

WOODWARD'S

Oral History Collection



Interview with:

Debbie Krull (DK),
Member of Woodsquat

Conducted by Josh Gabert-Doyon (JGD)

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– Debbie Krull

JGD: Let’s start after Woodsquat, with soccer. Tell me about the Woodwards and street soccer connection.

DK: Patrick [Oleman] can speak to the history of that, mostly because he was the one who lived in the Woodwards building, and he was one of the original founding members of the Portland FC, the Vancouver street soccer league but he was in a year prior to myself. He was selected to go and represent Canada over in Brazil during 2010. There’s a lot of political connections in all of that but that predates me actually because I wasn’t recruited into September of the same year - no wait, the year later, 2011, that’s when I got selected to go. When I started playing soccer it was a tool that I would use to pull me out of a depression that was homelessness-induced. And so when I started showing up at the field Patrick recognized me, and our friendship grew, our camaraderie grew on the pitch.

Right away he [had] recognized me as someone who had saved his life. I didn’t know him directly at the time but during those days I was a direct action case worker for the Anti-Poverty Committee [APC], and during those days we were doing non-stop organizing and relation-building with like-minded people. There was a lot of interest in building up to do a general strike, and a lot of interest in getting out the liberal party. People were out, organizing with one another, training each other, learning how to do direct action, how

to “cop watch.” There was a whole lot of skill sharing and a lot of skill-building. I trained in cop watch and whatnot, and it was just automatic, when I’m down in the community and I see something. Especially at that time I had a lot of privilege to call people on it. Over time, I don’t think I have that kind of clout, I have different clout now, it’s transformed, but I’m not in the position... Well look I’m still dealing with the repercussions of doing direct action from the Woodsquat, let’s just leave it at that.

JGD: So the cop watch stuff was predating Woodsquat or was that after Woodsquat?

DK: It was predating Woodsquat. We were all trained as activists, on how to do that. The Anti-Poverty Committee (APC) shared offices with Pivot Legal when they were just forming. We were two really, really new groups of individuals who had the same goal, and were being impacted by the same people. But the thing is, we were a group of people that were willing to take action. There was David Cunningham, that was his connection. We were able to find space on Carrall Street, the first APC office, we shared it with Pivot Staff. And then another space became available in Blood Alley and that’s when we moved in there. The primary tenant was Pivot, and we shared an office space with them. At that time the Pivot collective, a lot of them were articling, so they hadn’t quite got to the bar. I don’t know, I don’t know the whole process, but I recalled that John Richardson wanted to do a police affidavit tactics related to police brutality. John had always been connected to the cop watch, obviously one of the things you have to do with harm reduction, direct harm reduction, is addressing police brutality against the homeless, people who are in recovery, people who are actively using... John had taught everyone how to create an affidavit, that influenced a lot of our case work at the Anti-Poverty Committee, not just within his police brutality work. He trained groups of people who were willing to share their story. And

out of that people were actually willing to challenge the police, and sue them. There was a lot going on.

JGD: This is all leading up to the squat.

DK: John was the lawyer that represented us. Same with Cameron [Ward]. He was the actual lawyer, the other lawyers were articling, so they couldn't represent us, but could support us.

JGD: Then around 2002, APC gets this email, or some sort of communication about plans to march on Woodward's, is that right?

DK: Ok, there was a call that went out. But prior to that we were invited to be part of organizers as part of Woodward's Action Week. That was headed by Jim Leyden, and Ivan [Drury]-our two alpha's that don't get along, right? So Ivan dismissed the whole action, completely, and basically said: "I'm not going to waste my time out, it's never going to happen, Jim is crazy he doesn't know what he's talking about, it's never going to fly." So APC did not send representation at the organizers committee. But because I held two titles, as an APC member and as a member of Mom's on the Drive, which is how I had my own direct contact, I went there directly, as a Mom's on the Drive. We all went to a lot of the same meetings and whatnot, but officially APC was not on the organizing committee.

There was a general call for people to come to the march, and then I guess they [the original organizing committee] controlled the floor for a while, and then within hours, or within 24 hours, that was when there was a direct request to have APC organizers to step up and help, actually. Someone through a rock or a brick out of the building that said "Send APC" [laughs].

