

Special Issue | 2026

Catch da Flava

REGENT PARK MAGAZINE

Economics Development Issue

This special edition of Catch da Flava was produced in collaboration with
The University of Toronto Urban Studies Program and the Focus Media Arts Centre

Editorial

It is our pleasure to introduce you to a special **Economic Development issue** of **Catch da Flava**. Catch da Flava is a monthly journalistic e-newsletter and special edition print magazine serving the Regent Park Community. The newsletter and magazine is produced by FOCUS Media Arts Centre (FOCUS), a not-for-profit organization that was established to counter negative stereotypes about the Regent Park community and provide media literacy and production programming for residents living in the area.

This special Economic issue of Catch da Flava was produced in partnership with students and residents involved in the 2025 University of Toronto Urban Studies course called The Changing Cultures of Regent Park. This course was a 13-week collaboration between University of Toronto and the FOCUS.

The course took place at the FOCUS Media Arts Centre located in the Daniel's Spectrum Arts Centre. Together, University of Toronto students and residents of Regent Park learned about the multi-dimensional history of Regent Park focusing on topics such as immigration and racial formation, urban renewal, housing redevelopment, public health, and community organizing. Next, U of T students, residents and FOCUS journalists worked in teams to envision, research, and produce their own media project about Regent Park. In designing their projects, groups were encouraged to connect their research to contemporary dynamics in the neighborhood and mobilized their projects on various media platforms.

We are celebrating 5 years of the U of T Urban Studies Program and FOCUS partnership by publishing three special issue magazines focused on **Arts**, **Community Gardens** and **Economic Development**, featuring collaborative research conducted by students and residents.

Our collaboration aims to broaden who tells the stories of Regent Park and produce accessible participatory research to keep the community informed and engaged.



We hope you enjoy the magazine! - Adonis Huggins and Aditi Mehta



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**Watch The RPTV documentary about
Changing Cultures of Regent Park Course**



Catch da Flava

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Participants Reflections

Elena Taghizadeh, Jake Knight, Patricia Richards, and Shreya Shourie

The stigma surrounding Regent Park remains prominent in mainstream media; prior to the redevelopment, small businesses thrived despite this negative perception. Unfortunately, redevelopment displaced many families and businesses. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic weakened community ties, directly affecting the ability of small businesses to succeed. Now, amid the final phases of the redevelopment, Regent Park entrepreneurs, many of whom are residents, are diligently working to rebuild the neighborhood's retail fabric.

The entrepreneurs featured in this magazine are bravely moving forward with their ideas and passion for business. While the redevelopment has forced them to confront economic injustices, including outreach, growth, capital, and even integration challenges, despite the odds, each entrepreneur has fostered economic justice for themselves by achieving financial independence

and/or transforming their passions into a livelihood. The inspiring individuals mentioned in this article are not just building their livelihoods but also contributing to the social and economic fabric of Regent Park. Their success can foster the return of economic diversity that benefits everyone, from long-time residents to newcomers. Therefore, supporting local Regent Park entrepreneurs means endorsing their mission to build their lives and strengthen the community. As MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam stated in an interview with Regent Park Focus, '...the revitalization of Regent Park will not be successful without opportunities for economic advancement, and prosperity belongs to everyone...'¹

The Corner Shop Chronicles team would like to thank Dr. Mehta and the FOCUS Media Arts team for all their feedback and assistance with this project. Without them, we would not have been able to highlight the stories of these incredible entrepreneurs. We would also like to thank all the interviewees mentioned in this article for their time, trust, and vulnerability.

Regent Park Rising: A Story of Economic Justice, Entrepreneurship, and Grit

By Elena Taghizadeh, Jake Knight, Patricia Richards, and Shreya Shourie.

For years, Regent Park was trapped in a cycle of negative press portrayed as a neighborhood rife with crime and poverty. Despite these perceptions, local entrepreneurs thrived and built their businesses on the foundations of community, customer loyalty, and personal connections. Regent Park's redevelopment has uprooted these foundations, creating a significant void in the area's business landscape. In this article, we explore Regent Park's small businesses in depth, highlighting the successes and challenges that local business owners have encountered on their journeys to becoming entrepreneurs. How are these entrepreneurs reviving the once-thriving business scene?

BACKGROUND:

Regent Park is Canada's first and largest public housing project and is in the midst of its second redevelopment, which began in 2005. The neighbourhood was framed by city officials as a 'slum' in dire need of complete urban renewal. The news cycle and media blamed the deteriorating conditions of the housing stock on the predominantly marginalized residents rather than the landlords in charge of upkeep. City planners saw Regent Park as a haven for crime, poverty and delinquency.¹ The city's plan to fix it? To introduce mixed-income and mixed-use housing into the area, 'deconcentrate' poverty, and alter the social composition of the neighbourhood.²

While the city's plan was well intentioned, the reality is that the redevelopment has been far more disruptive than anticipated. The transformation of Regent Park has not just altered its skyline but fundamentally altered its retail and economic landscape. Many essential spaces in the neighbourhood, such as Small Ethnic Grocery Stores (SERGs), which are vital to Regent Park's identity and community consumption, have closed.³ For many Regent Park residents, spaces like SERGs are crucial to a sense of belonging; these stores weren't just places to buy food—they were vital to maintaining a connection to their cultural roots and forging ties with others with similar backgrounds.⁴ Small businesses like SERGs were the bricks that built the community up by creating a sense of belonging and shared history for residents. However, despite their significance to the internal community of Regent Park, these businesses are invisible to the greater population of Toronto, leaving the broader narrative to frame Regent Park as a place of urban decline.

