

Julio: The Neighbourhood House Made Me Who I Am

Julio Bello spent forty years volunteering and working at Gordon Neighbourhood House, including most recently as the director of Youth S.E.A.R.C.H. He now uses what he learned there to assist, as a consultant, other agencies who offer community services, and also sits on the board of Aspect (Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training). He shared his story on January 27th, 2015 beginning with when his mother, Camino, got a job at Gordon House as a childcare worker while Julio was in Grade 5, "We lived in the West End right across the street from Gordon House and my elementary school, Lord Roberts, was just up the block on Nicola and Nelson. At that time I was still learning English because we had recently immigrated to Canada and spoke Spanish. I remember going to Gordon House every day for my lunch – I did that all the way through high school, and my brother did the same. My mom was staff, but there was never any problem with us coming for lunch. In fact, they welcomed us and if my mom wasn't there, I was still given lunch, so Gordon House was really part of a community that raised me. Elizabeth Kwong, the social worker at the time, was always there; she was like an extra parent to me. And I remember there was a cat living there. My memories are very fond. After school, I would do my homework at the neighbourhood house. With all that came volunteering - I first went to Gordon as my mother's son but I quickly became integrated into the daily activities of the neighbourhood house, whether it was putting chairs away, helping out the seniors, calling out bingo balls when I had a pro-D day, raking leaves or cleaning - they quickly found work for me to do, and I was very happy to do it. My family was quite tight knit - we were around my mother or my parents most of the time and so I spent a lot of time at the neighbourhood house."

Julio reflected on some of the skills he developed "through osmosis" during those early years, "My social skills were really heightened by watching the social workers and my mother - who later became a family worker and worked with seniors and other groups - interact with community members. Quite a number of people who came in had mental health issues, so I learned to navigate around their stresses and coping mechanisms. That gave me the confidence to engage in conflict resolution in the work that I did afterwards. I learned how to de-escalate and talk to people in crisis because all the social workers did that; I watched and repeated their behaviour. A lot of learning happened just from being around, and it also gave me a really strong appreciation of community and interpersonal relationships later in life."

Julio described how his volunteer work became paid employment, "In my teen years I started to work as a summer camp counsellor. Being an inner city neighbourhood, the children came with quite a few behavioural challenges, so I had to learn how to work with my peers to assist kids who had these behavioural issues and to raise their self-esteem while maintaining peace and harmony." Following high school graduation, Julio wanted to travel. He related, "After high school I wanted to explore the world, so I started working to save money. I worked as a dishwasher in a high end French restaurant where Chef Thomas became a mentor for me. I remember my first two days as a dishwasher and being totally overwhelmed. I thought it was the worst job anybody could have; my attitude sucked. I was like, 'Ugh, do I have to do this?' Thomas told me, 'Look, you can be one of two people. You could be a person that's constantly looking for work, or a person that people want to hire. Take pride in what you're doing, and do it with a smile, then the result will be good. Employers want somebody with a great attitude. They can teach you the mechanics of a job. But the attitude, they can't teach.' At nineteen, I couldn't really understand what he was telling me. I was like, 'This guy wants to be Yoda!' So I fought it for a while, but finally I said to myself, 'Okay, I get it. I want to be that guy who has the right attitude, who is maybe not the best at everything, but who puts in one hundred percent.' And from that day forward that's who I became."

After working as a dishwasher for a year and a half, Julio realised his dream of travelling. However, he retained the values that had been instilled in him at Gordon Neighbourhood House. He recalled, "I travelled to Europe. My cousin's a priest in Spain, so I went to see him and found that he was doing similar things to what we do at Gordon House. He and I really resonated and I often found myself going to the poor areas of Spain and navigating using the tools I had learned from Gordon House. I've always had a curiosity and desire to understand the causes and meanings of poverty, and I think that came from growing up in the neighbourhood house where those conversations were always happening. I don't believe it was innate in me; I think the nurture piece was most prevalent. I followed my mother's trade because that's the environment I was in."

Julio described what happened when he returned from overseas, "The neighbourhood house kept bringing me back. When I returned from Europe, Craig, the ED, said he had a management position available: team leader for summer camp leaders. I had decided to go to university in fall, so the summer position suited me. At the same time, I also had a chance to work as an international tour guide. I faced a fork in the road. Should I go corporate, travel, and all that? Or to a life of helping others, to community. I made my choice and I knew that it was the right choice and I've never regretted it. The neighbourhood house made me who I am. It paid way less than the other job, which would have paid for my university degree, but Gordon was 'home.' I didn't have enough leadership experience for the coordinator position, so I ended up working as an assistant to the team leader. Jayna Carter was the team leader, and we worked really well together."

