

A servant of 2 masters

North Vancouver recreation commission

BY JEREMY SHEPHERD, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 24, 2013



Serving 13 facilities in the District and City of North Vancouver, the rec commission oversees centres and advises municipal councils. The commission recently advised against the two North Vancouvers pooling their resources for a 50-metre pool at the Harry Jerome rec centre, which is currently slated to be rebuilt in 2014.

Photograph by: NEWS photos, Mike Wakefield

THE lake's surface rippled under the summer sun, its smoothness broken by a single, struggling swimmer.

She was drowning.

A 16-year-old lifeguard spotted her from the shore, quickly diving into the frigid waters of B.C.'s longest natural lake.

He saved the dog.

Four decades after the rescue, Tom Walker serves as co-ordinator for Ron Andrews Community Recreation Centre as well as the Grant Connell Tennis Centre.

"I couldn't get a job when I was 16 so I went north and guarded on an incredibly cold lake outside of Prince George on Babine Lake. There was a beach there but nobody swam in it, except for this dog," he says. "It was a Lab, too, and she just instantly became hypothermic and started struggling and I had to go in and get her."

Walker is one of the 500 organizers, instructors and contract workers who make the North Vancouver Recreation Commission function. Now overseeing 13 facilities, the commission was designed to facilitate recreation for each resident of the District and City of North Vancouver.

Asked if he's been with the commission long, Walker laughs.

"Most of my life," he replies.

Growing up around the Capilano Winter Club, Walker credits his chlorine-scented existence to the lifeguards he knew in his youth.

"I admired the coaches and the lifeguards and thought: 'Why would I want to do anything else?' I just stayed in the pool."

Approximately 75 per cent of commission employees work on a part-time basis, something that hasn't changed much since Walker's days as a lifeguard and swim instructor in the middle 1970s.

"When you're coaching anything and trying to make a living at it, you have to supplement with other work," he says. "I was also doing other things, mostly around the pool, but heck, if a maintenance shift came up and I could do something, or guarding the beaches - anything to make a living back then."

Walker's language becomes almost poetic when he talks about coaching children.

"I loved to see kids learning how to swim, and to swim well," he says. "There's no better way to swim well than to do it a million times in a swim club and to repeat it over and over and over again until you've whittled away the inefficiencies and become graceful."

Before moving into recreation, coaching was Walker's passion.

Between getting married and having children he balanced part-time work with part-time school, eventually earning a physical education degree at the University of B.C. in 1982, all in an attempt to further his coaching career.

"It didn't work out," Walker says simply.

The wages were low and the security was nonexistent, but it was what he perceived as the mistreatment of young swimmers that pushed Walker from the sport.

The Top Age Group system measures swimmers against the very fastest times in their age groups across Canada.

"You can't do that to 10-year-olds. You can't put them up on a national platform like that because achievement at 10 years old bears absolutely no relationship whatsoever to

achievement at maturity," Walker says. "If you didn't have kids with TAG times you couldn't be a successful coach. Consequently I saw a lot of kids being, frankly, abused. Being pushed too hard, and I was not prepared to sacrifice children on the altar of my success."

Walker once saved a small child from drowning during competitive swim practice at Capilano Winter Club, an action for which he takes little credit.

"Your job as a lifeguard is to prevent that stuff from happening so when you can say you never had any (rescues), you're actually doing your job better," he says.

His preference for prevention rather than reaction was part of the reason Walker walked from the pool deck. "I left the sport. Still love swimming, but I left the sport as a competitive sport, as a professional coach, because I was disillusioned."

That disillusionment eventually transformed into a career with the commission. "I want to organize stuff like this and coach coaches and help instructors grow up and be good mentors and role models, the same role models that I admired when I was a kid," he recalls thinking at the time.

The career was rewarding but opportunities for advancement were scarce. "I wanted to get into management, and there was no room for me," Walker says. "And I wanted to buy a house because of course the market here is what it is. We could never afford to buy a house, we were always renting here."

Much like heading north to become a lifeguard in his teens, Walker left North Vancouver to become the first manager of a shiny new multi-sport complex in Williams Lake.

A complex that was drowning in debt.

"The place was in the red when I arrived and my job was to get it out of the red quickly because it was a political embarrassment. I wasn't able to do that, so it was easier to blame the new manager than to admit they built something they couldn't afford."

After losing a little selling his recently purchased house in Williams Lake, Walker came back home.

"I actually came back to the very job I left a year later, almost to the day," he says. "Within six months my dream job opened up."