This narrative was peddled by the mainstream media, who played an instrumental role in shaping the public's perception of the neighbourhood for the worse. News coverage often spotlighted organized crime, violence, and drug usage, which framed Regent Park not as the vibrant neighbourhood it was, but instead, a dangerous outlier within Toronto. The result of this narrative? A repellent effect which encouraged outside visitors to steer clear

of Regent Park. Residents from surrounding areas who might have otherwise frequented Regent Park's local businesses chose to take their business elsewhere instead. This had a knock-on effect where hopeful entrepreneurs looking to begin had to battle not only the usual hurdles of running a company but also trying to convince their prospective clientele that the neighbourhood was safe, welcoming, and worth visiting. The media-induced stigma fomented real-world barriers for business owners in Regent Park. As a result, foot traffic slowed, sales declined, and the economic vitality of Regent Park, which was already strained by redevelopment and displacement, was further weakened by reputational damage. In a city as vast as Toronto, there is a wide range of neighbourhoods to choose to go and shop. Public perception of the area a business is located in can make all the difference between thriving and folding. For many Regent Park stores, the uphill climb of maintaining a business was made heavier by the weight of stigma. Nevertheless, many have found success in this difficult scenario and, against all odds, created a thriving entrepreneurial scene. Their experience in tackling both stigma and the challenges of running a successful business makes them instrumental in understanding how economic justice can be better understood in Regent Park's context.

In addition to the stigma surrounding Regent Park, the COVID-19 pandemic considerably impacted the community and its small businesses. Many small businesses were forced to shut down when the Government of Ontario declared a state of emergency in March 2020; all of these businesses were classified as non-essential by the government.⁵ Importantly, many of these businesses were also affected because, unlike larger chain stores, they lacked

the resources to move their operations online.⁶ Moving a business online requires ample planning, capital, and human resources. Many entrepreneurs were also hesitant to take loans from the government out of fear that they would not be able to repay them.⁷ The pandemic also greatly impacted the community of Regent Park, which was vital for small businesses. Without community support and customer loyalty, many businesses experienced a significant loss of revenue.

While the pandemic presented immediate challenges for small businesses in Regent Park, longer-term efforts were already underway to address economic concerns and support local businesses. The City of Toronto and residents created the Social Development Plan (SDP) and its various subcommittees to ensure social integration and belonging in the community. The SDP was first implemented in 2007. At the time, it had 75 recommendations for tackling the social change brought to Regent because of its redevelopment from social housing to a mixed housing and mixed-use community.⁸ Every year, the SDP Strategic Planning Committee works to ensure the SDP stays relevant, effective and strategic.⁹ The City claims the SDP is "Maximizing social and economic opportunities for residents, businesses, community agencies and other stakeholders" and "... increas[ing] sustainable employment rates and entrepreneurial opportunities for residents."¹⁰ Notably, the Employment and Economic Working Group (EED), a subcommittee of the SDP, is tasked with "Increas[ing] employment rates and entrepreneurial opportunities for local residents."¹¹

While the SDP laid the groundwork for addressing certain challenges, individuals like Elena Taghizadeh bring the plan to life, ensuring

its success. Elena is a familiar face in Regent Park, where she has long been a resident and an advocate for the community. As co-chair of the Employment and Economic Development Plan (EED), Elena has witnessed firsthand the implementation of the SDP. She believes in its power to bolster local entrepreneurship in Regent. For her, the EED represents more than just a program—it's a bridge for rebuilding the economic fabric of Regent Park. She also mentioned that the EED works with Regent Park residents to provide them with training, certifications and even resume help should they need it. Elena's work also includes planning and executing many promotional events and educational programs for the EED, hoping to involve as many Regent Park residents as possible. For Elena, the work of the EED is vital for Regent Park post-redevelopment because it is a practical solution for local entrepreneurs. It helps them combat the issues brought forward by the redevelopment and promotes economic equity.

LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS ARE MAKING A COMEBACK:

The EED was created to support local entrepreneurs like Mohammad (Mo) of Mo's Milshakes and More, who are working hard to grow their businesses and revive the Regent Park business scene. Mo, a lifelong resident of Regent Park, is inspired by his mother's cooking and heritage and is passionate about selling fusion Somalian and Canadian foods. For Mo, creating and selling his products brings him a profound connection to his family and culture. Mo is dedicated to making every customer feel special; he mentioned that the most rewarding part of running his business is seeing the smiles on customers' faces when they enjoy his food. Mo's Milshakes and More is located in the Carousel Cafe within the Daniels Spectrum building and operates Monday to Friday from 9 AM to 9 PM.

As a new business owner and long-time resident, Mo has experienced the redevelopment from various perspectives; he shared with us the numerous changes it has brought to Regent Park. Mo remarked that the redevelopment has resulted in both positive and negative effects for the area. As a business owner, he stated that the redevelopment has been crucial for networking, allowing him to reach a broader customer base. He mentioned that due to this growth, he has been given the opportunity to participate in regional events such as Taste of Regent Park and Taste of North York. However, the redevelopment has also led to increased rent prices and heightened competition. Notably, this is also under an economy where grocery prices are exorbitant nationwide. Many local entrepreneurs like Mo face fierce competition from large chain stores, making it difficult for small businesses to promote themselves and



Picture of Project Chronicles team member, Regent Park Resident and EED Co-Chair, Elena Taghizadeh. Photo Credit: Dawar Naeem.

thrive. Larger businesses have the capital required for additional resources, marketing, and employment. The threat of large businesses is prominent in Regent Park because the more big box, chain stores enter the area, the more the culture of the area is lost. Small businesses such as Mo's, which have a unique story and sell unique items, set Regent Park's small business market apart from others in the city and contribute to Regent Park's unique cultural vibrancy. Ensuring smaller businesses have a voice against the grain of larger companies within the financial landscape of Regent Park assists the community in becoming more economically just for all.

Despite these challenges, Mo is determined to embrace change, stating, "The old Regent Park was one big family and now the family got bigger, this is the only difference..." and, "In my experience, this is the best community in all of Canada... from my personal experience, I really believe that." In the coming years, Mo hopes to expand his business beyond Regent Park, opening new locations and reaching a broader

customer base.

Many local entrepreneurs share the struggles faced by Mo. Patricia Richards, a member of Corner Shop Chronicles and a Regent Park resident for over twenty years, has recently embarked on her entrepreneurial journey after leaving the corporate banking world. She is focused on turning her passions into her livelihood. Echoing the struggles faced by Mo, Patricia mentioned to us that she wishes there were more dedicated spaces for entrepreneurs in Regent Park. She proposed a year-long venue for resident entrepreneurs to establish themselves and sell their products to community members. After these entrepreneurs are able to rent their own space, the venue is given to a new business. Patricia shares, "Residents should have first priority for space... instead of bringing in Tim Hortons and Shoppers because we have those things already five minutes away... we should help the residents first before the bigger franchises." This is a crucial point; before the redevelopment, community relations in Regent Park were deep and extensive; however, this bond was fractured when many residents were displaced during the redevelopment. Additionally, the sense of community further diminished due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prioritizing entrepreneurs like Patricia, whose products unite residents of the neighbourhood, helps to rebuild these community ties, subsequently challenging the stigma of Regent Park as a place of urban decline.

