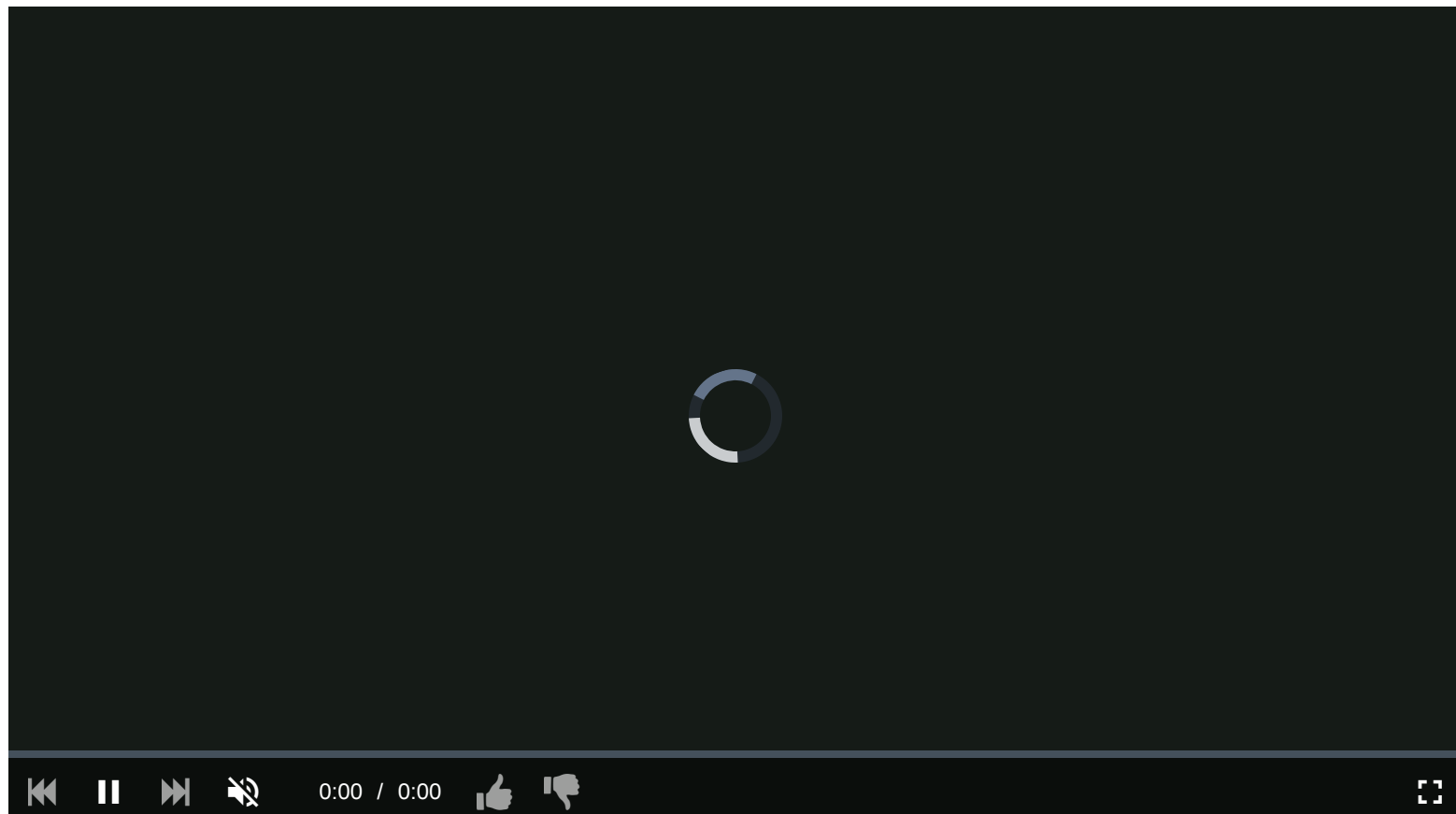




Advocates highlight best of Jane and Finch as community changes with future LRT, new homes



Nick Westoll speaks with community advocates and leaders who are working to highlight the best the Jane and Finch neighbourhood has to offer as some continue to hold misconceptions about the area.

By Nick Westoll
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Like so many parts of Toronto, the Jane and Finch neighbourhood is undergoing a broader transformation with a rapid transit line in the offing and a surge in new homes.

While a stigma among some surrounding perceptions of crime and violence has been an ongoing challenge even though advocates noted those misconceptions don't really match the day-to-day reality for most in the community, they said upcoming changes will add to the vibrancy of the area.

Steps away from the future Sentinel station on the soon-to-be-opened Finch West LRT is El Jefe de Pollo Chicken and Tacos where Chef Chino, as the restaurant's name suggests, serves up mouthwatering poultry and Mexican dishes with Canadian and Caribbean twists.

Chef Chino didn't always live in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. He said he grew up in a lower-income household near Dundas Street West and Spadina Avenue in downtown Toronto, and added he "got involved in the wrong things in the past."

Seeking a change, Chef Chino — who didn't want to share his full name — enrolled in George Brown College's culinary program and went to work in some of Toronto's top kitchens. He also moved to the Jane and Finch neighbourhood to find a more affordable place to live.



After he finished his studies, Chef Chino got into the catering business and the COVID-19 pandemic caused him to rethink his business. He opened a bricks-and-mortar establishment — one partially inspired by a staple restaurant at Jane Finch Mall.

"For me and my girl man, I remember every Friday we'd get a family special — they had a six-piece, something like that. You get the two sides, you get the little Caribbean-style juices. They are amazing," he fondly recalled.

