

## **Kimberley: The Neighbourhood House is in my Blood**

Kimberley Berger sits on the board of Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, and has worked at both Kits and Gordon Neighbourhood Houses. She shared her story in January 2015, beginning with when she worked as a childminder at KNH in the early 1990s while attending UBC, “While I was going to university, I lived in Kitsilano and worked as a childminder for a single mothers’ group at Kitsilano Neighbourhood House. And then I got a little bit lost - I didn’t know I wanted to do. I lived in Mexico for two years, and then in Argentina for two years, not knowing where I would belong. When I came back, I still didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. I taught ESL for a little bit and then I discovered Gordon Neighbourhood House. I stumbled upon a job posting for Family Program Manager at GNH. I had previous experience working in Family Places and in family resource programs; I’d worked with children and I spoke a variety of languages; the posting just fit. As soon as I walked in the door for my job interview, I felt at home, and I haven’t left the Neighbourhood House Association since. I had lived in South America for four years where the culture is very carefree in certain ways, and I remember walking in to GNH, it was very casual, and one of the women who greeted me was Camino Bello, Julio’s mother, who had been there for thirty or forty years and was retiring. It was Camino’s position I was applying for, and we started talking in Spanish. Everyone was laughing, and I think they saw my personality transform when I started speaking Spanish. Perhaps they thought, ‘This is a good fit. She’s a bit like Camino.’ It just felt so warm and safe. I was hired as the Family Program Manager responsible for GNH ECE programs, family resource programs, pre-teen programs, youth programs, family camp, the block party, and everything else that comes along with being in a neighbourhood house. I was there for four and a half years, from around 2000 to 2004.”

Kim explained that she found more than a job at GNH: “One thing that really affected me was the idea of community development and being part of the community. Before being introduced to the neighbourhood house concept I hadn’t felt part of a community. I was single, I had recently returned from travelling and living in other places and I didn’t really feel like I was part of a community of people. Yet as soon as I entered the neighbourhood house, I really felt that I had this community that people had always talked about having, but which I had never really understood. I really felt that impact, and it’s stayed with me until today.”

Recalling the years at GNH, Kim related, “At Gordon, I shared a very, very small office with the office manager; there was hardly any space for us to move. What I especially remember is the friendship and connection that Linda and I had from working so closely together; those are really fond memories. That camaraderie and the support that we were able to give each other is a really powerful connection and memory for me. I am still in touch with Agata, the Family Program Director there. The reason I know her is that I hired her for our Nobody’s Perfect Parenting Program when she was still in university. And of course Linda, who’s been there for at least thirty years now, and Jessy, the office administrator - we’re still in touch. They are life-long friends, so that connection is still there.” She continued, “Another important memory from GNH is family camps - every year we took a group of families who otherwise wouldn’t have been able to access the outdoors, or go on a vacation, to Sasamat Camp for the weekend. Some of the children had never swum in a lake, or been in a kayak. I’m fortunate to have had those experiences and also to have been able to provide those experiences for others. It was hard work: we cooked for 100 people, we cleaned, we did everything, and it was amazing. That was really memorable.”

Kim described how she ended leaving GNH to work for another organization, “After Gordon Neighbourhood House I had an opportunity to manage a child care centre and several satellite family resource programs for the Vancouver Society of Children Centres (VSOCC). I wanted the management experience in a unionized, licensed child care environment, and I wanted to figure out whether I wished to

remain a frontline worker or whether management was more my thing. And so I sadly moved; it was a very sad experience because I loved the neighbourhood house. I was at VSOCC for two years, during which time I continually went back to Gordon Neighbourhood House to volunteer for block parties, family camp, and other things. I wanted to remain involved because the people there were my friends. During this time I was asking myself, 'Is this what I want to get into, or do I want to remain in the neighbourhood house, community, front-line type of position? Then I got pregnant with my first child, and then the second one, and I ended up being out of the work force from 2006 to April 2014.'

Next, Kim described how she became involved with Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, "During the time that I was on maternity leave, I remained very connected with GNH, but I also discovered MPNH. I'd lived in Mount Pleasant for a few years by then and, from working with ANH, I knew that Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House existed. I had a child, and I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I'm going to go nuts at home,' so one day I walked in the front door and asked what family resource programs they offered for families. I remember signing up for Mother Goose, which I was familiar with because I had facilitated it. Angela, who still works at MPNH, facilitated the program. That was my first introduction to Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House. I was really impressed with the space and with everything that it had to offer. I put my children's names down for pre-school and that's when I really started becoming involved. My first child went to pre-school five days a week from age three to five. While one child was upstairs in preschool, my other child and I attended the family resources program, where I met a lot of other families in the community. I always felt that I was working, whether at the park or standing in line waiting for the preschool door to open, because I would tell all the families I met, 'This is what the neighbourhood house offers...' I wanted everybody to feel part of a community, especially new parents, because that is such a hard time. I knew what the neighbourhood house did for me and continues to do. I wanted everybody else to get that same level of support, because I saw on many people's faces that they felt isolated or that they were pulling their hair out. I thought, 'You just need to find the right community.' So I informally took on that role to let people know about the services offered here. Meanwhile, my second child started attending preschool five days a week and we also attended a lot of family dinners for different occasions. As a parent that was always at home, it was nice to get out and also not have to cook a meal. It was very reasonably priced. I would invite friends and we'd all meet here, so it provided that sense of belonging in the community as well."