Patricia sells crochet clothing items as well as Rastafarian-inspired food products. She sells her products at local events under the domain name "Kemba Veg Spot." She strongly believes in the sentiment that 'health is wealth' and brings this mentality to her cooking. She is also a firm believer in using food to unite the community. Patricia has recently obtained her food safety



Mohammad (Mo) from Mo's Milkshakes and More at the Carousel Cafe in the Daniles Spectrum Building.
Photo Credit: Elena Taghizadeh.

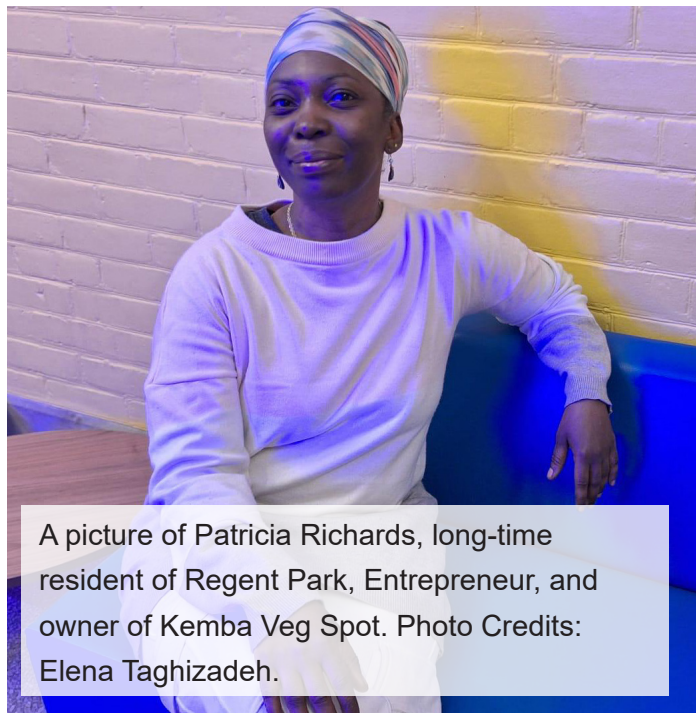
certification and is beginning a new cooking course to refine her skills further. She shared that the most rewarding aspect of her business is seeing customers enjoy her food; she takes great pleasure in knowing her cooking brings them joy. nity”

Eventually, Patricia hopes to have her own space to sell her products. She is passionate about starting a catering business sometime in the future when she has collected all the qualifications provided by her ongoing cooking courses.



A Picture of Patricia's Crochet Creations.
Picture Credits: Patricia Richards.

Another resident entrepreneur working hard to break the stigma and revive the business scene of Regent Park is Pereira Santos of B.A. Grocery and Variety. Pereira became an entrepreneur to achieve economic freedom from the harsh and unpredictable conditions attached to working blue-collar and gig economy jobs. While he enjoys the financial independence of self-employment, Pereira finds it hard to keep B.A. afloat; as the sole employee at B.A., Pereira works tirelessly to ensure his grocery store is well-stocked and staffed. This is a common



A picture of Patricia Richards, long-time resident of Regent Park, Entrepreneur, and owner of Kemba Veg Spot. Photo Credits: Elena Taghizadeh.



A Picture of Patricia's Food Station called "Kemba Veg Spot." Picture Credits: Patricia Richards.

sentiment among small business owners in Regent Park, mainly because the neighborhood faces economic struggles and transient customers.

Pereira works diligently so that B.A. can remain a store dedicated to helping the community; he

stocks essential grocery and personal items and strives to keep his prices as low as possible for residents. He mentioned that he feels a sense of reward and accomplishment when community members visit his store frequently. Building community support is a significant goal for entrepreneurs like Pereira. After the redevelopment of Regent Park, support for small businesses dwindled. The reasons for this include the displacement of many residents, the arrival of large chain stores in the area, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, due to the redevelopment and the emergence of big-box grocery stores, Pereira faces challenges from competition. He noted that competition impacts various aspects of his business, from initial capital investment to advertising to prices. At a time when small businesses are struggling to survive amid the neighborhood's transformation, community support for stores like B.A. is more crucial than ever. Supporting small businesses such as B.A. aids in rebuilding the retail market in Regent Park and also helps challenge the stigma surrounding the area. In the coming years, Pereira hopes to attract more customers to B.A. and grow his business; he wants to continue to support the community through his entrepreneurship. For further inquiries, B.A. Grocery and Variety is located at 140 Sackville Street and opens at 11:30 AM daily. It is also available on Skip the Dishes for delivery.



Picture of the outside of B.A. Grocery and Variety. Photo Credit: Elena Taghizadeh.

Lastly, Andrew, the manager of Café ZUZU, provides a unique perspective on the stigmatization and challenges entrepreneurs face after redevelopment. Café ZUZU is a café, restaurant, and retail shop located at 555 Dundas Street East. It is a relatively new business that began calling Regent Park its home following the previous stage of redevelopment. Café ZUZU belongs to a larger restaurant investment group called Gusteau 54, which has numerous restaurants throughout the city of Toronto but was particularly interested in opening a location in Regent.



Picture of the inside of B.A. Grocery and Variety. Photo Credit: Elena Taghizadeh.

For Andrew and the rest of the Café ZUZU team, the goal is to bring new customers to Regent Park and simultaneously fight the stigma surrounding the neighbourhood. Andrew stated, "...it's been wonderful to see many new people come into our space, many people who either hadn't been to Regent Park in a while or never had been to Regent Park to come here and be a part of what we're doing...." The story of Café ZUZU brings a different yet vital perspective to this article: new businesses that are not necessarily tailored for intra-community needs also have a large part to play in crushing the lingering negative stereotypes about Regent Park and in rebuilding the business scene.

