

## Celebrating 25 Years of Love, Laughter and Community



June 16<sup>th</sup> marks a major milestone - our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary! We're thrilled to celebrate a quarter-century of nurturing community with care and compassion.

The Sisters of St. Joseph have been offering comfort, shelter and support to Toronto's most vulnerable communities, including the South Riverdale neighbourhood, for almost 175 years.

But the Sisters knew that life deserves more than the simple basics, so they created unique learning environments, health care programs and perhaps most important, a community where everyone who walked through the door was greeted with love and respect, and was treated with dignity.

For over a century-and-a-half, the Sisters have responded to the changing needs they saw in the community, establishing ministries in education, social services and health care.

Fontbonne Ministries, founded in 2000, continued that tradition, bringing a kinder, more caring world to a larger community. Studio on the Hill, for example, is a community-focused pottery studio located at 967 O'Connor Drive in East York. It operates under the umbrella of Fontbonne Ministries, providing a creative outlet in a stress-free environment, fostering both artistic expression and community engagement.

Fontbonne is named for Mother Delphine Fontbonne, the founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Toronto.

Mother Delphine and three Sisters arrived in Toronto in 1851 to minister to the City's most vulnerable, beginning our legacy of offering love, care, service and spirituality to people in need.



*Breaking ground on what would become Mustard Seed and Fontbonne Place.*

The late Sister Margaret Myatt announced the creation of Fontbonne Ministries to the Sisters, saying, "It is our hope that the establishment of Fontbonne Ministries will free us to be present in a more personal way to the ministries we undertake in order to realize our commitment to nurture community with our neighbour, especially with people experiencing unstable housing, living below the poverty line and women at risk."



The Sisters opened Fontbonne Ministries in 2000 with a dream: to create a safe and welcoming place where people facing adversity would be valued and treated with respect, and where they would find a supportive community that celebrated their unique spirit with compassion and understanding.

Twenty-five years later, Toronto has changed. The City is bigger, more diverse, with greater income disparity, overflowing shelters, tent encampments and food banks that are struggling to feed the one in 10 Torontonians who count on them to put food on the table.

What hasn't changed: Fontbonne Ministries commitment to nurturing community with love, dignity and respect.

We could not do it without the compassionate support of our South Riverdale neighbours. Thank you for making our past 25 years possible. ■

# More Than Just Lunch

## Voices From Our Community

Tymm has been a Fontbonne participant for 15 years and he's seen a lot of changes in the neighbourhood over the years.



But what has remained constant: no matter who you are, no matter where you've been, no matter how you live, Fontbonne welcomes you with open arms.

Sister Gwen, he says, was his door to the drop-in.

"Come for coffee Sister Gwen told me. Stay for a movie. But I was from Regent Park; people made assumptions about me, and I didn't feel comfortable. I told Sister Gwen, and she said, No. Come back."

And he did.

Tymm says he's "not a chattering kind of guy" but has made friends here.

"This is a big-time good space," he says. "The company is good. People are friendly and pretty quiet. I've even met some guys I knew from Regent Park. And I feel supported – I can always talk to someone if I need to."

Sister Gwen's passing on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024, left a big hole, Tymm says. She was one of the reasons he quit substance use.

"She's still in my heart," he says. "Sometimes I need to talk to her, and when I do, I go somewhere private."

Tymm learned a lot from Sister Gwen, including the value of his life principle.

"I don't make promises because promises get broken. But I give you my word that I'll try. My word is my Bible."

Marty has been coming to our Mustard Seed location since 2021.

"I just happened upon Fontbonne during COVID," he remembers. "I was walking by and saw a lineup – people were getting bagged lunches and coffee. So, I stopped to see what was going on."

Since then, he comes for coffee and lunch, for programs and for companionship. He's made lots of friends and has rediscovered friends he knew from childhood.

Does he think the Sisters' vision has been realized?

"I have never experienced a place like this," he says. "Mean spiritedness does not exist here. Fontbonne represents something spiritual – it's 'home'."

"Here, I am unconditionally accepted. I have never been stigmatized, ostracized . . . or ignored."

Toni had been having breakfast at St. John's the Compassionate Mission up the street when staff there told her about Fontbonne.



