

AGENTS OF CHANGE Eleven Torontonians who are building a better city

Putting dreamers on the fast track

Part 1. Big ideas get a big push forward from the Centre for Social Innovation



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One wants to retrofit houses to cut down on energy and water waste — for free.

Another is giving kids in Rexdale gaming and coding skills. Yet another has created an emissions-free delivery company.

They are among a host of

groups and individuals with ideas that could transform Toronto for the better. And, thanks to the Centre for Social Innovation, that change could come quickly.

The centre has singled out 11 projects for its Agents of Change program, which aims to fast-track the success of projects, and help the people behind them move from idea to impact.

“We call them the dreamers, doers and innovators that want to make Toronto a better place through their own slice of vision of what makes a city livable,” said Chris DuPaul, one of the program organizers.

The year-long program of

fers work space at the Centre for Social Innovation, where “agents” can lean on the experience of other entrepreneurs. It also connects them with high-level contacts at important institutions, including the David Suzuki Foundation, the developer Westbank and the City of Toronto.

“We afford them the time and space and connections and resources to really make this a more entrenched part of Toronto and allow that person to become the best that they could be,” DuPaul said.

For Andray Domise, one of the founders of Techsdale, it’s a big opportunity.

“CSI has this excellent track

record of incubating organizations,” he said. “Once you get associated with the CSI brand there’s an air of legitimacy about you. It legitimizes the work we’re doing.”

That, in turn, will lead to stronger partnerships and support to help Techsdale become a reality.

Techsdale wants to help youth in Rexdale move into tech-industry careers by teaching them to build video games and apps. Its wider goal is to make Toronto’s gaming industry more diverse.

Right now, diversity is “inexcusably lacking” both in the industry’s work force and in the games it produces,



The Centre for Social Innovation’s 11 agents of change, along with community partners, are working to make their dreams of a better Toronto reality. CONTRIBUTED

Domise said.

“If the Agents of Change program didn’t exist, we would

have made it work,” he said.

“But this makes it so much easier. It’s going to happen faster.”



The Storefront Theatre’s Benjamin Blais and Claire Burns are creating change in Toronto via the arts.

KELSEY KUDAK/FOR METRO

Building community through the arts

This is the first in a series of stories exploring how the Centre for Social Innovation’s 11 Agents of Change plan to improve Toronto. Each is being set up for a year with tools, ranging from work space to contacts, aimed at turning ideas into reality.

The Storefront Theatre began in pseudo-circus fashion, when a group of thespians and friends morphed derelict Toronto spaces into temporary theatres.

But when Benjamin Blais mounted a production of *Wait Until Dark* in an old pharmacy with barred windows on the southwest corner of Bloor and Delaware,

the collective never left.

As one of the Centre for Social Innovation’s Agents of Change, Storefront aims to establish itself as a viable place for the creation and production of art.

CSI will offer legal and bookkeeping help, and Storefront will bolster its community presence through educational workshops and collaborative evenings.

Sing For Your Supper is a perfect example of what the group hopes to build on. The event invites playwrights of all backgrounds to submit scripts, which are then rehearsed, costumed and produced in a single hour by whoever shows up. The evening encourages teamwork and creative improvisation.

Storefront Theatre was founded in 2012 on the basis of inexpensive

performance space and a supportive atmosphere for indie playwrights, actors and directors.

For its three founders — Benjamin Blais, Stacey Turner and Claire Burns — becoming Agents of Change gives Storefront Theatre credence and a chance to collaborate with non-theatre groups to build community.

“It’s a sense of community that really binds people to live theater,” said Blais, who noted Storefront’s 70-seat black box is intentionally small and intimate, so that theatergoers feel like they’re a part of the production.

After losing costumes, office space and props to a flooded basement last year, Storefront supporters contributed the original cost of the theater space and donated used clothing for costumes, which are housed

in Storefront’s secondary space above Future Bakery and Cafe in the Annex.

Storefront will eventually use the space as an academy for emerging talent, beginning with a summer workshop to feature and produce works of five new playwrights.

Like all arts programs, Storefront’s biggest challenge is money, which leaders plan to combat with an upcoming fundraising campaign.

The money will help pay actors, produce a complete season and give the performance space a facelift, which will help the neighbourhood recognize the space as a theater.

