

Roberta: Coming into Her Own

Roberta Kihn has been the office manager at South Vancouver Neighbourhood House for ten years, having previously served as the office coordinator, and before that, as receptionist. She shared her story in December 2014. Roberta's initial contact with neighbourhood houses was through a 'Nobody's Perfect' parenting program at Mt Pleasant Neighbourhood House in 1985. In 1988 she and her family moved to South Vancouver. By then, her son was five years old and her daughter was two. Roberta also cared for her sister's children, who were three and six years old. Her cousin was the family worker at SVNH, which at that time was located in a run down, nondescript building that Roberta had barely noticed, despite having walked past it on numerous occasions. When Roberta's cousin started a free babysitting co-op and asked her to join, Roberta entered the neighbourhood house for the first time. She recalled, "Even as a fifth generation Canadian, I didn't know what a neighbourhood house was. This little building with the small pink awning, I didn't know what it was. I just walked by it. But looks can be deceiving, because what was on the outside was not what was on the inside. Outside was drab but inside it was bright and it was all about warm relationships and connections. I needed pre-school and babysitting but I also needed a connection to other parents with children the same age as mine. Stay-at-home moms can be very isolated and my husband worked long hours. So just having that connection was crucial - and then you grow from there." In addition to swapping babysitting services with other moms, Roberta and the four children also attended family night dinners organized by SVNH once a month on Thursdays.

One day, a youth worker at SVNH, Gary Robinson (with whom Roberta had coincidentally attended high school) entered Roberta's son's name in a draw at the neighbourhood house and he won a huge box of hockey cards. From that moment, Roberta's son was hooked on the neighbourhood house and also on Gary. Her daughter went to pre-school at SVNH in 1989. Both children attended youth nights, Saturday programs, and different groups for boys and girls. Their participation evolved as they got older, to include day camps, junior leadership programs, and work experience in grade 12. In Roberta's words, "The kids grew into the neighbourhood house."

A similar process happened with Roberta. When her daughter attended pre-school at SVNH, Roberta was at the neighbourhood house two or three times a week, and as a result got to know the staff. When her daughter started school, Roberta decided to return to the paid labour force after having taken ten years out to raise her children. She had been in the food service industry, but did not wish to go back to the nights and weekends that serving entails. While exploring her options, Roberta decided that she needed to be at home before 9am and after 3pm in order to be with her children when they were not at school. These limitations made it difficult to find work, but Roberta felt that her children had to be her priority. In the meantime, she started volunteering at the SVNH reception, thereby unknowingly setting the stage for a long period of tremendous professional and personal development, learning, and growth. As much as she enjoyed the work, however, she initially did not consider that she would one day work at SVNH. Instead, she "just helped out when reception was short of staff." However, what started as a once a week volunteer job soon became twice a week, then three times a week. By 1991 Roberta had been hired as casual staff. In 1992 she became part time permanent staff, working four days a week, then later five days per week. She

recalled, “As my kids grew, my shifts got longer, which suited me well. First I worked from nine to three, then it just grew and now I'm here all the time - nine to six or even later.”

Roberta had always been a people person, and had enjoyed interacting with guests at her brothers' restaurant where she had worked as a server. Working at SVNH allowed her to continue interacting with the public but without the difficult physical conditions and late nights that characterise restaurant work. Through SVNH Roberta found her true calling. She related, “When I was in high school my aptitude tests said I should be a social worker – and now I am working in social work. I feel so good about my work here - the helping hand that we offer. We fulfil needs and people move on. Actually, some people never leave because they always need us, whether for friendship or just being there, or a second home, or they need the services. And I need the connection too. I love the satisfaction of helping somebody find what they need, or I'll sit down and just talk to someone. The people that come into SVNH are like family. The neighbourhood house gives them a safe place where they can come and be themselves and make that little connection for the day and overcome isolation.”

As her confidence grew, Roberta not only became comfortable doing things she had thought she could never do, but also thoroughly enjoyed her job. She elaborated, “I evolved with the job, coming in with zero office skills, zero computer skills, and zero skills with other technology that I didn't grow up with. That's one thing I don't mind stealing from my staff – their knowledge of technology! I had taken typing and shorthand classes in high school but I had never worked in an office. In fact, I didn't think I could work in an office and sit at a desk. But I did. And twenty-five years later I am still here and loving it.” Describing the shift that she went through from someone who did not believe she was capable of working in an office to somebody who has her own office, Roberta related, “When I first started, I'd never worked a multi-line phone. No real office skills. But the neighbourhood house allowed me to try, and to make mistakes along the way. Just having the freedom to try to do something was huge. Lynn, the person who trained me just said, ‘Okay, go ahead and try. It's okay if you can't do it. I'll help you, I'm here.’ Knowing that support was there really increased my confidence and allowed me to grow as a person. Let me illustrate with an example. We had our colours read one time. Blue meant that you were basically a door mat who did anything to please anybody - and I was blue as blue can be. But that's evolved as I have gained confidence. I've now got public speaking skills. I chair meetings. One of the biggest things I've learned concerns leadership knowledge, and the idea of shared leadership. Being allowed the freedom to try new things and knowing that there's someone to catch you if you fall really brought my confidence level up. I still struggle with saying ‘no’ sometimes, but I'm getting better. I am still blue but thanks to the neighbourhood house I'm on my way to green!”

