



Elephant Space founder  
Milan Seki

# HEALING THROUGH PLAY

A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE FOCUSED ON YOUTH, USING AN UNCONVENTIONAL FORMULA TO PREVENT ISOLATION: BOARD GAMES



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SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

## PROJECT ESSENTIALS

### Industry Partners:



ELEPHANT SPACE

Learn more at [elephantspace.org](http://elephantspace.org)

### Partner of

startGBC

Learn more at [startgbc.com](http://startgbc.com)

Milan Seki is a passionate advocate for empowering youth and breaking the taboo around mental health—when she was eight years old, she moved to Canada from Japan. In middle school, she was bullied—as cyber bullying was just rising in prevalence, her school was unable to help or address the issue. Milan had to work up the courage to go to school while feeling the pressure to fit in with her classmates and struggled to become successful academically. As a result, she suffered from depression and anxiety for years.

Reflecting on this experience, she was inspired to found Elephant Space—a not for profit organization that provides board games, snacks, homework assistance, workshops and mentorship development programs for youth between 12-14 years old. The space is also filled with trained volunteer facilitators to support and foster personal growth. At its heart, Elephant Space builds on the idea of play therapy—a form of counseling that uses play (such as through board games) to ease communication with people, especially children and youth, to provide tools to work as a team, creating comfort to disclose experiences and create a sense of community and belonging.

“Those first few hours after school are very important,” says founder Milan Seki. Left unsupervised and unstructured, this time is when some youths find themselves making poor decisions, not wanting to go home or being bullied. Elephant Space is a positive space where they can have facilitated social interactions in a safe environment.

“I’ve been through these experiences myself, so I base our approach on how I would have wanted to be helped,” she says. Milan attended George Brown’s Assaulted Women and Children’s

Counseling and Advocacy program, giving her a unique insight into youth development and the effects of trauma and untreated mental health issues. “Our framework is [built on] prevention. I think that by providing a place to feel safe and comfortable we can prevent isolation.”

**It’s important that they can get what they [need from Elephant Space] without having to identify why...If they are here, that is the important part.”**

-MILAN SEKI, FOUNDER

But it’s about more than just a physical space. Elephant Space also offers homework help, workshops, mentorship opportunities and snacks.

“We also want to empower youth by giving them a space to relax without feeling pressured. It’s important that they can get what they want out of the program without having to identify why they want to be in Elephant Space,” Milan says. “If they are there, that is the important part.”

Milan says it’s the strength of partnerships within the Toronto

community that has made Elephant Space possible. “It started with Snakes and Lattes—we reached out, through email, and they were excited to be included,” she says. “They were looking for a community partnership that made sense with their values.”

The project was off and rolling. Snakes and Lattes, a local board game café, donated the space for the launch party, as well as some starter board games. This was quickly followed by a partnership with Community Corner in St. James Town, offering a physical space for the drop-in program to run on Fridays after school. Recently, they also partnered with Cabbagetown BIA, who donated all of their non-perishable food items to Elephant Space from their holiday kick off event.

She also partnered with startGBC, a hub for entrepreneurship based out of George Brown College. Given its mandate, Elephant Space project stands at the forefront of social entrepreneurship, an enterprise formed using and adapting techniques traditionally used by start-up culture to instead find solutions to social, cultural, or environmental issues.

“Milan and Elephant Space is an example of how social and business entrepreneurship are converging. Like all entrepreneurs, she identified a gap and offers a solution she is passionate about,” says Amy Matchen, manager of startGBC. “Elephant Space is her first start-up. I am sure it will not be her last.”

“We want to expand everywhere—into neighborhoods all over Toronto,” says Milan. “This is the kind of program that can benefit every youth, no matter who they are or what they are going through. We are inclusive to anyone who wants to belong because they do.”