

Jennifer: Follow Your Heart

Jennifer Gray-Grant is the executive director of Collingwood Neighbourhood House. Her journey with CNH began over twenty years ago, just after she moved into a housing co-op up the street from the NH. Jennifer told her story in an interview in November 2014. She began by describing how the initial connection with the neighbourhood house came about: "I found out that CNH was organizing a meeting on neighbourhood safety and I attended with my baby daughter because I was concerned about safety in my neighbourhood. While pregnant, I had done some gardening at the co-op and come across a needle. I was really freaked out and I put it in the garbage, which I shouldn't have done, but I didn't know better at the time...and then I found another one - threw it in the garbage. Then another one. I thought, 'What have I done? What kind of place have I moved into?' So I had some concerns that I wanted to discuss. While I was at the meeting with my daughter in my lap, a woman came up to me and said, 'Oh hi, would you like me to take your child? We have a child-minding room just across the hallway.' I worked out of my home, and my husband and I traded off working and child care so I wasn't used to the idea of somebody else looking after my child, so I thought, 'No way.' I declined her offer, but then she came back and said, 'How about I get some toys and bring them here?' So then I said, 'Who are you? Why do you want my child? Why is it so important to you?' 'I am so sorry,' she said, 'I am Paula Carr, the executive director of the neighbourhood house.' I remember thinking, 'The executive director babysits? This is bizarre.' But now I understand: if that's what's needed, that's what you do! So I finally agreed and we put the blanket down, my daughter was very happy, and I was able to participate properly in the meeting. In fact, the neighbourhood safety meeting turned out to be very influential. They had such a diverse group of people there to talk about safety, including the health centre, policing centre, someone in addictions, and the BIA. Previously, my attitude had been, 'Don't you just bring in the cops if people are committing criminal offences?' So that was starting to teach me that there's a different way of approaching problems successfully. At the time, I didn't know what a neighbourhood house was, so that was my introduction to the neighbourhood house approach."

Jennifer described her second interaction with the neighbourhood house: "A short while after I moved to this neighbourhood, a federal election came up, so I looked for the all candidates meeting for our riding. I come from a very political family and my father was one of the organizers of all candidates meetings. When I was twelve, my family bought a newspaper and I grew up working on the paper and learning about all levels of politics, especially civic politics. In fact, my earliest memory is of attending a social credit rally in Kerrisdale in 1963 when I was three years old. That background had left me very interested in politics. I found out that the all candidates meeting was at Collingwood Neighbourhood House, so I grabbed a few people from the co-op and we walked down - me, my husband, and maybe six of my neighbours. There weren't many people in attendance and there were a lot of candidates running; in fact, there were more candidates in attendance than people in the audience! I thought, 'This is not right.' So the next time an election came around, I got on the phone and organized the meeting myself. I chaired the meeting and it was really successful - the room was packed. I had some volunteers but it was really a lot of work. While I was working on organizing the meeting, the CNH ED, Paula, heard about it and phoned me to ask if I needed any help. I said it would be great if someone could help poster - and she arranged that. So I started to get a better idea of what a neighbourhood houses was. And then - I'll

never forget this – she came to the meeting and she had brought a senior with her; she had picked her up and driven her there and then was planning to drive her home. That in itself was amazing. But then, at the end of the meeting, Paula came up to me and said, ‘That was fantastic! Is there anything else you need?’ And I answered, ‘Yeah, a scotch!’ I was joking, but she replied seriously, ‘Okay, I have to drive Mrs. Whoever home first, and then I’ll stop at the liquor store.’ So all the way through, she was thinking, ‘How can I support this woman by whatever means?’ As a result, I began to get a sense of the kind of caring that neighbourhood houses provide.”

