

Sarah: Cross Pollination

Sarah Martin has been a board member at Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House since 2004, and chair of the board since 2008, but her history with the neighbourhood house began in 1986 when her family moved into the Cedar Cottage neighbourhood. Sarah shared her story on February 6th, 2015. She began by describing how she first became connected with Cedar Cottage almost thirty years earlier, “We moved to government housing over on 27th Avenue near Nanaimo in ’86. I was eight years old when I started going to Cedar Cottage family night dinners. They were awesome because it was a dollar per kid and a buck fifty for the adults. For my mom, who was a single parent, it was a nice opportunity to meet neighbours and get to know people since we had recently moved into the area. It was also a night that she didn’t have to cook or clean. We would eat dinner together, and then us kids would go downstairs to play and have fun while the parents spent time learning something – for example, the neighbourhood house brought people in to talk about how to deal with teenagers or children, or they would have somebody come in to show them how to cut hair, because if you can cut your daughter’s hair, it’s cheaper than going to the hair salon. Sometimes they would just have fun playing games like Pictionary or Balderdash.” Sarah added, “I’m the oldest. My sister has developmental disabilities and my brother is the youngest. It was a lot for my mom to deal with because my mom also has a brain injury. Combining her brain injury with three children and trying to do everything on her own, I think she really appreciated going to Cedar Cottage, to be with other adults and feel supported.”

Sarah described how her relationship with Cedar Cottage developed, “I started out with the family dinners, and then as I got older I don’t want to go downstairs and play with the kids, so I would bring my homework and sit at reception. There were two or three of us who were twelve or thirteen years old, who would sit at reception doing our homework and chatting. If the phone rang we’d be like, ‘Hello, Cedar Cottage! How can we help you?’ And we’d run and grab a staff person because we couldn’t answer any of the questions. Around that time, my mother wanted me to join the Boys and Girls Club because she wanted me to hang out with children outside of the government housing where there were suicide attempts, domestic violence, alcohol, drug abuse, sex work, foster kids, you name it. My mum wanted me to have stability and to get to know other kids, but I refused. Because of my father’s inability to manage his finances and pay rent, we had moved a lot - I remember living in about six different places before the age of seven. As a result, I was extremely shy. It was really hard for me to open up to other people because by the time I did, we were moving again! I had a lot of insecurity about meeting and getting to know people, so when my mom asked me to join Boys and Girls Club, I didn’t want to go. She also asked me when I was in Grade 5 if I would like to start French immersion, but I didn’t want to change schools again, so I was like, ‘No way!’ When I was in high school, I regretted it because I had to learn French!”

She continued, “Since I wouldn’t join Boys and Girls Club, my mother talked to Donna Chang, who at the time was a family program coordinator, and said, ‘Why don’t we start a group here for preteen girls?’ So they went to my elementary school and got a bunch of girls involved, and also some girls from another school, who I didn’t know. We got to choose our name and we called ourselves the Preteen Girls Club. It started out with us just getting together to learn things about ourselves - how to be confident, how to do your hair, and other things. We talked about things that were interesting to us at the time, which was everything: Nazis, apartheid, sex, everything - we were very curious and the group offered a rare environment where we were really allowed to ask questions. There was never a taboo question in my family, but for some girls who came from homes where you didn’t talk about that stuff, it was a really eye-opening opportunity for them. For those of us who could have these conversations at home, we wanted to know more than what we could learn from our parents. My mother’s a very devout Christian, so at home it was very much a Christian perspective. I wanted to know what other people’s perspectives were: what are non-Christian people thinking? I found it raised my awareness by opening a whole world of understanding. It was nice to talk to other people who weren’t always like, ‘No, you must be like this.’ I could still choose to be a kind and loving Christian, but I could also understand how other people thought.”

Eventually the preteen girls club morphed into a volunteer club. Sarah elaborated, “We started volunteering, mostly in summer. I got to volunteer in the preschool and also with seniors, which was amazing because we received training to work with different groups of people. I would always try to find a senior who was by themselves - I wanted to help the isolated seniors. I learned a lot from sitting with them and I really enjoyed that time. We also held car washes and fundraised so that we could go to Sasamat camp, and we volunteered with the summer camp. I signed up for every week. Our leaders were like, ‘You have to take at least two weeks off!’ But I loved it - I loved playing with the kids. For the second year of Summer Fun, when I was around fifteen years old, I had the younger kids all to myself. As the leader of around six kids, I was basically doing camp counselling, and I really enjoyed it. One year there was a deaf child whose mother wanted him to learn to read lips before he was taught sign language and they asked me to be his personal camp counsellor. He was so sweet. He would pick little dandelions and give them to me and I would make chains with them and hang them off my backpack. We were summer buddies.”

