

VOL.10

BELONGING

HOW YOUR SUPPORT
IMPACTS YOUTH



**Covenant
House**
Vancouver



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COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER recognizes the ongoing impacts of colonization and is committed to advancing reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in all the work we do. We acknowledge, with gratitude, that our work takes place on the ancestral and unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwúmesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

Thank you for supporting the work of Covenant House Vancouver and for taking the time to read our biannual newsletter, *Belonging*.

In this issue, we share how we are responding to the evolving needs of youth — adapting and strengthening our programs to provide the highest level of care to young people in our community.

For example, youth living with neurodivergence require — and deserve — greater flexibility, understanding, and individualized support. In these pages, you will see what that care looks like in practice. We are also proud to introduce Mariah, our occupational therapist who is helping youth facing complex challenges set meaningful, achievable goals that put them on a path toward stability and success. You will also learn about the important investments we are making to support young people who have experienced trafficking and exploitation.

As Chair of the Board of Directors, I am continually inspired to see Covenant House Vancouver grow and evolve in response to these needs, always with a focus on delivering compassionate, high-quality care.

I am especially proud of this progress given the increasingly challenging environment for charities. Over the past decade, charitable giving in Canada has declined¹, even as demand for services has grown and community needs² have become more complex. And yet, our donors continue to step forward. More than 80% of our funding comes from private sources — including donors like you — enabling us to remain responsive and meet youth where they are at.

I hope you see the impact of your generosity reflected in these pages. Thank you for making this work possible.

Warm regards,



MÉLANIE HENNESSEY
CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS,
COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER



¹ <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/generosity-in-canada-2025-generosity-index.pdf>

² *Stretched Thin: 2025 State of BC's Non-Profit Sector Report from Vantage Point*





PROVIDING CARE FOR **NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH**

In recent years, Covenant House Vancouver has welcomed more youth who show signs of neurodivergence, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

These observations come from our well-trained staff who work with youth, as most of these young people have never been formally diagnosed (more information on this below). According to Statistics Canada (2020)¹, “ASD has the highest unemployment rate of all disabilities — 80%.” In addition, according to CMHC (2020)², people with autism “are increasingly at risk for food and shelter insecurity and homelessness.” Intervening early can ensure people with neurodivergence are set up to succeed, which is why CHV has expanded supports for these youth.





Someone with neurodivergence may experience heightened sensory sensitivity, have differences in social interactions, or have unique learning styles. It can affect their attention, communication, and how they experience the world. We see the impact of these challenges every day. Some neurodivergent youth struggle to be in communal spaces and often avoid group settings or leave early when asked to participate verbally. Many miss appointments despite reminders and later express frustration or shame about not being able to follow through. Staff frequently see youth return from treatment programs after being discharged for “not meeting expectations,” despite trying their best. For many youth, these barriers feel impossible to overcome.

We provide immediate, tailored support, flexible appointments, and strategies that respect sensory needs.

Furthermore, getting a diagnosis is extremely difficult. In BC, assessments for autism or ADHD often require specialist referrals, with waitlists that are longer than a year and cost thousands of dollars

in private fees. Receiving a diagnosis gives youth more access to financial supports and housing opportunities. It also gives youth clarity into what may motivate their behaviour and a better understanding of how to manage their responses.

We work hard to help youth get diagnosed and in the interim, we provide immediate, tailored support, flexible appointments, and strategies that respect sensory needs. Our team also helps youth navigate systems

by connecting them to specialists, advocating for faster referrals, and, sometimes, by simply starting the conversation that there may be something deeper going on. These steps can be life changing and can open doors to the right care.

These steps can be life changing and can open doors to the right care. This is why your support matters.

This is why your support matters. It enables us to respond to each young person's unique needs and provide truly individualized care, fostering an environment where youth feel safe, supported, and seen. We also have built a strong partnership between our Community Housing and Life Skills department and the Pacific Autism Family Network (PAFN) to provide pre-employment support and work experience for youth. PAFN offers a program that helps youth understand their strengths, informs them about work environments, and helps them develop their skills. Through the program, some young people are hired at Paper Planes Café at YVR — a local organization that hires neurodivergent people.