JGD: [laughs] That's pretty funny.

DK: We were really good. Can you imagine now where the TD is, where the offices are, that's where they threw the rock, and it said "APC" [laughs]

JGD: I did not know about that at all. What were those first 24 hours like, why was there a call for APC?

DK: Well that's what I'm saying about the power dynamics. Jim was like "APC has no right to be here, this is community driven blah blah blah", but the community was asking for help, this mandate of action - within the squatters itself, it was them that called it. I was on the organizing committee, and it was only a 9-day action that was proposed, but it was a complicated action, with all these little festivals and actions are. There's always a media strategy, an education strategy, outreach strategy, but for us, all this work was automatic. I'm sure now you've been in the loop for a number of years you'll see the pattern right?

Because of the broad-based support, the movement that was developing and built since the election of the Liberals, that was very very broad-based and coalition-based, within the union sector they were getting ready for a general strike. They were organizing all the groups within the community. [inaudible] was a big one in that, he was the one that built the coalition listserv.

JGD: Who was doing that?

DK: Bill Lyons, who we just lost last year. He was a good guy. Very very good guy. The Coalition Listserv, that was a list that people can post their actions in and stuff. That was an email thread that was open to a lot of people. So who showed up? A lot of people. We had representation from the BC Fed (BC Federation of Unions) there, CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees) there, the HEU (Hospital

Employees' Union) there. That's because some of our organizers were trained by old school organizers back from the union days, the early days, during direct action, they carried all that knowledge and that history. They did support demos. It was like: "Come and support our cause, and we'll come and support you." And this was what happened, this was the buildup towards the squat. They were ready.

JGD: What was it like for you during the squat, what was it like on the ground?

DK: Well I'm a person that, for me, everyday, I'm manic. At some points I was very sick, it was bad. Over the year I was the mother of the group, I was the the mom of an adopted child who was 3 turning 4. I was happy. There was a charge in the air, there was a unity. There were moments of fearlessness and moments of total terror. By that time, we did have enough people behind us, knowing that there are people being burnt in the park, there are people OD'ing in their tents alone. They were happy that we had a place, that we had the community, we had the people's support, not just the general public but unions, right? Because that makes a difference. There were case workers within welfare that were telling people to go to the squat for a safe space to live. So there was that sense of general protection. The public were protecting the squat, that's what was needed.

I think a lot of that too, to their credit. All the organizers a decade before the Woodsquat who had been lobbying for social housing for so long, I don't know who that community is, I know that they exist, but I was new on the scene and I didn't know that there was all this pre-building organizing to get this going. I felt humbled, because I was surrounded by so much expertise. And powerful, because we were making decisions, things were getting done, we were getting immediate results. We need support on this? Done. We need to do that? Done.

We started to have bigger dreams, or we would get distracted. Because at the time the developer wanted to work with us directly, and we said no. We knew we had enough clout, and a strong enough response, when one of the staffers come and had a meeting with us over at the Metropole across the street. And he said "Yah the developer wants to work [with] you." And we said "No," We automatically said, "we already own the building, we can buy the building as the people. If it's open tender we could [...]"

The reason I'm still getting heat after all this was because I'm on the bank record for the Anti-Poverty Committee. So that was connected to my Social Insurance Number. That just fucked me for life. I signed up at the bank, I knew we had money going, I don't find any money because I don't have that privilege, but I'm there as a second signer. I said we can raise the money ourselves and buy it. That must have freaked them out to hear that. As organizers that we were already saying that, because the next thing we knew, the city bought it.

JGD: Who was the developer at the time?

DK: Hughes, Jeffrey Hughes or, Gregory.¹

JGD: This was early on in the squat that you had a sit down with them? This was before the police started pressure?

DK: The police evicted people in the first week, then we fought back and took the building, and then around that same time that election was happening, so that was gravy for anyone who wanted to campaign. That's when they started playing nice, the closer we got to the election.

JGD: So when COPE gets elected what was your feeling about that? That could be seen as a victory in some ways, but then maybe not.

¹ The city had approved the sale to Geoff Hughes.

