

WHAT COVID REVEALS



THE FACES OF INEQUALITY IN CANADA

THE ATKINSON
JOURNALISM FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD



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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: RENE JOHNSTON, ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE,
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Jerry McFeeters, who shares his story in *The Home Stretch*, decided he preferred living outdoors in Edmonton to living in shelters with rigid rules.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR

ABOUT STEPHANIE NOLEN



STEPHANIE NOLEN

2020-2021 ATKINSON FELLOW IN PUBLIC POLICY

Stephanie Nolen is an award winning writer with a focus on international environmental, labour and health issues. She spent 22 years as a foreign correspondent for The Globe and Mail, in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. Stephanie is an eight-time National Newspaper Award winner, and holds the national record for reporting nominations. She has four honorary doctorates, wrote a best-selling book about the African AIDS pandemic and was an Ochberg Fellow on journalism and trauma at Columbia University. In August 2021, Stephanie joined the New York Times as their global health reporter.

For her 2020-2021 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy, Stephanie shares the stories of people in Canada who were vulnerable to COVID-19, or made newly vulnerable by the virus, and how public policy shaped their pandemic experience. She followed working women, migrant workers and asylum seekers, and those who had no place to “just stay home” as the virus surged. Through the story of their pandemic year, Stephanie charts what COVID showed us, and what we’ve chosen to do about it.

The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy awards a seasoned Canadian journalist the opportunity to pursue a year-long investigation into a current policy issue. The fellowship is a collaborative project of the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family, and the Toronto Star.

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<https://www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries.html>

INTRODUCTION

Like many things, in the days following the first COVID-19-related shutdowns in March 2020, our usual recruitment process for the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy ground to a halt. It was apparent then, as it is over a year and a half later, that this crisis and how we responded to it, would have an immediate and prolonged impact on Canada's public health, economy and public policy.

It's the kind of story that our founder, Joseph Atkinson, would have stopped the presses for and figured out how to cover from every angle over time. Even as the story unfolded each day on the front page, Mr. Atkinson would be investigating who was hit hardest by the pandemic and why. He'd want to know the long-term impact on Canadians' health, work, and lives, and what should be done.

That's why when Stephanie Nolen, one of the previously selected finalists, proposed a series that would follow the communities hardest hit by the pandemic, we jumped at the opportunity. With extensive experience covering global health issues including pandemics in South Asia, Africa and Latin America, Stephanie was uniquely qualified to explore the complexities of this evolving global crisis, and its implications for public policy here in Canada.

Stephanie spent a year in conversation with people whose lives have been torn apart by COVID-19. What COVID Reveals is more than a few new cracks in the old system. It tells the stories of those who are stuck in fractures and faults in the very foundation of the system created by white supremacy, colonialism and racism in all its forms. The crisis has made these crevices wider, deeper and harder to escape, but also much easier to see who benefits from a social, political and economic system designed to perpetuate inequality.

Stephanie corrects the misperception that COVID-19 is a great equalizer by showing how only solidarity and collaboration on a massive scale has that kind of power. Being in this together has meant looking out for each other in the short-term — quickly securing incomes and housing, rolling out food and vaccines, rewriting inequitable public policies, and ignoring those who say it can't be done. In the longer-term, it means harnessing this power to repair and rebuild the system, starting with the foundation of shared values and underpinnings of responsibilities and rights.

We hope that this series gives you insight, inspiration from the policy alternatives already out there, and renewed motivation to continue this long-term work. We know it has for us at the Atkinson Foundation. We'd love to hear what you think of the series, how you are using this publication, and how we can collaborate to bring about an equitable economic recovery.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colette Murphy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Colette Murphy
ATKINSON FOUNDATION
NOVEMBER 2021



WOMEN'S WORK UNDONE

The pandemic set working women back decades, but it also created a rare opportunity

TUESDAY JULY 27, 2021

Paola Girotti was on the cusp of big things, back in February 2020. For 18 years she had been pouring her energy into a beauty business that started with one small shop and grew to three salons in Toronto and a line of products with her sleek Sugar Moon brand. That month, she went to the North American franchise expo in New York and found a bevy of would-be partners keen to buy in and take her model across the continent.

Girotti was bringing 33 people with her: the women on her staff, many of them recent immigrants, who had found enjoyable, steady work at Sugar Moon, where Girotti's "dream big" attitude was infectious. "We were really scaling up, to make the plan happen," recalled Girotti, 49.

One of those women was Gayani Senanayake. Last February she had a newly minted medical esthetics qualification, but no experience in the field. She had been hunting for a job for months

Paola Girotti was about to expand her beauty business, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON / THE TORONTO STAR



when Girotti took a chance on her. Senanayake is 40 and has a steady, optimistic way about her that Girotti thought would fit well with the Sugar Moon team. Senanayake was meant to start her new job April 1 and she couldn't wait. It would be her first time working in a professional role in English, her second language, and that felt like a benchmark in her efforts to build a life in Canada. And the money would help, too: she had student loans from her new diploma, family back in Sri Lanka relying on her to send cash, and a pending initial payment for her daughter's university tuition. "I was so eager for that first day, just eager to start work," Senanayake said.

We all know the next part of this story.

On March 15, Girotti found herself sitting on the blue leather sofa in the airy reception area of the Sugar Moon salon on the Danforth. She drafted three versions of an email on her laptop. In one, she told clients the salon was closing for two weeks. In the next, she said four weeks. And in the last version, that it would be closed, indefinitely. "I said, 'Probably we're sending the two-week one, right?'" Girotti laughed a few months later, recalling the moment, still almost disbelieving.

Today Sugar Moon is a battered shadow of its former self. Over the past 16 months, Girotti has tried a whole series of pivots — "God, I hate that word" — to save what she had built. The women she employed have been on Employment Insurance or other income assistance for most of this time. Girotti has abandoned the franchise plan and written off the \$180,000 she had spent on legal fees and manufacturing to prepare for it. She has closed one store, opened (and then quickly closed) another. Thrown away \$22,000 worth of products that expired with the salons still closed.

Sugar Moon salon owner Paola Girotti, centre, with employees Greta Tambas, left, and Gayani Senanayake at the Danforth location in Toronto. Girotti's salons were closed for months during COVID-19 lockdowns.

PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE / TORONTO STAR

Hustled to try to reinvent Sugar Moon as an online retailer. Scrambled to keep up the morale of her team, bringing them together for Motivational Monday Meetings on Zoom. And then at night at her kitchen-table-turned office, after her kids were in bed, she looked at the account books. And wept.

Over the course of the pandemic, the women of Sugar Moon have watched other businesses close, then open up again, get bailouts, get exemptions from shutdowns — and they have progressed from scared and sad to frustrated and angry. They have come to believe that their sector has been hit unfairly hard, denied the support that others have received because it employs mostly women — mostly racialized women — and because its proprietors aren't big political donors. "Where is the help for the beauty industry? Where is the help for all of these working women?" Girotti asked, her voice cracking in frustration, a few days after Ontario's latest lockdown began in April, quashing her hope that any kind of resurrection was in the offing.

This is the story of one small business, and the women who rely on it. It's also the story of all the ways the pandemic has damaged the sectors of Canada's economy that employ predominantly women, changing them in ways that are profound and possibly permanent. And it is the story of how, even as federal and provincial governments unleashed an unprecedented arsenal of interventions aimed at cushioning the impact of the economic upheaval, little of the policy or spending made things better for Girotti, Senanayake or tens of thousands of other working women.

In the first days of the pandemic, it was immediately clear that some people would be tremendously vulnerable. Indigenous people, the frail elderly, those with mental health problems, those experiencing homelessness: COVID would hit these groups hardest. Sixteen months later, we know that low-income and racialized people have been infected with the virus, and died, at far greater numbers than white and middle- and upper-class Canadians.

But there is one inequality that the pandemic has amplified that we did not, in March 2020, see coming.

Historically, all previous recessions have seen far more men than women lose their jobs. Manufacturing, industry, construction and financial services usually contract most in an economic crisis; those are areas that employ more men. Women struggle, but typically fare better as a group.

But when the employment statistics for April 2020, the first full month of the Canadian pandemic, were released last May, the disparity was undeniable. In just weeks, women's labour force participation fell from its highest level ever to its lowest point since the 1980s. Women accounted for 51 per cent of the full-time jobs lost in March and April. And women made up two-thirds of the part-time workforce, which shed jobs even faster.

That March, employment among women aged 25 to 54 years fell by 293,200 jobs, more than twice the decrease among men. In late spring, some provinces began cautious reopenings, and some people resumed work. But much of that reopening happened in sectors such as construction, and far more men found employment than women: only 44 per cent of job gains

"Women accounted for 51 per cent of the full-time jobs lost in March and April. And women made up two-thirds of the part-time workforce, which shed jobs even faster."



in May and June were made by women. By summer, employment levels were recovering, approaching pre-pandemic levels. But in August, nearly 400,000 women who became unemployed during the pandemic were still searching for work. Economists, and some politicians, began to talk about a “she-cession.”

This recession, the first to be driven by public health responses, hit women hardest for two reasons. The first is that far more women than men were employed in the sectors which shut down first and stayed closed. Many of

these were “people-facing” jobs — in retail, tourism, education, entertainment and hospitality. Women predominate in those sectors — they held 56 per cent of hospitality jobs in early 2020, for example, although they were only 48 per cent of the total workforce. In addition, women are far more likely than men to hold one or more part-time jobs, to work precarious hours, to be part of the “incremental workforce.” These “non-standard jobs,” as economists call them, were most vulnerable during the pandemic.

The second reason? As schools and daycares shut down and stayed closed, someone had to take care of children, and in the majority of households, that person, in 2020, was still a woman. Twelve times more women than men left paid work to care for children.

“Women lost more jobs, and they lost more hours, and it’s because they were vulnerable in a number of different ways,” said Jim Stanford, an economist who heads the Centre for Future Work. “The areas where women are overrepresented were hit harder and hit faster. And women were more likely to have precarious work, to be treated as a contingent workforce. And it had the biggest impact on women in the age group that has young kids: it chased a whole lot of them right out of the labour market.”

As the dizzying implications of this new virus began to sink in, Paola Girotti immediately laid off all but two employees — she hoped to fast-track her team ahead of what they expected would be a huge lineup for employment insurance (EI). And so most of the former aestheticians of Sugar Moon showed up in the March unemployment data.

But not Gayani Senanayake: she had not made it onto the payroll yet, and so she did not qualify for EI, or for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) that the federal government swiftly put in place for all those who had lost full-time jobs. “It was really scary,” Senanayake said. “I was thinking, ‘I invested all this money in a new career and I didn’t even get to work and I have no idea what’s going to happen.’”

The spring was brutal for Sugar Moon. After 15 days of shock, Girotti signed up for CERB herself. She and the two remaining employees began selling takeout kits of salon products for curbside pickup. The landlord of one of her stores agreed to apply for the Canada Emergency Commercial

Gayani Senanayake was getting ready to start her new job at Sugar Moon when the province shut down. Because she hadn’t made it onto the payroll yet, she didn’t qualify for employment insurance or the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE / TORONTO STAR



Rent Assistance, so she only had to cover a quarter of that rent (the landlord wrote off another quarter, and the government paid the rest). But she needed to use her savings for the other two shops. The takeout earned just \$500 a week.

Girotti is a single parent, and she found herself struggling to split the days between needing to be at the store and needing to take care of her two children, who were 15 and 11, and trying to navigate online school. She decided she needed to ask her nanny to

keep working a couple of days a week, although Girotti wasn't sure how she could pay her. She cashed out \$35,000 of retirement savings to cover the utilities, lease payments on equipment and other bills on the stores. And she battled to keep dark thoughts at bay, wondering if she might die of COVID, or give up on life: "I thought about my life insurance, and how if something happens to me, at least my kids will be OK."

After three interminable, anxious months, the news Girotti and the Sugar Moon staff had been hoping for finally came on June 18, when personal care businesses in Ontario were told they could reopen in six days' time. But there were many restrictions: they could operate only at half capacity, to a maximum of 10 people in the salon, and they could not provide any services that involved working on a client's unmasked face. Girotti had spent \$4,000 on Plexiglas attachments for tables that would allow aestheticians to do facials and facial hair removal, with the barrier between their masked faces and their hands on the unmasked face of a client. The upgraded tables, however, would be useless under the new rules — and those services had made up 50 per cent of their business.

"Being open is equally as challenging as being closed, because we are actually losing money daily," Girotti said. "Even though we had a surge at the beginning of people booking, that just sort of covered off what was spent. But we actually still have not figured out a way to cover our expenses." Nevertheless she tried to rally her team; instead of their former expansion plans, Girotti said they would set 30-day goals. "Just so we could start to feel successful." But even that, she quickly realized, was fruitless, as rules and news changed swiftly. They were open, but with the sense it would likely be temporary. They tried goals for two weeks, and then one.

Girotti was bleeding cash, but still, each day they were open was better than the other option. "It gives me some kind of hope that everything that I've done for the last 20 years will come back," she said. "If we're open, I feel like I have a shot, right?" Knowing that there was a significant chance her staff would be applying for income support again soon, in June Girotti shifted the aestheticians from a below-minimum-wage-plus-tips model to a fixed \$22.08 per hour. "That way they would get more EI and they'd fare better than the first shutdown."

Girotti invested tens of thousands of dollars on new tables with Plexiglas barriers for services like facials and hair removal. These were useless, however, under provincial reopening rules that banned services that required clients to remove masks. PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR



But as she watched her debt climb through the summer, she wondered if she should be closing one or more of her stores. “You think that the end is coming because the government has made you believe that everything’s going to be OK. But now they’re saying a second wave is coming. And I feel very lost, and I’m very sad. Because I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

For Senanayake, the reopening was a chance finally to go to work, and she burst eagerly out of her apartment, delighted to be with her colleagues. But starting work at Sugar Moon did not solve her financial woes: with the reduced occupancy rates, and ongoing hesitancy among clients, she didn’t get anything near full-time hours. Some weeks she worked just half a day here and there. The new, higher wages were good, but they didn’t help much when Senanayake didn’t have hours to work. She says she didn’t blame her boss, though: she could see Girotti fighting like mad to keep the business, and trying to keep all her employees afloat.

“I’m depending on my husband, which I really don’t want to do,” she said. Her husband, Joseph Francis, had started a small condo cleaning business not long before the pandemic began, and he continued to operate through the shutdown, which kept food on their family table. “I don’t even know how we survived this long,” Senanayake said. “But I am trying to be positive all the time. That’s my biggest strength, I guess.”

In the fall, COVID cases in Toronto began to climb again and on Nov. 22, there was a new shutdown order: Sugar Moon had to close. Girotti had been counting on the holiday season for some desperately needed revenue (in a regular year, the business typically made 10 times average monthly earnings in the weeks before Christmas), and had used credit cards to buy products that made good gifts. Now those products sat useless in boxes.

Girotti felt personal care businesses had been closed without the government considering all the steps owners had taken to protect customers; schools with dozens of COVID cases were open when the beauty industry, which had not been confirmed as the source of a single COVID case in Toronto, was closed, she said. “We’ve been emailing [premier Doug] Ford, saying, ‘Prove it.’ Prove we’re not safe. We are experts at contact tracing — we have the name, contact information, time of visit for everyone who comes in here. We do a pre-screen with online booking. Imagine if every retailer did what we’re doing, if Wal-Mart and Costco did it. If you can’t prove we’re a source of transmission then you have no right to prevent me from earning a living.”

The shutdown order closed gyms, cinemas, museums, and casinos; it restricted restaurants to takeout and non-essential stores to curbside pickup. Schools and daycares were allowed to

Senanayake with her husband, Joseph Francis, whose cleaning business kept the family afloat during the pandemic. The couple tried to keep their minds off their financial woes with a small anniversary celebration during the summer of 2020. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GAYANI SENANAYAKE



stay open as were manufacturing, supply chain and construction businesses. Big-box retailers that sold food were permitted to operate at 50 per cent capacity.

As the death toll in the second wave climbed, Girotti was aware she sounded out-of-step with public anxiety. “We just look like we’re complaining that we’re not open — and that offends me. They don’t want to look at what I’m saying to them about contact tracing.” When Sugar Moon reopened in June, she said, she had restricted her employees to working in only one store; she had 14 people working, who had seen 3,500 clients, with zero traced COVID cases. But the salons were closed regardless.

With the shutdown, Girotti began to organize other salon owners into a lobby group under the mantle of Beauty United, and they contacted politicians to make the case that salons were being punished unfairly. She had been asking herself a question - how much of a factor was it, in the unilateral closing of the beauty business, that it employed almost entirely women, many of them racialized women and recent immigrants? How much did the idea that they weren’t a powerful constituency contribute to the fact they had been left out of negotiations over closures? “We have seen Doug Ford meet with construction companies and with golf course owners. When is someone going to ask to meet with us?” She felt she needed a way to change the perception that the 70,000 people, most of them women, employed in personal care in Ontario could be discounted.

Fighting for her staff and her industry kept Girotti’s mind off her deteriorating financial situation. There was a new rent support program now, the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy, that would pay a sliding portion of her rent, but she wasn’t sure how much or when it would arrive. She calculated that she could keep Sugar Moon going until March; if nothing had changed by then, she would give up and shut it all down for good. “I’ll have to apply for a job somewhere

Girotti and other salon owners say the Ontario government did not consider all the safety precautions beauty services providers had put in place to prevent COVID-19 infections when it again ordered these businesses to shut down. PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR

because I can't live like this, I can't take care of my children — my kids look at me and say, 'You're going to be fine, right?' Well, I'm not fine. Actually I'm totally terrified. And I'm worried about every single woman on my staff."

When the November closure came, Senanayake put in an EI application, wondering if she would qualify. It was her first experience applying for government benefits and she found it dispiriting. Trapped in their two-bedroom apartment, while her 18-year-old daughter, Melona, anxiously did her first year of university by Zoom, Senanayake felt useless. When she came to Canada nine years ago — sponsored by her husband, a refugee from Sri Lanka's civil war — she obtained a qualification in early childhood education. Now she started looking for work in that field, too, since daycares, unlike salons, were still open. But there were no jobs there either. "Preschools had just two children in the class, people were not sending their children."

