



## The Past, Present and Future of the Jane-Finch Community

As the investigations into three teen shootings in north Toronto continue, the Jane and Finch intersection is in the spotlight once more. The area grew notorious in past decades for its gang activity, poverty and crime, and that reputation has been further reinforced in recent months by the alarming frequency of fatal street violence.

Fifteen-year-old Tahj Loor-Walters was shot on July 28th in the parking lot of the YorkwoodsPlaza, and died two weeks later in hospital. Only a month later, Kwame Duodu and O'She Doyles-Whyte, both around the age of 15 as well, were gunned down in a nearby housing complex. Suspects were spotted leaving the scene, but as of yet, no arrests have been made. The three were all teenagers, and reported to be clean, good kids who hadn't exhibited any signs of criminal activity or violence. The murders are not suspected to be connected, yet, they were all murdered within the same kilometre radius. In the past six years, there have been 10 homicides of youth under the age of 19 in the area, which is double the count in other communities of Toronto.

Five teens have been shot in the past six months within a 1 kilometre radius of the Jane and Finch intersection. Gang and race relations have been a constant and plaguing problem, as was admitted by several members of the community. The four teens shot fatally were known to be friends, and their families warned other teenagers in the community that the boys' deaths shouldn't be in vain. "Don't take [Tahj's death] lightly," said Tahj Loor-Walters' grandmother. "Use it as an example to turn your lives around." The shootings have shocked the community, who created a makeshift memorial at the scene of the third shooting for the victims of these senseless crimes.

So what is it about the Jane and Finch intersection? Why is its legacy so dark, stained with poverty and organised crime?

Originally developed in 1960, the area around the Jane and Finch intersection was meant to be a suburb, created to cope with Toronto's rapidly growing urban expanses. Public housing was established in the area, but during the 60's, the North York planning department and the Ontario Housing Committee (OHC) made the decision to urbanise the suburb. Between 1960 and 1970, Jane and Finch's population rose from around 1,000 to 33,000. This massive jump in population was drastically unhealthy for the area- the OHC and affiliates were later criticized for their lack of planning and community infrastructure. In a disorganised attempt to improve and expand Toronto, the committee didn't anticipate the negative repercussions of such an extreme increase in population.

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Community newspapers dating back to the 70's show suburban families frolicking and spending their days "having darn good fun, anytime". Real estate advertisements boasted neighbourhoods "stocked with an abundance of merchandise, more than you'll ever need". The truth was far from what advertising suggested, as it so often is. The Jane and Finch community faced problems from its inception, especially regarding interracial relations. Plainclothes police officers often patrolled the neighbourhood, and in Home Feeling, a documentary made in 1984 to bring to light the struggles of ethnic communities in the area, the flaws and harsh realities of the area were illuminated. Through the 80's, community groups were created to help deal with the tough conditions faced by residents of Jane and Finch, conditions which included gang wars and racial tension.

Fast forward to the 2000's, and the Jane-Finch neighbourhood has become a jaded witness to innumerable attempts at a fresh start. The most notable attempt was in 2009, when Councillor Anthony Perruzza began a rebranding movement, giving Jane-Finch the new name of 'University Heights'. It was a hasty attempt to solve a decades old problem, in the belief that giving the area a new name would erase its reputation. University Heights banners were established around the area, but the reactions from members of the community were less than pleased. As Paul Nguyen, founder of website jane-finch.com, very aptly put it, "Air Canada used to call it coach, now they call it Tango. They're just giving it a fancy name. It doesn't change the fact you're still in the back eating peanuts."

The renaming was only a small part of Perruzza's ineffective plan to reconstruct perceptions of Jane and Finch. His "gift box" rebranding also included plans to build a University Heights stop on the \$3 million subway line, as well as an \$880 million Light Rail Transit line. This didn't leave community members feeling any better about the situation. To them, what Perruzza was doing was an insult to the work they had put into making the community a better place during the last few decades. But Perruzza was defensive of his actions, saying "it's a good thing ... because the current name has negative connotations. When you say University Heights, it's going to sound much better. It's not about trying to hide the location - you can't - but what is important is it gives [people] additional information that this neighbourhood is really close to the university." Because renaming the intersection and throwing a lot of money at it would solve all the community's problems, right? At least, that's what city council seemed to believe.

Since the 1970s, more than 30 grassroots organisations have opened in the Jane and Finch area in sincere attempts by residents to solve the problems they face. Many improvements have been made, and though there are still issues to be dealt with, members of the community are proud of their achievements. The greatly puzzling thing is the municipality's lack of acknowledgement of any problems the Jane-Finch community faces, especially paired with the municipality's absence of confidence in the neighbourhood. After the shooting of Jordan Manners 6 years ago, the area received grants and private donations to help solve the issue. But as said by criminologist Scot Worley, "Both policing and community initiatives may have caused a temporary drop in homicide...after this initial funding period, has that funding to a certain extent dried up? You really do need some kind of coordinated, permanent, institutional effort to address the issues in these communities and give kids hope." He added that Jane and Finch's problems also go back to the fact that many teenagers in the area are born in social disadvantage, and become convinced that they can't succeed. Though the city has provided funding for community programs in the area, reports to city council admit that the money may not be reaching those who need it most, and "there still remains a significant need for a comprehensive, holistic and targeted approach to support youth at high risk of marginalization". More than the money granted by city council, it is the community involvement in youth initiatives and the support provided by members of the neighbourhood that allow reform to take place in the area.

Perhaps that sense of familial community is the Jane-Finch neighbourhood's greatest strength. After every report of violence or crime in the area, the community has come together in support of one another. Residents have managed to create reform and change on their own. Every organisation that opens its doors to troubled teens, victims of local gangs and former criminals is benefiting the neighbourhood. The history of the area cannot be easily erased, but present through that history is a profound sense of family in the area. People have made a difference, and are proud of what they've done. Dating back to the 80s when the community first attempted to rehabilitate the area, as noted in the 1984 dissertation 'Community Spirit of the Jane/Finch corridor', "despite [the area's faults] there is a real desire on the part of the community to improve its image". That continues to apply to today's Jane-Finch community. Perhaps what the municipal council needs to realise is that improvement of image doesn't literally mean improving the outside image of the area. What needs to be focussed on as of now is the cause of gang troubles and violence - and how an end can be put to the issues. No matter the money the city chooses to throw at the problem, or how much they choose to ignore it, those living in the Jane and Finch area know the true state of the community. It is not without its positive aspects, but there is still much work to be done. By perpetuating the negativity carried by the name 'Jane-Finch', the process of rehabilitation is being hindered. With everything that the neighbourhood community has been through since its inception in the 70s, perhaps its history will come to represent a place of great change, of reform, where ethnic communities get along, and gang violence is no longer an issue. This is an attainable future, and has been made more so by what residents are doing for each other. What is most important to remember, for citizens of Toronto, is that the negative connotations that come with

the name Jane and Finch are only as powerful as citizens let them be.



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Student, writer, journalist. I focus mainly on politics and social issues.

I believe every single one of us to be a catalyst of change – the key is to believe one can make a difference.

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