He got the co-ordinator job in the early 1990s and has been doing it ever since.

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The rec commission came under some fire in December 2012 when District of North Vancouver council considered dropping \$10 million into the City of North Vancouver's hat

to fund a 50metre pool at the Harry Jerome rec centre.

Five councillors and the mayor balked at funding a centre outside district borders, leaving Coun. Alan Nixon as the lone voice in the Olympic-sized pool.

Just 2.2 kilometres from Harry Jerome, and much closer if measured as the crow flies, the district is funding a 25-metre pool at William Griffin Recreation Centre.

"It is verging on the nonsensical for two municipalities to build two potentially substandard pools," Nixon said. "I think the recreation commission as it exists today under the joint agreement should be blown up and a whole new model should emerge."

With four pools in the area, rec commission director Heather Turner says she was worried about flooding the market.

"We didn't recommend that a 50-m pool be developed because

we were . . . quite concerned about an over-supply of aquatic space."

For some onlookers, the Harry Jerome dustup showed the difficulty of serving two North Vancouvers.

"The complexity of the dual municipality situation, it takes a little while to figure that out," Turner says. "I was used to one employer, one vision. There is one vision, I shouldn't say there's not, but also because we are arm's length to the two municipal staff structures, one of the areas that took some time was figuring out how the voice of recreation . . . was integrated into the other municipal services."

"Heather Turner and her people do a good job, but they serve two masters and that can be problematic from time to time depending on the political winds," says district Coun. Doug MacKay-Dunn, who also sits on the rec commission.

In the case of Harry Jerome, the city will likely be on the hook for an estimated \$70 million rebuild, but the operating costs are shared between the two municipalities.

"Here's the problem: Harry Jerome needs replacement. The city has decided to defer that and with any old building your operating costs go up. So the operating cost has increased and the district is having to pay a share," MacKay-Dunn says. "The answer to all this quite frankly . . . is amalgamation of North Vancouver, then we wouldn't be having this conversation."

City council is scheduled to move forward on the Harry Jerome rebuild in early 2014.

"I would love to see a new Harry Jerome," says Dawn Wimbles, the front desk manager at the weathered facility. "I was born in this pool, more or less."

Wimbles' mother was a swim instructor at Harry Jerome, and she transitioned from banking into recreation, eventually being hired for the commission by Tom Walker in 1986.

"At one point in my banking career I said, 'I'm not happy here. Looking at all this money, it's not for me. What would make me happy?' I want to go to a job every day and be able to enjoy every day, no matter what. Believe it or not, since '86 I have never had a bad day."

While the city and district continue their will-they or won't-they dance on the subject of a single North Vancouver, the rec commission continues to serve both.

For Turner, the current drive is to take a more comprehensive overview to ensure each rec centre complements its neighbours.

"Right now we're a bit more siloed than we'd like to be," Turner says.

When the economy took a nosedive in 2008, Turner says she observed how integral the programs were for many residents.

"When a lot of people were struggling with loss of jobs or something like that, we actually found that a number of people turned to community services," she says.

For Wimbles, the commission's efforts to reach people with limited income is a source of pride.

"That has changed, because I think when I started we didn't have that low-income assistance program," she says.

The future of the rec commission should be shaped by neighbourhoods, according to MacKay-Dunn.

"I see the future of the commission to be community-based with the commission providing some oversight in terms of the operation of the centre, but the thrust, the life's blood of those centres has to come from the community," he says.

Watching seniors interacting with little kids at Parkgate and the swell of the community support around the centre are an inspiration, according to MacKay-Dunn.

"You just sensed that something really special was going on. You can't really quantify it, you just have to experience it and live it," he says.

For Turner, the commission's success can be measured in the decibels that fill the hallways before finding her office at Delbrook.

When 40 parents are waiting to pick up children in taekwondo, kids in dance programs, or seniors who have just wrapped up a game of bridge, connections are forged and

community is created, according to Turner.

"Having an office in a community centre can be less than desirable if you want quiet, but to me that noise, that life, reminds me why I'm here," she says.

From his stand-up desk at Ron Andrews, Walker reflects on the different ways recreation touches lives.

"People tend to see the rec commission as a fitness organization or a place where you learn to swim, learn to skate," he says. "I don't think it's top of mind to see what we're doing as a social service. Although anybody who thinks about it would say, 'Oh, of course.'"

The commission promotes dance programs, art programs, and being fit for life.

Asked why he prefers a stand-up desk, Walker laughs.

"Sitting down can kill you," he says.

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