up and started dancing." On the evening the research team attended the café, a local visual artist provided sketching classes and diners were invited to add to a shared drawing.

#### CHAPTER THREE:

#### LOOKING UNDER THE SURFACE

When entering a community it isn't easy to identify what's going on or who makes things happen. St. James Town's Community Corner Executive Director, Ravi Subramanian, sums this up: "What we say in Tamil is that the fruit comes with the leaves. If we look at the leaves, you will see the fruit under that. People are here, but they are not always visible for different reasons." These reasons range from a complex and changing urban web of personal connections, loose networks, and the changing nature and dedication of local leaders.

There are a handful of arts organizations and arts programs known to most residents but other aspects of the arts scene remain a hidden part of community life- this informal but vibrant work is driven by personal interests, cultural practices or the organic processes of people coming together.

In addition, the evolution and growth of arts activity is subject to larger social and economic forces, to shifts in population and the emergence of community leaders.

#### POPULATION SHIFTS

In Weston-Mt. Dennis some residents identified tensions between "people born in the neighbourhood" and the "newcomers who don't stay long." While racism is not to be underestimated, one focus group member noted that often it is not so much about hostility as a "sense of longing or nostalgia – for what was...and people resist change." Local leaders are working to bridge cultural divides.

Immigrants change the landscape of arts and culture by bringing their cultural traditions and introducing new ways of discussing and expressing the arts. Arts are not often a high priority when compared to jobs and housing but once established, newcomers search out cultural resources and create new cultural scenes different from mainstream Canadian art.

Toronto is a destination for professionally trained artists and like other foreign-trained professionals, artists experience difficulties finding work and making connections in their new home. Bangladeshi-born Iftikhar Uddin Ahmed finds "the entire system of galleries and museums extremely limiting within this city" and that institutions are not representing the cultural

diversity of the city's art scene. The research identified the unique settlement challenges of newcomer professional artists and the need to work with settlement agencies to discover ways to mentor and support this sector.

#### LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM STABILITY

Leaders emerge, some stay, some move away, some get tired. With limited funding and dependency on volunteers, local arts and cultural programs are often unstable. In Weston-Mt. Dennis and St. James Town which have high rates of population transience, community development worker Jean-Marie Boutot notes that it is difficult for programs to move from being intermittent to becoming a local "institution" that the residents can count on. Short-term project-based funding also makes it difficult to establish long-term arts programs that will make a substantial change in a neighbourhood.

Local leaders spoke of their love of their home community, their enthusiasm for the power of locally-led development, and the importance of arts in the life of the neighbourhood. "Artists can be a shining example of what is possible when community and artists work together in partnership.

That is our mantra and guiding principle. And we see that both artists and community are intricately woven together. The artists can draw out the community's potential - the potential is always there, but the artist more or less frames it, whether through dance, theatre, or visual arts" says Jacklyn Thomas, co-founder and Executive Director of Artists to Artists Foundation in Weston-Mt. Dennis.

#### **LABELLING**

Toronto is a city of cities says, social work professor David Hulchanski in his report comparing Toronto of the 1970's and 2000's. City One includes the core and subway corridors where higher income earners live while City Three is made up of the surrounding suburbs with the lowest income per family. City Two, primarily middle class, is perched uncomfortably between the two and is disappearing while the other two groups expand.

The problems of City Three - including poor transportation, higher crime rates, and lower incomes influence all aspects of life including how residents access the arts. Weston-Mt. Dennis and Malvern are City Three communities; in addition, they were designated as Priority Neighbourhoods by the City of Toronto and the United Way,

www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca

making them eligible for additional funding. St. James Town is an exception. Although situated in prime downtown real estate, its density and high numbers of newcomers and low income renters make it comparable to City Three. It just missed being added to the Priority Neighbourhood list.

Residents and community organizers had mixed reviews about how Priority Neighbourhood funding was applied, whether it had an impact, and indeed whether being labelled this way was good for the community. One longtime resident notes the problem of connecting two distinct areas Weston and Mt. Dennis and labeling them as one area, pointing out that resources were not equally distributed within the region resulting in the residents of Weston feeling "really dispirited." Others criticized the plan as not being tailored to local needs, describing the process as being too focused on "charts and logistics with deliverables" resulting in a "cookie cutter" community development approach. In contrast, some believe the designation opened the door to opportunities for their neighbourhood that would not have occurred without the Priority Neighbourhood label.

High crime rates have cemented the reputation of all three neighbourhoods as "troubled areas." This affects the way residents feel about their home and as rapper Jason Strachan aka Jaek DeLarge says, "there are a lot things to stray you from the art." Despite negative perceptions interviewees emphasized the vitality of their community. They urged us to examine the assets of the neighbourhood – population diversity, local history, and more intangibles such as the spirit of the place and determination of the people.

Indeed, art of all kinds, from graffiti to music and fashion was identified as being a key resource in all three neighbourhoods. Community-engaged arts contribute to neighbourhood improvement by developing social networks and increasing understanding between diverse groups.

The urban arts scene, much of it coming out of suburban communities, has had a huge impact on popular culture, fashion and design. From the Culture Shock Festival and pop up galleries in Weston-Mt. Dennis, to youth-led mural projects in Malvern, to a Banner Contest featuring art work from local artists in St. James Town - the research communities are not waiting for something to happen; they are working to enliven their communities through the arts. In addition, a movement of creative placemaking is attempting to address the need for local cultural hubs. Toronto's ArtScape, a pioneer in building artist live/work spaces in downtown Toronto is now turning its attention to Toronto's suburbs which could have a positive impact on accessible and suitable space for arts activities.

The tensions between Hulchanski's three cities and the realities of each community are shaped by larger local and global social forces and inequities. One way that the researched communities are demonstrating their resilience and ingenuity is through the arts and in so doing are creating a sense of place in a larger urban context.



