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FEATURE

Building bridges, building community

Jaya James, of Guelph's Lakeside HOPE House, says beautiful things happen when people take care of each other

BY NANCY HARPER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS SETO

It's no secret that poverty has a way of crushing the dreams of even the most tenacious and hardworking people. What's not as well understood is that it isn't money alone that keeps poverty at bay, but rather a rich sense of community and a combination of essential resources — physical, emotional, spiritual and financial.

It's a particularly meaningful message at this time of year when many families feel intense pressure to spend what they don't have. And it takes a particularly astute, well-spoken and compassionate person like Jaya James to help make clear the distinction.

James has been the executive director of Guelph's Lakeside HOPE House since



November 2016. HOPE House is a charity that was established in 2012 when Guelph's Lakeside Church purchased the historic Norfolk United Church downtown at Cork and Norfolk streets with a mission to help fill gaps in programming.

Each year, the organization says, more than 10,000 adults and 4,600 children visit HOPE House. Offering services such as clothing, haircuts and Christmas hampers, it also distributes about 68,000 kilograms of groceries annually.

James, a 41-year-old wife and mother of three, grew up in Guelph and graduated from University of Guelph with a Bachelor of Commerce degree.

Her path to HOPE House began in January of 2016 when she took a six-month leave of absence from her job of

nearly six years as a policy adviser with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. She did this to volunteer with Guelph's Refugee Sponsorship Forum, where she was ultimately responsible for managing a team of 800-plus volunteers.

"It was an exciting time to see the community coming together," James says. "You saw a big movement to support people in need and people were just coming out with 'How can I help?'"

"I got to hear all these people's stories, including Vietnamese boat people whose experience (in the late 1970s after the Vietnam War ended) was so moving that they wanted to give back to help others. It was overwhelming to

be part of something that had so much goodwill behind it."

Near the end of her six months with the refugee forum, James was encouraged to apply for the vacant executive director position at HOPE House by Bob Moore, a social service worker who has been with HOPE House in various roles for more than five years.

Moore describes James as a bridge-builder.

"She is able to appreciate the needs of under-resourced people in the City of Guelph, and able to find well-resourced people, and encourage them to bring their gifts to fill the gap," Moore says.

"We watched her do this with the refugees, and she continues to do it with the marginalized."

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A breast cancer diagnosis at age 35 made the community-building journey for James even more personal.

"I call it one of the blessings of having cancer to learn at such a deep level what people can do for each other," James says. She has been in remission for five years and says she has been able to lean on her husband, Luke Hill, extended family and a supportive work environment throughout.

"The reason I'm here at HOPE House is I really do believe we can take care of each other, and when we do that, beautiful things happen. Every day I get to see people help each other solve problems, grieve together, celebrate together. And in many ways, I see people here who have a much stronger understanding than I did of how much we need each other.

"That's why I love being here. I get to see that happen all the time. There's so much joy here, even when it's the hard stuff."

James says her work keeps her extremely busy, but as mother to Ethan, 13, Marlon, 11, and Jayden, 7, she knows she has to leave it behind sometimes. Over the years, she's gotten better at creating balance.

She'll stay up all night to read if the book is worth it. She loves music of any kind. And she spends a lot of time watching her kids play soccer.

"I think Jaya's best attribute is her ability to listen to people, not only to what they are saying, but to be able to hear between the lines, to hear what people have a desire for at that moment," Moore says.

"She has been especially effective in moving HOPE House beyond the handout approach to building community that can give a hand-up to dignity and life change. When she knows what they need, she can help them find the appropriate resources."

Right now, those resources are focused on the holiday season. James is determined that the month-long HOPE for the Holidays celebration in December — featuring

activities such as a big Christmas brunch, a Christmas market where people can pay what they can, and social activities such as singalongs — will help bring the importance of community to the fore.


"What we see at the holiday time is something that as a society we are struggling with: the sense that people feel they're not able to give enough," James says.

"We've moved away from Christmas being about celebrating being together as family into somehow it being all about gifts and having a perfect house and stressing ourselves out and running around frantically.

"At HOPE House, we talk a lot about how poverty isn't just about the loss of financial or monetary means. Poverty is about the loss of a multitude of resources — and the opposite of poverty is not wealth but community."

James says that when people don't have what they need to make it through the day, it's tough to find the strength to build a plan to escape poverty — which is why HOPE House creates a safe space where people can rebuild the community they need.

"Humans aren't made to walk through life alone," she says. "I've seen how when you have mixed communities of people getting together regularly, they're able to support each other and how the diversity and different ways of looking at life are so rewarding.

"When you're part of a community like this, it forces you to constantly re-evaluate how you see the world." 

Christmas JOY

Lakeside HOPE House's Christmas JOY Home Tour fundraiser runs Nov. 15 to 17. Visit christmasjoy.ca for details.



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