

SERVICE **IN** ACTION

A real-world leadership case study from the Service Leaders at [FourSimpleWords.ca](https://www.foursimplewords.ca)

Serving Equity Through Courage and Vulnerability



A real-world case study from the Service Leaders at FourSimpleWords.ca about how the power of service transforms lives and organizations and the habits we need to build around service.

Story content graciously inspired by Brendan Johnson

In our professional and personal lives, courage and vulnerability (two related yet seemingly different ideas) often appear unexpectedly. And while these concepts may make us uncomfortable, it is important to remember they do not have to be heroic acts or involve huge emotional exposure. What they do require is a continual process of self-reflection, learning, and commitment to growth. As we better understand how to be in service to others, this theme of practice is one we hear from leaders around the globe.

A recent conversation with Brendan Johnson, executive director of the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition (GNSC), highlights this idea in a practical manner. Four Simple Words has long admired Brendan and the GNSC for their work in community building, poverty reduction, and front-line equity work. We have especially appreciated and learned from public conversations he has led regarding the individual and collective need to support truth and reconciliation with Indigenous communities. Brendan, who identifies as a cis white male, has impressed many with his ability to engage others in respectful and honest ways.

We wanted to learn from Brendan because we have seen him in action for many years as a community leader. We have long admired his willingness to step into spaces and conversations that others might find challenging and uncomfortable. Brendan has been involved in many public and private conversations including the role of policing in race relations, what true Indigenous reconciliation really demands and the systemic barriers that keep people in poverty. Through his



The Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition (GNSC) is a network of neighbourhood groups, sponsoring agencies and program partners. These three groups work together to share resources and ideas to build strong neighbourhood groups across Guelph. Through GNSC, neighbourhood groups bring together their collective resources to share information, provide support and advocate for community issues. Learn more about the GNSC at guelphneighbourhoods.org

challenging and important work at GNSC, Brendan is helping individuals through daily acts of microservice and at the same time creating system-wide change through advocacy and collaboration. Through it all, Brendan is in service of doing what is right for others. He is a Service Leader.

What we learned from a deep and thoughtful conversation with him is that Brendan’s courage to step into hard conversations is not a one-time act. It is a journey and ongoing commitment and exploration to stand up for equity — even when it’s uncomfortable. He often reflects on critical questions such as, *How am I choosing to lead with love? What gifts can I share to build others?* These questions are not rooted in self-doubt but instead in a purpose-driven mindset that aligns his actions with his values. This continual and honest reflection allows Brendan to identify situations where he can take action, no matter how small. From watching Brendan’s leadership we are reminded that courage — and service — grow with practice.

Much like any other habit we want to build, service is a muscle we need to continually use and stretch. And the more we stretch it, the more and easier it is to use. To adapt the famous quote about priorities: “Don’t tell us what you value, show me what you spend your time practicing and we’ll show you what you value.” The process of getting better at being in service is similar to a daily exercise routine. Start with the 5 lb weights and work your way up. And stretch. A lot.



This courage to keep flexing our service muscles doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s driven by vulnerability, a quality vital in pursuing service and equity. Brendan’s willingness to admit feelings of failure and his ongoing learning about challenges faced by others is not a weakness; it is a source of strength. His authentic concern about putting what is right ahead of what is easy allows him to step into service with confidence. To bring this back to our exercise analogy, this additional time and thought add just the right amount of weight to the next set of reps. By sharing questions about equity and admitting areas of struggle, vulnerability becomes a path to collaboration, new solutions, and impactful service.

What does his service look like in his day-to-day work at GNSC? He shares this example: “Our systems encourage us to buy into the lie of individualism, and I need to push back against that. When our community opened their doors to hundreds of Syrian refugees, the city offered them free transit for a year. There were voices in our community saying, “I have



FOUR
Simple Words

Four Simple Words is building a movement to transform organizations and lives through the power of service. We have seen the future and it is demanding we embrace service as a way to heal ourselves, build sustainable relationships and solve our 21st-century problems. This case study is a gift from Brendan about what it means to be in service to others. Learn more about the four simple words and our passion for service at [FourSimpleWords.ca](https://www.FourSimpleWords.ca).

lived here all my life and need a bus pass; why do they get one and I don't?" When it's presented as a "them vs me," as a community leader, I have to invite people to shift that focus from comparing you and me to understanding the social, economic, and systemic barriers baked into our systems that impact us all and some disproportionately. We can't let the issue be who does and does not get a bus pass. We need to demand that everyone can get where they need to easily and without spending a fortune. Our collective anger shouldn't be focused on other people; it needs to be directed at the systems we are working in. We need to see the big picture in order to move to a better, collective future."

From Brendan's perspective — and what our Four Simple Words research tells us — courage, vulnerability, and equity are deeply interconnected. He is mindful of the many system failures he sees daily and his role within it. However, he doesn't allow this sometimes harsh reality to paralyze him. Instead, it fuels his desire to make meaningful contributions at both the individual and systemic levels. Understanding his place within the system, recognizing his power and influence, and finding practical ways to be of service are motivators for Brendan. It's about the intentional and ongoing pursuit of equity rather than one great act of service that will solve everything.

Reflection is another recurring theme in Brendan's leadership, a practice that allows him to intentionally recognize success and areas for growth. This self-awareness (and embracing [Elsie's wisdom](#) of It's Not About Me) guides his actions, ensuring they align with his values. Regular pauses allow him to focus on what he can do rather than getting caught in the fear of never doing enough or continually failing. Every step counts in this journey, even the small ones.

Throughout our conversation, Brendan's authenticity to genuine service is clear. So is his frustration with the limitations and maddening barriers put in place by the social support system he works in. In spite of that, his commitment to partnership — with individuals needing help *right now* and systems needing long-term change — he embodies is a model for any leader pursuing equity in their work. Brendan's work is a reminder that embracing courage and vulnerability (especially for those with lots of privilege) in the pursuit of equity isn't an insurmountable task. It's about taking small, intentional steps that stretch us just enough to grow without becoming overwhelming.