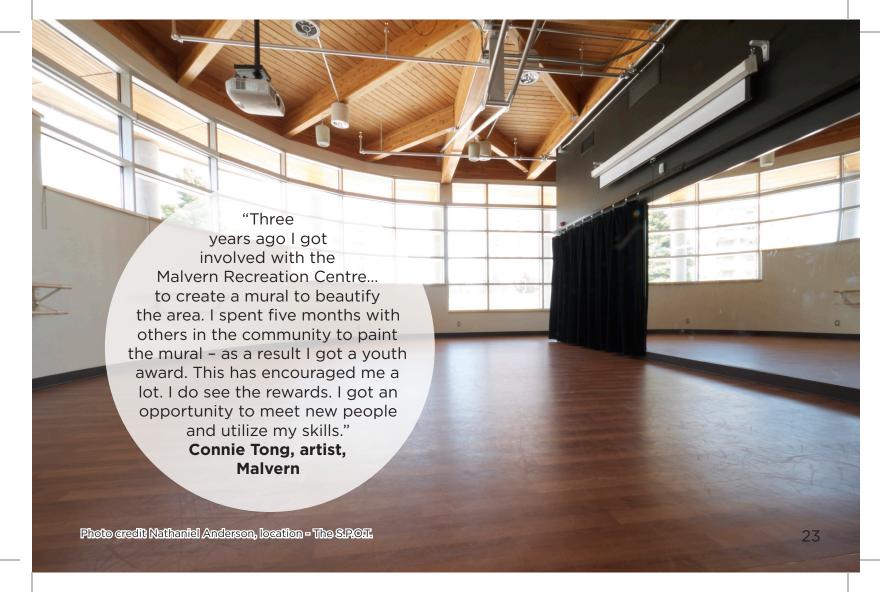


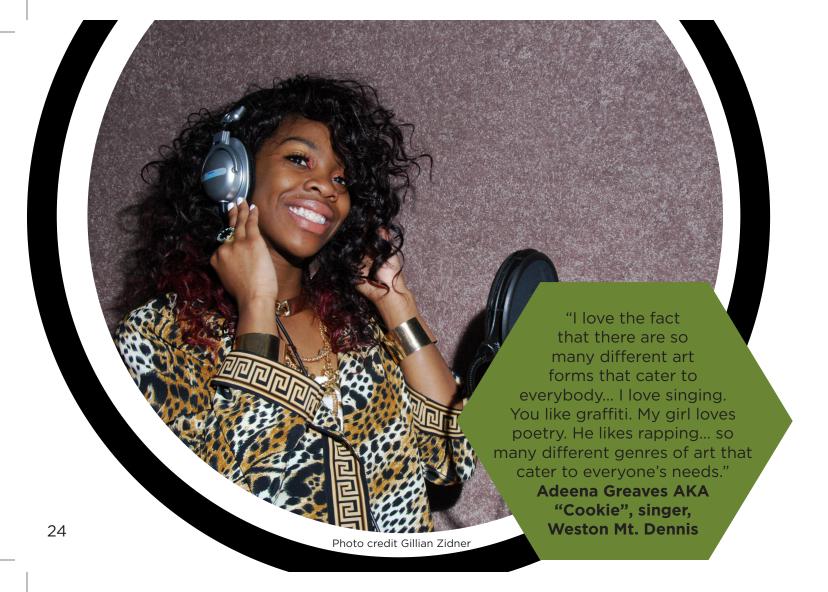


#### FEATURE STORY: THE ARTISTS TO ARTISTS FOUNDATION

Officially established 5 years ago, the Artists to Artists Foundation has been operating for nearly 20 years. Recently, it has collaborated with the Weston Business Improvement Association on window and office displays, worked with landlords to use vacant buildings to create pop-up galleries, and connected with businesses to organize events, such as a Somali food and art celebration at the Wiff Restaurant.

The AAF can be found at its home at 1 Victoria Avenue West. Renovated by the Foundation, the house is an artist run centre where members and the local community have access to a gallery, meeting space, individual artist studios and a print shop. Members practice a wide range of art disciplines from choreography to video to performance and visual arts. The Foundation has confidence that the arts will make a difference in Weston-Mt. Dennis. According to Executive Director Jacklyn Thomas the community "has all the ingredients to make it work" and the arts have a direct impact on the lives of residents because they "draw people in without confrontation" making them "a natural fit" for the community.





#### CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT IS ART?

Research teams posed the question: "What is art?" We did not expect to answer the question, but rather to generate conversations that expand how we think about art. Different points of view reflect not only community specific perspectives, but race, culture, gender, generation and economic class. What emerged from the research process was the shared view of art as "expression," of doing something because it is "inside you", an important part of living a full life, and building community or social change. Moving beyond easily recognized art forms like painting or music, art was found to encompass a far broader sense of individual and collective expression.

In conventional terms, art in North America may be seen to have three distinct practices separated by their goals and purposes. First is a "professional practice" that includes classical forms of art, literature and music where value is placed on the finished product. Secondly, a "community culture" that can best be described as the "act of doing" where the process may be more important than the product. Finally, there is a "commercial culture" that values financial reward and popular recognition.

On the ground, the lines blur between these basic divisions. In practice, categories merge and overlap, changing over time to account for new developments in arts and culture. Forms of arts appreciation, such as watching dance on TV rather than attending a live performance, have adapted with technology alongside changes in the arts themselves.

Adding to the challenge of defining art is the fact that art and the culture it reflects is in a process of change from moment to moment and from one context to another. There are also emerging art forms and ways of looking at them that expand these three basic categories. The researchers identified eight kinds of arts participation in the three neighbourhoods:

#### 1. COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ART AND ACTIVIST ART

Programs that link professionally trained artists with residents create art that speaks to the diverse identities, interests, needs and/or concerns of local residents and is referred to as community arts,

community-engaged arts or arts in development. Some community arts groups serve a specific neighbourhood while others work across the city carrying out projects in partnership with local organizations. The nature of the projects is as varied as the artists and communities they work in, with time-frames ranging from a few weeks to several years. Projects often culminate in exhibitions or performances - either a one-time or ongoing series of events shared with the community.

For example, safety concerns about railway tracks where children were playing prompted the Weston-Mt. Dennis Community Association to start an outdoor art gallery running along the exposed tracks. In response, the City of Toronto funded a new fence with assistance from Urban Arts and the Safety Initiative Police Partnership. Today, the fence (an example of activist art) is an outdoor art gallery and garden area.

Another example of community based art is the practice of "outreach" programs in the community. One example is "INside Opera," an opera summer camp for St. James Town youth run by Tapestry New Opera. The students are given the opportunity to write, rehearse and perform an opera while working

with a team of professional writers and performers.