Instead she thought about getting some other qualification — but how would she pay for it? Her brother and sister in Sri Lanka were also out of work; their families, and her parents, were relying entirely on her financially, so she had bumped up the monthly amount she was sending them, from \$400 to \$600. "If I don't send it, they're just going to die without food." Her student loan bill was another \$150 a month, and her bank account was empty; she had long since stopped quick trips to the dollar store for a little treat here or there to brighten the days. Her husband was covering rent and food. He had to keep working, even as COVID infection counts raced upwards; Senanayake tried to keep herself and Melona isolated, but she felt herself fraying. She could manage, ultimately, without much money — she'd done it before, through the years of the civil war, when her husband had left to seek asylum in Canada. "I'm OK with a minimal lifestyle. But for my brain, I need to be doing something. I just feel like, what the hell am I going to do with myself?"

The only bright spots in her weeks were the online meetings Girotti arranged for her staff, where she shared skills training and lessons in mindfulness and coping. "You feel like you have that job rather than, 'I'm not working and what will I go back to,'" Senanayake said. Like Girotti, she was baffled by the fact she couldn't go to work, when she saw busy construction sites or stores with crowded aisles. "It's very unfair what they've done to us — in our business, we are just two people in a room, for a short time."

Even before the shutdown, the gender disparity in the economic impact of the pandemic had continued. Between February and October of 2020, some 20,600 Canadian women 'fell out' of the labour force, in economic parlance — that is, they stopped entirely looking for work — even as nearly 68,000 men joined. This had implications for those individual women and their families, of course, but also for the overall resilience of the country: declining female workforce participation "sets the Canadian economy up for a slower recovery than might

"Between February and October of 2020, some 20,600 Canadian women 'fell out' of the labour force, in economic parlance — that is, they stopped entirely looking for work — even as nearly 68,000 men joined."

otherwise be the case,” economists Dawn Desjardins and Carrie Freestone warned in an analysis for RBC. While the sectors that employed predominantly women were struggling to recover, the “professional, scientific, and technical services industry hired 55,000 workers as e-commerce activity surged. Three-quarters of these positions were filled by men,” they wrote.

The second shutdown widened that gulf. On Nov. 23, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland released a fiscal update that laid out some of the federal government’s plan for stimulus spending and other plans to support economic recovery. Halfway through a 50-minute speech, Freeland mentioned gender. “We know that COVID-19 is rolling back the gains women have fought for and won in my lifetime,” she said. In response, she said, the Trudeau government was “laying the groundwork for a national early education and child care plan.” But she offered no details, other than a plan to set up a secretariat to start talking about a plan. And much of the rest of the stimulus spending she unveiled — such as \$2.6 billion over seven years for green retrofitting of homes — was destined for industries that employed predominantly men.

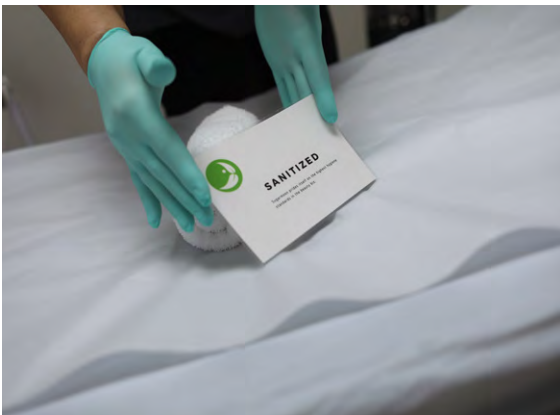
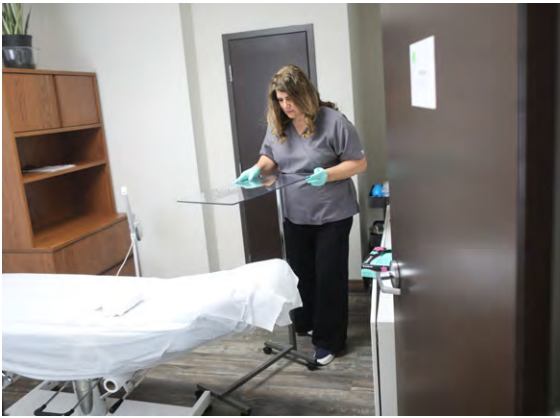
Freeland also announced an extension and expansion of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, which would now pay up to 75 per cent of the wage bill for businesses that had seen revenues decline by more than 30 per cent; the policy was designed to keep people attached to jobs. Girotti had used it, for the months Sugar Moon was open, and she said it was “a lifeline.” But now that they were closed again, and everyone was off the payroll, it was no help to her. And nothing in the budget was of any help to Senanayake.

As the year began, more than 200,000 women had slipped into the ranks of the long-term unemployed, a threefold increase over the pre-pandemic number. When those figures were disaggregated by race, it was clear that racialized women, who still faced double-digit unemployment rates, were being hit harder than white women (women’s overall unemployment rate was 9.7 per cent).

In January, Girotti threw out all the Sugar Moon products that had been open for a year: their expiration date had arrived, and there was no sign they could be used any time soon. But she continued to search for ways to convince the Ontario government that personal care businesses could operate safely. She put UV bulbs in all the stores’ ventilation shafts — a key infection-control innovation that had helped massage therapists win permission to open. Beauty United stepped up its lobby campaign: Prabmeet Sarkaria, the province’s associate minister of small business, toured a Sugar Moon salon. Girotti said he expressed shock that they were not being allowed to open.

But Girotti’s December rent subsidy cheques had yet to arrive by mid-January and one of her landlords was frustrated; she reluctantly began the steps to end the lease on her College Street store. She had applied for a \$40,000 Ontario small business loan but that hadn’t arrived yet either. She had to stop paying her staff benefits. Her advocacy campaign got her lots of sympathetic meetings, but little actual change. “People who go into beauty, we’re empathetic souls,” she said wearily. “And what I have learned in lobbying is that it is ugly and gross in politics.”

Senanayake finally got her first EI cheque in late January — just under \$900. “It’s not much, with all the things we have to pay, but I can’t complain.” She was deeper in debt, because she had had to have an emergency root canal after her Sugar Moon benefits were stopped. She had continued to look for work but she had her hopes pinned on returning to the salon.



At the end of February, Girotti channelled her anger in a new direction. Toronto was still under a shutdown order, but personal-care businesses in the surrounding districts could operate. She convened a meeting with her mother, sister and children and they endorsed her scheme: she would move quickly to open a new Sugar Moon, in Burlington, where salons were open. “It’s either this, or go insane.” She brought one staff member with her, and hired locally for the other jobs. When she put the news on Instagram, some longtime Toronto customers vowed to make the drive.

“I’m so afraid of losing everything,” she said a few days before the opening. “But if I go down, I’m going down with another store. This is going to give us a fighting chance. If I can do \$30,000 a month there, it will offset the 10 per cent of the rent I have to pay at the other stores.” They opened March 20, with cheers and a few tears for the first customers through the door.

Three weeks later, the third wave hit. Burlington businesses were ordered to close, and Girotti shuttered the new store, too.

By the start of the second pandemic spring, women as a whole had come close to regaining the same employment levels they had before the pandemic, although not necessarily in the same jobs. Carrie Freestone at RBC said that by March, 87 per cent of women who had lost jobs in the first months were again working; the other 13 per cent had joined the long-term unemployed.

Then came the third wave — for women, a repeat of the first, with the shutdowns first and longest in the industries where they predominated. By April 2021,

325,000 women had lost jobs compared to 179,000 men, which meant women have accounted for 65 per cent of job losses.

Because the gendered impact of the pandemic recession is unprecedented, it leaves economists and other experts unsure of what the long-term effect will be on the women whose working lives were disrupted by COVID. A yearlong maternity leave typically reduces women’s earnings in subsequent years; when women aged 25 to 29 take parental leave, they earn on average 28 per cent less than they did pre-baby, in the first five years after their parental leave. But a woman returning to work after a parental leave still has a job to go back to, said Tammy Schirle, a professor of

Girotti preparing to open a new Sugar Moon salon in Burlington earlier this year when salons were allowed to operate in that city. PHOTOGRAPHS RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR

economics at Wilfrid Laurier University who has been closely tracking the gendered effect of the pandemic. “And that isn’t going to be true of many of the women who lost jobs in the pandemic: they don’t have ties to an employer any more.”

At a minimum, this year-and-a-half out of work will have cost them Canada Pension Plan contributions and eroded savings; a third of Canadians did not have a financial cushion to cover even a month of household expenses, going into this in March 2020, said Jennifer Robson, a public policy specialist at Carleton University. “The entire trajectory of these women has been impacted. They are not building their CV or pursuing opportunities for advancement. And we know that workers who are out of the workforce for six months have way more difficulty rejoining the workforce and when they rejoin they do so at lower rates of pay.”

It’s not all bad: compared to other long stints of unemployment, women who lost jobs in the pandemic likely won’t be asked by a future employer to explain the gap on their CV, Robson said. “And the vast majority who lost work and jobs were younger, low-wage workers and they had good income-support.” There will be long-term effects, Robson said, but it will take time for those to become apparent.

But she pointed to an emerging area of concern. Historically, there was a labour force gulf between men and women: more men had full-time work, and they earned more. The pandemic has accelerated a shift that was already underway: now the more problematic and pronounced gulf is instead between educated and higher-earning women, and women in low-wage and precarious jobs. The first group were able to work from home, and have had a challenging but not permanently damaging year, Robson explained. And the majority of them are white. The second group could not work from home, lost their jobs, and have been faced with continual insecurity and uncertainty this year, as well as financial hardship. And they are far more likely to be racialized. As of April 2021, the unemployment rate for immigrant women who arrived in Canada five or fewer years ago was 16 per cent, compared to 7 per cent for women born in Canada. “That polarization is just growing,” she said.

On April 19, Freeland was back in Parliament to table the government’s first budget of the pandemic. The promised child care policy was a key feature: the government committed to spending as much as \$30 billion over the next five years, and \$8.3 billion each year after that, to bring child care fees down to a \$10-a-day average by 2026. The plan is modelled on the subsidized daycare system Quebec introduced in the 1990s. The federal government proposed to split subsidies evenly with provincial governments, aiming for a 50 per cent reduction in average child care fees by the end of 2022.

The proposal impressed advocates with its ambition and breadth. But it’s a long-term plan; it does not assist women struggling today. The one place it would have had an effect, said Stanford, who has advocated for a national child care plan for years at the Centre for Future Work, is if it had been in place 10 years ago, or 25, when the Liberal Party first proposed a national daycare plan. “If we had a more accessible, quality, universal child care system before the pandemic hit, all kinds of things would be different,” he said. “First of all, those differentials in women’s labour force participation and the nature of jobs that women fill would have been narrowed.” With universal child care, more women would have been likely to pursue employment in other sectors of the economy, and then this recession might not have had such a sharply gendered effect. Instead,

women have relied on part-time work and flexible sectors such as hospitality and retail, because it was easier to make those jobs work with kids. “If we’d had a system like this in place, women would have been in more work and in better work when the pandemic hit,” he said.

But by spring, Robson and other experts on labour markets and women’s employment had begun to voice a new concern. The federal government had expended considerable energy and resources — and had considerable success — in cushioning the short-term financial impact of the recession. But the same deep thinking and progressive momentum was not being applied to the question of what a post-pandemic labour market would look like, and how women, especially those hardest hit, might best be boosted back into it, she said. “Child care is great, but it’s not helpful if you have no job to go back to.”

In addition to the child care plan, the budget also included a pledge of \$3 billion over five years, starting in 2022-23, to raise standards in long-term care. Together these two investments hold the promise of new jobs (as many as 200,000 in child care and early education alone, in Stanford’s estimation), and these are sectors that employ predominantly women, particularly racialized women and women who are recent immigrants. But what kind of jobs will they be? The majority of child care workers today are not unionized; few make much above minimum wage.

“Will these new jobs be decently paid jobs with benefits?” asked Kendra Strauss, director of the labour studies program at Simon Fraser University. “Or are we talking about more precarious, non-permanent positions, part-time and on-call, that require ‘low skill’ workers to do multiple jobs to survive?”

It is clear that the recovery, when it comes, is going to be uneven, Freestone said: demand will be soft in tourism, for example, for some time. “So who will be available for the jobs that come back and what skills will they have? How will that match demand?”

Before the pandemic began, Canadian women held more than half of the 35 per cent of jobs that Freestone estimates were susceptible to automation. The COVID-created recession has clearly accelerated changes that were underway in retail — hastening the death of the mall and shifting so much commerce online — permanently changing the nature of employment in that field. Hospitality, too, is undergoing a shift to digitization. And education, another field where women hold the majority of jobs, has also been profoundly changed — with increased automation, and delivery-from-anywhere, including overseas providers with lower labour costs. The pandemic has entrenched some existing behaviours — such as online shopping — and opened up others, such as exercising from home — that will permanently change employment patterns, most with reduced labour forces. What will there be to go back to?

The April budget included \$1.5 billion for training and re-skilling, including funding to retrain workers in the most-affected sectors in new ways of working in rapidly changing industries, and funding to help some transition to new sectors.

“Will these new jobs be decently paid jobs with benefits? Or are we talking about more precarious, non-permanent positions... that require ‘low skill’ workers to do multiple jobs to survive?”

— KENDRA STRAUSS

Schirle is waiting to see what the retraining plan looks like: people who lost low-wage jobs need to be retrained for better-paid, more highly skilled jobs. “Put front desk clerks into construction management, put restaurant servers into oil and gas or IT. Putting people from long-term unemployment into sectors with higher wages could close the gender gap.”

Some women, the youngest cohort of workers, are already taking this on themselves: the size of the labour force for women ages 20 to 24 shrank nearly five per cent from February to October. Freestone and her colleagues found that more than three-quarters of these young women who were out of the labour force as of October were enrolled in post-secondary education. “They’ve chosen to use this time to further their education or acquire new skills in anticipation of the end of the pandemic,” she said.

Come May, Senanayake was only leaving home every 10 days or so, to buy groceries. “I don’t know how they let it get this bad,” she said, as her television showed a field hospital in a parking lot and the weeping father of a 13-year-old who died of COVID in her bed. She was worried about her own daughter, who had enrolled for a semester of summer classes since there was no chance she could get a job. Senanayake could see Melona’s loneliness growing, and her anxiety, too. “It’s so unnatural, for a young person to be cut off from starting their life at a time like this.” And in the meantime, she had a new fear: there were plenty of news stories about a rise in anti-Asian sentiment, even hate crimes, and she wondered what the streets were going to feel like, when her family went out in the world again. “What if people are getting angry with brown people? It’s a possibility. They’re attacking Asians, eventually they could be attacking us. I’m really worried about this.”

Girotti, meanwhile, sent a proposal to the Ontario government asking for \$10 million for each of the next three years to support the beauty and personal-care industry. Beauty United launched an infection control and quality assurance training program, in anticipation of a reopening. The funds would help operators put their staff through the training, and also help pay for new personal protective equipment and remodelling to meet upgraded safety standards. Her lobbying team met with a series of public health officials, and then, in mid-May, with Ford’s office; Girotti had accepted they wouldn’t shake the label of “high-risk industry” but they could be proactive about managing it. “We trusted them for a whole year to get it right, and they got it so wrong,” she said.

Girotti’s campaign garnered enough attention that at 8:30 p.m. on a Friday evening in early June, her phone rang and she found the premier himself on the line. Girotti was momentarily shocked but quickly launched into her pitch, telling Ford the shutdown order had ignored the science about how safe the personal care industry could be (it had been open in B.C. all year, she pointed out) and that he needed to make it up to them. Ford told her the Beauty United recovery plan sounded great, she said, and promised she would hear from his team soon.

“Put front desk clerks into construction management, put restaurant servers into oil and gas or IT. Putting people from long-term unemployment into sectors with higher wages could close the gender gap.”

— TAMMY SCHIRLE



Girotti was buoyed: they could be prioritized in the reopening, and a second small business grant from the province — another \$20,000 — would help a bit with the backlog of bills while they waited. She would just try not to think about the mounting pile of debt.

Except, in the end, Ford did not deliver: when Ontario's post-third-wave-reopening plan was released, Sugar Moon's reopening date was set for June 30, at 25 per cent capacity. And still no facial skin care, which was half of their business. Girotti alternated between fury and despair. But she rallied her team once more, and they began a social media push to urge clients to start booking.

The day before the big reopening, Girotti and some of her team were prepping the Danforth salon when a staff member presented her with an elaborate box. Inside were handwritten letters from each one of her 33 employees, even the general manager who had been stuck in India since an ill-timed April trip. "Thank you doesn't seem like anywhere enough to tell you how grateful I am," read one of the notes. "You're one of the strongest and most resilient people I know," said another. Girotti's eyes overflowed and the tears ran down behind her blue mask.

The first few days back in business were tough: Senanayake said she had to mentally run through the steps with each service she performed, recalling how to do the job. Wearing her uniform felt weird, being on her feet all day was tiring. A few clients were crabby, their social skills apparently eroded by 16 months of isolation. "But mostly, it's fantastic," she said, after

her first week. She immediately started saving her tips, hoping to bring her parents from Sri Lanka to visit in the fall, a dream that had now been deferred for years. She reckoned that she was out about \$14,000, the gap between what she would have earned since they shut down in November and what EI paid her. "That's a really big loss," she said. But finally, she was working, and that was thanks to Girotti, she figured: getting hired at Sugar Moon just before the pandemic hit was a truly lucky break.

Starting on July 1, the federal government began to reduce rent and wage subsidies — yet Sugar Moon was only 25 per cent open. "We should be subsidized at 75 per cent, and for all

Sugar Moon finally reopened for business on June 30. Senanayake was at the Danforth location for her first shift in seven months. PHOTOGRAPHS NICK KOZAK / TORONTO STAR

those months we were 100 per cent closed we should have been 100 per cent subsidized: that is why small businesses are failing," Girotti said. "This was something that the government asked us to do. So we have watched other businesses profit, the most they're ever going to make, while we suffered for the cause." She continued to hope for a beauty-specific bailout, to help fund marketing, replacement of expired products and PPE — a box of latex gloves that cost her \$5.95 pre-pandemic is now \$30. Meanwhile, Ontario awarded \$4 million to the construction sector (which had operated at full capacity for all but a few weeks of the pandemic) to help "rebuild"; Girotti felt her rage bubble up again when she heard that news.

Faced with making her own recovery scheme, she decided to revive an iteration of the expansion plan she had at the outset of the pandemic: she signed a lease on a new salon in Niagara, to have it ready by mid-July, and she began to scout locations in Ottawa, Waterloo and Pickering — places she hoped would be insulated from potential COVID flare-ups and shutdowns. But no franchises, this time: instead Girotti is talking to the women of Sugar Moon about a profit-sharing model. Because they're all in it together.

