

### **Breaking the bubble**

When Torontonians think about Thorncliffe, the first thing many think of is the image of the SWAT team storming through the hallways of my high school.

That Monday, someone in the school had called the office claiming to have a gun. The principal declared a school-wide lockdown. Within minutes, Toronto's Emergency Task Force had been dispatched, and officers were sweeping the entire school armed with rifles.

When images of the lockdown made it to the press the next morning, they reinforced many of the negative feelings students from my special magnet program had about attending the school. According to glossy brochures, it was the best program located in the best school. But things didn't seem that way. Many classes were held makeshift portable rooms on the school's soccer field. The mostly immigrant community was known for its low income and high unemployment, its densely populated apartment complexes where over 30,000 people were crammed in an area built for less than half that number. So it's not surprising that the school was at 140% over capacity.

Because the cafeteria was always packed during the lunch hour, my friends crammed themselves into a classroom instead. Our classroom "lunch club" was a big deal because it was a one place where magnet students could escape from rest of the student body. I was one of the students who eagerly joined the "lunch club". But after a few days I couldn't stand sitting in a room, separated from the rest of the school.

So on a couple of lunch hours I would venture outside the bubble. Out of all the places I could have gone, I ended up where the most intimidating people hung out: the Student Council Office. I, like some other students, saw Student Council members as role models. But I also knew that their office had a reputation for being a drug den. Yet, the more I hung around them, the more I liked them. They were warming up to me, as I was to them.

When the student council elections came around, I considered running. I viewed this as a chance to get to know people outside my circle of friends. When I asked a friend from my magnet program whether I should run, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "you're kidding, right?" I brushed him off and went to another friend for a second opinion who just shrugged his shoulders and said "you don't want to hang around people like that."

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Maybe these responses meant we were too smart to interact with people outside our circle.

Maybe they meant we were fundamentally different... that we weren't "cool" enough to fit in.

I decided to run anyways. I stood up at the front of the cafeteria. The students around the room looked at me and tilted their heads, unsure of how to respond to the shy new face at the front of the room. They started whispering.

My stomach sank. The canned remarks, the corny jokes, everything just vanished from my head. The words I wrote down on the page – went blank.

But I spoke. And I said, "Let's work together to make our mark in the school."

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*\*Laugh\**

It's probably as cliché as you can get. But it may have been just the phrase the school had been waiting to hear.

In the 3 and a half years since that fall afternoon, I saw my school's culture change in a way that I had never imagined possible:

Parents Night interviews at the school turned into a mini cultural showcase, where the entire school foyer was lined with student clubs doing bake sales. Students from both the magnet program and the regular school came to help out.

A tri-weekly breakfast program was started and organized by students from both communities to help feed those students who came to school hungry.

Other students from my magnet program had joined student council. And, in my last year, the entire school community came together with board officials to address overcrowding.

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Together, we had turned the school into a community.

But what does all of this mean?

For me, the parents' nights and breakfast clubs were superficial; what really changed was the attitude of the students. I realized that the kids my friends had avoided really weren't as bad as people made them out to be. But when I dug a little deeper I realized that we really weren't all that different. These guys worked just as hard, if not harder, as we did, juggling academics, a part-time job, and, often times, shit going down at home. These stories I heard of single, unemployed parents did not seem so distant from me. We may have looked different. We certainly sounded different. And had I stayed behind the closed doors of my lunch club, I would have never seen how similar we really were.

The day after the lockdown, photos of armed police officers made their way to headlines across the city. On the bus to school that day, I overheard more than a few people talking about my community using the words low-income, immigrants, drugs, gangs, and violence – often all in the same sentence.

Yet what did this really mean about my community? It meant nothing. I knew the truth. Nothing could change that. I wish the world could see what I saw. These kids of immigrant, low-income families weren't thugs. They were kind and decent people, who were often misjudged and framed as being bad, or violent, just because of their background.

These assumptions could not have been more wrong. In fact, some of these kids remain my closest friends today. When I go back to Toronto, I am always going back to this community. But really, I would say I'm going home. I am going home to some of the smartest, kindest, and most amazing people – many who are smarter than I could ever be. I am going home to the people who helped me break out of my bubble. I'm so lucky to know all of them – and to be able to call each and every one of them a friend – because life simply would not have been the same otherwise.

Thank you.