Find out more about this unique partnership that sets up neurodivergent youth for success, by scanning the QR code



or visit: covenanthousebc.org/world-autism-awareness-day

¹ <https://connective.ca/blog/autism-spectrum-disorder-supports/>

² <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/nhs/nhs-project-profiles/2020-nhs-projects/housing-through-an-autism-lens>

A young woman with long dark hair is looking out of a window. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is centered and reads:

YOUR SUPPORT ENABLES
US TO RESPOND TO EACH
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**YOUTH FEEL SAFE,
SUPPORTED, AND SEEN.**

Mariah Morris is an occupational therapist. She joined our team in January 2025. For the past seven years, she has supported inpatient mental health services and one-on-one therapy.

Your support means we can hire people, like Mariah, who help change a young person's life.





What is an occupational therapist?

MARIAH MORRIS: Occupational therapists support clients and help them to do the things that they want and need to do in their daily lives. We see any activity of daily life as an occupation. This includes getting dressed in the morning, making meals, taking a shower, keeping a routine, getting around the community, working, and going to school. We are experts in assessing an individual's physical, mental, spiritual, and cognitive abilities, and we take a holistic

approach to helping a person.

“We are experts in assessing an individual's physical, mental, spiritual, and cognitive abilities, and we take a holistic approach to helping a person.”

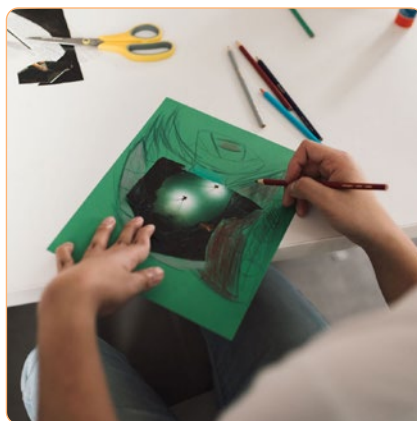
By understanding the different components of a person, we can then see which part is limiting that occupation, what is preventing them from engaging in the activity in their daily life, and then create a plan, so that they're able to do what they want to do.

MARIAH MORRIS

What does the occupational therapist do at CHV?

MM: Many of these youth have been living rather precariously and don't have a lot of life skills. We're trying to help them come into their own and learn some skills. Common goals for the youth include finding work, reducing their substance use, engaging in leisure, finding community (which is an important one for them), looking for where they belong, and social connection. We help them find their way.

We assess and identify how someone's mental health is impacting their ability to engage in their activities. For example, a youth experiencing depression normally has low motivation and difficulty getting out of bed. As an occupational therapist, I would identify their lack of motivation. We would then work on creating a routine and scheduling activities. We identify what's breaking down in their lives that's preventing them from doing what they want to do, and then figure out how we can get there.



What have you implemented since joining the team?

MM: Since joining, the youth and I meet as a group every day, Monday to Friday, which creates and encourages routine and structure, as a lot of the youth have never really had that before.

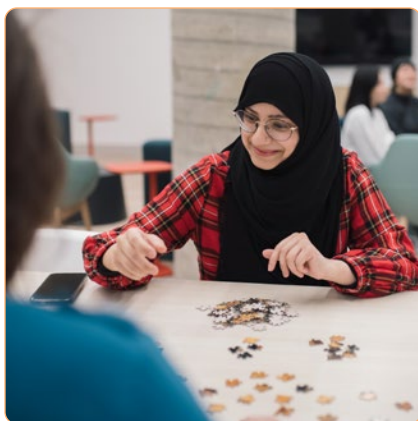
I also help to design groups, so that the material that we're covering is relevant and appropriate for the youths' cognitive and functional levels.

Do you have any stories you can share about youth?

MM: In the short time I've been here, I've seen group participation increase and youth use the skills we are teaching them. In our cooking groups, we see them building on skills and becoming more independent. The other day, a youth told me that they felt so anxious, but then they remembered to breathe and used a strategy that we developed to calm themselves down. These might seem like small wins, but learning to do something like regulate your anxiety can have massive implications for achieving your goals and living a better life.

What partnerships do we have and how do they affect your work?

