

Tatiana: It's a Circle

Tatiana Wong is a youth worker at Kiwassa Neighbourhood House. The daughter of Chinese immigrants who were teenage sweethearts at Templeton Secondary School, Tatiana has lived in East Van all her life. She shared her story in January 2015, beginning with how she first became connected with KwNH while she was in elementary school. She recalled, "My first connection with Kiwassa Neighbourhood House was when a couple of youth workers came to Hastings elementary school to promote their programs. I was already volunteering at the elementary school - I was one of those kids who would stay after school and hang around the teachers and the community school workers asking, 'Do you need help?' 'Can I copy this for you?' 'Can I...?' I like helping people. It's just one of those things that I've always done, so when the opportunity came at KwNH, I started volunteering in the Junior Leadership Program, which was part of their Preteen Program. I became a Junior Leader when I was twelve. One of my first jobs was assisting the summer program leaders at Pandora and Oak Street Parks. I volunteered even after hours - when my shift was done I stayed to help. Also, there was a dreamy leader there at the time, which may have contributed an additional incentive! I remember that the leaders really appreciated how I connected with the youth during the time I was there. They asked me to come back for training and then I was offered work in the summer day camps when I was about fifteen. When I was in high school they hired me for after school children's programs, so for a few years I did that; and in summers I continued with summer day camps, which was so fun. I worked my way up from volunteer, to getting my own group of ten kids and being a leader, and then to Day Camp Manager when I was around twenty."

Tatiana described some of the programs she has led over the years, especially Cultural Buddy (now known as Youth Settlement), Eastside Teens, and Eastside Power Mamas: "Cultural Buddy was about connecting with EAL youth at Templeton and Britannia, to help them become familiar with the neighbourhood. It was a lot of fun and really rewarding. What had happened was that I did two and a half years of general studies at Capilano University and then I had this 'What am I doing?' moment. I had been planning to become a teacher, because everyone had told me since I was a kid, 'You'll be a great teacher.' I loved kids so I thought it would be great. Then I realised that I like being outside with kids, and teaching them about life skills and experiences and guidance around that. When I thought about teaching in a classroom, it didn't match what I wanted to do. So I didn't register for the last term and I just focused on work. I told Kiwassa, 'I'd really like to work full-time. I love what I do here and I am not ready to continue school at this time.' Every supervisor was extremely supportive of me, and that's when I started leading the Cultural Buddy Program full-time. Now it is called Youth Settlement, and the focus is more on life skills and orientation workshops, as well as one-on-one counselling."

She continued, "Although Cultural Buddy is a great program, I really have a soft spot for Eastside Teens. All the kids know me because I've been involved with that program for so long. In fact, it was in Eastside Teens that I first became a junior leader and now I work closely with our supervisor. I have known some of the youth in that program since they were five. Just thinking about it, I start to tear up because I think about the situations these kids have come from and the fact that some of them are now asking about university applications, and thinking about where life is taking them; they are coming to me to talk about these decisions and, wow. Holy moly. Kiwassa's very friendly and we have an open door policy. I don't tell them what to do, but work with them to figure out what are they thinking. Sometimes they've already made the decision and you have to help them unravel their thinking. We provide a safe space for a diverse group of youth to hang out in the community and around sixty youth come to the drop in twice a week. It's really, really cool. One year we did such a good job saving money on our Eastside Teen budget that we decided to have a youth carnival. I have youth that still remember it to this day. It was fantastic. Over two hundred youth came out. That was such a fun event. The third program, Eastside Power Mamas, stemmed from Eastside Teens. A few years ago, there were a few moms who had kids, but were still teenagers themselves and wanting to go to Eastside Teen outings. We realised that there weren't any programs for teen moms to just hang out with each other and provide support. We don't structure it too much, so that it stays just as flexible as they are. For example, we connect the women with a nurse but it's very relaxed. We've been able to run it for about four years but funding is increasingly a struggle.

We do fun activities that are about the moms or their kids. Then conversations just start, and we have resources and information available. Everyone's having a good time and that's where the connections get made and the information gets shared. I've worked at Hastings Community Centre and a couple of other places, but my role there was very different from Kiwassa. I was literally just running soccer or an art program. That was it. There was no, 'Let's talk about this, let's work on this,' or 'Let's get you some resources, let's take you the clinic.' Nothing. It was so straightforward. Of course it's important to teach recreational activities, but it's also important to do the other stuff as well. I love Kiwassa programs!" She added, "I remember writing a cover letter for Kiwassa and in one of the first sentences I wrote that I was 'in love with Kiwassa programs.' There was no other way to put it except that I am in love with them. I remember one of my bosses told me, 'That was the best cover letter I have read in a while.'"

