

## **Ana: This is the Place where I First Opened my Eyes.**

An internationally renowned journalist and filmmaker from Romania, Ana Mateescu runs an Aboriginal Family Program at Collingwood Neighbourhood House. She has also worked at Little Mountain Neighbourhood House, where she led an Expressive Art & Dialogue Circle and coordinated a number of other projects. Ana shared her story in an interview in February 2015. During the interview she explained how she got her start at LMNH in 2012: "I met Jennifer, who was my manager and who also became a close personal friend, at a party while I was studying at Vancouver Film School. I was doing my grad film and needed some stories. Jennifer said, 'We have a lot of stories at the neighbourhood house. Why don't you come and check it out?' My first time at the neighbourhood house I observed a social enterprise project where people were sharing stories and creating small bird nests from beads and other art materials to sell to support their program. For me, it was just - 'wow'. I was shocked because I hadn't expected something so amazing. I was thrilled by the people's stories. I was listening and listening and I didn't want to go home. I wanted to listen more because I love stories and that place was so powerful – the stories the participants were telling, the things they were making, and the fact that they were sharing and they were from all over the world, I think from twenty countries. I had never seen anything like it before. I'd brought my child and she also loved being at the neighbourhood house. As we were leaving, she said, 'Mommy, I want to come back here.'" Ana continued, "The next time I went to the neighbourhood house I brought my camera and started recording people's stories. That was the first video I made for the neighbourhood house and it was an amazing experience. For that session, participants had brought their family members along - I remember Martha's father had brought an accordion and was singing Latin American songs. It's hard to express how 'at home' I felt - I felt like I could sleep at the neighbourhood house, it was just so comfortable there - even though it's small and crowded."

Ana had come to Canada three years earlier, in 2009, with her partner and five year old daughter. After living in Marpole for six months, she moved to Clark and Kingsway in 2010 and immediately fell in love with the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, as a new immigrant who didn't speak English, Ana worked at different jobs but also took time to explore Vancouver. She explained, "I didn't speak any English when I came here. I spoke French, and I was working at a call centre in French, but I didn't connect with anybody. I didn't take English classes; instead, I studied with my child at home from her books and volunteered every day for eleven months in the Downtown Eastside. That's how I learned English and eventually I passed Grade 12. For a while I also worked cleaning buildings from eight to five. And I was going to the film school. In my spare time, I explored the people and places around me." She began building an interactive documentary website about Mount Pleasant where people can access the stories in different formats. She explained, "I started to make stories about people in Mount Pleasant because I saw a big change occurring - gentrification was eating all the old things and I realised that people from the future would not be able to see what we see now. I started to document what I was seeing in stories about people who own stores, or who had lived in Mount Pleasant for a long time, or who had just moved there, or who had quit their jobs in the neighbourhood because they didn't have money to pay the rent, or just people I met in coffee shops."

For Ana, every experience makes a valuable contribution to her understanding of the world. She described how her work as a cleaner influenced her: “I found myself with a mop and a bucket in the middle of 250 apartments. Some people pay money to have different experiences; I was able to have this experience for free – I was even paid - and I loved it. I learned so much about myself. All my experiences at the neighbourhood house, on the DTES, and as an immigrant, plus the fact that I met Jennifer, made me who I am. I don’t think I made any mistakes because mistakes are places where people grow.” She continued, “I am a very different person than I was back home. My power of understanding is totally different. Canadian culture is so open and I borrow from this culture to open my soul more than before. I learn from Aboriginal people, from Vietnamese people, from Chinese people, and from others; I’ve taken a little bit from everything and everyone and built what I am now. Even though before I came to Canada I had everything I wanted – such as money and a great career – I feel I have much more now, even without those things.”

When asked about her contribution to the neighbourhood house, Ana replied, “I bring the story element to the programs I run.” She elaborated on the importance of stories and how they’ve changed both her life and also the lives of the people she’s worked with, “When I talk about the power of stories I mean that people can be empowered by sharing their stories and listening to other people’s stories. Through stories we come together because everybody’s story overlaps and creates the connection between people; we all have the same stories. Jennifer asked me if I wanted to run an art program at LMNH and as a result I made three life-changing videos, each of which took my life experience as a starting point because I identify with other immigrants here. Then other people shared their stories and it was so powerful. In one session, a Mexican woman who owns a café came with tears in her eyes to share her personal experience. She said, ‘I hate Canada. I hate the fact that I lost everything and now I am here alone and my husband and I hurt each other and we have two kids who see all this mess and it’s so hard for me. I don’t know anybody, and everything is just going down, down, down.’ After hearing her story, I contacted another journalist and asked him to share this typical immigrant story with the population of Vancouver, which he did. As a result many people came to that coffee shop and started to share their stories there. And from that moment things changed for that family and their business is successful now. It’s amazing how someone hearing your story can change your life.”

She continued, “In another session, I gave people disposable cameras and they took pictures in the neighbourhood of the things they love, hate, are scared of, feel comfortable with, or that call up strong memories or emotions, and so on. We put those stories and pictures up in the neighbourhood house. After that, so many opportunities opened up for me. For example, LMNH invited me to attend the community development course at Capilano University. In fact I was doing community development but I didn’t know that’s what I was doing. I learned about the ‘asset based model,’ which became my life model because it’s so important to believe in the assets of people around you and the gifts they have. I realised deeply that everybody has a gift, and that everybody can support community development. Every contribution matters.”