#### 2. INDIVIDUAL ARTS PRACTICES

A lot of people like to pursue their own personal creative journey. Some interviewees have been working at one art form for years, others are new converts, and others move from form one expression to another, or mix forms. Individual practices reveal a rich heritage of activities and art forms such as writing, painting and photography, taking place anywhere from apartments to city streets. For example, a Weston-Mt. Dennis textile artist explains the arts have helped her "find my way." Yet personal creative products may also reveal histories and identities that speak to others in the community.

#### 3. ART CLASSES

Many residents want opportunities for themselves or their children to learn art skills such as guitar, knitting or landscape painting. At the Community Corner, a service hub in St. James Town, free art classes are in high demand. Indeed the research demonstrates that demand is high across all three neighbourhoods and there is a need for more accessible classes.

#### 4. ARTS APPRECIATION

As the research teams discovered, even those who do not participate in the arts tend to support those who do. The public enthusiastically supports family and friends, festivals, cultural celebrations, galleries and performances. Public art displays are also appreciated whether they are seen by residents or those travelling through the neighbourhood.

In Weston-Mt. Dennis, the West Won Festival, Neighbours Night Out, and Culture Shock are popular local events. Smile Theatre is just one example of a company that tours productions to neighbourhoods throughout the city. Their tours to seniors' centres are well attended in Weston-Mt. Dennis and Malvern.

#### 5. ARTS OUTREACH

Some professional arts organizations provide arts opportunities in neighbourhood settings, challenging the notion that arts should be relegated to stages, concert halls, and galleries. Dusk Dances brings contemporary and traditional dance to a number of Toronto neighbourhood parks fusing art and culture with professional and community work. The annual summer event in Malvern's Neilson Park features performances that integrate amateur, neighbourhood

and professional dancers to develop neighbourhood specific performances.

#### 6. ARTS AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

In Malvern, The Roots and Branches Dance School teaches a variety of dance forms including dance traditions from the African Diaspora. Founder, Tamla Mathews-Morgan feels it is important "for the children to see themselves reflected in their teachers so that the classroom becomes a safe place to explore past, present and future identity."

Art is an important part of connecting to heritage and tapping into the collective memory of a culture. One example of the power of this collective memory is the growing number of Nepalese immigrants in St. James Town who maintain their cultural traditions, thus providing a significant incentive for other Nepalese to visit, and indeed to relocate to the area.

#### 7. ARTS IN DAILY LIFE

Interviewees frequently did not differentiate between art and craft and consider all forms of creative expression. Domestic arts such as cooking, sewing, gardening or body work (hennas, hairstyling and tattoos) are valued as art forms. The Taste of St. James Town, a local festival that features food from

the many neighbourhood ethnic communities, is described by local activist Margaret Coshan as "art through cooking" and an important way for people to see themselves creating arts in daily life.

#### 8. ART IN PUBLIC PLACES

Engagement with the arts at a neighbourhood level is a complex picture. Murals are popular in neighbourhood settings but they raise questions about who determines content, style and location of the work. For example: If community members are involved, how are they invited into the discussion? What is the relationship between the artists commissioned to create the work and the local community? What happens when there are diverse cultural aesthetics at play? While there are no easy answers, the research neighbourhoods are raising important questions about the impact of art in public places.







# FEATURE STORY: ARTISTS OF ST. JAMES TOWN, AN INITIATIVE OF COMMUNITY MATTERS, ST. JAMES TOWN

Recognizing both the needs and the resources of St. James Town, Margaret Coshan and Chris Hallet established Community Matters ten years ago. Rooted in the idea of neighbours helping neighbours, the group's many programs offer classes on employment, settlement, healthy living and adult education. Their aim is to build strong networks and to help people exchange skills and knowledge.

"Work, education, health and connectivity – mesh together through the arts. In fact the arts were a piece we weren't focusing on but now we see they can be an integral part of what we do...it's was an 'ah hah' moment," explains Coshan. Local resident Neudis Abreu, inspired by Community Matters' art initiatives, is now employed to coordinate the newly formed Artists of St. James Town. Originally from Venezuela, Neudis graduated from Emily Carr University of Art & Design. As a member of the Community Matters team, Neudis is "constantly thinking of ways to engage the community."

Community Matters recognizes how the arts make a valuable contribution to the area's ongoing revitalization. By connecting artists to artists and encouraging art-making in the community there are endless opportunities for art to make a difference. For example: its Banner Project invited residents to submit original artworks to be juried and displayed throughout the neighbourhood on street-lamp banners. Community Matters is developing an art plan that will transform public spaces in the neighbourhood, it includes: mosaics and murals, a sculpture garden, community walks, knit bombing trees, painting Bell boxes, and planting gardens.







## CHAPTER FIVE: ACCESSING ARTS EXPERIENCES

Interviewees talked about barriers to art programs that they, their friends, families and neighbours experience. Disconnection, alienation and isolation were flagged as the major barriers, along with lack of space, the need for local networking and improved communication. The most common barriers fall into three interrelated areas: the needs and problems faced by individuals, the neighbourhood and the larger society.

Many obstacles are connected to larger structural problems that are the result of social inequities that marginalize some people and communities more than others. Barriers tend to disappear with higher incomes; and long time residents with greater knowledge of the system and English fluency also experience fewer barriers to finding and using art programs. However, certain barriers, endemic to the arts, bridge economic, social and cultural backgrounds. For example, a lack of personal encouragement from others can lead to discouragement in the young and old regardless of class or race.

Some interviewees provided specific incidences of when they faced a barrier while others spoke of an overall feeling of being on the outside of an insider "arts community." Whether that is a perceived divide between downtown versus inner suburb, a long time resident versus newcomer situation, or simply a group in the know versus those not on the list - the reality is that a sizeable number of people reported facing barriers to access to the arts.

Local leadership, arts groups and community agencies are working to better understand and address access issues – taking into account individual, neighbourhood and systemic barriers.

#### **INDIVIDUALS**

Barriers that affect individuals included a) cost, b) accessibility, c) lack of support and low self-esteem.

Many parents requested information about where to find free or affordable arts programs for their children. There are not many options as free community arts programs fill up fast and for some the fees charged at community centres are too high. Some parents, particularly newcomers, also have trouble using the registration system.

