

Jodi: All-Inclusive Kiwassa

Jodi MacDonald is a casual cook at Kiwassa Neighbourhood House. The position involves working for Breakfast Clubs of Canada to provide snacks for the afterschool children and preteen programs, as well as feeding attendees at the daycare and family place drop in programs. Jodi also volunteers for the food bank. When she shared her story in an interview in March 2015, she had been working at KwNH for around nine years. She explained how she first got connected with the neighbourhood house almost fourteen years earlier, when her oldest son was six months old: "I was up at Pandora Park and I ran into a woman who had a baby close to the same age as mine and we started talking. I was going up to Longhouse for their food bank. I knew nothing about Kiwassa. I lived over at Nanaimo and Eaton, literally a block away, but nobody had told me about it. The woman in the park told me, "Oh, you need to come! There's a really nice family drop-in program for babies and there's this, that, and the other!" So I went and checked it out and - oh my God! It was amazing. Then I started doing the Nobody's Perfect program and Mother Goose and all these other programs that tied me to the neighbourhood house." Jodi continued, "Then in 2003, shortly after my youngest was born, I started an employment program called Take Charge and before it ended I found employment doing childcare. I did that for a while, and I was still coming here. I also started volunteering for Food Bank around that time."

Jodi described how she made the switch from volunteering to paid employment at KwNH, "The daycare had asked a friend of mine if she wanted to be the cook for daycare. She had a baby and she couldn't take the position, but she told them, 'You know, Jodi grew up in group homes and knows how to cook for large numbers of people.' It's true! I simply cannot cook for less than fifteen people! I always have to invite neighbours over to eat dinner because I cook too much and I personally can't stand to eat leftovers! I'd have all the different kids that I watched, and parents would be coming and going, and I would tell everybody, 'Here! Eat, eat, eat! Please, eat!' My boyfriend will walk in the kitchen when I'm cooking and be like, 'You realize there's only four of us, right?'" She joked, "I don't know how it happens, I swear I've only taken two onions out and all of a sudden I've got this mound of onions and it's like okay, Tupperware! Anyway, I did an interview and I got the position and that's what I've been doing ever since; it's a paid position but it was initially more of a volunteer honorarium thing." Jodi continued, "Five or six years ago Kiwassa created the Foods program, which has made a world of difference. Stacy has figured out how to get fresh produce coming into our food bank and that helps our clients a whole lot. We've actually started up a second food bank through the Saige program and it's almost all fresh produce. It's made a world of difference in this place, and for my family as well, because the kids are actually getting nutritious foods rather than some chicken strips thrown into the oven from a box. And they're not having cereal every morning for breakfast. It works a lot better."

Jodi not only works and volunteers at Kiwassa, she also lives there, along with her two sons, aged fourteen and twelve, as well as four guinea pigs, two gerbils and two cats. They don't live in the neighbourhood house itself, but in the housing next door. In fact, Jodi's favourite memory is getting the phone call saying that she had an apartment. She described how it came about: "I got in to the housing because I have two special needs kids. Back then, they were very hard to manage and I was literally having a nervous breakdown out front one day because I was having trouble finding a one bedroom place that would take all three of us. I could no longer afford the two bedroom I was in; my parents had been helping me pay the rent but couldn't afford to do so anymore. I was at the point of having to move into my parents' tiny house on a gulf island, which was not going to work at all! So I was crying out front and the housing manager saw me and asked what was going on. Then a month later a family in a three bedroom unit moved out. Due to our circumstances - two special needs kids, plus I have epilepsy and am bipolar - we got bumped up the list because we needed support, and so we got in. Because both boys are both special needs and my youngest is an insomniac and he has autism, we were entitled to a three bedroom unit. Getting into housing was a huge

game changer for me and the boys.” However, living next to Kiwassa has its ups and downs. Jodi laughed, “Sometimes a substitute staff at the front will call me on the weekend if somebody needs to get into the kitchen or doesn’t know where something is and I’ll run over in my pyjamas!”

The KwNH daycare was also a strong support for Jodi. She elaborated, “It’s a great daycare. My youngest son got kicked out of kindergarten. Everybody says you can’t get expelled from kindergarten, but you can. I put him into the daycare here and they were great! They could calm him down and they are so sweet! The support worker for Family Place, Penny, has been here longer than anybody I know and she’s wonderful. My youngest, Matthew, screamed all the time as a baby. I’d walk in, hand him over to Penny, go outside to have a smoke, and he would shut right up. She was the ‘Matthew-whisperer.’”

