

Chloe Brown's Rexdale

Two-time mayoral candidate, policy analyst and firebrand Chloe Brown was raised near Islington and Finch and has fond memories of growing up in Rexdale. She chats with **Stacy Lee Kong** about community and civic duty, where the neighbourhood's political leadership fails and why it all comes back to food

PHOTO BY JANICE REID

Is there a specific place that comes to mind when you think of Rexdale?

Weston and Finch. I know it might sound strange, but that's where I realized my mom was Chinese-Jamaican. There was a Chinese-Jamaican grocer at Weston and Finch and people called him Mr. Chin, and when we went, people would call [my mom] Miss Chin. It's like a term of endearment. I knew they weren't related, so I was like, "Why do people call you this?" Growing up in Rexdale, there are Africans, Jamaicans – a wide variety of Black people. I present as Black Jamaican. But I didn't realize Chinese-Jamaicans were their own separate category, that my mom was Chinese, or what that meant until we would make those grocery trips. That was the only little spot where I would meet other Chinese-Jamaican people, and how I started to understand that you can have a culture within a culture.

Trying to figure out if someone is related to you based on what the adults are calling them feels like such a classic Caribbean-kid experience. When I was little, I remember realizing that sometimes, people weren't actually related to me, I was just calling them Auntie and Uncle out of respect.

It's also a very working-class experience. My parents would be like, "This is Uncle Bob," and it was the person we'd go to for oxtail every Sunday. So that's how I started to understand the world. Because if Uncle Bob sees me on the road misbehaving, it's going to be something. He doesn't just sell oxtail to my parents; he's become a part of our community, because he knows every Sunday we buy this amount of food, and that sustains his lifestyle as much as it sustains ours.

I grew up at Islington and Finch, but we'd always go to Weston and Finch for Caribbean groceries, and Lawrence and Weston to go to Knob Hill Farms. My dad would go to the Molson Brewery for beer. We'd go to Rexdale Mall if my mom wanted Chinese groceries. And that's something I try to recreate for myself now. I still shop on Sundays. I'll go from High Park to Roncy, all the way to T&T at Spadina. Yes, I could buy everything at No Frills, but I want to give a little money to the Asian grocery store at the corner. I want to give a little money to the cheesemon-

ger. I think you need to practise being willing to go the extra mile for yourself, because that makes it easier to go the extra mile for your neighbours.

It's fascinating how our sense of place is so often tied to food. Every place that you've mentioned as the site of a powerful memory from your childhood is also a place where your family went to nourish yourselves.

It all goes back to food. One of the big moments in my life was going to school with curry goat, and the other kids being like, "What is that?" But I remember this Sikh boy named Jagdeep opened his lunch and he had curry, too. It's those little things that make you think, "I'm West Indian, you're East Indian, but what does that even mean?" That was such a humanizing moment, and it helped me see the other little connections between us. And that only happens over lunch tables. It doesn't really happen while you're debating policy.

I remember the barbecues at my building. There was a barbecue pit in the far corner and on Fridays in the summer, all the men would be there. My mom would be watching us from the balcony, throwing down popsicles. And everyone got to eat. It didn't matter how poor we were – everyone left with a plate. That was foundational to my sense of community and civic duty.

What else did growing up in Rexdale teach you about how Toronto works and who it's for?

I started to understand the difference between life in Rexdale and life outside of Rexdale when we went on school trips to the ROM and Roy Thomson Hall. Islington and Finch is very well-stocked; you have everything within that corridor. But we didn't have ease. When I got downtown and saw the subway and how easily people could get around, I realized how hard we actually have to work where I'm from.

I also saw what happened at Rowntree Mills Park. I remember going there as a kid. It's huge; there's a barbecue pit and all this infrastructure. From what I remember when I was eight to 11 years old, from around 1998 to 2001, is learning that what you hear as music to your ears might be translated as noise by others. At the beginning, it was a turf war between white homeowners who bordered the park, coming

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into the park in the evening to clear us – the kids from the apartments listening to rap music – out of the park. It got worse when there were larger community gatherings, but community relations collapsed as Mike Harris policies started to download and gut public services, as Rexdale started to transition from Etobicoke to megacity Toronto. Parks are really

a misunderstood luxury, particularly for those who associate luxury with a silent suburban lifestyle.

So it's not like there aren't resources in Rexdale that people could be using. But people [prioritized] protecting their property value over the value of community.

But I want everyone to realize that the only reason downtown has prosperity is because people dedicate their time to making sure it has something to offer the greatest numbers of users. We can also design Rexdale for those things. For example, Toronto Community Housing has one way in and one way out. It's not designed for opportunities and openness, the way that some neighbourhoods are designed, and that really impacts the way we believe our life can be. But it's very easy to restore fun and play; it's a matter of programming. We as residents just have to become more serious about our political capital. Because when I think about the political leadership in Rexdale, we just keep giving them office to produce nothing.