MM: Our partnerships allow youth to have access to nurses onsite that can help with medications and answer questions. Our connection with Foundry allows youth to access the drop-in primary care health clinic and different groups. We also work with local organizations, like VanDusen Gardens, to get access to activities and events for youth. This helps them reconnect with the community, which is our ultimate goal.



“These might seem like small wins, but learning to do something like regulate your anxiety can have massive implications for achieving your goals and living a better life.”

MARIAH MORRIS

A photograph of three people sitting on a rocky shore, looking out at the ocean. The person in the center is wearing a dark plaid shirt, the person on the left is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt, and the person on the right is wearing a red, white, and blue plaid shirt. The background is a calm sea under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING: MEETING YOUTH NEEDS

The population we serve is vulnerable to human trafficking and the predators that aim to exploit them. As a result, there are youth at Covenant House Vancouver that have been trafficked or know someone who has been trafficked.

Human trafficking involves the recruiting, harbouring, and/or controlling of a person for the purpose of exploitation — the most common forms are labour and sexual exploitation, in Canada.

ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In Canada, from 2014 to 2024¹:

- **Just over 5,000 incidents** of human trafficking have been reported to police services
- **93%** of victims of police-reported human trafficking were women and girls
- **22%** of victims of police-reported human trafficking were age 17 and younger, **41%** between 18 and 24, and **24%** between 25 and 34
- **34%** were trafficked by an intimate partner

In the US:

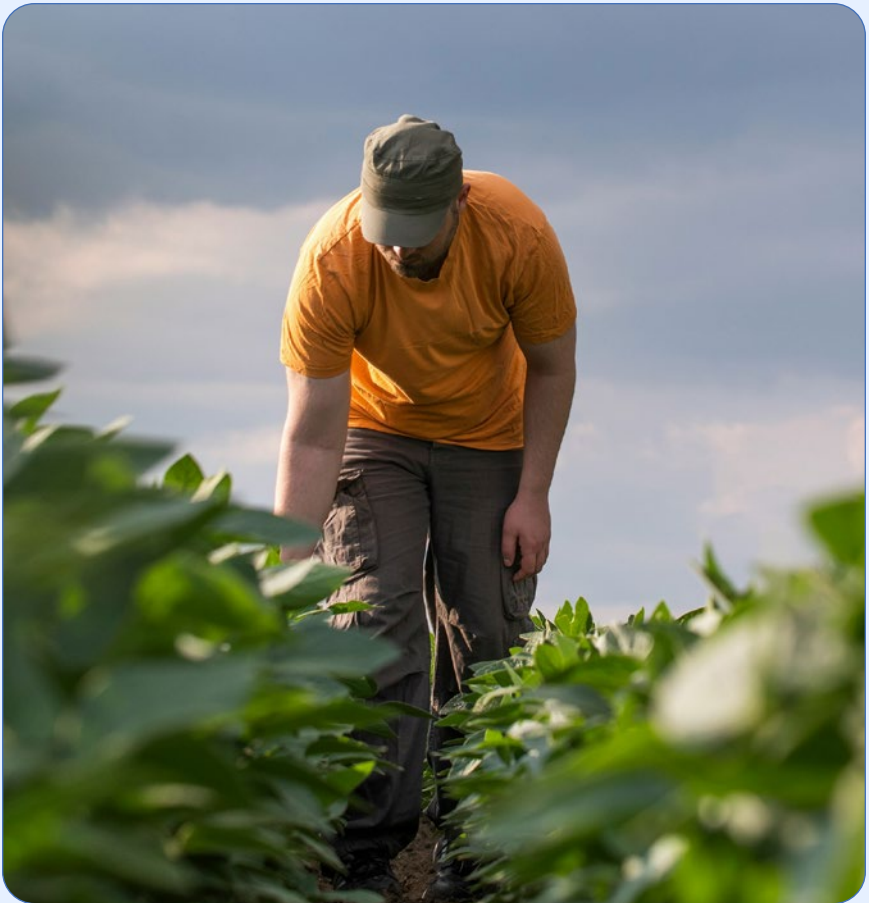
- **64%** of sex trafficking survivors reported being homeless or experiencing unstable housing at the time they were first trafficked².