THE PANDEMIC DIARIES



ALEXIS THIBEAULT, THE TOURISM GUIDE

MAY 2020

I'd been working three jobs for years. I worked at the Vancouver Aquarium, as the sleepover educator, which was really fun. I had a job guiding ghost tours. And for three years I drove a tour bus and worked as a guide — I'd worked my way up to being the operations supervisor. My last shift was March 17. My partner is still working — he's a rope access technician, he works cleaning windows — and my stepchildren, who are 14 and 12, come to us on alternate weeks and so I had to supervise school. I'm 30. I got on CERB pretty quickly. In May I realized I was going to have to find new work because tourism wasn't coming back and I started applying for jobs, for so many jobs. I had a half-dozen interviews, I got one offer of a part-time job that would have left me with less money than I was getting on EI. My background is in environmental education but all the jobs are online now, and they fill instantly. We live in social housing, in a co-op. We qualify as low-income with the kids. So at least that helps a bit.

OCTOBER 2020

I got pushed off CERB and onto EI, it's \$940 every two weeks so I'm bringing in \$60 less a week. That's about half of what my income was. And my partner injured his shoulder and he was off work for 12 weeks — he got medical relief but it wasn't much. Our household economic picture has changed, for sure, although not as dramatically as some people's. We're afloat. But barely. We're not spending on going out, or the kids' activities, which is a blessing and a curse. I still had to make a payment on my student loans this month, but I got relief for next month and I don't think I'll have to make a payment until May. We splurge sometimes on little luxuries, like a fancy cheese. My partner can't much work in winter so I'm worrying about January. Every couple months the president of the company I worked for sends an email — 'Maybe we'll be open for ski season!' But no. I've applied to all the museums and cultural centres, but I know a million people are applying for the same two jobs. I can't do an online course, I have a crappy computer. I was saving for a new one before the pandemic, but that money is gone. I've been looking at WorkBC. I'm thinking about trying to become a driving instructor: I'm used to driving and talking, I think I'd be good at it. But it's \$5,000

and I'm not sure it's worth it. Or I might retrain as an educational assistant. But those courses are six-months long and I wouldn't have an income while I was studying. I should bite the bullet and apply to be a bus driver for the transit company — but that's a front-line job that comes with a lot of risk. And it's night and shift work and I need to be around for the kids. It's vaguely terrifying: I have a lot of skills, I went to university, I have a TOEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate. There are a lot of us who want to take our skills to different sectors, but we don't have the qualifications — I'd like to see the government put money into re-education. Eight months is the longest I've ever been unemployed and it's hard — I like being productive. I was optimistic that tourism might rebound, but that hope is dwindling by the minute.

FEBRUARY 2021

Things have been pretty rough. We spent everything we could on Christmas for the kids, and now it's all ramen and Kraft Dinner for us, in the weeks they are at their mom's. It's pretty bleak. For a while we were playing video games on the second-hand PlayStation we got them for Christmas and then it's like — we're 30 and 34, what are we doing? Even that's boring. It's all just deadening inside. I was sleeping in later and later, just feeling this apathy, thinking 'this is crap.' Just sitting around staring at the walls. In January I wasn't applying for as many jobs as I should have, it just felt pointless. I gave up and stopped applying just in my field. The B.C. government is only paying for basic skills training, and I can't find a funding program that will pay for the education I need. Finally, I had my first interview of 2021, for a job I was really excited about, but in the end I didn't get it. I know things will get better, because it always does, but right now it's the worst it's ever been. I'm a college-educated, intelligent, employable woman and I'm sitting around staring at walls. Even though I know it's situational, I still feel like I'm doing something wrong. But I know there are so many people worse off: I've got an apartment with health, and it could be worse. I just have to get a job before March 17. I can't be unemployed for a whole year.

APRIL 2021

I finally found a job in the first week of March. It's only for three months, but it's a step in the right direction. I'm working for a not-for-profit teaching bicycle safety in schools and I really enjoy it. Hopefully I will be able to find a more permanent position when this program ends as well, but just having something is definitely helping with the coping, especially something that I have experience in. It is mostly in person ... which is a bit unnerving, however we have all the sanitizing and mask protocols in place and also our programs are mostly outside so that helps.

Alexis Thibeault worked multiple jobs in the tourism industry before the shutdown. This spring Thibeault finally found a job teaching bicycle safety in schools. PHOTOGRAPH DARRYL DYCK / TORONTO STAR

THE PANDEMIC DIARIES



JABY DAYLE, THE HOSPITALITY WORKER

MAY 2020

I worked the weekend of March 14-15, 2020 — I was a server with an event company in Toronto. I earned \$12.20/hour. The next day, I got an email from the company saying we should apply for EI, they were shutting down. They stopped working, but my rent did not stop, my bills did not stop. My partner was on short-term disability for a workplace injury from her job as a baker, and money was already tight. Right away, we had a difficult conversation with our landlord, who had been looking to raise our rent. Even with tips, the money I brought in was still \$500 less than my basic expenses, and I had no savings — December through March is the leanest season for a server, and the bank account was drained. I was coming off three months where I was earning \$100-\$150 a week. My bank deferred credit card payments, which was a short-term relief. The thing I was really looking forward to was starting to study for my sommelier qualification, which obviously is out of the question now. I struggled a lot with mental health when I was younger, and in the first week of March I started what was going to be weekly therapy appointments. I guess now I'll try to do it once a month. I grew up being poor, and things now will look like being poor again: lots of cabbage, lots of rice. Being poor is terrible and it sucks that I'm kind of used to it. I experienced homelessness in my 20s — and I like having a bed, and blankets. But even in my fractured emotional state, I'm still in a better place than other people.

SEPTEMBER 2020

I went back to work when patios opened up, in early July. But it didn't feel safe: clients didn't keep their distance and they would move around the place without masks. I was relieved when venues shut down again. I'm back on EI. I'm still treading water and it's filling my nose and mouth. I had been sending grocery money to my sister, who is a single mother, but there's nothing left to bleed from the stone. I'm putting the minimum of \$30 a month on my credit cards and I'm at risk of having the data cut off on my phone. One good thing that happened after the Black Lives Matter protests started in the spring is that I got a scholarship for Black people to study to be sommeliers, so I was

able to start the course during the pandemic. That's great but I still can't really afford it: you have to taste, and I can't afford any of the tasting wine. I landed a job with a big new venue that is supposed to open soon and that would pay \$16/hour with equal tips for all staff. But who knows if that's going to work out. This was supposed to be our year to have children. Our new plan is to eliminate debt and save \$8,000 and get out of Ontario. By the summer of 2022 I can clear my debts, if things open up. I could be standing on solid ground.

FEBRUARY 2021

My partner was able to go back to work full-time, so that helps. We're moving to an apartment above ground, which is exciting — and we're going to save a little money. That new job I was supposed to start is still up in the air. Meanwhile, I heard from the place I used to work and they asked if I'd be willing to come back and I feel like I don't have any choice. My credit cards are always at the max. But I really worry about getting COVID at work: the fact that it affects your taste and smell. That's my biggest fear: taste and smell are the basis of my entire dream for life. I'm doing the sommelier course, but I can't afford to buy the wine — I should be tasting 7-10 bottles a week. I'd need to be spending \$200 a week on wine to do the next level. So I've pretty much written off this year. But I'm feeling way better mentally. I've been volunteering with ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), working on affordable housing, and it means I don't feel so damn alone. If I can work hard for a year, I can get out of this debt hole.

JULY 2021

When things opened back up in Toronto in June, I went right back to work with three jobs. I was working at a wine store with a patio, I was working service at a wine bar, and I was on the floor [serving] at the newly launched restaurant that I'd been waiting for. But I soon realized that resto wasn't for me: it's funny because if I'd had that job in 2019 I would have given my heart and soul to the endeavour. But I've changed so much over the last year-and-a-half. I realized that I want to live a long and satisfying life and killing myself with work for someone else just ain't it. The two jobs I have now are able to respect my time far better. And I just don't have the capacity to help build another person's dream while working steadily on my own. A friend and I started a business we call Discerning Palate Wines. I realized that even with all the scholarships I've received, buying the wine to taste was still an issue. I knew that once restaurants opened up again I'd be able to afford the \$200 a week a student is supposed to spend for tasting — but that's an impossible sum for a lot of people and it will thwart any and all well-meaning efforts to truly diversify the industry. So DP supplies students and laypeople with small flights of wine and little info cards. We keep it simple and keep our prices low. We launched in May with a couple of dollars we were able to scrounge up and it's growing nicely. I'm in therapy, my therapist is great and lets me pay in installments. I'm making time for activism, to satisfy my soul and do what I can to try and forge a better world. Our accounts are still tight, but we've got a lot of hope for the future.

Jaby Dayle was working as a server, earning just \$100-\$150 a week when the Ontario shutdown began. During the pandemic, Dayle and a friend started a business called Discerning Palate Wines. PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR



THE MOTHER LOAD

COVID-19 created a crisis of care —
and working mothers bore the burden

WEDNESDAY JULY 28, 2021

There was a day in November of 2020 when Amy Lazar Kleiman got up before the sun. She hoped to get in a few hours of work before her children awoke and needed to be fed and helped to log in to school and find their classes and download their worksheets, and fed some more. She squeezed in an hour of crucial emails to clients at lunch while her husband took the kids outside to play. Then she returned to second-grade math and a kindergarten craft project, and more snacks and then games and dinner and bath time. Finally, she tucked the kids into bed and, when it was dark outside again, she sat down in front of her laptop, stared at the screen and tried to muster some crisp, shiny words for the copy she had promised to deliver. It was the day she thought, 'Actually, I can't do this. This is not going to be possible. We cannot go on like this. I cannot go on like this.'

Amy Lazar Kleiman had recently enrolled her younger child in preschool and was starting her own business in early 2020, when the pandemic hit. PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE / THE TORONTO STAR

“The scales are going to tip,” Lazar Kleiman, 40, said, assessing her world, as she tried to maintain her career as a copywriter and also get her children through a second pandemic lockdown, no longer trusting that they might go back to school that year. “Either I’m just going to stop school or — I guess, I stop working.”

Rebecca Tucker’s moment came much earlier: it was March of 2020. Halifax, where Tucker was studying clinical psychology, was just a few days into a provincewide lockdown that closed offices and schools. And Tucker, 34, found out she was being offered a residency, a crucial last step in finishing the doctorate she’d been working toward for more than a decade. But the residency spot was in Ottawa, a city where Tucker, a single mother to a then-10-year-old, knew no one and had no support system. She couldn’t afford to hire private child care on the stipend residency pays. If her son’s school and after-school program stayed closed, there was no way she could accept the position. But without the residency, she couldn’t graduate. And without the degree, she couldn’t start work. Her student loans and line of credit were exhausted. She was stuck. “I had to turn it down. I couldn’t do it.”

COVID-19 also upended Anne Merritt’s professional life last spring. In June she lost a job she loved, but it took longer, nearly nine months more, for Merritt to take full measure of how the pandemic would alter the trajectory of her working life, and with it her sense of who she is. In March of 2020 Merritt taught academic English to foreign students at an Edmonton university. With borders closed, her rolling contract was not renewed when the school year ended.

Merritt had a toddler, and was pregnant; when she lost her job, she also lost her parental leave benefits and her daycare subsidy. In January, she gave birth to twins. And as she contemplated the months and years ahead — needing to pay for child care for three children — she began for the first time to think that she might not seek a new job when the babies were nearing a year old, but rather spend some years as a stay-at-home mother, something she never imagined for herself. “My going back to work may have to be reconsidered.”

So many working mothers across Canada have had some version of this moment in the past year. The day the frustrated fifth-grader who couldn’t calculate the radius of a circle burst into a crucial Zoom meeting with the boss. The day they arrived to pick up the toddler at the home of a friend-of-a-friend who was the only emergency child care option — and encountered an unmasked stranger, hanging out on the sofa in what was supposed to be a ‘bubble.’ Suspecting the ninth grader in the next room was playing *Overwatch* all day on the laptop, but unable to do much about it without sacrificing her own work. Cancelling a presentation because a lonely, angry child who missed her teachers and her friends and her sense of security had started to cry and just couldn’t stop.

Plenty of fathers had these moments, too, of course, but one of the many things that COVID-19 laid bare was how little fundamental assumptions about gender and care work had changed by March of 2020. Before the pandemic, Canadian women already reported spending 1.5 hours more each day on domestic and caregiving tasks than men. Then, in the great majority of households where the pandemic created a crisis about care for children or elders, it fell to women to make a plan. It was women who took on the bulk of the burden, it was women who tried to juggle online school or baby care with a job, or reduced their hours, or stepped away entirely from work.



In the year from February 2020, 12 times as many women as men had stopped working because of child care responsibilities.

AMY LAZAR KLEIMAN

My younger child started preschool in January 2020, and that was my moment: I had 10 whole hours a week to build a business. I started going to a co-working space and I started drumming up clients pretty quickly. Before I had my kids, I was a manager of corporate communications and I'm good at writing marketing copy. Well, of course, my kid was in preschool for one hot minute before everything shut down. And suddenly I had two jobs, two totally exhausting jobs: I was trying to build a business and be an entrepreneur, and I had two kids at home who I was also supposed to be teaching.

These women lost income, obviously; many also lost medical benefits, including access to costly mental health support that they or family members needed more than ever. And they lost other employment related benefits such as Merritt's parental leave.

ANNE MERRITT

I was just not working for a few months, and then in the fall I picked up a couple of contracts. Then I lost the salary top-up for the mat leave. I didn't think I was going to get EI either, but then the federal government lowered the number of hours required, presumably because so many people were in this position. But I was down about \$15,000.

Amy Lazar Kleiman with her kids outside their home in Toronto. She says it has been difficult to balance child care and online school with running her business. PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE / TORONTO STAR



Women who stepped away from paid work experienced a career interruption that history shows has a lifelong impact on earnings and retirement income. There has been a flurry of economic analysis already to try to track these losses. But they lost something else, too: as women went literally back into the kitchen, there was a decline in their participation in social, civic and political life (such as it was in the pandemic), the long-term impact of which will take time to become clear.

And as the stories of Merritt, Tucker and Lazar Kleiman make clear, the pandemic extracted a price in women's well-being. One year into the COVID crisis, a large study reported in the journal *Lancet Psychiatry* found that the pandemic had increased depression and anxiety in women broadly — researchers went back to women they had followed over five years after a longitudinal pregnancy study and found a new, sharp drop in mental health since the onset of the pandemic. And they found it was worst for women who had lost income, were struggling to obtain child care or trying to manage home-schooling while working.

REBECCA TUCKER

The whole spring and summer was hard on my son and me both: I was stressed and unsure and we were both on edge quite a bit.

AMY LAZAR KLEIMAN

We haven't put ourselves first — ever, probably, but definitely not in the last year and our careers have suffered and our dreams and our hopes and all that stuff. And we're just hanging on, we're all like, hanging on. I have zero time and zero energy. There's no energy left for the extra, like the volunteer stuff that I used to really enjoy.

Rebecca Tucker and her son. Tucker has had to delay graduation at least one year and taken on more student debt during the pandemic. PHOTOGRAPH STEVE MCKINLEY / TORONTO STAR

In the first weeks of the pandemic, in many households with children, one or both parents were abruptly out of work. In others, parents worked in fields deemed essential and had to keep going to work. And in roughly half of families, parents' employment pivoted remarkably quickly to work-from-home. Yet schools and daycares were closed. The parents suddenly working remotely, and those who were still expected to show up at work, were stuck. Some reduced their hours; or stopped working and tried to find income assistance such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

Through the first year, the Canadian government threw an arsenal of policy measures, and a blizzard of money, at its effort to blunt the worst impacts of the pandemic. The CERB made up for lost income; the Canada Emergency Wage Support helped businesses keep workers employed and doors open; there were emergency funds for lobster fishers and grain farmers; money to repurpose hotels to house homeless people, and to put COVID isolation units in remote Indigenous communities.

But for this fault line in the crisis, the one that may have been the most widely shared, for this critical question of how people could continue to work but also care for children, there was no Canada Emergency anything. There was just ... figure it out for yourself.

"It's a classic failure of public administration: no one is in charge, and families feel they are on their own," said Jennifer Robson, a public policy specialist at Carleton University in Ottawa. (She did this interview while also supervising her daughter doing Grade 1 work on Google Meet).

Women lost more jobs than men in the first months of the pandemic, as the sectors such as retail and hospitality where they predominated shut down. But they also regained fewer jobs when reopenings began, and many left the labour force all together. One group, in particular, made a mass movement to the exit: women aged 35 to 39. By October, roughly half of the women in this age cohort who had lost their jobs in the first months of the pandemic had not searched for work. Why? Kids. In replies to the Statistics Canada monthly Labour Force Survey, and other research, women said the answer was overwhelmingly the need to care for children. Women with children under the age of six made up 41 per cent of the labour force in February, but accounted for two-thirds of the group who opted out of work or looking for it. "Women's participation declined more than men's, and it was really concentrated in the parents of young kids," said Jim Stanford, an economist who heads the Centre for Future Work. The caregiving demand, he said, "chased the parenting-age women right out of the labour market. The gap was already bad and it got a lot worse."

The first opportunity that the provincial and federal governments had to intervene concerned schools and daycares: had these been put at the centre of the COVID response, as they were in countries such as Denmark, they might have reopened safely in the first weeks of the pandemic. That would have required doing a lot of things differently, including, likely, closing virtually everything else to keep community transmission of the virus at the lowest possible level. It would have meant

"For this critical question of how people could continue to work but also care for children, there was no Canada Emergency anything. There was just ... figure it out for yourself."



implementing routine rapid testing at schools, and swift investment in hiring and infrastructure to keep class sizes small so children were kept in small cohorts. That, of course, didn't happen.

ANNE MERRITT

How, how is every administrator not diverted to addressing this? What's more important? If you had an imperfect plan I think the public perception would be a little more welcoming. But there's no plan. How is there not a commission designated in each city or school board to think of a back-to-school plan? I mean, I know why. Because in March when everyone moved home, the women who were saying, 'This is a whole lot of work for us, the kids are at home, my professional life is suffering' — it took the world at large a very long time to take that seriously — that the economy, the labour force of Canada as a whole is compromised, if the women are this tired.

REBECCA TUCKER

As soon as the pandemic started, I saw it coming. My son was 10. So he can't stay on his own. I was on track to graduate in 2020, and I have to finish, because I can't get loans any more. But now I can't work on my dissertation — my son is home. He's by himself, which no kid handles well: it's boring and long. So I'm just not working. When I found out I matched for residency in Ottawa, right away I thought, this isn't going to go well. If the schools don't open, or if they open and close again — I don't have any support system there. I can't afford to pay for a caregiver on what I get paid as a resident. I couldn't do it, not knowing what I would do if school was shut.

