

Mehak: Riding the Neighbourhood House Wave

Mehak is the Family Support Worker at Little Mountain Neighbourhood House. Only twenty-three years old, she had already been in the position for a year and a half when she shared her story during an interview in November 2014. Mehak explained how she first became involved with LMNH when she was in elementary school. Mary, the LMNH child and youth worker, reached out to Grade 6 and 7 students to get them involved in a graffiti wipe-out project. Alongside around thirty other students, Mehak spent a day painting over graffiti in the neighbourhood. When Mehak was in Grade 8, Mary came to Tupper Secondary, where Mehak attended high school, and invited youth to participate in the LMNH youth council. Mehak went to only one meeting though, because the other students on the council were all in Grade 12, which was quite intimidating for a Grade 8 student. However, in Grade 9, Mehak joined the youth council with a friend and attended for two years. As she explained, she became more involved in Grade 10 “because by then the Grade 12 students had left and it was basically a group of friends and we were able to spearhead different initiatives. At that time the youth council had a grant and we could work within that budget to organize events such as a potluck on the beach, a pizza party, or a Halloween haunted house. One time we cooked a meal for the LMNH seniors group; we did different things to get connected to community groups and individuals.”

Those connections created the foundation for long lasting personal and professional relationships. Mehak noted, “I still talk to the people that I was on the youth council with till today. I joined youth council to hang out with one or two of my close friends, so at the time I didn’t realise that the other relationships I formed would have such lasting impact. In high school, not all of us were close, but after high school we’ve been seeing each other and we are closer now because we’ve chosen to maintain those friendships. We’ve also become closer because my friends are also my neighbours, so we run into each other. Some of those people are also in service providing roles so can share our experiences as service providers as well.”

The local neighbourhood connection is important for Mehak. She elaborated, “I grew up in this neighbourhood and my family still lives here. Although I moved to a different neighbourhood just a month ago, I lived here for thirteen years, since a few years after we immigrated to Canada from India when I was six years old. I work in the neighbourhood and my parents and friends live in the neighbourhood, and I went to school in this neighbourhood. Even though I don’t actually live here at the moment, I feel like I’m still a part of the community, and I come here daily; if I am not going to work, I am going to see my family, so I still feel at home here.” Mehak also values the community connection that she maintains with LMNH participants. She explained, “Sometimes I run into young people I’ve worked with, which is fun. I see them in the community a lot and I enjoy seeing them grow up. I recently saw a boy at Tupper who is now in Grade 10 and when I worked with him he was in Grade 6, so he’s gone through puberty and his voice is much deeper now than it was before. He’s taller. That’s amazing to think that I knew him when he was tiny. It’s nice to see people I know from the neighbourhood house in the neighbourhood. I guess that’s how staff, like Mary or Galit, who worked with me as a youth, feel when they see me. It also helps me transition from one program to another because I still see the kids around the

neighbourhood, so even when the program ends, it's not 'goodbye.' We remain connected because I'm still here and so are they."

While on youth council, Mehak expanded her involvement with LMNH to include a short stint on the board, and also as a day camp leader. She recalled, "I was a youth representative on the LMNH board for a while in Grade 11. My friend and I shared one vote. Actually we were kind of lost in the meetings; the content was quite technical for us at that time because we were so young and inexperienced, but we tried it. The other board members were really supportive and welcoming, so it was a valuable experience for a young person." Day camp provided another positive interaction with the neighbourhood house. Mehak described her experience: "I volunteered at summer day camp when I was in youth council and it was a lot of fun. It was great because we were able to do something meaningful over the summer and also become more confident in facilitating groups and organizing activities. We could choose what kind of role and level of responsibility we wanted to take on. I remember one year there were a lot of youth who wanted to work but there weren't positions for everybody, so we volunteered for a small honorarium. It was great fun because there were so many of us, so the ratio of leaders to kids was really high, around one to three. That was a good way for us to get experience without getting thrown in at the deep end because the neighbourhood house was supporting us."

Mehak shared some fond memories from day camp: "Kids are so memorable and they really inspire you - I remember little things about each one. I don't think they realise how much they impact staff. I remember there were two boys who were very close friends. They were different ages, but got along very well together and their grandmas were also friends. One of the boys brought a hard-boiled egg for every snack; that's all his grandma would only ever send him with and every day as he was peeling it, he would say, 'I don't want to eat this!' I still remember his face every day as he peeled it, saying, 'My grandma only gives me hardboiled eggs and I want something different for snack.' Memories like that are really important and vivid, even though they might not seem significant on the surface." Mehak also shared the following story: "The first year we had some children who had just come to Canada, and initially felt uncomfortable coming into this big group where they didn't know any of the other kids or speak the language. They were experiencing culture shock and their families were also adjusting. In the second year with that group it was great to see the transition and see them feeling more comfortable and talking more and having their own experiences over the summer. I was really lucky to be able to work with those kids."

It was not only the children who experienced growth and learning in day camp; Mehak described what she learned as a day camp leader: "I had to be very creative in accessing city and community resources and I learned to ask people for things, and figure out where the expertise is or where free things are in the community. You think you know about Vancouver resources, but then you go to each different community and realise, 'Oh, I did not know about this neighbourhood at all.' And then you tap into those resources. It was great. I learned a lot. It really pushed me outside of my comfort zone to ask for things, but my motivation was always for the children; for many of them it was their first experience doing these things, so I wanted it to be a really positive and special experience for them. I can be quite assertive in asking for things when I know where it's going and when it's not for me."