The problem of arts access opportunities for children and youth is further compounded by cuts to arts education in Toronto's schools. Art City in St. James Town is a good example of an organization trying to fill the gap by providing arts experiences for children in a densely populated area. Operating out of a storefront space located beneath a high-rise apartment complex, it has insufficient space and resources to meet local demand; there is a continuous waiting list to access its free after-school art programs.

A member of the St. James Town Youth Council, notes that some youth lack self esteem and do not participate because they might "make a fool of themselves." She also talked about youth who do not have the support of their parents. This is particularly true for the children of newcomer immigrants who have "a lot of hope for their children" but are unable to see how the arts fit into this vision for the future. Parental concerns have to be understood in the context of the sacrifices parents made to come to Canada, including perhaps losing status and having to take on menial jobs. This situation reflects the larger social issue that there is a lack of general support for the arts as a livelihood in Canada (not the case in all countries)

#### **NEIGHBOURHOOD**

Significant neighbourhood barriers include a) lack of facilities b) insufficient program planning and funding c) not enough outreach as well as communication problems and d) transportation issues.

Programs are happening in the basements of Toronto Community Housing towers, in libraries, storefronts, community agencies, and in private homes. Some of these are excellent locations while others are cramped, poorly ventilated and unsuitable for arts programs. Interviewees shared many examples of how their neighbourhood could "blossom" with more space for the arts. The needs of families from the research communities stand in stark contrast to more affluent areas where there are more public and private spaces for arts programs and classes.

In Malvern and Weston-Mt. Dennis participants face transportation challenges because the neighbourhoods are spread out, and transit access is limited. In addition, some local arts groups cannot find space within the community and are forced to schedule activities in neighbouring communities.

Despite expressing optimism and belief in their neighbourhood, many interviewees were frustrated with the gap they saw between what could be and what is. This is particularly true in Weston-Mt. Dennis where, even though they were targeted as a "Priority Neighbourhood", the area still lacks a community or recreation centre. There have been many community meetings, research studies and promises given to the neighbourhood, and as one local resident wryly put it, "we're in year 3 of a 30 year upswing!"

Although there is insufficient programming for children and youth, the situation is even worse for working age adults, seniors, newcomers and men. In addition, there was a call for more intergenerational and intercultural programs to facilitate sharing between diverse backgrounds and ages.

Conversations about the focus of arts programs and what groups are targeted for participation brought out many conflicting opinions. Laura Bolender discussed building a relationship with the girls in her dance classes and why art should not be "categorized into cultural backgrounds." She sees no reason why the young black girls she works with should be limited to hip-hop dance programs.

"Kids in the neighbourhood who are living really at-risk lives need to be supported and their energy can be channelled into arts programs," said one local activist in Weston-Mt. Dennis, offering another point of view. Young men are frequently referred to as an at-risk group and arts programming is promoted as one of the ways that they can be steered away from criminal activity. In possible contrast, a community organizer in the area points out that programming for young women can take a back seat to the perceived needs of young men.

There was a call for more and better outreach so information about programs could reach more people. In some areas word of mouth is the best way to spread information; others rely on flyers, some on social media. In suburban areas the population is widely spread and hard to reach while in densely populated tower communities like St. James Town there is less public space which makes it harder to do promotion.

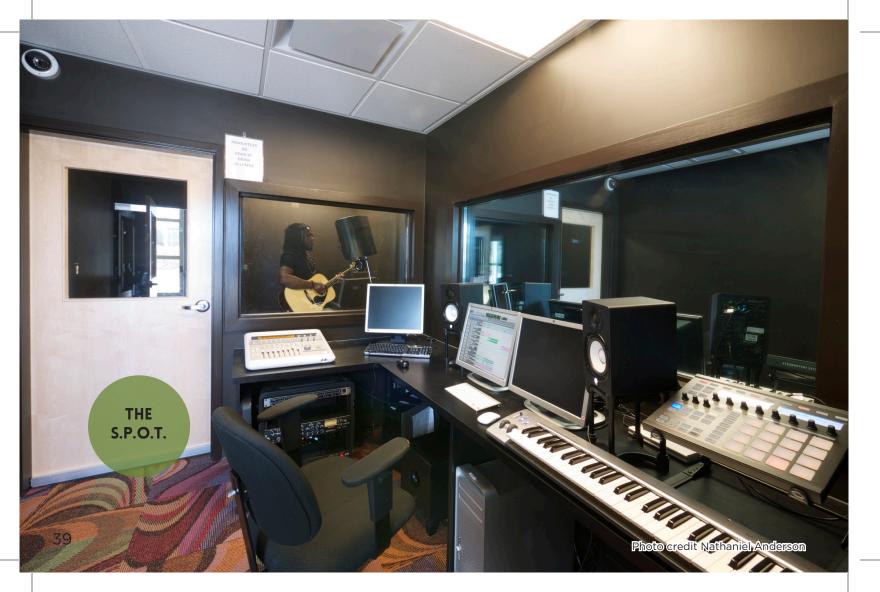
#### SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Finally, there are access problems that go beyond the neighbourhood, including a) the value of the arts to the larger society and b) the involvement of artists and arts groups in neighbourhood planning. Residents feel disconnected from decision making about cultural spaces and public art projects. Elizabeth Underhill, an independent curator, who grew up in Weston talking about a call for public art, reports "they brought in a jury of art professionals. They didn't go out of their way to invite the community into this process....this struck me as strange. How do these people know Weston?"

"What can spray paint do to cause change? What can a kid holding an SLR camera do?" recites Sara Elraheb from UforChange repeating what she sees as common misconceptions that show a lack of understanding about the need to invest in arts programming. Artists and arts organizations are important assets but this is not understood by some decision makers.

Newcomer professional artists struggle with questions like "What does art mean in a Canadian context? How does my art practice fit in here?" Settlement agencies are not equipped to deal with these questions and there was a call for mentoring and support for newcomer artists to find their place in their new home, so that their considerable talents can contribute to the broader community and they can consider careers in the arts.

A better understanding of the impact of arts on the quality of life in neighbourhoods is leading to more interest in the arts. Some social service organizations fulfill their health and wellbeing mandates by offering arts programs but many of these programs are short-term projects that come and go. The stability of the programs is dependent on a variety of factors including the support of agency leadership at staff and board level, and sufficient and sustained funding to maintain programs.





