

## **Lynn: Our Neighbourhood House Always Pulls Us Back**

Lynn Leong has been the Community Kitchens Coordinator at Burnaby Neighbourhood House for thirteen years. When Lynn told her story on 22 February 2015, she recalled how her relationship with neighbourhood houses had begun when Dave Stevens visited her elementary school nearly forty years earlier. He presented a slideshow at her school and described some of the things that they could do at Camp Wallace; Dave also handed out camp brochures. Lynn was enchanted by the slideshow and wanted desperately to go to camp. She explained, “We took the brochure and registration form home and begged and begged and begged our parents for a couple of months to let us go. My parents ran a grocery store on Commercial Drive and they worked fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, so we never went camping as a family. It was a foreign idea to send your kids to camp when you’ve got grandma in the back of the store to look after them. And the kids help out in the store; so if they’re off for a couple of weeks - there goes the help, too! It was a hard sell, but my brother, sister, one of our cousins, and I ended up going to camp together. The neighbourhood house most closely associated with camp was Cedar Cottage, which was on our way home every day. My parents had driven by it hundreds of times without knowing what was inside. When my dad dropped me off there, he said, ‘You’re going camping - I really don’t like that. What is there to like? Bugs, dirt, and bears! We live in the city - that’s for rural people who are poor and have no other options.’ I was born in Canada, but my parents came from agricultural communities in China and for them, camping was going backwards! Although they weren’t a hundred percent comfortable, they went with it. We were thrilled. It was such a fun time.”

Lynn continued her neighbourhood house journey by forging a connection at South Van Neighbourhood House. She explained, “The two summers following camp, I volunteered at Killarney Community Centre. Every day after school I would stand at the bus stop in front of South Van Neighbourhood House. One day when I was around fifteen years old and had been volunteering with kids in the summer time for a couple of years, I saw a ‘Hello World’ kids program flyer in the window. I walked in and applied, and was hired. I spent two fun summers working there.”

Getting the job at South Van was a major milestone for Lynn. She explained, “We spent most of our waking hours in the grocery store. The grocery business was something my immigrant family had been able to start with not much English - just hard work and long hours – and which enabled them to feed their family. Getting a real job outside of my parents’ store was really exciting - my first paid job! I was excited and proud of myself, but my parents were worried about me getting in with the wrong crowd. Because they didn’t spend time at the neighbourhood house, they didn’t know that I was actually in a really safe place where people were looking after me, and that I was responsible enough to look after ten kids that didn’t belong to me! I don’t think they realized that. Getting a job built independence for me and introduced me to a whole new world.”

Lynn described how her connection with neighbourhood houses influenced her personal development, “I was a very quiet kid, not talkative at all. I’m actually surprised they kept me at South Van! I worked hard, but compared to some of the other leaders who worked there I was much less confident; they were more sparkly. But I had skills and a belief in the value of community development. I love that you can take an idea, have no money, and still do something. When you get a bunch of people together, there are sparks, and bigger things happen. Even when I worked for other places, the idea of community development that I first learned at the neighbourhood house remained part of me.”

Lynn recalled some of her coworkers from the early days, “Antonia worked at South Van Neighbourhood House. Here I was, coming in as a newbie day camp leader, and she was Assistant Coordinator. I

remember thinking, 'Oh, she's so old!' For me at that time, everybody who was not a high school student seemed old! My other coworkers were sixteen and they were in the leadership program. I thought, 'That's what I'm going to do when I'm in Grade 11! Because then I get to go back to camp!' It was a valuable experience to be around people who were connected to neighbourhood houses in other ways. They really made me want to be part of it, so that was a very significant time for me." Lynn attended the leadership program in Grades 11 and 12 and after graduation participated in the Adult Outdoor Club for skiing, camping, and other outdoor activities. Meanwhile, she worked at Camp Wallace and Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House. As a result of her experiences, she decided to study recreation at university, much to her parents' chagrin. She recalled, "They said, 'Oh my goodness, can't you do something more respectable? You're going to university for camping?!'" While at university, Lynn worked in the leadership program at Gordon Neighbourhood House. Her partner in that position was Olivia, a social worker and program coordinator. Lynn also worked with Linda Watkinson, who came on as a UBC rec student, and stayed on for several decades.