“What’s exciting about potential investors is that they’ll create a legacy by creating a job market for these artists,” Blais said.

KELSEY KUDAK/FOR METRO



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Weight-loss story an empowering one

Part 2. Azeeza is one of many groups and individuals planning to make Toronto a better place through the Centre for Social Innovations

Two years ago Farheen Khan weighed 400 pounds.

She's now a size 10 after losing 170 pounds, along with her size 26 jeans.

The transformation was born of an abusive relationship, a painful, deceptive marriage and 2-1/2 years of hard work.

"I didn't value myself," Khan said.

After documenting her transformation on social media and writing a blog post on MindBodyGreen.com last year, women — many of them like Khan — reached out for advice.

So Khan booked a room at a Mississauga community centre and invited them to join her for free 45-minute sessions.

Workouts begin with an inspirational affirmation and end with a discussion. As Azeeza For Women grew, Khan opened a second Mississauga location and another in Markham. Over the next year, two more locations will open in downtown Toronto.

Kahn's mission is simple: To support women as they build



Farheen Khan is looking to inspire and empower women in her bid to improve Toronto. CONTRIBUTED

Inside the name

Azeeza means "cherished, respected, honoured and loved" in Arabic, Urdu and a number of South Asian and Middle Eastern languages.

self-appreciation and value themselves. Her larger vision is more complex: To provide counselling for abuse, virtual access to workout sessions and a means for women to empower themselves through formal weight-loss programs and financially through working at her female-only gyms.

As an agent of change, Khan has access to micro grants, sponsors who could provide access to free or inexpensive space and potential donors.

"It's not that I get women to conform to society's concept of what women should be," said Khan, who is working toward certification as a personal trainer. "That's not what that is at all, actually. It's about me as a woman. How can I ensure that I value and respect myself?"

"That regardless of my size that I feel healthy, and I know that I'm confident enough that I'm not going to compromise."

KELSEY KUDAK/FOR METRO

More than image

Many who've made their way to Azeeza don't need to lose weight. Instead, they need emotional guidance due to abusive relationships.

- **Direction.** Meetings are for inspiration and motivation, said Farheen Khan
- **Leadership.** Khan helps other people log food journals and makes time for daily phone calls and check-ins while still working full time at a women's shelter.

The Drop. Creating quick, speedy deliveries

When financial analyst Darryl Brown moved to CityPlace and decided to spend \$140 on a used bike instead of a Metro Pass, it was the first step down the road to bigger life changes.

Within a few years, he'd quit his job, used his savings to buy an electric car and imported two new-age rickshaws: The Drop Distribution had been born.

Brown began offering affordable delivery for small businesses via emission-free vehicles. For \$4 to \$8 in pickup fees, and \$2.50 per drop, businesses like bakeries, florists and local grocers can distribute products in The Drop's central delivery zone of Keele, Bloor, and the Don Valley Parkway.

As an agent of change, The Drop hopes to reduce traffic congestion by using bikes for delivery instead of larger cargo vehicles on city streets. Brown also plans to forge new partnerships with participating businesses with the same mission.

He wants to be a vocal advocate for emissions free and electric transport as part of city planning.

"I would like for the conversation to evolve from bikes versus car," said Brown, "to efficiency and what makes sense."

The Drop's professional tricycles were bought in from Cyclopolitan, a French company that specializes in urban street cycles, and hold as much



One of the high-capacity cargo cycles Darryl Brown uses for The Drop Distribution. CONTRIBUTED

cargo as a small car. Brown's electric car — a used Nissan Leaf — was a trickier adjustment because severe temperatures affect battery life.

In what he calls the Goldilocks zone — not too cold but not too hot — the Leaf will travel upward of 150 kilometres, but The Drop plans its routes with a 40 kilometre limit in the winter just to be safe.

As The Drop grows, Brown plans to add cycles capable of doubling as mini retail spaces and providing the option for advertising space on the fleet.

Though he now participates in one of the oldest methods of delivery — by bicycle — Brown himself claims not to have other energy-saving quirks.

"I think it's quirky enough to plan your weekends and your travelling around in an electric vehicle," he said.