Having lived in the neighbourhood for many years, Jodi understands the challenges that local residents face. She has also passed through difficult times and, as a result, brings a deep level of understanding to her interactions with KwNH program participants. She recalled, “I grew up all over Burnaby and Coquitlam, living in group homes through my teenage years. When I aged out of care I moved into an apartment over on Triumph and Templeton, then to Eaton and Nanaimo, and now I’m here at Kiwassa, so I’ve been in this particular neighbourhood for sixteen years now.” Jodi described her life before KwNH, “I came from the system. The month before I turned nineteen I was literally told to sink or swim; I was put into an apartment and advised, ‘This is how much money you get each month.’ It’s horrible to go from having somebody you can call on, to, all of a sudden, ‘Why are you calling me? I have nothing to do with your life anymore.’ I ran away and ended up working the kiddy track down the street from where Pickton was hunting. Then I got hooked up with Aunt Leah’s and I’m still in touch with some people from there. I briefly did a Youth Internship Program through the YMCA at the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Neither worked out well for me; I’m not an office person.” She continued, “My kids got taken away when my dad passed away and I lost my mind. So I know what both sides of it feels like and I think that rather than watching the kids disintegrate, it’s better for them to be removed and give the parents a chance to get their shit together. I got my kids back right away because I was somebody who legitimately just needed some temporary help. There was never a question of me getting my kids back, but I understand what some parents go through.”

Jodi described some additional challenges that people living in the Kiwassa neighbourhood face and her own experience with those issues: “A lot of people around here suffer from chronic long term mental health issues. But there’s also a lot of people not wanting to admit that they have mental health issues. For me, I’ve known since I was twelve that I have bipolar so I’ve lived with it pretty much my entire life. But then new things can come up – at one point I didn’t realise that I had epilepsy and I was having a seizure every morning when I woke up. It was causing terrible problems with the boys, but I didn’t know what was happening so I couldn’t see that the problems were caused by my seizures. Once I finally did see it after the boys had been removed, then I got everything on track and got them back. So if you don’t know that you have mental health issues it’s really hard. Sometimes things just blow up and you need help.”

Noting her extensive experience working with people who have special needs, Jodi offered some ways in which that experience also helps her at Kiwassa. She suggested, “The biggest contribution I make to KwNH is that I know how to work with people special with needs. We have one long term volunteer whose diagnosis might be autism. In the beginning, I was his one person that he really connected with. Over time, as we figured out how to work with him, eventually he started incorporating other people into his group until we finally reached the point where I was no longer his person. So that was a big achievement. If he gets upset, I’m still the one who can calm him down. For example, on Wednesday I was downstairs getting supplies and so was Bill. So nobody was up here to receive an order. So he received it. He can’t receive it though because he doesn’t know the protocol, so we were explaining to him that he has to tell delivery people to wait for Bill

or me to get here. He thought he was in trouble and got all worked up. I told him, 'No, no, it's okay. Calm down! Don't worry about it.' It was easy for me to calm him down, whereas if it had been somebody else, he might not have calmed down at all. I don't know how I do it; I do pay attention to my body language and tone of voice. Kiwassa paid for me to take a class on how to interact with people appropriately, and not be as blunt as I can sometimes be. I learned a lot about body language and what not. The experiences that I have at KwNH transfer to my home life, and my experiences and all the training I've done for my kids transfer to here, so I'm always thinking, 'Great, I can take this experience and apply it here too.'"