Anne Merritt, of Edmonton, had a toddler and was pregnant with twins when the pandemic forced everything to shut down. PHOTOGRAPH JASON FRANSON / TORONTO STAR

Children across the country were out of school intermittently — and to varying degrees — throughout the 15 months since March 16, 2020. B.C. sent kids back to school that June and mostly kept them there the following school year. In Ontario, children in Toronto were online for more than half the year, not counting disruptions for COVID exposures. “There has been limited effort to keep child care from closing,” said Robson. “They didn’t do the things to make it functional. ‘Open’ school is still wildly disruptive for families, with the testing and the isolating, it’s super stressful, and that’s harder for low-wage families. Uncertainty has an economic cost.”

AMY LAZAR KLEIMAN

Summer felt normal but then it was like — are the kids going to go school? In Ontario, every month or two things switch on us, so the kids are either in physical school, or they’re not; we’ve got a week or two of camp, or we don’t. Even when they’re in virtual school, you are completely their TA, you’re sharpening their pencils, if not actually teaching them the lesson.

REBECCA TUCKER

I’m not making progress on my dissertation, that’s for sure. And in order to get a job and start earning money, I have to have that done. My son is awake until 10:30 p.m., I’m up at 6:30 a.m. — there aren’t enough hours. And it’s not even just that writing it after work is hard, but it’s the constant, ‘Are schools going to be open? Is this the thing that will mean I can’t go to work this week?’ It’s exhausting.

Even when schools and daycares were open, uncertainty about what was to come prompted some families to decide a parent was going to have to stop working. In the wildly unpredictable days of the early pandemic, most households made this decision on brutally pragmatic terms: who earns more?

Almost 80 per cent of Canadian households with children have two working adults. But in nearly three-quarters of those households, if they are a heterosexual couple, male partners earn more, a gap that persists because women continue to take the bulk of parental leaves, losing out on promotions and raises, and because of the gender pay gap. And so in the great majority of households where one person stopped working, it was the woman. More women had the decision made for them, of course, because they lost more jobs than men did, but in other families, the decision was driven by cold financial reality.

In Robson’s characterization, “Parents said, ‘we have to stay where the money is.’”

AMY LAZAR KLEIMAN

It was clear that if someone was going to step away from work it would be me: my husband is a director of software engineering, he’s the main breadwinner, that’s how we have our bills set up. So it was clear it was going to be me who took this on. Every household has this discussion, ‘OK, this next year is going to be totally messed up, who can step away

from their job?’ And of course with the pay wage gap, of course it’s going to be women most of the time. My husband blocks off noon to 1 p.m. every day and takes the kids outside, so I get that time — but it’s hard, as a writer. You can’t just be creative on a schedule.

When a household makes these decisions, two things are coming into direct conflict, explained Tammy Schirle, a professor of economics at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont. who has been studying how the pandemic is playing out differently for men and for women. “When these decisions are made in households, it’s predominantly women stepping away from work, it’s Mom bearing the cost. And that’s an interesting conflict: it’s in the household interest but not the individual woman’s interest.”

In September, the problem spurred a landmark policy intervention: the federal government created the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB). The benefit paid \$500 a week before taxes for every weeklong period a person had to leave work to care for a child under 12 or a family member needing supervision, because of COVID: because they were sick, or because a school was closed, for example. It was the first time that the government had designed income support specifically recognizing that caregiving has an economic cost. Applications for the new benefit told the story of who needed the help: by March, more women than men had applied for the CRCB in every province — and in Ontario and Alberta, the two provinces with the greatest uncertainty about school, the number of women applying was more than twice the number of men.

REBECCA TUCKER

My supervisor has been amazing; she and another supportive faculty member tried to find me a new residency and in the meantime she was able to hire me on a project. A few individuals worked really hard to make this possible. But the system didn’t, and that’s something we all have to talk about: your success can’t depend on having the right people in your corner. From June to December I was working but not knowing if I was going to be able to do a residency. Then in December I started a residency in the Annapolis Valley, where I’m from. We’re near my parents. But they have underlying conditions and they’re at high risk for COVID complications so it’s hard for them to help with my son. But sometimes that’s the only option we have. I’m getting paid \$35,000. I get no child support from his father. Without COVID, my son would have been doing after-school clubs and sports, and I wouldn’t be paying for child care. There’s one place in this town that takes kids his age, and it’s \$300 a month. But I can’t get a student line of credit to cover child care, because I already used that up in other years just to pay the rent.

Finally in April, more than one year into the pandemic, came a policy response that spoke specifically to the impact that caregiving had had on women’s working lives. Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland revealed the details of a national child care plan in the federal budget. She said the government would spend as much as \$30 billion over the next five years, and \$8.3 billion



each year after that, to bring child care fees down to a \$10-a-day average by 2026. The federal proposal would split subsidies evenly with provincial and territorial governments, which will have to sign on to the plan. The goal is to cut average child care fees by half, by the end of 2022.

The federal program is modelled on Quebec’s subsidized child care system, implemented in the 1990s in an effort to increase women’s access to the labour market. Since then, labour participation rates for women aged 25 to 54 in Quebec have grown to exceed the national average by four percentage points, and that province’s child care system has been studied by governments and researchers around the world. In other countries, governments have earned back as much as \$6 for every dollar spent on universal child care (more mothers working means higher tax revenues and lower social assistance spending, both of which boost GDP). The Trudeau government predicts their plan will boost the economy by as much as 1.2 per cent.

The proposal was widely praised by child care advocates. Stanford believes that its ambition and comprehensiveness was made possible by the pandemic: the crisis amplified the struggle so many families were already having with child care, a shortage of spots, crippling fees, a reliance on unlicensed care. And it laid starkly bare the economic cost to individual women and to the economy as a whole.

ANNE MERRITT

We were fortunate to be part of a pilot project for my older child that reduced daycare fees to \$25 a day. But the Kenney government did not continue the pilot. So fees tripled. And then you imagine paying that for three children. \$225 a day. Assuming you can even get a spot.

Anne Merritt with her twins, who were born in December. Professional setbacks brought on by the pandemic and the high cost of child care have made Merritt’s return to work more challenging.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR

But the federal child care announcement does nothing to help families struggling right now: its implementation depends on what will no doubt be fraught negotiations between Ottawa and the provinces, and it will require what Stanford described as a near-war-time mobilization of people, the hiring of at least 200,000 trained early childhood educators. In a best-case scenario, it may start to increase affordable child care access a year from now. But women who are contemplating a potential return to work in the summer or fall need child care now. Before the pandemic, there were about 2.4 million Canadian children under the age of five, but licensed child care spots for just a quarter of them. In a survey in April, more than 30 per cent of child care providers said they were unlikely to reopen, or unsure if they could, post-pandemic, because of the heavy financial losses they incurred in lockdowns. A challenging child care landscape is going to be worse, in the short term.

REBECCA TUCKER

We were doing OK until schools closed down again. Now we're just surviving — that's the goal. We went back into lockdown in May and I have to do the counselling sessions I do for my residency from home. I put a giant red paper on the door and partially block it with a chair to help my son remember not to come in. We'll see how long that system lasts. I'm relying on that and bribery.

That has an economic cost overall, as well as a social one, said Amanda Watson, an expert on maternal labour and the politics of families at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver; accelerating child care access will be key not just for economic recovery, but to start the shift back toward a more equitable balance of caregiving, and with it, the possibility of a fuller life for women. It's true for middle class women such as Merritt and Lazar Kleiman, and it's particularly true of those who have been more vulnerable through the pandemic.

"Universal, accessible, high-quality child care allows people with depressed and precarious wages to survive in the workforce," said Watson. "This is it. This is the thing that will make the difference. And understanding that fact as a country is what would allow us to prioritize this service in future crises."

REBECCA TUCKER

I worked four piecemeal jobs to pay the bills. I kept missing out on grants, because I didn't have time to write that extra paper or be on a committee. There's nowhere to write on the form, under leadership, 'I'm raising a functional human.' Now I'm going to be paying fees longer, and this is the last year I can get interest relief for my loans. That adds up fast. I have \$130,000 in debt from school. My school stipend was \$10,000 a year, after tuition, for the two of us to live on, so I had to take on debt. I'm facing delaying graduation by at least a year, if not more. There's a special COVID grant for students with dependants, but I can't get it because I've maxed out the years I can get student loans — because it took me longer because I have a kid. I don't think anyone thought that through.

The national child care system, if it wins provincial support and begins to be built, will be an immediate, tangible step toward equity that comes out of the pandemic. As schools reopen, some women, such as Amy Lazar Kleiman, will be able to return to work. But they will enter a landscape where women's presence and participation has declined noticeably, to unknown effect. Other women, such as Anne Merritt, will likely take longer to be able to rebuild their professional lives; their pandemic setback will endure.

And all of them will have a more personal negotiation to make, about how the income loss, the exhaustion and stress, the narrowed horizons — how all of these, change how they see themselves.

"Women's identity and social value is tied up with being actively employed and in the workforce," Robson said. "We won't know for some time what was lost by women being set back this way."

ANNE MERRITT

I was very, very happy in my job. I had a lot of professional opportunities in my role. And I really liked the team I worked with. But assuming the child care costs remain what they are, and my work situation remains unpredictable — my going back to work may have to be reconsidered. I may not go back to the workforce or I may have to look for part-time work and balance child-minding for three toddlers, which is something I hadn't envisioned before. And then there might be professional setbacks there that I hadn't anticipated, because one year out of the workforce for mat leave is one thing, but several years is more worrisome. But it wouldn't make sense for my husband to be the one to leave his job, because he'd be leaving a job and I'd be looking for one and now that my field has gone online, I'm competing with all of Canada.

REBECCA TUCKER

I haven't been able to work on my dissertation: I could have been defending it now and instead I'm not even close. I will be lucky to be done next December. It's hard emotionally — it's hard to watch people defend their theses and go off to internships and think, maybe I'll get there some day.

AMY LAZAR KLEIMAN

The kids really, really need me and I'm trying to keep this business, and it comes second, it comes fifth. My career goals, my job, my wanting to start a business and be an entrepreneur and put all of my creative energy into it. And there's no public policy that makes this any easier for women at all. There is a huge portion of the economy that hinges on women doing this work — it's been blatantly obvious over the last year that their role is seen as being back in the home. And we just basically were put back 50 years.



ROOTS OF A DREAM

He worked our farms for decades, hoping to make Canada home — then the pandemic changed the landscape

THURSDAY JULY 29, 2021

All day Juan Luis Mendoza de la Cruz worked surrounded by dancers: that's how he thought of them. The work was hard, and hot, but when his back ached or his mouth was parched, he would sit back on his heels and watch the sunflowers dance, so tall, their faces raised to the sun, turning so slowly through the day to follow the warmth and the light.

Mendoza farmed flowers. He was imported labour on an industrial flower farm in southern Ontario. For 29 years, he came to Canada early each spring, to work for eight months and then take his earnings back to his family in Mexico. It was a lonely, alienating, physically debilitating life, and it was also the best of his options as he assessed them. He thought periodically about stopping, but life in Mexico grew only more expensive. So he kept coming. Until the pandemic began. With the borders sealed, it seemed he might not get to work a 30th year.

Then, in late April, word came from the agency that arranged his annual employment in Canada: exceptions would be made, and Mendoza and his fellow agricultural workers would be flown to Ontario in time to get another season's harvest in the ground. The Canadian government had deemed their labour too critical to a reeling economy to let the closed border and virus fears keep them out.

Luis Mendoza came to Canada for eight months a year, for 29 years, to work on farms and support his family in Mexico. PHOTOGRAPH FÉLIX MÁRQUEZ / TORONTO STAR



Mendoza debated: the COVID-19 pandemic was raging in Canada but appeared to be much less of a threat San Juan Tezompa, a farming community about an hour south of Mexico City. He hated the idea of leaving his family at a time of such uncertainty. On the other hand: “There is no work here.” And he was conscious, at 56, that he was running out of years when he would be strong enough to put in 10-hour shifts, six or seven days a week, hauling trays of bulbs and weeding fields. His hands were knotted and his lungs were scarred from a pesticide accident years earlier. He needed to earn while he could. So he came.

But his 30th trip was unlike any before. Everyone was frightened — in the airport, on the bus, at the immigration counter. A bus whisked Mendoza and his fellow workers from Pearson International to Pioneer Flower Farms, where he had worked for the past 12 years. When they arrived, they were hustled into their house, handed hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes, and told to stay put for two weeks of quarantine. It was eerily quiet. No cars passed. Someone came every day to take their temperatures. He wondered to himself whether he had made a terrible mistake. But he was the veteran, the one the younger guys were looking to for reassurance, and so he kept his qualms to himself.

Mendoza had a stern face and barrel chest that could make him seem dour; he also had a sly sense of humour and he liked to tease those he was close to. At work in Canada, he would heft huge pieces of equipment, crates almost bulkier than his arms could circle; back in Mexico, he would repot seedlings and small cacti in his plant nursery at home in Tezompa, tucking them into little clay vessels as if they were babies. Dressed in battered work clothes, he looked much like all the other labourers on the vast flower farm.

But Mendoza was also a thinker, and an activist, who had been working for years to draw attention to what he saw as a profound injustice. When he looked out over the fields at the farm, he saw exploitation. And he saw the dancing.

Luis Mendoza works on his garden in San Juan Tezompa, Mexico, with the help of his grandson Carlos.

PHOTOGRAPH FÉLIX MÁRQUEZ / TORONTO STAR



In 2020, Mendoza was one of an estimated 1.6 million people in Canada who did not have citizenship or permanent residency. They were asylum seekers, international students, undocumented people, and temporary workers like Mendoza. Farm workers accounted for 60,000 of the nearly 500,000 temporary foreign workers who came to Canada in 2019, a number that has risen steadily since the first Caribbean farm workers were brought here in the 1950s.

Lack of permanent residency meant they also did not have the same legal rights, workplace protections or access to health care as Canadians — and the effects of this, in a pandemic, would be tragic. On farms like the one where Mendoza worked, COVID raged through the communal bunkhouses and enclosed workspaces, through workers with limited personal protective equipment. More than 1,700 were infected in the spring, and three died. When a Mexican farm worker named Gabriel Flores Flores spoke up after his bunkmate succumbed to COVID, he was fired and told he would immediately be deported to Mexico. (He fled to a safe house, did media interviews, brought a successful labour relations board complaint, and jolted Canadians not accustomed to thinking too much about where their strawberries came from.)

One week after Mendoza arrived in Ontario, he learned there was a COVID-19 outbreak on his farm. He said he didn't hear about it from the owners, but rather in a WhatsApp message from a quarantined colleague in another house — one of the workers there was very ill and had been taken away to isolation. Soon 80 workers were said to be infected. All of them were tested, Mendoza said, and reminded to keep their distance at work, but it was impossible. "You can't stay two feet apart when you're loading or stacking or sorting: it's work you do together," he said. And it was even harder in the house; some of the rooms had four occupants. "La sana distancia — social distancing, it's a joke," he said.

Some of his co-workers were assiduously wiping down the kitchen or the bathroom with bleach after they used it, but others thought COVID was a lie, and wouldn't take it seriously, he said. When COVID case counts declined in the summer and they were allowed to leave the farm, they had to bring a small card that said they had tested negative for COVID and show it to store owners before they were allowed in. "It was frankly racist," he said. "But the fact is that a lot of Canadians thought we were bringing the infection."

Mendoza and other migrant labourers at work at Pioneer Flower Farms in St. Catharines last December. Some of their tasks require working closely with others, making it difficult to maintain social distance.

PHOTOGRAPH TARA WALTON / TORONTO STAR



When Mendoza was in his early 20s, he had a job in a city planning department in central Mexico, doing architectural drawings, and was halfway through a technical drawing degree. But it paid poorly, and he had a wife and children to support. A friend suggested signing on to the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program in Canada: the money picking tomatoes was better than an office job in Mexico. He worked first in Quebec, then near Toronto, and eventually around Niagara. His life became divided, between eight or nine months in the fields on a commercial farm, then the flight home as the cold set in to spend Christmas with his wife and daughters and, eventually, grandsons who delighted him and whom he missed with an almost physical ache when he was away.

His fractured life got Mendoza thinking about how men and women like him were brought here to do jobs Canadians didn't want to do, for far less money than Canadians were paid. But Mexico benefited too, he would point out, because those workers brought back wages that helped make up for the fact that the Mexican economy offered so few opportunities. Every time he landed in Mexico City, he exited the airport to a familiar scene: "You just walk right into the traffic, there's an older person selling sweets or potatoes from a cart, doing what they have to do to survive. People make these efforts to sustain themselves so that they don't die of hunger — you see this need in people. Because of the negligence of our governments in years past, setting things up the way they did, that's why we have to go and work the way we do."

More than a decade ago, he began to organize farm workers into small groups to talk about the conditions in which they worked and what seemed to him a fundamental injustice: that they would give the best years of their lives to Canadian businesses but finish with nothing to show for it. They would miss their children's milestones, have stunted marriages, not be at home in their own countries yet not part of the larger community here. They could spend years of their lives lost in this middle. He joined a network of migrants and began to participate in meetings and protests.

Mendoza with his wife, Guadalupe, and his grandsons David, 14, and Carlos, 4, at home in San Juan Tezompa.
PHOTOGRAPH FÉLIX MÁRQUEZ / TORONTO STAR



And then, in 2014, he had a surprising encounter that led to a whole new form of activism, one he found as bemusing as he did delightful. He happened, one Sunday, to attend an event led by Heryka Miranda, a dance artist and community cross-cultural educator with a longtime interest in migrants' rights, at a church hall near his farm. Miranda talked about using movement and dance for healing and what she called "deep listening to the body"; she asked the workers to express the stories of tight muscles, sore backs, scars and suppressed emotion. Mendoza was intrigued; they chatted, and she soon paid a visit to the farm where he worked. He was initially deeply skeptical, but Miranda coaxed him to take off his shoes and squelch the soil between his toes. And before long, they were working together to choreograph a dance. He wanted to express his love of the land and the relationship of the sunflowers with it and with the elements — and also the loneliness and isolation of a farm worker. Mendoza progressed from gruff protestation that he was not a dancer, to channelling his love of music and his role as a caretaker of sunflowers into the piece.

"It was about gratitude and connection to the earth and planting seeds of justice and transformation with each sunflower seed," said Miranda. "It was about visibility — he didn't want to be unknown and invisible anymore. And he found the courage to literally use his body to tell a story."