DK: I saw it as a victory. Every little inch. It was towards our goal. But I was a greenhorn back then. I was brought up by Unitarian Universalist, so I figure I must have been brought up in some kind of idealist utopia because the reality is completely different from what I was taught about what the general public are like [laughs]. But for a lot of people they saw it coming. It was a very old party. The Greens had no influence at the time. It was really our only option. That was when Vision was born, out of that. It was a split, they lost a bunch of their core membership. I believe Vision was born out of the Woodsquat.

JGD: That's really interesting. We're looking 15 years down the line and seeing that era ending, or maybe not ending. You have this piece in the Woodsquat Book called "The Step By Step Process of Meetings and Common Terms", which is really technical, pretty procedure-based for organizing, which is really striking. Tell me about that piece.

DK: As a parent I know the importance of the power of education, and right away we were blessed by people who wanted to show their truth, but they didn't have the literacy or the understanding about leadership. We had done 2 years of organizing, since [Gordon] Campbell had come into power there was endless meetings. When you're in contact with members of the community that are just coming directly off the street, or if they're coming from their parents homes or even their own homes, everyone can be an organizer right? They want to engage. There were 200 something odd people. There were organizers who knew exactly what they were doing, what they were in for, and what this stuff means, and there were some people that didn't, that they were in active crisis, and they had a lot to say. Just that structure, it gives people the tool to be included, to understand even what's happening on the floor. There might be people who don't want to engage at all, who are like, fuck this I'm just here.

I had started it by typing all the documents, because people had different models on how to conduct meetings in a circle. There was protocol of the territory [that] was introduced, we had a lot of Urban Aboriginal people. They were the ones that definitely maintained the core of operations, the Urban Aboriginal community. We had a lot of matriarchs on the floor, guiding us. A lot of warriors who were sharing this teaching, that teaching. We had a lot of union organizers who wanted to make sure that consensus was achieved, that everyone's voice had time. So that's how that document was created, it was an unmet need, and we met it. Without it people were getting mad, they were getting frustrated that they weren't getting heard, or that someone else would dominate the time on the floor, or that someone would get stuck on one point and we'd run out of time. We were dealing with people with different abilities, but the points were important to hear.

JGD: There was a very strong base of Indigenous organizers there, which I've heard from other people, you mentioned the territory acknowledgment. There's a sense that this was an early instance in the Downtown Eastside when the interest of Indigenous residents were really being taken up by White activists. What was that dynamic like?

DK: For sure. The early dynamic was not that healthy. Only a few Indigenous activists were recognized, the ones of colour, the ones who were most visible and had a body of work that was recognized within mainstream culture. So any other activist was not recognized. I'm still not recognized as an Indigenous activist, and I've been called out as if I'm a "want-to-be-Indian." That still is an unhealthy dynamic. The acknowledgment of the protocol was slow, very slow. We finally have it now in print, a decade later, but it was a very slow process [inaudible] with the APC there was an acknowledgment of the land, there was an interest in supporting Indigenous sovereignty, and those issues. That was the first thing to learn and to teach is the

acknowledgment of the territory, who we are, the territory that we're on. Who are we and where we come from. That took some time, a lot of our senior activists who were very dismissive. For Indigenous circles it was like - it's fucked up let's leave it like that. That's not ok, you can't just say that. You can't identify yourself as a social activist and think it's ok that shit like that is happening on reserves, or even just across the street. I'm sure that conversation carried on throughout the years until the acknowledgment actually happened. We went through all those uncomfortable feelings. It's not pleasant. But the feeling of reconciliation is still there. We're having those conversations. We weren't allowed to have that conversation.

It was nice to see. I see it as one of the things that the Anti-Poverty Committee played in the community. When I say Aunty and Uncle I mean it in a very general, community caregivers, they're always there they've always been there, they will always be there to watch your back. They were there before the Woodsquat. They're still there after. It got shut down and it was the Indigenous community that walked over to Crab Park and continued it for another - well they have different numbers. Some people say it was only for "this many days," but the Indigenous community says no we continued to hold the fort for another period of time in Crab Park. And people continued to carry that campaign within themselves on their journey. I think that's what Patrick continued to do.

