

Tara: Rooted in Her Community

Tara Browman is the Mother Goose Program Leader at CCNH, where she has been participating in programs since attending a jewelry making program at CCNH when she was in elementary school twenty years earlier. When Tara shared her story in an interview in February 2015, she could still clearly recall the teacher who led the program. In fact, she'd seen her recently when she registered her daughter for school, which, Tara said, is "kind of neat." Tara deeply values the long lasting neighbourhood relations that connect her with her former program leader and with others in her neighbourhood, and she has no plans to move. She stated, "I grew up in this neighbourhood and I still live in the house that I grew up in, which is a five minute walk from here. My husband and I rent the basement from my parents, but we recently bought a condo that is also five minutes away from CCNH. So when we move into that, we'll still be in the neighbourhood. My husband is an artist and works on Main Street – staying in the neighbourhood is important for our whole family." Tara elaborated on the importance of living and working in the neighbourhood: "Living in the neighbourhood affects my work at CCNH because it makes me more interested and more engaged, and more thoughtful about my actions. It creates a feeling of responsibility as a community member to always do my best for the community that we live in."

Tara explained how her connection with CCNH continued after elementary school: "While I was attending high school at Gladstone Secondary some people from Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House came to talk to us about the leadership program and I participated in that program for two years. We held weekly training sessions at CCNH with groups of teenagers and on weekends we'd go up to Sasamat and do kids camp. We took kids from around the city to Port Moody for walks in the forest and to make smores and do other outdoor activities. Children and teenagers from five or six neighbourhood houses would meet up at Sasamat, so we got to meet kids from the other neighbourhood houses – it was a really great experience. I did both leadership I & II and through that I got a job doing full day summer programs at CCNH. We didn't have indoor space so we were out all day long. We'd take the kids on the bus or sky train and come back at 3:30 every day. I did that for two years. But then I had to stop because to have that job, you had to be enrolled in school the following year."

She continued, "I wasn't going to college right away, so I stopped that program and started working in CCNH out of school care programs. My supervisor had been our leader in the leadership program and I also worked with another guy who had been in our leadership group, so it was many of the same people cycling into different roles. It was great! We had established relationships that were four years or more in the making, which created a sense of community in our team. We had already seen each other at our best and at our worst. It was really nice; we had a solid group for two or three years and it was such a good experience to work with people with whom I had long-lasting relationship. This often happens at the neighbourhood house. For example, I recently ran into Jamie, who had come to my high school class to give a demonstration and was also our leadership trainer; my supervisor from out-of-school care is also here now. It's so neat to be able to work with friends! I didn't realize how unique that was until I worked in other places where there's not that same team and community feeling, or the same sense of purpose and fulfilment. I also love seeing the kids I work with in my neighbourhood - they call my name when I walk through the park. I really

like getting to see the kids I work with grow up in the community, just like my program leaders saw me grow up in the same community.”

Tara also described how her involvement with CCNH influenced her career path: “The leadership training was a big turning point for me because it was a different group of youth than I hung out with at school and I really enjoyed working with the kids. After high school I began studying to be a nutritionist and worked at different jobs, but nothing really held me. I thought about what job I had enjoyed most and I kept thinking about working with the kids at Cedar Cottage. It just kept calling me back. First I returned as a volunteer working with kids aged three to five, and now I am back in school doing my ECE, so things have kind of come full circle. Early childhood education doesn’t pay a lot, so you have to love what you do. For a while I was thinking I would go into nursing, but in the end I thought, ‘Well, I just really like doing this,’ and so I started the ECE program.”

When asked how she ended up in her current position, Tara replied, “Soon after my daughter was born, I came to the annual carnival and Kelly, who’s so warm and good at bringing people in said, ‘Come back! We have this program and that program.’ I told her, ‘Okay, I am coming!’ So I started coming to the Strong Start program that CCNH runs through Selkirk. Then Kelly convinced me to volunteer to run a program. She is very good at convincing me to do things! She was here when I was a teenager as well, so I’ve known Kelly all these years. I volunteered to run a nature club program with another early childhood educator. My daughter was there with a group of kids her age. We ran two sessions over two months. I did KidSafe as well, which is the program that we ran for at-risk kids over the Christmas holiday. And then I did a baby time program for new immigrant mothers while my daughter was in pre-school last year; I’d come over and run the program and then go pick her up. Then Kelly mentioned the neighbourhood small grants project, so I applied and ran a program to make your own environmentally friendly products, and it was so fun. I got Lynn, who owns the soap dispensary on Main Street, and also one of my high school science teachers, to help us. We used the money to buy the supplies and everyone got to leave with cleaning products that they’d made, which were really simple things that they could replicate at home. Another time I sat on the residents committee for the small grants project, which was fun because I got to know about a lot of community events in the Cedar Cottage area and I took my daughter to them. Everyone on the committee was so nice. We held our meetings at the seniors home by Trout Lake, just a few blocks away. I got to meet some of the seniors as well as other community-driven people. We’d have dinner and then go over applications and it was really fun. The best part of sitting on the residents committee was that I got to hand out cheques - that was probably my favourite part! This year I am on the committee again. Finally, last summer I took the Mother Goose course. Kit, the family program worker was taking it at the same time. You need two teachers for Mother Goose, so they needed someone else and when Charnelle and Kelly called me, I was totally up for it. That’s how I got to where I am today.”