When asked to describe her contribution to SVNH, Roberta replied, “I am the ear. I am the person that everybody tells everything to. I'm a good listener with a big shoulder. And a closed mouth. People can talk to me and they know that it's not going to go anywhere. There's no judgment, so they feel comfortable. I am very calm and stable, even in a crisis. People feel free to come to me and talk, then they feel better and work can continue because things don't just simmer. A lot of times people have got the solution but they just need to talk it through. I am a sounding board. Somebody at the neighbourhood house said once about me, ‘She's like that crazy aunt that's up for

anything, the one that you can really talk to.' I like that! People are able to talk to me because I am like a family member without being an authority figure."

At the same time as Roberta was working part time at SVNH, she had another part time job selling Tupperware. As a manager, she made presentations to her colleagues, led meetings, and developed training courses. Although she eventually left a senior position at Tupperware to work full time at SVNH, Roberta attributes her success at Tupperware to the work she was doing at the neighbourhood house, explaining how she applied the skills she learned at SVNH to help her at her other job. Roberta also elaborated on one of the ways in which her professional development unexpectedly enhanced her personal life: "My husband's also in a management position now and being able to bounce what we've learned off each other is amazing. I'm delighted that we are able to share our experiences with each other. I really hadn't expected that."

Roberta noted that her experience at SVNH also changed her as a community member. She remarked, "I am much more involved in community because now I know the value of being involved in community. Even out in Delta, where we moved in 2003, I strive to support 'everything community' because I know the value. It is being involved with the neighbourhood house that made me into a very community-minded person and taught me that community needs run deeper than just dropping off canned food at the school."

Reflecting on twenty-five years with SVNH, Roberta recalled some special moments, such as being recognized as a volunteer and receiving a certificate of appreciation at the Volunteer Recognition Ceremony the first year that she volunteered. Roberta was also recognized with a twenty year service plaque at a Staff Fun Day a few years ago. She emphasized "the importance of being appreciated; they do that well here at SVNH." Christmas parties provide additional fond memories. Roberta explained, "The Christmas Party is special because we all come together to make it. It's chaotic, it's crazy. There's one team that takes the lead, but on the 'day of' everybody comes together and it unfolds perfectly."

Even more special are the strong and long lasting personal connections that Roberta has made at the neighbourhood house. Community members often attend at the neighbourhood house for many years and develop close relationships with staff. Roberta recalled that she and several other staff attended the funeral of a woman who had attended neighbourhood house programs for over twenty years. Roberta recounted, "This was her second home. She would sit on the couch and knit. Her son would bring her here from Surrey after they moved. And she would just sit there and knit beautiful baby sweaters. I have two sweater sets that she knitted before she died, one for each of my children to give to their first-born. We become people's family and their second home." Roberta also provided another example. Last year she was at City Centre Mall in Surrey when a mom with two teenage daughters called out to her: "I heard somebody shouting, 'Hey! Roberta, Roberta!' It was a mom with her daughters who had attended pre-school at SVNH; the girls are now eighteen and sixteen years old. They were so excited and I was too. I remembered them well because they were here for their whole childhood. They used to call me the principal. In fact a lot of the kids thought I was a principal because their moms would pay the program fees to me!"

Roberta also described the warm feelings that develop as a result of neighbourhood house staff and participants knowing each other's children and grandchildren: "When my daughter walks in, most of the people here know her. It's a really nice feeling that extends beyond the neighbourhood house. My daughter's preschool teacher was a guest at my daughter's wedding." Neighbourhood house staff become part of each other's extended family. Roberta remarked, "Our director of operations retired last year. She was here twenty-six years. It's a good group to work to work with. Like a family. The neighbourhood house is like a second home and the people here are my family." Staff also attend family occasions together. Roberta related, "We've been through births and deaths, funerals and weddings. It's very supportive. When my mom passed away eighteen years ago, they closed the neighbourhood house so that everybody could attend the service. When Gary's mom passed, I was brought in as casual staff so that everybody else could go to the funeral. So it's a whole sense of family. In other work places, something happens and you get three days bereavement. But here it's about the compassion. It's very compassionate. We're all about care and self-care." Roberta believes that it is these relationships that keep people coming back to the neighbourhood house: "It's that personal touch that makes us successful. It comes from the top down. Like when the executive director says 'hi' to the guy that gets coffee here and she knows his name, that keeps people coming back. Without realizing it, that's what we're doing to make people come back: we're making them feel that SVNH is their home. And a lot of people have said that: 'This is my second home.'"