She continued, "During that time, I connected with Jocelyn. We sat on the couch that I am sitting on right now, and she discussed the role of the community board and asked if I'd consider serving on the board. I went through the application process and was accepted; it was the first time I'd been on a board, so it was fascinating to look at a non-profit from a perspective other than that of volunteer, participant or employee. It gave me a different way of seeing processes, strategies, planning, and everything that goes with being on the board, which is very interesting. It's given me a new set of skills, and a different way of looking at how a non-profit is run. I've been on the community board here at the neighbourhood house for around six years now."

Kim described the role that Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House played in her life: "MPNH came at a time when I desperately needed community. I needed support. My first child was very challenging and screamed basically twenty-four hours a day for the first year of his life. I was a wreck. I remember walking through that door and just feeling, 'Thank goodness there's something here so that I can get out of the house, meet people, and feel that I am not losing my mind.' That was the first thing I remember. I needed to feel that I was more than just a mom as well, and I also sought a sense of belonging. That's what MPNH gave me in that really challenging time of becoming a mom for the first time. I discovered the preschool program, which is unlike any other early childhood program I've seen. I've seen a lot of them, but it's very

unique in its approach. I've been involved with the pre-school for four years and have built a really wonderful relationship with the two pre-school teachers, Mary and Irena. From the start, I was really inspired by their approach and their dedication to their field. They take a different approach in that they follow the Reggio pedagogy of early childhood. A lot of preschools say that they're Reggio, which means that they're broadly child-centred, and encourage child-led learning, but they don't consistently practise that pedagogy. Also, my relationship with the teachers was very unique; they made me feel special, for example, they'd sometimes ask my opinion as a parent on something. I needed that, at that time. I hold a very special place in my heart for those two very special women."

Kim recalled the way she felt walking into MPNH: "It was very welcoming. That's what is so important about neighbourhood houses - the welcome - no matter who you are, or where you are coming from. When I walk in, somebody's always there to say hello, whether they are holding a tray of food for the seniors lunch, or there's babies in their arms, there's always somebody there to say hello. People will go out of their way to help you and show an interest in you. You don't find that everywhere - you might get a 'hello' if you're lucky. I also find that people at the neighbourhood house always try to use your name. I've learned that it's important to use someone's name and greet them in a way that creates a warm welcoming environment. I think the diversity of people that access the neighbourhood house is also huge. There are people from all walks of life - different countries, different educational backgrounds, different socioeconomic backgrounds - there's just such a diversity of people that enter the neighbourhood house. What makes it so welcoming is that everybody's truly welcome."

It turned out that Kim's connection to MPNH ran even deeper than she had originally thought. She explained, "I grew up in Delta; when we kids left home, my parents moved to Vancouver. My dad had just taken early retirement and wanted to volunteer. I remember him coming home and saying, 'Oh, I found a place.' Finally, I recently put two and two together and realized that the place he had found was Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House when it was at a storefront location on Broadway! My father taught English to a group of men who were all senior Asian newcomers to Canada. If you knew my dad, who had been an engineer, this would be a funny story...So with MPNH there's history with my family; there are layers."

Kim explained how she came into her current position at FSGV: "In September 2014, both of my children entered school. That was a new era because all of a sudden I went from being this stir-crazy mom of two boys to, 'Oh my goodness! Both my children have gone to school. Now what am I going to do?' There was a lot still to do at home, but I felt I needed to work. Throughout the time I was raising my children I had asked myself, 'What am I going to do with my life after my children get older? Will I go to management or frontline? To the private sector?' I looked at different university programs and researched diplomas in various fields and all sorts of different things in the private sector. But I just kept coming back to the neighbourhood house, to community development. Everything just kept pointing there. So I went back to non-profit social services. I applied to three jobs: Sunny Hill Infant Development Centre, Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House, and Family Services. Family Services took me in and it was the perfect match. It is a two-minute walk from my house. I can walk my kids to school, walk to work, and pick them up after school. I've been there since April 2014 coordinating their community education and development department." She continued, "A big part of my work with Family Services is building relationships, and I have those relationships now at Cedar Cottage, Frog Hollow, Little Mountain, Collingwood, all the neighbourhood houses. The neighbourhood house is in my blood now!"