It was such a huge movement, a huge action. A lot of new relationships were built on it, and it made a lot of existing relationships stronger. It continued. I found a Woodsquatter just a few days ago while playing the floor at BC Place. We share this or that about it, we revisit the idea. We may not have gotten what we wanted as a community but we sure gained a lot as individuals, and we all now know how to protect ourselves. Patrick - he's a leader. He's a Chief, he's

a Hereditary Chief. He continues to build his house, his family, his team, we're now a tribe. We continue to support each other, and we remember that time. Patrick was not an organizer, he was a supporter, at that time. He was skateboarding and I don't know, being Patrick [laughs]. At that time I was organizing with Ivan and also organizing with Jim and also organizing with parents over at the Aboriginal Mothers Centre.

JGD: Can you tell me a bit more about this movement at Crab Park and what happened after this squat at Woodwards. There was a final injunction, a lot of people got moved to PHS² buildings as well, is that right? Where did people go after the squat was over?

DK: That's right. So some people refused to be housed at PHS at that time because of living conditions and also because of personal grievances. They didn't have 500 staff at that time [laughs]. I can't believe that's how big their staff is now, it blows my mind. They [the squatters] were housed in Blood Alley. They created micro-rooms, the rooms were so small, and they were not safe. People felt safer being in the park. They got the grant to renovate those rooms. I think they were one-bedrooms and they got turned into 100 SROs, or something like that. Some people were really happy with the rooms, you know? But the services were not provided. It was not safe. It was super not safe. There was use of weapons and a bunch of stuff.

There was a tension I forgot to mention, which is that the Indigenous squat did create another - people want to say faction, but I don't want to say that - people split off into their own social networks, I would like to say. Individuals who understood one another and all acknowledged they had the same needs that another social network had no idea about, or couldn't respond. And they had their own issues they needed to voice. So the Indigenous issues were always-well hard-

2 Portland Hotel Society

ly touched at all. That's why I walked away from that. I didn't know about the Urban Aboriginal community until the Woodsquat action. And that's when I learned about the Aboriginal Homelessness Steering Committee, and then I saw all their work, and I saw that's where I wanted to put my efforts.

That's the way that I left APC, I could no longer do that action anyways, it was no longer safe. There were social workers infiltrating our actions and apprehending children. That happened during one of the Woodward's demonstrations.

JGD: Really? Woah.

DK: Yah. That's another untold story. Jonathan had his child apprehended. And he asked APC to come support him in court, and a lot of people were interested in doing so, including myself, which he did, and he won. And that was that. But it sent a very clear message for me about the capacity of the Anti-Poverty Committee, about my engagement, as a parent. That was the reason when Aaron [Vidaver, editor of the Woodsquat Book]-well he had an interview, but I asked him not to put it in the book. I told him it wasn't safe for me. I couldn't say publicly I was an organizer. Even though they'd see my presence in the crowd but didn't know how engaged I was.

JGD: That's really high stakes, I didn't know that was going on at all. Was your daughter with you during the squat?

DK: Yup. You see that picture [in the Woodsquat book] which Marjan took. Again, yah, I asked Aaron not to do any publication of me or my daughter. Also during that year with my daughter, at school. But they still targeted, they still targeted my daughter. My kids and Marjan's kids. There were a couple of babies there [laughs]. This is the only time I get to use this line, but "Never trust an anarchist to babysit

your kids.”

JGD: [laughs]

DK: Because yah, she was there on the floor. I’d say “Can you watch my kid while we do this meeting?” and then all the kids would be right there, inside. And I’d say “You have to get the hell out of here!”

JGD: That’s incredible. So what does your daughter remember from the squat?

DK: We were a small group of organizers ok? [laughs]. She’s willing to do an interview if you’re interested in that. It would be something else man.

JGD: That would be so cool. Can you put me in touch with her?

DK: Yah, you have no idea-she doesn’t know anybody, but she has memories.

JGD: So after the squat-are you working with PHS now, through the soccer thing?

DK: This is me in my paranoid self, where like, through my engagement with other nonprofits, being a lone parent, and also as an Indigenous person who’s trying to connect with her culture again. I was apprehended when I was 9. As a parent I’m trying to connect with my culture and my traditional teachings, to pass it on to my kids.

