

Maheen: Gave Her Heart, Found Her Voice

Maheen Khorram is the Family Programs Manager at Burnaby Neighbourhood House. She told her story in November 2014, beginning with how she and nine family members arrived to Canada in 1986 as government sponsored refugees from Iran via Pakistan. They joined eight family members who were already in Vancouver, making up a close-knit group of eighteen family members. The relatives who had arrived earlier suggested that the new arrivals find accommodation in Mount Pleasant since it offered a central location with plenty of services. Thus the family settled in Mount Pleasant. At that time, Maheen's daughter was two years old; her son was born nine months after the family settled in Canada. Once her daughter turned three, Maheen began looking for pre-school classes and found herself at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House. The first person she met was the program director, Sharon Babu, who became her respected mentor and one of her closest friends. Sharon's warm and welcoming manner immediately put Maheen at ease. From day one, Sharon encouraged Maheen to develop a close connection with the neighbourhood house, advising her, "Every so often, come to my office and we will talk about how life is going, and what you would like to do." Meanwhile, Maheen's daughter began attending pre-school at MPNH.

Maheen remembered that at that time MPNH was located in a small, dingy storefront on East Broadway. Despite the less than desirable surroundings, Maheen immediately fell in love with the neighbourhood house. She explained what attracted her, "It was the warmth of the staff, and all the programs that were happening in this one hall...there was pre-school in the morning, then they would stack the tables and make the room ready for seniors to come for lunch. And then at five in the afternoon everything changed again, and persons with disabilities arrived for the evening program. And youth were coming for different programs. There was such an amazing feeling of community. I was drawn in - I wanted to be involved."

One day not long after her first visit to MPNH, Sharon asked Maheen if she would like to showcase her culture to people in Vancouver. Maheen was shocked and thought to herself, "What is she talking about? I haven't even been here a year and English is not my language." She continued, "It was such an amazing question. I couldn't believe that I was hearing right that people were interested in my culture. Why?" But after asking for more information, Maheen eventually agreed: "I said, 'Okay, what does that mean?' Sharon told me, 'You cook Persian food, and you bring things from your culture to put on the table and you can talk about them. You can arrange things however you like; it's going to be your night.' Sharon also said, 'Don't worry, we'll take care of the shopping, and bring volunteers in. I just want you to coordinate it.' She mentioned that around a hundred people would attend! At first, I was freaked out. Persian food is a little complicated, how was I going to prepare dishes for one hundred people? But some of my Persian neighbours and my sister-in-law agreed to help me. We said to ourselves, 'They want to know about our culture. How can we say no?' And that's how the whole thing started. We cooked the meal and, because we were showcasing our culture, we wanted to make everything the very best. We were so excited. The dinner went really well! Actually, I am a very organized person. And Sharon noticed that I have some skills."

Following the success of the dinner, Maheen put her name down to volunteer at the neighbourhood house on weekends or evenings when her husband was home. Elaborating on her decision to volunteer, Maheen related, "I wanted to be part of this amazing thing that...I couldn't explain what it is. In my culture, family members do things for each other; there are not organized agencies that provide services like the neighbourhood house. But I found it helpful and heart-warming. I found I wanted to be part of it." What began as a volunteer position became a lifelong career. Maheen explained, "Little by little, whenever I was ready, Sharon would offer little jobs. Two years after I started volunteering, I become part-time staff. Then about ten years later, full-time. In the beginning I didn't know what would happen, but when it came together I knew that this is what I wanted to do. This is where my passion is, and working at the neighbourhood house permanently became my goal. Now I am so passionate about neighbourhood houses. I think the neighbourhood house really saved my sanity in many ways. Other agencies were also helpful, but the neighbourhood house is really special."

While volunteering at MPNH, Maheen also studied English at evening classes and ultimately completed grade ten English. She decided that she did not want to go to university, and instead began taking short-term courses, including computer courses and several courses on group facilitation. During this time Maheen's husband attended BCIT as a full-time student while also studying English and working on weekends. Although he had completed a Masters degree in Industrial Management, a knee injury prevented him from working full time and he was therefore on income assistance. The family struggled financially, but Maheen made the choice to look after her kids rather than look for work. As she said, "My kids needed me so they were my job." This was a difficult period for Maheen, who "sometimes felt like a single mom struggling to bring up two kids in an unfamiliar country."

