

Youth Emergency Shelter Society (YESS)

YESS gives youth at risk a chance by providing youth and families opportunities to become confident and self reliant.



Justin was born in Burundi in a time of upheaval and war. The witness of much violence and many atrocities, Justin nonetheless has fond memories of his parents and younger sister. "My family all worked together. My childhood was overall a happy time despite the violence around me, because my family was with me." Justin attended school from the age of three, moving from town to town as his family fled the war. "My parents thought school was very important, and it came before everything," he says.

Justin's father died when he was five or six. Not long after, his mother became ill. With no access to medicine, she ultimately died outside a refugee camp. Orphaned at thirteen, Justin was brought to Canada by an uncle living in Toronto. He looked forward to going to school. However, Justin's aunt and uncle had other plans. "Life was not easy because I had to take care of everything in the house," he says, "I spent most of my time cleaning, baby sitting, and being like a parent to their four children." Barely a teenager, Justin had to contend not only with adjusting to life in Canada, but also the responsibility of caring for his young cousins; school or a part-time job were out of the question.

At sixteen, Justin was again uprooted when his uncle abruptly moved to Edmonton for work. Things continued much as they had in Toronto until one night, his aunt told him to leave the house and not come back. Fortunately, it was not long before Justin learned about the services available to homeless and at-risk kids at the Youth Emergency Shelter Society.

At YESS, Justin began working his way through progressive levels of programming, excited to have the chance to go to school and support at the end of the school day: "I also had somewhere to go after school . . . I had somewhere to call home."

Justin called YESS home until last fall, when he successfully moved out on his own. In the time he was with YESS, he not only graduated from high school, but also achieved tremendous successes in the community: he is the recipient of a RISE award for youth (recognizing his leadership in the immigrant community); he sits on the Ministry of Education's Speak Out Project, and works to promote human rights worldwide through his work with the Youth Action Project. "I feel I want to help others and to give hope to children in Africa and around the world," he says, "I want to help people the way others have helped me.

Last October, Justin was one of two YESS clients to receive the provincial Great Kids Award, which recognizes kids who show determination, generosity, compassion, and a strong spirit, and who make an outstanding contribution to their home, school, or community. YESS is so very proud of Justin, and he credits his time at YESS for paving the way for his success: "[Without YESS] I would not have had a home, and it would have been almost impossible for me to finish high school and achieve my dreams. I would not have the happy life and support I have now." Like so many of the kids who access the programs at YESS, it's clear that Justin's strength and courage will carry him steadily toward the realization of his dreams.

The REALTORS® Community Foundation is very proud to let you know that YESS was supported by proceeds from Ride for KIDS. The Foundation also sponsored their golf tournament.

In 2009 your REALTORS® Community Foundation provided a grant of \$20,000 to YESS.



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Shelter Society