# FEATURE STORY: THE S.P.O.T. SUCCESS, POWER, OPPORTUNITY, TEAMWORK

Malvern's higher than average youth population has contributed to a community with boundless talent and energy. The S.P.O.T is the neighbourhood's innovative response. Providing a hub for youth 14 – 25 to explore their skills, network and access facilities and equipment, The S.P.O.T has it all. This youth-led initiative, funded by the Youth Challenge Fund (Government of Ontario and the United Way) and the City of Toronto, runs under a youth board of directors and volunteer members. The S.P.O.T. provides much needed resources including a fully equipped performance space, recording studio, program space and youth lounge. "There has never been a dedicated space like this in Malvern," explains coordinator Femi James. The S.P.O.T. stands for - Success. Power. Opportunity. Teamwork - qualities it is nurturing in the youth who attend programs.

Beyond a physical location the organization offers a community spirit that supports the development of Malvern's talented youth through mentorships with individuals and partnerships with other organizations. The S.P.O.T. offers a safe space where people can connect with others and find a positive outlet for emotions. When reflecting on the difference The S.P.O.T will make in the community, youth who attend programs say it "will be a better outlet for youth", "get [youth] off the streets", and "it's exciting!"







# FEATURE STORY: IFTIKHAR UDDIN AHMED

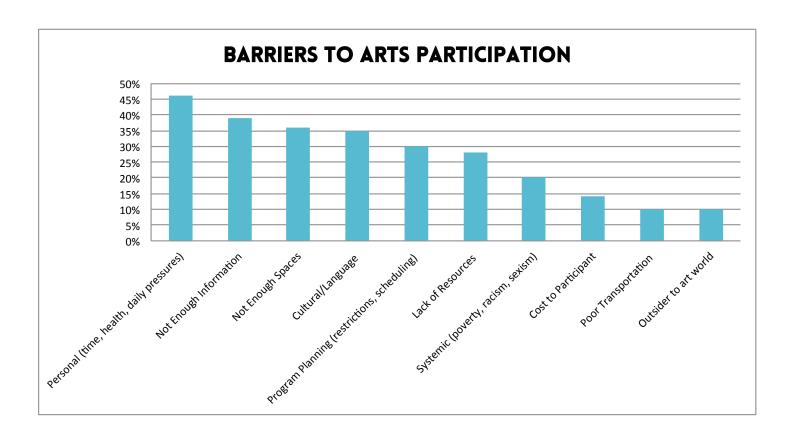
Iftikhar has been practicing mixed media, collage and painting for over thirty years. Born in Bangladesh, where he received a Masters of Fine Art, he has won numerous awards and contributed to over 75 exhibitions in the United States, South Africa, Pakistan, Iraq, China, India, Australia, and now in his new home in Canada.

He moved to St. James Town in 2011 and took an immediate interest in the beautification of the neighbourhood and contributing to the community through his art. Iftikhar was hired by the Daniels Centre of Learning in Regent Park to teach free painting classes to adults from diverse backgrounds and he works with Community Matters on mural projects in the St. James Town neighbourhood.

He advocates for arts education for children and the need for intercultural opportunities. He describes his neighbourhood as a multicultural place where he would like to see "all of these generations communicating and sharing with each other."

Iftikhar uses his home apartment as his studio space but he is looking to make more connections in the Toronto arts community. Although at times he feels limited by the gallery system he describes an artist as a person whose imagination is "flying in the sky and you simply cannot cage it."





### CHAPTER SIX: MAKING A DIFFERENCE

People are drawn to the arts because of the effect it has on their lives. There is widespread community support for arts programming because it has an impact on the local community. All this ripples out to the larger society.

#### PERSONAL WELL-BEING

To make art, a person must be willing to improvise and take some level of risk. This leads to greater self knowledge and understanding both for those working individually and those participating in art as part of a larger group. Personal creativity encourages development in other parts of our lives; while being part of a group art project supports a deeper sense of belonging.

When art is focused on a specific issue, sharing stories helps group members feel less alone and isolated. Even when the art is not issue-focused, members often share common challenges such as the frustrations of settling in a new country or learning to speak English or systemic problems such as poverty or racism.

Interviewees shared stories about how the arts increased their self esteem. Residents used words and phrases such as "uplifting, giving hope, cheers people up, helps express love, channels energy, relaxing, and calming" to describe the way the arts helped themselves and others. They also credited involvement in the arts for better mental and physical health; some called this healing or therapeutic. An arts program volunteer who lives in Mount Dennis said, "art has made a big difference in my life. During hard times it kept me going."

A key word which emerged through the interview process was "expressive". Frederick Brobbey aka Freeway Freddy, a young musician, producer, songwriter and entrepreneur from the Weston community, sees the arts as an important way to express emotions, especially for youth. Brobbey's ideas were echoed by other interviewees who suggested that the arts are "a microphone", a way to help youth "find their voice" and an important part of "harm reduction".

The expressiveness of the arts was considered to be especially important for youth. A youth participant in a focus group at Blessed Mother Teresa Secondary School in Malvern described the

importance of art in her life - "[art] makes life bearable, [it's] part of everyday, [you] must do something creative every day, something you love."

The arts help even those who do not identify as "artistic" to tap into their creativity. The effects of this can transfer to other aspects of their lives. A Weston-Mt. Dennis resident who volunteers at the West Park Healthcare Centre noted the positive effects of arts engagement for people living with disabilities.

Even though a person might not pursue a career in the arts, exposure to arts programs helps build transferable, expressive and problem-solving skills that can be used later in life. "Many parents in the Chinese community believe that drawing is a significant part of a child's education," says a parent living in St. James Town.

The active parts of creation (movement, sound, shaping materials) are valuable, but equally important is the way in which the arts provides a "place to take pause" and to look inward. Some describe this as a spiritual experience while others describe it as a quiet reflective state or a kind of "sanctuary."

The spiritual and emotional benefits of art are difficult to evaluate but the researchers heard that people were attracted to the arts because it helped them cope with difficulties in their lives. People blossom, flourish, and feel better when they engage in the arts. For some, being creative is not so much about pursuing an arts practice as it is a way of living. Weston-based musician, Jason Strachan succinctly captures the power of arts to help people live up totheir potential when he says, "arts helps people tap into the rest of who they are."

