

Jane-Finch voices speak truth to power on gun violence

Lifelong residents from the neighbourhood affected by gun violence offer their solutions to politicians amid another summer of senseless shootings

BY PAUL NGUYEN

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Photos by Samuel Engelking

Tiffany Ford.

As a kid growing up in Jane and Finch, I often rode my bike along Driftwood Avenue, having water-gun fights between the maze of townhouse complexes. On Saturdays, I attended Shoreham Public School for Vietnamese language class and remember sneaking off during recess to buy candy at Tadmore's in the nearby plaza.

Recently, **Jibri Husani James, 39**, and **Karim Hirani, 25**, were gunned down just a block away from each other (and less than 24 hours apart) at Driftwood and Shoreham. They are among a rash of shooting incidents in the city that media has already labelled the Summer Of The Gun Part 2. Part 1 was 13 years ago.

Back then, community leaders, politicians, activists and opportunists – the good, the bad and the fake – all came out the woodwork to chime in. Some had good ideas on how to address the gun problem, but many more demonstrated their blatant cluelessness. Today we are **still talking about senseless shootings**

These voices from the neighbourhood say that to fix the problem, we must understand the real causes.

TIFFANY FORD, TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD TRUSTEE, CANDIDATE FOR CITY COUNCIL WARD 7

"I've had plenty of experience with gun violence throughout my life. People I've known and grew up with have been shot and murdered. There was one incident that I will never forget at a recreation centre. I had to duck for cover under a table. I was 13.

"Jibri is the brother of friends I went to school with. **With the recent incident, I was more nervous about the children. These kids come to school with so much fear and anxiety and sadness and depression. It's something we have to deal with.**

"We know that poverty breeds violence and that violence also stems from people who feel like they have no options. It could stem from being expelled from school, feeling unsafe in the community and wanting to protect themselves. It could stem from community rivalries, and we see that in our community. There are so many issues involved, and it just feels like we don't really focus on the causes. The guns are coming from somewhere, and they're not coming from the young kids."

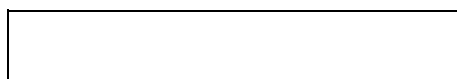


Samuel Engelking

Logan X.

***LOGAN X* (PSEUDONYM), "FROM UP TOP TO THE BOTTOM LANE"**

"I grew up around violence from the older heads on the block. The first time I seen somebody get killed I was 13. One of my older brother's best friends got shot in my mom's crib, so I came home to see him dead in the basement. That changed my life a lot. It made me feel anything can happen at any time.



"**But now, when you do something, it can come back to somebody who doesn't really deserve it just so everybody else can feel it.** That's how the universe works itself out. It's a cruel world. Somebody gets hit, and the next guy wants to take revenge and they're just trying to shoot anybody they can. It's just straight vulgar and

hard and super-violent shit and it's not cool. These guys out there, they're **playing GTA** or something and think they can just push reset and be back alive.

"We need community leaders on the block. They should be part of committees. These committees should link with other committees in other communities and have a way for all these kids to get to know each other. So this Black-on-Black shit would be harder to do because it'd be like, "Yo, I know this guy." We need to have a day where communities meet each other. Regent Park to Finch, wherever. Let the kids greet each other. The teenagers and up are already gone. Let them see the kids play together to be the example so we can be friends and this violence shit can stop."



Samuel Engelking

Marlon "Sling Dadz" Morgridge.

MARLON "SLING DADZ" MORGRIDGE, CURRENTLY COMPLETING STUDIES IN SOCIAL WORK

"When violence like this happens to somebody who's trying to make a change, it's sad. If it could happen to them, it could obviously happen to any one of us.

"Honestly, it would take a lot of funding to start **programs to help these kids** not get caught up in the streets and have something to do. **The government needs to get more involved and hire people from within the community so these programs can be more successful.** There would be a more positive outlook. These are people who these children, or teens, trust because they know them from their community.

"A lot of these parents, single parents, they work. And when they come home from work, their kids are already outside after school, hanging out with friends. It's going to lead to trouble if there's no guidance, no elders, no mentors or anybody else to look up to. Obviously, you need a job. If you don't get a job, you're going to need money. So, what's your next option? Drugs. That's something easily in their reach to make a dollar. So that's going to be a common problem for them, because they'll be caught up in charges, and then they can't move forward in life.

"A lot of these kids, they have a saying that they'd rather be judged by 12, not carried by six."



Samuel Engelking

Robbie Khan.

