

## Tommy: A Toolbox for Life

Tommy Yip lives in Toronto, where he is studying to be an actuary. Until moving to Toronto three years earlier, Tommy had lived in Cedar Cottage since his family had immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong when he was six. Although not currently connected with a neighbourhood house, Tommy spent around eight years volunteering with Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House and the experience made a profound and lasting impression on him. He shared his story in a Skype interview in March 2015. He began by describing how he first heard about CCNH at age fifteen. Julie, a youth worker from CCNH had gone to Gladstone Secondary to let the students know about the youth leadership program, which provided a \$100 honorarium for attendance. Tommy recalled, "I heard about this youth leadership program where you would receive \$100 if you attended. Honestly, I was attracted by the cash rather than a deeper humanitarian motivation. At that time I wasn't involved in the community at all; I was really just getting along in high school. What was valuable to me was getting good grades and hanging out with friends and playing games. That was me when I was in Grade 9 and 10." He continued, "I signed up for the program and Kelly interviewed me. She was so friendly and had such a good sense of humour...it really shocked me how different my interview was from what I had thought an interview would be." Tommy wryly summarised his initial experience: "I was this guy who didn't know anything, who only wanted \$100. He knew nothing about neighbourhood house and didn't really care about community, but ended up getting involved in a community. He learned new terminology, such as 'social boundaries,' and different types of leadership styles, such as laissez-faire. He learned these terms without at first really understanding what they meant. And he somehow got really interested."

Tommy described the first session of the youth leadership program and what happened after that: "I walked into this big room and there were around twelve other people from my high school. I didn't know them because I wasn't really connected in my high school either. In that first session, I definitely did not have the experience or confidence to speak up - I just didn't know what to say. That's one of the things that has changed since then; that's one example of how the neighbourhood house helped me grow up and learn to speak and socialize in various social settings." He continued, "I completed the program and at the end of it there was an opportunity to work in the Summer Fun Program with kids. I ended up working for Summer Fun, but at first I didn't really care much about it. Looking back, it's hard to know why I took the job: it definitely wasn't something that I thought I would do for a career, but it just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Maybe the neighbourhood house saw something in me that I didn't know was there. I was really near-sighted and I just went with the flow. After a while I was moved into a family program with much younger kids. I remember telling stories to the kids; I would hold a storybook and there would be ten kids in front of me and I would read the story to them. That program taught me to speak with people outside of my social circle, especially parents. Also, I played with little kids and told stories - things I would never have normally done. I was starting to extend my comfort zone further out. I think talking with kids is the best way to start because if you speak to someone younger than you, you won't be as scared."

Describing some of the things he learned in the leadership program and in Summer Fun, Tommy offered the following: "My first time working in Summer Fun I learned to apply my leadership skills to youth from grades two through seven. As a youth leader I learned about how kids develop differently at different ages. It was really fun - much more fun than I had expected. I learned a lot of skills to deal with different people and the importance of attitude and how you respond as a leader. These same skills hold true for adults, so that experience helped me learn to manage different audiences and gain respect among a cohort of people. I also learned how to work in a team and how I fit into a team. I was really learning about myself. I found that the role I like most in a team is that of the person who looks out for things that other people don't think about. For example, 'Oh did you bring the first aid kit?' 'No...' You see, no one brings the first aid kit - so I bring the first aid kit! Another thing I learned in the day camps program was to use 'I' instead of 'you.' If someone is doing something that you do not like, then instead of saying, 'You are doing this,' which is very accusative,

it's better to say, 'I feel like this, when...' I had not realized the intricacy of these small grammatical differences until my mentor from Summer Fun taught me how to resolve conflicts. The kids were saying, 'You, you, you,' every day. I taught them to say 'I.' That helped us get ideas across much better. The accumulation of skills like this made me grow up."

Tommy explained how his relationship with CCNH developed over time: "Shortly after the youth leadership training I was involved in a program called Get Out, which grants money to youth initiated programs. Some of my friends were applying for a grant, so I decided to apply as well. I wanted to make a program for youth with disabilities where I would hire a guitar teacher and the youth would learn how to play guitar. I'm hard of hearing and I have to wear hearing aids to participate in everyday life. My motivation for the guitar lessons was that I wanted to learn how to play guitar too. With the help of people from CCNH, I got the grant; the facilitator who ran the youth leadership program helped me put the application together." He continued, "It turned out that there weren't many youth with disabilities who wanted to learn guitar, so I decided instead to create a program where youth with disabilities could interact with youth who did not have disabilities. In school, the two cohorts would not normally hang out together, so my program would be a site for them to get to know each other and break down social boundaries. For most of my school years I had seen that segregation, but I was like a bystander; as a kid you often don't realize that you can say that you disagree with something - that's just how school is. But as I went through the leadership program, I learned about the idea of being inclusive, and about social boundaries. One very strong theme of neighbourhood houses is inclusiveness and bringing different people together. Neighbourhood houses love diversity and through my interactions as a neighbourhood house service user, that idea got into me through osmosis. It just got embedded into me, to value diversity and inclusiveness, and to develop a different perspective on society. That was one of the reasons I kept going back to the neighbourhood house - because I began to strongly believe in the ideal of diversity too."

