



# Y IMPACT

*A twice-yearly update on how you're helping communities shine*

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It's officially fall, and we have so much to tell you. We have a new strategic plan, guiding the Y's work from 2024-2029 – with a vision of thriving communities where everyone's potential can shine.

And we have a new Senior Development Officer, Mary Nikolakakos. If you have a Y story you'd like to share to welcome Mary, or a project you're keen on supporting, you can reach Mary at [mary.nikolakakos@swo.ymca.ca](mailto:mary.nikolakakos@swo.ymca.ca) or 226-577-2569.

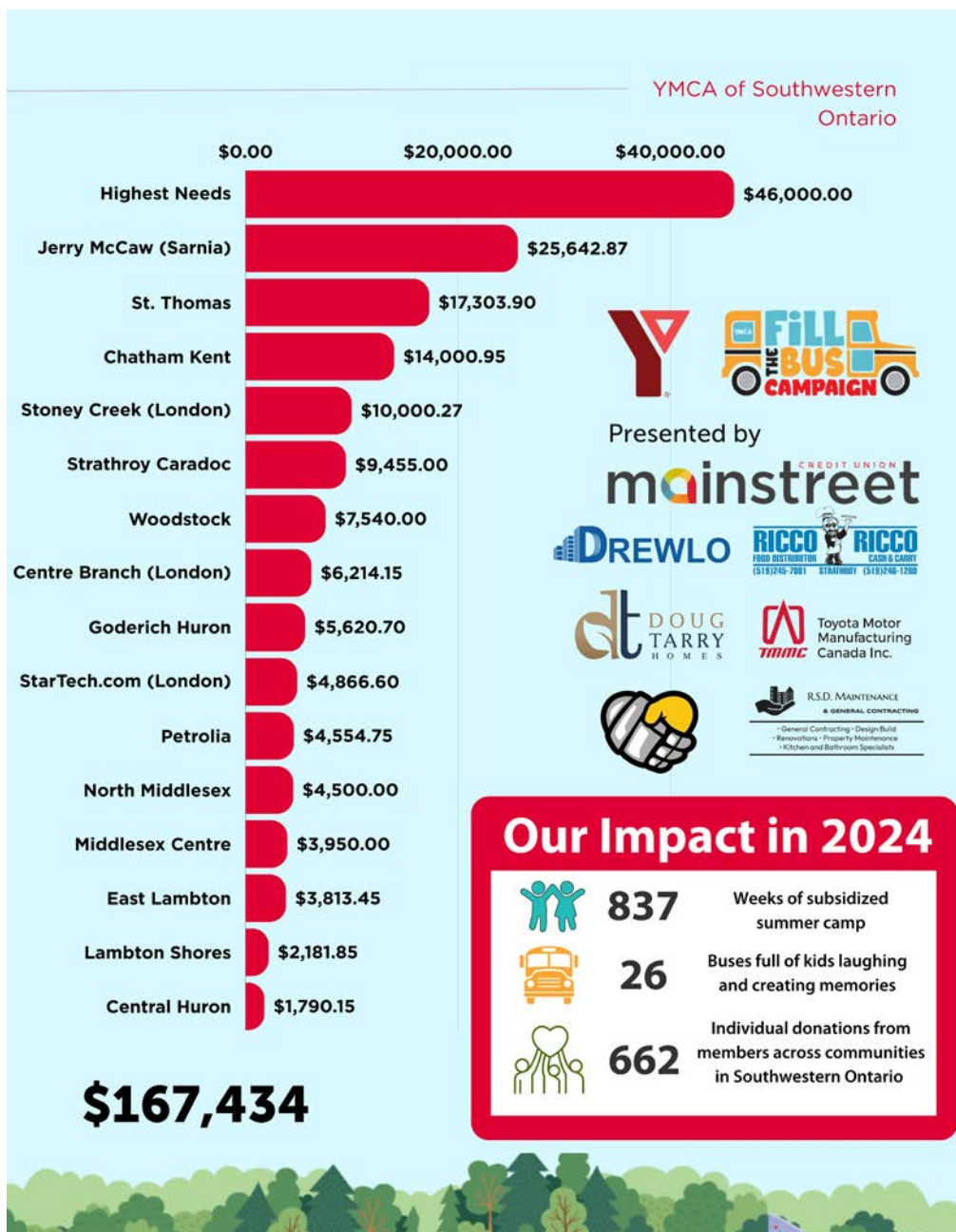
Thank you so much for igniting the potential in people at YMCA of Southwestern Ontario!