Before she finished university, Lynn decided that she needed to make more money and took a job as the Summer Fun program coordinator for the City of White Rock. She described some of the differences between that position and working in a neighbourhood house, "It was really different working at a more conservative place that was mostly unionized. The bureaucracy came as a shock. Also, pretty much everybody wore a shirt and tie, and you took your lunch at precisely twelve o'clock and you came back to your desk at one o'clock. But we got paid more and there was more money for renting buses so you could load all the kids in and go somewhere for a day rather than always doing things in the local neighbourhood." After working there for some time, the coordinator of recreation services asked Lynn to cover her mat leave, and so Lynn got to work in a corner office at city hall overlooking the beach for almost a year. At the end of the mat leave, Lynn and her husband headed overseas for several months of travel in Southeast Asia.

When they returned to Canada, Lynn began looking for work. Dave Stevens introduced her to Dave Adair, the ED at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House. It turned out that Antonia, who was now working at MPNH as the Program Coordinator, was going on mat leave and Dave offered Lynn the position while Antonia was away. Lynn reflected, "I've been lucky that, except for the White Rock position where I was a stranger walking into an interview and getting a job, I got a lot of work through word of mouth. It's been – 'talk to somebody here,' and, 'something has come up over there.' So I've been really fortunate!" She continued, "At Mount Pleasant, I worked mostly with youth. Sharon Babu was responsible for the preschool and seniors. It was cool to have a chance to work there because every neighbourhood house has a different feel and what they do is a little bit different. I also had a chance to work with Joel Bronstein, who was working there as well. I thought, 'Hey, things are all lining up.'"

When Antonia returned from mat leave, Lynn left Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood house. In the following years she worked at Centre for Ability and volunteered at Hastings Community Centre, where she helped found the community kitchen. During this time, Lynn also gave birth to her first child. However, she maintained her connection with neighbourhood houses through annual attendance at Sasamat camp. When she had her second child, she decided she no longer wanted to work full time. Lynn described how her commitment to spending more time with her family also led to a new connection with Burnaby Neighbourhood House, "After I had my second child, I thought, 'I can't work full time anymore.' It was a shift in my thinking. I really wanted to be involved with my kids' schooling and to volunteer with the things they were involved in. It wasn't due to lack of childcare - we had two sets of grandparents who were willing to help - I just wanted to be with the kids! Centre for Ability wouldn't let me work part-time, so I took a mat leave and then I took a year off to think about it. I really

loved my job at Centre for Ability. The pay and benefits were amazing. Everything was great except for the lack of a part-time option! Then one day I was up at Sasamat Outdoor Centre at the annual open house and I ran into Antonia. I told her about my plight and she said, 'Well, we've got this new project going. Kimberly's in charge. We need somebody to help with the community kitchen, but we're not paying a lot of money so it might not be quite right for you.' I told her, 'Let me check into it because I am interested in looking at options.' In fact, when I heard 'community kitchen' - food plus people - I thought, 'Wow, great!' because those are two areas that I love, and to be able to combine them and get paid to do it is pretty cool. That was twelve years ago!"

Lynn described some of the reasons she loves coordinating the community kitchen, "Even after twelve years, the work excites me because it's always different. All the groups are different and we have so many interesting conversations and so many good laughs - not to mention all the food I get to eat! Although on paper it might not look super exciting, like, 'You have to do dishes?' Yes! That's part of the deal! It's the people that make it exciting and there are few jobs where you can have an open ended conversation every week for three hours! Over food! The conversations are so rich and that's how the group members influence each other, so that's a beautiful, important piece. And it's intimate. We talk about everything! I have been quoted at the community kitchen roundtable as saying, 'The group is going well when we start talking about sex.' And it's true. That means the group is comfortable with each other and we can talk about anything. Religion, family...nothing is off limits because people feel safe. We build trust by doing things together; people also feel empowered because they can share their ideas and put them into action. Just holding formal meetings doesn't bring people closer. The people who come to the community kitchen are struggling with many different issues: diabetes, anxiety, body issues, weight, fear, depression, isolation, immigration, family problems. Of course not everybody is suffering all the time, but we are there for each other. People can help one another because they get to know the other participants and care about them: they're neighbours. It's a natural way of people getting together without forcing anything. Another important aspect is that we are communicating face to face: you cannot do community development via email. Getting together is the key to growing good neighbours. Many people cry when the groups end - including me!"