KELSEY KUDAK/FOR METRO

Quoted

"We're going to partner as much as possible with people — with organizations that believe and understand what we're working towards."

Darryl Brown, The Drop Distribution founder

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AGENTS OF CHANGE Eleven Torontonians who are building a better city

This is the third part of a series exploring how 11 groups and individuals plan to make Toronto a better place through the Centre for Social Innovation's Agents of Change program. Each is being set up for a year with tools, ranging from work space to contacts, aimed at turning ideas into reality.

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KELSEY KUDAK/FOR METRO

Changing the way we see — and get — food

For Building Roots, good food isn't just delicious, but also local and sustainable, accessible and affordable, and, if possible, neighbourhood-grown.

Food enthusiasts and advocates Darcy Higgins and Lisa Kates met four years ago when Kates — a food writer and photographer — moved to Toronto from Ottawa. She was shocked by the green space being lost to new development.

The pair formed Building Roots, an advocacy branch of Higgins' Food Forward organization.

Together, they work as consultants for the city and its neighbourhoods — advocating for better use of green space by architects, developers, city plan-

ners and councillors, and mobilizing neighbourhood groups to identify needs like community gardens, commercial kitchens and shared cultural experience through food.

Building Roots' actions morph according to the needs and desires of individual groups. In some neighbourhoods, it combats food deserts. In others, it fights laws that prohibit street vendors and food trucks. It's project driven, Kates said.

Quoted

"The system is set up so that food isn't a priority in city planning."

Darcy Higgins, Building Roots co-founder

Once projects are identified, Building Roots helps neighbourhoods and residents contact their city

councillors. They initially used grants from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and began by having workshops in various communities.

They've since worked with the Toronto Community Housing Corporation and its architects to design community kitchens according to residents' needs. They've built trust in residents by following through on promises.

As agents of change, the pair will get help with business development and long-term planning through the Centre for Social Innovation.

They also hope to partner more closely with the Daniels Foundation, which was responsible for the Paintbox Condos in Regent Park, which houses one of the social innovation centre's offices, a rooftop garden and Paintbox Bistro and Catering.

Step by step toward a brighter outlook on life

Farah Mawani's idea is simple: walking and talking. But she knows its impact firsthand.

Building Roads Together — which trains community members to lead peer support walking groups in their neighbourhoods — was born of Mawani's own experience with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In July 2009, Mawani and her close friend Josh Fattal finished a year as study-abroad guides. A few days after parting, Fattal went hiking in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and was captured by Iranian forces.

Mawani mobilized the Free the Hikers campaign, which helped see Fattal freed after 782 days. Though her friend returned safely, the experience had a profound impact on Mawani's mental health.

Stress from the ordeal left her depressed without motivation or energy, and anxious, knowing Fattal had been abducted while doing something as innocuous as walking.

To lead similar campaigns, Mawani started Farahway Global. But her symptoms inhibited her work.

"I had periods when I wouldn't be able to leave

the house for a week, even though I knew that the moment I got some physical activity, I would feel like a different person," said Mawani.

The only thing that regularly got Mawani out of her house was a weekly peer support group. At the time, she was finishing a doctorate in public health and knew that studies showed direct, positive links between physical activity and mental health. Building Roads Together would bind both.

She focused her initial group in Regent Park, training 43 individuals in a three-group pilot program last June. The groups quickly branched.

The training sessions give peer leaders two sets

Quoted

"I'll feel like the sky has grown more, and that's my gauge of my recovery."

Farah Mawani, founder of Building Roads Together, on helping others

of tools: practical skills like route planning and safety guidelines, and communications skills that maximize the benefit of the peer support.

For Mawani, being one of the Centre for Social Innovation's agents of change is a particularly special validation. She intends to work with project partners like Jane's Walk and the David Suzuki Foundation to extend her vision for Building Roads Together.



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AGENTS OF CHANGE Eleven Torontonians who are building a better city

This is the fourth part of a series exploring how 11 groups and individuals plan to make Toronto a better place through the Centre for Social Innovation's Agents of Change program. Each is being setup for a year with the essential supplies they need to turn their ideas into reality.

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Duo diversifies tech culture in Rexdale

Andray Domise and Sam Allemang are creating a geek mecca, a place for Rexdale youth to develop IT skills and gather for hack-a-thons, pizza parties and video game tournaments.

