

## **Theresa: Frog Hollow is My Gas Station**

Originally from Taiwan, Theresa Lin Zhao has volunteered for a number of programs at Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House and also leads a drop in program for parents of young children. During an interview in January 2015, she told the story of how she came to Canada and became involved with FHNH. Her journey began in 2000 when she went to Kamloops to study English. After three years she went back to Taiwan, but returned to Canada on a few occasions in order to continue practising English. While on a visit to Vancouver, she met her husband, who had come to Canada from China and was living in the Frog Hollow neighbourhood with his parents. In 2005 he sponsored Theresa to come to Canada permanently and two years later, at age 35, she gave birth to their son. Theresa mentioned that previously she had lived in Burnaby, and initially felt unsure about moving to Frog Hollow: "I had heard people talk about East Vancouver, saying 'Oh, it's very messy there.' But when I moved here, I found that it's a very fun place and also multicultural. And then people here in the neighbourhood are also very friendly."

It was only in 2008 after her son was born that Theresa learned about FHNH. She recalled, "We lived just a few minutes away, but we didn't know that the neighbourhood house had services for different people. We thought it was only a pre-school or a place for seniors to hang out. But after I had a baby, the community nurse came to visit me at home and told me, 'You know, just down the hill there is a neighbourhood house. You should bring your baby there.' She gave me information about what they offer at Frog Hollow, such as the programs for parents and children. So I went to FHNH for the first time when my son was three months old I decided to bring him to FHNH because I felt isolated at home; I was very lonely because my husband had to go to work every day. I lived with my in-laws, who were very helpful, but sometimes gave me suggestions that I didn't really appreciate, so I felt very stressed. And with a little baby, that's not healthy, so I knew that I needed to go out. So I came to Frog Hollow."

Theresa continued, "We started coming to the drop-in. I met other parents and my son found friends to play with and he was very happy here. Also, there's a community nurse that comes to visit once a month. At that time my son had a serious asthma problem and I needed information, but everybody I asked only suggested going to the family doctor, who doesn't help a lot. At FHNH I found out that the community nurse really helps a lot. They gave me lots of information and then they also told me that I have to care for myself, too. They told me how to give myself proper nutrition and not give my son allergies and things like that. And then they also taught me a lot about emotional well being, and about some programs for parents, like Positive Parenting. That helped a lot because after I had the baby, I was not the person that I used to be. I changed a lot and it was very, very stressful. If there was no Frog Hollow here to help me, I don't know what I would have done - maybe just stayed alone at home with my problems."

Theresa described how her relationship with FHNH developed: "We came three days a week for drop-in and then a parenting program every Friday. So almost every day I was here at Frog Hollow. When my son was eight or nine months old, the staff asked me if I was interested in doing some volunteer work. I was worried because my son was quite small but they said, 'It's okay, you can take him with you.' I used to teach pre-school in Taiwan, so they asked if I could do something

similar to Mother Goose, but in Mandarin – and that’s what I did. The other mothers had their babies with them and my son was there beside me. When he went to pre-school I started to do more volunteering. I came to FHNH because I needed help with parenting and then I began helping other parents. Lots of new families come here because of the community nurse. Most of the people who live in this neighbourhood speak Chinese. Some women just come here, get married, and have a baby right away and they don’t speak English at all, or know about the resources that are available to them. I shared my experience and I told new people what kind of programs we have at FHNH. I did that program for seven years - I only stopped last year. I had a very good time with the parents in that program. They also helped me a lot. For example, they helped me with the relationship between me and my in-laws; many of them were experiencing the same thing. Now the relationship between me and them is improving a lot. Even my husband sees the change. He was very worried. He had tried to help but it’s different talking to your husband than to friends. When they share their experiences with you, you feel like, ‘Oh, okay, it’s not a big deal,’ because you realize that you are not alone facing this. We also share a lot of recipes. When any of us cooks something we always say, ‘Oh, it’s really good, you have to try it.’ And then most of the parents don’t speak or read English well so I help them to find resources. In fact, that also helped me a lot because before that group, I never thought about how we should look for different resources, and now I know about so many things.”

Although Theresa no longer runs the parenting program due to another volunteer commitment she has at her son’s school, she had been employed for the past two years at FHNH to work at the drop in two days a week. She also continues volunteering at FHNH with the seniors’ program, where she teaches art and craft. She feels fortunate to have the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge at FHNH and also at the same time share what she has learned with others.

At the moment Theresa’s son doesn’t attend any programs at FHNH because there are no programs for children his age, but he will return when he’s nine for the pre-teen programs. Theresa related, “He really likes it here at FHNH. When he was in kindergarten and I was working here, every night before he went to sleep, he would ask me a lot about Frog Hollow: ‘Who did you meet today at the program? Did Adam come? Did he give you a hug? Was Crystal there? Has she had her baby yet?’ He really cares about things here.”

Theresa recalled some of the most significant events that have occurred during her seven years at FHNH, beginning with the Compassion Project. She explained, “We do a lot of work bringing compassion to children and families. In this project, people get together and share something that they feel very thoughtful about: something significant from their lives that they remember, that touched them, perhaps a story from their childhood. Through sharing those stories, I learned about responsibility and I discovered that there was something important that I had forgotten. As children we used to care about things; we used to have compassion for others, but when we grow up we often forget. The Compassion Project reminds you and brings out the compassionate feeling that you have for the community. Not only for your family, but also for friends, animals, and even the environment. I really appreciate that Frog Hollow did that - if there was no Compassion Project, then maybe I would just sit at home and read my bible and think about compassion, without

practicing it. FHNH and the Compassion Project really give you an opportunity to practise and become a better person.”