# Your Impact – 2024 Fill the Bus CAMPaign

The Fill the Bus CAMPaign presented by Mainstreet Credit Union allows children with financial hardship to experience summertime fun at the YMCA.

Thanks to you and your fellow donors, 837 weeks of subsidized Summer Day Camp were provided to kids across Southwestern Ontario in Summer 2024!



# Robel's Story: Beginnings in Tigray

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I was born in Tigray, in the horn of Africa. It's a region that has never been colonized or conquered. Despite this, war has been a part of this region for hundreds of years off and on – which is the reason my family and I left. To this day, I suffer from PTSD from the things I witnessed and experienced as a small child.

My father was the mayor of the capital of Tigray, but his position and title couldn't keep him safe (or us). He was thrown into an information-extraction camp. Luckily, his prison camp was one of the very few that rebel forces broke into, freeing the prisoners.

Making a long and dangerous walk to Sudan, which was the closest bordering country, my father was one of the few who survived. He reached out to my uncle, who was high-ranking in the military, to get my mom and I safely to Sudan before retribution to us due to his escape.

My uncle risked his life to smuggle a Canadian reporter into the country to witness and document what was going on. My aunt, her two sons, my mother, and I joined the Canadian reporter in the attempt to smuggle her back out of the country. Many times, we almost didn't make it and almost lost our lives. More times than I can remember.

I'll never forget the fear and terror we had to go through at each checkpoint. We travelled at night so that military aircrafts didn't bomb us. There were a few times we had to get out of the vehicle because it was stuck in the mud after heavy rains. I'll never forget hearing the hyenas and the sounds they make.

Once we made it to Sudan safely, my dad met us on the outskirts – where I recognized him from photos, as it had been a few years since the soldiers barged into our house and took him from us.

Roughly two years later, when I was seven, we arrived in Canada! We found a few families from where we were from, who went through similar things to get here. One of the first places they showed us was the YMCA.

I learned how to swim for the first time in my life without fear of crocodiles, serpents, and scorpions (which keep people from my region from learning how to swim).

I also did the YMCA summer camps! My favourite highlights were archery, hacky sack races, and bobbing our heads for apples so they could glaze them with candy afterward.

When I finally was old enough to utilize the rest of the facilities, I was a proud member, playing basketball and handball, swimming, and doing weight training in the gym. The YMCA was my heaven on earth, and a safe place to have the time of my life while healing my heart, mind, body, and soul.



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# Robel's Story (continued): A New Home in Canada – and at the YMCA

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Now, over a decade later, I am back to my haven – this time with my five children and wife of 19 years! I love that there's a variety of healthy activities for my four year old to my 17 year old. The YMCA has upgraded our lives as a family. It's too phenomenal to truly capture in words. The staff are warm, welcoming, and helpful – always with a smile on their faces. YMCA members are friendly, caring, and kind. We've become part of another family. I wish there was a YMCA in every community of our planet!

- Robel, Chatham-Kent YMCA

## Why support the Y?

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"Many years ago, I had the privilege of being sponsored to spend two weeks in Honey Harbour at Camp Queen Elizabeth. For our family, this was beyond our financial scope.

This experience was new for this kid who just didn't fit in. I learned how to paddle a canoe, dance with friends, and laugh with people my own age. I learned how to respect the administrators and enjoy the beauty that this country has to offer.

It's my intent, in giving back, that the kids of today have the chance to enjoy the same life experience that helped to change my life."

- A proud CQE camper (from the mid-1960s)



## Connect with us!

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