Where was I going with this? I guess I’ve always been an entrepreneur, and I learnt about social enterprise through the Aboriginal Steering Committee. [inaudible] It works through a social enterprise model, That was introduced into the community-how to use

social enterprising to build services, to help mothers and people become self-sufficient. That was important work. So the Harper government wasn't always 100% on social enterprises. They were watching like a hawk. When Vancity was going through their changeover I forgot that my name was on the APC banking document. So here's my paranoia, right? Every organization I've been in contact with has been like - targeted. That's what happened with the Aboriginal community. Every time I'd get a pay cheque say from United Native Nations, their whole program would get a review.

JGD: Woah.

DK: So when I came back from Paris, Portland [Hotel Society] had sent a team to the World Cup in Brazil, and there was very little repercussions from that. They sent our team the following year to Paris. And the repercussion came in a couple of years later. They [Portland Hotel Society] got a full audit, and the board got fired. Were you around for that, did you witness that?

JGD: No, tell me more about this.

DK: Well I'm not sure who did the audit. I think it was Vancouver Coastal Health? An audit was done and all the board of the Portland Hotel Society, and their executive staff, all got fired. And Coastal Health took over. That was when Dan Small was on the board, so Jenny Kwan also had to do a public apology for that. There was an expenses charge on their card for a Disneyland trip, or something like that.

There's a creativity in it [inaudible] In an organizers mind a limo carries more than 5 people, whereas a taxi doesn't. But the thing is, the optics of it looks like you're mismanaging funds, but actually, they're being creative. And also - there was a bit of local politicking going on. Coastal Health had this contract with Ann Livingston. I

know this because I sat at a table during an event about how services were getting provided in the Downtown Eastside. Vancouver Coastal Health put out 29 million dollars in the community and they had nothing to show for it. So they had to create a feedback form, and that gave it back to the people to complain about shit service, and underpaid staff. And then you saw Coastal Health go after Portland [Hotel Society]. So I don't know.

Portland paid 100 grand to send 8 people, and a couple of teammates. And I came back and worked for them in social enterprise and then that went down. I'm not staff by then, no. But now I participate in their programs.

JGD: So you see this weirdly as an afterlife of APC stuff as well.

DK: What was that?

JGD: You mentioned that this might be paranoia, but to you it's a result of APC organizing, to some extent.

DK: Well, yeah, absolutely, there was organizing, I was an organizer at that time and continued to be targeted. There was an action yesterday. I don't know. Where you familiar with the action yesterday?

JGD: No - what was the action yesterday?

DK: The Carnegie Action Group took the 58 West Hastings site.

JGD: Right, Vince mentioned this to me. What happened to that?

DK: They sent out a press release, they hosted the community dinner. I didn't realize anything was going on until I was walking across the street and I hear a megaphone, and a voice, and I go check it out and

stay updated. I see a wall of cops at the gate, and there are 15 cops shoulder to shoulder, on the sidewalk, and Jean [Swanson] was giving her campaign speech, because she's running for council. And then the Carnegie Action Group was sharing their stuff. But I didn't stay too long because seriously I was only there for half a minute. The thing is - I wear a lot of bling, because, well, I play it up [laughs].

JGD: [laughs]

DK: I saw Jean, we made eye contact. My vision is limited but I was shining. Then 3 or 4 different cops look behind their shoulder. And I was like "Ok, it's time to move" [laughs] and I got out of there. And there were a couple more undercovers coming towards me. And I was like - they know my face.

JGD: Right - there was so much police surveillance at Woodsquat. Going through the documents that Aaron [Vidaver] FOI'd [Freedom of Information Request], it's kind of insane.

DK: Did you actually read all of that? [laughs]

JGD: I mean I've gone through them, there's so many. It's really unreasonable the amount of resources they put into it.

DK: Not just one doorway, they had cops on bikes following Ivan chanting "We will win, we will win." They were little assholes.

JGD: That's wild.

DK: I witnessed two incidents of direct policy brutality against Anton and Ivan. I witnessed the time Ivan was taken down by 4 cops at the Art Gallery. And I witnessed Anton being challenged by the Film hired Cops while we were both postering in ChinaTown while the filming

of Scooby Doo was going on. That's the incident where I was not targeted (they did not ask for my ID, only Anton's)... I continued on my way home and Anton tried to do the same but he was met with more police brutality. It was just Anton and I postering together but I was not addressed at all. As in I was invisible...for simply for being a woman.

