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From Accidental Activism to Deliberate Changemaking

I've written parts of this introduction in several different places: in the Next Up office in Vancouver, on two airplanes, in a hotel lobby in Tacoma, Washington, sitting in the back seat of a rental car en route from Moose Jaw to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and now in a café back in Vancouver. The hopscotch nature of my writing intervals is a reflection both of how our work with Next Up has grown and how damn big this country is.

Next Up is a leadership program for young people age 18-32 who are committed to social and environmental justice. The very first program was offered in Vancouver in 2006 with 11 participants. Nine years later, this little idea has grown to six cities where we run seven-month training programs: Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg and Ottawa with a seventh program city, Regina, set to launch in October of 2016.

The fall of 2016 will also mark the 10th anniversary of the Next Up leadership program.

When we started Next Up in 2006 I thought that we had an idea that could grow; what I didn't know was to what degree that growth would take place, what we would learn along the way, and how the program and the work would change.

The first conversations that would eventually lead to the creation

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of Next Up took place in the spring of 2004 between myself and (co-founder) Seth Klein. Seth and I discussed a number of things, including how each of us came to be doing social justice work. (Seth is Director of the BC office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which is also celebrating a milestone this year — its 20th anniversary). In Seth's case, he had been raised in a family that had a long tradition of social justice activism and an unstated expectation that he would be involved in social change work of some kind. My journey into this work was more accidental.

I was raised in a working class, born-again Christian household, attended a fundamentalist Christian school from Grade 1-8, and lived largely within a Christian community. This was not an explicitly activist setting. However, when I reflect on my childhood, I can think of numerous examples of activism that people in the church community were involved in. Some of that work was connected to elements of the social gospel, predominately in relation to tackling and addressing poverty. Other examples of activism in that community were focused on promoting socially conservative agendas with which I now strenuously disagree because (among other things) they infringe on a woman's right to choose and LGBTQ issues.



Casserole Rally, Vancouver, 2012

Photo: Shelby Tay

Though I never quite felt like I belonged in the church context in which I was raised, I have realised that something my church did well was create spaces for people who were part of the church to build connections with one other and to foster a sense of belonging. Some of those insights have fuelled my personal journey as an adult and have fed directly into my social change work, much of which has been about fostering connection and community.

I was blessed to have parents who supported my educational and work pathways, as unusual and weird as some of those choices must have seemed to them at the time. I'm still not sure if my family understands what it is that I actually do. Which, to be honest, makes sense, as there are days when I too struggle to understand or describe what it is I do for work.

Eventually, through a series of unexpected events and detours, I ended up as an accidental activist in 1998.

My early activism work led to the co-founding of an organization in 1999 in Vancouver called Check Your Head (CYH), which works with high school age young people on issues of global justice and youth engagement. When I worked at CYH we would often see people in their early to mid 20s come through our doors who were looking



British Columbia (on the Salish Sea), 2013

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for training opportunities that were more in-depth, longer lasting and intense than what we had to offer. At the time, I really didn't have anywhere to direct them for training that would last beyond a workshop or conference for learning a very specific set of skills.

Over the years at CYH I found myself wondering what had become of these people and if they had found a way into social change work, what sort of support they had, and where they found their sense of connection, community, and purpose. I also wondered if some of them were forced to give up their passion for justice for a lack of finding ways into the work; in fact, I did bump into a couple of these people years after they had come through the doors of CYH, and we spoke about how they decided on other pathways for their energies, partly because they couldn't figure out a way into social change work. I was left with a sense of loss in regards to their potential (and unmet) contributions to social change.

Back to 2004: Seth and I also talked about the people who had helped us along our respective journeys. We talked of the role of luck, and the importance of community and mentorship in our respective journeys. We talked about the state of social movements in Canada; the strength and successes of the neoliberal project; the lack of action



People's Climate March, Vancouver, 2015

Photo: Shelby Tay

on so many essential issues in Canada — in particular climate change; the number of losses on numerous progressive fronts through the 80s, 90s and into the 2000s ... and, well, the list goes on.