In fall, Julio went to school. He recalled, "I started attending university and found that I really loved anthropology. Loved it. I realised that a culture exists within the neighbourhood house as well as within the communities that the neighbourhood house serves." However, Julio's career path was not yet clear to him. He explained, "Even though I loved anthropology and I loved the neighbourhood house, I was still trying to find ways to travel and work at the same time. I actually thought wanted to be a general manager for a hotel because it would allow me to travel. Then I ended up working at Whistler in a small leadership role where I had to face some stuff related to wealth and privilege that I didn't quite agree with. Some people were very affluent, but wasteful, and also very inconsiderate to others. I finally realised that this was not the environment that I wanted to work in. Catering to what I saw as frivolous needs made me feel servile rather than proud in my job; what I thought I wanted to do turned out to be this empty void."

He explained what happened next, "I never did finish my degree. Instead, I kept taking contracts for the neighbourhood house. Each contract allowed me to work with a different population, especially youth, some of whom were in foster care or living on the streets. I worked as a youth worker at Cedar Cottage as well. When John took over as ED of Gordon Neighbourhood House, we had a growing drop-in for at-risk youth with some really difficult youth who were on the verge of dropping out of school. I realized that segregated cultures exist within schools: the rowdies, the kids that smoke up, the jocks, the ones that sit in front of the class. I really fell in love with the outcasts - the tough kids - boys and girls. The kids that I really gravitate to are the ones that are really pushing hard. The ones who, if you gave them a choice to go down the hill to get to their destination, or up the hill, they would always go uphill. They chose the hardest path, maybe because they didn't believe that the shorter path was available for them. I just loved them. I still do. When they realize that there's somebody in their corner, all of a sudden doors open. Not that those doors weren't there before, but now they are able to see them. It would start with my team, and then the community, and once the community started believing in them, they not only saw those doors but they started walking through them, and that was amazing. You know, having a community raise a child. All the money in the world couldn't give me that sort of gratification."

So then I was hooked; I thought that if my cousin had a calling to go into the priesthood, then this was my calling.”

He continued, “I remember my first client. Tattoos - swastikas. The tears coming out of his eye. He was twenty-four, in and out of jail since age twelve: a product of the system. Now he was done being a thug and wanted a job. I was only a couple of years older than he was and he scared the crap out of me because he still had that jail mentality and demeanour. I’m sitting there going through my skill repertoire in my head to figure out what I can do with this kid, and thinking, ‘I don’t know what to do!’ Two things blocked my thinking: the prejudices that I had, and an idea that I needed to have all the answers immediately. Then he looks at me and goes, ‘Why are you staring at me?’ I blurted out, ‘Because you scare the shit out of me!’ He started laughing and said, ‘I get that a lot!’ So that’s where we started: how do we soften that look? The kid became a complete success and for twenty years he came to say hi to me and tell me what he’s doing. After that experience, I thought anything was possible and other youth repeatedly re-affirmed and reinforced that.”

Encouraged, Julio devoted himself even more fully to his work, “I really wanted to know why some kids were not succeeding – apart from our program, what other influences were there in their lives? Since many were street involved, I took on a second job with Covenant House Outreach Program – working until midnight or one o’clock in the morning on the streets - so that I could find out what happens on the street level. I saw that the influences of that environment were stronger than we were. I got that they really didn’t have any money. When youth came to us, it was to a place of safety. We fed and clothed them - we tried to do as much as possible when they were in our office. I learned about their social networks and realized that they also had their family on the street, I mean their ‘street family.’ Every individual had a reason for being there and each one of them had a story: they’re all somehow different from what many people would consider ‘normal,’ so they gravitated to each other. These new understandings helped me in my day job at Gordon because it allowed me to be more effective - more compassionate, but also to push harder in a way that was respectful. I dedicated my life to this and I really dove in to understand that youth are not simply ‘clients.’ Each person has an incredible history that is attached to them, and their behaviours were often the result of the circumstances that they were in. In a sense I had to put my own values aside to really accept what was normal for them.”

Julio described how his role at Gordon Neighbourhood House evolved, “I was fortunate in my mid-thirties to go from being a counsellor at Youth S.E.A.R.C.H. to a leadership role. However, when the coordinator position first came up, I didn’t know if I really wanted it. I took on the new role, but it was very difficult for me to let go of the hands-on ‘trench work’ and for a while I questioned whether I was in the right role. Then I had a few conversations with mentors who were in leadership positions and they put things into perspective for me. They explained that, as a front line worker, your role is linear; you don’t have a lot of room to move because somebody else comes up with the ideas and the overall concept – you only add the details. Although as a front line worker I loved working within those parameters, I was always testing the boundaries: ‘we can do more, we could be better, this project is limiting.’ That’s management thinking. They showed me that there’s a bigger picture, that the strategic piece is really important, and that as a director you have the ability to raise the bar and get the message out on a bigger scale. And then I loved it. I had no ambition to be the boss, but I wanted to have more ability to strategize over where a project went. That part was fantastic and through that, there was so much learning. One thing I am proud of developing was a hands-on training program for social work practicum students. Another great project we did was a hugely successful, youth-led fundraising project.” He added, “However, without a team and without the backing and the trust that I had from my ED and

the other staff, there's no way I could have done it. It was the entire team. I was just one little spoke in the bigger wheel of the neighbourhood house. And together I think we've moved mountains."