Mehak deepened her connection to LMNH in Grade 12 by proposing her own program. She related, "One of my friends and I had an idea to lead a program with pre-teen girls, which we thought would be really cool. Rachel from the neighbourhood house supported us so that we were able to lead it. We wrote a one-page letter of intent that Rachel read over with us. We submitted it to Joel [the LMNH ED] and got around one hundred dollars, which was enough to cover expenses for food or local field trips. Four girls registered and we ran the program for eight weeks. The following year Rachel said, 'You know what, I really want you to do that project again, but I don't want you to volunteer your time. I think you should be compensated for your work.' My friend had moved away, so Rachel helped me apply for a grant and we got it, so I did the program again." One opportunity led to another. Mehak continued, "The other thing that happened that year was that LMNH sent me to a community capacity building class with Kathy Coyne through Capilano University. I think I was the youngest person there. That laid the foundation for community development for me and put theoretical frameworks into my head about how to work with people and how to work with communities. The theoretical knowledge that I was learning in the class was very helpful because I was able to really reflect on it in my work with the girls and with other staff - I was able to tie them together. During that year I made a bridge between the work that I was already doing and the work that I wanted to pursue, and so that's why I went into social work."

While at university pursuing a social work degree, Mehak maintained close ties with LMNH, taking on part time shifts a couple of times a week. During that time, Mehak also wanted to learn about other neighbourhood houses so she successfully applied for a job running summer day camps at Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House and did that for two years. Then she arranged to do her fourth year practicum placement in South Vancouver Neighbourhood House in 2013. She described her experience at SVNH: "It was a very good learning experience for me and it was great to see another neighbourhood house context, with the familiar structure but different programs and staff and participants. I did a few different projects at SVNH. I facilitated a program called CitizenU, which was a youth anti-discrimination project that encouraged youth to reflect on their experiences of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and so on. At the end of the eight-week period youth were assisted to apply for funding to run their own event to create greater awareness about different forms of discrimination. Another project involved an elder financial abuse awareness project and dialogue with South Asian seniors. Through those discussions, the seniors came up with things that they could teach other seniors about. I also helped with a project about housing. For that one, I did a lot of research about housing related services, food security, poverty, and accessibility, and put it into a user-friendly format. Finally, I coordinated focus group or sat in on interviews for the NHiMV project, which was just starting, and of which this interview forms a part. Overall, it was a really great experience and I learned a lot from the staff at SVNH."

The practicum experience also enabled Mehak to transition from part time employee, student and volunteer, to full time staff. She explained, "After the practicum I was ready to transition into a staff member because I had learned so much. When I was at the neighbourhood house as a student, I concentrated on learning and observing and really looking at the neighbourhood house structure and organisation. It was a time for me to reflect on what I wanted to do. I opened

myself up to different things, like working with seniors and working with service providers and doing things that I hadn't previously done in a professional environment. When I graduated from the social work program, I was really fortunate that a full-time position came up at LMNH in the field that I'd studied in, so I applied - and I got it." She continued, "My participation with neighbourhood houses hugely influenced my education and my career choice. It's also enabled me to connect and make friends with people who are also my colleagues in community social services. It's been a reciprocal process: my education affected my work here and vice versa, so the neighbourhood house has really affected my whole life."

Despite all her experience with neighbourhood houses, full time work represented a significant change for Mehak. She explained, "It was my first full-time permanent position – it's like a new phase in my life where I'm a professional working full time in a proper job. It's an identity shift from being a young person, or a student. At work, I am confident that I know what I'm doing, and I take my work very seriously; I have to be on top of things to work with vulnerable people to whom I have a responsibility. But then when I'm with my friends sometimes I'm like, 'Whoa, I'm still really young.' For me, this has been an amazing transition into adulthood, into professional life, into a way that I can make a contribution to society. It feels like I'm on a wave; I can't really reflect properly on the change because I'm still in the middle of it!"

Mehak described some of the skills and knowledge that she has gained in her new position. She stated, "In terms of my professional development, I've strengthened my ability to be flexible and to go with the flow. I like to learn a lot of different things because I am working with people who might be more vulnerable in some way. I need to research and be reflective of the fact that I am helping parents even though I don't have any parenting experience. I could still be considered a 'youth,' so I have to present myself carefully when I'm working. At the same time, I've had to give myself permission to not have every single thing figured out." She added, "It's also amazing to see how other people are growing too, like Patricia from Kits Neighbourhood House who attended the community development course with me. Now she's a family support worker at KNH. We're in two different places but we came into our roles at the same time so we can really support each other."

When asked about her contribution to the neighbourhood houses, Mehak replied, "My contribution is my happiness; I cheer people up. I may also provide a different perspective but then everybody comes from such diverse experiences. I bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm - I am a very energetic person. Actually, it's much easier for me to see how the neighbourhood house has impacted me, than to see my contribution. I think everybody brings different ideas, perspectives and experiences."

As a young person, Mehak finds it difficult to predict her future, but she knows that she will be connected in some way with the neighbourhood house through working, volunteering, or attending community events. She concluded, "I am passionate about neighbourhood houses, and yet I don't know if you can plan your entire career in advance. Right now I am working with people and, although I'm not sure where the wave will take me, I hope I will work in a helping role with people all my life."