

Wen Ling: No Longer Alone

Wen Ling Chan is an art therapist who has volunteered her time and skills in numerous programs at Kits Neighbourhood House. She shared her story on January 27, 2015, beginning with her arrival to Vancouver from Taiwan in the summer of 2010, “When I arrived, I was totally alone. At first I was lost, not knowing where to go, what to do. I had assumed that I would just find a job and that I would get to know my neighbours and people at my work, but it was not that easy. I felt a sense of failure because I had two master’s degrees, yet I couldn’t secure a job at all, at least nothing close to what I knew or had done before. I didn’t know where to turn to because I didn’t have any connection at all. It was a bit scary, and I was thinking, ‘Oh my God, what am I doing here?’ A lot of people told me, ‘Oh, you just need to secure a survival job,’ but I was hoping for a different kind of future.”

Next Wen Ling explained how she got connected with Kits Neighbourhood House, “I was attending an occupational counselling program at a local immigrant serving agency and one day an email went out that mentioned a support program for immigrant women at Kits Neighbourhood House. I joined the group and from that point on, things started to get better because I realised that many immigrants had gone through what I was going through. I felt less lonely and less alone in my situation. At the time, I was a little bit depressed because if you imagine you have no one to talk to and the only connection you have to people is going to the library or grocery store, it’s very lonely. I really wanted to talk to someone, but you cannot just grab someone from the street and say, ‘Hey, listen to me, I need to talk.’ What happens in that situation is that your self-identity turns out to be not what you assumed it was, and you need to rebuild everything from ground zero. When I was in Taiwan, I was a middle-class kid with a high level of education, and I was teacher, which is a highly-respected job. I had everything. Then when I came here, I had totally nothing. So you have a lot of doubts and questions and you wonder who you really are. It was tough! I just kept sending out resumes and getting rejected. That has a very serious impact on your self-esteem, so my self-confidence was quite low at that time. Coming to Kits NH was great - at last I had someone to talk to! I saw that there were a lot of people out there struggling like me. It was great to get to know the other people in the program - they also had a lot of degrees! I met several teachers, a doctor - all these educational backgrounds, all these different experiences. I was really relieved!”

Wen Ling elaborated on the impact that Kits House has had in her life, “In the group, we shared our experiences and we learned that it’s not us; it’s the system. So at that moment I thought, ‘Okay, I am not that bad after all: I still have the potential or ability to do something here in Vancouver.’ It made a great impact on me - it kept me trying and moving forward. Kits House is very supportive. They give us a lot of chances to speak about things we know about. For example, because I have a Master’s Degree in Expressive Art Therapy, they said, ‘Why don’t you talk about art therapy? Why don’t you form a group? And why don’t you do blah, blah, blah?’ I said, ‘Okay! Let me try it!’ I started to feel great - just having someone acknowledge your ability is amazing. As a result, I got back my self-confidence.” She added, “For the first six months at Kits House, I was totally focused on myself. After being at Kits House, I was able to look around and focus more on others and all the things going on in Vancouver. I was not so depressed. If you’re focused on yourself - ‘I have nothing’ - that’s scary! But after finding Kits House, I focused on other people’s stories.”

Unfortunately, because the women’s support group lasted only three months, there was not a chance to develop close relationships with the other attendees; everybody was left wanting more. Wen Ling elaborated, “You get to know the other members and form a connection, but it’s not long enough to be ‘friendship’ yet. However, around the same time there was another program called Out Trips that took

immigrant women and other newcomers to explore Vancouver together. We often shared a cup of tea or coffee and a donut at Tim Horton's, and that actually made the friendships stronger. Those programs worked very well together, but I am sorry to say they no longer have the funding for Out Trips. We had to keep the connection going ourselves and it was a bit hard since everybody was busy with their own things." However, Wen Ling found a solution, "After the funding was cut we turned to our neighbourhood small grant and I become the facilitator for the group. I thought, 'Why not invite all the immigrant women to my place to do art and have coffee together and just build connections.' That was wonderful and I ran two groups; each one had around fourteen people."

Since then, Wen Ling has volunteered for several other neighbourhood house programs. She explained, "I volunteer for Mother Goose because I love kids. Also for a parenting colours program, seniors drop-in program, and other programs as they come up. I offer individual art therapy for children. I found the strength of volunteering; I do it because I know I need to keep in touch with the community to know what's going on in Vancouver. Volunteering also gives me an opportunity to have contact with locals. I've also participated in all kinds of programs – for example, the English Circle. That was great. Whenever they have some kind of program, Kits House always sends an email, 'Do you want to try this one? Is this what you are interested in?' We are very isolated at the beginning and coming to these programs has given me courage to try more things and talk to more people. Also, based on a suggestion from Kits House I have done a lot of volunteering at other places. For example, I volunteer for Battered Women's Support Services. A lot of women, when they are feeling anxious or depressed, their language skill drops. When you are crying, you cannot think about vocabulary - that is very hard. Having someone speak their language during a crisis makes a huge difference."

