

Low-key learning centre enables UBC to bond with the Downtown Eastside

Residents balked at help with problems, but Learning Exchange earned respect

BY JANET STEFFENHAGEN, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 9, 2009



Margo Fryer headed a UBC effort to forge a relationship with people living on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, opening a learning centre in a storefront space at 612 Main St.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

When the University of B.C. announced plans for a storefront in the Downtown Eastside a decade ago, it did so with the best of intentions.

It wanted to help solve urban problems such as poverty, crime, drug addiction and homelessness by establishing a presence near Hastings and Main, former president Martha Piper said at the time.

The response from the community was unexpected. No thanks, said residents who were tired of having their neighbourhoods treated as a laboratory by people who wanted to fix their problems. The ivory tower wasn't welcome in their neighbourhood.

A front-page headline in *The Vancouver Sun* in 1999 stated: Downtown Eastside forces UBC to cool outpost plans.

While the university was forced to take a step back, it refused to quit. Instead, it hired two graduate students to consult with residents about what sort of university presence might be welcomed in their community.

"We encountered suspicion, even hostility, especially from people who felt the neighbourhood had been exploited by researchers," one of those students, Margo Fryer, wrote later. "But the university persisted."

Those consultations led to the opening in 2000 of the UBC Learning Exchange, with the university choosing a name that it hoped would signal that it was as interested in learning as it was in teaching.

Fryer, now an adjunct UBC professor and founding director of the Learning Exchange, said the storefront acted on the advice it received from Downtown Eastside residents: Move slowly, don't assume you know everything and work in partnership with others in the community.

"We were very low-key," she said in a recent interview. "And we gained respect."

The Learning Exchange began by offering free Internet and community services in its Main Street storefront and connecting a few UBC students with non-profit organizations and two inner-city schools with the goal of sharing skills and experience.

Initially, just 30 student volunteers were placed, but that number doubled every year until there are now 1,675 students involved in 40 schools and non-profits in the community. It's known as community service learning and while popular in the U.S., it's relatively new in Canada, Fryer said.

The work is diverse. While some UBC students tutor children in their schools, help with science labs and organize recreational activities, others were involved in projects this year such as building frames for the YWCA rooftop garden, erecting a Ming Dynasty barrier in the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, researching storm-water drainage systems, promoting habitat restoration and encouraging women to run for political office.

It is always two-way learning. The students impart their knowledge while also learning about the community in a way that challenges their assumptions and broadens their understanding. There are also practical skills to learn, including -- in the case of the rooftop garden -- how to use a hammer.

"Being in the community gives students an understanding and awareness of their subject matter that they don't get listening to lectures," Fryer said. "They need to be engaged in their learning. The more engaged, the more they learn."

The interaction also forces everyone to get beyond stereotypes about the people who live in the Downtown Eastside and those who work in the ivory tower.

Nancy Cameron, the program manager at the YWCA's Crabtree Corner Community Program who has worked in the Downtown Eastside for two decades, describes the university initiative as the joining of head and heart.

"UBC has definitely found a niche in the community," she said in an interview. "It's a win-win situation."

Many UBC volunteers have worked at Crabtree, bringing a wide range of much-needed knowledge, she said, mentioning nutrition and occupational therapy in particular. In return, they learn about the culture of the community and the subtleties of a city, she added.

The students who volunteer with the Learning Exchange come from different academic disciplines but share a hunger for real-life experiences, Fryer said. The goal for the next five years is to expand the program until 10 per cent of the UBC student population is involved.

The storefront, meanwhile, continues to offer free Internet and computer training as well as ESL conversation. Last year, it moved to a larger location in Chinatown, followed by a growing group of regular visitors who have come to view it as a refuge. They take pride in belonging to an intellectual community, Fryer added.

Some have used the space to write novels, finish their Grade 12 or lobby politicians by e-mail. Others seek conversation, stimulating debates or a quiet place to read. "We opened up a space, but it's the people who have come here and created a community."

UBC anticipates further expansion in the Downtown Eastside as a result of a \$2.17-million donation over seven years from HSBC Bank Canada for the Learning Exchange as well as cutting-edge addictions research by UBC's faculty of medicine and St. Paul's Hospital.

The donation is the largest ever received by the Learning Exchange, which has an annual budget of \$2 million and 20 full-time staff, although not all are located downtown.

Fryer, who now works full-time at the Learning Exchange, said she also arrived in the Downtown Eastside with stereotypical impressions of the residents but she soon discovered they are mostly ordinary people. "What then becomes unsettling," she wrote in an academic journal, "is the realization that there is not that much separating those who sleep in warm, comfortable beds from those who sleep on cold, hard sidewalks."

The more she learned about the Downtown Eastside, the more she wanted to know. "I got drawn in," she explained. "I couldn't walk away." And after 10 years, she believes suspicions about the Learning Exchange have been put to rest.

jsteffenhagen@vancouversun.com

Read more education news at vancouversun.com/reportcard

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun