

# A Juxtaposition of Two Worlds

*An incredible volunteer experience in St. Jamestown with underprivileged children*

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Is the rest of Toronto as privileged as Leasiders are? Absolutely not. I discovered while volunteering over the summer that dinner on the table is not everyone's reality, even in Toronto. It may seem hard to believe, but just ten minutes away from the neighbourhood of Leaside, lies an area called St James Town – one of the thirteen economically deprived neighbourhoods in the city. Consisting of nineteen apartment towers with over 25,000 residents, it is considered one of the most densely populated and underprivileged places in North America. Most of the apartments are occupied by newly arrived immigrant families, making St James Town extremely diverse – “a world within a block”. The average family income in this area is about \$22,000.

Most of the children living in this neighbourhood attend Rose Avenue Public School, which is in the centre of St. James Town. Since many of the kids attending the school have recently immigrated to Canada, they are academically challenged, and therefore, continue to struggle with simple literacy concepts. The Stephen Leacock Foundation recognized this discrepancy, which is precisely why the Leap Into Literacy Camp was organized. Each summer, for the month of July, students from grade 2 to grade 6 receive the opportunity to attend a fun, literacy-enriching camp.

When I decided to volunteer for the

Leap Camp, I had no idea how profoundly the experience would affect me or how vastly two Toronto neighbourhoods could differ from each other when just a few miles apart. Initially, all I was aiming for was to improve my skills and help others, by teaching the kids how to read and write. I was fortunate enough to be a volunteer two years in a row, and I experienced a completely different world, which was

home from work very late, but it was worth it because the company provided her with food to take home for her family's dinner. It was heartbreaking to hear this. Another time, I met one of the kids at the public library in St James Town to give her some books and was shocked to be greeted by a security guard that was stationed at the door, to prevent theft and violence. I would return to Leaside night after

night, where the average incomes are higher and houses are routinely listed for over \$1 million. I was suddenly conscious of a harsh reality that children are dealing with so close to the neighbourhood in which I am fortunate enough to live.

Clearly, St. James Town is not a developing country; I didn't need to cross the ocean to see the gap. Most of us may not notice the various communities surrounding us that do not have the luxuries or privileges we possess, but, they indeed exist. This experi-

ence really opened my eyes, and broadened my outlook on life. It is amazing how the entire atmosphere can be completely different, within a short distance. After I completed 112 hours assisting at the Leap Camp, I realized that I gained more than just the mandatory volunteer hours to graduate – I gained a better perspective on the world.



something I wasn't prepared for. Seeing children as young as age seven walking to camp by themselves, having difficulty spelling the word “the”, reusing bubble bottles from the dollar store as their water bottles, and wearing the only articles of clothing they owned every single day was hard to watch. One of the young girls I taught told me her mother always came