Notably, Andrew referred to some challenges that Café ZUZU is facing, namely that they feel

disconnected from the Regent Park community, sometimes seen as a gentrifier by original residents. Being one of the larger businesses in the neighbourhood, Andrew hopes that long-time Regent Park residents will frequent the space more often. While Café ZUZU hosts community events, the team hopes that long-time Regent Park residents will drop by as customers, too. In this way, Café ZUZU would become a space for inclusivity—a space for visitors, newcomers, and long-time residents alike—a space for

social cohesion. Andrew and the rest of the Café ZUZU team believe that residents should frequent Café ZUZU because they take great pride in their hospitality, stating that “...people is what we’re about...” With this said, the team recognizes that it takes time to integrate fully into an area. Still, they are invested in the process, saying, “...we’re heavily set foot right here... we are invested in this neighborhood... we’re here to stay....”



Picture of Andrew from Café ZUZU. Photo Credits: Elena Taghizadeh.

Galaxy A54 5G

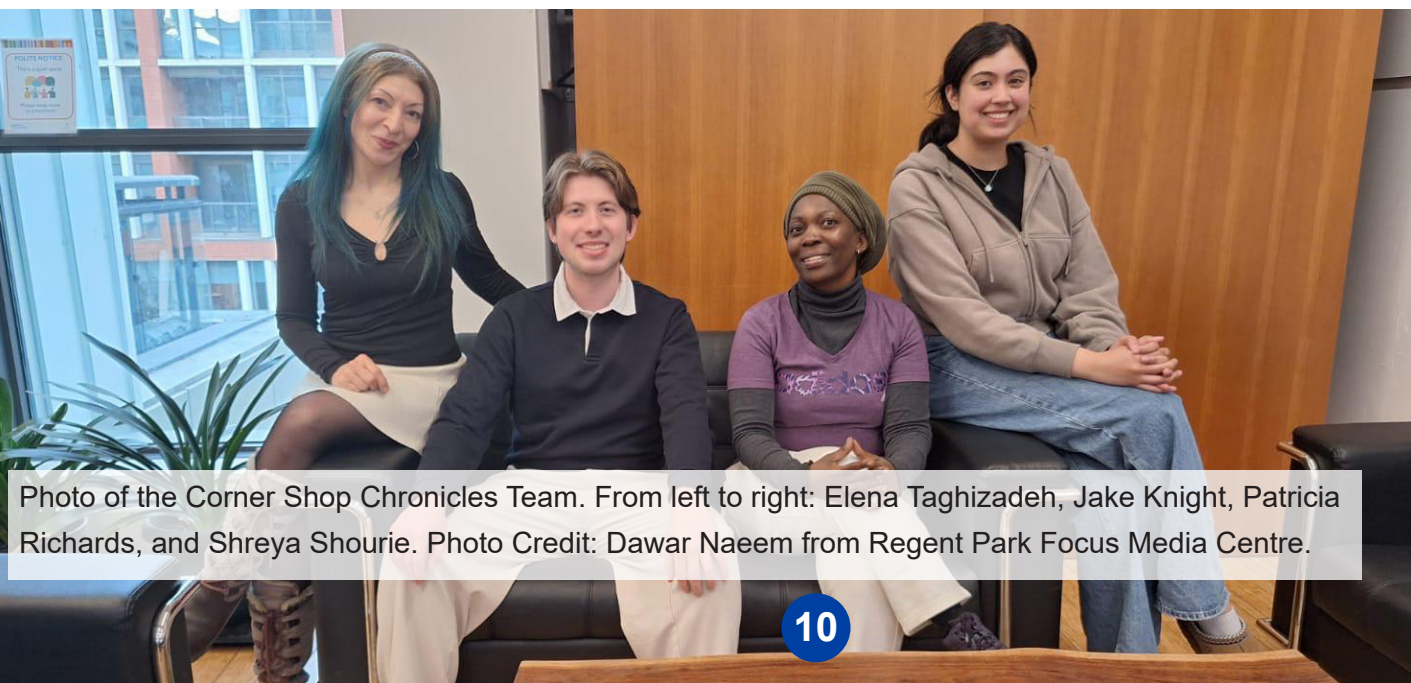


Photo of the Corner Shop Chronicles Team. From left to right: Elena Taghizadeh, Jake Knight, Patricia Richards, and Shreya Shourie. Photo Credit: Dawar Naeem from Regent Park Focus Media Centre.

Where Did My Neighbours Go?

By Jamie Yu, Eric Fallas, Kaitlyn Chan, Farhana Ahmed

INTRODUCTION

When thinking of carousel rides at theme parks, many might recall the gentle, rhythmic motion, spinning steadily and continually round and round. The air is tinged with the sweet scent of popcorn and cotton candy from nearby stalls, mingling with the faint traces of oil and wood from the ride itself. Warm bulbs glowing softly overhead, while playful tunes—waltzes and lullabies—play from hidden speakers. Children spinning dizzily, their laughter rising above the music, as eager parents stand by with cameras in hand, ready to capture the moment. It all evokes a nostalgia from another era, a whimsical, timeless charm.

In Regent Park, the mirroring idea of community nostalgia is endangered, amid the quiet churn of change. Regent Park, located in Toronto's downtown east area, is a historically marginalized and highly diverse neighbourhood currently undergoing one of the most ambitious redevelopment plans in the country. Spearheaded by Toronto Community Housing and The Daniels Corporation, the revitalization seeks to replace aging social housing with a mixed-income model, bringing in market-rate condos and retail while promising to preserve space for original residents. Yet, as cranes moved in, and new towers rose, long-time residents faced more than just changes in the skyline. The transformation raised questions about who gets to stay, who benefits, and what economic justice means in a rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood.



In the face of these challenges, many Regent Park residents have taken matters into their own hands. They've organized, advocated, and built initiatives that center their voices and needs—demanding not just inclusion but ownership and opportunity. Enter Humaira Rahman, a born-and-bred Regent Parker who, growing up, experienced multiple displacements in the neighbourhood, witnessing friends and family constantly moving in and out of her life. She, alongside her mentor and close friend Halima Farah, co-founded the Carousel Cafe in the atrium of Daniels Spectrum. The cafe doesn't just serve food; it operates on a rotating vendor system that allows local food entrepreneurs to run their own business and invites customers to be a part of their culture. It is economic justice in motion, to create space for possibility, circulating opportunity within the community, and ensuring Regent Park's transformation includes—not erases—the people who built it.