Her work with CCNH has also enabled Tara to undertake additional training. She explained, “CCNH has had a huge impact on my professional development. Last year Kelly suggested that I take the Community Capacity Building program through Capilano University. CCNH funded me and also helped with child care while I was in the program so that it was accessible to me. CCNH chose only one person to go and I was like, ‘Why did you choose me?’ I realized, ‘Wow, they like me!’ At CCNH they invest in people and really encourage participation. That course opened my eyes to just to how

much knowledge there is out there and what other people around the world are doing in their communities. There were a lot of really community-minded people in my class from different neighbourhood houses and non-profit organizations, which was a great learning and networking experience for me. I am still in contact with those people, so that grows our neighbourhood a little bit. Also through Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House, a couple of weeks ago I attended a professional development symposium with Donna, Kit, Charnelle, and the pre-school coordinator. Again CCNH provided child care. Everything becomes so easy because the neighbourhood house staff think of the things that people need to be able to participate and they use that information to make programs and education accessible. The other important thing is that I've been able to use some of the knowledge that I have gained in the programs I run."

In addition to providing child care so that employees can attend professional development, CCNH demonstrates the value they place on families in other ways as well. Tara elaborated, "The idea of returning to work after my daughter was born was always complicated by the need to arrange child care. Being able to come here and run a program with my daughter had never occurred to me. Her being a part of the program and benefitting from it as well was huge because it made it easier for me, and made all those connections make more sense. So I ran a program and she was one of the participants. It was a little challenging at first because she was just two years old and quite clingy, but we figured it out. It ran over a year, with the programs back to back with breaks in between, so she got more comfortable with sharing her mom; it was good for us both."

Tara explained how CCNH has influenced her personal life, especially as a parent. She stated, "I am a shy person by nature, so it's difficult for me sometimes to interact with other parents - I'm great with kids, but not as comfortable with parents. My four year old daughter's very much the same as me, and she attends programs here as well. She did pre-school here last year. This year we do the family program nights when I'm not in school. One important aspect of her attending programs and seeing me work here was me challenging myself to show her, 'See, I like to meet new people and make new friends.' We always talk about this at the end of each day, 'Did you talk to anybody? Did you make a new friend at the class?' Or, 'How does it make you feel to have fun with all these people?' It makes me a more reflective parent, and I am leading by example, challenging myself to prove to her, 'I am not too shy.'" Tara added, "I also want her to think community is important. I would love her to do the leadership program and to send her to camp. She really likes the family program on Thursday - it's five dollars and you eat dinner and then play games or do crafts together. We also hold plots at Cedar Cottage Community Garden. CCNH really values families and connections - the staff always bring their children to events. We want to stay in this community and be part of this community and I think it's important to teach my daughter that community is important. She's learning that the neighbourhood house is a place we can come to for fun activities and to meet other people who live here, and that those connections are important."

At the neighbourhood house, Tara feels like she is part of a family. She explained, "I know everybody - it feels good when I come in the door and everyone says, 'Oh, hi Tara!' That's part of what keeps people in the neighbourhood house. Some of the families I've worked with have moved out of the area and live closer to some other neighbourhood house, but they still prefer to come here because they know everyone." She continued, "I don't think of it as a workplace really - when I think of CCNH, I think of all the celebrations, like Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year, and all the

events and things I've done here with my daughter. It's more like a second home than a workplace." Looking back over her twenty-plus years of involvement with CCNH, one of the most special moments for Tara was when she returned to CCNH after a medical leave. She explained, " At one point when I was working at Cedar Cottage, I got really ill. Everyone here was so understanding even though I had to just immediately leave; I couldn't give notice because I had to go to the hospital. It really meant a lot to me - how supportive the ED, Donna, and the participants and the staff were. It was nice to not feel guilty, because I am a hard worker. They made it so easy for me to step back for a while. And then when I came back, I remember thinking, 'I wonder if anyone will remember me?' But instantly when I walked in the door, everyone was like, 'Tara! Is that you? I haven't seen you in ages! Can you come to this program or that program?' It wasn't awkward or weird at all as I had feared. That was really nice. It's nice to be wanted."

When asked about her contribution to CCNH, Tara replied, "My contribution is a friendly face for the kids to rely on every week – that's helpful. Also, helping parents – even with the new Canadians who can't speak English, and I can't speak Chinese, we can connect in other ways. My husband speaks Chinese though and sometimes he translates when he's here to pick me up. It's funny because the grandmothers tell him how much they like me, and they tell him funny stories about me and the kids. Also, I'm a reliable person that the kids see regularly - like Amy, that little girl we bumped into coming down the stairs - I've known her since her mom was pregnant, her whole life, and it's nice to be able to make those connections with people. Another thing I bring is understanding. When I had my daughter, I was twenty-seven, but I looked much younger – in fact, just recently I was asked for ID buying matches! Most people thought that I was a 'teen mom.' When people think you are a teen mom, they treat you differently. I can only imagine from my experience of people thinking I was a teenager, how hard it would be to actually be a teenager because some people are not so friendly when they think you are a teen mom. That helps me in Mother Goose and is partly what inspired me to lead Mother Goose – because working with teen mothers is where the history of Mother Goose came from."

In response to a question about how she sees her future, Tara drew on something she learned through her work with the neighbourhood house, "In the community capacity building course we learned about gifts, about how everyone can be an asset in the community, rather than looking at deficits. My gift is child care. I am good at that and I like it and I like to work with people's kids. In addition to remaining strongly connected with CCNH, I would like to be able to open up some day care spaces in this neighbourhood; I would like to be able to contribute that and serve my community in that way, too. I know I will be in the neighbourhood and will stay connected because this is where my roots are." She added, "There will always be a place in my life for CCNH because of how flexible they are with what they offer to the community – even as I've changed and grown up, there's always been something for me here. Whatever age I am or whatever stage I'm at in my life, there will always be something to draw me in to the neighbourhood house."