

Mark Simms; Shifting the world's perception of Jane and Finch



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It has always surprised me how saying the name of two streets seems to strike fear in the hearts of people. Wherever you go in Ontario, and say the street names Jane and Finch, there always seems to be a similar reaction; a reaction of fear. One of the reasons for this is that according to some statistics, violent crime is high in the Jane and Finch area. Data reported from the 31 Division, shows that in the past 10 years, there has been more shooting reports coming from that division than from any other 17 police divisions. According to their reports, there have been 703 shooting incidents between January 1st, 2009 and December 31st, 2019 (Kurek, 2019).

For many years, the press was afraid to go into the area, and this is why the reports many of us heard were negative, and mostly surface reporting. The hearsay devastated the area, and it is one reason why our Classic Man Mark Simms, and his best friend Paul Nguyen decided that it was time that residents of the area took back their narrative. I would like to introduce to you, a man who has found a way to look at the positive that comes out of this neighbourhood and shift the world's perception of Jane and Finch; the one and only Mark Simms.

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"Every night I couldn't go to sleep until I heard that one gun shot; it became a game" ~ Mark Simms

Mark's story begins in the Oakdale area of Jane and Finch, where he experienced the 80s, a time when Jamaicans were beginning to migrate to Canada. According to Mark, this was a very rough time, and the area was experiencing higher than normal violence. Mark recalls a man running through the house being chased by the police, "I was in the heart of it," Mark tells me. His next story left chills down my spine, "My parents moved to Driftwood and Topcliff in 1990. When I first moved into the area, I was amazed by what I saw. They were older Italian houses, and unlike what I was used to, they were not attached housing units. It was a much better neighbourhood at that time. The day after we moved out of our old house, the person that was moving in happened to get shot. To think; we missed the shooting by one day."

Mark didn't realize that his good fortune had not only allowed him to miss being involved in a shooting, he was also about to meet someone who would change his life forever. Back in the days before: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and all the other social platforms, children actually went outside to play, and this is how Paul met his business partner for life, Paul Nguyen. Paul was out playing soccer, and Mark went over to him to ask if he could play with him. This request launched into a full, and lifelong friendship that has allowed them both to do some powerful things for the Jane and Finch community, including what many of the readers will recognize as <http://www.jane-finch.com/>

For those who do not know, Jane-Finch.com started off in 1993, when Mark and Paul began making short films about what they saw in Jane and Finch. They made hundreds of videos, and then finally they made a mix video. They began to distribute these videos, and word spread about how cool the videos were. People began to make copies of the videos and spread them around the neighbourhood. What was brilliant about this venture was that they did all of their edits on a camera; everything was freehand. If they wanted a certain angle, or shot, they would do what they had to do to get it. The videos became so popular, that in early 2000 Mark and Paul decided that they would launch Jane-Finch.com.

"Making videos kept me out of trouble"

Their work became so popular that it caught the attention of producers Tamar Weinstein and Jennifer Fowler at the Fifth Estate. They needed access to the community, and Mark and Paul were the only ones who could give them that access. In 2006, he spent a year working with CBC following the lives of gang-involved youth in the Gemini-Award nominated documentary, "Lost in the Struggle."

Mark has appeared numerous times on CBC speaking on behalf of the Jane and Finch community. Some of our readers might remember that: in 2006, he opposed the installation of police cameras; in 2007, he spoke on behalf of the Manners family following the 2007 murder of Jordan Manners; in 2008, Mark appeared on the CBC French Radio program Désautel to talk about gang crime in Jane and Finch; and more recently, in 2016 Mark appeared on CBC's Marketplace to investigate racism in Canada.

Alongside all that Mark has achieved as an activist, what some people may not know is that he is a 2nd Dan Black Belt in Taekwondo, and has competed and won multiple provincial tournaments. You can find Mark travelling the country, appearing as a motivational speaker and guest lecturer at events that focus on children and youth. He was the recipient of the 2011 Ontario Volunteer Service Award, and a couple of weeks ago Mark was awarded the Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers, which recognizes the remarkable volunteer achievements of Canadians.

Mark now resides in Regina, where he tells me life is very different from Toronto. "Black people are not treated the way they are treated in Toronto; there is a certain respect that I am awarded, but I think that it is because they think I am a football player," Mark remarks jokingly. Mark has always been proud to be from Jane and Finch, and even though he is now further away, he still reps his community, and will do so for the rest of his life.