*At Mustard Seed, Marty feels welcomed, respected and heard.*

Her first impression?

"Indoors! And more women were here – I liked that. I didn't feel as if I was in danger. And I was welcomed; people were just super nice. There was no judgement. All of us are here because something happened in our lives, so . . . who are we to judge?"

"Fontbonne feels like a community," Toni says. She especially likes Game Day. "I love backgammon – I haven't played games like that since I was in my 20s."

And she's thankful for the support and services she can access. "I got my taxes done! I got a winter coat – it's silver – with a hood. It comes down to my knees so kept me warm."

Toni has anxiety; sometimes she likes company and sometimes she likes to be left alone with a book.

"Coming here forces me not to be so antisocial," she says. "I can talk to people here or not, depending on how I feel, and that helps me to stay balanced." ■

## Warmth, Welcome and a Way Forward

In the late 1990s, the late Sister Gwen Smith was asked to set up a community outreach in the South Riverdale neighbourhood. She and her team spent time getting to know the neighbours and asking what programs would answer a need in this east end community.

As the group reflected on a name for the new outreach, Mustard Seed suggested itself . . . the smallest of seeds growing into a tree where birds could nest, from the Gospel of St. Matthew.

Today, the drop-in supports the community's most vulnerable, many of whom are unhoused or precariously housed individuals, face food insecurity and are often socially isolated. The safe and welcoming space offers breakfast and lunch, much-needed foot care services, a clothing and hygiene boutique, social programs like Game Day and a crafts program for women.

# Welcome Home

## A Roof, A Refuge, A Right – For All

In January 2001, the City of Toronto and the Sisters of St. Joseph entered a social housing agreement: the City would facilitate the process, and the Sisters of St. Joseph would fund the creation of 18 rent-geared-to-income apartments for vulnerable older, single women.

To be called Fontbonne Place, it was an ambitious project championed at City Hall by the late Jack Layton, an outspoken advocate of affordable housing.

A two-story addition was added to a former St. Michael's Hospital community clinic to create the 18 apartments. The main and lower levels of the building would become Mustard Seed, offering a drop-in, meals, programs and more.

Fontbonne Place officially opened in March 2003 and Varine was one of the first residents.

Varine, born in Jamaica, came to Toronto as a nanny. Her sponsor was abusive, withholding her wages and forcing her to work many more hours than was legal.

She ended up in a long-term shelter and determined to turn her life around, she took a food industry course and got a job in a corporate cafeteria.

Varine was nearing the end of her two years at the shelter – and had nowhere to go. Several friends at the shelter had received applications for an apartment that was being built in the neighbourhood called Fontbonne Place. Annoyed that she hadn't been invited to apply, Varine marched into the office to complain. "Why am I being overlooked?" she asked.

But moving to Fontbonne Place, she says, was God's plan for her, because two shelter residents did not want to move to Fontbonne and gave her their applications.

She applied, was accepted, and joined the community at Fontbonne Place just as her two-year stay at the shelter was coming to an end.

"I was offered independence, support, safety and community," Varine says. "I have been blessed. And I have never felt overlooked or left out.

Margo, who has been living at Fontbonne Place for more than a decade, was working in administration at St. Michael's Hospital emergency department when she was suddenly let go.



*Top: Fontbonne Place has offered Varine independence, support, safety and community.*



*Right: When Margo first walked into her apartment, she was in heaven.*

"I couldn't afford my apartment," she remembers. "I had been looking outside Toronto, because rent was so expensive, and I heard about Fontbonne Place from a friend. I applied. A year-and-a-half later, I was accepted.

"When I first walked into my apartment, I was in heaven. It's beautiful with lots of windows and it's so quiet.

"Fontbonne Place gives single women the opportunity to live good lives. The Sisters of St. Joseph have been in the community for so many years, helping women in Fontbonne Place and Mustard Seed. There should be more places like this.

"I come downstairs for coffee in the morning, and to say Hi to people – it starts my day off right. Volunteers and staff who work in Mustard Seed are always welcoming and make a point of knowing your name. It's a bright light for me."

Fontbonne Ministries recognized housing as a human right more than 25 years ago; rent-geared-to-income housing was critical then.

