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Paul Nguyen: Fighting Negative Stereotypes Of Jane & Finch

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Paul Nguyen founded the website [Jane-Finch.com](#) in the hope of dispelling "negative stereotypes" of the area. For the most part, it seems he has succeeded. For his efforts, he was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee for being a "role model and mentor for at risk youth" and the [Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship](#).

Later on this month he will also be honored with the prestigious [Aroni Awards](#). He [reflects with me on his activist website](#), his "typical Canadian" immigrant upbringing and the reasons why he is proud of his neighborhoods.

Tell me about yourself

I was born in Toronto and grew up with a typical Canadian childhood. My parents were among the [Vietnamese Boat People](#) to arrive in Canada during the war. In Jane-Finch, I played street hockey, tobogganed in the winter, and filmed homemade kung-fu movies with my friends. I loved movies so much I used to hang out at Blockbuster reading the backs of rentals for hours.


Like other children living in a modest community, I learned to maximize my resources. In Jane-Finch, you grow up with a strong sense of humility and compassion. The neighborhood made me who I am today.

Your site has had much success in highlighting the Jane and Finch neighborhood. What was the reason behind it?

[Jane-Finch.com](#) was the result of a curiosity I had about my community's geographical and historical roots. Despite years of media attention, there was no definitive source about the Jane-Finch area on the Internet. So in 2004, I purchased the domain name and started out as a humble single-page website. I posted home grown videos I filmed in the community.

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During this time, social media tools like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter weren't around yet, but I noticed my website getting a small but steady stream of visitors. One of my videos went viral and ended up being featured on a national news program. As the site grew, I realized the potential for it to do some good. It was an opportunity -- a voice -- for residents to show the real Jane and Finch to the world.

Today, we function as an online community broadcaster working with residents to highlight life in the neighbourhood. We post community news, history, videos and feature local talent from the area. The website has touched a global audience and I think it's a reflection of the genuine experience that we try to deliver.

You created the site to dispel "negative stereotypes" of the area. What were some of these stereotypes and how did the site tackle them?

When I grew up as a child in Jane-Finch I was pretty isolated from the news. I didn't have the concept that I was living in a 'bad' neighborhood. Outsiders would do that job for you.

Decades of negative news stories have created a really poor image of Jane-Finch in the public's mind. But I knew that life in the community was different from the way it was depicted on TV because I had a positive experience here. One negative stereotype is that youth in Jane-Finch are gang members and have guns. However, the community has some of the most talented and passionate youth you could find anywhere. I made it a priority to showcase positive stories about them on my website to break that stereotype.

You are also a talented film maker.

My hobby was making homemade movies with my friends using my dad's camcorder. We made action movies from kung-fu to zombies to cops and robbers stuff. My passion got serious and I graduated from York University with a degree in film.

I enjoy producing videos for my website, but I have also produced several television documentaries that have aired locally and nationally. The major productions can reach a lot of people, but my heart is working at the grassroots level. I would love to make a Hollywood movie about Jane-Finch one day.

Your site added a "community news section was added to allow reporters to document local events not covered by the mainstream media" -- Explain

During the website's early days, it was a singular voice. I worked alone, but felt it was necessary to have Jane-Finch.com represented by others in the community. I brought on some talented young reporters to help contribute their vision and experience. We created a community news section to cover events that wouldn't normally get mainstream news coverage.

It has become our bread and butter- to highlight the positive events and stories that happen here. The mainstream does an excellent job of covering the bad stuff, so we made it our mission to cover the good.

You have won many awards over the years and Aroni Awards is your latest -- What do these Awards mean to you?

The recognition for my work means that the public sees the importance of making the Jane-Finch community, and other similar areas in Toronto, a place where everyone can live and grow in a positive way. However, I can't take all the credit. Growing up in the Jane-Finch area has taught me the value of giving back and contributing to the area's success- no matter how big or small. Everyone here counts.

To those who may want to follow in your footsteps -- what advice do you have for them?

Being from Jane-Finch, you understand how hard it is to be labelled. I have never considered myself an activist, but just a kid from Jane-Finch trying to show off my great my community really is. I think everyone has the capacity to contribute to the health and success of their own community.

You don't need to be an 'activist' to help. Being compassionate and concerned for others can take shape in many ways. It can be mentoring someone, helping the elderly, or making new friends. Social networking has made it easier to connect with like-minded people about a cause. If you want to help stray cats, start a program for youth, or keep your community clean, you can join an organization or create your own if it doesn't exist.

The key is to be passionate and true to yourself. I have been able to touch a large audience through passion, not dollars. You should give back not expecting anything in return. It should be fun, rewarding and not feel like work.

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