#### **ECONOMIC IMPACT**

In economically challenged neighbourhoods, arts programs are sometimes seen as a way out, a pathway to a career, or at the least a chance to supplement your income. A self-taught artist from Weston Mt. Dennis shares his enthusiasm for the arts by teaching neighbourhood children; he and his young daughter also work together on art pieces that they sell.

In St. James Town, vendors set up on the sidewalks while in Weston an informal bazaar called Fish Fridays is a chance to "sell some stuff and make some money." Adeena Greeves aka Cookie, a Weston singer, admires the person doing the

hosting because "she's hosting not just for her (to sell items) but for other people so they can profit off of it as well ...she's actually giving to the people and that's a big thing in leadership."

Young entrepreneurs are launching careers in music mixing, graphic design, clothing design and multimedia. The opportunity to make a living is a huge motivator and youth who "made it" act as beacons of hope. Royalz, a fashion designer, graduated from the ReMix Project and then received a grant from ArtReach. He found mentors who could train him in clothing design and now is an inspiration here and abroad.

Numerous programs have emerged to help young entrepreneurs. The City of Toronto's 2011 Creative Capital Gains Report acknowledges that the arts are important to the whole city and the Arts Services Branch has focused on supporting the development of youth artists. Nadira Pattison, Manager of Arts Services, notes the number of programs that have emerged to assist young entrepreneurs because they "have to have somewhere to go after they build skills - the ladder of opportunity."

Pattison also sees access to prosperity for all as a key component in Toronto's ambitions to be a strong, global city.

#### CONNECTING AND SHARING

All three communities identified similar motivations for participating in the arts with the most important being a desire to connect with others and to engage in community life. Because humans are social creatures, sharing experiences with others is vital, particularly in the big city where it is too easy to become impersonal in everyday events. Arts programs help participants connect with each other and public events such as festivals are excellent ways to foster neighbourhood connections and a sense of belonging.

For some, art is a way to connect with a cultural community, to strengthen the bonds between family generations, explore a sense of identity and connect to memories. Much of this activity happens in people's homes without formal organizing or funding. Some immigrants feel very strongly that if their cultural traditions are not encouraged, then over time "everything disappears." Somali-born, editor of The Immigrant Post, Muse Kulow explains, "It's the arts that define the gifts I give to my children...

We come with talent but I have three children here, they don't know my culture, if I am gone that culture is missing, gone, and Canada doesn't benefit from what we bring here."

While some want to keep traditional culture alive, others encourage ethno-cultural mash ups – borrowing a little from here and a little from there to create something new, reinventing culture. Toronto Arts Council Music Officer, Christy DiFelice notes that in Toronto musicians are coming together from different traditions, figuring out how to tune instruments and play together; they are creating a "whole new sound unique to our present-day, Toronto, urban experience."

Alternately, some interviewees pointed out that communities sometimes live in silos; next to each other but apart. Josephine Grey, the Program Director of Low Income Families Together (LIFT) in St. James Town, speaks about the benefits of intercultural programming. She notes the isolation of First Nations people and suggests that "it would be great to create a link between First Nations and new Canadians... There are times when multiculturalism [has been] used as a strategy to divide as much as it has been to promote individual

cultures; this keeps [diverse groups] isolated from one another... The arts can make a major contribution to this process with community events and performances with a broad audience." The arts offer a form of conversation that urges us to see things differently, shatter expectations and question ways of doing things. They can bring people with different perspectives together, open up minds, hearts and spirits, and help us envision what could be. Where diverse populations live side by side, the arts can offer another "language" with which they can communicate.

#### **SOCIAL CHANGE**

Interviewees spoke of the ways arts "can counter violence", build community, create a sense of belonging, and help people discover that "this is home." In the research neighbourhoods there is no shortage of people creating art that is spiritually, intellectually and artistically relevant to themselves and their communities. In some ways local art counters the dominant consumer culture: rap becomes resistance, knitting and gardening can be subversive and the selling of hand-made art objects provides a new platform for local commerce that challenges the mass production of goods. The arts are part of a democratic impulse to get involved and

make a difference by working together or altering public space; they are positive responses against isolation in urban environments.

The arts provide an opportunity to educate, raise awareness and shatter expectations. "I want to show a different image of immigrants. Toronto is such a diverse world," says St James Town photographer Alejandra Higuera. Yassir Nagim, uses his visual artworks to raise awareness of what he sees as a problem in his home country. Describing one of his works, he points out "the relief pieces are made of bamboo and deal with the issue of forced female circumcision in Africa."

In Weston-Mt. Dennis, the Artists to Artists Foundation see the arts as a way of bringing the past and the present together through a shared interest in the arts. In St. James Town, Community Matters is working to craft a neighbourhood transformation plan. Kick-started through a participatory process that asked residents to identify what is needed in the community, the plan is using the arts and local artists to change the look, feel and use of public space.

Youth-led arts programs are increasingly important, and their development is moving away from top-down models, becoming more in touch with on-the-ground needs. Femi James, Director of The S.P.O.T, a new youth-led arts hub in Malvern explains that the centre is especially important to neighbourhoods where many young people have been "criminalized, racialized, and marginalized." At the S.P.O.T, youth are involved in governance, decisions about programming, and evaluation. Like Urban Arts in Weston-Mt. Dennis and UforChange in St. James Town, the S.P.O.T is providing much needed arts experiences for local youth.

Shahina Sayani of ArtReach, a youth arts funding and mentoring program, speaks passionately about the impact of the arts on young lives and the desire of youth to support "active change" by speaking out about the problems they are facing; this is having a "long term ripple effect" on the lives of youth and the communities they live in.



"I believe the
arts are almost like a
second language to youth"
Benjamin De Graaf,
Operational Manager,
Young and Potential
Fathers, WestonMt. Dennis



Tamla has a long history with the Malvern community. She grew up in Malvern from age 7 and while she currently lives in Ajax she continues to run dance programming in the neighbourhood. Despite living outside of the community, Tamla connects with Malvern. She has been working and dancing in Malvern for 25 years, is "really entrenched" in the community and never hesitates to get involved.

Tamla's background informed the creation of her dance company, Roots and Branches. The school, located at the Berner Trail Community Center in Malvern, teaches children and youth a variety of forms including African, Indocultural and Caribbean dance forms, ballet, hip hop, jazz, and contemporary dance. The goal is to help teach students about who they are and where they come from. She believes it is important for the children to see themselves reflected in their teachers so that the classroom offers a safe place to explore past, present and future identity.