It still is. ■



Help us continue to support the people in our community who need us most. Visit our website to make a gift today: [www.fontbonneministries.ca/donate](http://www.fontbonneministries.ca/donate)



# Feet First

## Our Program Heals More Than Feet

Sister Rosemary McGinn arrived at Fontbonne in 2007. She had nursed at St. Michael's Hospital for decades and when she retired, was looking for a way to continue living one of the hospital's guiding principles: "What you do to the least of these brethren, you do to me," from the Gospel of Matthew.

"Fontbonne reaches out to some of our community's most vulnerable," Sister Rosemary says, "so I asked myself, 'How could I be of service?' I wanted to do something hands on, hairdressing, perhaps, or foot care. The hairdressing program was two years; I found a one-week foot care certification course specifically for RNs, so that's what I decided to do!"

Sister Rosemary welcomed each person who came to her for foot care for 10 years. Retired now, she volunteers at our weekly Good Food Market – FoodShare is our partner - where participants and the community can purchase fresh fruit and vegetables at minimal cost.

Has the community changed since she started at Fontbonne?

"I see more people with more mental health challenges," she says. "More people in need economically. More people who are isolated."

"They are searching for a place where they feel safe, where they feel welcomed."

Does she have a single memory that captures her drive to serve?

"I had a foot care patient, a woman around 35 years old. She told me she had depression. She continued to talk,



*Sister Rosemary now volunteers at our Good Food Market.*

sharing the number of times she had been sent to hospital, the medication complications she had suffered . . .

"At the end of the hour, my patient said, 'Thank you for listening. You are the first person I have told.'"

"It was a powerful moment. It made me realize that everyone has a voice, and we must listen."

Over the past years our Downtown Toronto East Footcare Clinic has grown. Last year Dr. Minh, chiropract, supported 968 visits at our Mustard Seed location - and thanks to the generosity of La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso and our community, we are able to offer foot care five days a week! ■

## A Legacy of Caring and Compassion

The Footcare Clinic serves a community that often faces significant barriers to care—poverty, unstable housing and transportation challenges.

Many participants arrive with foot issues they have suffered with for years. Some participants don't know that professional care can bring relief. Others have complex health needs. Sister Rosemary set out to take care of soles with her trademark respect and compassion.

In 2007, she joined Fontbonne Ministries as a nurse with footcare specialist training; she knew how important healthy feet are to our overall health.

She remembers, "It was always a privilege for me to welcome each person. With relaxing music I soaked their feet, took care of their nails, offered a comforting foot massage – and slipped them into a new pair of socks as they left.

"I was blessed to hear their cherished life stories, and I was deeply touched. I realized more and more how love of neighbor transforms and bonds our relationships.

"Today, decades later, foot care continues to root and nourish our being so we can all sprout new growth, and support both for and with one another."



# Kindness on Call

## When a Knock on the Door Means Everything



*Friendly Visitors offer companionship, conversation, and a renewed sense of community to people who might otherwise be alone.*

A sense of belonging - to one another and to community - is essential to our well-being. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, guided by their long-standing commitment to fostering inclusive communities and nurturing meaningful relationships, developed a program at Fontbonne Ministries to meet a deeply human need: connection.

In the early 2000s, led by Sister Georgette Gregory, now the Congregational Leader of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, a dedicated team of Sisters began researching similar initiatives and soon discovered that many people in the community were living in isolation at home, cut off from social interactions and support systems.

These neighbours, Sister Georgette realized, needed the same sense of connection and care that was being offered through the drop-in programs. In response, she launched In Good Company in 2002—a volunteer-driven visiting program designed to bring companionship, conversation, and a renewed sense of community to those who might otherwise be alone.

“In Good Company, to me, is about walking with another to share stories and be a companion in life,” the late Sister Barbara Grozelle shared in our 2010 Springs of Hope Newsletter.

Now called Friendly Visiting, volunteer Lauchie McInroy would agree.

Lauchie has been involved with Fontbonne Ministries since 2009, first as a volunteer, then as Volunteer Coordinator, and now as a Friendly Visiting volunteer.