Our project brings this story to life journalism, alongside two creative mediums: a podcast, and a comic. Through our projects, we seek to center the voices of Regent Park residents and uncover how grassroots efforts like the Carousel Cafe are reshaping what economic justice can look like in a changing city.

OUR INVESTIGATION

In the beginning stages of our investigation, we found ourselves having several discussions around a deceptively innocent question—“Hey Regent Park, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Such a question easily invites imagery of an adult asking a young child, perhaps seeking to understand the child’s aspirations. For us, this question posed in the context of Regent Park begs a more critical awareness of the community’s socio-economic realities characterized by economic instability and systemic inequalities. This question is layered in deeper implications to whether residents can access the resources needed to achieve their goals, and consider who truly benefits from the changes brought on by gentrification. Given the myriad of perspectives and framings this research topic invites, we decided to keep our research process open-ended to allow for an authentic exploration of our findings.

It took a long time to realize our project’s vision, but had guidance from Farhana Ahmed—a fellow group member and long-time Regent Park resident. We are mindful of our positionality as university-educated researchers from outside of the neighbourhood, which makes Farhana’s insights as both a team member and a Regent Park resident essential in grounding our work in authentic local perspectives. Her lived experience and foresight ensured our framework was informed by local knowledge and that our

methods were respectful and responsive.

We frequently met at local cafes and community spaces like the Daniels Spectrum throughout the entire process. These rendez-vous ushered in a whirlwind of chaotic, lively conversations, spanning every topic under the sun, where we developed meaningful relationships not just with each other, but with the local community. Each meeting delved us deeper, uncovering more focused questions we could ask about how redevelopment, displacement, and accountability have shaped Regent Park into what it is today. Some of our preliminary questions were:

- What stops Regent Parkers from dreaming?
- What kinds of promises of economic justice were made to residents?
- Have those promises been kept?
- How do local residents come together to protect the spaces that are important to their identity?
- What examples are there of stakeholders, such as The Daniels Corporation and TCH, being held accountable by residents?

It brought us closer to our central research question that anchors our project:

- What are Regent Park residents doing to ensure economic justice is delivered to those in their community?

We set out on multiple exploratory walks through the neighbourhood, using each outing as a chance to observe the spaces and gradually assemble a more complete picture of Regent Park. For most of our group, these walks were our first meaningful encounters with various parts of the neighbourhood. We documented points of interest such as aging social housing, newly constructed mid-rise developments, local food networks, commercial activity, and

community initiatives. All of this culminated in our introduction to emerging grassroots hubs like the Carousel Café & Bistro, the focal point of our project. After talking to the co-founders, Humaira and Halima, we instantly felt moved and inspired by their story. We collectively recognized this project also serves as a platform for residents to be heard and understood, while spotlighting how local community-driven initiatives illustrate real-time economic justice in Regent Park.

This leads us to our present focus on how Regent Park residents are not passive recipients of change; in fact, residents are active agents in shaping their community's future. Through grassroots initiatives, local entrepreneurship, and sustained advocacy, they are challenging dominant redevelopment narratives and reclaiming space—economically, culturally, and politically. Places like Carousel Café & Bistro aren't just businesses—they're gathering spots, storytelling hubs, and living proof of what it looks like when a community identifies gaps and leans into its strength to generate economic opportunities. Local residents are creating jobs for the community, mentoring youth, advocating for accountability, and protecting the parts of Regent Park that make it feel like home. Through

Humaira's story in particular, we heard dreams that did not disappear entirely—only adapted and re-conceptualized as the revitalization progressed. Economic justice here isn't just about income or policy; it's about power, pride, and the right to imagine a future that doesn't leave anyone behind. And maybe, in asking Regent Park what it wants to be when it grows up, we've come a little closer to understanding the kind of future its people are already fighting for.

Before Humaira, There was Armand

Gentrification is rarely quiet—it reshapes the built environment, shifts demographics and redraws the social map of a neighbourhood. From community-driven initiatives to city-led projects, efforts have sought to balance growth and affordability. By broadening our understanding through personal stories, historical context, and academic insights, we can connect Regent Park's experiences to global conversations on economic justice, recognizing how local action influenced broader issues on equity in urban spaces worldwide.



An easter egg on Google Maps to find Armand's Food Truck (and what appears to be Walid on shift) is best done in September 2007, with 15 Belshaw behind (Photo Credit: Google Maps, 2007)

The examples of ethnic grocery stores in and around Regent Park have quietly contributed to economic justice and sustaining community cohesion (Komakech & Jackson, 2016). One frequently mentioned example in our discussions is Arman's Farmers Market, a modest business whose foundation is trust, kindness, and genuine community relationships. At the heart of this long-standing community icon is its founder, Walid, who affectionately named the business after his son. Walid's story is one of resourcefulness and seeking to combat food insecurity in the neighbourhood. In his farmer's market, he sourced surplus produce from major grocery chains, turning what would otherwise have gone to waste into affordable produce accessible to local families. His shop was situated in a truck, where he could easily transport goods around the area. Walid's reputation was that of an honest and hard-working local Regent Parker. His upstanding character is evidenced by a just approach to his customers; for example, allowing some customers to delay their payment if they didn't have enough money. Through quiet dedication and consistent generosity, Walid transformed a humble market into a cherished community institution.

Similarly, Rabba Fine Foods tells a story of immigrant entrepreneurship and community care. Walid, and Rick Rabba (the founder of Rabba Fine Foods), prove Komakech and Jackson's (2016) thesis on how Small Ethnic Grocery stores (SERGs) are vital infrastructures in urban neighbourhoods—not only supporting food access and cultural specificity but also fostering economic justice through community-oriented practices. They embody a powerful model for how urban policy can support minority-owned businesses to prevent displacement, promote equity, and preserve the social fabric of rapidly

changing communities.