From volunteering, the group became a pre-leadership and then a leadership group for youth aged sixteen and up. The leadership program offered additional opportunities for skill development. Sarah recalled, “I loved the leadership program! I’m a real outdoorsy person. I can build a fire with one match! I can build my own shelter with a tarp. Starting at age fourteen, when I had time off, I did the Sasamat outdoor camp, which was two days of training at Sasamat and then five days on Stave Lake where you have to dig a latrine and cook your food over a camp fire. I was so proud of what I learned! At every step there are leaders helping you. That was a lot of fun and I was lucky to be able to do it for a few years.”

As much as she loved camp, Sarah found she had to make a difficult decision in the summer following Grade 11: “I really wanted to work at Sasamat, but I had also been accepted into the Ailanthus acting program. I enjoyed acting and I was really into the arts. I told my mom, ‘I don’t know what to do!’ She said, ‘You have the rest of your life to work. Go to Ailanthus and have fun.’ So I did. Even though I missed out on a paid position as a camp counsellor, it was a good thing I chose Ailanthus because I ended up meeting my future husband there! We started dating a year later. That was sixteen years ago!”

Sarah explained some of the very positive effects that Cedar Cottage had on her as a young person, “Grade 12 was a very busy year for me because through my experience at Cedar Cottage I had learned how to be confident. I was the student council president and editor of the yearbook. I was involved in all sorts of clubs, including theatre and sports. However, before that I had been one of those very insecure people who wore black all the time and had half my face covered with my hair. My mother’s family is Chinese and they have a very different culture. If somebody gets an A, you don’t say, ‘Congratulations, great job!’ It’s like, ‘Did you suck up to the teacher?’ I experienced a lot of put downs and developed body issues, even though I was an average-sized kid, because I had nicknames like ‘butterball’ and ‘sumo.’ There were also some complicated family relationship issues that arose from misunderstandings around my mother’s brain injury and memory loss and I became the target of family bullying. Some of my aunts and uncles were physically and emotionally abusive but my mother didn’t understand what was happening to me until I was much older. Of course now I wouldn’t blame my mom for anything, and actually those experiences made me a stronger person. Things happen for a reason.”

Sarah reflected on the impact that Cedar Cottage had on her mother, “She’s one of those people who I look up to as a survivor. Through her experience at Cedar Cottage she became empowered and learned how to do many things, including how to ask for help and how to work with other people to get things done. She’s the type who helps other people. For example, she taught English for a while at the church to Korean immigrants and she helps at other churches if they need help with food preparation, also at other neighbourhood houses, and at senior centres now that she’s a senior herself. She’s moved to North Vancouver, but she still comes back to Cedar Cottage for special dinners and events.”

Since she was so busy with school in Grade 12, Sarah didn't have time to participate in Cedar Cottage programs or events. She explained how she reconnected with the neighbourhood house a few years later, "I went off to college, and I spent a year working in Vancouver. Then I went to college for a year in Victoria to study photography. When I came back to Vancouver, I moved in with my boyfriend, and started working. I was just trying to get life going. I began to feel kind of disconnected because I wasn't going to church anymore and I wasn't participating in the neighbourhood house. I really wanted to get reconnected. Somebody had recommended that I join the board. I thought about it but worried that I wouldn't know what to do because I was so young, so I just started going to evening bible studies at my church." However, the seed had been planted. Sarah related how the neighbourhood house drew her back, "Eventually I decided, 'Okay, I'm going to sit in and find out what it's like to be on the board.' The first three years were spent mostly observing, asking questions, and trying to understand how the board works. Since then, I've done education and research on board governance, non-profit management, facilitation, and all sorts of other things. In fact, I now sit on both the Cedar Cottage board and the Association of Neighbourhood Houses board as a representative for Cedar Cottage. I'm on the board development committee and we're working on evaluation matrices - I'm becoming an expert in board governance!"

