

Marcela: I Discovered Myself Here

Marcela Mancilla-Fuller is the Settlement Services Coordinator at Collingwood Neighbourhood House. When she shared her story on January 28th, 2015 she had been in the position for eight years. She described how she first got connected with Collingwood, "I came to know about Collingwood Neighbourhood House because I was working for another organization that used to rent space here occasionally, but I really didn't know what a neighbourhood house was. I come from Mexico where we don't have this type of community organization. My first perception was that it was a daycare or preschool. Then, when I went on my mat leave, I practically became a new immigrant, even though I had been in Canada for five years, because it was such a different stage of my life. I wasn't working and I had to develop new networks within this new life stage of being a mom in Canada. While I was on my mat leave I decided to open a second hand toy store on Kingsway, less than half a kilometre away from here. At lunch time I'd close shop and come here to one of the programs for moms and toddlers. I started to connect with people and understand a little bit about what the neighbourhood house did; not very much, though, because my time was very limited. I also felt like I was already settled in Canada and that therefore the services were not for me. Nobody told me that, it's just what I thought for myself. I was afraid of accessing something that was for other people who really needed it. I was afraid of saying who I was: I started to develop relationships with the other moms but I never shared my personal life in terms of work or how long I'd been here."

She continued, "After a year it was clear that my business wasn't working out and I closed it down, but I didn't go back to my previous job; instead, I resigned and decided to stay home with my child. However, I'm a very active person and it wasn't really my thing to be at home all the time. I started to volunteer at the program for new moms and babies. I liked it, but I didn't want to work only with babies and moms. I started to look for other volunteer opportunities and became a board member of another organization. The reason I wasn't more involved with the neighbourhood house at that time was that I didn't want to take the place of anybody accessing services - I felt like I would be 'taking unfair advantage' of the program. I didn't come back to the neighbourhood house until one day when I suddenly realized that there were some white women here and I thought, 'Wait a minute, if they are accessing these services, I guess I can do it too! I don't have to feel guilty about it.' So I came back and that was when I actually got more connected with the organization. When a job posting came out for settlement coordinator, I applied. Six people interviewed me and, after being out of the workforce for more than two years, I was offered the job. However, at that time I was three months pregnant with my second child. Before I signed the contract, I told my boss that I was pregnant. She said, 'I don't think there's any problem. I think the opposite actually. This is what we do: we nurture families and we want our staff to represent what the community is about.' I cried when she said that. In Mexico, if you're pregnant you'll never be hired. In fact, sometimes when women become pregnant, they are fired."

Marcela explained how she developed in the position, "When I started, I promised not to take my mat leave because I felt like I needed to be very committed to the job, and also it was a job that I wanted to do. I learned a lot of things very quickly and gained understanding of the community from different perspectives. Also, while working here, I realized that I could advocate for people who came to the neighbourhood house so they wouldn't feel like I had - that they were taking the place of women who 'really need' the help. My baby was born six months after I started, and the neighbourhood house supported me so much through that process. My husband took parental leave. He looked after the two kids and he used to bring the baby here for me to nurse. I felt really stressed at that time because I felt like I was like not being serious about my job. Which place in the world actually allows you to have your baby with you twice a day and even provides a room for you to nurse? I could not understand why this

place was allowing me to do that, but now I understand. It's because it is a house, and because you have to provide a space where people feel safe, whether you are an employee, a community member, a volunteer or whoever. It was amazing! The beauty of the neighbourhood house is that it's for everyone to feel connected and included, and to develop a sense of belonging; it's not only for one community or group of people."