It was right in front of my face. That was part of the strategy, I think, they didn't target me because I didn't have a child. I was somehow protected, or that was their strategy to fuck with my head. Like everyone got physically harmed.

JGD: And you didn't?

DK: I didn't.

JGD: Right, and that's also hard in its own way.

DK: Right.

JGD: I wanted to ask you about one thing, which was the initial email exchange I had with you, where I initially reached out to you about Woodsquat, and your reply is really great. You said: "Straight up none of the people you mentioned organized the Woodsquat they're first responders and I dont give a shit about your thesis statements and neither do the homeless."

DK: [laughs] Sorry.

JGD: It's great! What was your response to getting this request?

DK: Well you did the homework, and I acknowledge that. Thank you. I was surprised that you did reach out to me. But I wasn't sure if it

was your own interest, or if there was a campaign behind it. Because it's a topic that's used a lot by other organizers in the city [...] So I guess a lot of work went into it, and we've been whitewashed. The only real reference to that action is Aaron Vidaver's work. The city barely acknowledges us. People put their lives on the line. People give themselves political clout - like "I was at the Woodsquat." Well were you? "What did you do? What do you want?" We're protective. When I was trying to connect to other friends, because we've lost... we care about one another. So when someone loses their life, we look into it, ok, we weren't able to maintain contact. What was out there, what can we share with the family? And I have done research on the other work people have done on the Woodsquat and it's infuriating. Who are these people? They didn't even contact us, so who are they contacting? Who's sharing the information?

But also as a parent, I guess you had me on an off day. But that's a sore spot, that's a big sore spot. It takes a lot for me to regulate.

JGD: No I don't mean to...I think it was also really important for me with this project, to get that message as well. Because I think everything you're saying is true. And I think that there's this huge problem of the neighbourhood being over-researched. The way that there's a lot of, well I know that VANDU has certain rules about this, like with academics.

DK: Who gets to talk and not.

JGD: Especially academics. What do you think are the lessons that you think would be really important to live on from Woodsquat? That's something I've been asking everyone I talk to. For you personally what are the lessons that you think should live on?

DK: What are the lessons? Well, we continue to be a community, we're

all still connected and we're all still here and we're all still passionate about these issues that we care about. And we still have each other's backs.

JGD: Are there things that get left out of the history that you think should be included?

DK: Absolutely. I don't know why Aaron [Vidaver]'s [The Woodsquat] book" feels like it's way far on the other side of the baseball field right now, it needs to be recognized by the developer for sure, our work and what-not. That was a living action. And I believe it was one of the first social movements that happened online. It happened before Facebook was created, before all that social networking that's played a large role in making actions happen. Our digital communities got established, and continue to work today.

JGD: What were people using online for talking about Woodsquat?

DK: Listservs. The Coalition Listserv. And the Resist Listserv, which was the first one that offered the opportunity to us. We grew up together, right, we got to know what our needs were. We realized we were the leaders that we were looking for. And now organizers, and running for council. And knowing that we have that power. And you just have to start doing it [...]

I wanted to thank you for your time actually, and all of this, and the review. And trying to figure out what's happening. I don't know why...why are you doing this, that's what I'd like to know, actually.

JGD: I think that this action, to me it's the history and understanding the history that's so important. And I think there's so much from this action that can be applied to things today, and that struggle is still so alive, and the lessons in that about organizing. And it's

also a way to learn about organizing and teach it. And that's why your piece in the Woodsquat Book is so good, because it's about continuing to learn and find out how to do this, and conserve those lessons for the actions' that are still happening. Like 58 [West Hastings], which is still ongoing. That feels really important to me. That feels super important to me [...]

DK: We appreciate that actually, to get acknowledgment, this is how it's coming. Of course we're happy to share this work. My thoughts may not be all formed right now, but you're making me think.

JGD: I think that you're incredibly articulate about this stuff to be honest, it's so good to talk with you about this, and I'm happy I came to these soccer matches.

DK: [Laughs] I wanted you to get a sense of the pride. And yah we didn't get the housing units that we wanted, and we didn't get the community space that we wanted, but we got each other, and we continue to build our dreams. And we did discuss it meeting after meeting, acknowledgement of the territory. We didn't accomplish everything, but we did a lot.

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