As a result of these challenges, Maheen's connection with MPNH played an important part in her life by providing her with a feeling of moving forward and also a sense of fulfillment. At one point, one of the group facilitation courses that she was taking involved a practicum component and MPNH staff helped Maheen work with an existing fitness course for seniors. As the program progressed, Maheen realized that Persian seniors in the neighbourhood, many of whom did not speak English (including her in-laws) would also benefit from the program. She recounted, "I wanted to do something for them because they are isolated here. It's not like Iran where they can go out. There is only the Baha'i community, which is great, but not enough. So I asked Sharon if I could use one of the small rooms upstairs to run a program for Persian seniors. And she said, 'Sure, I'll pay you to do it.' Another amazing moment! What?! She said, 'We have a tiny budget to run a multicultural seniors program and we haven't found anybody who wants to do it.' It was three or five hours a week. I would have done it voluntarily! So that was my first job at the neighbourhood house, and I created it myself. By then I had some experience working with the neighbourhood house and I knew how things worked. The program was really successful and I had about twenty Persian seniors coming from all over Metro Vancouver."

While Maheen was experiencing success at the neighbourhood house and discovering new capabilities within herself, her family was struggling to find affordable and suitable housing. After moving four times to different neighbourhoods within East Vancouver, Maheen and her husband

finally bought a house in Burnaby ten years ago. Maheen shared some of the challenges her family had with housing in the early days: “The first place we lived in had a lot of cockroaches and stuff like that; the management wasn’t good. By the time my son was born, I thought, ‘I can’t handle this. We’ve got to move.’ So we went from a spacious but horrible apartment to a smaller but cleaner one in a different area of Mount Pleasant. We lived in one bedroom with two kids. I didn’t think it was a big deal. The kids were small and didn’t need their own rooms, so I never felt deprived. But the challenge was the tenants underneath us, a young couple working at night and sleeping during the day. My kids were not allowed to walk in the house! The downstairs tenant would come to the yard and F---- us like there was no tomorrow. He tried to fight with my husband and we called the police a few times. The manager, the police, and the other tenants agreed that it was a family building and that the downstairs tenants should move. But they made life hell for us for two years. At ten at night, to make it tough for us, they would put the music on really loud, so that our floor was shaking, and then they would leave the house for the night. During the day, I would take my kids to the park at least three times. And they would jump on the couch because they were afraid to be on the floor. One day we were watching a movie and the kids in the movie were jumping on the couch. My five year old son asked, ‘Mommy, do they have bad neighbours underneath? Are they afraid like us?’ I realised that the situation was having a negative effect on the kids and we moved to a co-op apartment with three bedrooms. Unfortunately, it wasn’t in a good area – there were drug dealers and other troubling things going on. It got worse as the kids got older and so we ended up moving again.”

Meanwhile, at MPNH Maheen was working an increasing number of hours in different programs, including a one-year contract for a women’s support group as well as various seniors groups. She described working with seniors, “I loved that job. I travelled. I learned lot about Vancouver and I loved the seniors. They were really amazing and smart people, and they really loved each other and being together. MPNH was a beautiful place to work. And I learned a lot, being with those seniors.” Another contract involved a program for disabled people. Maheen explained how she got the position: “The coordinator came to a staff meeting and said, ‘I’ve interviewed a lot of people with education but not much experience.’ Sharon said, ‘Why don’t you interview Maheen?’ I was surprised, but the coordinator asked me to go for an interview. Half an hour later I was hired. I have some disabled family members who I’d lived with all my life so I had some experience. In fact the people in the group were really functional people who came for socializing and out trips. I really loved that job and that group. My mother-in-law helped by watching the kids between school and when my husband came home.” One day Maheen saw a sign in the window at the neighbourhood house advertising a “Nobody’s Perfect” parenting program. She asked Sharon if she could register for the course. Sharon told her that the current group was for single mothers, but that she would send Maheen for training to become a Nobody’s Perfect facilitator. That’s how, without having attended the course as a participant, Maheen became a facilitator. She ran two or three groups per year for many years. She recalled, “It was one of my favourite things to do. From facilitating, I became a better person and I learned so much from all the parents.”

