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Getting Past the Stereotypes: The Inside Story on the Jane-Finch Community

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Paul Nguyen, my guest blogger and founder of Jane-Finch.com. Here, he has received the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada Award.

The Jane-Finch area has a bad rep for gangs, drugs and gun violence. It's a community north of Toronto and a place many immigrants call home. Residents have fought hard to change the public's perception by working together to show the positive reality of the neighbourhood.

I grew up there and, as a kid, I was unaware of the media stereotypes. For me, the community was an exciting mix of diversity, culture, and occasional mayhem. It was normal to shoot firecrackers at each other during Victoria Day, shop for brand names inside someone's apartment, and witness the 6 o' clock news reporting a

JANICE (A.K.A. CAFE)



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murder on your street. I've seen SWAT guys, police, and gangsters walking around with sawed-off shotguns. It's not your typical suburban upbringing, but those unordinary moments help give you a different perspective on life.

What many people don't see are the hard working residents that line up at 5 am at the bus stop to go to work. The sharing and caring, the multicultural harmony and people accepting each other regardless of race and ethnicity. Things that stand out in Jane-Finch are how real the people are. People's intentions are clear-cut — whether they like you or not, you will know. And because you deal with so many different characters growing up in the area, you learn the strengths of tolerance, understanding and an open mind.



Paul with his best friend and executive producer of Jane-Finch.com, Mark Simms.

I was a shy and quiet kid, so I communicated through the cops-and-robbers and action movies I would make in the neighbourhood. My friends and I got a local following. Kids in the area would pass around our VHS video tapes and give us props for our homemade flicks.

One day I got curious about the history of my neighbourhood. How did it become what it was? Who made it? who designed it? Unfortunately, there was no resource online, but only the news reports of crimes and other bad things.

So I decided to create a website to share the videos I made about the Jane-

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Finch neighbourhood. It was a volunteer project with the modest goal of sharing the videos and artwork of my friends, mostly musicians and rappers. My site grew and received national attention. For decades, the only things you would hear about Jane-Finch were the frequent crime stories on the news. For the first time, the public was getting the Jane-Finch story from within.



Click to get an insider's perspective on the Jane-Finch neighbourhood (after you read this post!).

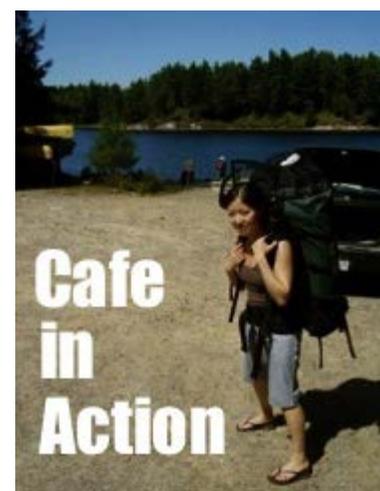
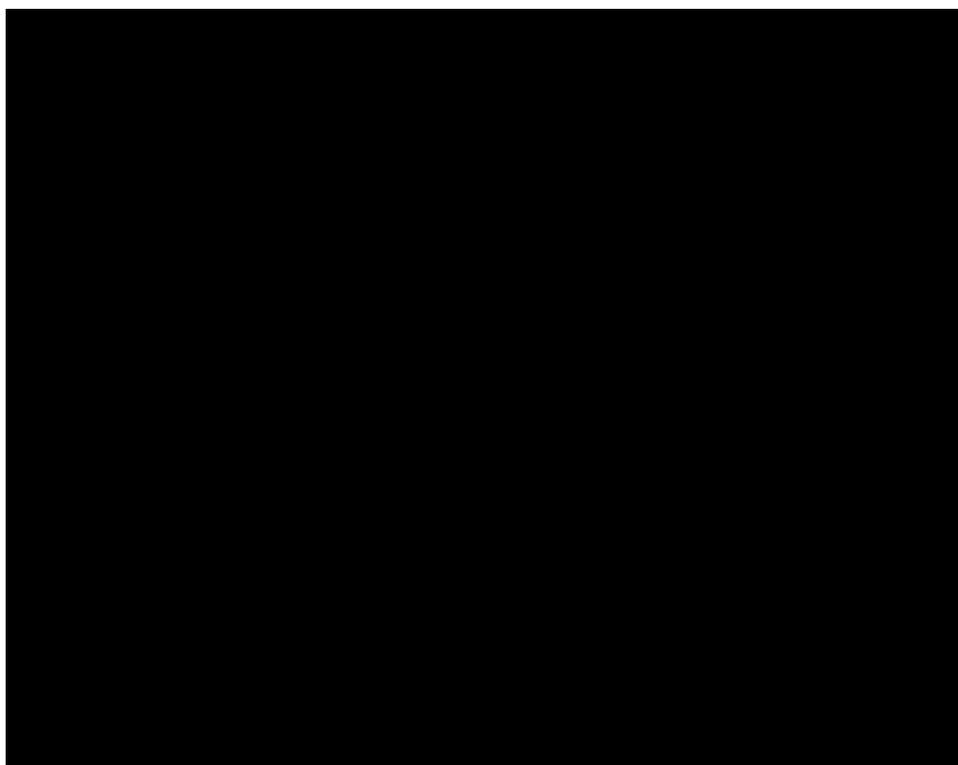