HUMAIRA'S STORY

In East Toronto, born and raised, t'was Regent Park where Humaira Rahman spent most of her days. At just 22 years old, Humaira has done it all—all for the neighbourhood she proudly calls home. Many moons ago, her first home was at 15 Belshaw Street. After experiencing multiple instances of involuntary displacement and significant disruption in her childhood, she now owns the Carousel Cafe and Bistro in Daniels Spectrum. Coincidentally, her cafe sits on the very site where her childhood home once stood. We stumbled upon her remarkable story—what she calls “a full circle”—during our investigation into local entrepreneurship and the role of residents in delivering economic justice within the neighbourhood. Our teammate Farhana had known Humaira for years, but it wasn't until we sat down to interview her and her business partner, Halima Farah, that we fully understood Humaira's deep connection to the community and her inspiring journey to empower her neighbours.

Humaira's story began with her three brothers and parents at 15 Belshaw Street. Her parents, originally from Bangladesh, had moved to Toronto before Humaira's birth. Then, in July 2002, Humaira was born, and soon after, her family welcomed her younger brother. As their family grew, they moved from the thirteenth floor to a larger unit on the third floor of the same building. This move, it turns out, would be the turning point for the Rahman family. Not long after settling into their new unit, 15 Belshaw Street was announced as part of The Daniels Corporation's first phase of revitalization. In 2005, The Daniels Corporation partnered with Toronto Community Housing to redevelop 53 of

the 69 acres of Regent Park, which at the time was home to around 7,500 low-income residents. The corporation promised that the revitalization would “blend Regent Park seamlessly with surrounding neighbourhoods,” and reconnect it to Toronto’s broader grid of streets and avenues (The Daniels Corporation, 2005). The plan also included the creation of new commercial spaces and community facilities, positioning the development as a beacon of hope for the area’s future. But, as many residents would soon learn, this promise was short-lived.

On paper, the revitalization seemed like a perfect promise, but for Humaira’s family, it meant the displacement of their family of six. Her life would never be the same. According to the 2005 tenant agreement between the housing authority and evicted residents, tenants were promised that, upon completion of the revitalization, they would be able to choose their permanent units—

based on the order in which they left their old ones, with newer homes being allocated on a “first come, first served” basis (Johnson et al., 2017). Yet, Humaira revealed the shortcomings of this promise. To qualify for Daniels Corporation’s revitalized dwellings, residents were required to be relocated twice within the neighbourhood, effectively removing those who had stayed in the same unit from the waitlist for new housing options. Additionally, if residents chose to relocate to a community housing option outside Regent Park, they were barred from returning once the revitalization was complete. Yet, Humaira expressed gratitude, saying, “Alhamdulillah” (Praise be to God), as she noted that her family was one of the lucky ones. Since Humaira’s family moved twice to different floors within 15 Belshaw Street and rejected offers to relocate outside the neighbourhood, they ensured their eligibility to stay. Therefore, Alhamdulillah, indeed.



A map depicting different phases of Regent Park’s revitalization (Photo Credit: Toronto Community Housing, 2005)

Although her family stayed in Regent Park and later moved to 229 Sumach Street on the neighbourhood's north side, life was far from easy. According to our teammate Farhana, as a Southsider of Regent Park, making the move to the North was a significant challenge for any resident. Divided by Dundas Street East, the neighbourhood's two sides had a long-standing rivalry, marked by stereotypes, assumptions, and even associations with underground activities. Humaira and her siblings, three elementary school students, were suddenly thrust into navigating entirely different social and physical environments. To make matters even more complicated, the Rahman children faced their biggest challenge yet: what Humaira calls "Double Displacement." This term describes how four of the Rahman siblings were split up and enrolled in three different schools, as Nelson Mandela Park Public School—where all three siblings were originally supposed to attend—was undergoing renovations at the time of their move. At such a young age, Humaira and her oldest brother had to step into parental roles, helping care for their younger siblings while their parents worked tirelessly to support the family. Where did her neighbours go? In response to the million-dollar question—Where did her neighbours go?—Humaira's answer was simple: "I honestly don't know." She explained that from a young age, she had been in "Go mode," with little time to reflect on her past or the neighbours she once knew. Sadly, Humaira's fragmented memory of her neighbours and the painful disconnection from her experiences of relocation are not unique. In a 2009 research study on urban renewal and involuntary displacement, Mindy Fullilove explains that displacement—particularly involuntary relocation from one's home—can leave people feeling rootless and vulnerable. For Humaira, the forced displacement not only

disrupted her family's sense of belonging but also dismantled the social networks crucial to public housing and ethnic communities. Her family lost the tight-knit connections they had built at 15 Belshaw Street, and she herself lost her childhood friends. To top it off, Humaira had to step into a guardian role to take care of her younger brothers. Through further research, we may have found an explanation for where Humaira's neighbours went. Upon completion of Phase 1 of the Regent Park redevelopment, TCH (Toronto Community Housing) reported that only 40 percent of the original residents were able to secure housing within Regent Park. The remaining 56 percent were relocated to other public housing across the city (Johnson et al., 2017).

TEENAGE YEARS AT DANIELS SPECTRUM and YEA

The obstacles Humaira faced, however, do not define her story. Despite the tough hurdles in her journey, she fondly recalls the strength of the Regent Park community. As a child, she loved playing with her neighbours at Big Foot Park, going ice skating near her first home, and later rushing home from hangouts to beat Maghrib (sunset) and make it in time for Islamic prayer. She described these moments as the community's most vibrant "link ups," where kids burned off energy from playing, while their mothers and aunties sat nearby chatting. "There was always something happening outside," Humaira recalled. In the summer, the scent of barbecue meat and popcorn would fill the air in Regent Park as adults hosted cookouts and festivals for the neighbourhood. These memories remain close to her heart, and they would later shape her deep commitment to community involvement.



Outside of Daniels Spectrum (Photo Credit: Eric Fallas, 2025)

In 2012, Humaira's first home, 15 Belshaw Street, was transformed into Daniels Spectrum, a vibrant community cultural hub funded by the Daniels Corporation and the John and Myrna Daniels Charitable Foundation (Daniels Spectrum, 2025). While many events unfolded within the Spectrum's walls, for Humaira, it became a place filled with countless late-night conversations with friends and study sessions during her high school years. Before Daniels Spectrum, however, there were many other instances of community-oriented businesses in Toronto that we can look to for similar models of civil service.