Kim's connection with MPNH remains strong. She reflected, "I haven't been quite as involved as I would like between children and working, but I am still involved with Mount Pleasant. When I received the job with Family Services, I thought, 'I can't be on the board anymore. I love it, but I'm just too busy.' Then Jocelyn

sent an email to everyone asking who wished to come back. I immediately thought, 'Oh gosh, I'll go back!' And so I'm still happily on the board. I can't leave it. I can't leave the neighbourhood house in any capacity. I am very fortunate because I've been working a lot in my current job with all the neighbourhood houses, especially with Mount Pleasant, so I've still got my foot in the door." She added, "In addition to board committees, I attend all the community events, festivals, the dinners, I was Santa Clause one year, Mrs. Clause the other year. And I am quite involved with the preschool." Kim's kids are also connected with MPNH. She explained, "I bring my kids to the neighbourhood house for family dinners and I've signed them up for Sasamat summer camp in August. Two years ago around Christmas, they opened up the neighbourhood house for people who didn't have a warm place to be and my children and I made a big pot of pea soup and the children served the people that were here. So they are still involved in little ways and they know all about the neighbourhood house. It's in their blood too! My goal is for them to do the leadership program, then volunteer, then maybe even work for the neighbourhood house at some point."

Kim mentioned some of the ways in which neighbourhood houses have influenced her personal development: "In terms of working with people, I had always thought I was a non-judgemental person, but I really became much more non-judgmental after working in the neighbourhood house. It's given me compassion for people. It also makes me always want to use the best practice to empower people and provide them with the best service. I've also really come to understand the value of community in my own personal life and for my family, but also for all people, whether they're newcomers, or people who struggle with mental health or addictions, or whoever they are, community is key to supporting people in their journey. Finally, I've learned about my boundaries and my skills; we do this work because we love it, but how do we also not get burned out in the process when you always want to do more? I learned a lot about that. Sometimes I work way too much but it's part of the process of how we learn to set those boundaries."

Kim also commented on how the neighbourhood house movement has influenced her professional development: "I've taken so many courses, including Volunteer Vancouver [now Vantage Point], fundraising, grant writing, Nobody's Perfect, Mother Goose, working with family and youth, budgets, management, performance management...I was always ambitious so I grabbed whatever course was offered and that has really helped me in my path. At the MPNH board, Jocelyn is always providing us with opportunities for professional development to help us in our roles on the board around responsibilities, chairing, and so on. We have a very strong board because of Jocelyn's leadership; she's always looking at how can we make it better and stronger."

Kim considered how her involvement with neighbourhood houses has influenced her career trajectory: "It's the reason why I am here and I'm aware of that. You know, it led me onto this path and sparked my interest at a time when I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was doing all sorts of things. I did one degree in French Literature and another in Psychology. I thought maybe I wanted to be a teacher, I wasn't sure. Working at the neighbourhood house set me on the right path, on the path that was of interest to me. I had a very supportive supervisor who gave me a lot of independence in terms of programming, and he really encouraged professional development. All that has obviously led me to where I am now."

Considering her contribution to neighbourhood houses, Kim responded, "I see myself as a connector. I am out in the community a lot. I'm very involved in my own community, my children's school community, my work community. I find my role is to let people know what the neighbourhood house is and what it offers. I'm always saying, 'Why don't you go see this person?' or 'Oh, did you know this is happening?' I meet people in the park and for some reason, people just tell me their stories and I feel like they know that I have these resources, and so I connect them with the neighbourhood houses. That's why I feel like I am a connector and an advocate for the neighbourhood houses. I give all my love and dedication and my heart."

Sometimes you see the effect you have: about three years ago, I was at one of the dinners, and a woman came up to me with children who were probably around seventeen years old. She told me, “Kim, I had just moved to Canada, and I walked into your office and you welcomed me in. You got me involved in some of your programs and you set me up with someone at ISS. That totally changed my life.” So every little connection we make with each person has an influence on their lives. That was really neat because a lot of the time people don’t come up to you and just say, ‘Thank you for doing that,’ and it was amazing that after so many years she still remembered me.”

Looking ahead to the future, Kim reflected, “As my children get older and I have capacity to be involved more, I may take on a greater role in the board than I do now. The position of liaison with ANH would be a really exciting role! That’s somewhere where I think I would like to go, to see the neighbourhood house from another angle. No matter what, I am always going to be connected to the neighbourhood house. As long as there are people on this earth, we will need neighbourhood houses. They are places that change lives for all involved.”