

Antonia: Everything Falls into Place

Antonia Beck is the Executive Director of Burnaby Neighbourhood House. She described her almost forty-year journey with neighbourhood houses in an interview in October 2014. Antonia's involvement with neighbourhood houses began when she was a teenager living in East Vancouver. She explained, "I got hooked into the neighbourhood house when I did the Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House leadership program at Camp Wallace, which is now known as Sasamat - that's where it all began. The following summer I worked as a camp counsellor at Camp Wallace; I was teaching kids canoeing and other outdoor activities. The other camp counsellors were people I had gone through the leadership program with and we became lifelong friends. I did the second level of leadership in Grade 12 and the next summer I volunteered at CCNH. Then I was hired for the South Vancouver Neighbourhood House day camp program. They actually created a special position for me: outdoor resource person. I taught kids from South Vancouver Neighbourhood House to camp, canoe, and cook outdoors - I loved it." Antonia's mother was also pleased. Antonia explained, "She was so happy when I took the leadership program because as a teenager I had some not-so-great peer relationships. I could have gone either way, so I really know how important that youth leadership program is, and how important positive role models are in young people's lives because I wasn't hanging out with the best people. In the leadership program we had great leaders who were young and very cool. The friendship and support and the diversity of that group, and the employment opportunities that followed - all that changed me for the better. That's what ignited me to being involved in the community."

Based on her positive experience with neighbourhood house summer camps and her love of the outdoors, Antonia enrolled in a recreational leadership program at Langara College. She described how her career took off from there: "While I was studying at Langara, I was offered part time work at CCNH running the breakfast program in the mornings. I organized one of the first breakfast programs in the Lower Mainland before they were funded by the Province. I did that for a couple of years and then I did my practicum at False Creek Community Centre (FCCC). As a student, my project was to set up a volunteer program. Meanwhile, I worked a bunch of part-time jobs and volunteered at Cedar Cottage - those turned out to be really important connections. That summer I was hired as a program leader at FCCC. When their programmer left, they hired me as an acting programmer but then I didn't get considered for the full-time position - I was too young perhaps - so I kept doing part-time stuff there. Then CCNH offered me a full-time job. I thought it was a great job - kind of a generalist program person for family nights, special events, and other program related tasks. As a result of that job, at twenty-two years of age I learned to cook for a hundred people before I learned to cook for four! What I really aspired to though, was a core position in a neighbourhood house as a program director."

Antonia didn't have to wait long. She recalled, "After a couple of years in that job, a position became available at MPNH - the program director job! That was my dream job so I applied for it, but didn't get hired right away because typically that position in a neighbourhood house was held by somebody with a social work degree and it took around six months to restructure the position so that I could qualify for it. Dave Stevens, who was my mentor and coach, and a lifelong friend until he passed away, told me, 'You can do this.' He coached me through getting that

program director job. He was a key person in my life at that time, and had also been my youth worker at Cedar Cottage. That shows the connection that adults can make with young people and the influence that you can have with youth - it's life changing. Dave Stevens ended up being the ED of Sasamat Outdoor Center. David Adair, the executive director at MPNH, had a great interest in outdoor recreation too. Finally MPNH hired two people: a family worker, Sharon Babu, who works at Family Place now, and me, the program director in charge of organizing and developing programs. That was really my talent - talking to people and responding with interesting programs. I was twenty-four and I had the job that I wanted! My experience shows that it's not all about the education - it's about the experience and the person."

Antonia described how she and her family soon developed close connections with MPNH: "I loved MPNH. There were tears on both sides when I left because when you work in a neighbourhood house, you really become closely connected, and your family gets involved too. While I was at Mount Pleasant, when I was twenty-four, I married my husband, Michael, who I'd met in a leadership program. It was because of the leadership program that we connected; we had attended the same high school but never spoke to each other because we were in different social groups. Also while at Mount Pleasant, I had my first child when I was twenty-eight. So it was such a close family - you have a child, you bring the child in; everybody had such joy. Even today I've got pictures up on my wall of David Adair carrying my baby son, who's now twenty-four."

Despite how much she enjoyed working at MPNH, Antonia eventually moved to a new position at SVNH. She explained why she made the change, "I worked at Mount Pleasant for about seven years, and I thought my lifelong career would be there. But then a more challenging position came up at South Vancouver Neighbourhood House. It was a lateral move in terms of hierarchy and pay scale, but involved more responsibility. When I went over to SVNH to meet with the ED, I had my son Derek with me, who was three or four years old at the time. The ED was talking to me and Derek was running around the room. That was kind of fun and unusual, and it really underlines how neighbourhood houses value families." Antonia described how after the move her family developed new connections at SVNH: "One year after I started at SVNH, I got pregnant. I took leave for six months and had Douglas, and again there were such strong connections between my family and the people at South Van - they are my family and I'm still very much connected to them. Both my sons went through pre-school at South Van Neighbourhood House. The kids become part of the neighbourhood house, too. It's like the whole family embraces the culture of the neighbourhood house. My husband also volunteered and he was on the boards of Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House and Sasamat Outdoor Centre for many years. He was also a representative to the Neighbourhood House Board of Governors."

