

## **Hendrik: Still Growing**

Hendrik Beune has been involved with DTES Neighbourhood House since its inception. In an interview in January 2015 he described how his neighbourhood house journey began: “In the early 2000s, Joyce Rock and I were working on establishing a neighbourhood house at the life skills centre, which is now called the Drug Users Resource Centre. Once the neighbourhood house came together, we both applied for the job of director, but she got the job and she was the right person to get it. She was really the one who came up with the idea.” Although he didn’t become the ED, over the years Hendrik has maintained a close connection with DTES NH. He is especially passionate about food justice and food security. As a lifelong writer and activist, he is an active member of the DTES NH Right to Food Zine Group which puts out a quarterly production, and he has published articles in several issues. He described the Zine: “It’s always struggling with lack of funds but somehow always manages to get five hundred dollars together to get a production going. They cost about a dollar a piece. Nobody gets paid. It’s really a wonderful production – it’s one of the most outstanding things from the neighbourhood house and I am really happy about being involved with that.” Hendrik also writes for Megaphone Magazine.

Originally from the Netherlands, Hendrik came to Canada in 1970. He shared the story of arriving in Montreal at age nineteen and how he came to live in the Woodward Building in the DTES forty-five years later: “I landed in Montreal and took the train to Alberta because I had been accepted at university there. But I didn’t like it so I came to BC in 1971 and went to UBC. I wanted to be close to the coast. I completed a degree in zoology, specialising in ethology, ecology, and marine biology. I’ve lived all over the lower mainland. As a dive master I’ve led a diving expedition organized solely by myself. For twelve years, I had a shellfish operation north of the Sunshine Coast in Desolation Sound. I knew the animals better than I knew the people in the neighbourhood – I knew the bears, the cougars, and the others. I also raised two kids there. I came back to Vancouver around 2000 after a three month break in Europe. I came to the Downtown Eastside because I needed time to recuperate from a major back injury. I couldn’t work; I had broken my back twice, and I couldn’t walk or stand up for more than a few minutes at a time. I was already familiar with the Downtown Eastside from past visits when I had usually ended up at the Astoria Hotel for a beer because that was one of the few places that allowed me to take my dog into the pub. When I arrived on the DTES, I didn’t have any money but, because I’d never been on welfare before, and because I was educated and I’d been a successful entrepreneur, I couldn’t get on welfare immediately. They made me wait, saying, ‘Hey, you’ve done all this. You must have some money hidden in somewhere - try and find it.’ Instead of waiting three weeks, which was the usual period, I had to wait three months before I received anything. So I lived out of what may be found on the street. Despite the line-ups and my injury, I’d be out there to get some food. Everybody for themselves, right. Here, you are on your own. It’s almost like the system is designed to turn people into addicts and criminals. Well, I survived and now I live at Woodward.”

As a result of living on the DTES and volunteering with the DTES NH for the past fifteen years, Hendrik has developed a sharp sense of what life is like for local residents. “It really bothers me,” he explained, “that there’s a two tier system in Downtown Eastside - an apartheid system based on class: we are the clients, a lower class people, and then there are the privileged elites who come here and they take money away from here. They are employed here by the money that gets poured into

programs and then they spend the money outside. I do the opposite. I sell my newspapers at the farmers' market and get money from the rich people. Then I bring it to the Downtown Eastside and stimulate the local economy by spending it mostly on the street, not for drugs, but for recycled goods and that. Some people don't want to buy the paper. I say, 'Hey, can't you put some money back in the economy by purchasing a Megaphone for two bucks?' And sometimes even regular customers will say, 'Oh, I never read it, I don't want it anymore.' Even in January, my toughest month, you know - they have no consideration for us. It's right after Christmas when you've spent all your money like everybody does. Then welfare gives you a 5-week month! I don't know anybody else in the society who gets a 5-week month: 'Oh, there's an extra week. You get to wait another week for your cheque.' There is exploitation going on here in the Downtown Eastside."