But soon, other more action-oriented questions began to emerge. What if we could remove some of the element of luck from people's leadership journeys into this work by being more intentional in our approach to leadership development? What if we had a place where those doing different types of social change work could come together, meet, learn, build connections, debate, explore tools of social change, as well as progressive thinking and ideas for tackling many of the sticky issues that we face today? What if we had a focused space where people could build bonds with others who may not be in their immediate circles? What would it look like to try and build unity on areas and issues of common purpose?

My earlier experience in civic governance led to other questions: how do we work with people with whom we have political disagreements to advance issues of common interest?¹ What does unity mean and how can it be fostered? (Not unity at all costs, but unity on issues of common concern and in moments of opportunity.) How can we support an understanding of the work of those both inside and



Winnipeg, 2016

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outside official systems of power? When do we push? When do we support?

We also examined structural templates: various training and leadership programs, the broader context of social movements in Canada, and how the conservative movement invests in developing new leadership and supporting young people in their work.

These explorations and questions developed into a more foundational framework. If we are as passionate about justice as we are about our ideas, then we need to seriously invest in and support those who are coming into this work. We have to foster new and developing leadership. We need a way to provide people who may not think of themselves as leaders or even as activists, with the right support at the right time, so that they might connect what they care most deeply about, with what they are good at, and what their communities need, and figure out where to place their energies around those issues for maximum impact.

Over the next two years we shopped the idea around to other people and organizations whose questions, ideas and feedback fed into the original program. We also met with potential funders to seek support for the project, which at that time was simply called 'The



Saskatoon, 2013

Leadership Project". Those initial funders understood what it was we wanted to create and came on board. We set September 2006 as the launch date for the first program, and our Advisory Committee came up with the name for the program — Next Up — mere weeks before the call-out for applications was set to begin.

The Next Up format and schedule is rigorous: during the seven-month program, participants meet one evening a week and one Saturday a month. Evening sessions tend to explore various pressing issues in a given program city, and weekend sessions tend to focus on skills development such as media training, campaigning and organizing, facilitation training, using story in social change work, anti-oppression training and more. We bring in guests who work on both the inside and outside: community organizers, policy nerds, those who have served in government, people using the law to make change, trade unions leaders, people working in the cooperative movement, and so many others.

We explore different approaches to change work, various theories of change, strategies and tactics. We don't hold to a view that there is only one given way to do this work. We don't believe in silver bullets. Rather, this is a time for silver buckshot: trying things, experimenting, learning from what we try (or learning as we walk). This is also a time for boldness. We believe that we need many people doing good work, who can see what others are trying to accomplish, who look for moments when and where their efforts align to advance something larger than their own project or concern.

Next Up isn't the perfect program, and it never will be. We try not to let the perfect become the enemy of the good. We continually evaluate our work and adapt the program based on feedback from the program participants. Our work has evolved a lot since the first program in 2006. As we work with different groups and receive feedback from participants, we develop new sessions and lenses. We continually seek to deepen and strengthen the program based on what we learn, to incorporate new voices, perspectives, and tools. We don't cover every issue of importance: we simply don't have the time to do so. Instead, we try to provide tools and analysis that can be used on any given issue, foster connections that can live beyond the life of a given program, and provide participants with some fundamentals that they can carry with them for the long term.

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One of our goals over the past few years has been to explore ways of working with more people and to offer programming that feels most appropriate and relevant for different communities. To this end, we have begun to experiment with different forms of programming including three-day intensive workshops, a five-month Climate Leadership Program in Alberta, a program called Act III which will be for people age 55+, First Nations Intensive Leadership Programs, and a new overall format for our two Saskatchewan programs. All of these mirror our approach to the work, namely that social change is a process of continual experimentation.