Over the next few years, he and Miranda performed the piece in a variety of venues that took Mendoza far from the flower fields: their work made the local papers, and then caught the attention of NDP member of Parliament Niki Ashton, who invited them to perform it on Parliament Hill at a forum on precarious work. A Toronto-based filmmaker named Monica Gutierrez made a short film about that trip called *The Sunflower Man* and it screened at festivals. After a performance near Niagara, audience members came up to Mendoza to express gratitude and thanks; it was clear many had never considered a farm worker as someone with a connection to art, he said.

Mendoza had to carve out the space for all of this from his six-days-a-week at the farm. He also feared the trip to Ottawa might prevent him from returning to work in Canada, but the risk was worth it. "Canada owes me something," he told the crowd that day. "It owes all of us something," he said later, "and I had the chance to speak for all of the workers."

He had become increasingly focused on the idea that farm workers who served in Canada for years were entitled to a pathway to permanent residence: to be able to bring their families and retire here, as other immigrant workers could. The idea had growing support among farm workers, but he was skeptical that employers would ever endorse it — "they only want to keep their pool of cheap labour, this system of slavery."

Mendoza is pictured among sunflowers. PHOTOGRAPH HERYKA MIRANDA

The pandemic, and the deaths of farm workers, had increased public sympathy for the idea, he knew, but he questioned whether the federal government would make a change, even a temporary one, in time to benefit him. “Canadians get pensions and, at a minimum, respect as seniors who have worked for their country. And what do we get?” he asked. “I want there to be a change. It can’t go on like this, with employers just able to say, ‘If you don’t like it, if you don’t want to come, that’s fine, there are a thousand more behind you waiting’.”

On Dec. 6, 2020 Mendoza flew home from an eerily empty Toronto airport. He’d stayed in Canada later into the winter than usual, hoping to make up some of the wages lost to the shortened season — he was taking home about \$17,000 for his eight months of work, compared to the usual \$22,000. He wondered, looking down from the plane window as Toronto shrank beneath him, if he would ever be back.

Mexico was in a “red phase” when he got home, with COVID cases surging. At least 120,000 people had died in the country, but the real number was thought to be much higher; the government response was “chaos,” he said. The family had a food truck he bought for his wife with his wages from Canada, and a small plant nursery, but now he proposed that they shut down the businesses. “No one wears a mask here, no one is careful.”

Through the first months of 2021, Luis Mendoza found himself once again considering travelling to Canada for work, while a pandemic raged. COVID was unchecked in Mexico — he lost a brother to the disease in January, in addition to a sister who died of COVID the previous of spring. And the scant vaccines available were going to front-line health-care workers and those with connections to private medical clinics.

He wasn’t sure what the work season would look like this year, but in early February the agency that organized his trips to Canada sent a message that he was expected back at Pioneer, telling him to forward his travel paperwork. This time, the documents had to include proof of a negative COVID test conducted within two days of his trip. Mendoza hadn’t been going out much, but now he stayed totally isolated with his family, knowing that if he got infected it could jeopardize everything. He was booked on a flight departing April 27.

The morning before the trip, he went for the test. It came back positive. Yet, he felt fine. “It’s almost impossible to accept this news.” He sent his family to test: soon it was confirmed that his wife, daughters and son-in-law were all infected, too.

He called the employment agency, where staff said they would send word to Pioneer and that he should get tested again in two weeks, at which point they would discuss next steps. “Maybe they will send someone else in my place, I don’t know. I have to hope my employer will wait for me — otherwise I will have to wait until next year.”

Mendoza’s family income was now in jeopardy, but the stakes were also, suddenly, even higher. Just a few days earlier, the Canadian government had announced a significant change to its immigration policy in response to the pandemic. It appeared, at first blush, like exactly the kind of change that Mendoza had been pushing for for years: 90,000 people who had been doing work deemed as essential during the pandemic would get a fast-tracked path to permanent residency. There were 25,000 spots for non-health-care essential workers — including farm workers.

But if Mendoza wasn’t in Canada, he could not apply.

The announcement of the temporary pathway was heralded as a partial but significant victory by migrant advocacy organizations, which had been pushing since the beginning of the



pandemic for “status for all” — a mass regularization that would include even undocumented workers — arguing it was the only way to guarantee an end to exploitation and abuse. And it generated a frenzy of activity among potential applicants. Within days the cap on applications from international students was reached.

But the other categories registered much slower uptake, and it quickly became clear why. The requirements were rigorous and complex: Mendoza would struggle to meet them. Applying was expensive. He would need a raft of documents from Mexico — all translated and authenticated. And he would have to pass a Canadian Language Benchmark Level 4 English test. His English was considered more than adequate for him to work in Canada for 30 years. But this level required written and comprehension tests that were a challenge even for native English speakers with limited formal education. Mendoza worked in a rural area, far from a test centre, and his work hours left no spare time to study or seek help. Permanent residence — and retirement in Canada, and a pension, and the more dignified life as a senior citizen in a country with a social safety net — was suddenly a possibility, after 30 years, and yet still agonizingly out of reach.

In the end, the eligibility requirements were irrelevant.

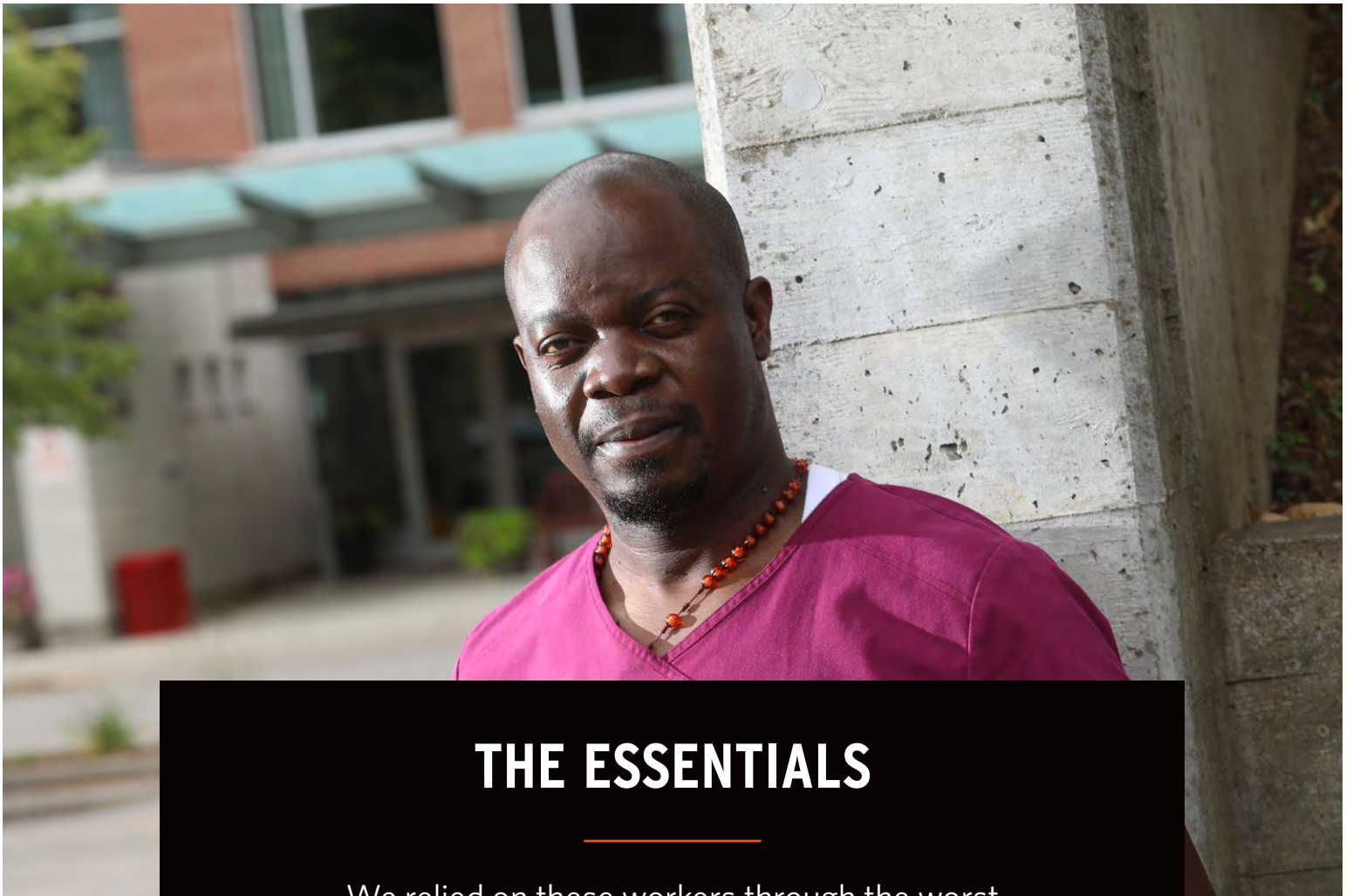
COVID quickly made Mendoza’s wife very ill; she needed oxygen. He worried about her, and then he grew even sicker than she was. Finally on May 2, ill but not quite so incapacitated herself, his daughter persuaded him to go to hospital, where he was admitted to critical care and suffered a heart attack.

Mendoza died on May 19.

When news of his death reached Canada, his longtime employer, Pioneer Flower Farms, posted a photo of his sunflower dance on Facebook, and a message of sympathy about his passing.

“He always had a big smile and was a kind and gentle man,” it said. “He will be missed and we hope he knew how much his hard work and commitment was appreciated.”

Juan Luis Mendoza de la Cruz, who liked to dance among the sunflowers, died May 19 in Mexico weeks after testing positive for COVID. His wife, Guadalupe, keeps an altar in his memory at their home. Mendoza is buried in the local cemetery, which his family visits regularly. PHOTOGRAPH FELIX MARQUEZ / TORONTO STAR



THE ESSENTIALS

We relied on these workers through the worst of the pandemic — will Canada let them stay?

FRIDAY JULY 30, 2021

Francis Ddembe spent his pandemic working: days in a Toronto homeless shelter, or nights in a nursing home. Or the reverse. Or both. “Once I worked 24 straight hours. I worked 70 straight days from November to January. Sometimes you feel like you’re being sacrificed.” The only good thing about the work — besides the money he could send home to his children in Uganda — was that it filled up his days as he waited and waited for news about the refugee claim he made more than two years before. Living in limbo was maddening; at least work was a distraction.

Edeline Royo Agoncillo was working 60 hours a week through the first and second waves, too — first as a caregiver, then as a cleaner, in Edmonton. But her work permit ran out in February. And after seven years in Canada she faced the choice of working while undocumented — a risk she would not take — or letting her family go hungry — and how could she do that? “It’s just overwhelming, this situation.”

Francis Ddembe is a refugee claimant from Uganda, where he was a math teacher for 16 years. He now works two jobs in Canada, one at a nursing home the other at a homeless shelter. PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR



In Montreal, Diana V. was facing a grim choice of her own. She had a job cleaning an office building, on the night crew. It paid less than minimum wage because the guy who runs the crew knew she is undocumented. But it was steady money. But what if she caught COVID? She would have nowhere to go for help: undocumented people have no access to health care. “So we can only pray to god we don’t get sick. I stopped working for a couple of weeks because I was so scared. But then I started again. I might get coronavirus. But I have to go to work, to be able to pay our bills.”

At work at a nursing home in Trois-Rivières, Bertrand Z. had signed up for a particular job: Every time someone died of COVID-19, he shooed his colleagues away, double-checked his PPE, and went in to scrub the room from top to bottom, walls and floors, windows and bed. It was better, he figured, if just one person had that high-risk job. But when his work days

were over, he stripped off his clothes outside the door of his family’s apartment. Inside, in clean clothes and with his three children clambering onto his lap, he would wonder if he could have brought the virus with him. And he wondered what else it might lead to, these months he was spending doing the job everyone else was afraid of. Would it change how his colleagues saw him? How Québec saw him? Would it mean his family could stay? “I was the worker they were depending on, I went in there before the nurse, the doctor, the care worker,” he said. “But I don’t think they think that makes me essential.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, there were an estimated 1.6 million people in Canada who did not have citizenship or permanent residency (not including the ill-fated tourists and visitors). One in 26 people in the country at the start of the crisis was part of a vast pool that includes international students, caregivers, asylum seekers such as Ddembe and Bertrand Z., undocumented people such as Diana V., and those such as Royo Agoncillo, who is among the roughly 100,000 people a year who enter Canada to work, with the explicit agreement that they will leave again when the work they were hired for is done — those who are commonly called temporary foreign workers, although they enter on a variety of permits. People who were not settled here permanently, with the security that brings — yet also people who, for a host of reasons, were reluctant or unable to go home.

The one place that they could go, that they had to go, was work.

The first days of the COVID crisis saw a groundswell of gratitude for front-line health-care staff, who went to work in the face of great risk. But it took more than doctors and nurses to help the country face this disaster. While some people lost their jobs or switched to doing them from

Bertrand Z. is a janitor at a nursing home in Trois-Rivières. During the pandemic he cleaned the rooms of patients who died of COVID-19, a job he worried would put his health and his family’s health at risk.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BERTRAND Z.

home, many others had to keep showing up, to drive buses, care for residents of nursing homes, check out grocery orders, mind children, deliver takeout, slaughter chickens, drive long-haul trucks, stock store shelves and harvest tomatoes. They were soon being recognized as “essential workers.”

The fact that many of these essential workers did not have citizenship or permanent residency meant they also did not have the same legal rights, workplace protections or access to health care as Canadians. And, it quickly became clear, the consequences of this, in a pandemic, would be tragic. In early spring there were raging COVID outbreaks among temporary foreign workers on commercial farms. These labourers work in close quarters and live in even closer ones, in communal bunkhouses and crowded trailers. By summer, at least 1,700 had been infected and three had died. Next the problem spread to meat processing: the largest workplace-based COVID outbreak in the country was at a Cargill meat plant in High River, Alberta that for years had relied on the labour of refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, and international students to run its factory. And then long-term care: as COVID began to wreak havoc in nursing homes, it emerged that a huge portion of the personal care workers who were becoming infected were refugee claimants and undocumented workers, who did not have access to the health-care system. Few farm workers, meat packers or care workers, bound by the need for their jobs and the need to stay in the country, felt they could speak out about a lack of personal protective equipment or unsafe conditions.

The pandemic brought into stark relief an inherent and long-standing contradiction at the heart of Canada’s immigration policy. The system focuses on bringing in individuals with “high human capital” (good English or French, post-secondary education, professional work experience). And there is a widely held view among immigration experts that it is this approach, combined with the fact that few immigrants show up uninvited to cross Canadian borders, that makes this country an outlier in terms of the broad public support for immigration. The perception is that Canada “chooses” its immigrants — good ones, who will be a net positive addition to the economy. And these educated, professionally experienced immigrants are believed to be more likely to prosper, and to drive economic growth.

However there are also a vast number of jobs — most of them physical and low-wage — that are done by people brought into the country on uncertain terms: either with the explicit agreement they will leave again — the temporary foreign workers — or with a complex and far-from-guaranteed route to permanent residency, such as refugee claimants and international students, some of whom use their enrolment in studies primarily as a path to employment here.

No matter the risk to themselves or their families, at the height of the pandemic, most of these workers kept working; indeed many, such as Ddembe, worked more than ever. There is an entrenched belief in migrant communities that if you lose your job, or accept income support, you will ruin any chance you have of gaining residency. And they needed a way to put food on the table and keep a roof over head.

“Of course we need the qualified people,” said Usha George, director of the Centre for Immigration and Settlement at Ryerson University. “The problem is that so far we have pretended we don’t need the others. We’ve relied on the pool of undocumented and others without the possibility of residency.” The pandemic, she said, had made the inner workings of the existing system clear. Will it also create the willingness to change it?

When the first COVID wave retreated in the spring of 2020, the stock-taking began, about who had been most vulnerable and why. There was already enough data to show that racialized people and immigrants were being infected and dying at much higher rates. And there was anguished public discussion about the carnage in long-term care. That drew new attention to the reliance on asylum seekers and undocumented people for carework, people confined to hourly wage jobs regardless of what skills or training they might have had in their country of origin. And it was these workers who spurred the first pandemic-related reconsideration of the immigration system.

In August, the federal government and the government of Quebec each announced a special program intended to thank the people they called “guardian angels” by giving asylum seekers who worked in long-term care the chance to skip the normal pathway — a process that adjudicates the validity of their claim of persecution in their home country — with a fast track to permanent residency. The programs were open to those who were waiting for a decision on their refugee status and to people who had had a refugee claim refused, provided they had been employed in a recognized health-related job between March 13 and August 14, 2020 for at least 120 hours. They also had to have at least six months of full-time or 750 hours of part-time work experience in a public or private health institution or a company that specializes in home care, by August 31, 2021.

“Canadians are appreciative of asylum seekers and the work they are doing during the pandemic,” Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Marco Mendicino said when Guardian Angels finally opened for applications in December. “Thanks to this special measure, we are recognizing their significant contribution by providing them with a more secure future in Canada.”

But the list of occupations eligible immediately caused consternation: it included registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, orderlies, home-care workers, and “patient service associates” (the lowest-paid workers who typically do the most hands-on work of feeding, toileting, bathing and dressing.) Only those doing direct patient care would be permitted to apply.

BERTRAND Z.

I have been a cleaner in a long-term-care home since shortly after I came to Canada in 2018 — we crossed at Roxham Road and we went to Montreal and then after a few months we came to Trois-Rivieres, because it’s quieter here. When the pandemic began, I worked in the isolation ward, the *zone chaude*. Somehow I never got infected. I worked a thousand hours — that’s what it felt like. It was hard, and stressful. When I heard about this special program, I was so excited, because we have been waiting so long for a refugee hearing, my wife and I and our three children — the youngest one was even born here, while we have been waiting. But then my lawyer said I would not qualify. That it’s only for the people who did the direct care work. It’s very unjust. We were all at risk. We’re waiting to see if the program will be expanded. I have a communications degree and I worked in health-care communications in Cameroon. But an aide in a long-term-care home is worth nothing — we’re not ‘essential.’