She continued, "Once I began this job, I never turned back. This is something that works. In so many ways, this job is a good fit for me. It's also a good fit for my family because, although my kids are teens, they still need us after school. And we've got four aging parents, so there needs to be some flexibility to help them. The balance between my work and home life is a good one and they're very intermeshed because a lot of the prep happens right here in my kitchen at home! The files are downstairs in my home office - work doesn't stop when I come home; conversely, I get that flexibility. There have been a few times when the kids have come to work with me and I don't know many workplaces where that would have been okay! There are a couple of staff members who bring their dogs to work and they lie under their desks. A cat lived at the neighbourhood house for a while too and that's just the way it is. Mount Pleasant also had a cat. So it isn't super rigid; they give you what you need in order for you to come to work. I think that's why a lot of people stay at neighbourhood houses, because it's certainly not the wages!"

Looking back over some of her fondest memories from her many years of involvement with neighbourhood houses, camping sticks out as a critical experience. Lynn reflected, "Our camp always pulls us back. Our neighbourhood house experiences always pull us back and the camp is a dear place to us because of the lifelong friends that we've made there. I also sat on the board for camp for a couple of years. It's a part of our life. The camping trips were fun because it was so different from life in the city. There was always a chance to try new things. Also, because you spent several days with people, you

were able to have many good conversations – even with people I wouldn't normally have had a conversation with. That was especially valuable during those teen years when you tend to talk to your six friends and that's about it."

When asked if she was still friends with the people she went camping with as a teenager, Lynn replied, "I married one! In the early years I didn't really know him; Bentley was one of the people that I didn't talk to as much. 'Wow, what a geeky guy,' was my initial impression! I got to know him better when we worked at Sasamat together one summer. He helped me buy a bike and I still have it in our garage! We even got married at Sasamat." Caroline is another lifelong friend who Lynn met while working at Cedar Cottage in summer. They and two other university students begged Doug Slight, the director of the House, to let them take a week off work to go camping on the West Coast Trail. As a result, they formed a lifelong bond. Linda Watkinson is another friend originally from camping days who Lynn also worked with at camp and leadership program, and she was Lynn's husband's leadership leader at the Cedar Cottage group. Lynn reflected, "She's still in our lives 30 years later. That's pretty wild."

Lynn also acknowledged her long connections with coworkers, "I've known a lot of my coworkers for many years. It happens that way with the neighbourhood house. For most of us, including participants, we expect that when we come to our neighbourhood house somebody will know us and give us a big hug, or at least a big smile, and say, 'Hi Lynn!' Even after moving away for a while and doing other things, when you come back it's always, 'Hey welcome back!' It's very different than, say, a community centre where people don't know my name even though I'm there on a weekly basis." Sheri Parke, who worked at South Van with me decades ago, lives in my 'hood and we connect through the Neighbourhood Small Grants program.

Lynn's kids also enjoy a connection to the neighbourhood house movement. Lynn related, "When my kids were babies, we went to Mother Goose at Collingwood Neighbourhood House. They've both gone to camp at Sasamat as day campers and as res-camp campers. I first took them when they were babies and Linda Watkinson, who was the Program Director out at Sasamat at the time, said, 'Hey, do you want to work a few weekends in the summer? You can bring your kids because this is family camp!' So we worked those weekends as a family. My husband also works at family camp on those weekends. As the boys have got older – they're now fourteen and seventeen - they go to the parking lot and help people carry their luggage to the cabins. They're so proud of that place because they know where it is and from summer to summer you often see the same families, so they have that connection. My older son has gone on some of the canoe trips and now he's in the leadership program. My younger son has also spent part of many summers at Sasamat.