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2025001/article/00008-eng.htm>

² <https://homelesshub.ca/collection/population-groups/sex-trafficking/>

Mateo was a young and devoted single father who wanted nothing more than a safe and happy life for his daughter.

In his home country, opportunities were scarce and safety was not guaranteed for either of them. Determined to change their future, Mateo dreamed of starting over in Canada, where he believed honest work would allow him to provide a stable home.



Through his connections, Mateo was introduced to someone who identified himself as an immigration agent. The man promised him steady farm work in Canada and assured Mateo that he could soon bring his daughter to join him. Trusting this opportunity, Mateo left his daughter with a cousin, promising her that they would be reunited as soon as he settled. The agent even offered to stay in touch with Mateo's daughter on his behalf.

When Mateo arrived in Alberta, he was met by another man and ushered onto an old school bus that was filled with newcomers. They were taken directly to a remote farm. Under the pretense of "paperwork," Mateo was required to hand over his passport. It was never returned.

Life on the farm was harsh and dehumanizing. Mateo shared a small trailer with two other men, sleeping on plywood with old sleeping bags. The floor was littered with rodent droppings. Days began before dawn and stretched endlessly in the fields. Food was scarce, threats were constant, and despite weeks of exhausting labour, Mateo was never paid the wages he had been promised.

When Mateo raised concerns about the conditions and his missing pay, he was met with a chilling response. The agent warned that if he tried to leave, there would be serious consequences for his daughter. Mateo felt trapped, powerless, and terrified for her safety.

Everything changed when Mateo witnessed a fellow worker being beaten for taking too long to refuel a tractor. In that moment, he understood that staying was no longer safe.

Everything changed when Mateo witnessed a fellow worker being beaten for taking too long to refuel a tractor. In that moment, he understood that staying was no longer safe. Risking everything, Mateo and two bunkmates escaped in the middle of the night, eventually making their way to British Columbia.

In Vancouver, Mateo arrived with nothing but hope. He found his way to Covenant House Vancouver, where he was greeted with compassion, warmth, and safety. He was offered a bed, nourishing meals, and the chance to rest for the first time in months. When he was ready, Mateo was connected with a social worker who helped ensure his daughter was safe, supported him through a refugee claim, and connected him with the Vancouver Police Department's Human Trafficking Unit.

With time and caring support, Mateo began to rebuild his life. He learned English, strengthened his job skills, and earned key certifications, which helped him secure work in construction — a field where he could put his hands-on skills to use and regain a sense of pride and stability.

Alongside employment, Mateo worked with staff to build essential life skills, including learning how to budget, find a place to rent, and navigate daily life in Vancouver. As his confidence and independence grew, Mateo was ready to move into the community and begin the process of bringing his daughter to Canada.

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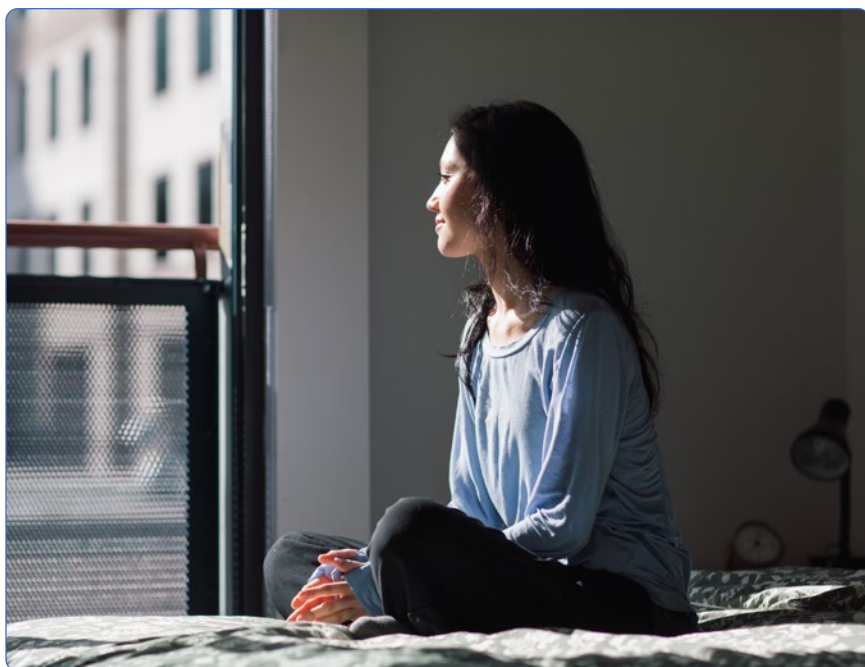
Years later, Mateo shared joyful news. His daughter was thriving in daycare, Mateo had returned to school, and together they were building the future he had once only dreamed of.