The narrow parameters frustrated those who work with asylum seekers. “Guardian Angels made me so mad: for god’s sake, you have tens of thousands of people and you have created a program that captures maybe a couple of hundred,” said Dorota Blumczynska, then the executive director of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Association of Manitoba. She had been watching the struggles of the families that the organization supports — with staff clad in full PPE trying to teach parents and kids standing six feet away how to use borrowed laptops so they could join online school — and she knew the uncertainty and anxiety of the pandemic was layering on top of the trauma that refugees had already seen. Refugee review hearings abruptly came to a complete halt at the onset of the pandemic, and then resumed at a glacial pace, and here was a program that might have helped, if the terms were broader. “[Permanent residency] status gives a certainty nothing else does: you can access health care and public services, which is very important, and it gives a sense of permanence, which is vital for practical reasons but also mental health.”

By mid-July 2021, 4,595 people had applied under the program, almost all of them in Ontario and Quebec; 305 had been approved, and another 235 rejected.

While Guardian Angels opened the door to a subset of asylum seekers, it did nothing for many others working in long-term care, including some who did direct patient care. This immigration pilot, as with all the others, barred undocumented people — even though it is an open secret that the private long-term-care industry, much like the construction business, is reliant on undocumented workers to keep operating, says George. Many undocumented people lost their jobs in the first days of the pandemic: as the most precariously employed, they were the first to be let go. But they had no access to CERB or other income support. They could not seek treatment if infected, or access the COVID caretaker benefit, or even get a COVID test in most places.

DIANA V.

I came here 13 years ago from Colombia. I haven’t been back, and I can’t go back. I was a victim of domestic violence and I fled. I came into Canada with my daughter on fake Mexican passports that we bought. When we came we didn’t know how the system worked. I made an asylum request but I was manipulated by a corrupt immigration consultant who told me to lie. While I was waiting for my hearing, I had the right to work legally and I trained as a long-term-care aide and I really enjoyed it. But I was sexually harassed by the cook at the home and that was difficult. I could not complain: if you have no papers you have no protection, no access to systems. Then, after two years, my refugee claim was denied and I wound up in detention. When I got out, I did a federal appeal but it was rejected in 2014. So I signed the deportation order, and then I took our clothes and we just ran. It’s frustrating and it’s horrible, living undocumented. I’ve considered suicide: it’s so much pressure— you feel like you’re at the bottom of a well and you won’t get out. My daughter finished high school, but then she had no way to continue because she had no documents. So we both got work cleaning offices. They pay \$10 an hour because they



know we are not legal. When people know you have no status they treat you like a leper. We can only be paid in cash. I thought we would have more possibilities, with a life in Canada. Now the only thing I can hope for is a regularization.

Data on the number of undocumented people in the country are, for obvious reasons, imprecise, but most who study the issue put the estimate near 500,000 people in March 2020. The pandemic has, in all likelihood, since created more, says Vancouver immigration attorney Deanna Okun-Nachoff, who works with a large clientele of vulnerable workers. There are students whose studies were suspended or ended, for example, but who did not want to return to countries where the virus was raging.

And one group of workers was particularly trapped: those who came into Canada as caregivers. The program is one of the few that offers temporary foreign workers a built-in pathway to residency, but it requires the migrant to work for two full years in a 36-month period to qualify. Caregivers were already uniquely at risk: they often live with the individual or family who sponsored their visa to work as a nanny or look after an elderly family member. That means employers can withhold wages, demand extremely long work hours, or be verbally or physically abusive — knowing that the caregiver, needing to log the months of employment and be able to apply for residence, and with nowhere else to live and few financial resources, has no leverage and is unlikely to quit.

All of this was dramatically exacerbated in the pandemic, said Okun-Nachoff. “There has been an absolute mountain of problems ... people who were told they couldn’t leave the home even when they weren’t working, people who were fired because their employers decided to care for their elderly family or children themselves, people whose employers had been laid off themselves.” Some employers who switched to remote work immediately expelled a caregiver, wanting no one but nuclear family in their homes, while others forbid the employee from leaving

Diana V. fled Colombia 13 years ago and is now living in Montreal with her daughter. She works as a cleaner, but because she is undocumented she is vulnerable to exploitation and abuse at work.

PHOTOGRAPH JOSIE DESMARAIS / TORONTO STAR



the premises lest they bring the virus back in. Caregivers who lost jobs also often abruptly lost their housing, she said, and, critically, lost a way to continue to carry out the work they needed for their permanent residency applications. They were left scrambling to find a job at the peak of a recession and isolation.

EDELIN ROYO AGONCILLO

I came to Canada in 2014, as a temporary foreign worker, to work in a commercial laundry. When I had been here for two years, I was lured by a corrupt immigration consultant to apply to a private college to study hospitality management — he said it would be a route to residency. At that point my kids were still in the age bracket that I could sponsor them to come, and that was what mattered the most to me. But it was a lie: I found out after I had paid thousands of dollars. The college was paying the consultant 15 per cent of tuition — mine was \$13,000 — of every student he referred, plus I paid him \$3,500 in fees. But we were not going to be eligible for residency. So, in 2018, I applied for ‘humanitarian and compassionate’ consideration and while I was waiting for a decision on that, I got permission to work as a caregiver. But my employer was very abusive. It was a really difficult, terrible situation. Finally in February 2020 I got an open work permit for one year, so I wasn’t tied to that job and I could do any job. I was cleaning houses. I was sending \$1,500 or more back to my family every month. When the pandemic began, I had to work much harder, because things were more difficult for the family there, no one else

Edeline Royo Agoncillo arrived in Canada in 2014 as a temporary foreign worker.

Her family in the Philippines relies on the income she earns here.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR

was working. But people didn't want me to come into their houses. And I was afraid I would get exposed to the virus. Finally, I did: I had a client call me and say she was positive. And I was supposed to isolate for two weeks. But how can I stop working? People are relying on me to eat. My father needs medication. I would take any job. At night, I looked in the streets for cans and bottles to recycle. In January my humanitarian-and-compassionate application was rejected. And that means that in February I will be undocumented and I won't have a work permit. I will have to stop working — I'm not going to be double-undocumented. The government's own assessment was that I am "skilful" and "resourceful." So what more do they want from me? Canadians are always saying we will steal their jobs — but who wants to clean the toilet?

By late 2020, the Canadian government was assessing the fact that it had not processed nearly the number of immigrants it had said it wanted for 2020. It had processed just 184,000 of the target of 341,000: a 50 per cent drop in the number of family class arrivals, a 60 per cent decline in refugees, and 38 per cent fewer economic migrants, than the year before. And there was debate in immigration policy circles about what to do about it. One perspective, advanced by prominent labour economists such as Mikal Skuterud at the University of Waterloo, argued that it would be foolhardy to try to bring in more immigrants, in the teeth of the worst recession in decades, since there is ample evidence that those who come to Canada in a recession fare worse than those who immigrate in periods of growth. Two million Canadians were unemployed in January, and another 700,000 wanted to be working but were no longer looking for jobs. However another, stronger, set of voices said that an aggressive push would be necessary to counter demographic decline and keep the workforce growing. Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Mendicino announced the 2021 target would be 401,000 people.

FRANCIS DDEMBE

In Uganda, I was a math teacher for 16 years, and then I became an accountant. I had to flee my country in 2018, and I came to Canada and I made a refugee claim. I had my first hearing finally in December 2019, and then it was adjourned twice and it was postponed, it was supposed to be in May 2020. All this time, I am stuck. I have my three small children back home in Uganda and I don't know when I will see them. But I got a work permit two months after I arrived here and I was able to start working so I could make money to support them and my mother who is ill. I started as a personal support worker in a homeless shelter — a lot of refugees do this work — and I got connected with an agency that found me shifts. I worked all through the first wave. I don't remember a single day that I didn't go to work. Then I heard about Guardian Angels and I was very excited. But when I called my lawyer he said that the work at the homeless shelter didn't

qualify and then I felt a bit broken down. Then I was working in the second wave. In October, I started also doing shifts in a retirement home: it pays \$25 or even up to \$35 an hour, compared to \$17 an hour at the shelter. An agency makes you work a lot and takes a lot of money — they are paid \$50 an hour for my work but I receive \$25 or so. Meanwhile there was no news about my hearing. You would think the pandemic would be the time to clear the backlog when nobody is coming. In November, my facility had a COVID outbreak and I got infected. I worked for two days with body pain and dizziness, I was feeling unwell but I did not think it could be COVID. Then I tested, and when I got the phone call I got so scared. I was confined at home. And if you do not work you cannot get any money. If you have a family depending on you back home, you cannot help. It was one of the worst experiences I've been through.

In February, with a record-high immigration target and borders that remained effectively closed for the foreseeable future, the federal government took the first of two major steps to try to boost the number of new permanent residents. The first targeted the Express Entry system (the fast-track for skilled economic immigrants), specifically applicants in the Canada Experience Class pool. Typically, every few weeks, a few thousand people — those with the highest point scores — are invited to apply for permanent residence. This time, 27,332 people were sent invitations, more than five times the previous record. The Canadian Experience Class category requires immigrants to have at least one year of recent work experience in the country, and 90 per cent of those invited to apply this time were already living in Canada. An Express Entry applicant is assigned a score based on age, education, work history and language skills. The usual cut-off for issuing invitations is well over 400 points. This time, the cut-off was 75. Many analysts of the immigration system found the move chaotic and confusing. “It’s undermining everything we’ve done in Canadian immigration policy for the last 50 years in terms of, we select people, and the fact that we select people tends to improve public confidence in immigration,” said Andrew Griffith, a former director general of the federal immigration ministry. And Okun-Nachoff predicted that few of the invitations would produce actual permanent residents, because the low-scoring people in the pool would have far too few of their requirements assembled in the 90 days they had to apply.

There were two other one-off, COVID-driven changes to the system around this time: visitors to Canada with a valid job offer were given the ability to apply for a work permit without the normal requirement to leave the country. And, more relevant to vulnerable workers, those who had fallen “out of status” at any point in the past year — for example, had their work permit expire — were told they could apply to regularize their status.

But for those who were undocumented before the pandemic began, nothing changed.

DIANA V.

I feel so guilty when I look at my daughter, wondering why I brought her here. We signed her up for a cosmetology course using a borrowed ID document but she won't be able to register as a professional when she

graduates. But she could work from home and it would be better than nothing. She has had terrible thyroid trouble for a couple of years and I pay \$100 every month for her medication, but I can't afford to pay for a private clinic to do the tests she needs. Imagine it, as a mother: your child is sick and you can't take them to a doctor. We get food boxes from different charities. Men offer to marry me for residence but what they want is sex. I can make about \$300 in a good week, cleaning. I have to keep a very low profile — the fewer people who know, it's less stress. I don't talk to the neighbours. Every time I cough, I'm sure it's COVID. But status or no status, pandemic or no pandemic, you still have to pay the rent. Still: it is better here than in Colombia. I can work. And no one is beating me. I used to think I was the only one here undocumented but no, actually there are so, so many of us. The government has to do something — they treat us like a problem, like criminals. They believe we live on air. But we're a powerful, necessary workforce — and we're human beings.

Refugee hearings continued to be badly backlogged through the second pandemic spring. "Our community is very very resilient but families have been in survival mode for years before they even get here," said Blumczynska in Winnipeg. "Usually after four or five months in Canada they start to come out of it, we spend time talking about agency and self-determination, and dreaming of the future. And instead we've seen families slide back into survival mode." The pandemic should have driven the refugee-processing program to redouble its efforts, not slow them, she said: this was a moment that called for speed, not new uncertainty. "People's vulnerability is so amplified."

She sees the exclusion of refugee claimants from the new programs as both cruel and a wasted opportunity. "There is no courage, no conviction, no boldness, no willingness to put what's right ahead of what would have been politically popular," she said, before correcting herself. "Except it would be popular. If they [admitted] 20,000 people, nobody would blink an eye, because the public understands right now who these people are and what they can contribute."

A record number of humanitarian-and-compassionate applications were denied by Ottawa in 2020. Some 4,520 people applied for the consideration in 2020, and 2,638 were rejected; even more had applied pre-pandemic in 2019 — 4,946 people — of whom 1,529 were rejected.

FRANCIS DDEMBE

I finally had a refugee hearing on June 28, and I was hoping so much that it would be my last one. But my lawyer's internet kept cutting out and finally the board members said they could not continue and they ended it. They rescheduled for the end of August. The impact on my life — my health is deteriorating, everything is collapsing under the stress of this. It's so painful. So I also applied under Guardian Angels. It seemed like I would not qualify. But I heard of other people who worked in shelters, they applied and were successful. They got an

answer already. So I decided to try it — because I can't keep waiting. It cost me nearly \$6,000: the cost to get the documents and the other requirements from Uganda, and the application fees, and the advice of a lawyer. If my application is denied then it's money lost. But perhaps a decision could come sooner. My children keep asking, 'When will we see you?' So what could I do?

In April, the federal government announced the most significant change to date in immigration policy in response to the pandemic: 90,000 people who had been doing work deemed as essential during the pandemic would be given the opportunity of a fast-track to permanent residency. Nearly half the spots — 40,000 — were for international students, but 20,000 were set aside for health-care workers, and another 30,000 for other essential workers, including farm workers. (There was a parallel stream without caps for French speakers.)

It was a small step toward the idea of “status for all,” which migrant advocacy organizations had been pushing since the beginning of the pandemic. And it generated a frenzy of activity among potential applicants. Within days the quota for international student applications was full. But the other categories filled much more slowly — by July 14, just 2,500 health care workers had applied.

“I've had some very interesting conversations with the minister on this, and he really wants to do something for agricultural workers — so when I saw the announcement of this program, I said, 'Wow, this is going to be really terrific,'" said Naomi Alboim, who held senior positions in the federal and Ontario immigration ministries. “And then the guide to applicants came out and I read it and I practically burst into tears.”

Eligibility criteria were specific and complex — the categories that qualified, the documentation that must be provided, the upfront cost, the level of language proficiency required — but the logistical hurdles were even greater, she said. “There was no way that they were going to be able to do it — even if you forget about the eligibility criteria, just the practical, how are they actually going to do this all online?” asked Alboim, who is now the senior policy fellow at the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration at Ryerson University.

The people working in meat-packing or as personal care workers — the most “essential” — are the very people least likely to have the immense stack of documents required on hand, or the funds to acquire them; to have access to a computer or the necessary digital literacy to submit a package or book appointments. Testing slots at recognized English and French testing centres were already limited because of the pandemic; now they booked up instantly. Written tests, for people who lack the digital skills to do the tests on computers, were even more scarce. The program closes in November, but when some would-be applicants tried to book, the first available test dates were in March of 2022, Okun-Nachoff said. The pass level required — “Canadian Language Benchmark 4” — is a level of written ability and reading comprehension that some native English speakers with limited education would struggle to pass. Caregivers putting in 12-hour shifts, farmworkers working six or seven days a week: none of them had time to study.

And undocumented people and asylum seekers were left out all together, as were essential workers in Quebec, which manages its own immigration and did not agree to participate in the program. Alboim blamed the problems with the program on “an unfortunate gap” between policy intent and actual implementation. But Karen Cocq, the campaigns co-ordinator for the Migrant

Workers Alliance for Change, was more skeptical. She reckons the whole exercise was just PR spin. “All of these programs, these part-pathways, they’re not fundamentally addressing the cause of these inequalities to begin with, which is inequality by design,” she said. “And all of these criteria exclude precisely the people who need permanent residency the most in the circumstances of extreme crisis.”

EDELIN ROYO AGONCILLO

I managed to fix my status and be legal: people I was pet-sitting for, they were very kind to me and they paid for a lawyer. I applied for a judicial review, all before Feb. 7, when it expired. So I can still be employed. And then I saw this announcement for the non-health-care essential workers. I could not believe it. My classification, cleaning, that qualified. It was extremely expensive to apply. The difficult thing is the English test: it is very hard to get a spot to take the test. But I was so lucky: I volunteer to teach English to people who are trying to take that test, and last fall a lot of my students were failing, so I thought ‘I have to take this test to figure out what the problem is.’ So I took it in January — and my scores are high, much higher than the minimum they ask for. I’m a college graduate from the Philippines, but that doesn’t count for anything here. But my test counts. So I had all the qualifications to apply. I feel sure this time I am going to get it.

Andrew Griffith speculated that the various one-off, narrowly defined, special immigration programs could be viewed as trial balloons from the Trudeau government, testing the public response to a broadening from the high-human-capital model. “If they don’t get too much flak — and they don’t seem to be — that might give them confidence to do more, to make more fundamental changes,” he said. “The challenge they face is: how do you bring people into regular status without creating anger about queue-jumping, in both the general public and people who came in the regular way?”

Alboim believes that there is now a growing feeling in both Ottawa and provincial capitals that the current system of relying on temporary foreign workers to do essential lower-skilled work is not viable. A modified version of the essential worker program, made more accessible, could become part of the regular immigration system, she said. That’s still a far cry from the view of advocacy organizations that believe no one should come here to work without permanent residence on arrival, but it would be a significant shift from the human capital focus.

“For the recovery and going forward in terms of labour market forecasting, we know we actually do need people to come into the country, or to be regularized within the country, who can do jobs at every point in the labour market continuum,” she said. “Having high-end jobs filled by citizens and permanent residents, and low-end jobs filled by temporary foreign workers who, with minor exceptions, do not have a pathway to permanent residency — that’s a kind of bifurcated workforce, which ends up being a bifurcated society. Which is not what we want.”

But Okun-Nachoff is skeptical that any significant change in the system is coming. “I don’t think that there’s really any intention of fundamentally rethinking the temporary versus permanent divide. It’s tinkering, not deep or visionary thinking about how the system works.”

DIANA V.

On Easter weekend my daughter was staying at a friend's apartment. Someone who lived there invited other friends over. They were smoking on the balcony, and the police came because they were violating the curfew. She didn't have ID and she was arrested and then they realized she was undocumented and they took her to immigration detention. I let her go out to see her friends that night: it has been years, we can't continue in this situation. She needs a normal life. But when her friends told me the police had taken her — I was desperate, I was panicking, I didn't know what to do. They would send her back to Colombia — a country where she doesn't even know anybody. And I would have to stay here, because I would have to be able to send her money to live. To deport someone with her profile is insane: she speaks English, French and Spanish, she is well-integrated into society — it's illogical. An NGO helped me get a lawyer, and after eight days she was released from detention so that she could do a humanitarian-and-compassionate application. And this month she got a work permit that is good while her application is being processed. It's such a relief: one of us can work legally, for now. Why is there such resistance to letting us stay here? I want to just yell, to beg: 'Please, please just let me be in this country.'

That, to Karen Cocq, is a squandered opportunity, to make a sweeping fix to one of the most stark revelations of the pandemic, what it revealed about who does what work, and what rights they have. The prime minister frequently invokes the idea of "building back better," she said. "What is the new economy after we live through the pandemic? If not now, when?"