Sarah's non profit experience is not limited to Cedar Cottage. She explained, "After studying photography, I worked in photo labs for a while then decided to go freelance. While I was doing freelance photography, I also started an artists' collective of photographers, painters, writers, musicians, and actors. It was a really great experience and that's where I really began to learn about non-profit management. When the economy started to go bad, I stopped freelancing and went to work for a company that published outdoor magazines. So I was running the artists' collective, working a fulltime job, and also taking part time classes! I didn't sleep a lot for about four years. Then I got laid off from the magazine when the economy really tanked. I had long ago decided that whatever happened, I was never going to be on welfare like my mom had to when my dad left. I started researching what I wanted to do with my life and took a part time job doing street fundraising for charities. By this time I was also learning about board governance at Cedar Cottage and I realised that I actually I knew a lot about non-profit organizations. I also took Kathy Coyne's community development course. Then I got a bursary to take an Introduction to Non-Profit Management course at the University of the Fraser Valley. That meant leaving work half an hour early and driving all the way out to Abbotsford and getting home at 11 o'clock at night, going to bed, then doing it all over again the next day. I gave up the artist collective to avoid burn out. While doing all of that, I started interviewing EDs and CEOs of non-profit organizations that I wanted to work for. Finally, six years ago, an entry level job opened up at the SPCA, and now I'm their data management officer. Through that I've also taken the opportunity to learn more about fundraising and databases. I've basically taken my opportunities and used them as educational experiences and grown from there by applying what I learn to everything else I'm doing. When I saw Simone Joyaux at a meeting of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, I bought a copy of her book for myself, as well as for Cedar Cottage and one for ANH, and we use it in our work. I bring everything that I learn back to Cedar Cottage and ANH and to SPCA as well. Cross-pollination, right!"

Sarah elaborated further on the impact that Cedar Cottage has had on her personal and professional development, "One significant event was definitely during the preteen girls group. At that time, I couldn't accept compliments. I always brushed them off - you know, feeling like you don't deserve it. People would say stuff and I would just blow them off and say something rude. My peers confronted me about it with the woman who was in charge of the group at the time. I was in grade six when that happened. That's when the conversation really started happening about how I felt about myself and the way things were in my life. Obviously you don't become confident overnight. I realized in the summer between Grades 8 and 9 that you have to choose to be happy. You have to choose to be confident, and you have to fake it until you make it. That was the first big change for me." She added, "My family on my mother's side is very outspoken. We yell, we tell you the truth even if you don't like it. That made me a very blunt person, so when I started to be more confident and talk to other people, then I had to learn about filters - that's another thing I learned at

Cedar Cottage: about filters and how to reframe my words - to think about what I want to say before it comes out.”

She recalled another milestone that occurred when she was around thirteen years old, “Donna called me into her office. She told me that my mother had come in and cried because our cousins had emptied their joint bank account of all the money that my mom had been saving for almost ten years for a family trip to Disneyland. Donna said, ‘I want you to know this because your mother’s really struggling and she’s going to need your support.’ That was another turning point where I saw how neighbourhood houses are about more than just helping you get social services, where I saw somebody at the neighbourhood house caring and wanting to support.” She reflected, “I had to grow up faster than other kids because my sister had developmental disabilities and because of my mom’s brain injury. I’d be up with her sometimes until two or three in the morning when I was ten years old trying to balance a bank book. I didn’t even know what it was about! I cooked dinner when she was busy. I cleaned my room. If my brothers and sisters were told to clean their room and they didn’t, then I got in trouble - not them. I took on the weight of everyone and whenever something went wrong, I always took responsibility! Although I’m now much better at boundary-setting, I’m still a ‘people pleaser’ and if somebody asks me to do something I’ll try to help even though I have no time.”

Sarah described some of the challenges she faced as a teenager, “I was trying to find myself. It’s really difficult when your parent doesn’t have the same experiences as you. My mother didn’t have much memory so she didn’t know much about the world beyond church and family – we have over 200 family members in the lower mainland. My teenage years were about me trying to figure out the world that I was growing up in without a guide. I was trying to understand how people communicate. I had troubles making friends in Grade 8. Six people I knew died that year, including both of my grandfathers. One of my friends was murdered. It was a very dark, troubling time for me. My cat was what made me feel happy. He was very empathetic: if I was in my room crying, he’d come and lick my face and snuggle up to me. He was my reason to wake up in the morning because I had to feed him, and then I had to go to school, and then I had to get a job so I could feed him. In my mind, everything was about him rather than my single mother or the rest of my family who has all these problems. Instead, it was, ‘I’m waking up because I love my cat and he loves me and he cares about me.’”