Note: This is a composite story that reflects the experiences of multiple youth while protecting individual privacy.

OUR WORK

CHV provides specialized programs to ensure that we can best serve human trafficking survivors. We are members of the Human Trafficking Prevention Network, where we connect with other organizations to influence and impact policy around human trafficking. We are committed to raising awareness, and deepening understanding of human trafficking and exploitation, to strengthen how we support youth who are at risk of, experiencing, or healing from trafficking. We also created a toolkit called *Pivoting Practice: Building Capacity to Serve Youth Impacted by Trafficking*, to support other organizations and share practical information.

Our donors and supporters make this work possible and help create real change in the lives of youth who have experienced trafficking.



CREATING LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS WITH THE
SUPPORT OF ARCADIA FOUNDATION

Arcadia Foundation is a Vancouver-based charitable foundation with a focus on improving the lives of children and youth.



Their work is centred on the early experiences of youth, and the belief that when young people have access to safety, dignity, education, and creative expression, the long-term impact can be transformative. They support organizations that impact a young person's life at critical points, which is why they continue to support Covenant House Vancouver (CHV).



Providing long-term outcomes and stability for youth is something that will have a lasting impact, both for the youth and the community at large.

“What truly inspires us is the way Covenant House Vancouver shows up for youth in a consistent, compassionate, and practical way. You are not only responding to immediate crisis, but also investing in young people’s long-term stability and independence.”

CONNECTING TO CHV

Rights of Passage, the Drop-In Centre, and Outreach were some of CHV’s programs and services that resonated with Arcadia Foundation in particular, because CHV provides youth with more than just shelter. These programs and services provide essentials

like food and shelter, as well as life skills support, access to counselling, and stability in a youth’s life. When Mala Kustermann, President of Arcadia Foundation, visited CHV’s facility, they had this to share: “What impressed me most was how thoughtfully the physical space supports the mission and the people it

“What truly inspires us is the way Covenant House Vancouver shows up for youth in a consistent, compassionate, and practical way.”

MALA KUSTERMANN

serves. The way indoor spaces, such as areas for classes, therapy, recreation, and communal connection, are integrated with residential units, shows respect for young people as individuals with aspirations, needs, and worth.”

MAKING AN IMPACT

CHV’s impact grows from year to year, as we reach more youth and provide more support. For Arcadia Foundation, impact is about “restoring agency, confidence, and hope, while also providing real tools and supports,” which gives youth the ability to move forward.

At CHV, youth are not just a number, they are complex and unique people with their own perspectives and personalities. CHV provides youth with one-size-fits-one care, which allows impact to deepen beyond the physical supports provided.

