Springs of Hope

Fontbonne Ministries

Fall 2025 Newsletter

The Quiet Power of Being Seen

When Brendan Comes to Fontbonne, He Finds More Than a Meal

Brendan was born and raised in Toronto. His father left when he was young, and he had a difficult relationship with his mother.

When Brendan was diagnosed with ADHD, his mom refused to get him Ritalin, the standard treatment, telling him, "Just focus".

"I couldn't just focus," he says. "I didn't feel normal."

So Brendan started using drugs when he was 16, graduating from marijuana to smoking methamphetamine.

Using helped him feel normal.

Brendan dropped out of high school, four credits shy of graduating. At 22, he studied culinary arts at George Brown College and worked in restaurant kitchens for 10 years.

"There's no creativity in restaurant cooking," he says. "I quit and went into construction – better money."

Today, he's two weeks "clean" – his word – he says, not for the first time, not by a long shot.

"I've decided to quit many times," he says. "The longest I've been clean is two years. Like many addicts, I thought I could use recreationally . . . I know it doesn't work like that, because I enjoy the high.

"I've been to rehab, I've been to meetings. Sure, I was in pain when my dad left. Yeah, I didn't get along with my mom. But I used drugs because I like getting high.

"I will always be an addict – it's up to me if I choose to use."

Brendan lives outside – not rough, he says, because he has a 100-square foot shelter he built himself, from found timber.

His home is insulated, heated with propane, has electricity "borrowed" from the nearby hydro line and a water/shower assembly he also created.

Two friends live in their own structures on this hidden part of a park; they buy bikes, fix them and sell them to supplement their government assistance cheques.

"E-bikes are the thing now," he says "so we buy them, customize them and sell them, too.

"Sure, it's a hard life," he says, "and we're always on the go to get what we need. But we choose to live this way, and I'm happy to a point."

Does he feel seen?

"Most people don't pay any attention to us," he says. "You know who we're visible to? The police. They came by recently and cut our power, accusing us of stealing. Well, we were. But it's impossible to get housing in the City from the Ontario Disability Support Program of $600 a month; it's simply not enough to live on.

"Everyone has the right to live somewhere."

Each day, we see firsthand the struggles our participants endure – from rising living costs to food insecurity and unstable housing. But together, we can make a difference. Help support those who need it most by making a gift today.
www.fontbonneministries.ca/donate

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At Fontbonne, Brendan feels seen, and grounded.

"Everyone has the right to live somewhere."

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Brendan admits he "did a lot of dumb stuff". He spent 18 months in prison, convicted on 17 counts, including assault. Smoking meth with a friend who was smoking fentanyl, he picked up the wrong pipe, took a big inhale and died for 3.5 minutes.

"I fell into a fire and burned my eye – it took seven doses of Narcan to bring me back."

Brendan heard that Fontbonne served breakfast and lunch, and one day, he stopped by. Now, he comes two or three times a week. He "shops" in the Clothing Boutique, too.

But he's clear: he comes to the drop-in for more than meals or a warm winter jacket.

"There's good support and good companionship here," he says. "A lot of my friends come here so the social aspect is good."

At Fontbonne, he feels seen – and grounded.

"We need more places like this," Brendan says. "I see more and more older couples sleeping outdoors, or on the floor of drop-ins.

"Out there we're the left behinds." ■

From Compassion to Action

A Monthly Donation Makes a World of Difference

Cecilia has been volunteering at Fontbonne for nine months now, serving coffee and meals and chatting with the participants.

"I love the way I put smiles on people's faces," she says. "This is a happy place."

Cecilia knows what an unhappy place feels like.

Born in Nigeria, she started an NGO when she retired, offering similar services to people in need. With financial support from her family and friends, her NGO grew to include several locations.

And then, the unthinkable happened.

"I discovered that the man responsible for coordinating our finances was embezzling from us," she says. "I told him I was going to the police – and he hired people to assassinate me. I had no protection – anywhere."

Running for her life, Cecilia arrived in Canada in February 2024.

"My home was close by Fontbonne," she says. "The hand of God brought me to this place, and I asked, 'How can I contribute?'"

Supporting Fontbonne puts a smile on Cecilia's face.

Giving back is, quite simply, Cecilia's way of being in the world. So it seemed natural to also become a monthly donor.

When she arrives at the drop-in early in the morning, Cecilia sees how giving her time, energy and donor support impacts the lives of some of the city's most vulnerable individuals. And she feels the impact on her own life.

"When I give, I get back 10-fold," she says. ■

You can make a tangible difference too - become a monthly donor today!

$10 $10 will provide 2 nutritious meals. *Double your impact with a $20 monthly donation!*

$25 $25 will provide 1 care kit of essential items (may include shampoo, toothpaste, soap, warm socks)

$50 $50 will help cover a chiropodist treatment for someone living with diabetes.

