

https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/vitalsigns/cooking-up-unique-solutions-in-st-james-town/article_36942559-7c76-5ee6-b14e-63dde769ac7e.html

VITAL SIGNS

Cooking up unique solutions in St. James Town

Three women who like to cook and eat spicy food also have starring roles in an extraordinary story that could only take place in Toronto.

Oct. 5, 2010



Community Volunteers (from left) Thuraiyammah Thevarajan, Joyce Edem and Ranjinithevi Vigneswaran help care for the elderly, ill and infirm and their families in St. James Town as part of a Hospice Toronto program.

ADRIEN VECZAN FOR THE TORONTO STAR

By Judy Gerstel Staff Reporter

Joyce Edem, Ranjini Vigneswaran and Thuraiyammah Thevarajan like to cook and eat spicy food.

Edem is Ghanaian. Vigneswaran and Thevarajan are Sri Lankan and speak Tamil.

But all three women share a lot more than distaste for bland dishes.

They have starring roles in an extraordinary story that could only take place in Toronto, where diversity and community, giving and caring and making the world better for your family and your neighbours are not just guiding principles but, especially for these women, every day practice.

Note, throughout this story, the word “volunteer.”

There is no financial compensation for the time and energy the women cadge from caring and supporting their own families to give to the community.

All three are participants in the Creating Caring Community program offered by Hospice Toronto to residents of St. James Town.

Preparing food that’s familiar, nourishing and comforting is just one of many ways these women help elderly, ill and dying neighbours remain in their own homes and offer support to their families.

“In my culture,” says Vigneswaran, softly but firmly, “seniors stay with their families.”

The Hospice Toronto program recognizes that important cultural imperative, supports it and, at the same, time, sustains and comforts those who have no family, recognizing that isolation is not uncommon in densely populated St. James Town, where more than 40 languages are spoken.

Part of the Vital Ideas initiative, the innovative home hospice volunteer training program “trains volunteers in diverse communities to be caregivers and engages those who are already caregivers,” explains Dena Maule, executive director of Hospice Toronto.

“Rather than say to them, ‘Here’s how we do it,’ we say, ‘How are you doing it and how can we help you?’“

The St. James Town program, which began in the winter, is the TCF’s response to two facts gathered in the Vital Signs report:

- The city’s share of long-term beds has remained unchanged since 2000 while the population of elderly continues to rise.
- Only 16 per cent of Canadians who die have access to or receive hospice palliative and quality end-of-life care services. However, funding for hospice care has not increased.

The Vital Idea: Extending the “Caring Community” model and Toronto Hospice volunteer training program to ethno-cultural communities so volunteers can support palliative support for families in their own language and culture.

Participants learned how to deal with everything from diapering chronically ill and end-of-life patients to communicating with a family when someone is dying.

They learned how to refer neighbours to such services as Telehealth and transportation assistance, explaining how they work and providing phone numbers.

And they learned things they didn't know.

"For me, it was new information that Telehealth is available in different languages," says Edem. "I didn't know that before the training."

It was valuable information she was able to pass on to the families who could benefit from advice from Telehealth instead of always waiting in the Emergency department of St. Mike's.

Edem says she also learned just how diverse her neighbours really are.

"One Tamil man, he said he's Catholic," recalls Edem, "and he would like us to call the father when he passes. Before the training, I thought that every Tamil person was Hindu."

But most of all, the volunteers learned how to get beyond the mistrust and concerns about privacy many new Canadian families have about allowing strangers, even from their own community, beyond the barrier of intimacy, especially when there's a crisis of illness or end-of-life care.

"There's often a stigma about needing to ask for help outside the family," explains Sally Blainey, manager of volunteer services for Hospice Toronto.

One of the ways to get past that, explains Edem, "is to say, 'I'm aware that you want to be private but, as a neighbor, I'm concerned. And I know that, as a neighbor, you would look out for me.' It's important for people not to feel they're being patronized."

Strengthening neighbour-to-neighbour ties in St. James Town is one of the important beneficial byproducts of the Hospice Toronto Vital Idea.

"A cascading outreach model," is how Maule describes the approach.

As well, people who trained together stay connected and involved in the community.

Another byproduct is the experience and skills the program participants acquire.

The Canadian experience is important in the job market, even though Vigneswaran was a teacher in her native Sri Lanka and Edem trained as a social worker in England.

All three women came to the Caring Community program initially for the "Community Navigator" program sponsored by Hospice Toronto and Community Matters Toronto, which guides new Canadians through the health system and teaches them how to help others find their way through it.

In halting English, Thevarajan searches for the few words that explain why her participation in these programs has been so important to her, "I like to help other people."

Her friend Vigneswaran gives an example of how she does that.

The mother of three young children tells about an elderly couple who live on the same floor as she does in St. James Town.

“They are a different culture,” she says. “They stay at home but they were healthy. Then, she has surgery on her knees. They have no children. I take care of them. I make food and give it to them at lunch time.”

What is the culture of these neighbours? Vigneswaran is asked. Where are they from?

“I don’t know,” she replies. “A different culture. They speak English. But the wife likes my culture’s food. Spicy.”



Judy Gerstel

Judy Gerstel is a former Living reporter at the Star.

REPORT AN ERROR

JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

ABOUT THE STAR