Jodi mentioned one of the ways in which Kiwassa has influenced her life in the neighbourhood. She explained, "From working here I have become better at accepting everybody just as they are. When I deliver food, I go through the seating area out there. There are some pan handlers who I know from up on Hastings, and this is where my relationship in the neighbourhood can get tricky. People ask for food here and if I've got leftovers that I know I can't reuse, I'll put them out front. But at the same time if they're panhandling up on Hastings, they expect me to give them money. On the rare occasion when I know it's close to welfare day and I know that they literally don't have anything, I will. But then they come into the kitchen asking me for money. So it's really hard to keep that line clear. One day one of them was yelling at me to give him money. I had to empty my purse to prove that I don't carry cash anymore! I offered to buy him a can of soup but he cussed me out a blue streak. He came to the kitchen a couple days later to apologize. Now I'm learning more about setting appropriate boundaries. I don't hand out any money. I will offer to go in to a store and buy something but I will not carry money in this neighbourhood for the simple reason that if people know I'm carrying money, they want me to give it to them. I'm like, 'Do you guys realize I'm on disability too?! I only work ten to twenty hours a week, so almost one third of the time you see me at KwNH I'm actually volunteering.' People don't get that; they just assume that I work here full time and that I'm making a really decent wage. The fact is that I make just under \$10.70 an hour, so I really don't have any extra money either." Jodi added, "I can't even go down to the corner store some days. There's this one woman who decided that I go down to the corner store solely to buy her stuff. If I say no, then she gets mad. It's been over two years since I've given her anything because it was obvious that she was just using the money to buy meth. But the drug addicts around here never give up hope - if you've ever given them anything they will never forget it. It gets even tougher once they've cleaned up because you're still kind of iffy about it - you don't always know where the lines are."

Jodi also shared the following anecdotes about living and working in the Kiwassa neighbourhood: "Carrying cigarettes is basically the same thing as carrying cash. I've actually switched over to vaporizers, but people know that I was a smoker and so it's always, 'Can I have a smoke?' It got to a point where I would leave my cigarettes at home. At first I would take just one with me and I'd start smoking it when I got to Hastings so that by the time I got to London Drugs it was about half way done, then I'd give it to whoever was sitting out there. There are so many calculations you have to make just to leave your house! How much change am I going to take? It's basically, 'How much am I going to give away?' That's how much you carry with you. If I need laundry money, the bank is the last stop and I come straight home! Oh, maybe I'll buy somebody a hamburger, or give somebody a can of soup, but no smokes and no money. It's about setting boundaries. A lot of the time you really feel for people and you know their situation."

She continued, "I'm on disability and I have two kids, but people think that because my kids are special needs that we get all these other benefits so, according to around here, I'm rolling in it. They don't understand all the extra costs that come with raising special needs children, like paying for special counselling, going to a different school, bus fares, repairing things around the house that they've damaged. Even when we get free things there are extra considerations. For example, we get tickets for a hockey game. Well, you can't just go to a hockey game and sit there - there's got to be a drink and popcorn. And then there's also the fact it takes us out of our routine so by the time we get home the kids are all up in arms even though it's only a short

walk from the PNE to here. One time we actually got to go to a Canucks game but I hadn't taken into account how many pictures get taken and how that would affect my epilepsy. So I had to leave in the middle. Our seats were in two sections, so my boyfriend stayed with my little guy in one section and my older one had to stay on his own. We had to pay for the cab fare home because I couldn't take the bus because I was throwing up and getting dizzy. So you know, there's things like that." Jodi also described some of the challenges of living on a low or fixed income: "My oldest son goes to Britannia high school, but the free lunch program there is humiliating. For one thing, you have to apply for it, so the parents have to go in with their income information, and then the kids are given a punch card. It's basically like advertising to everybody how poor you are. Thankfully, I at least have the money to be able to pack lunches for my kids. Also, my little guy only eats a few things, so there's no point in trying to get him on the lunch program because he would starve! As it is, he's tiny - only fifty-nine pounds!"

Despite her own struggles, Jodi doesn't hesitate to help others. She related, "I try to help wherever I can. You know, there's sometimes a kid who hasn't eaten all weekend and they come in, and it's just like, 'Here, have a little sandwich on the side.' I'm not supposed to do that. It's tough to see. At the same time you know which parents are truly struggling and which ones are taking advantage and just not taking care of the children properly. Those are the ones that you really feel for, when you know the parents are taking the money and buying drugs and alcohol or gambling or whatever their issue is." She added, "We're all doing our best to try to make everybody comfortable and happy and supported here. I've had families come up to me and ask, 'Can I have a jug of milk until Child Tax day on Friday.' And it's like, 'Well, I'm really not supposed to, but here! You make sure you bring this to me Friday morning though!' I haven't done this for a while, but when I have done it they always make sure to bring it back first thing in the morning on the day you agreed on. Actually, the last time I did it I got found out and I got in a lot of trouble. But at the same time, how can I turn a family away when they only ask for milk for two days before child tax? There's a lot of discretion required here in trying to figure out who really does need something and who is just trying to play you."