Currently, Wen Ling is pursuing a third masters degree, this time in Clinical Counselling, to complement her other degrees in Special Education and Expressive Art Therapy. Her practicum is at Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Services with immigrant women who have been abused. She related, "I'm not sure what the future holds so I just keep challenging myself. I find that everything that I'm doing is connected. For example, women experiencing domestic violence are very isolated and they don't know where to turn to. Now I am trying to find resources for women because, as a counsellor, I want them to feel the sense of connection so they will have the strength to keep going. I am doing what I love!" She added, "However, in the other places I volunteer, I've never had the kind of connection that Kits House offered me. In the other places, there's no sense of belonging - there's a different attitude. If you are welcome, you definitely feel it. So the attitude at Kits Neighbourhood House really made me feel like this is where I want to stay. I can volunteer for them for my whole life if they want me because they made me feel very welcome here. It feels like a home away from home; there's a sense of connection, a sense of community. I know if there's anything going on I can just drop in and say, 'Can you help me with this or that?' and they will definitely say yes."

Wen Ling described another opportunity she was able to take advantage of through Kits House, "They sent me to a program called Community Capacity Building run by Capilano University. I met a lot of volunteers there from other neighbourhood houses, and we shared our experiences. We are all so committed to neighbourhood houses. It was like a big family - it was great! The reality here in Vancouver is that it is very hard to make friends. A lot of immigrants feel intimidated by the locals. The neighbourhood house provides a moment of safety where you don't need to speak perfect English; you just need to share your story with someone else who understands, and then the next step will be to get more involved with locals. In the beginning, we lack self-esteem, so we close up. I have been through that; when I'm feeling insecure, I appear cool, distant, unapproachable - and people feel it. Because we feel insecure, we push people out. We talked about this in our community capacity building class

because most of us are immigrants. And we found that the neighbourhood house is actually equal to the kind of informal public meeting places we have back home; neighbourhood houses provide a common area which we are drawn to because of the sense of community feeling it creates. That is also the feeling that I want to create as a counsellor. It felt good to speak to other people in that class. We realized that we are not alone in our experiences here. I learned new vocabulary too, like 'top-down' and 'bottom-up.' Now I know what bottom-up means and I like that idea. Anyone can always approach the staff and say, 'You know, we could do this and I'm willing to do it.' And the staff always say, 'Okay, let's try it out.' It's a collaborative relationship. One time Sandra invited a lot of people, especially newcomers or immigrant women who have a family here, to ask them, 'What do you need?' That was so unique. They have the goal to include everyone. It's not just saying, 'You need to do this, you need to do that.' That's top-down, and that kind of thing always intimidated me because they say, 'This is what you need to do,' and you feel like you're just doing what you've been told to, as if you were a servant or something. And when you're finished, you don't feel anything. But here, I feel more like a human being. It's more equal."

She continued, "From the community capacity building course I understood how important community is to immigrants. It's also important for locals, but if you're born and grew up here, you probably have your family and friends and you know a lot of resources already. Immigrants know nothing - they are isolated, and if they also have a language barrier it's like they don't know what's going on with themselves, with others, the city or the future. After that course, I started to focus more on community rather than only on individuals. If I hadn't found Kits Neighbourhood House, I wouldn't understand how important community building is for my future. I now see my future in non-profit because it is where people need services the most."

After completing the Community Capacity Building program, Wen Ling ran a pilot program called Expressive Art for Immigrant Pre-teens. She described the experience, "Kits House asked me, 'Why not use your background to create a program?' and I thought, 'Why not?' Because they don't have any programs for the pre-teen age group, I decided I wanted to do something for this group. I met a lot of immigrant families. I love that. I was paid a little bit to run that program, but it was not about the money - it was about the experience. I've been doing that on and off now for two years." Wen Ling has contributed her skills and time in other ways as well: "Sometimes I give a workshop for seniors or for women's groups. This coming February Sandra asked me to do a presentation to introduce art therapy to all the frontline workers. I like doing these things."

Wen Ling gratefully acknowledged some of the staff at Kits House who have had the greatest influence on her, "The multicultural immigrant women's group was run by Patricia. She is my mentor: as an immigrant woman, when I look at her I think, 'This is what I want to become.' She's very successful, not in the sense of getting rich, but in terms of building strong connections among women and providing services and connection for all the people around her. That is what I want to do in the future. I feel like she's changing my life." She continued, "Sandra also gives me a lot of opportunities, always saying, 'Do you want to try this? Do you want to try that? What do you think about this?' She just keeps giving you opportunities to prove to yourself that you are worth it. Because people at the neighbourhood house believed in me, I began to think, 'Hm! Maybe I am good at something.' Their trust in me gives me the confidence to do so many things. Actually everyone here is great. Natsuke is so helpful. Even Emily knows everyone's name. That means a lot. Kits Neighbourhood House is always here for me; I can always come back to talk about my ideas and about what I want to do."

Wen Ling proposed a computer metaphor to understand the way a neighbourhood house works, "Many people misunderstand the difference between a community centre and the neighbourhood house. A lot

of people go to the gym, so they understand the hardware - what's out there. That's the community center. I've been going to the gym for a year or two, but I still don't know the names of the staff and they don't know my name. The neighbourhood house is more about people - the human connection. This is software. It's difficult to feel; you don't know it unless you join and participate in the program."

Finally, Wen Ling reflected on the importance of Kits Neighbourhood House in the community, "Kits neighbourhood House offers an opportunity for people to come out - this is so important! The frontline workers here are trying to make people feel more connected because, without the connection, people feel isolated and a lot of things will come out, like depression and anxiety. All kinds of mental illness will come out. I know. I experienced depression so I understand that. But by having social support and connection, you are half way towards your goal. Having someone to talk to, someone to hear your story, can validate people's experiences and their feelings. It's more important than anything else. Kits House, and all neighbourhood houses, offer a space for people to share their stories."