



*How three York millennials are
making our world a better place*

CHANGE MAKERS

BY LINDSAY MACADAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF KIRK



GOOD SHEPHERD:

York grad Deanna Lentini is on a mission to humanize homelessness

MILLENNIALS, Generation Yers, echo boomers or digital natives – call them what you will. But don't believe everything you hear about those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, often labelled as narcissistic, lazy, wasteful and irresponsible. York University students and alumni are among the growing number of ambitious young visionaries who are on a mission to change the world for the better, and a few of them recently sat down with *The York University Magazine* to share their stories.

Humanizing Homelessness

DEANNA LENTINI (BSC '16) REMEMBERS IT WELL, the childhood moment that would forever shape the course of her life. Entering the grounds of Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition at the age of six, her tiny hand clinging tightly to her father's, she couldn't help but notice the people sitting outside the gates, so obviously in need of help but being completely ignored by passersby. "As a little girl, you see that and you feel something because you don't have any of those stereotypes instilled in you," she says. "You don't see 'homeless people,' you see people, who are homeless."

From that day forward, Lentini couldn't pass people in need without pulling out some money. "The outside pockets of my jackets would always have loonies and toonies in them so I could give them away," she admits.

With social justice as her *raison d'être*, Lentini went on to do a lot of volunteering in her high school years, including making beds and lunches at the Good Shepherd Ministries in Toronto. But it wasn't until she was about halfway through university that she thought up a new way to help the homeless. She decided to start giving away gift cards that she had received – that way, she could hand out more than a dollar or two at a time and it wouldn't actually cost her anything. "Gift cards are a form of social currency," she explains, "because you can feel like everybody else when you order your food."

Lentini began urging her friends and family to participate, and soon she realized this donation model could really have potential. Since people always have odds and ends left on gift cards, it only made sense to collect them and use the combined funds to make bulk purchases for homeless shelters.

First, she called her initiative the "ReGiftcard Program," but she soon renamed it "Fix the 6ix" in hopes that it could become a larger movement encompassing other poverty alleviation initiatives. Just as Lentini was dreaming all this up, York's Faculty of Health serendipitously announced its Agents of Change program, which rewarded startup money to fund worthy projects addressing the social determinants of health. Her application was successful and a Fix the 6ix pilot campaign was launched at York's Keele campus on March 7, 2016. "Honestly, without that \$500 grant this project would not have happened," she says.

She used the money to buy 18 gift card donation boxes, which she placed across campus. In just four weeks, the program had collected more than \$2,400.

After the success of the pilot campaign, Lentini decided to adopt her friend Matthew Mikhael's 100 for the Homies program into Fix the 6ix, since they share a no-cost donation model and both benefit Toronto's homeless population. Whenever the Toronto Raptors score over 100 points at a winning home game, all tickets for that game are valid as Pizza Pizza vouchers for the next 24 hours – so 100 for the Homies collects post-game ticket donations, packages them up and delivers them to shelters the next day.

Since the launch of the original ReGiftcard Program last spring, Fix the 6ix has held drives across the city, at storefronts and summer festivals, and at other university campuses, collecting more than \$3,500 to date.

Most of the gift card donations are used for big purchases of food, clothing and toiletries for local shelters. "We did all the grocery shopping for a women's shelter in Scarborough for their Thanksgiving dinner," says Lentini. "We do Sunday brunches and monthly tickets to the movies for a youth shelter."

To help achieve the social mission of the program, which, as Lentini puts it, is to "humanize homelessness," some of the gift cards – ones for values between \$5 and \$10, for fast food – are given directly to individuals in need, and the interactions are shared on social media every Wednesday. The team's

photographer takes a photo of the gift card recipient, asks for his or her name and a quote, and posts the moment on the organization's Instagram account (@FixThe6ix). Scroll through the feed and you'll find artful images of Toronto streets and beautiful portraits of the people who call those streets home – people whose faces we don't usually take the time to look at, whose stories we don't often hear. "We're trying to put names and faces to these people," says Lentini, "to help end the stigma."

Working full-time and juggling Fix the 6ix on the side, with plans to start graduate studies in the fall, Lentini wouldn't be able to continue to execute her vision without the help of her hard-working team: Awo Dirie, a third-year English student at York; Justin Miceli, a fifth-year student in York's Schulich School of Business; Monica Shafik, a second-year student in York's Law & Society program; Adrian Autencio, the photographer, who is a business student at York; and Mikhael, who is helping the team from afar while teaching English in Madrid.

Fix the 6ix recently took part in Launch YU, York's entrepreneurship program, and was awarded funding to help pay for a lawyer to get the organization into a trusteeship with West Neighbourhood House and become a volunteer-run committee within the charity. This change will allow the team members the freedom to focus on finishing school without having to abandon their passion project entirely. The hope is that down the road, Fix the 6ix can incorporate as an independent non-profit and eventually grow into a charity of its own.

Spirited Software

YORK UNIVERSITY IS OFTEN PRAISED for its multicultural community and interdisciplinary approach to academics. It was those two critical factors that drew Alejandro Mayoral Baños (MA '16) here from his home country of Mexico. With a seemingly unconventional background in both computer science and aboriginal issues, he wanted to bring his two specialties together in his postgraduate studies, but faced skepticism from his peers back home.

After doing a small research project in 2011 comparing the Mi'kmaq in Antigonish, N.S., to the Totonacs in Mexico, he realized how many similarities there are between the countries' indigenous cultures: "They are facing the same challenges: poverty, isolation and depression."

He knew Toronto was a hub for indigenous people and as an international student, he found York's diversity appealing. He decided to embark on his master's in interdisciplinary studies at York, and ended up staying for his PhD.

According to Mayoral Baños, there are approximately 250 aboriginal students enrolled at York every year, yet York's Centre for Aboriginal Student Services only sees around 30 to 35 students on a regular basis. He believes many don't want to identify themselves as aboriginal because they are afraid of the discrimination they might face if they do. Also, many of these students have to work while they are studying, so their schedules may not allow time for connecting with their cultural community on campus. Whatever the case, he is concerned about the higher rate of depression and suicide among aboriginal youth due to discrimination, harassment, post-trauma from the residential school system and the like. He stresses that it's not just a problem in isolated northern communities – it's a problem in cities, too.

As part of his master's studies, Mayoral Baños wanted to help indigenous youth, and he figured the best way to reach them would be through the one thing they all use: mobile phones. There were already a lot of indigenous apps on the market, but none of them offered a truly safe space. So he set out to create one – the Indigenous Friends App, which is now available and free to download via the Apple Store and Google Play. The process began by consulting with indigenous staff, faculty and students at York, as well as alumni and aboriginal elders – 20 people in total – to determine the needs of the University's aboriginal population. His intention was to use what he calls an "indigenous software methodology": making every decision with indigenous values in mind and working with the community every step of the way. "When we started developing the app, we had a ceremony for it," says Mayoral Baños, "so the app has a spirit within the community ... so the community believes in and owns this app."

In addition to the app's chat feature, which provides a directory of indigenous people at York that users can connect with, the app also provides access to traditional indigenous