Since Tatiana was a student for much of the time she's worked at KwNH, she greatly appreciates Kiwassa's flexibility around scheduling. She stated, "Kiwassa has been very flexible with me; whenever I was in school or my semesters changed, they were very adaptive, 'Okay, what are you interested in? Let's work with that.' They always found me the hours that I was looking for. A lot of the time I was doing part-time Kiwassa and full-time school." Tatiana also appreciates that Kiwassa gives her the opportunity to grow at her own pace. She noted, "What stands out for me is the moments where I got to run programs on my own as opposed to helping someone run a program. Being able to take leadership and realize that I can deliver a program how I see fit is always a crucial moment because I have so many thoughts and ideas based on the connections I make with the youth and their families. I love the feeling of, 'Okay, this is working!' It gives you confidence to move forward."

Tatiana is grateful to Kiwassa for providing her with so many opportunities over the years. She reflected, "There's never been a time that a contract has ended where they've said, 'Okay, well, sorry, you'll have to find something else, good luck.' I've never really worried about a job because they've always provided me with amazing opportunities. There's always some discussion along the lines of, 'Well, now we're doing young moms and you did this pilot project that we would like to get up and running, so what can you do?' 'Oh yeah, I am in!' There's always this amazing community support, not just for participants but for the staff as well." She continued, "I've been considering programs such as community development programs that are very related to what I am doing. I'm also thinking about applying for VPD; I would love to be a school liaison officer. I've had talks with my supervisor and my manager and I've been very open about what it is that I'm struggling with in terms of personal stuff and my schooling and they've just been incredibly supportive of giving me information and saying, 'Whenever you need to talk or you want to hash this out, we are here.' In terms of my development, I've never felt like they steered me in any one direction, but they always guide me to make my own decision. If I want to work fewer hours and go back to school, they're okay with it. We have these discussions and it's almost unreal - I don't hear about a lot of other places showing that flexibility." Kiwassa has also provided Tatiana with numerous opportunities for professional development and training. She explained, "I've done so many seminars and lectures on different topics such as mental health in schools, delivering curriculum, working with groups, how to talk to youth, building resiliency in youth, and so many more. Kiwassa provides a lot of training during staff workshops. Also, we have a staff retreat twice a year, and we usually as a group decide on a topic that we want more information on."

Tatiana elaborated on the opportunities for professional development she has enjoyed at KwNH: "Because I started at Kiwassa so early, I didn't always go through a full interview and evaluation process. Then one time, a supervisor told me, 'You know, you have never had an interview with us. We're going to interview you.' I was terrified. She was absolutely right because I was nineteen and I needed to practice. Over the years I've gotten better and KwNH has helped me with that as another area of growth that prepared me for the labour force. Sometimes I'll see a position that I would like to apply for, or I'll have an interview and my supervisor will say, 'You know what, this isn't for you. You are doing more in your current position, but when something opens up, we're here for you.' How can I not love that? I'm extremely lucky to have them keeping an eye on me with my well being in mind."

The supportive environment that Tatiana finds at KwNH has positive effects on her work with youth. She noted, "The understanding that I get makes my work with youth better because I see leadership by example. My supervisor and management are not soft, but they're very supportive. Whatever decisions they make are always the ones that are best for Kiwassa and for me. So I try to do the same for my youth. It trickles down. Sometimes I feel like we're all just big kids and sometimes we have to make decisions. The managers are open with the youth, and it's amazing, I don't see that in a lot of places. It's really special if you have a talk with your supervisor - then you think, 'Oh wow, they spent time with me to do this thing that is totally about me.' That shows the passion they have for this line of work. There's no other reward than seeing change in your community and being a part of it. Being able to deliver it through our line of work is amazing. The ideas come from everybody, it's youth workers and management going back and forth with the youth. I have awesome coworkers. We are very open with the youth and we encourage their input. The management's very open door and we're like that with our youth. We always try to better the program. So, it's a circle."

