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MR. ROWE'S NEIGHBOURHOOD; LAWYER TELLS ALL THAT HE'S PROUD OF LIVING AND WORKING IN THE JANE-FINCH CORRIDOR, NICHOLAS DAVIS WRITES

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NO MATTER how you slice it, Jane and Finch is a tough neighbourhood.

It's not an easy place to live for those who lack intestinal fortitude and mental toughness.

"My home was robbed a couple of times by kids who should have been in school," says Roger Rowe.

Rowe is a lawyer who has lived in Jane and Finch since 1979. He's aware of the challenges of living in a place where there's a lot of poverty and high unemployment, especially among young people.

"I could have armed myself against children," says Rowe. "But what good would that do?"

Rowe decided at an early age he wasn't going to run from the place he loves because of a "few problems." Instead, he decided to be part of the solution to make his neighbourhood a better place for everybody who lives there.

While a student at York University, Rowe joined the youth wing of the Jane Finch Concerned Citizens Organization. While there he helped tutor high school students.

"At the time there were a lot of problems with young black men in the neighbourhood regarding high school drop out rates," says Rowe. "At the time I was your typical university student who felt I could change the world."

Changing the world, at least the one he lives in, is still a priority for the 44-year-old lawyer.

Rowe opened a legal practice in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood in 1995. His practice provides services to many young people in need of legal help.

But where Rowe feels he's affecting the most change is in his role as chair of a community-based organization called PEACH -- Promoting Economic Action and Community Health.

The main goal of PEACH is to help young people in the Jane Finch community become productive members of society. They do this by recognizing the problems young people face in the school system, in the criminal justice system and in their efforts to find employment. PEACH then designs programs to help young people deal with those problems.

They include a Wraparound Program for students who have been expelled or are at high risk of being marginalized.

The way it works is a Wraparound coordinator coaches individual youth to create a support group that meets over a period of a year. The group addresses the challenges the young person identifies and then they create plans to face those challenges.

Another program PEACH has is called SAS -- suspended and studying.

It's for students suspended from school who want to stay connected with school to help ease their transition back into school.

PEACH also has a Get On The Bus Program that teaches pre-employment skills to young people and then links them with an employer in the local community.

PEACH is also looking to start a program with a group called Friends In Trouble (FIT). It's a group of young people who have turned their lives around and are now teaching others to avoid the mistakes they made.

"I know these programs are working," says Rowe who has been with PEACH for the past 10 years. "I see how some kids have improved their lives. I hear from their parents and teachers who tell us our programs have made a difference."

Rowe says it's his volunteers who make PEACH work.

"It's easy for me to sit on top and take the credit, but it's people like Jessie Kear, Marilyn Eisenstat, Pastor Clayton Kuepfer, Andrea Daley, Kerry Wilson, Maurice Thompson and Spencer Rupke who deserve most of the credit. They're the strength of the organization."

They may be the strength of the organization but there is no denying the passion Rowe feels for the work he is doing.

"I used to see how people used to bash this community," says Rowe. "But I chose to live here to help make it better. When I go out I let people know I work and live in Jane and Finch and I'm proud of it."

FOR MORE information about PEACH call 416-740-9593 or email them at peach.sas@rogers.com.

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- photo of ROGER ROWE
- Wanted to change world

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