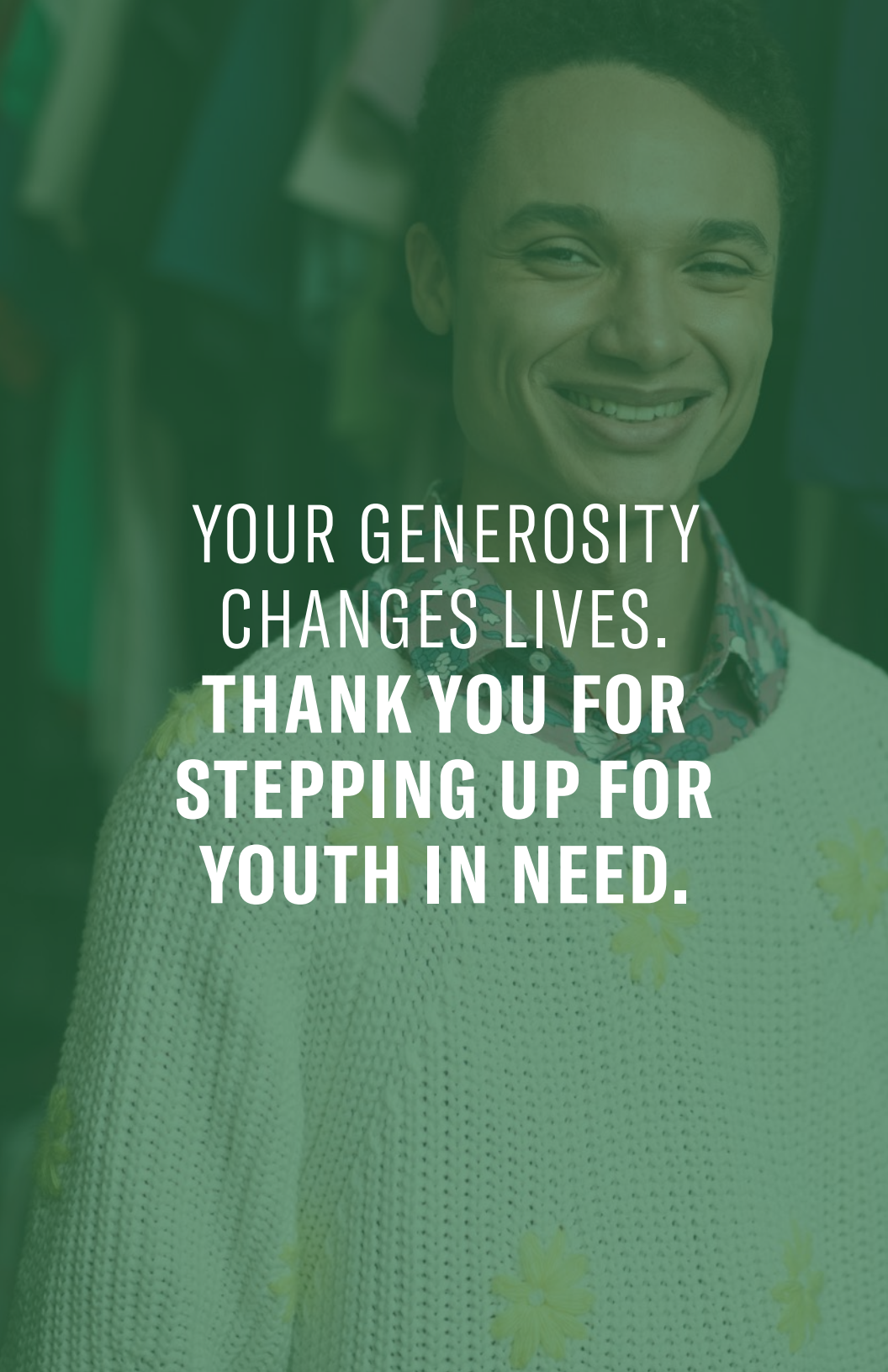
When asked what Arcadia Foundation would like to say to youth, Mala shared “We want them to know that they are seen, they are valued, and they are deserving of support and opportunity. Their past does not define what’s possible for their future, and there are people and organizations who genuinely believe in their potential.”

Arcadia Foundation is grateful for the support of partners like Airfoam Industries, a Vancouver-based company committed to reinvesting in the community and enabling the Foundation to support organizations in a meaningful way.

“[CHV] is not only responding to immediate crisis, but also investing in young people’s long-term stability and independence.”

MALA KUSTERMANN



A close-up portrait of a young man with dark hair, smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a light-colored, textured knit sweater with several yellow flower-shaped patches. Underneath, a colorful patterned shirt is visible at the collar. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf. The entire image has a semi-transparent green overlay.

**YOUR GENEROSITY
CHANGES LIVES.
THANK YOU FOR
STEPPING UP FOR
YOUTH IN NEED.**



**Covenant
House**
Vancouver

1280 Seymour Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 3N9
604-638-4438 • covenanthousebc.org



@covenanthousebc