

## Satinder: Finding her place under the sun

Satinder Singh is the Family Program Coordinator at Collingwood Neighbourhood House (CNH), where she has run Family Place for almost twenty-five years. She was interviewed in December 2014. During the interview, Satinder recalled how she first became involved with CNH: “The day is etched in my memory because when I and my family came to Canada from Bahrain, we didn’t know a single soul here. My husband and I wanted to look for work, but first we needed daycare for our two children, who were ten and six years old. We didn’t know where to start. Fortunately, CNH was at that time doing a community research project to find out what the needs were in the community. A researcher from South Asia, Rashmi, came to know about me and when we met she told me about the neighbourhood house and the daycare and other services. The next day I went to the CNH storefront on Kingsway - I remember walking in and asking about daycare. At some point during my conversation with the staff, one of them suggested that I help out in the “Nobody’s Perfect” parenting program as a volunteer Punjabi facilitator. I am originally from India and I speak Punjabi. They even offered to send me for training first. That’s how I started my journey with the neighbourhood house.”

Satinder was among the first people to receive training as a Nobody’s Perfect facilitator. After volunteering for about a month, she was offered part-time paid work at CNH and ran one of the first parenting groups in 1990. Satinder loved the experience and still enjoys looking over her notes from that first year. The program was small then but, as the neighbourhood house grew with each passing year, Satinder worked a few more hours each week. She became full-time staff in 1998, which suited her perfectly because by then her kids were older and more independent. Now she is at Family Place five days a week. Working at CNH was not only Satinder’s first job in Canada, it was her first experience with paid employment. Despite having completed post-secondary education in India, she had never worked outside the home.

Although she looks back over the years with fondness, Satinder remembered that her life was not always as comfortable as it is now. She related, “The early years, the 1990s, were my period of learning and struggle in both my personal and professional life. I was learning to drive. I’d never been to a bank. I had never worked outside of the house. In my family everything was exclusive because we came from a privileged stratum of society. The word ‘inclusive’ was something I learned when I came to CNH. It was hard to send my kids to the local public school because they had gone to an exclusive private British school. We’d always had paid staff to help around the house and when we came here I remember getting blisters on my hands from cleaning and lifting, things I’d never done before. And then, seeing my husband struggling to establish himself in his career was hard, especially since we had come from a place where we’d had a very comfortable lifestyle. Also, I couldn’t afford to go home for several years, which was very painful; I couldn’t go back when my father passed away because we were struggling and I was studying at that time. We had come from a country where we had lots of friends, and here there seemed at first to be no connection. So a big piece of my life was missing in the ‘90s. I was working, I had some friends, my kids and my husband were with me. But still there was that certain loneliness...”

Since then, life has only got better. Satinder explained, “By 2000 I had finished studying, and the family program was well established. On a personal front, we were back where we wanted to be

financially. Now we've made it - my husband is happy with his work and so am I. I am very proud of what I have done." She added, "Within CNH, I've created my own space in a new country. It is very cozy here. When people come here, they say, 'This is Satinder's place.' The kids think I actually live here!

Working at CNH helped Satinder deal with the challenges that she faced as a new immigrant and eased her difficult transition from being a lonely newcomer to serving as a foundation of her community. For example, assisting in the EAL classes at CNH gave her the opportunity to travel around the city. As a result, the idea that Vancouver was her new home became more concrete in her mind. The neighbourhood house also supplied emotional support by "providing an opportunity to meet other people who were struggling and realise that [they] were all in the same boat." Satinder's gratitude for the support she received at CNH spurs her to do the same for others. She explained, "When I see any immigrant woman walking through the doors, I have to support that person - whether they are looking for job, whether they need an ear to listen, or whatever they need - because the neighbourhood house supported me and I want to give back to the community."

In turn, Satinder's experiences as a newcomer also helped her in her work at CNH because she understands the challenges that newcomers face. She stated, "I am so proud of the women that I've met here, and the changes they've made in their lives. I know myself the challenges they have overcome. For example, there was a woman who used to bring her two kids to my program, and she'd never worked outside of the house because she lived in an extended family and was always looking after her in-laws, children, and husband. When her children went to school and her mother-in law passed away, there was a huge vacuum in her life. One day I bumped into her in the corner store next to CNH. She was depressed and didn't know what to do with herself. I said, 'Why don't you come and volunteer with us?' and within a few weeks she was volunteering. And then she was so happy - she was finally doing her own thing outside of the house; she found the space for herself. She said, 'My husband thought that I would never be able to do anything outside of the house.' She went on to take her ECE training and was even employed by the neighbourhood house. When I see her, I'm so proud of her, her achievements and the skills that she's acquired. This has happened with lots of people. And they always come back to me. Some way or the other, they say, 'How you changed my life!' And I say, 'It's not me - you had the desire to change. I was just there to show you the way.' But it's a huge thing, because immigration is not easy. I'm glad that I could contribute to their success in a small way."

