

Agata: Passed Through Turbulent Waters, Now Smooth Sailing

Agata Feetham is the Program Director at Gordon Neighbourhood House. She shared her story in February 2015. Agata's journey with the neighbourhood house movement had begun almost fifteen years earlier in 2000 when she was attending UBC and working as a waitress, but hoping to find employment that was more relevant to her field of study, psychology. At the time, a government program called Passport to Education paid eight dollars per hour of volunteer work in tuition credit; Agata volunteered for one hundred hours at the South Vancouver Neighbourhood house homework club and earned eight hundred dollars towards her tuition.

While volunteering at SVNH, Agata saw a posting for a part time childcare worker at for a six week Nobody's Perfect parenting program at Gordon Neighbourhood House and decided to apply; she already knew that she wanted to remain in the neighbourhood house movement. The position required a first aid certificate, so Agata took a first aid course and that's how she met her husband, who was the instructor. While working for the Nobody's Perfect program, she started working in GNH's out of school care. When summer came around Agata was eligible as a university student for a summer camp position that received federal summer jobs funding. For the next four years she worked in out of school care during the school year and did summer camps in the summer time. She recalled fondly that "during that time, I became one of those people at the neighbourhood house that worked in every program I could, and filled in everywhere possible. I literally worked in every program, including the front desk! I did a little bit of everything. The unique thing about that period was the variety of work that I did and how much experience I gained from those positions and how relevant they were to my education, which is exactly what I was looking for! I'm lucky, because a lot of people have to do volunteer work to gain relevant experience and I had a paid job. It paid for my entire tuition back then! Working with children and families, in a non-profit, with diverse and vulnerable populations was the ideal situation, and laid the foundation for my career. I'm really proud of the fact that I have a psychology degree and a job that relates to it! Gordon House is the foundation of that."

Following completion of her BA, Agata enrolled in a one year counselling diploma program because she was still considering a career as a counsellor or psychologist. At the same time, she really enjoyed working in the neighbourhood house. At one point her husband asked her, "What is it that you want to do?" Without any hesitation, Agata replied that she wanted her supervisor's job! In other words, she really wanted to coordinate the family and youth program at GNH. Once she had clarified what she wanted, it was only a matter of time before Agata obtained the position she had wished for. That didn't happen immediately though, because Agata couldn't take on full time work while still in school. In the meantime, she worked at other neighbourhood houses, running a leadership program at BNH and homework club at CNH. She also spent time as a family worker with KidSafe. Agata deeply enjoys working with children and families, as well as with immigrants. Her family had immigrated to Canada from Poland when Agata was a young child, and she believes that coming from an immigrant background enables her to come from a place of understanding in her work with immigrant families. On top of her work at other neighbourhood houses, Agata maintained her place on the GNH payroll by taking on different tasks, such as driving shifts. At one point she applied for a position as seniors and

volunteer program coordinator even though it wasn't what she really wanted. The neighbourhood house staff also knew that and understood that the reason she'd applied for that position was to stay at GNH, because she loved working here so much. Finally, in March 2005, three months after Agata finished school, her dream coordinator position came up again and neighbourhood house staff encouraged her to apply.

Only twenty-four at the time, sensitive Agata was so nervous that she threw up when she was applying for the job. She recalled, "I was literally sick in my husband's elevator going up to print my resume and cover letter. It was awful!" At the same time, she also remembers feeling happy and excited. However, she couldn't shake her awareness that the position, which involved overseeing a number of programs, represented a significant step up from working with children, and for Agata that was a frightening prospect. She noted, "It was a huge learning curve for me and it took about six months before I stopped feeling sick at work." Although Agata lacked confidence in herself, the other neighbourhood house staff knew that she could handle the job and, over the years, Agata has grown into the position. She is particularly grateful for the support that she received from two long term staff, noting, "Jessie and Linda have been here since the beginning for me and they're like family members." She added, "There were a lot of things like meetings with other organizations, grant writing, report writing, supervising staff, hiring staff - firing staff! that I had never done before, so it was a big jump! I was so flattered when Linda said, 'Agata can do that. She can do this job!' I'm thankful to her for having that confidence in me. I learned so much in that first year. Linda always told me, 'Don't worry! We'll help you!' And they did! I quickly learned how to delegate - a very important leadership skill that I hadn't understood before. Linda has been here so long, she knows everything; she mentored me and helped me. She got me through that year. Once I got past that first stressful year, the second year was a breeze in comparison. That's when I was able to implement new things, or change things that didn't work the previous year. As a twenty-five year old, I was really proud of myself."

