



## New Learning Centre at The LivingRoom

A recent partnership between the Basic Education Department of Vancouver Community College (VCC) and the Lookout Society has led to the pilot of a new learning centre at The LivingRoom (524 Powell St.), specifically focused on learners who use The LivingRoom and/or live in buildings supervised by the Lookout. The partnership between VCC and the Lookout evolved organically out of the college's desire to maintain a connection with the Downtown Eastside community, and the expressed interest by staff at The LivingRoom to have a fundamental literacy class. Since September 2011, free classes have been held at The LivingRoom on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Learners are provided with help in reading, writing, computers, and math by Rene Merkel, the class instructor, and Jessica Jessome, a staff member at The LivingRoom.

Recruitment of students began in September with Rene spending time at The LivingRoom Drop-In Centre and getting to know the people who frequented there. Rene also recruited new students by literally knocking on the doors of residents living in Lookout housing units. She explained that when working with reluctant learners, "often a one-on-one connection is needed before a prospective student will cross the threshold".

The new learning centre at the LivingRoom currently has 5 to 6 students regularly attending at any one time. Rene expects the number to increase in the new year. Located on the second floor of The LivingRoom and complemented by a kitchenette, the learning centre is resourced with self-paced materials and several laptops, both provided by VCC. As the class instructor, Rene says that she sees her role as encouraging people to come and learn, as well as to provide them with the ability to be lifelong learners. And already, she has observed successes in the students' learning. A student who was at first hesitant to learn how to use a computer is now typing out his answers to reading comprehension questions on a laptop. Another student, working mostly on math questions, has reminded himself of



*Rene Merkel, instructor at VCC and the learning centre at The LivingRoom, and William Oksanen, manager of The LivingRoom.*

what he learned in the past in order to solve the problems. Rene says that she has seen a student with a severe hearing impairment increase her vocabulary each class by using the Oxford Picture Dictionary to write out sentences describing the events in different pictures stories.

Yet despite these many successes, Rene still has questions around how to best support learners at the new learning centre, especially those who have challenges with routine or who feel uneasy in enclosed spaces.

One area, however, that holds no question for Rene is the importance of having multiple learning centres in the Downtown Eastside which can support the many kinds of learners in the community. As Rene said with a smile, "There's no one size fits all here. We need different centres for the different learners."

'ROUND DTES LITERACY LIFE is a newsletter with an eye towards **fostering lines of communication** and **celebrating collaboration** between groups and individuals participating in the literacy life of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) community.

This newsletter is supported by the DTES Adult Literacy Roundtable, a group of adult educators working in the DTES. Members of the Roundtable have been coming together since 2006 to share skills, ideas, support and information.

Check out the Roundtable's website for a list of **learning events and programs** happening in **December 2011** & **January 2012** in the DTES community. Archives of 'Round DTES Literacy Life can also found on the website.

<http://dteslit.blogspot.com/>

## Conversations with Elders of First Nations Languages Sharing Circle

Since September, the First Nations Languages Sharing Circle has been meeting at the Aboriginal Front Door every Friday morning. Focusing on topics such as numbers, animals, family, or nature, participants are invited to share stories or words from their traditional languages. All people from all nations are welcome to join the Circle and some of the languages that have been shared include Cree, Chippewyan, French, German, Gitsan, Kwak'wala, Ojibway, Russian, Sliammon, and Spanish. This inclusive approach to language learning has great relevance in the Downtown Eastside community where languages, in particular First Nations languages, are many but fluent speakers are few.



Participants of the First Nations Languages Sharing Circle

The First Nations Languages Sharing Circle is facilitated by an Elder each week, and this role has been shared by Mabel Nipshank, an Elder from the Cree Nation, and Kelvin Bee, an Elder from the Kaw Kaw Ka Nation. Raised in Northern Alberta in a small Metis community, Mabel's first language was Cree and she often shares stories during the Circle from her childhood and the practices that she learned from her *kookim* ('grandmother' in Cree). Kelvin has worked for the past year as one of the in-house Elders at the Aboriginal Front Door. Kelvin is a first language speaker of Kwak'wala and he brings to the Circle a rich knowledge of the many stories and dialects that are shared and spoken by First Nations people, particularly in BC.

The remainder of this article contains excerpts from two separate conversations with Mabel and Kelvin, during which they shared some of their reflections pertaining to the First Nations Languages Sharing Circle.

*Q: What motivated you to become involved as an Elder?*

**Mabel:** I realize how fortunate I am to be fluent in my language and that I still carry my cultural values and beliefs. I wanted to share this with other people who may not be as fortunate. I feel really honoured and privileged that I can share with others.

**Kelvin:** My motivation is to keep our language alive. If we don't keep it in a good sense, it will die and the colonial attempt to wipe out our language will have succeeded. It has been my privilege to help this language program, especially in the Downtown Eastside where we don't always use cultural practice and knowledge well. In this community, there are not only people from the West Coast Nations, but also from the Plains, the North West Territories, the Yukon, and the Metis. In the Circle, many people have come from the Manitoba and Ontario sections and so we try to involve all the languages.

*Q: What do you think participants are learning in the Circle?*

**Mabel:** I think they have an interest and thirst to learn about

culture and language. The Circle follows the traditional values of sitting in a circle and sharing knowledge, language and food. People also want to be a part of a community. We are very much a communal people and we're not meant to be isolated. Being part of a family or a circle alleviates loneliness. The Circle also offers opportunities to speak our languages which was taken away from us. It instils pride that we contributed in making what is known as Canada today.

**Kelvin:** They have an understanding that they're going to learn a little piece of their language. Just this little piece is a glimmer of hope that shines in their aura. This gives them hope to hold onto and breaks cycles.

*Q: What are you learning from the Circle?*

**Mabel:** I am learning about other languages and dialects. It has also reminded me that our beliefs and legends are similar. There's a lot of joy in knowing that.

**Kelvin:** It lifts me up to see those who come to the Circle grow. I get a feeling of wealth from watching their success in using the words, and from being able to help them move forward, even if it's not my language.

*Q: What are your hopes for the Circle in the future?*

**Mabel:** I hope it will become larger. One of the challenges of this Circle is that the learning process is slower because there are so many languages around the table. I would like to see more people come to practice their traditional language. This way, they can work in small groups of 3 or so to practice the language. I hope the Circle will be kept informal and open so that those who participate can continue to decide how to learn best in their own way. If there is enough funding, my dream would be to go out and do a medicine walk with participants. To go out into nature and identify the plants used for medicine and pick sacred medicines.

**Kelvin:** In the future, I hope we will practice more building of words together in our traditional languages. I also hope that the Circle will include sharing of less used First Nations languages such as those spoken by the Haida Gwaii and Bella Bella people. It would also be good to have more resources, such as language CDs, for people to practice with. My hope is that this language program will be backed with more support and be recognized for doing good in the community and for bringing people in. There are regulars who attend and it seems there's something here for them. The Circle is most successful because of the regulars and their determination to learn.

### WHAT IS LITERACY?

The Downtown Eastside (DTES) Adult Literacy Roundtable understands 'literacy' as much more than knowing how to read and write. Rather, literacy is having the **knowledge, skills, and confidence** to participate fully in our lives.