ROBBIE KHAN, PRODUCER/RAPPER

"Picture going to bed at night and all you hear is the sound of gunshots. That's like your bedtime lullaby. Even waking up to it, that's like your alarm clock. You become immune to the loud sounds.

Jibri was a childhood friend. My brother and him were tight. They went to school together. I saw him all the time. He was just always positive and a funny guy, very humble and loveable. Recently, I went to the neighbourhood to promote my album, and the man was like, 'Yo, this is what the streets need to hear.' Because it's something different than what everybody else is rapping about. It's a positive vibration. He took it in and was like, 'Yo, I'm gonna make sure the whole 'hood hears this.'

"This shit touched my heart because he was just a bystander. What I think we need to do, though, is attack the next generation coming up. We have to try and condition, change their mentality and guide them as they grow. We got to find out what's going on in their heads. What do they like? What do they love? Show them the beautiful things in life and what this world can offer. Eliminate violence from their thought process. **We need to destroy this territorial mentality, push the reset button and look at each other with love. The world is ours.**"



Samuel Engelking

Phong Nguyen.

PHONG NGUYEN, LONGTIME JANE-FINCH RESIDENT

“Growing up in the community and growing up in a certain lifestyle, I had many friends affected by gun violence. An argument happens, people get heated, things are said and to lose your life it was pretty much like, ‘Fuck it, right?’”

“The reactive solution would be more police officers on the street? Right now, at various times in the night there’s only a couple cars on the road. So they definitely need **more officers for deterrence**. [But] we need better role models. Like teachers, older members of the community or pretty much anybody in a position of influence. Those are the people who need to find out who these people are who may be at risk and work with them. Being a person like that can change someone’s life.

“**To say that guns are the problem, however, it’s not the core of it. Even if they take away all the guns, what do you think people are going to do? They’re going to find another method.** So, we need more cops on the road investigating and seizing firearms. Activists are not going to like it, but if there’s no police presence people will feel more free to do what they want [illegal activity]. Police should change their tactics and training so that they aren’t targeting innocent people when investigating the community. Focusing only on those involved in criminal activity to retrieve illegal firearms should be the priority because you don’t want to be harassing people going about their business. It’s kind of a Catch-22.”



Samuel Engelking

Mr. Fresh.

MR. FRESH, CITY OF TORONTO YOUTH ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR, AUTHOR, PUBLIC SPEAKER

"One of my friends who I grew up with, KD, was going to help me with a project called EXIT to help kids in Jane and Finch. A few days later, he got shot, like, 10 times. It was a crazy experience because he was someone who was a peacemaker and an artist.

"Don't die over the neighbourhood your momma's renting. **We need to understand, as people living in our community, that we're just here to rent temporarily. We're not here permanently. The plan is that we're hustling to eventually get a house and raise a family.** Why are we claiming turf in poor neighbourhoods while the wealthy are living a good life? We need to strive to build generational wealth.

"We need to support each other rather than being from "up top" (north of Jane-Finch) or from "down bottom" (south). It was stupid, growing up. There's all this politics. You can't go here or there without getting bothered by people. If you look at Flemo (Flemingdon Park), or different areas, they're all one. Why are we divided? Why is this side red and the other side blue?

"A lot of the youth in the area are entrepreneurial. We can teach them business, create grant opportunities and give them a chance to **turn their hustle to start a legit business**. We don't need more police. We need to find out what issues are really happening at home and figure out what we can do to assist them financially to change their life, whether it's music or learning how to publish a book. We're not going to judge."



Samuel Engelking

Blacus Ninja.

BLACUS NINJAH, RAP ARTIST AND COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

"I was shot in 2009, just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I knew Jibri since grade nine. I know his sisters and father. His was a real Rasta family, a positive family. He was a good friend and always had wise words to say and make you laugh.

"We need to start dealing with trauma, not just trauma of gun violence, but trauma of other things that [young people] have been witness to. **Mental illness is a very, very important aspect. How are we going to do it? Are we going to put them on drugs and make them zombies or are we going to try and have counselling and have actual solutions?**

"What's happening in society has made everybody desensitized, especially with the internet. [Violent] imagery on the internet that is consistently being played and recorded and replayed has an effect on the psyche. I think that some music and some movies, mostly movies, have influenced how people go about their day. On top of it, drug users are not being identified or helped in the manner they need to be helped. Instead of going into rehab or counseling, they're getting thrown in jail, making them more hardened, vicious criminals."

These interviews have been edited and condensed.

Paul Nguyen is founder of [Jane-Finch.com](https://www.jane-finch.com).

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