



The Yellow Door rose to the challenge during COVID-19

Description

Generations program celebrates 50th anniversary – Planning ongoing to re-open the Coffeehouse

By Irwin Rapoport

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For more than 100 years, [The Yellow Door](#), located at 3625 Aylmer Street in downtown Montreal, has been a staple of Montreal life. While many are aware of the Yellow Door through performances and cultural events at its **Coffeehouse**, few are aware of its true nature in **providing social services to seniors** living in the downtown area.



A volunteer provides pet therapy to seniors at home
– Image: The Yellow Door staff photo

As a matter of fact, The Yellow Door is a **registered charity** that operates intergenerational programs and activities that bring young adults and seniors together in the promotion of mental and physical health and the prevention of social isolation among all ages.

Its main programs are **Generations, Wellness Groups**, and the **Rabbit Hole Café**. The Yellow Door has a small staff – just five permanent positions – and it relies heavily on a team of close to 200 volunteers to help run its home-based services for seniors, weekly wellness groups and community kitchen. “The Yellow Door has existed for over 100 years, taking on various roles serving the community each decade,” said **Kaitlin Fahey**, The Yellow Door’s executive director. “What is now known as our Generations Program started in 1972, making this year our 50th anniversary!”

The history of The Yellow Door reaches back to the late 1800s. States its web page:

*“The **YMCA of McGill University** was founded by a group of McGill students in 1887 and with the support of **Lord Strathcona**, obtained a provincial charter in 1904. Its purpose was the promotion of religion and morality in the McGill community. In 1928, the work of the YMCA in Canadian universities was taken over by the **Student Christian Movement of Canada**. Today, the McGill Chaplaincy Services still serves the students of McGill as a drop-in centre where they can meet for spiritual advice and companionship.”*



*“In the late 1960s, The Yellow Door Coffeehouse grew out of an initiative of the Student Christian Movement and was staffed by local artists and provided a showcase for music and poetry. The Coffeehouse also played an active role in the community and between 1967 and 1971, a lunch program served meals to war resisters, students, the elderly and itinerant persons. From 1970 to 1972, in response to the counterculture drug scene, a **drop-in psychiatric clinic** was set up, and **Douglas Hospital** doctors counselled youth with drug addictions. As the **longest-running coffeehouse in Canada**, The Yellow Door Coffeehouse has become a landmark while remaining a lively folk music and spoken word venue.”*

“In 1972, the current Generations program was started as the result of a Local Initiatives Projects grant that was used by a group of McGill students to conduct a door-to-door survey of the elderly residing in the community.”

*“The program has been maintained with the help of grants from **Centraide**, the **Quebec government** and the generosity of private individuals and corporations. Today, our coordinators and more than **250 volunteers** serve close to 300 older adults in the downtown Montreal area.”*

“In the continuing spirit of community service, The Yellow Door has fostered various other projects, including several current initiatives: a food cooperative for students in temporary financial difficulty; a collective kitchen known as the Rabbit Hole Café; and fieldwork placement for students in nursing, social work, religious studies, physiotherapy and occupational therapy, among others.”

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Although the **COVID-19** pandemic has temporarily suspended performances at the Coffeehouse, The Yellow Door volunteers were busy helping clients and making a positive difference in the lives of many.

In an interview, Fahey described how The Yellow Door operated during the health crisis, its goals, and how the community can help to accomplish them.

WM: *How did the pandemic affect The Yellow Door?*

Fahey: Over the past two years, The Yellow Door has stayed true to its mission to reduce social isolation, something that became even more important as health and safety measures had us all isolating, especially seniors who were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and sustained long periods of isolation. So, while our services and programs were adapted, they ran in much the same way, helping seniors with groceries, making friendly calls, or offering weekly wellness activities via Zoom.

We did add two projects in direct response to the needs of seniors during the pandemic: our **Cultural Roulant**, a delivery service bringing items such as library books, CDs, and games to the doors of seniors who are home-bound and who live without home internet; and our **BiblioTech Connect**, a project that loans tech devices and offers a tech café where seniors can receive one-on-one tech support, improving their digital literacy skills, and helping them to connect with loved ones.



A volunteer gives tech support to a senior – Image: K. Slomski

WM: *Is there a greater need for The Yellow Door services?*

Fahey: There was a big spike in requests for volunteer services at the beginning of the pandemic, and we have had a higher-than-average year for new members, which suggests that more seniors are feeling isolated and in need of our services, signing up to be a member at the YD. We have also added new projects and services, and staff and interns as needed, but seniors are resilient and have learned to adapt to this new reality like the rest of us.

WM: *Does The Yellow Door require more volunteers, and can people help the organization via donations?*

Fahey: Like many organizations in our area, we have seen a surge and then decline in volunteers since the start of the pandemic. We are not 100% sure why this is the case but our guess is ongoing pandemic fatigue and youth feeling overwhelmed by their current academic and work schedules. We are always looking for [new volunteers](#) – and there are a wide variety of roles they can fill, from being paired with a senior for friendly visits, to helping at our office, to running a weekly wellness group! Volunteering is a great way to meet new people, step away from your screen and make a meaningful impact in your community.

Donations supporting our work are crucial! You can mail a cheque or use your credit card on our website – yellowdoor.org

While many are aware of the Yellow Door through performances and cultural events at its Coffeehouse, few are aware of its true nature in providing social services to seniors living in the downtown area.

WM: *How important is The Yellow Door to the community?*

Fahey: The fact that the Generations Program has been running for 50 years is a testament to how important

our programs have always been for seniors in downtown Montreal. For seniors who do not have family or friends to support and assist them, we offer critical services as well as a friendly community for them to be part of. Almost all our members live alone and in downtown apartments, meaning they cannot access services like those offered in an assisted living facility. As well, for more than 50 years, we have been a space for youth – mainly university-aged students – who are seeking to give back to their community and develop connections outside of their normal social circles. The majority of our volunteers are not from Montreal and we seek to provide them with support and any resources they might need.

WM: *What is The Yellow Door's plan to restore live performances at the Coffeehouse?*

Fahey: The Coffeehouse – or what we call our **Friday Night Hootenanny** – was part of our Wellness Group Program and a space for emerging artists, both music and spoken word, to perform in front of a live audience and receive collaborative feedback. Probably the biggest change to The Yellow Door from the pandemic is the loss of this weekly event. So many people have asked when it will be back, and, at this time, we are not sure. Planning for performers has been difficult given the ongoing health and safety measures, and the space is small, so a packed house doesn't allow for much social distancing. We are hopeful that it will return in the fall, but it's too soon to tell.



A volunteer visits with a senior – Image: J. Schneider

WM: *What is the history of and current connection of The Yellow Door to McGill University, and why do they remain an important resource?*

Fahey: The YD was founded by a group of McGill students at the turn of the 20th century and connected to the university for decades. It was only very recently that we stopped this direct connection. Given our proximity to the university, however, we remain indirectly connected as the majority of our volunteers and many of our interns are McGill students. We are not funded in any way by McGill.



WM: What are the goals of The Yellow Door for the next five to ten years?

Fahey: The Yellow Door has existed for over 100 years because of its keen ability to adapt to the needs of the community around it. Our goal for the next five to ten years is to continue to meet the needs of younger and older adults living downtown with creativity and care, fostering a sense of community that reaches well beyond the walls of The Yellow Door.

For more information, visit The Yellow Door's website – yellowdoor.org

Feature image: J. Schneider

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Irwin Rapoport is a freelance journalist.

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