

Cassandra: Coming of Age

Twenty-one year old Cassandra Ly is a board member of Collingwood Neighbourhood House and also a busy student in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems at UBC. She had already been involved with neighbourhood houses for ten years when she shared her story in an interview in November 2014. Cassandra's introduction to neighbourhood houses began in elementary school when her mother enrolled her in several after school programs at Kiwassa NH. The experience made a deep and lasting impression on her, although it wouldn't be until many years later that she would be able to renew the connection to KwNH. Meanwhile, as a result of their initially unstable financial situation, the family moved several times while Cassandra was young. Cassandra attended three different elementary schools, and a number of programs at different neighbourhood houses. Despite the challenges of frequent moves, Cassandra acknowledges that she was privileged to have had a place to live and the opportunity to attend school. She stated, "It was pretty tough, but reflecting back now, it was a good learning experience. Becoming an adult and understanding the barriers and challenges that my parents went through, I am very grateful to them."

Looking back on her experiences as a young person participating in neighbourhood house after school programs, Cassandra realised that the program benefitted not only her, but also her mother. Although Cassandra was born in Canada, her parents came to Canada as immigrants. When they arrived, they spoke only Cantonese and Vietnamese, so the neighbourhood house programs were extremely helpful in assisting them to navigate the Canadian education system and meet new people. In other words, the programs not only met Cassandra's needs for fun and engaging learning experiences and interaction with other children, but also those of her parents. She explained, "Neighbourhood houses really allow families to just be comfortable in a welcoming space. I remember my mom would be comfortable leaving us at the neighbourhood house. She would go home and then come back to pick us up later. Her feeling comfortable to let us be alone there sent us a really strong message that a neighbourhood house is a safe place to be."

When Cassandra was in Grade 8 her family moved to Renfrew Collingwood, and at that point she became involved with CNH through the Peer Prevention Education program, which brought elementary and high school students together to work on social issues around the community and to build capacity and facilitation skills among students. Her brother and sister also volunteered with that program. Later, Cassandra enrolled in the leadership program at Windermere Secondary School. Through these experiences she developed new friendships and a strong passion for food security and food-related social justice work, which led her to volunteer at the Renfrew-Collingwood Food Security Institute, which is located at CNH.

When she was nineteen, Cassandra returned to KwNH to work as paid staff on an elementary school food program that involved cooking and gardening. The program developed Cassandra's leadership abilities and she enjoyed the challenge of coming up with a great plan for every week that ensured the program was always fun, inclusive, and accessible. Despite her busy schedule,

Cassandra makes herself available whenever youth need her, and offers as much time and commitment as she can to different initiatives that promote community development.

As a result of Cassandra's demonstrated commitment to CNH and the community, Paula Carr and Jennifer Gray-Grant invited her to sit on the CNH Board as one of three youth representatives. She has completed two one-year terms and is contemplating running for a third term. Cassandra explained, "It's been a really amazing experience learning about the operational side of how a neighbourhood house works - a lot of work goes into it by all the amazing people behind the scenes who make it run so efficiently and effectively. It's also great being able to connect with other board members, given all their experience and expertise." If she doesn't run for the board again, Cassandra will maintain her involvement with CNH in some other way; as she emphasized, "Collingwood Neighbourhood House is my second home."

Cassandra's work with neighbourhood houses extends beyond CNH. She organizes a Vancouver Youth Food Policy Council that meets at CKNH, and is also working on a project with GNH. The program at GNH is part of her course work at UBC, and consists of a Community-based Experiential Learning Project that involves partnering with GNH to run a food demonstration event at which neighbours can drop by to learn quick, easy recipes.

Whether participating in programs, leading activities or engaging informally with community members, what Cassandra appreciates most about neighbourhood houses is the diversity of people that she encounters, how safe and comfortable neighbourhood houses are, and how they ensure that community members' needs are met with programs that are low-cost or free. She elaborated, "The main highlight is seeing how many different community members are so comfortable walking into a neighbourhood house to grab a cup of coffee or participate in different programs and activities. Take KWNH for example: there are a couple of couches to sit on, there's free coffee, and just a welcoming space that is offered to people." Cassandra also deeply appreciates seeing how community members take ownership of neighbourhood house programs. She noted, "Collingwood Neighbourhood House focuses on ensuring that they tap into the resources and assets of community members, having them lead the activities rather than taking a top down approach of 'This is how we're going to help you.' Instead, they have the community members say, 'This is how I would like to be supported and what activities I would like to take part in.'" Cassandra has firsthand experience of taking ownership of a program and the sense of accomplishment and fulfilment that offers. For example, she volunteered at a cooking program and then later assisted at a canning training session led entirely by community members. Each experience developed her leadership abilities while also teaching her useful skills.

Many people from CKNH, CNH, and SVNH have influenced Cassandra's professional and personal development and nurtured her growing passion for food justice and youth advocacy. As a result of that mentorship, most of Cassandra's work in neighbourhood houses has been connected with food justice work, including advocacy, and working with young people. Cassandra comes from a large family and has a lot of younger cousins. She noted, "I never go too long without interacting with kids and I love hanging out with them. Throughout my journey with neighbourhood houses working with kids and youth has definitely been one of the highlights of my experience."

Considering the contribution of neighbourhood houses to her personal development, Cassandra noted, “Being involved in neighbourhood houses has taught me a lot – for example, that I want to give back and support the community members who have taught me. Also, I’ve learned to become more patient, understanding, and supportive through working with community members and really learning from them... a lot of the learning experiences that I’ve had with neighbourhood houses involves learning directly from community members, so listening skills have been a huge part as well. Collaborating, problem-solving, developing and sharing different opinions - I’ve learned countless things from working with neighbourhood houses, especially with community members.”

Her work with neighbourhood houses has also influenced Cassandra’s career path. In fact, she recently prepared a five-year plan as part of a school assignment and, based on her passion for food justice and neighbourhood houses, her initial career goal is to work at a neighbourhood house after graduation. Ideally, Cassandra explained, she would like to develop programs, workshops, and activities related to food, especially for seniors, immigrant families, and children and youth. In terms of her contribution to the neighbourhood house, Cassandra believes that she brings a multi-disciplinary approach to her programs and to the support that she provides to youth.

In addition to continuing the amazing work they already do, Cassandra has a long term vision for neighbourhood houses. She suggested, “Neighbourhood houses have so much potential to address hard issues that we often don’t talk about, which are stigmatized. I’m referring to some of the systemic problems that communities face, such as racism, sexism, ageism, economic challenges, and what it means for communities to live on the unceded, ancestral territories of the Coast Salish peoples. I see the potential for neighbourhood houses to offer space where people are able to come together, not only to share and celebrate the happy things, but also to seek solutions for the not-so-happy things, and to break down barriers that stigmatize different issues, thereby ensuring that people know that they are not alone in these experiencing these issues. That’s the vision I have.” Cassandra is also interested in connecting with communities that do not have a neighbourhood house in their area and perhaps lack the capacity to develop one. She offered, “Bridging those gaps would be really interesting, and I’d like to explore how I can put my time and energy into that.”

Cassandra concluded with some thoughts on what she likes best about neighbourhood houses: “I find the beauty of neighbourhood houses in the reciprocation of knowledge and experiences and the sharing of skills - doing everything together is what makes me love the neighbourhood houses and spend so much time in them. It’s always so nice when you go in and see a familiar face and you give them a big hug like things haven’t changed even if you haven’t seen them for a while. It’s the community members that make neighbourhood houses so worthwhile; it’s the people that bring me back.”