“I was a secondary school administrator for the Toronto Catholic District School Board,” Lauchie explains. “I knew a number of the Sisters of St. Joseph because I travelled to schools where they were also administrators. Fontbonne’s commitment to supporting the marginalized resonated with me, so when I retired, I thought I’d volunteer.

“I come from a family of 10 children; seven of us went into some sort of public service work, and were heavily involved in volunteering, so this seemed like a natural fit for me.”

When the opportunity opened, Lauchie seemed naturally to slip into the role of Volunteer Coordinator

As Coordinator, Lauchie recruited and trained the Friendly Visiting volunteers, interviewing them and then matching them to a person who had applied to the program based on similar interests.

“I also monitored each mentor/participant, acting as a go between to make sure both were pleased,” he says.

Lauchie’s favourite part? The monthly volunteer evenings he launched.

The evening was held at Fontbonne. The reception started at 5:00. At 5:30, the group was invited to spend half an hour discussing a scripture reading – say, something about volunteering, or soul searching – and how that reading was relevant to their lives or their role as a volunteer. This was followed by dinner and a guest speaker, perhaps an expert on dementia or medication and the elderly. One speaker was a visually impaired woman who used a guide dog and shared what her life was like. Bringing volunteers together throughout the year to share food, listen to speakers, or simply talk about their experiences helps them feel connected and supported.

When Lauchie retired from his role as Volunteer Coordinator, he once again became a volunteer.

Richard, whom he met in 2009, had just suffered a stroke.

“The first time I visited,” Lauchie says, “he was in a hospital bed in his living room. The stroke had left him unable to speak. I used my skills as a teacher and now, he could talk your ear off!”

He still visits Richard today.

What inspires Lauchie?

“Each person has a different vulnerability,” he says. “But if you look below the surface, you begin to see resilience and strength of character. That strength comes, I think, from their experiences, and the people they have met who have encouraged them. They are my inspiration.” ■

Volunteers at Fontbonne are at the heart of all our programs; we could not do the work we do without them. Are you interested in joining the team as a volunteer? Visit our website:

[www.fontbonneministries.ca/volunteer](http://www.fontbonneministries.ca/volunteer) to learn more.



# Community Corner with Riverdale Share Community Association



## Singing For Suppers Community Style

### Bringing People Together to Offer Help and Hope

Susan Baker and Jen Volk, Co-Producers of the Riverdale Share Concert, have been partnering with Fontbonne Ministries for 20-odd years.

The annual December Concert, produced by the Riverdale Share Community Association – Susan is the Executive Director and Jen is the Chair of the Board – brings the Riverdale community together to share a single goal: supporting people in our community who are in need.

“A volunteer connected us with Sister Gwen,” Susan remembers. “Tickets to the Concert included bringing a non-perishable food donation and we decided to add Mustard Seed to the groups we gave the donations to. I loved her.”

“Sister Gwen came to the Danforth Music Hall that first time with a pickup truck,” says Jen, “and kept saying, ‘I can’t take it all!’”

Today, Fontbonne receives grants from Riverdale Share Community Association to support our food security program.

The grant awarded this year is being used to support the five-day a week sit-down meal program. The previous year’s grant supported Fontbonne’s breakfast program, helping to ensure the delivery of nutritional and culturally sensitive food five days a week.



*Susan Baker and Jen Volk at the Riverdale Share Concert last December.*

“I worked with Sister Gwen at the Riverdale Food Working Group,” Jen says. “She was a kind soul and a gentle force who got things done. I loved having meetings with her. My dad worked with her too, on housing issues.”

Both Susan and Jen have seen a change in the community in the last 25 years.

“More people are falling through the cracks,” Susan says. “More women are homeless. We live in an unaffordable city for so many people.”

“The work that Fontbonne has done – and continues to do – is incredible,” adds Jen. “They are offering wider outreach programs in response to the increased community need. They’re on the frontlines – a tough place to be. And they don’t just speak. They act.”

“We want to congratulate Fontbonne on the great work that the team has done in the community for the past 25 years,” says Susan. “We are proud to be associated with Fontbonne and particularly the Mustard Seed location.” ■



**Join us in making a difference! To find out how you can help our community, contact: Wendy Bray at [wbray@fontbonneministries.ca](mailto:wbray@fontbonneministries.ca) to learn more.**



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