Agata mused, "And now I've been here for ten years! I've always wanted to be here. The position has changed and grown: I was hired as the family and youth program coordinator, then it changed to family and youth program manager, and now program director. With Paul, the new ED, I'm learning even more than I have in the past. I look forward to coming to work every day. I can't believe how lucky I am!"

Agata described the subsequent four years until her daughter was born in 2009 as a plateau characterized by profound enjoyment of her job. Life was proceeding smoothly. She explained what happened next: "A lot of stuff happened in my personal life: I got engaged, married, and had kids. There was a rough period after my first daughter was born. I enjoyed a smooth work life, but meanwhile there was a lot going on in my personal life. I took fifteen months off for my mat leave and then came back full-time. As a new mom, it was a real challenge to balance childcare and work full-time, drive my daughter to my mother's for the day, then go to GNH, pick her up again after work, and back home. It made for very long days. On top of being a new mother and feeling unprepared for all that entailed, when my daughter was eight months old we bought a house that required significant renovations. At GNH though, everything was going smoothly and that stability helped me get through the challenges I was dealing with at home.

GNH was always a safe place; it was a place where I could be myself and get support. That helped a lot.”

Eventually Agata’s home life settled down. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean that all was well. As she described, “Then things switched around again. There was a balance and happiness at home, but meanwhile at GNH John, the ED, got sick, so work was sad and stressful and uncertain; it was a more stable life at home, but turbulent times at Gordon House.” After John left, Agata, Linda, and Julio shared responsibility for the ED position by dividing the tasks amongst themselves until a new person came on temporarily. Finally Paul Taylor joined GNH as the new ED. Less than three months later, Agata went on her second mat leave.

Agata described her twelve month mat leave: “It was amazing. Second time around was just the best, and it went by so quickly! I remained connected to Gordon House: I went out for lunch with Jessie and Linda and I came to the playgroups, so that was nice. Finally, I emailed Paul to let him know that I preferred to come back to work part-time, if possible. He didn’t think twice. He said, ‘No problem! We’ll make it work.’ When Agata returned from her second maternity leave in 2014, she became the program director in charge of family, children, youth, adult, seniors and newcomer programs. She also got to know her new ED. She recalled, ‘When I got back and started getting to know Paul, there would be days that Linda and I would close the door and say to each other, ‘Can you believe how lucky we are to have Paul?’ Everyone was so happy because it was exactly what we’d needed. We had felt for some time that we were treading water, just trying to stay afloat. Whereas now we’re growing, flourishing, and doing amazing stuff that makes us super excited.” She added, “I don’t know if there are any more ways I can express how much I appreciate Paul’s flexibility and understanding. He totally gets that I have kids and that if something happens, then I need to be at home. That’s priceless. I have that perfect balance that I have always wanted and I’m really happy - I’m in a place where I’m happy at home and I’m happy at work. It’s a good place to be!”

Agata explained that GNH is also an important part of her family. She stated, “I brought my older daughter in for our strike camp when the teachers were on strike, as well as to day camps, and special events. And now I come with my younger daughter to the mom and tot drop in. Even though I live in Kits, I don’t go to a Kits group - I come here because I know Mary Jane, the facilitator, who’s been here for many years. She’s the best. I also know a lot of the moms and the caregivers who come to the group. There’s one mom whose kids are fifteen and twelve, and I’ve known her kids since they were little. It’s like a big family. It’s my second home and these people are my second family. I think that’s such a blessing.”

Over the years, the moments that really stand out for Agata involve losing people, whether because they left for another job or because their funding ran out - as happened with Julio, who used to run the Youth Search program. Agata recalled that losing Youth Search and the people who were part of it was extremely hard and very emotional for all the staff. She added, “Probably the most difficult was when our previous ED had a stroke and was not able to continue as ED. He was such a good person. When you love the place you work and the people you work with, and you lose them, it’s heartbreaking.”