Let's go back to Rabba Fine Foods. Rabba is a small ethnic grocery store, founded in 1966 by Palestinian immigrant family of Rick Rabba (Sponagle, 2021). Formerly a single convenience store located just east of the U of T downtown campus, the business has continuously evolved to reflect the cultural diversity of communities, and their needs. Whether it be offering different products like halal meats, Middle Eastern spices, or Jamaican bread, Rabba has long been a steady, reliable presence in the area. In 2020, while the world grappled with a global pandemic, Rabba kept its stores open 24/7, offering economic relief, food security and social connection especially in trying times.

Similarly, Humaira—now a high school graduate—realized she too could make a difference. She joined the Youth Enrichment Academy (YEA) at Daniels Spectrum, an initiative designed to address gaps in programming for youth in grades 6-8 in Regent Park (Yearegentpark, 2023). Starting as a Youth Mentor, she quickly rose to a contracted position as a Youth Outreach Worker. Local youth in Regent Park face continuous challenges due to the neighbourhood’s historical disinvestment, which exposes them to threats like “safety issues, local environmental hazards, harassment and stigmatization, and growing up in a culture of

immediacy” (Laughlin, 2008, p.25). Additionally, the revitalization efforts took away fundamental communal support relied on by many local families, such as childminding and informal educational provisions previously offered by other parents (August, 2014). In response to these challenges, Humaira and her colleagues at YEA worked tirelessly to bridge these gaps by hosting a series of classes, tutorials, activities, and after-school programs, all aimed at improving educational access and uplifting the neighbourhood’s youth.



The second floor of Daniels Sepctrum, where Humaira spent her days in high school (Photo Credit: Eric Fallas, 2025)



Humaira on the second left wearing a blue jacket, leading her group to the Canadian Opera Company (Photo Credit: Growing Neighbourhoods Foundation, 2023)

It was also during Humaira’s time at YEA, she met someone who would change her life forever—her mentor, partner in crime, and future business partner, Halima.

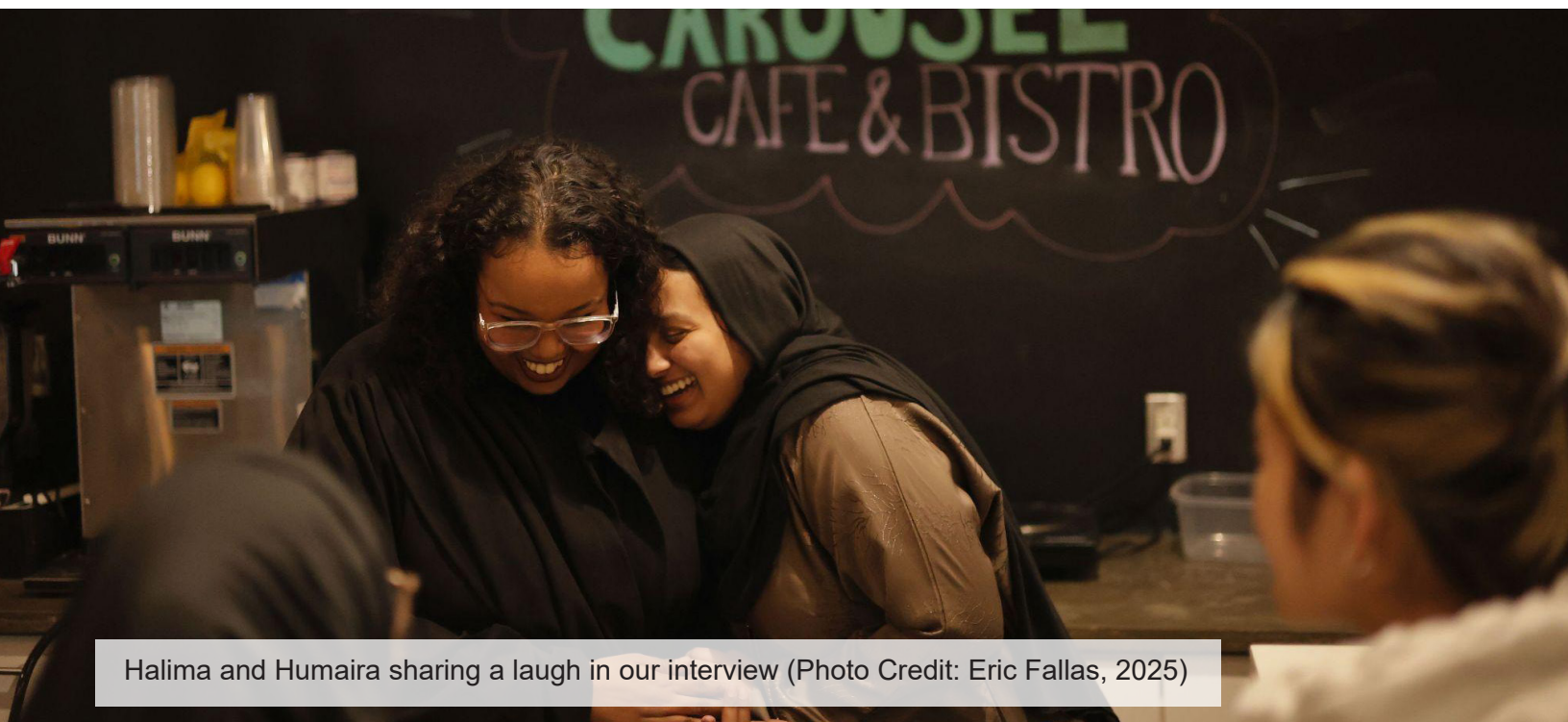
HALIMA

During our interview with Humaira, she jokingly referred to Halima as an “official Rahman,” as if she were part of the family. Their energy was electric, filled with laughter, telepathic agreements, and an uncanny ability to predict each other’s next moves. This was especially evident when our photographer teammate, Eric, asked for photos. They effortlessly knew how to strike the perfect pose and even anticipated each other’s best sides, and it was difficult to find any shots where they weren’t smiling. Halima entered Humaira’s life in 2020 as her

mentor at the Youth Enrichment Academy (YEA). Over time, their friendship blossomed, and the two quickly became inseparable outside of work. Beyond inspiring youth at the academy, their conversations sparked endless ideas on how they could make a greater impact on their community. Humaira fondly recalled her childhood memories of the community’s strength, but also noted that the revitalization of Regent Park had simultaneously led to division within the neighbourhood. She described how the area, once full of activity, had become quieter, as displacement dismantled the communal support that had once been integral—like childminding, socialization, and a shared understanding of mutual care.

