

**NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES AS SECOND HOMES**

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Funded by SSHRC (Grant No.: 435-2012-1276), the NHIMV project explores the contributions of neighbourhood houses to local communities. Neighbourhood houses have a long history of operation in Vancouver, dating back to 1938. They began as part of the Settlement House Movement made famous in North America by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House. While time and distance have created differences to that early model, the houses remain neighbourhood-based, locally governed, multi-service, community development oriented organizations. Visit [www.nhvproject.ca](http://www.nhvproject.ca) for more information.

This research brief examines a subtheme that emerged from oral history interviews with service providers, volunteers, and board members, who were once service users of NHs. This subtheme stemmed from several themes about the role of neighbourhood houses as “second homes”. The findings below are based on the participants’ oral histories about their personal experiences of neighbourhood houses as their “second home”.

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A total of 40 participants from 11 different neighbourhood houses, who started as service users and became service providers, volunteers or board members, shared their experiences with neighbourhood houses by providing oral history interviews. From an analysis of oral histories, several prominent themes emerged, with multiple subthemes. A subtheme that stemmed from several of the themes concerns neighbourhood houses as second homes. Participants felt the houses were their second homes because they were spaces that provided connection and support, which, in turn, fostered second families and lifelong friendships; there was also intergenerational involvement.

**A Place of Services**

All participants in this study initially began their involvement with NHs as service users. To them, NHs are places that fill service gaps. As a participant from Gordon NH said:

*"I think Gordon House has always traditionally had a place here because we were here to fill the gaps, not create constant whatever, because we're here for the people and what the people needed. If there are people who need something else that they don't have, that community centres don't have, we'll create that program to fill the gap."*

**A Safe Place to Connect**

NHs are more than places that provide services. Participants also shared how they view the houses as breaking social isolation, creating safe spaces, and providing a sense of belonging. As one participant commented:

*"Our lives are newer and so it's just to find ways of getting to know each other; you feel safer and then you have a support system because a lot of us don't have families here necessarily."*

According to another participant:

*"I was feeling safe in this place... Finally, you find a place like Collingwood, where you find support and you find a family, the right place to go. You are very connected, a very strong connection."*

As reflected in their personal experiences, most participants agreed that NHs are places that bring people together. As one participant said:

*"Most of the people I see are living in poverty, but the neighbourhood house sees so many other people so it's neat when people come together. Because some people have things to share and give too and somebody who's living in hard times has things to share with people who are doing really well and people who are doing really well have things to share with other people. I*

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*see the neighbourhood house as a common place where people come together."*

### **A Place for Lifelong Friendships**

Participants also talked about their experiences of finding lifelong friendships and second families at the neighbourhood houses. As one participant illustrated:

*"When you work in a neighbourhood house, you really become close, connected, and they become your family; you're with them so much and your real family gets involved too. All of us were so close and best friends and so it was such a close family. Everybody had such joy. You have a child, you bring the child in. The connections to the people at South Van... They are still my family."*

As the neighbourhood houses provide places for strong friendships to develop, which turn into second families, the houses start to feel even more like participants' second homes. As one participant noted:

*"I think I would still very much be involved in the activities around there because Collingwood is pretty much my second home."*

### **A Second Home for the Family**

NHs are second homes not only to the participants themselves but also to their families. It was very common for participants' family members to become involved in the NHs. A participant shared her family's story with us:

*"You're with them so much and your family gets involved too. They were all so happy when [my son] was born and both the kids went through preschool at South Van neighbourhood house. So, the kids become part of the neighbourhood house too. I mean, even though I am an employee, the whole family embraces the whole culture of the house. I can remember my husband; he volunteered in the early days and he was really involved in helping out and he really believed in the neighbourhood house movement too... My mom's connected too. There's a picture of her in the early days and*

*she's in the kitchen at the church, cooking. Highlights for me are the ways that my family is incorporated into my work and how my children have also been impacted by the neighbourhood house. There are not too many people that have that, where there are family bonds in their work as well."*

Another participant spoke about how the neighbourhood house was a second home for her entire family:

*"They kind of grew up in neighbourhood houses. They were always there, they would come, like, if I didn't finish the job, they walked to the neighbourhood house. We go home together. It was a really homey feeling. It was our second home. During a lot of the evening events we did, I would bring my family. My mom was here. She came to a lot of the family nights and multicultural nights. My husband would come to some of them."*

NHs are also places for people to connect, share with others, and feel at home. An Oak Ave NH participant stated:

*"In my opinion, although we are volunteers, we see ourselves as members of the hub... If anything happens at home, we, as men, will try our best to solve it. We will help without receiving rewards in terms of money or fame. I think that, because we play here, we see everything here as family matters and try our best to solve them."*

A common thread in the participants' oral histories about the neighbourhood houses was in regard to the intergenerational connections at the houses. This spanned from their children, siblings, partners, parents, and even grandchildren. Just as neighbourhood houses provide services for everyone in the community, they also impact multiple generations, often within individual families, showing the ways in which intergenerational involvement contributes to participants experiencing neighbourhood houses as second homes.