Despite the warm welcome she and her baby received, Marcela sought to maintain a separation between her family and the neighbourhood house. She explained, "Understanding that the neighbourhood house was for everybody, not only people without resources, was something that helped me to do my job in a different dimension, through a lens of 'everybody's welcome.' Still, in the beginning I was very clear with my husband, 'You don't access any services here. No. That makes me feel uncomfortable. I don't want you here. This is my job.' You see, the impact of my culture was so great in terms of the idea that 'when you're working, you're not with your family.' Nobody here told me that, but I told myself, 'I might be seen as unprofessional if I bring my family here.' That was a huge misconception on my part." Marcela described how her perception began to change when her daughter started school, "That was when I realized that I needed a relationship between my work and my family because my daughter didn't speak English and I needed to make sure that she was in a safe place. My kids were born here but we spoke only Spanish at home. When my daughter started school, she had a hard time detaching herself from me and my husband because of the language; at first she was really afraid. Working here, I was able to connect with my daughter, which made her feel safe. At the same time, it was very hard for me in terms of feeling, 'Oh my god, I'm not doing my job. I'm practically just here for my family.' But it wasn't true! In fact, it was helping me do my job better because I work with families, including immigrant families, and people who are not able to express themselves in English."

Marcela explained how the relationships she developed at work also helped her deal with challenges outside of work, "My daughter was bullied in kindergarten. It was horrible. Fortunately, I was able to work with her to overcome that rather than fighting with the community. That was possible because I had those relationships where I work and my work allowed me to have that impact, not only at work but also outside of my department. I was able to speak out, to talk to moms and teachers. I felt so connected. I felt like I made a great impact with the school and that my daughter was part of that. It was the same when my son went to one of the daycares here. I had conversations about things that bothered me because I could see that by having those conversations, I could understand the community better, and by being invested in making those changes, the impact on my son was going to be very positive. That was really fantastic. Creating those connections was my way of growing, not only as a worker but also as a mom, and a way of giving my kids the opportunity to understand that living in a community is very important. Connecting with people is not done just through school. It's not just through work. It's connecting with whoever you can connect with. It's understanding how that person can have an impact on you. And also understanding that work can be part of your daily family life. Doing these things empowered me so much." She added, "My work here also frames things in a different way with my family back in Mexico; it changes how I connect and interact with them and I share what I've learnt - most of my family are also community workers and activists. How the neighbourhood house has contributed to my growth is something that I can also give back. I work in a great place."

As Marcela has grown, so has her department. She explained, "When I started here, I had four staff under my supervision; now I have fourteen. My relationship with them is very strong. It's not all sweet, but it's about being able to interconnect with them on different levels, not only at work but also to help them be aware of their community contributions and how those impact others, and how that makes you grow as a person. Working here has been really amazing for me and has enabled me to analyse

experiences and information at a different level. As a result, I've grown as a leader; not only as a mom or as a worker, but as a leader. I feel richly rewarded. I love my job. It motivates me. I think that's why I'm healthy - it's the motivation to go to work! People care about me here. As soon as I arrive: 'How are you?' If I don't come, I know that my team is going to worry. They're going to call me to make sure that I'm fine."

Looking back over the years, Marcela preferred not to focus on significant events, and instead emphasized process, "Significant moments I can't really think of, but process is very important. When I came here I had to supervise people who had already been here for many years. When you're younger and an immigrant and have to supervise people, it's a huge challenge. If you asked me now though, I feel like I have empowered those people and they have also empowered me with their knowledge. That's why I would call it a process and not a moment." She added, "I'd also like to mention that by providing employment opportunities to new immigrants, we are living our values in a very practical sense. When I came to Canada, I never thought I could have a job like this, but somehow circumstances took me into this place. The leadership was very encouraging in terms of, 'Believe in what you know already and build on it.' Paula Carr, the former ED, was very supportive. It didn't matter whether you spoke or wrote the language perfectly. Welcoming that richness and diversity of being gives people the opportunity to discover themselves and the richness they have within. I discovered myself here."