Ana shared how her connection with the neighbourhood house led her to a new career path. She stated, “I think I can achieve more through community development than through filming

people's stories. I never thought I would say something like that but I have to acknowledge that I love it even more than filming! At CNH I am trying to build a bridge between immigrants and Aboriginal kids through their stories in a puppet theatre. I love it; it's starting to grow and it's lovely. My career here basically opened up as a result of my involvement with the neighbourhood house, so even though I wasn't paid much for the videos I made, I created my portfolio and developed a network. I was hired last year to do videos for so many places because of the videos I made for neighbourhood house. I am so happy." She continued, "I changed a lot because of my work with the neighbourhood house. Back home I was a very career-driven person, and I had a lot of success. I won two awards for my films and I was well-known. I was interviewed by a lot of TV stations from other places because of the films I made, especially one about trans-sexual prostitutes in Holland and another about Abu-Ghraib prison in Iraq. I was part of an Emmy award winning team at my TV station. I had everything that a journalist could want but I didn't feel complete. I was kind of stuck. I didn't know what to do apart from more of the same. Here, it's totally different. I feel so happy with what I am doing and I feel it has meaning. I feel in touch with people in a way that I couldn't be as a journalist; now I am part of the people, part of the life that I am looking at; I'm on the inside rather than looking in from the outside. I changed my life and the path of my job. The neighbourhood house was the place where I discovered where my career is going and, having established that, my career is guiding my personal life."

Ana elaborated on the changes that have occurred in her personal life: "I discovered myself here. I feel happier than ever before. I had a hard time because of immigration and then my relationship ended so I am now raising a child by myself. But I don't feel overwhelmed by these things. I have people around me and I love them. At LMNH, just as when you are born, this was the first place where I opened my eyes. I call this my native land. Canada is so rich, the texture of human beings here is so rich because of all the nationalities coming together. Despite all my family's problems back home, and the struggles that I faced here as an immigrant, I am so happy I came."

While changing lives through stories at the neighbourhood house, Ana was also working and volunteering as a support and outreach worker in the DTES. She described the impact of this experience on her personal and professional life: "When I came here I didn't know anything about Aboriginal people even though my dad is a history teacher and I had read many history books. I took a six-month course to develop my cultural competency; through that course and by working with people and their stories and traditions I've learned so much. Now I am trying to create a pallet of resources for people like me who learn through seeing, touching, and smelling rather than through books." Ana described something else she had learned from working on the DTES and the unexpected effects of that new knowledge: "I learned a lot from the harm reduction program. I actually applied the harm reduction program to my life in the way I see people and how I interact with people. Now I see how important it is not to force anything, but just offer the resources without pushing, and to not judge anybody or their actions. The harm reduction program changed my life. I bring out the stories of people who feel that they are inadequate or less than; I just let them do what they want, and they bloom - it's beautiful to see although it may sound egocentric to say so. Before, I was just pushing and pushing, but being connected with the harm reduction program I learned about creating the environment to let

things grow organically. That was a hard change to make, but I worked hard on myself and I changed.”

In response to a question about her future, Ana replied, “My story is still developing. I see the stories I have collected from other people in the neighbourhood house as a lot of beginnings and no ends, but with potential for adding more. My story is part of the neighbourhood story because they all overlap to create the neighbourhood. I don’t know what my future holds, and I don’t want to know - I like to live day by day. Professionally, I see myself working in the same area, growing in my knowledge of how I can make things better for people. I would like to go back to school at some point, but at the moment I’m working too many hours to study as well. I want to learn more about community development and ways to create more resources for people, especially for immigrants, and how I can better apply the tools I learned in school.”

Finally, Ana reflected on the value of neighbourhood houses for herself and for others: “A neighbourhood house is a life-changing place for many people. For example, a Taiwanese woman came in to the neighbourhood house last year. She had come to Canada with her husband and neither of them spoke much English. When she came in, she was crying, she was depressed. She missed her family and felt alone here. She had been a piano teacher but gave that up when she came to Canada. She created this amazing Japanese art called *chigiri-e*, but she had stopped doing that as well because nobody asked her to do it here. She felt that nobody wanted her and that she was good for nothing. I love that people can come in from the street and change their life inside the neighbourhood house; you just step in and all of a sudden everything changes. I told her, ‘Why don’t you come to our programs and just hang out and see if you like it.’ Now, a few months later she’s running programs at three neighbourhood houses! She also ran a program for me as part of the Expressive Art and Dialogue Project. She got connected with other people and felt so empowered because everybody loved her sessions. She even teaches at a local college! I love this: a person doesn’t know anything except that she wants something. She comes to the neighbourhood house, and we are able to empower that person so that they’re able to do many things. We are in the position to give them an opportunity that they wouldn’t otherwise have had. This is also very empowering for me.” She added, “You need places where people can grow and develop, where you share joy, where you connect, share your problems, and get resources. A neighbourhood house is a very special place - like the library or a grocery store; it’s part of our life. I don’t think we can live without the neighbourhood house - we need it like we need air to breathe, not only immigrants, but everybody.”

Ana concluded, “The neighbourhood house changed my life. I changed my values as a result of being part of the neighbourhood house. I changed the way I look at people; I don’t judge people any more. As a result, I like myself now more than before. I was also able to leave an unhealthy relationship with my former partner as a result of the support I found at the neighbourhood house. I wasn’t able to make the change that was needed on my own, but the neighbourhood house empowered me. And part of the change is the fact that I was there and I was listening people’s stories. I was empowering myself through people’s stories. Because of the neighbourhood house, I am totally different from how I was before. Now I feel very good when I wake up in the morning because I feel I have meaning.”