

RESEARCH COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

*Meet **AnnMarie Marcolin**, the Director of the Mustard Seed Program at Fontbonne Ministries.*

Fontbonne Ministries was founded in 2000 to continue the Sisters of St. Joseph's tradition of caring for their neighbours. Fontbonne Ministries runs six programs across Toronto, including Mustard Seed. The programs strive to meet the diverse needs of their communities while working with other organizations to offer services and opportunities that might not otherwise be available. Everyone is welcome without distinction. In this conversation, AnnMarie Marcolin discusses one of those programs, called Mustard Seed, which works to support people that live in marginalized conditions in Toronto's East End.

Can you tell us a little bit about what Mustard Seed does and the community that Mustard Seed supports?

Mustard Seed is a low barrier drop-in that is accessible to everyone. We are located at 791 Queen Street East, a few blocks east of the Broadview on the south side. Our location is easy to spot because we have a wonderful courtyard in front of the building that is open to our participants and the broader community. It's a space that offers a place to rest, and to bring people together while enjoying a little touch of nature. Like most social service agencies, we've had to pivot our onsite program delivery model during COVID-19 to align with Public Health safety recommendations.

But prior to COVID-19, that's how I would describe Mustard Seed: "a low barrier, accessible drop-in that offers a multiplicity of services and is open to everyone 16 years and older." During our working hours, Monday to Friday between 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Saturdays between October to May, our front doors were always accessible, both literally through an accessible button and figuratively in that they were never locked. The reception area was wide open, and everyone is greeted with a smile and word of welcome. We didn't ask for any client personal information, but rather kept simple quantitative stats on programming engagement. Also, the building is accessible, with an elevator and accessible washrooms on both the main floor and downstairs where the multipurpose programming room is located. We serve a number of people that use various devices, whether it's a scooter, a cane or a walker, and we've seen a growing trend of folks that require accessible space in order to participate in group activities.

In terms of programming, we provided diverse services. Food access and security was a priority for us before COVID-19 and will continue to be as we revisit all of our programs. Before the pandemic, we offered meal programs as part of our onsite drop-ins and structured services. Working in partnership with FoodShare we created a year-round Good Food Market starting in 2018, where people could buy produce at affordable prices. However, the folks that come to Mustard Seed have different food access needs. Many are precariously housed and don't have access to cooking facilities. Some need a hot meal, others prefer to grab and go, and still others are looking for the experience of eating with community. Also, a year ago we partnered with Newcomer Kitchen Inc. as part of a social enterprise to train newcomer women in the food industry with the intention of finding employment. As well, we're part of Food Rescue, a food recovery initiative with Second Harvest that helps to reduce waste through the

salvaging of edible food from local restaurants, grocery stores and markets. On a daily basis, and at almost every program even if you just drop in, there would always be something to drink and a light snack. So, food access and security are very important to our work, because it's a critical ongoing need to those that we serve.

Another of our programs was, and I'm saying "was" because we're revisiting all of our services, called Whimsical Wednesdays for Women (WWW). This initiative brought women together in a safe space, most of whom are marginalized for many different reasons. The WWW program gives the participants the opportunity to engage in creative recreational expression and social inclusion, and of course provided a healthy lunch. Mustard Seed also has a dedicated sewing room equipped with six machines, two sergers and a lot of fabric and other important sewing paraphernalia. The space was opened for participants to come in to work on their own projects, whether a novice or expert sewer. There were wonderful skilled sewing volunteer's onsite to help teach a particular stitch that supported folks in repairing their own clothing rather than discarding them. And with the new normal asking the public to wear masks when indoors, perhaps the timing is right to create a collaborative sewing hub where folks can sell their products while learning a new skill.

What would you say has been Mustard Seed's biggest challenge during COVID-19?

The biggest challenge is that since the end of March 2020 we had to temporarily close access to our building and ultimately all of our active programming. At this point, we are not prepared to bring people onsite until we have the necessary Public Health safety protocols in place. However, for the last four months we've been offering takeout lunches on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. We're serving about 240 lunches over the three days, as well as handing out hygiene products and extra food when it's made available to us through local food banks.

We see folks who are desperate to find clean indoor washrooms and shower facilities. While most of the people who come to Mustard Seed do have housing, albeit precarious, there are a few who are living on the streets. And, there are many who are not comfortable isolating in their homes due to violence.

Before COVID-19, there were a lot of public spaces; libraries, restaurants, community centre, drop-ins, including ours, where folks could access washroom facilities. Unfortunately, the pandemic changed this, and what would seem to be a very simple thing, access to a 'clean' washroom, is now a big challenge for those we serve. The Jimmy Simpson Recreation Centre is just across the street from us, and the City did put two portable toilets outside. However, there are a lot of people using these limited facilities, and they are naturally concerned about cleanliness and safety. It's being recommended that high touch surfaces, including those in washrooms, are frequently cleaned and disinfected, but how is this getting done in the portable toilets? So, access to enough clean washrooms has been a big issue.

Related, there is also the issue of geography. Eventually some City-run indoor washrooms were opened, but many are clustered in the downtown core, making them less accessible for those in the southeast end of the City. The same challenge arose with showers and cooling centres that eventually opened. Folks that don't have the means to get to distance facilities require these resources within their local neighbourhoods.

I think the hardest thing has been struggling to meet these very basic human needs that people are asking us to help them with. But also empathizing that everyone appears to be trying to do the best they can in this very unprecedented situation.

How is your organization involved in MARCO, a project that seeks to evaluate programs that serve marginalized communities during COVID-19?

Social inclusion and food access and security are definitely priorities for Mustard Seed. So, we're hoping to learn about potential projects or initiatives in these areas that come out of the grant. Also, it would be helpful to understand how Public Health recommendations impact folks that don't have a home to go to or one that is unsafe. For example, how does it work that the public is asked to wash their hands or stay home when the majority of people we serve don't have the privilege of "a safe space to call their own home."

What inspires you about your organization or community's response to COVID-19?

I think it is our ability to pivot quickly without complaint. One day we're doing full programming Monday to Friday, and the next we're planning for outside pick-up lunches on the days – Friday, Saturday and Sunday – where there is the greatest community need. Lunch may seem simple, but it's not when we are giving out a few hundred over the three days, and this is being done with a very small team of amazing dedicated staff.

Also, it has been wonderful to have such outstanding neighbours, with Ralph Thornton Community Centre staff pitching in helping with our lunches in May and June. Now we're slowly bringing back some of our volunteers, who really want to be here. I'm inspired by the fact that with all the unknowns related to the pandemic it might have been easier for staff and volunteers to say "I'd rather just stay in my home until this pandemic thing is figured out," but this was never a consideration.

Also, we're proud of our outreach efforts to go beyond our own service users at Mustard Seed. We collaborated with Michael Garron Hospital and have given out over 2,500 cloth masks. Our team picked-up the masks from the hospital, ironed them, packaged them with the disclaimers, and gave them out to our community partners who needed them. Now we're doing the same with the TTC Mask Awareness Campaign working to distribute over 4,000 non-medical surgical masks to those most vulnerable. So not only did our team want to give out lunches, they just keep asking, "What else can we do?" So, that's what I'm proud of the most.

To learn more about the MARCO Project, visit <https://maphealth.ca/marco>