



Alex

The value of giving back

As a student studying computer science at York University, Alex Meli knows technology. And as a person experiencing homelessness, he understands the challenge of finding food, shelter and other services throughout the city.

A 24-year-old refugee from Cameroon, Alex came to Covenant House last fall. His youth worker, David, reflects on their first meeting: “When Alex first came in he was withdrawn and isolated, but he created his own opportunities and we supported him along his journey.”

Alex’s talent in computer programming quickly became clear to staff as both a career path and a way to always stay on course: “No matter what, as long as I have my computer and my books and can do my work, I’m okay,” Alex says.

Knowing this passion, the Covenant House employment centre connected Alex to technology-based non-profit organization Ample Labs. Working with Ample Labs, Alex helped develop and launch ChalmersBot, an app designed to connect people who are homeless with the nearest option for the things they need.

Youth using a smart phoneUsers click on ‘Free meal’, ‘Drop-in’, ‘Clothing’, ‘Shelter’ or ‘Emergency’ to find the closest service, hours of operation and directions. The app also has a chat feature to help tailor advice.

Ample Labs Executive Director CG Chen says that by mid-summer, six months after the app launched, ChalmersBot had given about 6,500 referrals, including 4,000 meals and 800 overnight shelter stays.

Alex is proud of and excited about his involvement in the project: “Working on this app has given me lots of work experience, and it’s my own way of helping other people who have experienced what I have.”

David is also proud of what Alex has accomplished in such a short time. “He’s back in school. His housing is stable. A few months ago all of this was in limbo, but it’s all moved forward and it’s made a huge difference in his life.”

Check out Alex’s interviews with the [Toronto Star](#) and [Global News](#).