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Fighting Stereotypes With Stereotypes

Jane And Finch Residents Use Website To Combat Misconceptions

By: Murtz Jaffer

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Two Vietnamese friends have developed a unique strategy to combat Jane and Finch area stereotypes using stereotypes.

Paul Nguyen, 25, started [Jane-Finch.com](http://Jane-Finch.com) in March 2004 with his own mandate to "facilitate the growth and development of the local area youth."

"We provide a perspective from inside the community, instead of outside it," he said. "Now people have a voice, now they can use the website if they want to express something, whether it's through a written article or a drawing, or a song. I am always looking for contributions."

The interesting thing is how Nguyen has used stereotypes about the area to try and combat them.

### "You Got Beef?"

What put the site on the map was the relationship between Nguyen and 19-year-old local rapper Chuckie Akenz. The two were introduced by a mutual friend and the friendship produced immediate results.

Last year the two produced a music video entitled "You Got Beef?" The video was released on the Internet and featured the [Jane-Finch.com](http://Jane-Finch.com) logo at the end of it. Hits immediately began to increase for the site and came from fans who were attracted to the music and the fact that the pair used race as a weapon to combat racism.

The "You Got Beef" video focused on Vietnamese peoples living in the Jane and Finch area. It featured a scene where two brothers (Nguyen and Akenz displaying their acting skills) come in to save a younger sibling from knife and

gun-toting hoodlums.

While there has been criticism from some residents and the media that Nguyen and Akenz are glorifying the stereotypes that the site is trying to deconstruct, the pair vehemently disagree with this assessment.



Paul Nguyen

"The video brought attention to the site," Nguyen said. "People here are born in this area and you're growing up with people of all colours and so they don't take race so seriously. You can make fun of each and call each other names and nothing would happen, but outside people might interpret it too literally. You see that stuff on MTV all the time."

Nguyen also said that the media is to blame for reading into the video more than the site's goals. Many articles in the mainstream media have focused specifically on the video, but do not mention that "You Got Beef?" was intended just to bring traffic to [Jane-Finch.com](http://Jane-Finch.com) and when people do arrive at the site, they can read about all of the positive developments in the area.

"They (the media) do mention the site, but they focus so much on the Beef video. That thing was made last year and I am trying to get over it," he said. "The video was instrumental in getting our site on the map, but we're the new generation and we're going to use entertainment to get young people to come to the site and then see the broader community message."

Akenz agreed with the false focus that the media seems to maintain, but still is trying to spread his message.

"What I'm trying to do is build a sense of unity and strength for my people exposing us to society," he said. "You could say kind of trying to break any stereotypes society has of us, we can do whatever they can do and better even."

Akenz said that there is a broader message to the video that people should learn from.

"I'd like for people to know what it's like to grow up in a world where everything is dominated by white and black people and you're a Vietnamese teen trying to find yourself," he said. "All I'm trying to do is represent my people and open people's eyes to a life they never knew."

Jane and Finch resident Albi Aziz, 15, agrees and said "You Got Beef" is important.

"For people to watch the video and say that its 'bad and scary,' I would say that it's a great video for everyone to watch because although it deals with some violence and some other content, it should still be watched by many people and be considered by everyone," he said. "No matter what race or culture, everyone has a feeling of brotherhood. I think Chuckie clearly shows this brotherhood within the "You Got Beef" video."

### **"It's A Shame"**

Nguyen says outsiders continually condemn Jane and Finch, without visiting the area itself and blamed the media for perpetuating the stereotype. He says being online is an advantage in spreading message that the neighbourhood isn't as bad as it is made out to be.

"People think of Jane and Finch as being impoverished with a high crime rate. It's a shame that the media only comes down here when something bad is happening," he said.

According to crime analyst Const. Tyrone Skanes of 31 Division, the information can be found in the Toronto Police Services 2003 Statistical Report where there were only three reported cases of murder in the area. While there were 155 reports of sexual assault and 1,973 cases of other assaults, these did not really deviate from other areas.

### **The Site**

Nguyen developed the website because of the "lack of resources" available about Jane and Finch. He said the lack of material about an area that receives so much attention inspired him.

"I do it completely on my own. I started it from my home. I primarily deal with the art and videos. People e-mail submissions to me and I interview malls, it's hard to do everything yourself," he said. "The updates are sporadic."

The webmaster said that the global reach of the Internet allows him to educate people, even beyond the borders of Jane and Finch.

"It helps when you are on the Internet because we have a lot of people (not only Canadians) accessing the website to get a better understanding and not fear this place."

Reeducating people about the positives in the Jane and Finch area have gone beyond the website as well.

Tropicana Community Services is an Outreach program in the area and they are in the process of instituting a new Aggression Replacement Training

program (A.R.T). It is a program that is "an intervention as well as a preventative strategy to reduce aggressive behaviour, providing youth with the necessary skills to manage behaviour."

Damian Oliver, 29, is the Art Employment Facilitator for the new program and he says that A.R.T will serve as a compliment to the efforts of Paul Nguyen.

"I think that A.R.T will compliment what Jane-Finch.com is doing. A.R.T is not just for the Jane & Finch community but for everyone," he said. "By assisting youth in understanding themselves and interacting with one another I think that would be a great start in guiding them towards a positive path."

Oliver also referred to addressing the stereotypes in the area and while admitting that he hadn't seen the "You Got Beef" video, he also is an advocate in its favour.

"I am not for stereotypes but again if this is what these peeps grew up with all their lives then it's just a way of them expressing how they live."

Chuckie Akenz agreed that [Jane-Finch.com](http://Jane-Finch.com) brings a new voice because it is appealing to a younger generation of Jane and Finch residents.

"What differs us is we grew up in the struggle knowing how teenage life here is. Knowing all the problems and confronting them rather than hiding them and pretending they don't exist," he said. "I think [Jane-Finch.com](http://Jane-Finch.com) is a great site that lets outsiders see into Jane and Finch and see what we got."

"It (the site) has exceeded my expectations. I just wanted to have a little local thing, but now people are visiting it internationally, he said. "When the site came out, younger people were downloading the video but it takes time to reach the older people who are controlling the media."

"You hear about Jane and Finch in the media but it's for a bad thing about crime or something. Our site tries to offer stories about students working or trying to do things with this websites. The good things."

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