THE HOME STRETCH

Will Canada end homelessness for good?
Pandemic response shows what really works

SATURDAY JULY 31, 2021

It quickly became apparent to Ben Young, in the early days of March 2020, that the Calgary homeless shelter where he was living was about the worst place a person could be, in a pandemic.

Too many people lined up for meals and toilets and beds, packed together breathing in the same room, lots of them standing too close but much too edgy for him to be able to safely point that out. So he left the shelter and went to crash with a woman he'd been dating for a while, and then, when that relationship got sticky, he couchsurfing with her family. It was a short reprieve; as the COVID news grew more frightening, that option disappeared, too.

Young called up the Calgary Drop-In Centre again: it's the largest homeless shelter in North America, with the capacity to host 1,000 people in bunk beds in its vast dorms. He assumed he could spend a few nights there while he figured out his next move. But new public health protocols meant that capacity was drastically reduced and the shelter had no room for him. There was a spot open at Alpha House, but he was afraid of the frequent violence at the facility, which does

Ben Young spent weeks on the streets and in shelters at the beginning of the pandemic.

PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR



not require clients to be sober, as some others do. And so Young found himself stuck: none of the things he had relied on before were workable in a pandemic.

For three nights he slept outside in a chill spring rain, waking up to move to a new spot downtown every couple of hours, until a mat on the floor of a shelter called The Mustard Seed came open. It was warm and dry, if noisy and chaotic, and physical distancing was being assiduously enforced. But it was only a place to sleep; those who spent the night there were expected to leave by 7 a.m. Yet all of the other places that Young had relied on in his three years of homelessness were now closed. He used to spend days searching job ads at the library, but its doors were locked. He couldn't go sit at the mall, or drag out a coffee in a Tim Hortons. Critically, there was nowhere to go to the bathroom. "When you leave the shelters and go to the public places, that's your time to breathe and catch yourself and escape that life and feel like you're part of the general public," he said. "It's a really weird position to be in, when everyone's told to isolate at home but you have no home to go to."

After a few weeks of this, Young, who is 29 and white, headed back to Edmonton, his hometown, figuring he would feel more secure in these strange days in a place he knew well. He found a place to sleep at Hope Mission, and spent his days in a temporary day refuge in the Expo Centre, where social service agencies were providing food and health services. There were housing outreach workers there, too; the line in front of their table was a couple of hours long.

Just as Young was moving into the Edmonton shelter system, Jerry McFeeters was leaving it.

He decided to head for the outdoors: McFeeters, 52, a member of Cold Lake First Nation, is a residential school survivor, and the child of survivors. He could not stand the rigid rules at institutional shelters. Instead, in late spring, he pitched a tent alongside a handful of others in Lighthorse Park. "I'd rather sleep outside ... I don't like people controlling me, white people yelling at me or talking down to me." The encampment, when he moved there, lacked running water or any kind of toilet facility. McFeeters is a tidy and organized guy who likes a shirt with a crisp collar.

Early in the pandemic, Young returned to his hometown Edmonton, hoping he would feel more secure in a place he knew well.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR



Nevertheless the camp felt like a good choice: about three-quarters of the people living there were Indigenous. He could have a fire out in front of his tent, and he found that soothing. “It was all people trying to help each other.”

McFeeters and Young had each in their way been cycling through the options for homeless people in Alberta — large shelters, church basements, sleeping rough, encampments — for a number of years. Young, who is chatty and likes to feel useful, had become homeless in his mid-20s after a period of lousy money management and some stressful times as he was trying to build a career as a hip hop artist. McFeeters is a father of three who has worked as a counsellor and did outreach for a variety of social service agencies over the years. He is a natural and generous leader who makes fast, shrewd assessments and doesn’t mince words. He has an alcohol addiction that can sidetrack his life at times; he has danced a complicated pattern with his anger and pain and how much space they leave him to negotiate his way in the world.

But the pandemic had created upheaval in the homeless support system, in Edmonton and everywhere else across the country. The shelters that have been the ill-fitting Band-Aid on homelessness for decades were suddenly unviable. The response that was hastily cobbled together in their stead didn’t keep a roof over every head. But it markedly shifted the conversation: what if, actually, we just solved this problem for good?

The day the pandemic began to radically remake life in Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau addressed the nation.

He said Canada’s borders would be closed to international flights, that Canadians abroad should hurry home, and those in the country should avoid travel. And, he said, “Finally, all Canadians, as much as possible, should stay home.”

But there were at least 35,000 people experiencing homelessness that day: that’s how many appeared on the “by-name list” maintained in each community across the country, a real-time tally; and there were almost certainly others who had slipped through the cracks and were invisible

Jerry McFeeters decided he preferred living outdoors in Edmonton to living in shelters with rigid rules.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR



to the system. They were among the quarter-million people who are homeless for some or all of each year in Canada. And for each one of those, there were an estimated 23 more who were precariously housed — couchsurfing, staying with relatives, teetering on the edge of eviction for rent they couldn't pay — whose strategies quickly fell apart in the face of COVID.

Yet even as more people needed homeless resources, there were dramatically fewer available. Congregate settings — large groups of people in a shared space — were suddenly a terrifying potential site of infection. Chronically homeless people were hypervulnerable, because so many of them had health already compromised by life on the streets and a lack of access to care.

The lockdown imposed in March seemed for most Canadians to come out of nowhere, but those who work with the homeless had been watching and worrying for weeks about what might be coming. Andrew Bond, who heads Toronto's Inner City Health Associates, the largest homeless health support organization in the country, had been tracking this new virus since late December; he had seen other infectious illnesses sweep through the homeless population in the past and read the first news reports with a sense of dread.

A member of his team used an IT vendor with connections in Wuhan, China to make contact with public health officials there. "They said, 'Yeah, it's a total disaster. We are seeing disproportionate cases (among the homeless).'" Alarmed, Bond and his colleagues began planning how they could conduct disease surveillance among the homeless, how they could isolate anyone who became infected, and how they could prevent infections in the first place. "We set up isolation centres at hotels, we made massive PPE requests, we lit a fire under Toronto," he said. Bond also spoke with key homeless organizations across the country, and together they put pressure on the federal government.

"I expected catastrophic loss of life — I expected it to be awful," said Tim Richter, director of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH). "Andrew saw it coming and we started talking to the feds. And the government to its credit was very quick to act and to step in with money." Ottawa disbursed \$157 million in emergency funding for supports for the homeless by the start of April.

There was clearly a desire to protect vulnerable people, said Jeff Turnbull, a doctor who has worked with people experiencing homelessness for decades and heads Ottawa Inner City Health — but there was also concern that if the virus tore through this population, it could swamp the health-care system and put the whole population at greater risk.

Edmonton's unoused population can be seen sleeping on the streets, in tents downtown or in ravine encampments in the Edmonton River Valley. PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR

People who are homeless fall roughly into two groups. About 85 per cent of people are homeless for only a short time. “They may have lost their job, or failed to make a rent payment, but they end up getting back on their feet pretty quickly: they come to an emergency shelter for a short stay and we often never see them again,” said Richter. The other 15 per cent are considered chronically homeless, unhoused for six months or longer. Often these are people who are “high acuity,” in the language of social services — with substance dependencies, or mental illness, or chronic health problems or, often, “trimorbid” with all three. It is these people who can find it most difficult to find new housing, or stay there, when they get there. They cycle through the shelters and time on the street.

There is a sense, among housed city dwellers who veer automatically around the inert figure in the sleeping bag near the Tim Hortons, that there have always been homeless people in Canada and that the issue is to some degree intractable: that some people simply can’t or won’t be housed. But in fact the problem is barely 50 years old: until the mid-1980s, the federal government typically added about 20,000 units per year of subsidized housing to support those who could not pay market rates for rent. That program was cut; the recession of the early 1990s and austerity-driven reductions to social support exacerbated the problem. “Mass homelessness” — whole communities of people without safe, stable, permanent housing — became normalized, especially in the largest cities. At present Canada spends about \$7 billion a year supporting people experiencing homelessness, on everything from shelters to emergency rooms to justice system resources, dealing with those who are criminalized for their use of public space.

For just as long, of course, there has been public debate about how to respond; individual communities have been drafting 10-year plans to end homelessness for decades. Thinking evolved about what worked best (today the consensus is a “housing first” approach that gets people into a home and then tries to tackle other issues such as addiction). But advocates say fundamentally the problem endures because the resources available have never been commensurate with the scale of the problem. Federal and provincial spending on affordable housing each year has been enough to counter, at best, what is lost in the private rental market; it does little to provide homes for the existing pool of unhoused people.

In 2017, the Trudeau government released a national housing strategy, and two years later, launched an updated program called ‘Reaching Home.’

The new program doubled the amount of funding directed to communities with the goal of reducing chronic homelessness by half. It was a significant sea change in the perceived role of government — while many of the key drivers of homelessness stem from issues that require federal policy (such as wages and income levels) or provincial (access to mental health care), it is cities that are often expected to manage the actual provision of support to the homeless, creating a multi-layered bureaucratic snarl.

“Federal and provincial spending on affordable housing each year has been enough to counter, at best, what is lost in the private rental market; it does little to provide homes for the existing pool of unhoused people.”



It was progress, said Richter, but it wasn't nearly enough to solve the problem. The CAEH puts the price tag at ending it all together at \$55 billion over a decade, for a mix of new housing units, rent subsidies and support programs.

And then COVID created both a massive new sense of urgency and a new understanding of just how much money the government could move — and how quickly.

Just as Andrew Bond and others like him in cities across the country were scrambling to try to space out shelters, conference centres, arenas and hotels were suddenly empty. Municipal governments and support agencies rented out the huge spaces for new shelters, and they began to rent out floors of Travelodges and Best Westerns, and even whole hotels, by the month. They moved people out of shelters, and out of ravines, and off the streets. "We did it in a week, when we hadn't been able to do for decades," said Turnbull.

There was almost instantly a visible change in the well-being of the people who were moved into hotels, said Chantal Perry, who until recently ran homeless services for the municipality of Chatham-Kent in southern Ontario. Waking up knowing that they would have that same bed to fall asleep in again that night, that they had access to a washroom whenever they needed it — "just the simple dignity of a door, it made a world of difference."

"It sounds ridiculous when you say it like this, but the key to addressing homelessness is to give homeless people a home," said Naheed Dosani, a palliative care physician who works with homeless people and who has served as medical director of the COVID-19 Isolation and Homeless Program for Peel Region outside Toronto. "When people are in a home, you can do all the other things: medical care, mental health care, all the other services."

The new approach had an impact across the country. The rapid shift in approach opened up a whole new conversation, said Greg Bishop, who oversees homeless services for New Brunswick's Human Development Council. It wasn't news to anyone in his field that shelters were a poor solution, he said — but now they had solid evidence to show how much more effective it is to get people

Municipal governments and support agencies rented out hotels to get people off the streets during the pandemic.

PHOTOGRAPH GEOFF ROBINS / TORONTO STAR



into housing. “It’s also cheaper: it costs \$1,000 a month less to house someone than it does to have them in a shelter.”

And that helped bolster the idea that this was the moment for a permanent change in how Canada accepts, and engages with, homelessness. “The temporary housing has helped to establish a new normal,” Dosani said. “It’s not going to be possible to say, ‘everyone’s vaccinated, now, as you were: back to the street.’”

The first wave of COVID passed without the mass death that bond and others had feared, but as the weather warmed, many homeless people joined encampments in parks, under overpasses and in other public spaces.

Some were afraid of shelters, and some who’d been moved to hotels were struggling, because the accommodation was often at the outskirts of cities, far from other social services and, critically, not a safe space to use drugs.

Overdose deaths were surging as people were obliged to break the first rule of safer use — don’t use alone — even as the drug supply became less reliable and they had less access to services.

Encampments provided a relief from isolation, a way to use drugs with peer support, and a measure of protection from harassment from police and others that could come with camping alone.

Some encampments, such as Strathcona in Vancouver and Trinity-Bellwoods in Toronto, quickly grew to house several hundred people.

There were also clusters of five or 10 or 15 tents in parks and patches of land in small towns in the Maritimes, and a sprawling collection of more than 400 tents in the Saskatchewan River Valley in Edmonton. Communities that had never before had encampments suddenly saw them spring up, and agencies struggled with how to deliver services. Some encampments were more heavily populated in the days, because all other options were closed, and people went back to shelters to sleep at night. Some neighbours responded with deliveries of food, bottled water and other

Encampments provided a relief from isolation, a way to use drugs with peer support, and a measure of protection from harassment from police and others that could come with camping alone. PHOTOGRAPH STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR

necessities; others resented the loss of public outdoor space at a time when it was at a premium and lobbied for evictions. Police ticketed residents, harassed them and slashed tents with knives.

Meanwhile the moratorium on eviction was lifting in many places, creating fear of a new wave of people left unhoused. Some hotels, hoping for regular business as restrictions eased, were reclaiming their space. Shelter staff, who are poorly paid, serving a frightened population, and constantly at risk themselves, were burnt out. By early fall, the fear of a second wave haunted Andrew Bond and other service providers. “What if it’s the majority of people needing isolation, or a high level of care?” Bond worried. “We’re already going as hard as we can, so what happens?” The federal government disbursed another \$230 million, to maintain shelter spaces and buy more PPE. And in September there was a signal that a more permanent solution was also in the works.

Advocates for the homeless were watching the Sept. 23 Speech from the Throne for a renewed commitment to the issue, and when it came, it was in a very short phrase that spoke volumes. “The Government is now focused on entirely eliminating chronic homelessness in Canada,” Governor General Julie Payette read in the speech. Not decreasing, not lowering — ending. That commitment was backed with an initial pledge of an additional \$1 billion.

The funds were earmarked for a rapid housing initiative to create up to 3,000 new permanent, affordable housing units across the country.

This would be done in three ways: quickly developing new modular multi-unit rentals; converting non-residential buildings; and rehabilitating abandoned or decrepit buildings to serve as affordable multi-residential homes.

Half a billion dollars would be split between 15 major cities that had been deemed to have either a high number of people experiencing homelessness, or a high level of renters in severe housing need. Toronto received the most, at \$203.3 million; Montreal was sent \$56.8 million and Vancouver, \$51.6 million.

The other \$500 million would be allotted to projects based on applications from provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous governing bodies and organizations, and nonprofits. The funds could be used for purchase land and building, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. would run the program.

Advocates praised the plan for prioritizing speed, recognizing the critical need for vastly more affordable housing, and channelling funding not just to provinces but directly to municipalities, many of which had taken the lead on the issue in recent years.

But they expressed concern about the emphasis on physical infrastructure, without concomitant funding for social infrastructure: the kind of wrap-around support, of on-site addictions and mental health and other assistance that is key to helping high-acuity, chronically homeless people stay housed. “It’s no use having the building if you don’t have the money to pay for the staffing,” said Perry.

And there was little in the program targeted specifically at Indigenous homelessness, even though First Nations people make up a disproportionately large number of the unhoused in every community. People who identify as Indigenous represent just five per cent of the total population, but 30 per cent of shelter users. “Two elections ago, the federal government promised a national Indigenous housing plan,” said Steve Teekens, the director of the housing and support organization Native Men’s Residence (NaMeRes) in Toronto. But there was no sign of it yet. Meanwhile, there was a new national plan, and his organization would be pitching projects

alongside every other municipality and provider. “Now we are competing. How does it address inequities if we have to compete with the mainstream?”

Ben Young continued to sleep in shelters through the summer and fall.

He was trying to scrape together the money to get an apartment, but it was difficult to raise the funds. Young grew up middle class; his hip hop group toured nationally before he fell out with his creative partners and his life got messy. Now he tried to pick up shifts with a moving company, but he had to beg bus drivers to let him on the bus without fare, until he got paid. If he left the shelter early in the morning and got back late, he’d miss the chance at free meals, but couldn’t afford to buy food.

“After four days in a row of working like that, you’re dead exhausted and you miss a day and then — you’re fired.” He didn’t have a way to wash clothes, didn’t have a place to store his stuff when he went to work. And now he was looking at a much tighter job market. “And the general public, they’re more cautious of you now — everyone assumes you’re COVID-ridden when you’re on the streets and no one is going to take a chance to help you out,” he said. “Hiding homelessness is very hard: if you don’t have any options for storage, you’re constantly carrying everything you own with you which is an immediate, obvious red flag.”

Young was trying to navigate the bureaucracy to register for Alberta Supports (welfare) which would give him a core benefit of \$415 a month and a couple of hundred bucks for housing, depending on what kind he found. Yet the average rental price of a bachelor apartment in Edmonton in 2019 was \$879. And the waitlist for subsidized housing was two-and-a-half years. This is a problem across the country: rental prices in nearly every market are far higher than many people can pay; demand for rent-gear-to-income housing far outstrips supply and the amount available has steadily declined over the past 15 years. Toronto has more than 90,000 people on a waiting list for social housing, and a 12-year wait for a one-bedroom apartment. Nationally, there is an estimated shortage of 370,000 affordable housing units. Between 2011 and 2016 the number of private rental units affordable to households earning less than \$30,000 per year (which means rents below \$750 per month) declined by 322,600 units. Where do they go? Simply put, they become assets: investors, ranging from individuals to large capital funds, buy them to capitalize on rising rents. The pandemic accelerated all of these problems, driving renovations and the acquisition of older properties that had lower rents, for new development.

One October night, Jerry McFeeters was helping another resident of the encampment move a pile of stuff when he fell, hard.

He broke four ribs: not a fatal injury but a miserable one. He woke up the next morning immobilized and concluded this was a sign. He took the last beer in his tent, placed it in the fire and watched it burn. And then he went to the hospital. The pain in his ribs was bad, the cold turkey sobriety was worse. When he was discharged, he went to crash with a woman he’d been dating, a volunteer he had met at the encampment. He was too debilitated for a tent.

“Rental prices in nearly every market are far higher than many people can pay; demand for rent-gear-to-income housing far outstrips supply and the amount available has steadily declined over the past 15 years.”



“I was confined to the house and I couldn’t really go anywhere,” he said. “And I had to go through all my grief and trauma, all that shit I was going through in my withdrawal. That was the worst part of my transition. It was ground zero again and I was dreading it.” He hunkered down, grateful to have a place to sleep out of the cold, but gnawed by the lack of privacy and space of his own.

At about the same time, Ben Young, who was living in an emergency shelter at the convention centre, was flagged as a “close contact” of someone who had COVID — an imperfect system shelter staff used to try to keep track of who might be most at risk.

