

How the simple act of listening helps our most vulnerable communities

One woman's experience volunteering with The Yellow Door through COVID-19

This National Volunteer Week, The Yellow Door is reflecting on how our volunteers, who give freely of their time to support those most vulnerable in our society, have bravely faced the past year of COVID-19. This is the story of just one of those volunteers.

Hannah Buteau is an entrepreneur who, with her husband, runs a successful moving company in the heart of Montreal. In this business clients need services to be delivered efficiently. Time is money. But her volunteering for The Yellow Door during the pandemic as a “friendly caller” to isolated seniors, has changed her relationship with time.

“At first my role was to make a 5-minute check in call to Yellow Door’s senior members, to see if they needed help with their groceries, assistance making medical appointments, things like that,” Hannah shared, “but calls very quickly became half an hour, or even an hour – people just wanted to talk to break the boredom and isolation. Although I had other names on my list, there’s no way I was hanging up on them, so I just listened and gave them the time they needed”.

Hannah very quickly got to know the people she was calling week after week and began to form strong connections. “I didn’t really have a grandparent-grandchild relationship growing up, but I’ve always had tremendous respect for our seniors, so I just took the time to listen and have a real, connected conversation. It was fascinating for me to learn about the people I was calling. Just through listening I learnt so much. We’d talk about banal, daily things like how one woman missed doing her crossword in a café, but we’d also talk about their personal story – what brought them to Montreal, the way the world had changed over the years, and even their hopes for the future.”

When asked about the nature of the conversations, Hannah said “anything and everything. Conversations are philosophical, introspective, hilarious, and sometimes sad. Some people just want to talk about what they did that day – which is something so important that’s missing during this period of isolation. When you live alone and you’re not allowed visitors and you’re discouraged – or banned – from going outside, you don’t have that simple social interaction of accounting for your day with someone. Everyone you come into contact with is there for a transaction and there’s no time to just *be* with each other.”

The simple act of listening has given a social outlet to isolated seniors, and given this volunteer a fresh perspective on life. Hannah recounted, “I feel more empathy than I ever did before. Hearing the stories of the seniors I’m calling has been eye opening. It has made me think about the choices I make and long-term ramifications of those – the serious decisions I make now that will determine my final path. Our conversations often cover how people’s choices have affected them, and I feel so lucky to be able to get to know people on this level.”

The Yellow Door Generations Program, through its volunteers serves over 220 senior members with friendly visits, tech help and other support, such as helping book, and accompanying seniors to COVID-19 vaccine appointments. The Friendly Calls service, launched in 2019 with financial support from Bell Canada, was originally a way to quickly check in with members, and has now been adapted so that the most vulnerable and isolated seniors are matched with a volunteer for a 1-hour phone call each week.

To find out more visit www.yellordoor.org or contact Kaitlin at director@yellowdoor.org or 514-845-2600 x.4 (please leave a message).



THE YELLOW DOOR
LA PORTE JAUNE