Roger Rowe '87 Could Live Anywhere but Jane-Finch is Home

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He could live anywhere, but Jane-Finch is home
Headshot of Anthony Reinhart
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TORONTO -- By conventional standards, Roger Rowe does not lack for options.

At 45, he enjoys a thriving law practice, a rewarding volunteer career, a guitarist's role in a lawyers jazz band and a rich family life with his wife and three children. With his Osgoode Hall pedigree and a Supreme Court of Canada win on his résumé, it's safe to say Mr. Rowe can live wherever he wants.

Indeed he does -- not in Rosedale or High Park or the Annex, but in Jane-Finch, Toronto's ground zero for gun violence.

That others might question Mr. Rowe's choice of neighbourhood only confirms to him that he's made the right one. In a world where privilege is often seen as a free pass out of life's problems, Mr. Rowe sees his as a way in, to where the solutions, if there are to be any, must be found.

He wishes more people would see it the same way.

"It's like we're being left, really, to fend for ourselves," said Mr. Rowe, who has lived in Jane-Finch, in the city's northwest, since his undergrad days at York University. "If we have to fend for ourselves, then it gets scary."

Mr. Rowe is referring to the sense of isolation that residents, many of them poor and black, have been feeling for years, and more acutely in the wake of an unprecedented year of gun killings. In turn, people who live outside the area feel increasingly fearful of it, and ever more distant from its seemingly intractable problems.

The result, he said, is a widening gap that decision-makers routinely try to fill with law-and-order solutions -- gun bans, more police officers, zero-tolerance policies -- that appeal to voters outside the troubled area, but have little practical effect inside, where volunteers toil in obscurity, with little funding, straining to be heard.

"It's not rocket science; what's needed to be done to fix these situations is well known and the resources are there," he said. "The political will is not there," and Mr. Rowe suspects that's because "Jane-Finch residents are perceived as people who don't vote."

What's needed is a sustained, reliable commitment from federal, provincial and local governments to fund programs to give young people more opportunity to

work, play and study, he said.

If that sounds like a familiar refrain, Mr. Rowe would be the first to agree. "I've been singing this song for 25 years," he said, "and now my hair is growing grey."

Well, not quite. Mr. Rowe, trim and boyish, could pass for 35. It's the frustration in his voice that ages him; a frustration that began to build during his own adolescence in Toronto in the mid-1970s.

To be clear, his upbringing bore little resemblance to that of the marginalized young men at the heart of Jane-Finch's struggles today. Mr. Rowe's father was a diplomat and Second World War veteran, one of the few black officers to serve with the Royal Canadian Air Force. His mother was a schoolteacher.

For his first seven years, he lived in Montreal, and for the next seven, the family bounced between Ottawa, Barbados and Kingston, Ont., as his father moved among various diplomatic and government postings. It was a childhood marked by strict schools, chauffeurs, rigid rules and limited but lofty career expectations: law or medicine.

At 14, his parents divorced and young Roger moved with his mother and sisters to Toronto, where they settled in Don Mills. He excelled at high school, but soon became angry at the plight of other black students who weren't faring as well.

"There was a high dropout rate and a high push-out rate among black students," who saw little of themselves reflected in and out of school during the city's multicultural infancy. "I was an angry young man."

Mr. Rowe turned down an invitation to be valedictorian of his graduating class, but did not ignore the few teachers who noticed his gift for communication and pushed him to pursue it.

His complaints also earned him little sympathy from his parents, who had overcome far larger barriers as Barbadian immigrants during a less-enlightened era.

"My dad would say, 'Look, man, you can't use that as an excuse to fail,' " he said, recalling his father, the late Owen Rowe, who had a master's degree from McGill University and gave orders to white airmen during the war. "Talk about a role model."

While mulling his postsecondary options, Mr. Rowe took a part-time job shelving books in the Osgoode Hall library. He opened one, became interested, and started talking to law students.

He enrolled at York at 19 and lived on campus, near the Jane-Finch neighbourhood, while working odd jobs, including driving a Zamboni at the York hockey rink. After earning a bachelor's degree in sociology, he took two years off and worked with children living in public housing in Scarborough, then returned to Osgoode Hall as a law student.

University gave Mr. Rowe what he had wanted, but didn't get, in high school -- knowledge of black history in Canada, including this country's little-discussed involvement with slavery and segregation. Still angry, but now armed with information, he wound up in community law, working with disadvantaged clients in Jane-Finch. He opened his practice in 1995.

"It's been wonderful," Mr. Rowe said of family life in one of the city's most diverse neighbourhoods, where his children, 8, 10 and 17, attend school and play sports, and where his wife is a social worker.

"The down side is, for example, the little girl who got shot in the head [on a TTC bus last year]," he said. "My kids ride that bus. And that little boy who got shot four times, that happened very close to my house," he said, referring to the wounding of Shaquan Cadougan during a shooting last August.

His home has been broken into twice since 2002, by "kids who were supposed to be in school."

Like anyone else, Mr. Rowe felt violated. Unlike many, he did not react with calls for more police or stiffer sentences for criminals, or by arming himself. Instead, he wrote a funding proposal for a volunteer agency called PEACH, for Promoting Economic Action and Community Health. PEACH, with Mr. Rowe as president, intervenes in the lives of young people who have been expelled or suspended from school, had brushes with the law, or trouble finding a job.

"It's not a panacea," he said, but it's better than the alternative -- leaving kids on the street with nothing to do, often as the result of measures touted as solutions, such as Ontario's Safe Schools Act.

Mr. Rowe said he understands the helpless frustration many Torontonians feel at news of each shooting; he feels the same way when he hears of yet another suicide bombing in the Middle East.

"I'm afraid to ask, 'What can we do to help?' " he said.

He lays no claim to simple solutions or convenient scapegoats for Toronto's gun woes, but he's pretty sure that disengagement -- especially among the privileged, who could make a meaningful difference by reaching into the neighbourhood -- is not the answer.

"If they don't start to try and be part of the solution, then everything is going to crumble under them," he said, raising the spectre of riots like those seen in Paris this fall. "And I'm in that group, too."