Techsdale, as they call it, will offer classes in web design and app development, but also give kids an opportunity to develop contacts in an industry that's largely unavailable to them.

The pair first collaborated when Allemang offered IT support for Domise's Ward 2 campaign against Rob Ford for city council in the fall. Techsdale was a part of his platform, figuring if kids are going to the library to play video games, why not teach them how to make them?

"Just because I didn't get elected doesn't mean it's not my responsibility to keep that promise," Domise said.

As a partner with the Centre for Social Innovation, Techsdale will run a 14-spot pilot program for 14-



Sam Allemang, left, and Andray Domise. CONTRIBUTED

to 17-year-olds this summer. Next fall, they'll fully open at Kisomo Learning Centre, with multiple programs and, eventually, mobile, school-based workshops.

Allemang, who teaches kids to code at CoderDojo and at The Boys and Girls Club of Toronto, is planning a project-based curriculum. Students would take weekly courses with increasing ambition to make a portfolio.

Placing Techsdale in Rexdale promotes tech as a lucrative career option and is a way to bring diversity to the tech industry.

"What we're not getting out of this medium is someone else's story or seeing yourself through someone else's eyes," said Domise, who wants to battle the stereotypically "gritty, square-jawed superhero" with multi-dimensional, multicultural characters in video games.

Whether it's websites or games, tech is "the creative art form of the 21st century," Allemang said.

"No one should feel like they're excluded from the opportunity to participate in that."

Leading the way toward creative solutions

Toronto doesn't need a creative director to decide if street sign lettering should be sans-serif or to designate its colour scheme.

"What it needs is an office that's a kind of magnet for creative collaboration," said Jason Logan.

Logan is working to make a creative director part of Toronto's bureaucracy, a vision that aims to ensure creativity as a problem-solving method is honoured and respected at city hall.

After a successful campaign launch last summer, Logan, a graphic designer, is now drafting how the position would work.

He's working with a diverse group of people, and there are a lot of op-



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tions for how the job would function. It could be an entire department at city hall, for example, or just one person. It could be appointed or elected.

To Logan, imagery as a problem-solving technique is largely ignored.

"I'm not even good at talking on the phone," he said. "I'm used to doodling it out. My whole career

has been about explaining things through words and pictures together, and I just feel like there's a lot of potential for that in a civic setting."

The idea struck after the original plans for the new 14 Division police station were unveiled.

Logan, who had recently bought a house across the street, was dreading the boxy, prison-like design. He mobilized his neighbours and fought the architectural plans. Ultimately, the building was redesigned.

The police station also inspired Logan's proposed "ugly buildings tax," which would do exactly as the name implies: put tariffs on eyesores.

"That tax," said Logan, "should go into a pot that makes beautiful things: a bridge or public sculpture or art or parks."

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AGENTS OF CHANGE Eleven Torontonians who are building a better city

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Chad Craig, left, and Lucas Medina. CONTRIBUTED

Filling a diversity gap in foster care

Lucas Medina and Chad Craig are looking to change the lives of foster children who fall along what Medina calls the rainbow spectrum.

The couple's venture — Five/Fourteen — is a foster placement agency focused on providing a safe space for youth who identify under any part of the LGBTQ2A acronym.

Medina himself grew

up a crown ward. From age eight to 17, he lived in the same evangelical foster home, uncomfortable to come out. When he was 16, his foster mother discovered he was gay and left him a note deeming him a "boarder." He left soon after.

Because of the way children are placed in the foster-care system — as boys or girls — there is no system in place to help a child transition if, for example, a boy at

eight self-identifies as a girl.

When foster agencies think of an 11-year-old saying they're gay, Medina said, they think of gay sex instead of focusing on the fact that the child is declaring an identity they understand.

The vision for the agency has two parts. It brings kids on the rainbow spectrum into Toronto to be placed with families who have ties to the gay community. It also functions as a transitional spot for young people aging out of the foster-care system.

The company's name comes from May 14, which has been dubbed Children and Youth In Care Day for Ontario.

System limitations

"There seems to be a strange lack of being able to separate the concept of sexual orientation and sexual activity."

Lucas Medina, co-founder Five/Fourteen

A collaborative approach to shaping their city

Liz Rykert and Caitlin Colson believe city-building is for everyone.

