

## Mardi's journey: From housing instability to empowering others



Mardi's journey from LOFT client to a peer support worker is a testament to her resilience, determination, and unwavering spirit.

Her early life was marked by a challenging family dynamic. From seven years old, Mardi found herself cycling from one transitional housing space to another. By the time high school rolled around, she was couch surfing among her peers while keeping her housing status a secret.

Despite the instability, Mardi saw education as a lifeline. She was determined to break the cycle of unstable housing. Eventually, her hard work paid off when she graduated high school with honours, earning herself a scholarship to the University of Toronto.

At UofT, Mardi diligently juggled her studies and work. However, she was still struggling with her mental health. She decided to seek external support. In 2015, Mardi's campus

connected her with LOFT's Transitional Age Youth (TAY) program. This program provides safe, affordable housing and age-appropriate support to developing youth and young adults.

At TAY, Mardi found essential mental health, housing, and personal support that allowed her to thrive personally and professionally and eventually graduate from UofT in 2017 with distinction. She went on to work full-time as a peer support worker for the TAY program for six years, helping young people navigate their own housing challenges.

"I was really lucky. LOFT helped me get back on my feet." Mardi fondly recalls. She believes in the importance of helping individuals under 24 find stable housing, emphasizing its role in goal-setting and self-improvement. Through her commitment to personal growth and the unwavering support provided by LOFT's programs, Mardi has emerged stronger and more empowered than ever.

“LOFT helped me get back on track, and it's been rewarding to help youth with similar experiences.”

## Get to know Zena Gopal: LOFT's Director of Health and Community Services

Zena Gopal is a dedicated advocate for positive change and the Director of Health and Community Services in Supportive Housing at LOFT Community Services.

Zena collaborates with LOFT's program staff, clients, and partner organizations to understand and assess LOFT's healthcare needs across all supportive housing programs in Toronto and York Region. Her approach is rooted in empathy, focusing on a deep understanding of our clients' most pressing challenges. For Zena, this is more than a job; it's her passion. Witnessing the transformative impact of her work on people's lives is what drives her each day.

"It's important for me to understand our clients' most urgent needs to develop meaningful services and program enhancements that respect their rights to safety, dignity, and optimal health." Zena asserts.

"One of the most significant challenges in our community is the rising cost of living,

especially for clients with limited or no income. Heightened living costs have greatly limited access to safe and sanitary housing."

In addition to economic challenges, Zena is equally dedicated to combating the stigma faced by trans and non-binary individuals in our communities. She collaborates tirelessly with LOFT staff and partners to ensure equitable access to life-saving, gender-affirming care for 2SLGBTQIA+ community members.

Zena emphasizes the profound importance of leading with empathy and kindness. She reiterates, "I've seen how much we can achieve by approaching our work with genuine compassion."

Beyond her professional life, Zena's interests include travelling, singing, and hiking. She also has a remarkable talent for baking and decorating cakes - a skill she generously shares with her colleagues, fostering community and connection beyond the workplace.

### Laurier Award for Community Impact

Wilfrid Laurier University's Alumni Association (WLUAA) and Wilfrid Laurier University announced the recipients of the 2023 Alumni Awards of Excellence and the 2023 Laurier Philanthropy Awards.

LOFT is proud to share that our very own Heather McDonald was presented the Award for Community Impact. This award recognizes outstanding achievement by a Laurier alumnus/alumna to foster a better world through local, national or international initiatives as a volunteer, advocate or employee.



## An update from **Heather McDonald,** **CEO**

Heading into autumn, we have a chance to reflect on recent happenings at LOFT. I want to thank staff, volunteers and supporters for noteworthy accomplishments that continue to improve services for vulnerable populations.



### **In person for the first time in a long time**

After three years of virtual meetings, we were thrilled to have 150 of LOFT's community members come together for LOFT's Annual Meeting. September 26th was an opportunity to celebrate our collective achievements, and provided an evening of connections and



reflection. The information shared at the Annual Meeting allowed us to learn more about LOFT's impact this past year. It was also a chance to celebrate LOFT's remarkable 70-year journey. Together, we have helped to improve the lives of countless people.

### **Earning the City's thanks:**

LOFT received a letter of recognition from Mayor Olivia Chow celebrating LOFT's 70 years of service. In the letter, Mayor Chow and Councillor Mike Colle expressed the city of Toronto's appreciation for LOFT's customized and concrete solutions as a community service provider for people facing a combination of mental and physical health challenges. They thanked LOFT for helping our clients get the care they need to live full lives.

## **Celebrating 70 years of Community Service**



Everyone  
deserves to  
be seen

### **Annual Impact Report**

You can find more details about LOFT's 2022-2023 accomplishments in our newly released annual report online at [www.loftcs.org](http://www.loftcs.org). Check out the impact your support has made. It's all possible, thanks to people like you!

## On the road to **achieving dreams** of a job and housing

Earlier this year, LOFT joined the city of Toronto and the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) to expand our Multi-Disciplinary Outreach (M-DOT) Program supporting people sheltered within Toronto's transit system. Thanks to this program, Dinesh has found renewed hope of turning his circumstances around.

Bags of belongings in hand, Dinesh first met LOFT case manager Laura and her team while they were doing their rounds at the Scarborough Centre station. Dinesh had been homeless for a little over a year, and was struggling with the hardships of living on the streets.

Laura approached Dinesh with a helping hand, offering TTC tokens, coffee cards, and LOFT's unwavering support. Taking her up on the offer, Dinesh finally found the assistance he needed to secure shelter, access vital mental health care services, and pursue his aspiration of finding employment. After some temporary work with Elections Canada, Dinesh feels re-energized in his job search, and confident that he'll be able to return to an office position in the city.

LOFT continues to support Dinesh in his pursuit of a long-term housing solution through Toronto Community Housing. With a laugh and a new gleam in his eyes, Dinesh tells us that Laura's positivity and approachability make her a great case manager.



LOFT's M-DOT Program supports those living with complex mental health and addiction challenges while simultaneously experiencing chronic homelessness. Our dedicated staff have direct access to embedded nursing and psychiatry services through our partners at Inner City Health Associates (ICHA). We do our best to ensure that each client receives the necessary long-term supports to improve their health, well-being, and independence.

This program expansion with the TTC and City of Toronto has allowed us to provide our community's most vulnerable with access to medical attention and other critical health services where and when they're needed most. Under the guidance of LOFT case managers like Laura, we're on track to connect 80 to 100 people sheltering in the TTC with health support and community services by the end of the year.

For Dinesh, the help couldn't have come at a better time.

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