Lynn has applied the passion for community development that she learned at the neighbourhood house to the neighbourhood where she lives. She explained, "When I moved into this neighbourhood some years ago, I didn't know anybody. That was kind of scary and uncomfortable. In my old neighbourhood, I knew all my neighbours. We would apply for neighbourhood small grants and hold block parties and I wanted to do the same thing in my new 'hood but I needed a second signature on the application. I knew little about the people who lived around me. Finally I grabbed a neighbour from across the street who also has kids, and said, 'Would you do this with me?' She wasn't very excited by it to begin with, because it's never happened around here before, but she agreed. The idea that you can build something with just one other person has been a really important lesson for me. Now, at Halloween and at the end of summer, we always do block parties or fireworks with fifty or sixty people; this is the eighth year. My husband also organized neighbourhood street hockey in the school parking lot in the summer time once a week. We brought the hockey nets and sticks, and people just come to hang out and play. And I have

organized stuff at school – the PAC really didn't organize many events when I started, but that has shifted as people got to know each other by doing things together. During the first fall season, I was frustrated that there weren't any family activities at school that helped me to connect with others! Since then, I've organized movie nights and potlucks and everybody comes together and the kids are having a good time, and the parents are there. It's a popular thing. Staff appreciation lunches got fancier and made with love by parents who cooked community kitchen style, from scratch. And when the community capacity increased from working together, we started doing spring fairs I'm so glad to get the email recently that said, 'Hey Lynn, we're doing it again!' Yay! I've left something good! You don't even need a great idea - something happens when people work together and good things get built in neighbourhoods because of that. I think that's my biggest learning from the neighbourhood house - along with being able to talk to anybody and everybody through the experience of being around all kinds of different people. I've been lucky to have that experience!"

Lynn also reflected on some of the changes that have taken place at Burnaby Neighbourhood House over the years, beginning with the incredible new kitchen, "The new kitchen is amazing! There have been growing pains – some people use it and leave it messy - so it's like any other communal kitchen. I've become the kitchen nag because I really care about it and I can't stand it when things are missing or something is scratched up! We are so fortunate to have this expensive new kitchen – we have to look after it. With the new building and a fast-growing organization, things are shifting. It's harder to communicate with everybody so you feel like you have to write it down or send an email. My boss used to say, 'We'll just do it and apologize later!' I hope that way of doing things doesn't change because you don't always need to have a committee to examine every simple decision. I like having the flexibility to shift as needed. And I hope we don't get unionized or accredited so that we don't have to squeeze ourselves into those boxes. I would say all of us work more than what we're paid for. That's part of the give and take; in return, there is freedom to do things your way."

I asked Lynn what she saw as her contribution to neighbourhood houses and she replied, "The community kitchen at Burnaby definitely has my signature on it. It's getting tweaked and worked on constantly. For some people who were previously quite isolated, their participation in the community kitchen has led them to other positive things. I think that's been something that I have helped to do. Also, I'm open and accepting of whoever comes, and I'm empathic. I love sharing ideas and food and helping to connect people. I think the other thing that I've discovered over time is that sometimes people tell me things that they might not tell other people. It helps them to get it off their chest or find a solution to something that they've been working on that they can't figure out by themselves. So I think that's something that I bring to the job. I guess another piece relates to taking on a more responsible role guiding and supervising staff and volunteers, which has enabled me to pass on what I've learned to others."

Looking forward to the future, Lynn reflected, "As an older person who's not working, I'll need places to go, and things to do, and opportunities to connect with people who get me. The neighbourhood house will be that place and connection. As far as my career goes, I don't know what will come up because funding is unstable. That's okay – I've always been somebody who flies by the seat of their pants and takes the opportunities that come along. Whatever happens, I hope that I'll always be involved with the neighbourhood house because it's an amazing organization and it's so varied. There's really something for everybody, so I can't imagine not being involved or not feeling like it's home. Even if I don't know anybody, I know that there's always good stuff happening at the neighbourhood house."