Why do you think that keeps happening? I'm thinking about the

Fords and how they've managed to position themselves as community leaders in Etobicoke, even though their political actions don't necessarily serve everyone in that community.

Food, again. When you think of Ford Fest, they give out free food and it makes me think of the parable of Jesus and the fish and bread. It's such a simple gesture, but people will fully absolve you of a lot of things if you starve them long enough, then make them grateful for food.

It's like when Doug Ford went to Toronto Community Housing to give people \$20. That to me was so abhorrent because it was nothing in comparison to what people actually needed, but if you have nothing, it seems like a lot. If you're working class, you can make \$20 stretch into a week's worth of sandwiches. That's what they prey on. They know we have nothing, so they use their time in office to starve us, and when they finally show up with little crumbs of food, we have swollen bellies, just hungry to taste something.

You ran for mayor twice; clearly at one point you thought different

political leadership could bring about change. Do you still feel that way?

I have no desire to run for office again. I want to support cooperative businesses and worker-owned business [Brown is an analyst at Future Skills Centre, a research institute with a focus on underrepresented and disadvantaged Canadians], because when workers own the decisions about the operations and processes, businesses run differently. If we can have community gardens that people take ownership of, why couldn't they take ownership of a community-owned grocery store?

What makes you hopeful for Rexdale's future?

The kids who are still there. During the mayoral campaign, some of them reached out to me, and I realized all I need to do is clear the path and deliver community. Rexdale has strong community unity already, but I want them to see that if they can build their own cooperatives – healthcare cooperatives, education cooperatives, wherever there's a deficit – they can take each other out of poverty together.

Rexdale and Woodbine malls on shaky ground

BY LUCIANO CESTA



REXDALE MALL: GOOGLE MAPS

TWO NEIGHBOURHOOD staples, the Woodbine and Rexdale malls, are on the brink of closure.

For decades, the shopping centres have played a special role in their community, housing small immigrant-run businesses alongside bigger retailers like Beddington's, Dollarama and Hudson's Bay. But the malls' futures were put into question when property developer Chris Hinn entered a forbearance agreement with Romspen Investment Services after defaulting on the malls' mortgages in 2018. Hinn sold his other properties as part of the agreement, but the two malls remain unsold.

In May 2023, Romspen petitioned the Ontario Superior Court to place the properties into receivership. The sale of the properties is now the responsibility of professional services firm Ernst & Young.

Woodbine Mall is big. It houses an indoor fun fair [see page A10-11 for more] complete with a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round in addition

to more than 80 stores and restaurants. Rexdale Mall, on the other hand, houses 13 businesses anchored by a large grocery store that sells Chinese, Caribbean, Filipino and Middle Eastern products. It is in the process of being sold on an "unpriced basis" – potential buyers will offer bids – according to its listing on Realtor.ca.

Mohammed Azam, owner of the 95 Cents Plus Discount Store at Rexdale Mall, said that people in the community have nowhere else to shop. He even gives discounts to customers when they ask. His store is filled with a large variety of items – anything from bed sheets to batteries to lamps. Upon hearing the news that the mall is being sold, his customers have expressed concern for his business.

"They don't necessarily talk about their problems," he said of his customers. "They're concerned about mine."

He said he has no intention of looking for a new space to rent if

the mall closes, because of his age, 61, and the challenge of finding comparably low rent anywhere else. He says that for the rent he pays, he would not be able to find a two-bedroom apartment, let alone a commercial space. He also mentioned that Hinn was fine with late rent payments and has forgiven rent in the past.

"He was very compromising," he said.

Raj Toor, the owner of the furniture shop across from the discount store, has similar feelings about Hinn.

"He never gave us a hard time," she said. "Such a nice person. Such a nice guy."

While business has been slow, Toor said that people value the mall overall, and especially the supermarket. Fresh Value, which takes up the majority of the mall's footprint, is an extensive maze of high-quality, low-priced groceries.

Woodbine Mall, still anchored by a Hudson's Bay store, once commanded attention in Toronto.

Families from across the city would come to the mall to shop and enjoy the Fantasy Fair. The mall used to be filled with national retailers, but has since turned into more of a haven for small businesses like Imperial Professional Alterations and Tailoring, which specializes in selling and altering Indian and Pakistani clothing.

Owner Muhammad Khalid is unsure about the future of the mall. Last time he renewed his lease, he was told that when it ends in 2028, there will be no more renewals.

"That's why the owners of these businesses do not have any more interest in building up their businesses," he said.

Many stores in the mall are unoccupied or were closed during opening hours. Foot traffic is low. Businesses are struggling to pay rent. Khalid said that his business is down 70 per cent compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The people are only trying to survive," said Khalid. "And trying to keep their families alive."