Meanwhile, Jennifer pursued a career in journalism and communications, and volunteered extensively in the community and at her children’s schools. She explained, “I had worked as a journalist and had always done lot of volunteer work, because that’s how I was raised. After I moved to this neighbourhood, I worked on contract for about a year and a half doing communications for the BC School Trustee Association. I went into the office almost full-time. Then I became pregnant with my son and around the same time, they cut the job in half. I began working more from home and picked up more contracts, including one doing communications for the City of Vancouver drug policy, and I did more volunteer work as well. I was chair of the landscape committee in the co-op for several years and I sat on to the board of the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC (CHF). When my daughter started school, I became chair of the Parents Advisory Council. When the kids changed schools to attend a fine arts program, I joined the fine arts parents committee and then became chair of the PAC for that school. When my daughter reached Grade 5, I started thinking about how she would lose the fine arts program in high school. I checked the original motion by the school board and found that they had said there would be a transition to secondary school. Then I approached one of the Associate Superintendents at Vancouver School Board and we put together a committee and created a matrix; three schools put together proposals and we selected Windermere. In Grade 7, we formed another committee and worked with Windermere to implement the plan, and then in Grade 8, I got involved in the PAC and worked on the implementation.”

With her professional experience and obvious passion for community work, it’s no surprise that Jennifer was eventually offered work at CNH. She recalled, “Paula phoned me and wanted to me to come in and chat about an opportunity. My kids were still quite young at the time, so I told her, ‘I’d like to, but I don’t know what to do with the kids,’ and she replied, ‘No problem, I’ll come to your house.’ Through that she taught me a lot about the way neighbourhood houses work – how flexible they are.” Jennifer continued, “The first contract was related to housing. I was on the board at CHF and really interested in housing issues. Around that time, the new neighbourhood house was built as part of the mandatory contribution for the development of Collingwood Village. The developer realized that they were tapping out the condo market and so they were looking at other ways of building. Paula got some money to look at what kind of housing was needed in this neighbourhood; she contacted me and I prepared a report for the board. That got my feet into the neighbourhood house. When I made my presentation to the board, I noticed how diverse the board was and I can remember realizing that each person on the board knew who they represented. And that was okay; they didn’t have to try and blend into something else. Boards I’d been on before had been more focused on what members have in common, whereas the neighbourhood house model was based on an ideal of ‘strength in diversity.’ That taught me a lot -

it wasn't about quashing differences; it was that there was a need to consider the makeup of the neighbourhood and have that reflected in the board."

Jennifer also shared another important memory from that time: "There's one thing I will never forget because it was tremendously moving to me. For the housing contract, I was often at the neighbourhood house and so the staff would see me around. I was also a program user because I brought my kids to gymnastics, which they loved, and I appreciated because it was inexpensive and very local. I didn't have much to do with the internal workings of the neighbourhood house, although I did a bit of volunteer work announcing stuff at the annual art auction, and every time there was an election I did the all candidates meeting. Then my dad died and I remember getting this card in the mail, signed by all these people from the neighbourhood house. Some of them I didn't even know. Wow, I was just so touched by that. It taught me something about neighbourhood houses, and it also showed that the staff knew me better than I knew them. That was the first time I felt like I was really part of the neighbourhood house. A card may be a small thing, but it matters. People need to hear that others are thinking of them. You don't even have to know them. But to know that all those people would take a few moments just to think positive thoughts for you really makes a difference."

Over time, Jennifer's connection to CNH continued to grow. She explained, "A couple of years later Paula got in touch with me again with a project looking at the potential of expanding the neighbourhood small grants project to this neighbourhood. That project was a continuing contract and it taught me a lot about the neighbourhood house way of doing things. Also, working more closely with the staff made me feel more a part of the neighbourhood house; I was building something and reaching deeper into the neighbourhood and into the neighbourhood house as well. That was really exciting."

Jennifer was also brought in to lead or mediate controversial meetings at the neighbourhood house. She related the following anecdotes: "The neighbourhood house was starting a program for homeless people to come in on Saturdays and Wednesdays for a shower, clothing, a meal, and nurse outreach. There was a push-back from Wednesday childcare parents, who did not like seeing homeless people, mainly men, some with mental health issues, around the neighbourhood house while they were dropping off their children because they felt that their presence raised safety concerns. The neighbourhood house needed someone to come in and mediate a meeting between staff and childcare parents. The parents were very upset and there were also some bad feelings among staff. For example, a staff person who had been homeless was heading up the program. So it was a difficult situation. Ultimately, the neighbourhood house decided to have the homeless program on Saturday only and it's worked out very well."