Tatiana described how her personal development has been shaped by KwNH: "In high school I was very quiet and shy; that's how I normally am. For some reason, though, when I'm working with kids or when I'm helping people at Kiwassa, I am not quiet or shy and it's something that I really look forward to. I welcome growth and learning. I remember intently watching my leaders to see how they talked to people and then I'd take what I liked best from each leader and create my own style. So over the years I've been developing my style of working with people; it's been progressive growth. For example, I've had to learn to be a little less 'soft' because sometimes I'm too easy on people. Sometimes I can see youth asking for something as a direct result of me not saying 'no' last time. So I have to work on that. The thing with Kiwassa is that there is always somebody to help me grow - it's a great atmosphere. Someone is always there to guide me, and say, 'Okay, let's try it this way.' I respond well to that and I've learned a lot." She continued, "Another thing I've learned through working at KwNH is how to mix friendship and work. What happened was that I worked with a friend at Kiwassa and, being young, I had no idea that there could be complications from that or how to deal with them. Our friendship sadly ended after we worked together. For me, that experience was a big part of growing up and realizing my mistakes. We had communication issues and differences of opinion that I took too personally. I also didn't know how to problem solve in a work setting with someone that I knew from outside of work. At one point a supervisor said, 'We've got to talk about this.' We were in a room together and I couldn't say a word; I didn't know how to apologize. I wasn't able to tell her what was making me upset or not working for me. That was a very crucial moment for me to realize, 'Okay, actually, Tat, you are not perfect either.' That really helped me realize how I need to work with people as part of a team effort; that was a huge thing for me."

Now in her late twenties, Tatiana recalled a difficult period she had gone through a few years earlier: "I don't think I'd realized that you can't lose yourself, that you have to take care of yourself in order to be the best person you can be in those parts of your life where you are helping others. At some point, I kind of lost myself serving my youth and my programs and also my partner at the time. I just forgot about myself completely. I can see that now - this is a new revelation. I was trying to juggle too many things and trying to please too many people without giving myself time to figure out what I was passionate about, what I liked doing, how I could care for myself and fulfill both my career and my personal life. Thinking about that time now, I question how I kept going - no wonder I felt so burned out. Eventually my relationship ended, and since then it has been a period of really steady growth involving a huge reflection on myself. Through that I finally realized that I needed to be content in my personal life or it would affect my work and the creation of clear boundaries and all of that stuff. Over the last couple of years I've developed a different outlook on my work. I am always honest with my youth, so they know a lot of my journey, and I think it's helped me to guide them through what they're going through. I try to use my own experiences and my own faults to figure out, 'Okay, how can I use this for good, and how can I pass on this information so that it can help others?'"

Tatiana discussed some of the values that she brings to her work, especially 'continuity' and the value of living in the same neighbourhood as the young people she works with. She emphasized, "I believe in consistency with youth. A lot of them have come from unstable homes or unstable environments and to know that I can be a consistent factor means a lot. It's the connections that you make, and stability is important. It's really cool that I have been here for so long and I get to enjoy that. I see the youth I work with everywhere. it's something that I embrace and sometimes if I know there's an activity going on and some of the youth will be there, then I'll walk that way just to say 'hi' and show my face, and they love it. I've lived here my entire life so I see them in the program, outside the program, I've bumped into their families and talked to their grandparents, aunts and uncles, and it's really cool. I know young people not only as participants, but within their families, at school, within their life here as community members and neighbours. I definitely have a soft spot for them." She continued, "I don't see myself ever leaving this neighbourhood and I'm always going to keep the values of community and integration because I've been lucky to see what they achieve on the frontline. Not a lot of people can say that, but I can say, 'Wow, we started with the idea, and then we put in a proposal. Then we got funding and we are running a program, and now the program's doing this.' I can see all of that. It's so cool. I love this community - although I could see myself helping in any community I live in, really. That's what I am about."

Considering her contribution to Kiwassa, Tatiana responded, "My contribution is knowing what the programs are doing - full circle. As a child, I benefitted from Kiwassa's ideas about how to support youth in the community. We never say, 'You can do one program and then you're out.' You can go from volunteering, to leading, to working, in a circle. When youth look at me they can see how that circle works. Having been around for so long, I am also able to effectively relay Kiwassa's mission, passion, and services to youth with whom I have a relationship. I know what Kiwassa's vision is and I also know what funders want out of programs and I have learned to work with that. I talk about Kiwassa so passionately because I honestly and genuinely care about neighbourhood houses. When I meet police liaisons, counsellors, school staff, SWIS workers, Vancouver Coastal Health, or representatives of any other organization, I simply love to tell them about Kiwassa and what our programs are doing."

Looking forward to the (distant) future, Tatiana enthused, "As a senior, I'm definitely joining the seniors program. I can't wait! I might be only fifty and then join, if they'll let me. I totally see myself being a senior! Kiwassa is full of seniors and they are so happy and so loud - sometimes they are louder than the youth. I want to be that crazy old lady that everyone wants to be around. I always tell the youth, "Tat's going to be a gangster senior. You just wait. If she needs a cane, she'll bling it out. She'll still be rocking this bun, wearing the sweat pants and the Nike sneakers with the velcro..."