Hendrik described some of the work he's done with the neighbourhood house to address some of these challenges: "I helped run a Smoothie program that still exists - the Banana Beat is a smoothie truck that goes to the welfare offices. They go at 6am to serve smoothies to the poor people who have to wait in line until the office opens, in order to get some money when they are starving. They don't have enough money for food although the rumour is that people here don't know how to spend their money wisely," Hendrik finished with an ironic grimace. He noted that many people go to the neighbourhood house for food, "because it is hard to get good quality food; it's mostly stuff that would turn you into a diabetic quickly. In the Downtown Eastside, do you get proper nutrition? No, it's always sweets, donuts, and coffee. That's what you get here. Some people that want to do good come to the Downtown Eastside and give us more candies. The road to hell can be paved with good intentions," he concluded.

In addition to accessing healthy food, people also visit the DTES NH for friendship and social interaction. As Hendrik stated, "Vancouver's quite stuck up and it's hard to make friends. However," he continued, "I find the neighbourhood house to be very friendly. Other people feel the same way - like Donna, who now lives in Surrey, but comes all the way out here to this neighbourhood house." Another positive feature of DTES NH, according to Hendrik, is its "grassroots, bottom-up, not top-down organization; they support peer led groups, which benefits the community and program participants. The neighbourhood house is an uplifting place, which is important because so many people on the DTES are ground down by life. The neighbourhood house is 'open door' and gets people doing things for themselves and for their community. The best governance always comes from the bottom-up, so it's good to see local people involved in planning the community."

Despite the importance of the neighbourhood house to the community, the organisation struggles. Hendrik explained, "Place-based, bottom-up policy needs to happen. Neighbourhood houses are ideal hubs for that. But where does the funding come from? Carol is a fantastic ED. She's got a background as a young upstart hippie in Vancouver in the 1970s, and she knows a lot. It's a real struggle getting grant money and yet she manages. But it's getting worse - why do they have this policy that the rich get richer and businesses kill each other to become bigger? It just doesn't make any sense at all."

Hendrik explained how he first became interested in activist movements and social justice: "I really became a leader when I moved to Canada. In Europe I was a good student; I did my homework and did what I was told. Then when I came here at nineteen, all of a sudden I could do what I wanted.

That's when I started to take on leadership positions as I explored things on my own. Also, being from the Netherlands, I was involved with the Provo movement [a Dutch counter culture movement that used nonviolent methods to promote social change] in the 1960s. They're part of my history. I was very proud of that and I wanted to bring some of that over here as well."

Hendrik has been involved with a number of different neighbourhood house programs. He explained, "I wear many hats. For example, I got involved in a radical discussion group with students, which was set up by the students themselves. Kim del Valle Garcia was in that group and also a university prof. Kim and I ended up doing a permaculture design course at Langara College in 2013, which DTES NH allowed me to take without paying the fees. The Langara permaculture course was a highlight for me because I had no extra funds and I believe in lifelong learning. Moreover, from that, I am now doing extended studies with a really good teacher, Delvin Solkinson, on the Sunshine Coast. I get to go up to Roberts Creek every so often and be involved with a really interesting group of people from all walks of life - totally my kind of people. That's also led to my first experience getting paid for leading a group and showing people about urban gardening. For example, I got to do some teaching about how to make planters out of newspaper. I'd never done that before, although I have a lot of farming and gardening experience. Urban gardening is different from gardening in the forest where I had 160 acres. I was given that opportunity by the neighbourhood house and I actually get paid twenty dollars for each session, which, including clean up and set up is two hours.

Hendrik described two other urban gardening projects that he has become part of through his involvement with DTES NH: "Through the neighbourhood house, I took part in some urban gardening with the Servants group, on a plot kitty corner from the neighbourhood house. That was really enjoyable. More recently, I began a three-year residency under the auspices of Village Vancouver in Strathcona Field House. I am on the board and it's the first food-based residency; before that, it was always an artist space. Hopefully we'll do some growing there and preserving and fermenting. DTES Neighbourhood House is our one official partner in the proposal so we have a very strong connection with the neighbourhood house. The underlying philosophy is related to the transition movement into which neighbourhood houses fit very well."

Based on his extensive experience, Hendrik has come up with some innovative ideas related to urban gardening. He explained, "One of my design projects is for localized composting with green spaces, and to engage apartment buildings around a certain area and take the compost there by a low-energy mode of transport. I've already talked to city planners about this idea and they love it." When asked about his contribution to the neighbourhood house, Hendrik responded, "Problem solving. Also, I generally get along with everybody. I usually manage to diffuse the situation. I've also got a good sense of humour, a good easy way. And I know quite a bit from experience, not just from books. You gain wisdom as you get older."