When asked what she loves most about working at KwNH, Jodi replied, "I love the kids! I love Breakfast Club. It's my favourite part of the day. Once a month I bring my guinea pigs over and the kids at the daycare get to play with the guinea pigs and have a ton of fun with that." Jodi likes living in the same neighbourhood as the kids she works with: "Five years ago I was seeing these little kids coming in for Breakfast Club who were in grade three or four and now they're towering over me. It's like, 'Wow, I remember when you were shorter than me and you were so sweet, and now you're a teenager cussing everybody out.' It's nice to see kids grow up."

Jodi mentioned some of the people who brighten up her work days at KwNH, "There's this little old man who quite often doesn't realize that I'm in this huge cupboard of pots and pans, and he's closed me in there a number of times! He's always got this great big smile on his face. The first few times I thought, 'Okay, it was an accident,' but now it's at the point where I'm wondering, 'Was that really an accident?'" Jody continued, "And then we've got this tiny little old lady who's around 100 years old, nobody is really sure. She's deaf as a doorknob and all hunched over. She's here every Friday for the seniors' lunch and she puts out the cutlery. If you try to take that cutlery away from her, holy shit. She may not be able to hear you, but you will certainly hear her! Then there's Jim, another senior who is here almost every day. He's really happy-go-lucky and he's always busy doing something around here! And then there's Bill - holy cow, that man does everything around here. He just turned sixty years old although nobody's allowed to say he's over fifty-eight. Bill helps run the Food Bank, he helps with the Saige food bank, he puts up the Christmas tree and decorates it, he sets up for every big event that we have, and he deals with all the kitchen deliveries. He does it all! And he's great; he's one of the happiest people you could ever meet. So he's one of my favourite people around here."

Apart from the people she works with, Jodi also greatly appreciates Kiwassa's flexibility. She emphasized, "One of the best things about working here is the flexibility to put my kids' needs first. I couldn't have asked for a more flexible job. There have been times where I've had to literally turn off burners and go running to pick up one of my kids from school because they've bitten the teacher or something like that. Once I had a béchamel sitting on the stove, and a phone call came so I had to go. But I forgot to turn the element off. Nobody said anything about it other than, "Jodi, you burnt the sauce." So the flexibility here has been incredible, amazing, you simply don't find that anywhere! I have tried a number of times to work, go to school and look after my kids, but I've found that can't do all three at the same time. I have not yet graduated high school, but I'm hoping that maybe in a couple more years when the kids are a little more self-reliant then I'll be able to. For now, this is the perfect job." Jodi also enjoys that she is appreciated at work. She noted, "There are times when Nancy, the executive director, will come in with a little coffee card and say, 'Thank you!' So this is a cool place to work."

Jodi also likes the hours because her schedule allows her to be home with her kids when they are not in school. She stated, " I have to be here for 7:30 in the morning, which means leaving my kids with somebody else until they get on their school buses, but it guarantees that I'm home for them after school and can do dinner for them, and I don't have to worry about anybody else messing up the routine." Jodi explained why this is important, "Because of them being special needs, we live and die by the routine! My phone alarm starts going off every night at 6:55pm. Okay, Matthew, it's time for you to do the litter box, then both of you time for cleanup and snack, then it's time for showers, then it's time for medication, then it's time for reading, then it's time for bed. Everything has a five minute warning. So my phone goes off probably sixteen times in an evening."

Jodi also appreciates KwNH's inclusivity. She related, "It's been enlightening to see people's reactions to the Saige food bank because it's all inclusive; you do not need any ID or proof of address. It was designed for transgendered people because nine times out of ten, their name or appearance does not match their ID and quite often they'll be turned away from food banks. My boyfriend is transgendered and sometimes trying to get him out of the house is next to impossible because of the way people treat him. People are so mean sometimes. At KwNH, though, everyone is great; everyone here makes the effort to, for example, remember which pronoun to use for somebody. Here, we try our best with everybody. That could be the motto of Kiwassa, 'you try your best.' Kiwassa is all-inclusive...it sounds like a resort! Here, it's a very welcoming environment. All ages. All ethnicities. All different types of sexual orientation. Different levels of income. Different everything. It's all inclusive - everybody is welcome. That is ultimately my favourite thing about Kiwassa."