Through her work at CNH Satinder has formed close and long-lasting relationships with participants, colleagues, and volunteers. She is especially passionate about her work with children. She asserted, "I have a huge love for children. When I do my stories, they give me a hug and say 'I love you.' All these big hugs - that's what's keeping me young and motivated. It's these children and the families. We have a long history with everybody. I've even had parents standing with their kids outside CNH in the middle of the night when the kids are sick and want to see their teacher (me). The parents are telling them, 'No she's not there now,' but the kids insist until they have to drive them here to show them that Collingwood is closed and I'm not here! That's the level of connection I have with families."

Despite no longer living in Collingwood, Satinder still runs into people who she first met during her early days at CNH. She recalled, "I met this girl the other day. She is in high school now. She broke down and started to cry with emotion when she saw me and her memories of attending my program as a child at CNH came flooding back. Because in this community, a lot of the families used to really struggle, and I was part of that struggle with them." She continued, "I feel like a queen when I walk down Kingsway, waving to half the families; the kids may have grown up, but they still remember me. Also, sometimes at the temple I see South Asian community members from the early years here. And they come and talk to me. Their children are in university or married now, because I'm talking about twenty-plus years ago."

Satinder related how the warm caring atmosphere of CNH draws people in: "Whoever comes in, whether parents or volunteers or staff, everybody falls in with our philosophy of being welcoming, of being non-judgmental. When families come in, they feel it is their place. So we may have parents who don't speak a word of English, but we still connect. The neighbourhood house is a very special place. It has a heart." She also emphasized the importance of CNH for the neighbourhood, stating, "If there wasn't Collingwood Neighbourhood House, there would be no cohesiveness in this community. It would be very fragmented because this is the place where people meet. This is the place where they connect, but they continue their relationships outside of the neighbourhood house." For example, Satinder noted with pride and happiness that parents who met each other through her program remain in touch with each other over the years, meeting outside the neighbourhood house and even overseas while on holiday, ten years or more after the program ended.

In addition to maintaining loving connections with current and past program participants, Satinder has also developed lifelong friendships with other staff members as well as with volunteers. She elaborated, "Once people have gone through Collingwood Neighbourhood House, they often don't leave. Some attended a program years ago and now work as staff or in community development. We all grow up and learn together. Jenny at the front came in as a student, and I remember her studying for her exams. She's been with us for eighteen years. Many other staff members have also been around for that long. In Family Place, I've had only three staff in twenty-four years. Some of my colleagues have become like family members. This place is very blessed to have such people working for it. Each one in their own area does phenomenal work. It is very inspirational and I am so proud to work here." She added, "My volunteers are also a huge part of my life, even after they leave. Volunteers keep coming back to me, from wherever they are working. They always say, 'Thank you, Satinder - we started with you.' I still get updates from former volunteers or students in Thailand, Malaysia or Japan - wherever they are now."

When asked what keeps people at CNH, Satinder responded, "Turnover is so low because there's a lot of respect in this place. There's a lot of trust and respect of diversity. And we have such strong relationships among the staff. The respect is built from the top level down to frontline staff. And people believe in it. Everybody has such a passion for their work. People at CNH put a lot of heart into their work and it shows. The strong connections that we have among staff come through in our work, and the people that come in to use our services become part of the magic."