Through dance, Tamla advocates the importance of diversity. She explains that "diversity works best when everyone comes to the table with a healthy sense of self." It is this sense of self that Roots and Branches strives to provide for its students. For Tamla identity has been "fostered here" and art has "made life meaningful." Based on her own childhood, Tamla believes that kids who grow up together through these types of programs will stay connected.



### CHAPTER SEVEN: MOVING FORWARD

Research interviews ended with the question "What are your hopes for arts in your neighbourhood?" Replies addressed many barriers facing the communities and offered a bright vision of what might be possible with dedicated attention and resources.

#### **SPACES**

Weston-Mt. Dennis residents dream of a community centre with arts programs, a performing arts centre and a joint arts and sports complex. A resident and theatre artist imagines how the arts could "revitalize the whole community." Jacklyn Thomas (Artists to Artists Foundation) echoes these sentiments when she says "my hope is that every corner would be a very dynamic corner... arts galleries, murals or even sidewalk cafes...Saturday performances, kids arts initiatives, community gardens...Weston has potential to become a very vibrant community." A neighbourhood minister adds to the picture by dreaming of using empty storefronts to create pop-up galleries and fostering "a real entertainment corridor" on Weston Rd.

St. James Town music teacher Mike Benford would like to see a new building to showcase the work of

local artists. A local community activist shared her love of musical jams and noted that in the past places of worship brought people together through music. She suggests that what is needed now is a site where multiple cultures and faiths can share a common space.

There were many ideas about how to transform existing public spaces: run down, unused tennis courts transformed into space for youth activities; muddy patches of earth turned into community gardens; dark Bell electrical boxes made into colourful canvases; and haphazard markets changed into a vendor area shared with artists and entertainers. These visions are fuelled by the belief of residents who have seen small improvements in their neighbourhoods, such as those being brought to life by Community Matters' Arts Plan for St. James Town.

#### ARTS AND ARTISTS AS LOCAL ASSETS

Toronto is a city of neighbourhoods, each with unique features, history and atmosphere. The arts contribute to these identities. An artist from Weston-Mt. Dennis reminds us of the contribution artists can make when she says, "I'd like to see more opportunity for the artists to really contribute their talents to the development of the neighbourhood... I'd like to see more communication between the city and artists when it comes to development."

Weston-Mt Dennis is home to many young musicians. More support for music programming would increase the profile of this talent and the emergence of a local sound "created straight from here." In Scarborough, the arts offer a way to nurture neighbourhood pride. For Tim Whalley, Executive Director of Scarborough Arts the potential of the community is in its history: "from Doris McCarthy in the past to the huge hip hop scene that's exploded here," Scarborough is an arts destination and there is no need to make "downtown the place to go."

The arts break down barriers, increasing local pride and encouraging skills development for some of its more vulnerable members. As one resident strongly put it, "this is your home and this is where your heart belongs so you make it your own...it's community building and engagement and absolutely that can be done through the arts."

#### SUSTAINABLE AND ACCESSIBLE ARTS PROGRAMMING

Many interviewees envisioned improved access to the arts for young people including addressing the costs of arts participation and equipment access. A couple of Malvern youth underscored the importance of mentors for their development and hoped that the same support would be there for

their little sisters who would one day literally and metaphorically be able to "sing their own songs."

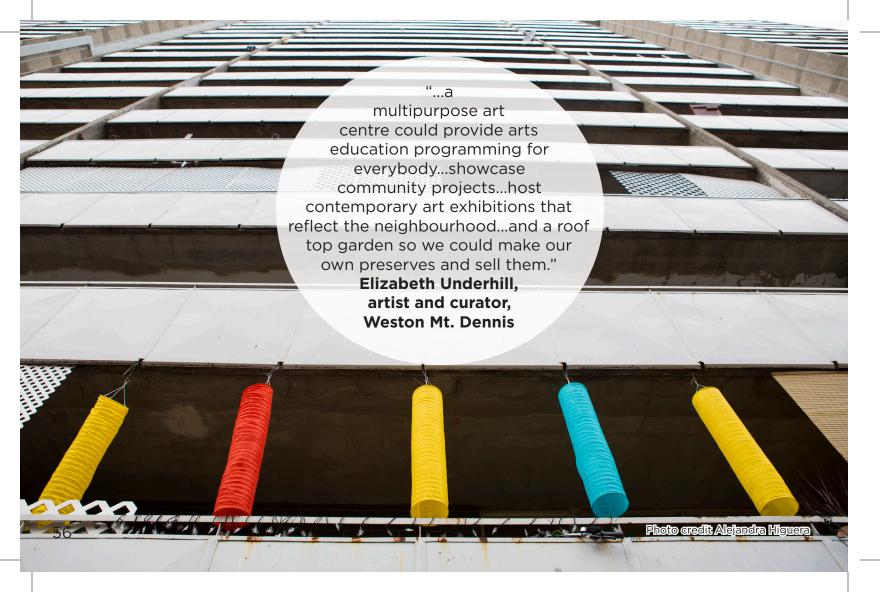
A Weston-Mt. Dennis teacher noted that some local parents are currently taking their children outside the neighbourhood for art classes. With support, local artists can flourish on their home turf alleviating the need to seek programs elsewhere.

Strengthening local assets would benefit parents, children and artists alike. A dance instructor in Weston-Mt. Dennis dreamed of local children and youth being able to learn a variety of dance forms from classical to contemporary to urban. In a neighbourhood that has a high dropout rate, she thinks more arts programs will help keep children in school, because they would have an outlet for their creativity and energy.

A number of community-engaged arts project have emerged in the research communities. Sustained programming is possible only if these groups receive "the funding they deserve." There is a hope that arts programs can be offered to underserved residents - seniors, working-age people and men. There was also a call for intergenerational and intercultural programs to assist in breaking down barriers between residents. Opportunities are

needed for older, new and current immigrants "to show the rest of the community what their cultures are all about."

Supporting neighbourhood-based activities is an investment that not only supports specific local programs but helps residents see the arts sector as a contributor to the economy and quality of life in the whole city. In addition, focusing on the value of local arts can facilitate partnerships between local organizations and arts groups serving the city as a whole.