Young was moved over to the isolation side of the shelter, to sleep on a cot in a row with others who had been similarly identified as exposed. COVID tests were in short supply, he was told, so he would get no confirmation if he actually had the virus, but he would have to be in the isolation zone for two weeks regardless.

But the next day he woke up with sniffles. He told a shelter staffer, who backed away in alarm, and before he knew it he was in an ambulance being transported to a hotel. He was tested as soon as he arrived, and four hours later, it was confirmed: he had COVID. Given how careful he had tried to be, he said, if he got infected, then the whole shelter must be rife with the virus. “I’d be shocked if all 400 people who were in there didn’t have it.”

The next few days were nerve-wracking.

“You don’t know if tomorrow you’re going to be super sick or if you will be in that small per cent that dies. But the symptoms never came and after a few days I was like ‘Hey, like, I’m gonna get through this fine probably.’” Relieved of that fear, he was able to take stock of his situation. “It’s not a motel with all the regular amenities, it’s not regular hotel sheets and pillows. All the pictures and mirrors are removed. The phone is removed. The lock for your room is removed and the window is boarded shut. So you can only open it a little bit. But you have three meals, those meals-on-wheels sized-meals, brought to your door, with some snacks here and there: not a

The Edmonton Convention Centre where Young was spending days and nights when he was exposed to COVID.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR



whole lot of food but not starving, right. But you've got a TV in there. You're inside, you get a bed, you get a pillow, you get a blanket. You can go to the bathroom whenever you want." It was a major upgrade in his circumstances.

Meanwhile, a housing case worker from a support agency called Homeward Trust, whom Young had met at the shelter, had doubled down on finding him a place to live. He got Young registered for a year-long housing subsidy program (the Trust subsidizes the rent of more than 1,000 people in Edmonton), and was emailing him apartment listings. When Young was released at the end of the two weeks, he slept for three nights at a Salvation Army shelter, and then the case worker handed him the keys to a furnished one-bedroom basement apartment. The utilities were connected. There was food in the fridge, a real pillow on the bed, and a lock on the door.

Young benefitted from a shift in focus that had come with the pandemic: homeless agencies were pouring resources into diversion, and into getting people housed. Diversion includes steps such as emergency rent payments, financial planning and help with negotiations, to keep people from falling into the homeless system. Pre-pandemic, diversion might have used 10 per cent of an agency budget; now it was half. The aggressive push to get people into permanent housing meant an expansion into the private rental market, negotiating with landlords, committing to cover the rent for clients or guarantee their leases.

Homeward Trust was laser-focused on getting people housed, director Susan McGee said, but also on making sure they could stay in their new homes. That means a full slate of supports such as access to therapy, life skills coaching, connections with health care, and dozens of small interventions that recognize that the transition from the street or shelters to living, usually alone, in permanent housing can be enormously challenging, emotionally, and require skills people do not have or have not used in years.

"There are definitely aspects of the life on the streets that you miss," Young said, when he'd been housed for a couple of months. "I prided myself on being a helper. I developed a reputation

A support agency helped get Young registered for subsidized housing and helped him find a basement apartment.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR



where people could talk to me for help, when something got stolen, or I would help people who are overdosing. At the end of the day I could hold my head high. I'd feel, I'm strong because I made it through all this shit today. And then to go from an environment where you're constantly having to prove to yourself how strong you are to an environment where you don't have to overcome anything — I feel a loss of importance."

And he had another source of anxiety: Young was paying his \$925 rent with a combination of a shelter allowance through Alberta Works, and a \$595 subsidy from Homeward Trust. But the subsidy was only for a year. He had been sending out resumes, but not getting calls, and he worried about the gap in employment on his CV that was steadily getting longer. "What happens if I just have to go back to the street?"

When millions of people were suddenly out of work at the start of the pandemic, the federal government responded with the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, an income support program that was rolled out swiftly and with a minimum of bureaucracy. Homeless support organizations believe it kept many people housed. But the CERB, at \$2,000 per month, was a marked contrast to pre-pandemic income support programs: welfare in Nova Scotia pays a single person \$508 per month, for example; in Ontario the rate is \$733. Disability support in Ontario is \$896, while it's \$600 in Saskatchewan. Old Age Security is a maximum of \$626.49.

"Anyone in receipt of welfare or Ontario Disability or seniors' OAS really cannot afford housing," said Chantal Perry, bluntly. NaMeRes in Toronto operates 35 units across three houses in Toronto; they offer a \$464 bachelor and a \$560 one-bedroom. "On paper, 80 per cent of the average market rate is deemed to be 'affordable,'" Teekens said. "That would put a bachelor at over \$1,000 a month. That is not affordable on disability or welfare." But for most chronically homeless people, this is what they have to spend: a pot of money that puts virtually all private rentals out of reach.

Once he was housed, Young assembled and distributed care packages for people who were homeless. He included items he found useful when he was homeless and turned aluminum cans into "penny stoves" that can be used to boil water or warm food. PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR



McGee called it the missing piece in the discussion about ending homelessness: the money people had to live on. “You can have an individual who, in terms of their personal change and recovery, has gone from A to D — but they still can’t afford their unit. And they’re going to go right back to A if we can’t address that gap,” she said.

Income support and disability benefits are set provincially. Some provinces have raised their rates over the course of the pandemic; none approach the \$2,000 per month rate of the CERB. In April, the federal budget committed an additional \$567 million over two years to Reaching Home, beginning in 2022-23, and put another \$1.5 billion into the Rapid Housing Initiative. But there was still no earmarked funding for social infrastructure. And as the weather warmed, encampments began to grow again. Almost as quickly, police began forcibly to disperse them.

In June, Ben Young got a full-time job with a moving company, and right away started working long days.

He was delighted to have money coming in, and started talking to Homeward Trust about ending his subsidy early. All the support he had from the agency was helpful, he said, but ultimately the thing that got him housed was that subsidy. “I needed a chance to get my shit together, a little bit of a grace period to catch my breath and get my feet back under me. When I was unemployed, I was backed into a corner and I couldn’t escape, through my own best efforts.”

After a couple of months, however, he started to struggle with mental health issues he had been doing his best to ignore — a not uncommon experience for people who are newly securely housed after a long period spent just focused on survival. He had a conflict at work and lost his job in July. He began to sit with the idea that the road out might not be as smooth as he had hoped.

Jerry McFeeters spent the second pandemic spring couch-surfing, and working frantically to find a place of his own.

But it went badly. He scoured the ads each day, emailed dozens of landlords, walked miles because he could not afford bus fare. He would copy down numbers from windows he passed, but then by the time he could raise the money to buy more cellphone minutes, the place would

Young got a job with a moving company in June. PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR



be taken. Over the winter, rents had climbed, he found. Apartments that before the pandemic were \$700 were now closer to \$900.

When someone did call him back about a place, he would go to visit and find apartments that were dilapidated to the point of being safety hazards, bleak and dirty, in dangerous neighbourhoods rife with open drug use that he knew would threaten his sobriety and his mental wellbeing. When he told landlords that his source of income was Alberta Works, they quickly concluded he would not be able to pay rent. That, and his skin colour, stood in the way, he said: "The moment they see me, they instantly make that face."

Homeless support agencies were focused on getting people housed, but the wrap-around support didn't catch everyone.

One Edmonton agency promised McFeeters the cash for first- and last- and damage-deposit, but no one was helping him find a place he could afford, or a landlord who would accept him. Regardless, some days he was optimistic. "I've got to keep going because I know eventually I'll hit something, I know it," he said. "I just don't know how long it's going to take. And I'm already beyond tired. But I'm keeping going."

Then in May news coverage began of the unmarked graves found buried on the grounds of the Kamloops Residential School, and it churned up the anger and fear from his youth. Everything felt more difficult, and he had a growing level of anxiety about his situation, still shuffling between friends' couches, reliant on the whims and kindness of people who themselves were struggling. "I've got healing to do," he said. "Because I still get mad. These guys need to understand what it's like to be so sad and broken all the time. And then be criticized for that." He could manage his anger and frustration when he had a place to stay, he said. "It's easy to do that with my own space, where I can have my medicines, I have my altar." Without it — then the anger just felt huge.

Come summer, McFeeters faced the increasing likelihood that he simply was not going to find a place to live. He made arrangements to store his possessions with a friend and started to look for a campsite again.

PHOTOGRAPH AMBER BRACKEN / TORONTO STAR

Talk of reconciliation with Indigenous people dominated the news, and yet the thing that would make the difference, the basic thing, wasn't part of the discussion, he said. Everyone he knew on the streets was a residential school survivor or the child of one. And what they needed was a place to live. "You know what people need at this point. None of this is going to happen without funding." It means paying the rent. "Start by helping us individually. So we can grow together as a people, or as a nation."

Come summer, McFeeters faced the increasing likelihood that he simply was not going to find a place to live.

He made arrangements to store his possessions with a friend and started to look for a campsite again.

"A homeless shelter to a homeless camp," he said with a dark laugh. "Not the legacy I was hoping for."

THE PANDEMIC DIARIES



JOSIAH CHALMERS

APRIL 2020

COVID kicked my ass right away. When the pandemic started, I was living in a shelter. I had been living there for a couple of months and I had just graduated to having 'permanent resident' status, which means I knew I would have a place to go every night. That was the most secure I had been in two years. In the fall of 2018, when I was 22, I had a job at Value Village and I was sharing an apartment. But it turned out that my roommate wasn't paying the rent and she hid the notices until we got evicted. I started couchsurfing, staying with different friends, and then it turned out that one place I was crashing was a trap house. And I started using. I'm not a person who was using drugs and wound up homeless: I'm the opposite, I started using drugs because I was homeless. Finally, in July 2019 I went to rehab and I got sober. When I got out I was trying to figure out where to live. I spent a couple days with my parents but that was not a good scene. In August and September I backpacked around the province trying to pick a city and I wound up in London, which has lots of resources for homeless people. I was staying with a friend who was still using [drugs] and that wasn't a great environment. So then in January I went to an LGBTQ-inclusive shelter called the Unity Project. And that was way better. And then the pandemic started and they had to close. And then I was homeless again.

OCTOBER 2020

When the shelter closed in March of 2020 I ended up relapsing. I started using again and crashing in crack houses. After three months I thought, 'I just don't want to live this way.' I slept

outside for the summer, off on the side of a park. But I was calling the office of homeless services all the time, being super persistent, saying, 'You have to help me.' The waitlists for housing ranged from one year to six years. I had no plan for the fall. Then on Aug. 20 I got a call saying I was going to be housed. I'd heard that before. But this time, I signed a lease within a week. It was a building where the organization that was helping me, Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.), had a relationship with the landlord and they would be paying the rent directly, so they were willing to rent to me. I moved into a bachelor apartment on Sept. 1. I get Ontario Works which is \$400 — they deduct 30 per cent for my rent. Y.O.U. pays the rest. The apartment is a bachelor and it's really small and it's in a really sketchy building in a sketchy neighbourhood. I use food banks. But when you've been living on nothing, then \$400 seems like a lot.

MAY 2021

My first apartment got broken into so I moved to a bigger unit, it's a big bachelor in a better area. And I will move again next year, I just have to be here long enough to have a good reference from a landlord. I've been struggling with getting work because of the lockdown. And really because now that I have a door, I just want to hide away. Maybe I can work when I feel able to be around more people. But I've been sober for a year and a half now. My worker from Y.O.U. helps me keep track of appointments and make food bank trips, keeping me solid. I'm doing advocacy around youth homelessness. I want to pay it forward.

Josiah Chalmers was living at an LGBTQ-inclusive shelter in London, Ont., when the pandemic started and the shelter closed.

PHOTOGRAPH GEOFF ROBINS / TORONTO STAR



TIM HORSMAN

MAY 2020

I've spent about 20 years on the street. I just lived out 24/7 sometimes. I moved around a lot, different places. I had two little girls in 2002 but I lost custody and then I was on a cocaine trip for 15 or 20 years. Living on the street for so long, not having a permanent place to live, it really took a toll on me. I'm 60. When the pandemic started I was in Moncton. I was crashing at an emergency shelter and it closed. But the workers asked if I'd be interested in housing. I said, sure. And I ended up getting it. I wasn't expecting it. And it was hard. All of a sudden being in an apartment alone. It made me feel like I was driving backwards. I stayed for a couple weeks, but it was making me really nervous. Then I just booted out and left everything and ran. And I thought, that's it, I'm done, there's no more housing for me.

MARCH 2021

In February the outreach team [from the John Howard Society] came across me. I was really in dire straits. I was [panhandling]. I slept in porta-potties, I was getting high. They told me about Housing First [the program] and I said okay, I'd be up for that. On March 2, I moved in. I got a one bedroom in Fredericton with appliances and everything. I have COPD, I was fighting for each breath. I got a puffer from the downtown clinic. I paid \$90 for two puffers. My whole cheques are spoken for. I get \$530 a month [in welfare]. Phone and electric is \$80. I haven't had a TV in 30 years. I'd like to be working, but I have all these health problems. I've been a temporary labourer, I worked in warehouses, I do lawn care and snow removal and driveway-sealing. I'm adjusting better than I did in Moncton. I have some of the same feelings here, too, but I think what will be different this time is that I have the support I need. I'm seeing a social worker every two weeks. They're looking after my medical needs. I've been trying to get therapy on the phone. I've been off drugs and booze for four or five months. It's hard. It's emotional. Every day is up and down. But I don't think I would have made it through one more winter out there.

Tim Horsman in Fredericton.
He spent the winter sleeping outdoors.

PHOTOGRAPH STEPHEN MACGILLIVRAY / TORONTO STAR



MARK HARTWELL

JUNE 2020

I had a nervous breakdown in 2000 and I developed severe anxiety. When I have attacks it puts me out of action for seven days at a time. I'm an engineer but I haven't been able to work since then. I'm 62. When I became homeless in 2019, it was the first time. I sold a house, I lost a lot of money, I went to stay in a buddy's outside of London that had no heat or hot water. And when I had no cash left, I was homeless. I had no concept of the system. I had no idea where to get food. I got into a short-term shelter, but I couldn't get into a long-term one. The pandemic was just hitting and I was staying in a mammoth shelter with 200 people, six people to a room. You couldn't get any news there, all of those people were totally cut off. Then I got moved into a single room, it was \$160 a month. I paid for it with my disability payments. After a month in that room they started to move us into hotels. It was nice, it had an office desk, I had a big screen monitor, I was exercising and eating extremely well. I was ecstatic.

FEBRUARY 2021

After three months in the hotel, the housing coordinator found me a nice large apartment downtown. I'm planning to stay here a long long time. Rent takes \$139 out of my disability [payment]. The apartment costs \$900. I get \$672 in cash in the bank every month. I pay for the TV and web, that's \$170. With the rest I have to pay for food, clothing and transport. I'm still relying on church meals four times a week. I'd like to be working but I'm not able to do it yet, but I'm getting there. I used to have a whole other lifestyle, but it's all gone. When you're on the streets your mind just goes numb. One extremely cold night can send you into a panic. I remember walking and walking through the rain and I just kept on going. When you have shelter you have time to inhale and plan ahead.

Mark Hartwell was living in a short-term shelter in London, Ont., when the pandemic started.

PHOTOGRAPH GEOFF ROBINS / TORONTO STAR

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the spring of 2020, the first weeks of North America's COVID-19 pandemic, I asked the Atkinson Foundation staff if they might reconsider an original fellowship proposal I had made, months earlier — because while that project had been rendered both not feasible and no longer particularly relevant, the still-mysterious but clearly momentous unfolding events urgently required documenting.

We had all been plunged into a world that had been unimaginable just weeks earlier. But the years I spent charting the social, political and economic impacts of other pandemics, particularly that of HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, led me to suspect that this one would both prey on and magnify all of the vulnerabilities that existed in Canadian society, and that public policy would be key to blunting those effects. Many colleagues in the news media were working frantically to try to chart the virus's spread, but the fellowship offered a rare opportunity to step back, track events as they went on, and dig deep into how these events played out in the lives of individuals. I'm very grateful that the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy Selection Committee, chaired by John Honderich, was willing to consider a reimagined proposal, and grateful for the faith of those committee members when they dispatched me on a project that was still largely unknowable at that point.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of what I imagined I might do proved impossible. (It seems almost amusing now, 18 months later, that I spent time figuring out a travel budget. I never even had the chance to work in the coffee shop down my block.) It was a far greater challenge than I ever imagined to try to connect with the vulnerable people I hoped to write about, when I couldn't leave my own home (and some of them had no home to be in). I spent the year trying to find people, maintain connections with people, and figure out how to evoke the situations of people who told me their stories, when I couldn't actually go anywhere. I'm glad I did it; I would not like to do it again. Inevitably, what I said I would do, and what I was able to do, and what I thought it was important to do, changed continuously through the year, reflecting both the unpredictability of the pandemic and its impact on people's lives, and my own; I appreciated Jenn Miller and Colette Murphy's understanding and tolerance for my always-under-revision plan.

All of that said, I feel extremely fortunate to have had the luxury of that year to watch events unfold and the chance to spend time talking to so many wise people about what it all might mean. I am particularly grateful to all of those who signed on early in the project and agreed to let me check in with them every week or two, and to let me eavesdrop as their pandemic year went on. My thanks to Edeline Royo Agoncillo, Samira B., Josiah Chalmers, Jaby Dayle, Francis Ddembe, Paola Girotti, Hyemi J., Mark Hartwell, Tim Horsman, Harpreet Kaur, Amy Lazar Kleiman, Jerry McFeeters, Anne Merrit, Bertrand N. Z., Gayani Senanayake, Alexis Thibeault, Rebecca Tucker, Diana V., Martha Wafula, and Ben Young. It was a privilege to get to know Juan Luis Mendoza de la Cruz, whose death from COVID in May was one of the bleakest moments of this project.

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I feel both fortunate and regretful to be the last Atkinson Fellow in the current incarnation of the role, although I understand and indeed experienced how the very changed landscape of journalism has made the original model for the fellowship less relevant and less viable in the current newsroom. Journalists need to be able to lift their heads from the firehouse of news coverage and think deeply about critical issues in our communities. More than ever, there is a need for journalism that sets out consciously to contribute to building a more just and inclusive society. I'm acutely aware of how precious this opportunity was, and extremely grateful to have had the chance to contribute.

STEPHANIE NOLEN
September 2021

THE ATKINSON

JOURNALISM FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

A collaborative project of the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich Family and the Toronto Star, the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy provides financial support for a Canadian journalist to investigate a public policy issue, with a goal toward promoting social and economic justice.

ATKINSON
For social and economic justice



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