Roberta also has close relationships with her front desk staff and volunteers. She explained, "We have a lot of volunteers that are here for years and years and years. We have very dedicated volunteers. The volunteers come, and then they stay. Some volunteers and program participants become staff. My receptionist, Esperanza, started as a volunteer. Actually all of my staff participated in programs here in one way or another. My assistant, Lester, was our #1 volunteer here as a youth. David, the communications person, came from another neighbourhood house but worked in our out-of-school program. They're all like that." Roberta tries to pass on to her staff and volunteers the same supportive mentorship that she benefitted from. She elaborated, "I give them the freedom to grow in the job through shared leadership. My staff have a lot of skills that I don't have, but as a team we can bring everything together for the common good. So they bring me the ideas, and I say, 'Okay, go for it!' I allow them to grow. I try to be a good mentor and role model for my staff. I want to pass the knowledge on that I've learned because I love seeing my staff building their skills and confidence and growing in their jobs too."

Roberta reflected on some of the changes that have occurred at SVNH over the years. In addition to staff changes, the organizational structure has also adapted as the neighbourhood house has grown and continues to offer ever more services. Despite the changes, the focus on creating close personal connections remains strong. Roberta explained, "We are in teams now; the bigger you get, the less of the family feel there is because you are bigger and you split off into teams rather than working together as a whole. Even though that bothers me a bit, the fact is that I can't get enough work done in this open space because when you are on the frontline you are dealing whatever is happening, so I also needed to move up to an office, which I share with our director of operations. But I still want to be connected because that's why I started here - because I enjoy the people and I love knowing participants' names and watching kids grow from wee little ones to leadership roles in

Grade 12. I know all the kids and all their parents because that's the best part! I like to know everybody. Even though I work in an office, I strive to keep those connections strong."

Thanks in part to the arrival of a fantastic new director of operations, Roberta expressed great enthusiasm about the future: "I am really excited about what's coming. For a while, I was too comfortable at my job. At one point last year I was even asking myself whether I should stay. But with Paul, the new director of operations, everything has been renewed. Things are more streamlined and there's more structure. It's better for everybody. Now we are looking at new challenges and goals, which has rejuvenated me. We are doing a lot more projects and Paul's giving me a lot more lead. It's like reinventing my job. I'm being asked to do new things that I have no idea about – sometimes I think, 'I am in my fifties, can I learn this?' And then finding out that I can learn something - 'Yes! I got it done!' That feels great. All this learning new things and growing is exciting and healthy. I am being supported more than ever - it's always, 'Good job!' and 'You got it!' That reinforcement makes a huge difference. Just a tiny acknowledgement goes a really long way. It boosts your confidence so much. Here I am doing a job I never thought I could do, and I'm doing it well, and I'm still learning! It's amazing to know that I've got these skills, and that I can also teach others. I am really excited about what's coming in the next year." She elaborated further, "Also, now that I'm being held to a higher standard, I am holding my staff to a higher standard as well. For example, this year we created goals. I never had goals before. So I feel a sense of accomplishment for reaching my goals on my deadline and then I also get a 'High five, job well done!' The other part of it is that when I am getting close to my deadline Paul will say to me, "That's a self-imposed deadline, you know - you can move it. Having that support behind me has really rejuvenated me."

When asked about her future plans, Roberta replied, "It's funny, because on the weekend someone asked me, 'Don't you want to retire?' And I said, 'No, I am really enjoying my job right now.' I'll probably be here till I retire, another ten years or more. I just turned fifty-four. Things have just gotten better and better and I am excited about the future. I've also got a lot more freedom now in my job. I work from home on Fridays, which allows me to get my statistics done. The neighbourhood house is very good with flex hours - we don't have to punch a time clock. Most people tend to be like me: stay later, do a lot of overtime. There's always more need and work than there is time. So I'm not going anywhere."

Roberta concluded by summarizing her feelings about SVNH: "It is a fabulous place to work. We have a common goal and we work together really well. And we've had a lot of stability over the years. Most of our workers stay ten or twenty years plus but there's always new people coming in with fresh ideas, too. I love new ideas and I am not afraid of change. At the same time, stability creates the sense of family. It gives you a sense of belonging and that's why we stay here."