The revitalization also introduced a mixed-income model, which incorporated individuals with higher incomes into the area. This shift has created tension between long-time residents and newcomers, leading to conflicts over cultural differences. This tension is explored in the documentary *Farewell Regent*, where one long-time Regent Park resident expresses his frustration with the new condo owners, recounting how they rejected his invitation to community barbecues, saying, “The condo

owners do their own thing, with hors d’oeuvres and wine.” (Browne, 2019, 47:05) Another interviewee comments, “Before, neighbours knew neighbours. Now, in the condos, there’s no sense of community.” (Browne, 2019, 46:44) These sentiments reflect the broader impact of the revitalization on the neighbourhood’s sense of unity and belonging.



Halima and Humaira sharing a laugh in our interview (Photo Credit: Eric Fallas, 2025)

CAROUSEL CAFE & BISTRO

With Halima’s years of experience in youth empowerment in Regent Park, she resonated deeply with Humaira’s vision of bringing the community together. In 2024, with the support of Arthubs and Daniels Corporation, they took on a new challenge: opening a café—what they fondly call a “community living room.” Located in the lobby of Daniels Spectrum, the pair named it the Carousel Café and Bistro. The café not only serves as a gathering place for residents but

also welcomes local food entrepreneurs, offering them a rotating space to sell their goods. Like a carousel, the vendors change regularly, but the aim remains constant: to celebrate and unite the diverse community through food.

Since its opening, the café has embodied Humaira’s cherished childhood memories, becoming a hub of activity. Open almost daily from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m, you can feel the

presence of long-gone neighbours in every intimate conversation at the cafe, every big laugh you hear at the counter, the sound of the TV playing cartoon shows and sports games. These moments invoke a sense of nostalgia and recreate on a minute scale the childhood memories Humaira once shared with her neighbours—from the whispers of aunties gossiping to the sound of her childhood friends jumping in the bouncy castle and the smell of barbecue meat at summer cookouts. These memories have culminated into Humaira's vision of a "community living room" at Carousel Cafe for her new neighbours. Her vision includes a space where there is always something going on, whether it be open mic or game nights, and provides childcare services for the area's children, such as a shared television children can watch cartoons on.

The cafe enjoys a constant ebb and flow of customers. Looking ahead, Humaira and Halima

plan to expand the café's impact by offering summer employment opportunities for local high school students. These positions will equip them with valuable skills in roles such as a barista and cashiers, providing a stepping stone for their professional growth. Some of these services are like those formerly provided by Landsdowne Cone, a former ice cream shop located in what is now Cafe Zuzu, and the now closed basement mosques of Regent Park (Ruggerio, 2014; Parnell 2020). In the basement mosques, parents could leave their children at the mosque knowing that a trusted adult was always present. The mosques also had printers where students could print their homework, as well as a treadmill for exercise. The space brought a sense of belonging, building networks of support and solidarity to address issues of social justice and access to spaces, especially in marginalizing environments (Jamil, 2015). It appears then that many of the cafe's services and hopes are inspired by the experiences at these basement mosques.



Prayer in progress at Regent Park Khadem Committee Centre, basement of 260 Sumach Street in Regent Park (Photo Credit: 30 Masjids)

THE END...

You've now reached the end of Humaira's inspiring story, at least for now. Despite the painful experience of displacement, she continues to dedicate herself to her community, honouring her childhood neighbours—displaced or not—in meaningful ways. As a community leader, she's making strides in creating space for those around her. Whether through her work with YEA, addressing economic disparities, and launching specialized initiatives for local youth, or tackling the divide created by urban revitalization, Humaira's efforts speak volumes. As we wrap up her journey, we wish to leave you with one question: Where will her neighbours go?

Humaira's successes with YEA and Carousel Café are not a perfect, "happily ever after" tale of residents delivering economic justice within the neighbourhood. Far from it. The obstacles that continue to arise as she remains devoted to Regent Park's community make it clear that the fight is far from over. Just because residents are taking on the role of delivering economic justice doesn't mean it's a one-size-fits-all solution. Challenges are ongoing. As of the time of writing, YEA has struggled to survive due to funding issues. Humaira reflects on how, as a child, she experienced the painful impacts of involuntary displacement. Through her work with YEA, she sees today's youth facing a similar struggle with the unpredictability of funding from large organizations. Programs that young people have come to rely on can disappear in an instant, leaving them uncertain about their future. Carousel Café, too, faced its biggest challenge during the week of our interview with Humaira when the café was robbed. The thief, someone familiar with Daniels Spectrum, managed to slip under the radar early in the morning, pretending

to be a regular passerby. This incident underscores a harsh reality: the obstacles in delivering economic justice to your neighbours are compounded when individuals from within the same community actively work against you. As we shift away from the positives of Humaira's community work, it becomes clear that the future holds new sets of challenges for economic justice. So the question is: How do we take the lessons of the past—Humaira's childhood, the good and the bad—and her community ventures, both past and present, to help future generations avoid facing the same marginalization and social separation? The hope is that future efforts will guide a new generation of Humaira down a path of resilience, one that can withstand the forces at play in urban revitalization.

Therefore, we leave you with a reflective thought: How can you help future residents in Regent Park fight the injustices they face today, and empower them to become community leaders just as Humaira has, continuing the work she began?



Existing Historic Social Housing 2 (Photo Credit: Eric Fallas, 2025)

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Authors

Elena Taghizadeh, Jake Knight, Patricia Richards, and Shreya Shourie

Editors

Adonis Huggins
Aditi Mehta

Additional Photography

Taken by the respected authors

Layout

Tyrone MacLean-Wilson



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