Julio elaborated further on what he learned about leadership at Gordon Neighbourhood House, "Leadership is not only understanding your staff's skills and deficiencies but also deficiencies in your skill set as a leader. For example, if you don't know what you're doing, admit that. Another big learning curve was around delegation; delegating was really hard for me. The reason I finally learnt was because my boss gave me full reign. If somebody's trusting me, I have to return the favour and support people through their mistakes and not judge them. In other words, I've learnt through what other people have done with me. Another ability I developed was to be able to speak comfortably with a youth coming off the streets and then two minutes later talk to an employer or a politician or a funder in their language. I also learned about outcomes and community impacts. Budgeting! All those things were learnt on the job. It was hard. Honestly, some days I thought, 'What am I doing?' Sleepless nights. Finally I asked my mentors, 'Do you ever have sleepless nights?' And they were like, 'When don't I?' So I realised that I'm not alone in the world. Being able to talk to your leaders and say, 'I'm insecure about this,' and to trust them is so key - that's where my success came from. I couldn't be here without their wisdom and their experience because I really just copied them." In return, Julio contributed his "total, undivided, undeniable, 100% loyalty and dedication to the concept of what a neighbourhood house stands for. I still have that. I also brought my quiriness. And I'm a joker; I've never taken myself seriously and I value humour in the workplace. Also, I can often see a different angle to the problem: I was never one to say, 'We can't do this.' For me, there's always some way we can work through it; I try to see possibilities rather than barriers."

Unfortunately, all good things come to an end. However, when one door closes, another one opens. Julio described what happened when Youth S.E.A.R.C.H had to close its doors after thirty-five years in operation, "In 2012 we lost our funding for Youth S.E.A.R.C.H. The federal and the provincial ministries went to a different model and we didn't fit that model. That very difficult for me. At the same time, it gave me a huge opportunity to be with my kids – I was a father of two boys and working seven days a week - always at Covenant and Gordon House and really dedicating my life to that. My wife had already told me, 'We're at a crossroads: you can continue working as many hours as you do, and when you retire tell your adult sons that you want to spend time with them. Well, they might not have time for you, then. Or you can choose to slow down and give them the time that they want now.' During all those years of working with youth, I had seen a lot of parental neglect. I said, 'I don't want to be that parent,' and I made a choice to be more involved in raising my children than in my career. Meanwhile Gordon House was in transition at the management level, and then Youth S.E.A.R.C.H. closed, so it was a good time for me to step away."

Julio mentioned what he's been up to since then, "In my life, every step of the way, the message has been, 'Be passionate about what you do and things will work out. Love what you do.' Almost right away, I started a small business with a friend producing t-shirts for non-profits using socially and environmentally just production principles. Also in 2012, I began working as a procurement specialist for Sprott Shaw Community College, who I'd worked with many times to help kids get through college. In effect, government procurement is what I had been doing for a long time: navigating through proposals and government contracts. They took me on as a consultant and it's been great because I get to pick up my kids from school and drop them off. I hear about their day and their challenges, their successes - I love it. There have been opportunities for me to go back to an office and do what I used to do, but I'm really enjoying my new role as a consultant and father. And it's not all admin - recently I was asked by Family Services to go back to my roots to help a bunch of Grade 7 kids with the transition to high school,

and it totally re-energized me. I couldn't do this consulting work without having worked at Gordon; because I was involved with Gordon House, I am able to speak to politicians. Honestly, I can't believe that I meet these people. Yes, they are public servants and you're supposed to have access to them, but you have this preconception that they're over there, and I'm way over here, right? So it's amazing that I, this little grain of sand, can touch these big boulders. To be able to get their support is even more interesting: to write proposals and convince other people that a project is needed in the community. I bring a lot of passion to that because you're working with a population that needs you."

When asked to consider some critical moments from his forty years with Gordon House, Julio replied, "Certain things stand out, but it's more like the sum of all the parts. There are so many little moments that led to the big moments, and those little moments are just as significant as the others. I had amazing mentors that gave me great advice, and leaders that really gave me free reign, always telling me, 'Okay! Go for it!' That takes a lot of courage. All along the way I was very nurtured, very supported. I learned a lot and I ended up in a great leadership position with a lot of responsibility. Mentors lead by example, by trust, by compassion. They want you to succeed, and, more importantly, they want you to be better than they were. I've been very fortunate to have those people in my life to mould me."

Looking forward to the future, Julio focused on the journey, rather than a destination, "I'm on this surfboard and not necessarily interested in taking a specific wave. I'm just catching them as they come and enjoying the ride, whether it's a small wave or a big wave, and seeing where that leads me. Maybe I'll fall off my surfboard, but I know I can get back on. It's about the adventure and that passion – it's about loving what you do."