She continued, "Later, another controversial issue came up. The issue involved Living In Community, a city-wide group looking at safety around sex work; we were chosen as a neighbourhood to explore creating a neighbourhood model that would ensure safety for sex workers, residents, and businesses, and allow all to co-exist. I was hired to be the community development person to develop a plan for Collingwood. We didn't know what the response would be but it turned out to be a fantastic model. The project involved a lot of consultation and

provision of information ahead of time. It was a question of finding something that would work for everybody. We hired an outside facilitator and brought together a really diverse steering committee that included current and former sex workers. Eventually, the steering committee created a 'kitchen table' discussion format that we took out to the neighbourhood; it allowed people to express their ideas, really talk through them and they felt better. People were very honest and we were able to come up with a consensus. I learned that when you give people information, quite often the fears recede and the compassion comes out. Collaboration and relationships are key. Pushing doesn't work. Pushing people, sex workers out of a neighbourhood doesn't work. We all knew that. So the question was, how do we co-exist in a way that people can thrive? Problems arise when you impose things on people, and it's just basic respect to involve the people who would be impacted." Jennifer concluded, "These one off projects were really interesting and fulfilling because each one presented its own special challenge."

Jennifer elaborated on how she overcame another challenge that she faced at the neighbourhood house: "One contract that I took on shortly before I started as executive director required a logic model, which I wasn't familiar with at the time. Now, this speaks to the way I approach work - I got on the internet, found out what a logic model is and created one, and then got some examples of others from here to make sure I was doing the right thing. To a great extent, for many of the contracts I took on, it was a question of learning as I went along and being open to learning. Sometimes I think that perhaps I should have gone to school and studied community development and executive leadership, but I didn't, and I think there are strengths and weaknesses attached to that."

Eventually, the work that Jennifer was doing at the neighbourhood house and as a volunteer led her to the executive director position. She explained what happened: "I was doing community development without using the language, which I didn't know. I really enjoyed that work, which I called my 'paid work with heart.' But it didn't occur to me that I would end up leading a neighbourhood house. What happened was this: BC School Trustees made my position into a full-time job and I realized that I didn't want it. They were really surprised when I turned it down. I myself was thinking, 'Agghh, what have I done!' Later, I discovered that's the way life works. The same night that I turned down the job, Paula emailed me saying that she was doing a course on executive mid-career coaching. I didn't even ask for more information, I just hit reply and said, 'I am in.' And so I started doing coaching with her. And through that coaching, we had long talks because I had to write out my personal values, and my personal and financial goals, and do research around positions of employment. So she was hearing all these things from me. That work was also really valuable because I was getting inside the neighbourhood house as an organization and understanding more about how the staffing works and the work culture. Before that I'd simply been a contractor. Then Paula asked me if I could do part of her work, so that she would have time to look into the idea of a social enterprise for the neighbourhood house. After a number of months, she announced that she was planning to leave the executive director position, which left me thinking about applying for it. I really had to think about it because I wasn't sure whether I wanted to give up my current lifestyle. But then I was also having a bit of a crisis because I was approaching fifty and still doing contract work. I thought, 'This is an amazing opportunity - do I want to keep doing contracts for the rest of my working life? Do I want to go back into full-time

work?’ And then I decided, ‘Yes, this is what I want.’ And I made it! I was so excited to get the position because once I decided I wanted it, then I worked very hard on my application because I wanted to make sure it was my vision. That was four years ago in September 2010. Ultimately, it was a case of my heart and my values leading me to where I needed to be, and where I was meant to be. It was a very organic process, which is very ‘neighbourhood house.’”

