

Graduate Profile: Emily Hunter

Contributed by Emily Hunter
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Emily Hunter (pictured on left) shares her experience since leaving CHE.

Almost immediately after submitting my thesis in December 2005, I said goodbye to Edinburgh, which had been my home for 5 years, and headed to the unknown wild shores of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, where my family was living. I traveled light in terms of physical belongings but I felt rich in terms of what the CHE had given me: a new passion for human ecology, a renewed passion for creative writing and friendships which would hold me across the oceans. Due to lack of work on the island and a high school friend's offer of employment, I moved from the island to the city of Vancouver, where I began tutoring Korean high school students in the evenings. During the day I wrote and found a women's writing group.

Vancouver in some ways is a typical Canadian city except that instead of clouds of pollution hovering over the horizon line, dark blue mountains rise from the ocean and push into the sky. While many people in Vancouver are extremely wealthy, Vancouver is also home to one of the poorest communities in North America, the Downtown Eastside. I remember the first time my sister took me to Main and Hastings, an intersection where poverty and madness converge. People weaved past us, hustling each other for drugs and money. A car screeched to a stop and picked up a woman tottering in high heels on the street corner who, after a moment's conversation with the driver, got into the car. In the alleys, which stank of urine and rotting food, people rooted around in garbage bins, pushed each other angrily against brick walls and held needles to their arms. The men and women who walked past us didn't seem to see us; eyes glazed, bodies sometimes shaking and twitching, they wandered like hungry ghosts through the bleak concrete landscape of the city.

At the intersection of Main and Hastings a beautiful, stone building stands amidst the chaos. The Carnegie Centre was built in 1903 as Vancouver's first public library, with funds donated by U.S. steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. I heard about the Learning Centre, on the top floor of the Carnegie, from a friend but for various reasons it took me almost a year to get in touch with the volunteer coordinator and arrange a meeting. The first time I made my way to the Carnegie I was afraid: Who would the students be? Was it safe for me to be there? Would they accept me?

Stepping into the Learning Centre on the third floor reminded me of how I felt when I stepped into the CHE library for the first time; (this was when the CHE shared the yoga center's space on Roseneath Place) that I was coming home. Brightly coloured posters, adult learner's artwork and photographs decorated the walls. A small library hugged one corner of the room, while a row of computers stretched out along the far wall. At tables covered in newspapers and literacy materials, learners sat and talked or read silently, while others worked at computers. A woman with obvious energy and incredible presence introduced herself as the volunteer coordinator and welcomed me to the Learning Centre. I shared my passion for writing, human ecology and women's voices while she nodded enthusiastically and immediately set me up with one of the learners who had just walked in. She was a young First Nations woman from the community, who regarded me fiercely. We started to work on multiplication tables together, taking it in turns to quiz each other. Much laughter punctuated our answers and we talked a little about our lives. She told me she was really tired because her boyfriend had kept her awake all night smoking crack. She told me she was going to get out of the city in the summer and pick fruit and 'get clean'. After about fifteen minutes she stood up and said she needed to leave but she'd come back. She didn't leave the Downtown Eastside in that summer and as far as I know she's still living with her abusive partner and working as a sex worker. But the Learning Centre is a safe place for her to be and when she steps into the classroom, she is treated with respect.

Not all of my students are living in such extreme conditions of poverty and violence. Many of the adults who use the Learning Centre are older immigrants who have lived in Canada for many years but have never learned English fluently. I am constantly amazed by the determination and courage of these women and men whose main motivation is often a desire to be able to talk to their grandchildren.

Through my volunteer work at the Carnegie I was asked to interview for a Research position at Literacy BC, the 'go-to' place for Literacy in British Columbia. I have been working part-time there for a little over a month, and am learning about the field of literacy at the policy and research level. One of the aspects of my role is to build a bridge between the

university literacy community in the province and the literacy practitioners and learners on the ground. I work with a dynamic group of people and as part of my training I will be taking an on-line course called 'Writing Out Loud', an instructor's course for women teaching creative writing to women with low literacy skills. I am still volunteering at the Carnegie because it keeps my literacy knowledge grounded in practice and it has become my community in this city.

I feel passionately about literacy work because without sufficient literacy skills, people are hindered from engaging politically and giving voice to their hopes and desires for their communities and the earth.

Help those you think you cannot help.

Anything you are attached to, let it go.

Go to places that scare you.

from the beginning of Pema Chodron's book, Places that Scare You.