In another project, Theresa applied for a grant to create a program to bring teenagers to the FHNH seniors groups to sing and, at the same time, create a connection among different generations. Theresa recalled, “It was great. Everybody loved it, especially the seniors - they felt so special that the young adults came to sing for them. I also gained a lot from that experience because before I did this program, I’d had a problem talking to teenagers. But I learned that they are very nice. When I was a teenager, I thought everything was boring, so I was afraid that they would say to me, ‘Oh, I don’t want to do that,’ but they actually came regularly, and we practiced together, and they really enjoyed it.”

The accomplishment that Theresa is perhaps most proud of involves her successful organisation of a mock election at FHNH before the last provincial election. She described the experience: “I knew there was an election coming. I also knew that so many people didn’t have information about voting, especially high school students who were soon going to be eighteen years old. They were eligible to vote for the first time but often nobody teaches them about that - it depends on your teacher. I also wanted to do it for the seniors. My mother and father-in-law from China had never voted before coming to Canada. They’d lived here more than ten years and were citizens, so they voted here. During one election period, I told my mother-in-law, ‘You should vote for someone who you feel can represent you in the Parliament.’ And she said, ‘Yes, there’s one person like that.’ I said, ‘Then just go and vote for her.’ But when we went home, she told me, ‘I didn’t vote for that person because she’s not in the party that’s in power.’ I replied, ‘It doesn’t matter,’ but she insisted, ‘She’s going to represent me in the Parliament.’ My mother in law thought the party in power was important for the country because she’d lived in a communist country for seventy years. There you couldn’t vote for anybody who’s not part of the party that is in power, so she felt like if the party loses, the country will lose. But it’s not about that here - Canada is what we call ‘democracy.’ I told myself, ‘I have to do something about this.’ Then I had an idea to do a mock election.”

She continued, “For the mock election, Elections BC provides everything for you, including the box and the voting paper. That day, I had many immigrants come to practise voting. Most of them were seniors and high school students. Some of them had grown up in Canada but they needed to practise. We had an information room, and I invited some candidates. I emailed them or I found them on Facebook and asked, ‘Could you come? You know the seniors would love to talk to you. And some high school students want to hear about you.’ Half of them responded and three showed up. The seniors were very excited and happy. They had lots of discussion about who to vote for. We also registered them, because some of them didn’t know that before you vote, you have to be registered. So we had a computer open for them to do the registration and fifty-eight new people registered, mostly seniors and high school students. It was a lot of work, because I had to read the party platforms and translate them for seniors who don’t read English, and make posters. Every day I was reading, reading, reading. My husband asked, ‘What are you doing? Are you going to be a politician?’ I like to see people get involved in the community. Standing in front of people - that’s not me - but I can help at the back, so that’s why I organized a mock election.”

In addition to the skills and information Theresa gained through volunteering at FHNH, she also attended programs and training opportunities. She elaborated, “I attended a very helpful program for immigrant women called Pathway to Leadership. It was here at FHNH. I met so many different people and we worked together for five months. We learned about how to search for a job and attend an interview; how to start a small business; we did tests to find out our strengths and what kinds of job we are good at; and the neighbourhood house invited librarians to tell us about the computer system in the library. We found out that there are so many resources available for us to use. They teach a lot in the program and they also give you ‘Canadian experience.’ We heard that a lot - you know, when you go to a job interview, the interviewer always says, ‘Tell me about your Canadian experience.’ They don’t want to know what happened when you were back home; they want to know that you’ve done here. I went to so many programs and training sessions at Frog Hollow and learned a lot about health, emotional well-being, and about lots of different resources. If I hadn’t volunteered or gone to the training and the programs, then I don’t think I would have had the chance to work here. Even now, I am still learning every day. Frog Hollow gives me a chance to learn.”

Theresa explained that FHNH also influenced her personal development. She explained, “Frog Hollow makes me a better person: to be more responsible, to have better time management, and to have more compassion. And FHNH gives you confidence. There’s a balance among me and my family, Frog Hollow, and my son’s school. If one is removed then it’s unbalanced. I have to come here because I need a break for myself from home. I feel that Frog Hollow is like a gas station for me because when I come here, I feel I have energy again to go out and face the world. This is because when I talk to the staff or the moms here, I feel, ‘Okay, this is not a big deal; everybody’s facing that. It’s okay.’ I have relationships here and I can also practice and experience compassion at FHNH.” She added, “At Frog Hollow, every day is special. Every day when I come to drop-in, I see the parents, share my experiences of raising my son in Canada, and also inform the parents about what they can do at home to make their family’s lives better. I made friends here too. The parents who come for the drop-in are very friendly to me, so I like to see them every day and to see their children growing. I am so happy. Frog Hollow is like my kitchen – I mean I feel that comfortable here. I come all the time. Also, when they need me, they call me and I come down. It’s part of my life; if I don’t come here, I feel that something is missing.”

When asked about her contribution to Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, Theresa replied, “I just share the experience that I’ve had, and maybe some ideas, or goals for the future, with children and parents. And I share my art and craft skills. I am lucky to live in this area and have Frog Hollow in my neighbourhood. I really want to do more things for the parents here at Frog Hollow. Maybe in the future I’ll volunteer more and continue to bring energy here. I always want to do more for Frog Hollow.”