Good Food for All

Offering Fresh, Affordable Groceries —and a Sense of Dignity—to Communities Often Left Behind

The Sisters of St. Joseph opened Fontbonne Ministries in 2000, with a mission: to create a welcoming space where Toronto's most vulnerable would have their physical, emotional and spiritual needs met with compassion and understanding in the spirit of dignity, inclusiveness, hospitality and community.

Today, more and more people are struggling with food insecurity and while long-term strategies are urgently needed to address the issue, people need support to eat today.

Opened in July 2021, our weekly, volunteer-run Good Food Market, offers everyone in our community the opportunity to purchase local fresh fruits and vegetables at our cost – we purchase the produce from FoodShare, a social justice food organization – many of whom are struggling with food insecurity.

Janet, who lives on a fixed income in subsidized seniors' housing in the neighbourhood, counts on the Good Food Market three weeks out of four.

"I come with my trolley," she says, "and plan my meals for the next week, based on what's available. Everything is fresh, much of it is grown in Canada, which is important to me, and way cheaper than the grocery store."

But just as important, she says, the Market offers a sense of community.

"When you're waiting in line, you say Hello to other regulars, chat about life, the weather, the news, explain how the market works to new people who come looking baffled!

"We chat about what's there this week. How you saw the same thing at the grocery store for $3.00 more. Or how to tell if a nectarine is ripe.

"And we share recipes and tips. I didn't know you could roast radishes until someone in line told me how she baked them with a roast.

Janet counts on the Good Food Market for fresh produce and catch-up conversations with the community.

"I shared the easiest way to shuck corn on the cob: make a deep cut in the husk at the bottom of the cob, slap it in the microwave for three minutes or so, and the husk and corn silk just slide off! My mother did that – no fuss, no muss."

And people look after each other.

"I have my trolley," says Janet, "and if the weather is bad, or someone needs help carrying things home, I tell them, 'I can take it home for you'.

"I'm not the only one. Someone in line says, 'Oh, I wish I could take that but it's too heavy' and someone always steps up to take it home for them." ■

Food is a right, not a privilege, and we are so grateful to our community for supporting food security for everyone. Thank you for being part of a mission that nourishes body and soul. Please do pop by, Wednesdays, from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm in the Fontbonne Ministries courtyard, and inside when the weather turns chilly. And take your purchases home in a French-inspired jute market bag, yours for only $10.00.

Compassion on Call

Rodney Came to Volunteer – and Discovered Himself

When Rodney arrives for his volunteer shift at Fontbonne Ministries, he's pumped to make a connection with the community, to ask how they've been, to comment on the weather or play a board game.

"We all want to be recognized," says Rodney, "and I am available to participants for whatever they need. To listen, offer emotional support, help them access services or just to hang out."

At Fontbonne, everyone who comes through the front door is welcomed and treated with compassion, dignity and respect. No one is invisible.

And Rodney knows firsthand how important it is to be seen and to be heard especially when you're living on the margins, homeless or marginally housed, facing food insecurity or battling personal demons.

He's walked down that road.

Rodney was 13 when he was diagnosed with social anxiety disorder and depression.

He struggled to find his place in the world until, at 16, he discovered alcohol.

"Sober," he says, "I was uncomfortable in my own skin. With alcohol, I could talk to people. I found a group of new friends who drank like I did – all week long, not just on weekends.

"I dropped out of school and started working with my dad in his construction business.

"Then I got pancreatitis from my alcohol abuse and was hospitalized in so much pain. I had a hydromorphone IV drip, and when I was discharged, they sent me home with a script for a couple of weeks as I healed.

"When the script ran out, and I realized I couldn't drink anymore, I turned to fentanyl. I lost my apartment and for the next five years, I lived on the street. My girlfriend overdosed. I tried suicide by cop.

"I had finally hit my bottom – I knew I could not live like this anymore. I went into a treatment facility for 30 days and because I was homeless, they got me into a men's sober living house.

"I have been sober since 2022."

It took strength and courage to face life without a chemical helpmate, but Rodney looked himself in the mirror and discovered that he was more than his addictions: he was a valuable and worthwhile human being who had something to offer the world.

Volunteering at Fontbonne gives Rodney the purpose in life he was searching for.

He completed the Transitions to Post-Secondary Education program offered at George Brown College – it's designed for adults facing mental health or substance use challenges to prepare them for college and employment.

Today, he's in his second year of the Social Service Worker program at George Brown College.

"When I got sober," Rodney says, "I needed to find something to give my life purpose. My friend Salomon was volunteering in the drop-in at Fontbonne and he said why don't you come along?

"Before I started, I didn't know how volunteering at the drop-in would affect me. I had no expectations. But being here has made me feel wanted and needed."

Rodney says he's met so many amazing people at Fontbonne, participants and staff.

Perhaps the most surprising encounter: a blast from his past.

"One day a participant came up to me and asked, 'Is your brother named Keith?' I said yeah and she said, 'Remember me? I babysat you when you were little'!"

Rodney says he is so grateful for what Fontbonne does for the larger community – and for him.