Eventually Maheen’s husband graduated from BCIT as an electrical engineer, but the job market had changed significantly since he had started studying and there were no longer any jobs available in his field. While studying he had worked on weekends for his nephew’s roofing

company and decided to start his own roofing company, which soon became very successful. As a result, Maheen did not seek full time employment while her kids were young, but continued to take on part time contracts with MPNH. After a few years of taking on temporary contracts, Maheen was hired to run the Community Action Program for families and children. By then she had a lot of experience working with new immigrants and also with families, in addition to being an immigrant parent herself. She started the drop-in program at Mount Pleasant and worked there for seventeen years. Although working at the neighbourhood house had not been her original goal, Maheen knew she had found her niche. She asserted, "I think my passion always was to work with families and young children. I really value parenting. I know it's a hard job. I know parents need a break. I also know the first five years of a child's life is very important - that's one of my really strong beliefs. So, if I can do anything to make that first five years a little easier, then I will. Of course I am not perfect. I learn something every day that I work with families, and I try my best not to judge people. But I knew I had found the right place for me." Maheen added proudly, "Nobody offers what neighbourhood houses offer. Many organizations are amazing, but they work with specific groups. The beauty of it is that we are here, and we are going to be here for a long time."

To illustrate her latter point, Maheen related the following anecdotes: "I went to the hospital many years ago when one of the moms who came to my drop-in program gave birth to her second child prematurely. She was devastated so I visited her. Now her daughter is sixteen, and she's in our foundation group. I was working at MPNH at that time. When the family moved to Burnaby, they found me at the neighbourhood house. I know many such families like that. People will even come to find me again after five or ten years. The neighbourhood house captures people because it has so much to offer. Which other agency can claim relationships like that?" The second story involved "a six month old baby who came to our program with her mom and dad. They'd moved here from Toronto and they were utterly lost. This child was shaking like a little bird when she came to our program. But the parents felt comfortable at the neighbourhood house and they felt respected. While in elementary school, the little girl would come to the neighbourhood house to give me a hug on her way home from school every day. Later, when she was a teenager, her family got in touch with me again at BNH. That's why I love my job."

As Maheen became more involved in the neighbourhood house, she also drew in her family members. She remarked, "My family was very involved with the neighbourhood house. I became part of any community event that the neighbourhood house was involved in – for example, I organised lots of community dinners and family nights – and my family members always came along. Both of my kids were closely involved with the neighbourhood house. Both went to pre-school and summer camp, attended leadership programs, and volunteered with summer programs. They kind of grew up in MPNH - they were always there. If I didn't finish work on time, they would walk to the neighbourhood house from school and we would go home together. It was our second home. My mom also came to a lot of the family nights and multicultural nights. My husband came if he had time. My sister-in-law volunteered. My nieces and nephews got involved in the leadership program and they also volunteered. The neighbourhood house was part of our family."

After a few years as a family worker, Maheen became a coordinator. MPNH moved into their beautiful new purpose-built building and everything seemed to be going perfectly. Then the executive director, David Adaire, passed away. Maheen explained what happened next, “We hired a new director and everything changed. A number of staff members, including Sharon (who is currently ED of Family Place in Vancouver), were laid off. Several other staff quit. I was also unhappy and so I was fortunate when Antonia hired me as Family Place coordinator at Burnaby neighbourhood house, even though when I started here I lost my seniority, my vacation time, and other benefits I had built up over seventeen years.” Maheen recalled the good years at MPNH: “We had the best team. We worked together like the parts of a clock, it was really amazing. Most of us were happy most of the time. I consider myself lucky to have been able to work in such a place. It was my first work experience in Canada and I loved it. I was planning to retire from MPNH, but it didn’t work out that way.”

Both MPNH and BNH played a central role in Maheen’s personal development and in helping her develop a sense of Vancouver as home. She stated, “It was through my involvement with the neighbourhood house that I started becoming strong and able to stand up and have a voice and be able to look for things that I wanted. The first five or six years in a new country, you don’t even know who you are. It’s like being a singer without a voice. That’s all you are because you were ripped out of what you knew and thrown somewhere. I remember when our plane landed in Canada that I felt like I would be okay here. But you still have to learn the language and culture, look for a job, earn money, bring up your children, and go through the struggles that I see people going through every day. The neighbourhood house saved me because being a part of anything at the neighbourhood house gives you some sense of how the world works, how Canada works. You can’t put a value on that.” She continued, “I am lucky – my kids are healthy and happy. I’m able to work and live in a country where I don’t have to worry about people taking my husband away every night. The neighbourhood house helped me to be grounded here and to realise that Canada is a great country. It has a lot of challenges, but I feel like these are my challenges now because I am part of this country. It’s my country now, so, okay, what am I going to do to make it better? I’m grateful to the neighbourhood house for giving me the opportunity to help myself and also help others – for helping me to be part of the solution. I don’t know many people who, like me, feel fulfilled in so many ways every day.”

