

Hamilton man uses basic income floor to stay active in community

James Collura is receiving a basic income through the Ontario Basic Income Pilot Program, in Hamilton. The Hamilton area, along with Thunder Bay and Lindsay, are the three basic income pilot sites. He has been using it in a way that serves his community. Lindsay Advocate Publisher Roderick Benns interviews Collura on exactly how – and why – he is using his new income floor in this way.

Benns: *How did you find yourself in the position you were in so that you were able to begin receiving basic income?*

Collura: I studied economics at McMaster and graduated with a BA. Like most students in my program, I realized my education didn't exactly qualify me to be an economist or execute any valuable job-skill. I ended up working as a teller at a bank, where I found the most valuable aspect of my job was the personal interactions I had everyday. Meeting new characters, discovering their needs, witnessing their spending habits and lifestyles, and getting to know people from all walks of life. I had a big interest in the future of technology, because at my age, I need to anticipate what's to come – the future of jobs in an automated world. At the bank, I realized my job was quickly becoming 'app-ified', and my top assignment was to convert customers to 'digital banking'.

Essentially, I was teaching them to do my job from their cell phones and computers. Digging a little deeper, you'll find that even financial advising is becoming automated – kind of like what happened with most travel agents and Expedia/Hotels/Trivago/Bookings.com. So, working up the ladder didn't make sense for my long term stability.

Some people gave me the advice to 'do what I love' and be an artist, but, there's no benefits in art, and there's no guarantee it'll sell. In order to feel stable, I stayed where I was, in a job that wasn't suited to my personality, and where I didn't have the space or time to be creative. I ended up going to a city-wide meeting for basic income – an idea I had heard about in a TED talk, and soon found out that Ontario would be piloting a basic income project. I knew basic income would be psychologically and physically freeing, and that if I were to be supported and stable, I could feel comfortable enough to make a move to somewhere new and contribute to society more effectively.

Benns: *How does this show basic income is free from stigma of any kind? Why are you staying so active in the community, now that you are receiving a basic income?*

Collura: I'm a big believer in the sharing, giving, and trading economy – not just participating in dollars for dollars type transactions. Since I've received basic income, I've embodied that philosophy. I work in a building full of entrepreneurs, and have been using my skills to help with event planning, posters, marketing, and social media. I've even painted the logos of three different businesses (soon to be four) on the walls in their office spaces. I've done all of it for free. Zero dollars.

In exchange, I've been getting the services in the building – yoga, float-therapy, psychotherapy sessions, voice-acting lessons, breath-work classes. They all asked what I wanted in return for my services, and all I ask is for what they have to offer in their business. I've contributed more to my community in 3 months than I did in the previous five years, and I don't even need to get paid for it. I'm stable now – so I feel like I can give more of myself without asking for anything in return.

Benns: *What do you hope to accomplish during this time period*

while you are receiving basic income? What are your goals for paid employment or self-employment?

Collura: I'm going to be an entrepreneur. I'm learning from the people I've met in this building. I'm showing up everyday and doing work. With some practice and patience, a project or idea will come along that I believe in, and I'll be self sufficient and thriving in a matter of months or weeks. One good idea and a skill set to back it up – that's all anyone needs to thrive in the Internet era. And if you have friends who can help you out, even better. I've made a ton recently, and they're all willing to help me out if I ask for it.

Benns: *Why do we need this program across Canada?*

Collura: I worked at a bank in downtown Hamilton for five years. I met everyone. Some think that people on social assistance are moochers, or a burden to society, or not willing to work hard and get a job – that is so incredibly false. There are people with mental illness, mild to extreme. There are people with PTSD and trauma that make it difficult to hold down jobs. The ones who may be taking advantage – a small minority I believe – aren't the happiest people. They're still struggling. Welfare is barely enough to pay rent in most places in Hamilton. ODSP helps a lot of people, but that's a different story.

Basic income will help people survive – even those who don't have to prove they have a mental or physical disability to qualify. And not only survive, but thrive. I was making less than 30k a year working at a bank. And now I'm doing what I love, and I feel safe and secure. And to thank my society for supporting me, I'm giving back as much as I can, with as many skills as I have to offer. There are a lot of people like me out there, waiting to get unstuck from the stability trap, and do what they were made to do.

In the age of automation and self-service checkout lines, we

need a system like this in place. The alternative is to keep around menial labour, keep the repetitive tasks, and keep the drudgery, for the sake of dollars and paycheques. People are scared of automation because it threatens their stability. It's poised to eliminate their income streams. I can understand why people boycott the self-serve checkout lines – but that's not the best answer, economically.

There are changes that we're making that are going to work, and improve our lives and society. If Canada had basic income permanently in place – I think it would eliminate a lot of the fear and resistance to change we see in the world today. The future is abundant, and we'll all be able to take care of each other and our environment – because we'll have the time, freedom, and platform of stability to do it.