"Being here has changed my mindset, and confirmed what I want to do with my life." ■

Volunteers are at the heart of all our programs; our services would not be available to those facing adversity without their loyalty and belief in our mission. Join our volunteer team and, perhaps, discover yourself. Visit our website: **www.fontbonneministries.ca/volunteer** to learn more.

Leading With Purpose: Meet Gael Gilbert

Gael Gilbert looks forward to enhancing our programming and growing our support.

We're excited to welcome Gael Gilbert our new interim Executive Director. She brings a fresh perspective, a lot of great experience, and some big ideas for the future. In this conversation, we'll get to know Gael a little better, what inspires her and what she is most looking forward to accomplishing in this new role.

Q: What drew you to this opportunity at Fontbonne Ministries?

A: I worked in this neighbourhood decades ago – I know the community and I know people who live here. I was impressed with the good work Fontbonne Ministries does here, I was impressed by their mission, vision and strategic plan; and I wanted to contribute.

Q: You've only been at Fontbonne since September 17th. What has surprised you as you settle in?

A: Surprised me? The enormous potential this place has to become a hub for the community. We need to be more visible, more engaged, if we're going to grow our support.

Q: How would you make that happen?

A: We need more physical presence. Our building sits back from the street – people walk by without realizing we're there. We will do community surveys, hold Fontbonne open houses, and invite people to come for coffee chats.

Q. How would you describe your leadership style?

A: My leadership style is quite simple. We are here to serve the community and in order to support the work, I ensure staff feel respected, are treated with compassion and dignity and are valued for the contribution they make. Each person brings to their role commitment and passion and it's my role to nurture staff, guide them, build a team and be responsive to the larger community. Creating a sense of 'belonging' for the staff will in turn help them create a sense of belonging for our clients.

Q: Your biography says that you sky dive. Are you naturally fearless?

A: No! Water terrifies me, planes terrify me . . . lots of things terrify me. I decided to embrace some fears, one being flying and the other finding myself in deep water. How better to confront them than by doing those activities, so I took up skydiving and bought a kayak. I learned to confront what didn't feel comfortable and learn that I could find utter joy floating in the sky held up by some nylon and chords, or floating down a river with nothing but trees, sky and birds as my company

Q: You fostered 47 children, mostly teens, over 25 years.

A: Yes. I became a foster parent when I was 24 – he was 15. We have kept in touch – I recently visited him in Vancouver.

Q: You have worked as Executive Director of a number of organizations that support some of Toronto's most vulnerable. Why?

A: I was about 10 years old when I read *The Family Nobody Wanted*, a memoir about a young couple who adopted 12 children. And *The Family Under the Bridge*, a story about a man in Paris and his young children living under the bridge. The stories planted a seed in me: we need to look after each other.

Q. And what do *you* get out of being of service?

A: Let me tell you a story. I ran St. Stephen's Corner Drop-in – we often saw as many as 350 people a day. Reiner was a regular. No one understood what he was saying when he spoke, so you never knew if he understood what you were saying. He wore a blanket as a cape and rode a bike. We received a piano as a donation. Reiner walked over to the piano, sat down, and started to play. He was classically trained, clearly. He turned to me and said, 'I'm schizophrenic. I used to be a chemist. I love music' – and walked out. He got a standing ovation. It turned out that when he arrived in Toronto from Germany in his late 30s, he developed late onset schizophrenia – that's very rare. The only time he spoke recognizable language was when he played.

People had been afraid of him but now, every time he played, they gave him a standing ovation.

People I have met along the way, people like Reiner, inspire me. That's why I do what I do. ■

Community Corner with Raise the Root Organic Market

Fresh Organic Produce Nourishes Body and Soul

Angela Donnelly and JJ Sheppard, co-owners of Raise the Root Organic Market, have been offering the Riverside and Leslieville communities the best local produce, grocery staples and gourmet items since 2014.

When they opened Raise the Root, they wanted to contribute in a meaningful way to the neighbourhood.

They know that food insecurity is a stark reality for many in our community; but while so many struggle to put food on the table, an alarming amount of food ends up in Green Bins.

So every week for the last eight years, they donate fresh organic produce, and sometimes dry items, that won't keep until Tuesday morning to Fontbonne's kitchen to be turned into tasty meals enjoyed at the drop-in.

"We found Fontbonne on Instagram," Angela says. "We try and make the store a safe and welcoming space where everyone is treated equally and with respect. Fontbonne's vision reflects ours, so we thought this would be a good partnership.

Co-owner Angela wanted to contribute in a meaningful way to the neighbourhood.

"At the end of day on Sunday, we look closely at every bit of fresh produce – will this last until Tuesday? If not, we bundle it up and Antonio, Drop-in Coordinator, comes to pick it up.

"Last week he managed to take away 42 ears of corn – on the streetcar, I think!

"We believe that everyone should be able to eat fresh, organic produce so we're proud to support Fontbonne and their commitment to feeding anyone who comes through their door." ■

Support local. Make a difference. Together, we can make our community stronger.

Connect with us to find out how you can help build a thriving community – together! **Contact Wendy Bray at wbray@fontbonneministries.ca to learn how you can help.**

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