

Wei Wei: Ripple Effect

Wei Wei Siew is the Family and Adult Team Leader at South Van Neighbourhood House, and has been in the position for ten years. Wei Wei shared her story during an interview in November 2014. She began by describing her move to Vancouver and introduction to the neighbourhood house movement: “I was born in Malaysia, but when I was three years old we moved to Tahsis, a tiny logging town on Vancouver Island with a population of 2,000. Then in high school we moved to Killarney in Vancouver and I’ve lived here ever since. Now I love living and working in this neighbourhood, but initially it was a big cultural shock coming to Vancouver and arriving at a huge building and my dad saying, ‘This is where you are going to school.’ I remember looking at the building and thinking it was gigantic! In Tahsis there was one tiny school building that housed K to 12. I was in shock when I realized that this gigantic building only housed the elementary school for my brother and sister! When my dad drove me to my high school and I saw Windermere, I was beyond shocked because it was just impossibly huge. It was a big adjustment; not having been in a city before meant navigating a whole new world. In Tahsis we knew everybody, there were no traffic lights or lines in the road, people left their doors unlocked; it was a different culture - a different atmosphere - and it was difficult to find my way and make friends at a new school. But then I found the neighbourhood house and it opened up a lot of doors for me. I found out about the neighbourhood house in Grade 11 when a youth leader came to the school to give a presentation on a youth leadership training program. They showed slides of a camp where you did canoeing, rock climbing, hiking, building shelters, and lots of games. I thought it looked so exciting! I got my friend to sign up with me, and that basically changed my life, giving me the gateway to where I am now.”

Wei Wei described what attracted her to the leadership program: “I was really excited about the recreation part. It was fantastic. It opened up new worlds to me because before that, I hadn’t gone hiking or canoeing or done any of that kind of stuff. We went fishing in Tahsis, but it wasn’t outdoor recreation in the same sense of enjoying the outdoors, because in a logging town, environmental conservation isn’t a priority. It’s a different way of looking at the world because the mindset in smaller towns revolves around the sawmill, pulp mill, hunting, fishing, and that kind of thing. So it was interesting to come here and learn about recycling and clear cutting. It’s a different cultural mindset.”

The leadership program exceeded Wei Wei’s expectations and also led to paid employment. Wei Wei explained, “It was fantastic. The two leaders were great role models, funny and educated, and they became my heroes. The program taught us how to be day camp leaders, about group dynamics and behavioral management, and how to self-care so that we could care for others. There were also games, songs, and camp fires; growing up I hadn’t done those things so it was great to experience them as a youth. After the training, we got jobs as day camp leaders, so I worked at SVNH for my very first job as a day camp leader when I was seventeen years old. The second year I came back and did it again. That got me connected to other neighbourhood houses and to Sasamat Camp as well. After that I worked at SVNH part-time as a cultural buddy coordinator where I matched up newcomer youth with long-term resident youth to help the newcomer youth integrate into their new life here. I loved it.” She continued, “The leadership

program was crucial because it got me on this road. I met new people and saw different ways of communicating and engaging that I wanted to emulate. When you work with different people, you learn that some leaders have certain capacities and you realize, 'This is a trait that I want to nurture in myself with the people I manage.' That had a long lasting effect on me."

Fifteen years later, Wei Wei could still recall the feeling of accomplishment that being a day camp leader offered her: "I remember the first time I was a day camp leader. There was one child who was quite a handful - hyperactive, very rambunctious and misbehaving - lots of energy, but not directed in a way that was positive. We had gone to a park with the group and at one point the other children came running, and they were really upset. They told us, 'Tim was throwing rocks - he hit a baby duck and killed it!' After that, the children came to us leaders and said, 'We don't want Tim in the group anymore.' So we had to deal with that situation and talk to Tim and also to the others. He was a long-term project for us. Because through the training I had learned about listening and relating to the children and hearing them and seeing where they are coming from - developing a relationship with them - I was able to realize that Tim was not merely the sum of his behaviours. So I and the other leaders worked with him and eventually he became a junior leader. That was a great accomplishment and I felt really good."

Wei Wei's neighbourhood house journey continued after high school. She explained, "After finishing high school, I had to figure out what I wanted to do. Being at the neighbourhood house with the leadership program and working with kids, I figured I would either go into early childhood development or outdoor recreation. I went to Cap College and did the recreation program and then completed my degree. In the meantime, I worked seasonally doing day camp at MPNH for a couple of years. I remember being the day camp director and having no driving license, then going for my class four. After I passed the driving test, my boss, Sharon Babu, and I were both excited and jumping up and down on the street and hugging because we needed me to get the license in order for me to drive the children. So that was another milestone. I also worked at CCNH. And then Sasamat had some positions open so I went up there and did day camps, and also facilitated youth leadership and camping programs. At the same time, I was also a snow-shoe guide and then did a practicum for GVRD as a park naturalist. This path was started by my taking part in the SVNH leadership program. Before that, I didn't know what outdoor recreation was, but afterward it became a passion. So the neighbourhood house basically brought me to who I am now; I am exactly what I am because of neighbourhood houses." She continued, "That period of seasonal and part time work was a growth period for me to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I am a floater; I never knew what I wanted to do. I just kind of let the world move around me and I followed along. I've been lucky that through working at the neighbourhood houses, opportunities fell into my lap. When those opportunities came, I took them and grew with them. Eventually I realised that it was all 'meant to be' because I love working with the community and I love learning and growing and challenging myself and working with people. So I am happy with who I have become, even though it wasn't very intentional. They say, 'It takes a community to raise a child,' and my story really illustrates that because it was the neighbourhood house community that made me who I am."