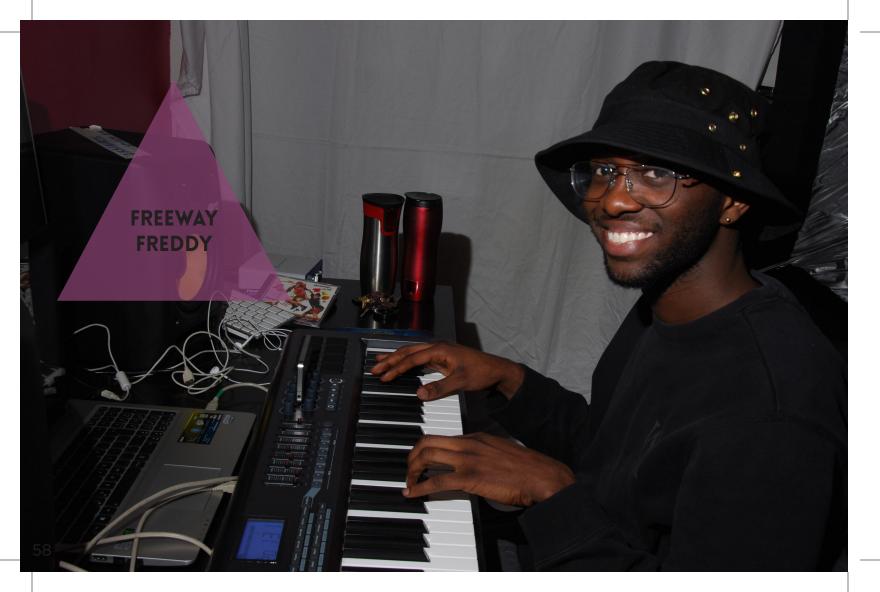


# FEATURE STORY: FREDERICK BROBBEY AKA FREEWAY FREDDY

"The arts are a visual or sonic expression of emotion!" says Frederick Brobbey aka Freeway Freddy, a young musician, producer, songwriter and entrepreneur from Weston Mt. Dennis. In addition to his own performances, Freddy produces musicians from all across the greater Toronto area and is the founder of JustOverBrilliant Inc.

He works at Urban Arts, a youth arts centre in Weston, where he runs the recording studio and is the Head Producer of Beats.Mind.Movement, a music production and professional development program for youth. At Urban Arts he encourages youth to pursue the arts and assists them to begin a career in music.

Freddy believes art made him who he is by giving him the confidence to pursue his passion for music.

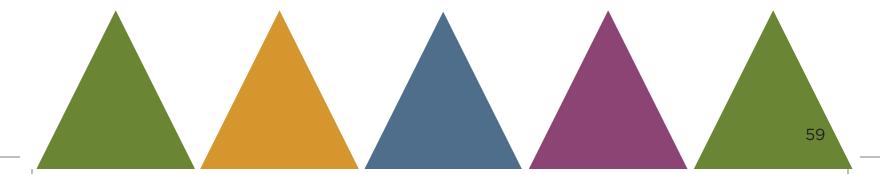


## COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE

As the lead organization in the research the Toronto Arts Foundation, with its sister organization the Toronto Arts Council, is committed to moving forward with policy and funding to explore these directions. The research focused on three neighbourhoods. Although each community has its own specific challenges and needs, the findings are generally applicable to all underserved areas of Toronto.

We have identified three major directions that require further development and investment: connecting, mentoring and sustaining arts in neighbourhoods.

The research partners (York University, OCAD University and Art Starts), project contributors and other stakeholders will be invited to continue the discussion and explore opportunities and potential partnerships to support the transformation of neighbourhoods through the arts.



# COMMECT

**Need:** improve communications within communities; strengthen connections between artists with the development of local arts networks.

Opportunities: build on the connections that are currently being developed by Local Arts Service Organizations, the Neighbourhood Arts Network and the Toronto Arts Council's 'Community Connections' funding.

# MENTOR

**Need:** partner with settlement agencies to identify, support and connect newcomer professional artists with the cultural industries and arts sector.

**Opportunities:** develop and expand Toronto Arts Council's Mentoring and Micro-Granting Programs and the Neighbourhood Arts Network's connections with settlement agencies.

# SUSTAIN

**Need:** work with local organizations, city-wide funders and advocates to support the development of more spaces for arts activities and funding to support programs that serve neighbourhood needs.

**Opportunities:** enhance funding for Toronto Arts Council's grant programs, continue to map cultural spaces, identify and support increased access to space for artists.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR MARGO CHARLTON

CO-INVESTIGATORS DEBORAH BARNDT, ROSEMARY DONEGAN, LIZ FORSBERG, ALBERTO GUEVARA,

TAMARA HABERMAN

RESEARCH ASSISTANT KATHERINE DENNIS

RESEARCH TEAM (OCAD UNIVERSITY AND YORK KATHERINE DENNIS, BENJAMIN EDELBERG, AMY GAIZAUSKAS, KIM JACKSON, NAILA LALJI, MARY MACDONALD, BENTON MCKNIGHT, SARA MOHAMMED, ZITA NYARADY

UNIVERSITY(

COMMUNITY LIAISONS ADEN ABEBE AND AYESHA STEWART (OF MALVERN), IDA SHARMA DHUNGANA

OF ST. JAMES TOWN(, COLANTHONY HUMPHREY OF WESTON MT. DENNIS

INTERN LAURA JABALEE

DESIGNER BRITT WRAY

EDITING DOUGLAS GREEN, SUSAN WRIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHY NATHANIEL ANDERSON, IDA SHARMA DHUNGANA, ALEJANDRA HIGUERA, JOSEPH

MICHAEL PHOTOGRAPHY, LISA SIMPSON, GILLIAN ZIDNER

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#### RESEARCH PROJECT ADVISORS:

ANGIE ARANDA, ALISON BAIN, ELENA BIRD, JANE BURNS, DENISE CAMPBELL, SUSAN CROCKER, SARA DIAMOND, JENNIFER GREEN, CLAIRE HOPKINSON, MICHAEL JONES, MICHELINE LAFLECHE, SKYE LOUIS, SUSAN MCISAAC, NADIRA PATTISON, BARBARA RAHDER, SHAHINA SAYANI, BARBARA SELLERS-YOUNG, ANDREW SURI, SUSAN WRIGHT, JOYCE ZEMANS, ROCHELLE ZORZI

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