Like how that restaurant provided a great meal to Chef Chino, his space now is doing the same for others.

"The people that are fantastic, to be honest, really great. I have a lot of locals that are regulars here. We hold great conversations. You know, I even know some of the kids' names and stuff like that, and what ball practices they're gonna go to next, and what school they go to like [James Cardinal McGuigan Catholic High School], C.W. Jeffreys [Collegiate Institute]," he said.

"Anytime I throw an event the community is coming here for me, man. I got lineups and a half all the time and I have proof of that. And they won't come out if it's not good people. Everyone's coming to support each other around here, man. It's different, it's not what you guys think — trust me."

Website promoting Jane and Finch has been telling positive stories for nearly 20 years

Similar to Chef Chino's comments, people CityNews spoke with talked about a strong sense of community in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood.

Ever since 2004, Paul Nguyen sought to tell those stories to a broader audience through a website called [Jane-Finch.com](#). Nguyen, a York University graduate whose family immigrated to Canada from Vietnam and settled in Jane and Finch, has been a lifelong resident in the neighbourhood.

"It's a place where people (seeking) new beginnings and people coming from the struggle, whether from war-torn country or they want to make a new life here and new opportunities," he said.

"This neighbourhood does have really unique challenges and I think people here are really resilient. They're very welcoming and warm."

Jane-Finch.com was born in an era before social media and the site maintains a similar feel to when it launched.

"Growing up as a kid in the neighbourhood, Jane Finch gets a bad rap and I wanted to show the public Jane and Finch is not what you think it is," he said in a recent interview.

"A lot of wonderful things here, a lot of young, talented people, vibrant community, lots of multiculturalism. I wanted to show it to the world, so I made a website.

"It just started off as like a one-page website and we're just kind of showcasing facts from around the neighbourhood. We actually started at our roots [and it's] founded in hip hop and rap. So we did a lot of rap videos with local guys, I did a lot of videos for free, and we went viral from that point on," Nguyen recalled.

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Nguyen, like others, said prolonged media coverage of instances of violent crime-fueled perceptions of the neighbourhood is dangerous. He said the creation of social media and digital media platforms allowed more voices to tell stories from a different perspective.

"There are incidents that happen across the city (and) those items have to be reported, but I think it's also up to us as residents to showcase and kind of not be afraid to show off that we have a lot of good things going on here," Nguyen said.

"Having reporters come back and get to know the community and get to know the people and find out those different those positive stories is a big help.

"A lot of residents here their first language is not English ... it's very difficult to communicate those ideas and stories to like the mainstream, especially mainstream news. So I think we have to have more diversity in the reporters and journalists and also having journalists, homegrown journalists, come here from here and reach out to the community and reach out to the through the public. I think that's something that my website was doing."

When asked about the best of the neighbourhood, he encouraged people to visit places like Yorkwoods Plaza for a meal or Jane Finch Mall (particularly on Sundays he said when the flea market operates).

Nguyen said the opening of the Finch West LRT line will bring overdue transit improvements where riders can face lengthy waits for buses that run on Finch Avenue West. He added having the Line 1 subway extension to Finch West and the nearby York University has been helpful for students and commuters.

Along the LRT corridors signs are starting to pop up advising of residential development applications, which has sparked concern about gentrification and those in affordable housing being pushed out.

"Some residents have expressed concern ... we had public housing and they were in disrepair, and I think now it's gone. They're going to put new development there, so some residents are concerned about affordability and all those kinds of things. But I think also change is also important and necessary," he said.

"Affordability is always going to be a thing here, but I hope that it's going to bring more prosperity to this community."

The push for stronger, well-rounded programming and services for Jane and Finch

In the Jane and Finch neighbourhood, a variety of non-profit groups have opened to provide services to residents — especially youth and lower-income individuals.

At PEACH (Promoting Education and Community Health) on Eddystone Avenue, interim executive director Tiffany Ford is on a mission to turn her organization into one that can support people from all age groups and backgrounds. Ford, who lived in the Jane and Finch area for most of her life, began volunteering as a board member after finishing high school. More recently, she served a term as a Toronto District School Board trustee and ran for city council.

"I want the space to be a hub for families and community where everyone can sort of build off each other and not just focused on ... one particular demographic in our in our community," she told CityNews.

"I'd like for people to kind of step away from the fact that Jane and Finch seems to be this isolated community within the city. We are Toronto as well, right, so if we can have not only access to resources up folks downtown."

Ford said grant funding has heavily focused on youth violence response initiatives, but emphasized a variety of other groups such as seniors, women and job-seekers need investments too.

"We need all of it. So tech hub tech things, everything that other communities have, we should also have access to."



PEACH has a variety of amenities at its facility that Ford is hoping to beef up, including a recording studio, a commercial kitchen, music spaces and a computer lab.

When asked to reflect on changes in the area, Ford said those changes involved public housing being torn down and gentrification creeping in. But with a wave of new people coming to the area, the perceptions might be changing.

"Jane and Finch is definitely the place where you just learn just so much about the world in just one pocket of the city. Jane and Finch is extremely resilient, and it is just a phenomenal place where you can have pretty much anything that you want, like food-wise and cultural-wise, just a really fun place, but it is changing now," she said, emphasizing how misconceptions continue to hurt to this day.

"When you have stigma upon yourself because people believe it, they start believing it.

"Ultimately there's a lot of damage done to this community in terms of stigma and you know how people describe our area but trying to get away from that has been quite difficult. And there's not even a lot of violence. You don't even hear about violence really in our community anymore, but we still have that label — it's still embedded."

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