Of course there have been many happy moments as well. Agata described some of her most significant achievements, such as organizing the block party. Although it made Agata sick to her stomach for four months each year because it took so much work to put together, she recalled happily the pride and sense of accomplishment that she felt when the block party was successfully concluded. "It isn't just big events that are important though," Agata emphasized, "When I see a room full of people getting together and enjoying themselves, that brings me such joy. It's what we're here for. The best part of my job is seeing firsthand the difference we can make in people's lives. There have been numerous examples over the years where there was a single mom or a family, or recent immigrants, who we were able to support. And they come back and say 'Gordon House saved my life!' Or, 'Gordon House changed my life!'"

Agata described some of the changes that GNH has gone through over the years, especially since Paul came on board: "For the eight years before Paul arrived, my schedule was a regular yearly schedule. Now, not a single day is the same as the previous one. There's so much going on, so much buzz. So many positive things have happened in the last two years. I always felt like GNH was a small player in the community, but since Paul has come on, people are looking to us for advice and support, and we're doing all these cool things that no one else is doing! I love that we're doing things that are different and make us stand out." She continued, "Paul is so passionate about the work that he does and it's obvious that he's happy to be here. So we're all happy to be here, too. He's so encouraging and supportive and doesn't put pressure on us – he'll say, "Well, we'll do what we can!" And so we're like, 'Okay!' And we just keep going. He's always thanking us: "Thank you for all the work you do. We have such a great team!" And we're like, "We have a great leader!" We wouldn't be who we are without his leadership. We do so much work, but we have such fun doing it. We work together as a team: everybody has their position, but everyone pitches in and helps each other out."

Agata has also changed over the years. She explained, "I used to live in fear of the future. I used to worry all the time about what was going to happen. That gave me a lot of anxiety. But with age and children, I have seen that things just work out, in both my professional and my private life. I've stopped hoping that nothing will ever go wrong: instead I pray for strength when things do go wrong." Agata describes herself as a spiritual person; spirituality provides a sense of calm and gratitude and she is thankful every day for what she has: "I have my wonderful life at home, my family, wonderful friends. I have this amazing job. But I also have friends at my workplace, so it's a social life as well."

Reflecting on her personal and professional development, Agata credited Gordon Neighbourhood House with providing her with a career path. In addition, GNH also supported her financially in continuing her education with a certificate program on non-profit sector management at the Justice Institute, as well as regular attendance at conferences and workshops. She also has many close friends at work. It is not surprising, therefore, that Agata has no plans to go elsewhere. She exclaimed, "Where am I going to go? I'm retiring from here! Why would I ever leave - I love this place! There's no salary that can replace the family that I have here, and the support and the love. No amount of money can take me away from this." However,

Agata may consider a different position at GNH. Inspired by Paul, she has considered that she may possibly one day think about becoming an ED. “But,” she emphasized, “not for at least ten years, given how much there is to learn and the age of my kids. I’m not at that level yet, so for now I just follow Paul and learn!”

Agata views her contribution to GNH as arising from her close relationships with staff and participants. She is open, understanding, passionate, compassionate, and easy to get along with, which contributes to the overall welcoming atmosphere. While she was away recently, GNH staff and participants made her a handmade card. Reading the card during the interview brought tears to Agata’s eyes: “They wrote, ‘We love you!’ and, ‘You’re the best!’ and, ‘Thank you for your smile!’ ‘I’m so lucky to work with you,’ ‘Thanks for bringing joy, smarts, passion and smiles to our work!’ ‘Thanks for caring for us!’ ‘We missed you!’” She added, “This makes me feel very emotional because I realise that people feel the same way about me as I feel about them. I don’t make this place better - we all make it better, and I’m part of it. My passion for the work means that I genuinely care about the people that we work with, and the community. It’s not just a paid job, it’s a big deal. That shows through in my work. I fit into the puzzle that we are. It’s a good team and everyone just fits – we’re like a well-oiled machine, and I’m proud to be just one part of it.”