Collingwood Neighbourhood House has also had a significant impact on Marcela's family. She elaborated, "The impact this place has had on my children is huge. For example, my daughter is ten years old and her goal is to come here to volunteer. We come to the youth program on Saturdays; it's one of my programs. When we come, she's always ready to volunteer - to be in the community. She has developed a high level of compassion. Volunteering gives her a sense of 'I can do things and I can help.' My son has also been affected. He said to me of the youth worker who had taught him how play basketball, 'I want him to be my big brother.' When I asked him why, he told me, 'He really knows how to teach - he makes me feel like I can do it, mom.' For my son, it was a moment of complete connection. I had never heard him say that about anybody else before. My husband is also changing - he's changing careers. He's going into the certification course to become an ESL teacher and he's volunteering in our ESL class. My nieces came to Canada out of very abusive relationships. They're very young. They also volunteer here. My sister now comes for the ESL classes and she volunteers in the kitchen."

Marcela reflected in amazement, "I started out rejecting any idea that my family could come here. I always said, 'Don't come to my work.' And now they're coming. They feel connected. They feel, 'This is a place where I want to do things.' We also take part in programs near where we live but I haven't found that connection for my kids where they feel like 'I want to go,' rather than me saying, 'You have to go.' My family is so connected to here! It's like a house - everybody's welcome. Whatever you have, just bring it and share it! It's the same concept when you say in your family, 'Oh we're getting together.' 'What do you want me to bring?' 'Whatever you want to!' And the best conversations happen here in the kitchen just like they do at home. Home is where the heart is. It's a real home in the sense of sharing an atmosphere where you bring your self. As I was telling this story, I realized very deeply that my body is connected to this place. That's what happens and that's exactly what this house means - not only for participants, but also for those that work here. I think it's important to distinguish that this is my workplace but it's also a place where I can contribute."

Marcela also provided some insight into the challenges of her job and the contribution she makes to the neighbourhood house, "You question yourself when things don't work out in a way that produces a positive impact, 'Why am I doing this? Does that really align with the values? What is my contribution,

really?' It's a big challenge that keeps me awake: what is my contribution here? My contribution is, I think, my experience, my connection - not what I feel, but my being - something different that contributes to the richness of a place where you're safe as well. Safe, in that I can share and I know that I'm not going to lose my person or my job. My other contribution is as a leader by recognizing the contributions of others and by facilitating opportunities. It's about recognizing the contributions of the people that we serve and feeling the connection between us rather than seeing it as 'we're helping you with a service.' I feel really great when people feel like they have grown and can move on. I guess that's what I learnt from my mother. When my mother died, she told me, 'I can go because you are grown.' She said, 'I'm glad to find that you need yourself, and not me. So I can go.' That was so peaceful. She'd had cancer for two years but her mental state was very strong."

Recalling her childhood, Marcela shared, "I had fifteen brothers and sisters. My father passed away when the youngest was only two years old. I never had my own bed or my own jeans! I had nothing. But I had everything. I do not remember my childhood as being sad or depressed - never! I moved out of my family house when I was twenty, the only one to move out before marriage. I was independent! I continued working, but it was a big thing for my family. Within a month my mother told me, 'You're my best friend.' She was a pillar in my life, a great inspiration. She was always happy, even when she didn't know where the next meal was coming from. She always cared about people and relationships rather than material things. I'm proud that I can carry what I learned from her into my work."

Looking ahead to the future, Marcela found it difficult to make predictions, "I don't see the future clearly. I'm in a process of growth and reflecting on myself. I think I'll continue to grow with the responsibilities that I have, and probably when I have grown a little bit more I will be able to say, 'Okay I'm ready for other things.' My process at the neighbourhood house has taught me that changes occur within yourself not because you are in a position with a particular title, but because of where you are as a person. It's a very personal journey. I just hope I can continue contributing and growing and finding myself over and over again."

Marcela concluded, "That's my story. I have never talked about my life before! This is the first time that somebody outside of my family hears about me. I never realized that my story had any kind of meaning. There are stories that are deeply moving and there are stories that change people. But there are stories that just pass by, that don't relate to you. And I thought my stories were always like that: that they don't relate to others, it's just me. Now I feel like - I have a story! I have a story! I'm very privileged and I cannot compare my story with the hard times that a lot of people come through when they come to Canada, even though I can relate in some ways. But my story can create connections between people: my story, my staffs' stories, my children's stories - they're all connected. My family is connected. We are all connected."