Tommy described how his life began to change as a result of what he was learning at the neighbourhood house, "It changed my life in high school because I started to participate and volunteer more in the community and that in turn affected my communication skills with my peers and allowed me to identify how people around me see things versus how I see things. I started to develop a wider social network because I hung out with people who were in the Youth Leadership Program - I started to talk to them in school as well, rather than just outside of school. These volunteering activities also helped me achieve recognition in school because if you do a certain number of volunteer hours then you get a certificate. I also softened my focus on academics. Before, all I cared about was grades, but after working with the neighbourhood house, I started to have a life outside of grades...and I become less of a perfectionist. Also, due to the changes I was experiencing in myself, in Grade 12 I took the Special Ed class because I wanted to help other students with their homework. The neighbourhood house experience influenced that decision and helped me get to the point where I could talk freely enough to offer my skills to somebody else."

Meanwhile, Tommy continued to deepen his involvement with CCNH. He related, "Through the guitar program I built my credibility in the neighbourhood house and I began to know more people. Previously, I knew only two people - Kelly and Julie - but as I interacted more in the neighbourhood house and in the community, people saw me more. I learned to get comfortable around the neighbourhood house and with different people. In the Youth Leadership training I would attend for three hours, then leave without speaking. In the guitar program, I needed to talk with people. The neighbourhood house staff started to talk to me and I would say 'hi' to them. My social network broadened. In Grade 11 they invited me to the Small Grants Committee to review grant applications. I wasn't well equipped to participate in those grant application reviews, partly because I didn't have the experience to speak up about why I believed one application was of value vis à vis another application. The Small Grants Committee was my first experience of a committee-based meeting environment. Through that process though, I began to understand what I

needed to improve on to take part in these committees. I wanted to learn how to create value in such a setting by understanding the different perspectives from which I could look at a problem, so I carefully took in what people said, and paid attention to how they critiqued things. I needed to build up a toolbox in order for me to speak up on different aspects of problems. After that, I did the Summer Fun Program again. This time I was in charge of ten kids. I took them around the city with other youth leaders. It was a very good learning experience.” He continued, “In Grade 12, I did a second version of the guitar program, again involving youth with and without disabilities. I had a bigger vision this time; I wanted to involve three associations: Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House, Association for the Hard of Hearing, and the community centre. It was really difficult because it was my first time doing something like that. I hired a sign language interpreter for meetings and I managed to get a taiko drumming program running. I was thinking that youth without hearing could feel the vibrations of the drum. Again, the main purpose of the program was to get youth to interact with each other and dissolve social boundaries. Unfortunately, I held the program in the summer when people were doing other things and so it wasn’t well attended. However, it was a huge lesson for me in terms of the various aspects of putting a program together and running it.” He added, “I learned some very tangible skills: identifying resources, computer programs like excel, how to market a program, how to make changes to your program if it doesn’t work out.”

While attending university at SFU, Tommy continued volunteering at CCNH. Two years after the drumming program, he decided to try again to organize a youth program, which he called Citizens of Change. Tommy explained, “Citizens of Change targeted marginalized youth. I wanted to generalize the idea of diversity from disability/ability to larger categories of minority and majority. I also wanted to give youth something of substance to do that would help them discover their passion. I wanted people to join a program where they could talk with people older than they are in the same way that I had interacted with my mentor, Julie; where they could learn different things and eventually find their true calling, and also acquire tangible skills, rather than doing drugs and whatnot. I wanted to do it because of the journey I myself had taken. During my journey with the neighbourhood house I acquired different skill sets that really empowered me to make a difference in my community. I wanted to help youth younger than me to have this experience as well.”