Jennifer elaborated on one of the values that led her to her current position - collaboration: “There’s such value in collaboration because one of the things that comes out of collaboration is trust of the people you work with. If you trust one another, then you can take on controversial topics and challenges and start looking at how to come up with approaches, not necessarily solutions, that everyone can live with, and that may result in harmony around the issue. I think my communications background is very helpful in this respect. Relationships are the key to everything, but you really have to work hard on those relationships and continually nurture them.” Jennifer’s emphasis on relationships has also influenced the way she carries out her day to day work as ED. She related, “One of the first things I started doing unconsciously when I started here was keeping my office door open. I felt that people should feel welcome to come in and chat, and that it would be really important to form relationships. So I kept my door open virtually all the time unless I needed to have a private conversation. When I had my first evaluation, I heard how much people appreciated my ‘open-door policy.’ I was thinking, ‘I have a policy?’ It comes back to doing things instinctively - I was just doing what I do naturally.”

While allowing her instincts to lead her, Jennifer also admits that she has learned a great deal through her work at CNH. She elaborated, “One very important thing I’ve come to learn is that it’s not about the product; it’s about the process. Sometimes the process is the goal or the product. And the relationship is a part of that. I’d always been goal-orientated and hadn’t consciously thought about process as much as I have in the neighbourhood house context. When I was a contractor, I had deliverables. In many cases, there was a process but I wasn’t as conscious of it until I came here. That changed me for the better because it creates a richer experience for everybody involved. It’s not just about establishing a protocol; it’s about involving people in that process. ‘You don’t speak English? Okay, we’ll get you a translator.’ ‘You don’t want to come to the neighbourhood house? Okay, we’ll come to you,’ - just like Paula came to my house when I had two young kids. It’s about recognizing and meeting people where they’re at, in order to involve them. Last year I was on the Mayor’s task force on civic engagement and that was really important to me because I realized even more deeply how engagement can happen at a neighbourhood level.” She added, “I’ve also gained a much greater understanding of immigrants’ experiences here in Canada, of the fear, isolation, loneliness, and difficulty of getting established. How do you live in a completely different culture and feel you are yourself? I hadn’t expected that from this job and it’s been a gift. As a result, I am now even more aware of how important it is to have something like a neighbourhood house where you are totally accepted and you can be part of processes that affect you.”

Considering the value of living and working in the same neighbourhood when one is engaged in community development, Jennifer offered the following reflection: “This job allows me the opportunity to improve my neighbourhood for people living in the neighbourhood. I think it adds

to my work here that I live in the neighbourhood - things matter more - and it makes a difference to people to know that many of our staff live in the neighbourhood and therefore what we do also impacts us. I think this is also a contribution that I make to the neighbourhood house. There's something about living in the neighbourhood and raising kids in the neighbourhood - you become aware of resources and networks. So I bring a live-in-this-neighbourhood experience that's quite valuable because it gets at a deeper level of issues around the neighbourhood and who should be around the table. I feel very proud of the work that we do here as a group, as a neighbourhood."

Jennifer loves the challenges that working at CNH presents to her every day. She explained, "Somebody told me that throughout your life as you take on each new job, it should be the hardest thing you've ever done because that means you are challenging yourself. If it continues to be easy, then you're not developing as an individual. Taking on new challenges is really exciting, but it is hard. Some days I come in here and just throw out my plan for the day because so many different things happen, which is what makes it a really fun job. But it also tests me every day right to my limit. However, I decided before I started that I wasn't going to pretend that I know something if I don't, so if I don't know something I say, 'I don't know, let's try and find out together,' or we talk it through. The other thing I've come to understand is that I don't need to do it all. I've got really great people I can count on; everybody does their piece. Assembling a great team is also part of leadership."

When asked about her future plans, Jennifer replied, "I am coming round to the second, third, fourth, fifth time doing things. That really helps a lot. I remember when I took the job, a friend of mine who's an executive director in a different sector told me that it would take three years before I would feel that I really understood what's going on, and that only in my fourth or fifth year would I be able to implement significant changes based on my experience. And I think that was about right because the job has such breadth and depth to it. I don't see myself going anywhere for a long time, if ever. I enjoy coming into an office and having a split between my home life and my work life, which I didn't have for eighteen years when I was doing contract work out of my home and raising kids. Now I need that split because when I am here, I am so here. It's long hours and very intense. At the same time, my personal history is very wrapped up in the neighbourhood house because the neighbourhood house has become an integral part of who I am."