My small website grew into a movement, attracting many local youth and volunteers. We were soon asked to appear on television and participate in all kinds of community events. It was not my goal to volunteer, become an activist or to be labeled. For a shy kid, being in the spotlight was a daunting task.

After the sudden surge in public awareness, I saw the opportunity to use my site as a way to give a voice to other residents in my community. I developed a local news team and covered positive events that the mainstream media wouldn't cover. I realized the power of my site and how it touched people. I would get countless requests from students, teachers and reporters trying to learn more about the 'real' Jane-Finch.



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It's been a long journey, but it soon became a way of life. Being involved with the community as a volunteer has so many benefits. You get to meet all kinds of people and learn about the different challenges facing your community. Being involved has helped me grow and mature as a human being.

I would encourage you to volunteer for a cause or effort that you're passionate about. It could be cleaning up trash in your neighbourhood or dealing with the local pet population. There's so many important issues out there that need special attention and people to create positive solutions. Giving back doesn't cost a thing, and what you get in return lasts a lifetime. If a kid from Jane-Finch can volunteer, so can you!



Jane-Finch.com receiving the 2011 Ontario Volunteer Service Award.

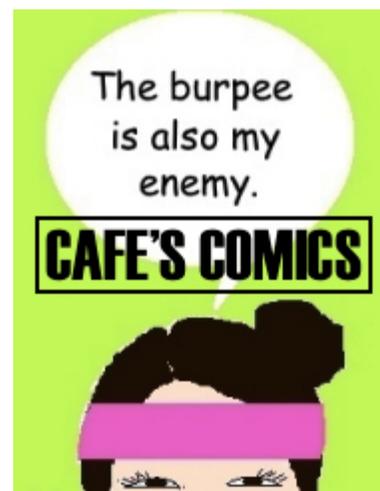
Thanks to Janice for the opportunity to share my story of volunteering.

- Paul



Reading Paul's story, I was reminded of my own experiences volunteering in a jail to provide prisoners with info to connect them to things like housing programs, addictions treatment, and so on. I felt fulfilled in doing this because so many of them need this kind of help (and hope) to turn their lives around.

I was also reminded that negative stereotypes against whole communities and the people who live in them can be extremely damaging. One of my earlier jobs involved interviewing youth from so-called "priority neighbourhoods" in Toronto, including Jane-Finch. Many of them said that the negative perceptions about their neighbourhoods have affected their own



beliefs about themselves. If you tell someone enough times that they are something, they will eventually internalize it.

There are negative stereotypes about all groups of people, and *nobody* would want those stereotypes thrown at them by others who haven't even taken the time to get to know them personally.

Do you volunteer or would you like to volunteer for a cause? Have you ever been the subject of a negative stereotype because of the way you looked or where you lived?

Don't forget to visit Jane-Finch.com! ;)

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