As a result of her work at CNH, Satinder went through a tremendous transformation in her personal life as well as in her professional life. Those changes were made possible because CNH

offered her the chance to find out who she was and what her life's work would be. "The compassion," she stated, "I already had in me, I had that love in my heart; I had the people skills; I had the energy to connect with people and be supportive. So I just needed to be in an environment like CNH to mould me, and to make me what I have become now. I had that energy and love and compassion in me, but I needed something to bring it out and that's what CNH did. When I count my blessings, I count Collingwood as one of my blessings. If I did anything right in my life it was to find Collingwood and find my work here." Graduating from the ECE program in 1997 was a major milestone. At that time Satinder was working during the day and going to school at night, a significant transition for a person who had never worked outside of the house. Satinder recalled, "When I had my first business card printed, I took it back home to India - I was so proud. There's been a shift in the culture in India over the years and many middle class women work outside their home, but when I was growing up, it wasn't like that. I come from a family of very strong, independent women - my mom was a doctor - but she never worked outside of the house." Important mentors for Satinder include Oscar (a former supervisor), and Paula (former CNH ED), as well as her present supervisor. She remarked, "Their energy, knowledge, personality, advocacy, and love for diversity have been so inspirational." Satinder recalled with pleasure the experience of being part of the hiring team that selected Oscar: "That was an eye opener! Coming from India, I wondered, 'How do you get to hire your own boss?' It was so empowering." Another significant moment for Satinder involved being part of a documentary about CNH. She felt particularly proud when, after the documentary was aired, some service providers came from Ontario specifically to meet her, saying that her story had really resonated with the immigrant women they work with.

Satinder developed the skills she is most proud of at CNH. Leadership was a skill that she had not previously considered to have any connection to herself. At Collingwood Neighbourhood House, she explained, "I found that I can be a great leader and I'm also a very good team player. I've also developed strong problem solving skills because working in Collingwood, my brain works faster, harder." Moving to the new CNH building offered opportunities for further learning and growth. Not only was the new building brighter and more pleasant to work in, but it also offered space to expand existing programs. Satinder recalled that building up the program and developing a structure constituted another huge learning curve. In addition to knowledge about community development programming and management, Satinder also learned practical skills, including taking minutes for the first time and chairing meetings. She is rightly proud of what she has accomplished. Speaking about Family Place, she said, "I worked hard to establish all of this and I am very happy where I am."

Working at CNH not only provided Satinder with a set of useful professional skills and a sense of confidence in herself, but also with an individual identity. She asserted, "I was always known back home by my husband's name. His name was Mr. P. Singh. So I was Mrs. P. Singh. I didn't have my own identity. So Collingwood gave me my identity." She continued, "My life in Canada wouldn't be the same if I hadn't worked here. Collingwood gave me my own space to grow as a person. I am what I am because of my work at the neighbourhood house. Here I've found my own place under the sun."

Satinder's work at CNH has also positively affected her family members and friends. For example, her daughter volunteered with Collingwood and also led a youth program. Satinder shared the

following: “Now my daughter works for CIDA, writing policies and dispensing millions of dollars of aid, but she says that the passion that she has stems from her connection to CNH and the work that she did here - it all started from Collingwood.” Satinder also noted that her daughter has seen her make important changes in her personal and professional life, and is so proud to hear her say, as she often does, “My mom is my biggest inspiration.” CNH has become a large part of Satinder’s friends’ lives too: “They all know we are short of resources and they are always making donations of food, clothing, and money. And I have a lot of connections through Collingwood - people who cook, or sew - a huge network of people who help each other - so my friends see me as a resource because of my connections to the richness and diversity of people and skills in the local community.”

When asked to describe her contribution to CNH, Satinder responded, “In my own little way, I have contributed by running a program that’s safe, secure, friendly, warm, and respectful and welcoming of diverse families. I made a program that people always remember - they love being here. It’s like a starting point for immigrant families especially. It has a huge impact by making the families feel more secure and less isolated.”

In terms of her future with CNH Satinder remarked, “I am still young; fifty-five is too young for retirement, so I’m giving myself at least another five years. Physically, my body is slowing down. But mentally, I still have that same passion, the same connection. I forget I’m working for money. My work is something that I enjoy doing so much. When I think of retirement, I wonder what I would do without the neighbourhood house, since it’s such a big presence in my life. I don’t know if I can live without this place [CNH].” Although Satinder no longer lives in Collingwood, she emphasized her ongoing connection with the neighbourhood, “No matter how far away I live, I will remain connected to Collingwood because for me this is my community. I’ve lived in Coquitlam for fifteen years and I still don’t know my neighbours. It’s not a community like Collingwood because people drive everywhere and there is no neighbourhood house to connect them. My life is here in Collingwood. This is my second family.” The importance of these connections cannot be overstated. Satinder explained, “When you know a lot of people, it makes you feel so connected, so grounded. When I came to Canada I felt very isolated. Now I feel I have a history.”