Maheen explained how being involved in the neighbourhood house impacted her professional development: “As my kids were growing up, the neighbourhood house allowed me to figure out what I am capable of; the neighbourhood house was key to finding myself. They allowed me to grow at my own pace. It was never, ‘Well, if you want a job, you have to work full-time.’ Or, ‘You only can work from nine to five,’ or, ‘You have to come at seven in the morning.’ Instead, as long as I was doing my job, I could negotiate the time and do the tasks that I was willing and capable of doing. I also received a lot of encouragement: ‘You’ll be great, why don’t you apply? Why don’t you do it for three months to see how it works?’ Ultimately, I learned, and I contributed too. The neighbourhood house allowed me to develop skills that I might not even have had the confidence to try because they let you develop at your own pace, but encourage you to move forward too.” Maheen now models the same behaviour with neighbourhood house program participants. She explained, “They walk in the door and I connect with them - a lot of the neighbourhood house

staff do the same thing. It's about sitting down and seeing where they are and figuring out what is the next step for them and what we can do - how can we help their dream become reality - and support them as they work towards that. You find mentorship at the neighbourhood house, and you pass that on. Mentorship is part of everybody's job here." Summarising the contribution of neighbourhood houses to her personal and professional development, Maheen thoughtfully articulated, "Throughout my life in Canada, I've learned more and more about respect, about trust, about being curious, and about asking questions and not assuming. Neighbourhood houses were a huge part of my journey to become a better person. They opened my eyes in ways that I couldn't have imagined - it's like opening all the different windows onto the personal, spiritual, and physical abilities that you didn't even know you had. I am grateful to God and the people at the neighbourhood house who provided that opportunity."

Although her primary position is as manager of Family Programs, Maheen indicated that she has undertaken a range of tasks at BNH over the years. She stated: "I've done different positions, such as cooking for family nights, and I am part of any big event that takes place in Burnaby - city fairs, multicultural fairs, community fairs, pre-school fairs, barbecues. BNH does so much and I do a little bit of that 'so much.' At the neighbourhood house, you never do one job. Everybody takes up whatever is to be done depending on their skills, what they love to do, and what needs to be done. We all wear different hats at different times, like a family." She added that due to some recent Family Place funding changes she has had to pick up 15 hours per week in other neighbourhood house programs. Expressing her gratitude to BNH for ensuring that she has the hours that she needs, Maheen concluded, "That's what the neighbourhood house is all about - making things work for people."

When asked about her contribution to neighbourhood houses, Maheen responded: "My heart, I gave my heart. I really love people. I have lot of shortcomings - for example, I can't write reports - but I am grateful that the neighbourhood house saw what I have to offer. We all have skills and we all have area that we can improve on. Even though I don't like writing reports, doing so has helped me grow and develop. You meet challenges and you find ways to overcome them. Mainly though, I give my heart - because I genuinely care, and want to work with people. And whoever comes to the door, I always see people as people."

Looking ahead to the future, Maheen anticipates many more years with BNH. Currently fifty-seven years old, she looks forward to volunteering at the neighbourhood house when she retires in eight years. Or maybe she will run the drop in program. She knows that wherever she is on her journey, the neighbourhood house will be there for her. For example, last year when Maheen underwent cancer surgery, the neighbourhood house staff were a tremendous support. She insisted, "I want to be involved with the neighbourhood house no matter where I live or how old I am. As a senior, I can read books to kids. I can attend seniors programs, go on trips when I can no longer drive, become part of the social activities, cook soup together with the group in the kitchen, and bring my grandchild to the pre-school and to the summer program." She chuckled, "I don't have any grandchildren yet. It looks like one may be born in Japan and another one in Los Angeles. If I end up going to LA, I'll probably start a drop-in program. If I go to Japan, I'll probably start a

neighbourhood house in Japan, even if I'm already retired. That's how much I believe in neighbourhood houses."