To facilitate their philosophy, the two network developers created Shape My City, a free social network that helps passionate Torontonians develop their causes.

The platform connects and encourages individuals, groups and organizations with similar causes. Users range from grassroots activists concerned about the Gardiner to neighbourhood advocates calling for cleaner parks.

The pair met when Colson began a mentorship with Rykert, who had discovered there was no place online to connect groups working toward similar goals.

"It comes down to how people connect with each other," Rykert said. "How you help people collaborate and work more effectively together."

Unlike networks like LinkedIn, Shape My City (which launched last September), is a place to "get work done" beyond networking. The pair designed tools to make the site a practical place, rather than a "vague, nebulous network."

"It's about helping

people who have an idea actually bring it to life," Rykert said.

Users post ideas, projects and events. They form groups that can be seen by anyone. Groups are connected through a "virtual block" that helps users sort through content. Users can join or follow a project: Join, meaning they intend to take an active part in the group, and follow, to simply keep an eye on its pulse.

They can develop meetups, and organize projects according to 16 categories, including architecture and design, business, education and transportation.

The site has polling

Participation

235

Users connecting with each other on Shape My City.

tools, and ways to post for event volunteers. It has a radar that sorts content and alerts users to new causes they might be interested in.

"You don't have to be a politician. You don't need to be an architect. You can be a curious neighbour who wants to try something," said Colson. "That's really important to us, that people can see themselves as city shapers."



Liz Rykert, left, and Caitlin Colson. CONTRIBUTED



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AGENTS OF CHANGE



Eleven Torontonians who are building a better city

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Building a better toilet for less

Marc Soberano has become an unintentional spokesman for toilets.

The Toilet Guy, as many are now calling him, is the founder of Building Up, which fits low-income housing with retrofitted showerheads, faucets and toilets to save both water and money.

It trains members of the low-income housing community to do the work instead of hiring a private contractor. Buildings can also pay for the retrofits through savings.

Each retrofit costs \$300 to \$350 per unit, which can add up if you have a 200-unit building, Soberano said. So, if the retrofit saves \$100 per unit over the



Marc Soberano, CONTRIBUTED

year, the owner would pay over three years and reap the benefits of the savings thereafter.

As an agent of change, Building Up will run a pilot project this year, selecting three applicants to work on some 400 units across the city. Employees will have nine days of hands-on training and spend every other Friday

at an in-class session with the Learning Enrichment Foundation.

The curriculum comes directly from Ashoka Canada, which is the model for Building Up. It offers trades-based math, intro to plumbing and soft skills like financial management.

Soberano hopes a successful pilot project will encourage others to implement Building Up's services. He also hopes to work with the Toronto Community Housing Corporation.

"People are literally flushing money down the toilet," Soberano said.

Building Up has made Soberano — who traversed 5,000 kilometres of old fur-trading trails by canoe in 2013 — even more aware of water as a resource.

Bridging divides one ramp at a time

Luke Anderson wants a barrier-free Toronto.

Anderson, who has used a wheelchair since suffering a spinal cord injury in 2002, said he used to avoid restaurants and businesses he couldn't get in to. He sometimes waits up to an hour to receive assistance from wheelchair lifts.

"Single-step storefronts are the same as storefronts with five, six, a dozen steps," he said. "It doesn't matter. A step is a huge barrier that prevents independent access."

To combat this, Anderson — a structural engineer — founded StopGap, which uses donated materials and volunteer manpower to create cost-free ramps for



Luke Anderson (left) CONTRIBUTED

storefronts with single-step entryways. Shops with more complicated entryways can also apply for Ramps on Request, a division of StopGap that builds more complex ramps.

StopGap has built more than 500 ramps between Halifax and Prince George in the last three years. Some 300 of those are in

The way forward

"As the name suggests they're a stopgap solution to this huge issue. They're a means to an end, and that end is permanent."

Luke Anderson, founder of StopGap

Toronto.

Anderson's ramps have been embraced universally, which is part of his mission. From parents with strollers and travelers with suitcases, anyone can benefit. "Barrier-free elements can be integrated into the design of a space so that everyone can use them without even knowing they're using them," Anderson said.

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