While Antonia was at SVNH, she and her family moved to Burnaby. There was no neighbourhood house in Burnaby, so she would load up her kids and head to SVNH for social connections while on mat leave. At the time, Antonia didn't give much thought to the fact that there was no neighbourhood house in Burnaby. She explained what happened next: "One day a friend called me. She had worked with me as a camp counsellor at South Vancouver Neighbourhood House. She had seen a poster for a community meeting looking at starting a neighbourhood house in Burnaby. So my husband and I with the little kids went to a community meeting and we signed

up to get involved. My husband and I were both involved in the beginning but then he stayed home with the kids and I ended up going to the meetings. We wanted to incorporate and become a society but we didn't have any money, so we each threw in five dollars and then it just kind of happened - we created South Burnaby Neighbourhood House. At that time, fifteen years ago, I never expected to be where we are today! We had no money, we didn't have a location, and we couldn't get a location because we had no money." Antonia pointed around her to the new building and joked, "Pinch me!"

She continued, "For the first three years we spun our wheels doing gatherings at the church hall and educating Burnaby residents about neighbourhood houses, because people didn't understand what they were or see the need. The people who were involved in those early days all shared a vision. There was me; Chrissie George, who is on the Alexandra Foundation and was on the board at SVNH for many years; Harminder Sangara, who used to be multicultural worker at South Vancouver Neighbourhood House and she was working for the Burnaby School District at the time; and Gabe Mayo, who was a social work student at SVNH, who is now working for MCFD in Burnaby. After three years, we got some money and a really tiny location - we were so excited and we just kept going from there. We got furniture donated. We painted. It was a true community project because so many people helped to fix the place up. I wrote a few proposals and we got some money to hire Kimberly as our first staff person - she's program director now. So we kind of grew up together."

Antonia reflected on how subsequent developments seemed to come together naturally, "The experience that I had from the three previous neighbourhood houses and what I'd learned from each of my mentors really helped build what we have today. Everything about our journey has really been about things just falling into place. Even how I met Kimberly was serendipitous. I met her first at a Langara job fair when I was working at South Vancouver Neighbourhood House and she was working for Boys and Girls Club. Then one day she phoned me to let me know that she was looking for work - and there we were trying to find a staff person for BNH. We had held some interviews but hadn't found the right person. We hired Kim and from there, we started up our different programs."

Antonia explained how she ended up as executive director, against all her expectations, "I was working my day job at SVNH as program director, volunteering with the development of BNH, and raising two little kids with my husband - it was really busy time! I never meant to be the executive director. I was really happy with my program director's job at South Van, and I was also chair of the BNH board. What happened was that we felt we needed an executive director to move us forward and Kimberly didn't want the position. We put a posting out and I was on the hiring committee with Gladys and Gabe; we did some interviews but didn't find anybody. Then Gladys suggested that I apply, but I told her I already had a good job, a pension, kids, a mortgage, and my husband's construction work wasn't always stable...but they put that bug in my ear. Then Karen Larcombe at South Van granted me a one year leave of absence to be the ED of South Burnaby Neighbourhood House, telling me that if it didn't work out I could have my job back. So SVNH really supported this neighbourhood house." She added, "Once I started working here as executive director, this became my passion, my baby, and there was no going back. If you are

passionate about something and you have a vision and you love what you are doing, that radiates from you and other people want get involved. And so that's what happened."

However, it wasn't all smooth sailing. Antonia explained, "We are here to make the neighbourhood a great place and yet when we first applied for city support we were informed that we didn't fit into the continuum of service delivery in Burnaby. But we kept trying! I mobilized and we sent a delegation to council to say, 'Look at all the great work we're doing.' We filled that room - there were even people in the lobby. It felt very powerful to be able to mobilize like that and people felt really empowered. Determination has always been part of me - if I have an idea then I'll make it happen. Slowly things have turned around, and here we are."

Antonia described two important personal milestones that she has achieved on her neighbourhood house journey: "When the mayor asked me to be on the committee to make up the social sustainability plan for Burnaby, that was a highlight of my career because of the struggle we've had. Another highlight was receiving the Queen's Jubilee Award, which is to honour significant contributions and achievements by Canadians. I was honoured with this medal and my family was so proud of me." Perhaps Antonia's greatest source of pride, however, is how her family is fully incorporated into her work, and how her children have been impacted by their connection with neighbourhood houses. She elaborated, "All three of my kids went to pre-school at South Vancouver, even my daughter who's eleven now. We drove her there from Burnaby, and my mom also volunteered at SVNH. Now my mom cooks for the seniors at BNH. In fact, she's been connected to the neighbourhood house since the early days and is always supportive. One year after I started working at South Burnaby Neighbourhood House as executive director I got pregnant and had my daughter, so she's also connected to BNH. My boys both did leadership at South Burnaby so both of them are connected to a youth leader and staff come in to my office and tell me stories about my kids! I'm so fortunate to be a working mom but have my kids here with me, on site. There are boundaries, but I couldn't have achieved what I have without my family behind me."

Looking back over her years at different neighbourhood houses, Antonia reflected on what made each experience special: "The executive directors who I worked with make each period unique. I brought with me a little bit of each of the different EDs I've worked with and that's who I am today. Doug Sleight was executive director of CCNH and he was great with financial matters. Dave Adair was the creative one but also from him I learned how to write proposals. I remember I would write these proposals and give them to him to look over, and they would come back with red ink. Barbara Downs was an awesome administrator and I learned to manage contracts from her. Karen was so supportive of my work at BNH and really helped me get started here."

Looking ahead, Antonia concluded, "For me personally, retirement is next chapter. I think I have achieved what I want to achieve. I feel self-actualized - this has been my dream and it's come true. I'll continue to be creative and chase opportunities, but before I retire I will also ensure that I've spent time mentoring somebody and that the systems are strong and that I can leave and the neighbourhood house will remain strong. I would also like to see the vision of BNH remain grassroots, cozy, homey - not sterile - and truly helpful; those are important values that have brought us to where we are today and which will continue to guide us in the future."