As Tommy explained, once again the program turned out differently to what he’d imagined, but also brought unexpected benefits. He recalled, “The vision I had versus what actually happened differed. Marketing the program was difficult because there was nothing obviously substantial to do in this program, the goal of which was to help youth find their passion, and to develop their own skill set. It was kind of a youth driven mini Youth Leadership Program. I had the applicants send their resumes and cover letters and I screened them. To be honest, there wasn’t much screening because there weren’t many applicants, but it was good practice for the youth to make a resume and cover letter. Finally the youth who took part decided they wanted to tackle the issue of homelessness so we brought in people who worked in homeless shelters and they educated us. We decided we wanted to take action, and the youth decided to fundraise for this cause, and we held a bottle drive. This was significant for me because it signifies my move from being a service user of the neighbourhood house to a service provider in the sense that I was bringing more people into the neighbourhood house and helping them find, learn and develop themselves through activities. In the end, I put all of what I learned together and become a ‘Julie,’ my mentor in Youth Leadership. I became the ‘Julie’ after developing all these skill sets. Of course, Julie came from a social work background, so I didn’t have the professional background that she had, but I learned alot.”

Based on everything he was learning and contributing, CCNH asked Tommy to take on another role. He explained, “After the Citizens of Change program, Donna invited me to the CCNH board. I was the youth voice on the communications committee. I felt very honoured. That committee really helped me learn about what a board does and what it looks like. Similar to the Small Grants Committee, I needed to be able to speak up on different issues. I’d gotten better - still not there yet, but I had come so far. Now, working in the post-

university world, I realize that all these things that I did really helped me prepare for working in the professional world. I really see now how the neighbourhood house impacted me and how, in turn, I can create an impact on others. I don't think I would be where I am now, without the neighbourhood house. The neighbourhood house developed my character."

Tommy described other ways in which CCNH positively influenced his development: "I learned how to speak publicly, especially to make motivational speeches, and I developed presentation skills. Those are really helpful in a business setting, I've realized. Through the various programs I acquired many skill sets that at the time I wasn't aware that I was acquiring. Networking skills are definitely a plus. I've gone from struggling to socialize in a room of fourteen people to trying to make an impression on almost everyone in a room of fifty people. One other thing that I learned at the neighbourhood house is how to resolve ambiguities. As I went through the neighbourhood house journey, I realized that things are never straightforward and that you learn more from your mistakes than from successes. I learned that things will go wrong, and how to deal with that. Also, it's always a good idea to ask for feedback and ideas from others, and to ask lots of questions. I learned to consult with a lot of people before I actually did something so that people could give me different perspectives. Through that, I learned that my perspective of the world is narrow and I won't be able to take into account all the important elements unless I consult with others. These are the skills that I learned through activities in the neighbourhood house." Tommy added, "It was a very good investment in myself! It was also a really enjoyable journey. Without those experiences I wouldn't be able to do a lot of the things I am able to do today. In so many ways, CCNH made me a much bigger person than what I would have otherwise become."

Reflecting on his last comment, Tommy elaborated, "Let me tell you a story. This is a story my dad and mom told me a lot. Pretend you are a garbage collector in Hong Kong. On your own, you can only collect so much, right? But if you work with other people then you can make a deal with several buildings, and even have people working for you. In that case your effort scales up. The moral of the story is 'you can only do so much by yourself.' If you want to increase your influence, you need to know how to work with others and lead others toward your vision. I say the neighbourhood house made me a better person because now I have a skill set or a toolbox that I can use to influence people around me, and to achieve my vision. Because at the end of the day I know I can only do so much and if I cannot influence others around me, I cannot progress further. My parents told me that story many times and I didn't understand it. When I actually learned it myself, through the work I did at CCNH, I finally understood it and now it's easy to remember."

In response to a question about his contribution to the neighbourhood house, Tommy replied, "I liked to say hi to everyone: 'Hey, how you're doing?' Just chit chat with everyone. Now I think it's nice to interact with someone different outside of your social cohort. So I feel like that was one of my contributions. Also, at the annual carnival I would be the guy who's in charge of the treasury and the money counting, because that's what I like to do - I can do quick mental math whenever it gets busy. At events, I also volunteered wherever help was needed. If you've been somewhere for a long time then you don't need people to tell you what to do to help. That's another thing I learned - to make yourself useful wherever you are needed: 'Do you need help in the kitchen? No? Okay, I'll take the trash away.' Those are the kinds of little things I learned, but they are also contributions I made to the organization as a whole. I learned to encourage other people to participate in neighbourhood house events and I spread the word about what the neighbourhood house does. That is a huge change from when I first joined the neighbourhood house, when I was a very quiet ICB. ICB means innocent Chinese boy. Although I'm still an ICB, my journey with the neighbourhood house changed me." Tommy concluded, "I feel like neighbourhood houses are my true calling because of the values they hold, especially diversity and bringing in people of different backgrounds."