There are challenges too. There's the perennial challenge of funding our work, which is nothing new to people who work in social change. There can be challenges within groups, between people, their personalities and their approach to social change work. There can be demands on the programs for improvement. Many of those demands are helpful. The work is living as we grow, learn, and push ourselves to improve the program.

So, 10 years ago we started with the first cohort of 11 participants in Vancouver. The Next Up program now is very different from that first year's offering. Our grads are working in areas of leadership that now eclipse the leadership experience of those who created and work in the program.

Ultimately our goal is to build a network of people doing justice work across Canada who work in many areas, in different levels of leadership; people who are working boldly, strategically, and with intention, at times working together to lean into larger moments of opportunity and to create moments of opportunity.

As you will see from the submissions in this issue, our alumni are involved in a diverse array of initiatives and areas of focus. When I'm asked by people if the program works, or what our graduates of Next Up are doing, I reply with stories of some of the alumni. More useful than my replies to that question, perhaps, will be reading the words of some of the alumni themselves in this edition of *OS/OS*. Through the 25 stories in this submission you will get some sense of the scope of both the experiences of people in the program and the work that they are involved in now.

We always understood that the real power of Next Up was in the alumni network, in the friendships forged in the program. As of

July 1, 2016, there are 534 alumni of the various Next Up programs, so this OS/OS issue contains only a small sampling of their diverse efforts.

There are some common elements in some of the contributions to this issue: the power of building relationships and fostering community, in supporting one another to engage in this work for the long term; the realization that part of a leadership journey is figuring out how to support those who are in the work with us, and to be clear and honest with ourselves and those we work with; the understanding that justice is a journey more than an endpoint, with marker moments of victory along the way. For some of our alumni the journey into this work has not been a work of choice; it has simply been a necessary response to numerous injustices they have witnessed and experienced. For others it has been an explicit choice to engage.

Our grads work with too many groups and organizations and in too many places to name individually. Most are working in the four western provinces of Canada and in Ontario; some are in the U.S. and a few are in Europe. Next Up alumni work in community organizations, serve as elected officials, work in trade unions, in the cooperative movement, in law, health, education, research; they work for government, for campaigning organizations, training work ... and the list goes on. A number are serious NGO leaders, across a range of sectors, and they serve on numerous boards.

I'm immensely proud of what we've done together over the past nine years, and am eager to continue exploring new program formats, while continuing to strengthen our core offering. And we are excited to find new partners to work with, incorporate new tools, sharpen old ones, do better things and find more concrete ways to support our growing network of alumni in the next steps of their respective and collective leadership journeys.

I want to thank the trade unions, individual donors, credit unions, and foundations across the country — your support makes Next Up possible.

I want to thank Erika Shaker at the CCPA for suggesting this collaboration, Shea Sinnott for cat-herding the issue into cohesion, all of the people who made submissions and everyone who has supported, worked with us, cheered us on, donated, funded, applied, participated, advised, presented and helped with program outreach over the years. We simply would not be here without all of your collective efforts and smarts.

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When we began these conversations back in 2004, I thought we had an idea that might grow. But I did not foresee the depth and breadth of support that we would receive from so many amazing and talented people these past years, and the growing ripple impacts of the many amazing humans who have come through this program.

Thank you for all that you do in your work for justice and I hope you enjoy this issue of *OS/OS*.

Best,
Kevin Millsip

KEVIN MILLSIP is the Co-founder and Director of Next Up and lives on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

ENDNOTES

1. This question was informed by my experience in civic government in Vancouver. In 2002 I was elected with many others as part of an unprecedented progressive sweep of all elected bodies in Vancouver's local government. Within less than a year, divisions and differences surfaced within the folks on city council and inside the party that would eventually divide the party into two entities and cause some long lasting and bitter divisions in the community. I saw people who were my mentors on both sides of the debates treating each other poorly and acting in ways that reflected badly on the joint project we were involved in. It was a disheartening but ultimately essential learning experience.