Around 2000, when Wei Wei was in her late twenties, she began working at Kitsilano Neighbourhood House as a full-time program coordinator working with adults, children, and families. She stayed in that position for four years. At some point she visited the newly built SVNH, which had replaced the run down, mouse infested building that she had known. She recalled, "When the new building was completed, I came on a tour. In my mind, I said, 'I've got to come back here and work.' When the job posting came out, I thought, 'This is my opportunity!' The position involved more responsibility than I'd had before, but they took a chance on me and it's worked out."

Wei Wei described some of the challenges that she's overcome in her new position: "Each year as you gain confidence, new things come on your plate, so you grow with the position. This is the most growth I've experienced in a job. In groups, I am very task-oriented so I can provide leadership and help keep things on track. However, I've had to learn that process is important too, that conversation is important, and that the relationship-building piece is important. The conversation is a relationship. If I am impatient, then the relationship will not be good and neither will the outcome, so I have to hear what's going on for the other person and look at how we can resolve it. Mostly it is about listening so that people feel heard and acknowledged so that they can move on." She continued, "Also, I hadn't been trained for HR so that was a big piece to learn, along with some skills around achieving outcomes and communication. It's been challenging and fun because I am always learning. I've also had to realize I don't have all the answers and that's okay. I've realised that I can ask other people for support and that it's okay to make mistakes. That was a huge lesson for me because I'd had the idea that I needed to be perfect. Realizing there's no such thing as perfect, and that it's better to make mistakes and learn and grow from them, has been huge. I feel like I am still not quite an adult because I'm still growing, even though it's perhaps silly to think that way at forty-one."

Wei Wei expressed her gratitude for the support she has received along the way from her supervisors. She emphasized, "Having the support from my boss and director of operations to be able to make mistakes, stumble through, learn, and then go through it, has been critical. It's been a supportive environment - our work is with community members, to support them and build their capacity - but that also happens internally with the team and the staff. I think that people stay here so long because it feels like a family. Karen and the other people here are amazing. I just love working with Karen - she's been a great mentor. Gary Robinson was another key mentor. Hearing that Karen is retiring in two years, it's like, 'Oh no, changes...' But that's something else I've realized: that change is part of life, and it's good."

Because Wei Wei has such a long history with neighbourhood houses, she has seen a cycle of births and deaths, as in any family. She stated, "During my life time with the neighbourhood houses, several key people have passed away. At Sasamat, very suddenly, the executive director passed away and that was emotional. And then at MPNH, the executive director passed away too. But there's also babies, and that's lovely. I guess I am talking about connections and people because it's like a little family, so people die, but there's also babies being born, and then people have opportunities and they grow to fill the places that others have left."

Wei Wei elaborated on the personal development she has experienced through her work at the neighbourhood house: “When you work with people, it becomes a community and they show you different aspects of yourself. You also learn about how you want to be and how you want to treat other people. I’ve learned how to have difficult conversations. It’s always the challenges that form you the most, even though at the time you are not enjoying it. I am a conflict-avoider, but working here you can’t avoid conflict, like anywhere that has a lot of people coming through. You really need to see what the issue is and address it. That has been a huge learning curve for me and I am still learning and growing. I am also a peace maker, so to sit with the discomfort of someone not being pleased, and being okay with it is tough, but I’m learning. Related to that, just realizing that happiness is a state of mind and that I get growth and nurturing from this place has been another important learning for me. For example, coming in today feeling kind of blue, and talking to a senior and her telling me, ‘Today is walking club and I’m going to walk in the rain.’ For her, it’s an investment in her health. I really appreciate just having the reminder that life is really quite that simple. It’s lovely coming in and having those reminders; those conversations with people give me the perspective that life is pretty darn good.”

In response to a question about the future, Wei Wei replied, “That’s a good question...perhaps this position would benefit someone else coming in, but at the same time, the position is always growing and I am always learning new things. I haven’t reached my threshold yet, so I feel like I still have several more years here. Maybe I’ll eventually go back to school and get a Masters degree, but I’m not sure. I think I may need to dream bigger because I am very much a person who’s rooted in my community and I really like security. I need to take more risks if I want to achieve different things. I feel like I may be at a crossroads actually. I don’t know what the future holds!”

Finally, Wei Wei reflected on her contribution to the neighbourhood house, “Sometimes you impact people and you forget. I remember bumping into a youth. She asked, ‘Hi, do you remember me?’ Then she turned to her colleague and told her, ‘The whole reason I am here now is because Wei Wei was my leader!’ Sometimes I forget about the ripple effect that I have in my job, the personal impact I have on other people. I am not gregarious or outgoing; rather, I’m more quiet and reserved, so I have a different style of leadership. It is more of a quiet leadership but very supportive.” She continued, “I remember another time somebody came up to me and asked, ‘Did you used to work for GVRD? My daughter remembers you. You did a program with her about frogs at the park and now she’s a biologist because of that.’ All these ripple effects! Sometimes it’s like the universe saying, ‘Hey, good job.’ Sometimes it says, ‘Remember - be mindful.’ We really impact the community. Just as my heroes had ripple effects on me, I have ripple effects on other people. So it’s lovely to have that full circle where I was a participant and now I provide services, and then am also able to mentor. There’s that full circle of participating and now giving back and then providing capacity and training to other people and having them give back. It’s just amazing because I gain capacity, then pass it on, and then others are also able to pass it on. So it’s that wonderful circle-of-life ripple effect.”