She continued, “During this dark time, somebody told me, ‘You know, most people who go through all that would take time off school.’ I didn’t even know that was an option! I was so terrified that if I didn’t do well in school and graduate that I wouldn’t get a job and I would end up on welfare. I grew up in a neighbourhood of intergenerational welfare families and that’s what I was afraid of. I wouldn’t have sex. I was going to be that 1% who didn’t end up pregnant - I wasn’t coming back to the school to give talks! Meanwhile, I was really depressed. Nobody else was interested in the things I was interested in, such as jazz music or politics, so I had to pursue my interests alone. To deal with my situation, I created characters. The character that I went to school with was Ms. Goody Two-Shoes. She did really well in class, teachers liked her and thought she was smart. And then there was the person that went to parties and raves on the weekend that nobody knew about. And there was a totally different person that went to Cedar Cottage, who was similar to the one at school. There was the person that I was at home - defensive, walls up, ready to defend herself both physically and emotionally. By the time I finished school, I was so used to wearing masks that I didn’t know who I was anymore. So in my mid-twenties, I had to strip myself down, face the parts of myself that I did not like, the parts I hated, the parts I was afraid of. It was an emotionally tumultuous couple of years. I was also connecting with God and reading books about creating boundaries and understanding why you don’t have to be a doormat to people around you.”

Sarah reflected on how Cedar Cottage has guided her professional career, “It was because of Cedar Cottage that I started working in non-profit management and community capacity development. Cedar Cottage influenced my decision to stop doing photography. I loved photography but I felt like I wasn’t doing anything to make the world a better place, whereas being involved with Cedar Cottage I was making the world a

better place. Even when I was doing day camp counselling with kids, I'd be spending the day building up their confidence. I would see sometimes when the kids were getting picked up the way that stressed out parents would speak to their child. Part of me would be thinking, 'I see why the child behaves the way they do.' But I don't know what else is going on in their lives; we only see what we see and can't understand everything that's gone into making that person. Being a part of Cedar Cottage has really helped me be respectful of that."

Sarah recalled how she ended up as board chair, "The most recent big turning point in my connection with Cedar Cottage was when I missed a board meeting because I was sick, and came to the next meeting to find that I was president of the board! That was in 2008. It was really tough because at that time my mother was on the board, as well as some of her friends. I had grown up looking up to these people who are thirty years older than I am. You bend to their will, you take guidance from them - how do you now deal with them as a board chair? That was a tough experience, but Donna helped me and I was able to find my way in. I'm very organized and extremely hands on - I intervene to remove as much from Donna's plate as possible. Staff have got a million other things to do - we're the board, so we need to take responsibility and do things ourselves."

Sarah acknowledged the influence that Donna has had on her, "Donna is fantastic and the staff that she chooses are amazing. She looks for people who are not only good at their job, but are who good at working with others and whose values are fully integrated with Cedar Cottage values. I really love the direction the neighbourhood house is going - every time Donna says, 'Now we're going to do this...' I'm like, 'That's wonderful! I love it!' Donna's an amazing person who has seen me grow up and who I've got to know better over the years, and the more I know about her, the more I admire and respect her."

Thinking about her contribution to Cedar Cottage, Sarah reflected, "When I was younger, my contribution was to volunteer, but now my contribution is more around fundraising, board governance, and helping with facility development planning. The future contribution that I want to make concerns the Association of Neighbourhood Houses, which I think should be considered a sort of commonwealth - specifically, I'm interested in how we can share and support each other better. Currently there are have-houses and have-not-houses; Cedar Cottage is definitely one of the have-houses and a lot of that comes down to Donna's stewardship. However, I think resources should be spread more evenly. I'd like to bring the ANH board of directors closer to the community boards and to bring the community boards closer to each other. I would love it if we got together to do something like the ropes course at Sasamat or canoeing or hiking or something where we can just be with people and build those connections in a way that won't happen over wine and cheese."

When asked about her future with Cedar Cottage, Sarah replied, "I'm always going to be involved with Cedar Cottage. In the immediate future, I plan to stay on the board to support the new chair and to work with the facility development committee. I want to keep doing good. My future involvement with the neighbourhood house will also depend on my family situation because I hope to have kids soon! I'll definitely join my kids' school PAC as well. In fact, something funny happened recently - one of our people who joined the board is chair of the District PAC, the DPAC. I ran the AGM and when the meeting was over he asked me, 'Do you have kids?' When I said, 'No,' he was like, 'Oh darn. You'd be really good on the DPAC!'"

Finally, Sarah reflected on the role of Cedar Cottage in the neighbourhood, "Cedar Cottage is always going to be that part of the community that brings people together. It's the community living room. The neighbourhood house movement is about making people better neighbours and I don't ever want that to end. I want there to be somewhere for those people who are vulnerable, shy, or afraid, who are in bad situations or just don't know where to go. I want them to feel welcomed to come to that place. But I also want them to grow from that experience, to find themselves. And then to go out and make the world a better place."