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MEMBER IN FOCUS

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Jada Basi MCIP, RPP, Manager of Housing and Community Planning at CitySpaces Consulting

IN THIS ISSUE, WE ARE EXCITED to bring you a new feature that highlights the perspectives, experiences and insights from a fellow PIBC member. In this issue, we're pleased to be featuring someone who is a passionate advocate for social planning issues such as housing affordability and women's rights.

We caught up with Jada Basi MCIP, RPP, Manager of Housing and Community Planning at CitySpaces Consulting, to ask her some questions about how planning became her calling. Having grown up in a small town in rural BC, she's now worked with clients and communities from all over Canada and internationally, specializing in areas of social policy planning, housing strategies, and feasibility studies.

Was there a specific event or person in your life that propelled you into the planning field?

Yes to both actually! I grew up in Quesnel and I worked at a grocery store as a cashier during high school. My coworker at the time invited me to go to Prince George for the day and sit-in on her University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) planning class. At the time, I didn't even know what university was. Most people that I knew - family, friends, my friends' families - nobody had gone to university. In fact most adults I knew didn't even finish high school. When I got this invitation, I had no idea what she was talking about but it was a free ride to Prince George and something to do, so I took her up on it.

The two-hour Planning 101 class lecture

opened my eyes to higher education and the world of community planning. It was one of those moments that changed my life. My worldview expanded and for the first time I focused on a major personal aspiration. I knew this was it - I was going to go to university and I was going to be a Planner. I was 16 years old.

To me, establishing a university in the North is so important because it provides access to post-secondary education to youth who otherwise would not have considered attending. I was part of the first generation of youth to attend UNBC and the first to go to university in my family - I am very proud of this and of the university.

How about your co-worker? What is she doing now?

She is now the Director of Development Services for the City of Quesnel. Thank you, Tanya Turner!

Speaking of influential people and experiences, it is so important to meet with students and young professionals who are just starting in their career. Mentorship and guidance provided by senior professionals have a significant influence on young people and their future, like they did me.

You are a strong advocate for affordable housing and women's rights. How has being a planner enabled you to make a difference in these areas?

One thing I love about the planning profession is that you can create a career that aligns with your passion, values and interests. For me, I gravitated towards projects that create inclusive communities. Through policy and project development, this includes planning and developing affordable, suitable, adequate and livable housing. It means meeting the needs of vulnerable populations through the provision of social infrastructure like childcare facilities, women's centres, and seniors' facilities. It means designing spaces that meet the needs and programming for LGBTQ, for persons experiencing crisis such as homelessness and mental health issues.

Being a professional planner enables you to make incremental differences through policies and, as this evolves over time, we (hopefully!) get better at it. As planners, we have the tools and the responsibility to make communities more inclusive and better for everyone.

Can you tell us about a huge challenge you've had to face & what you learned?

One challenge I experienced early on was breaking into the urban and lower mainland market. Having grown up in the interior and specializing in Northern and Rural Community Planning, there was a real barrier for south coast public and private sector organizations to hire someone with more of a small town lens. I also had no local networks, professionally or personally, to guide me or provide introductions. It was very challenging to get employment.

Eventually I did break in, and now that I've worked as a consultant on projects in major urban centres from Vancouver to Halifax, to Denver and even Seoul, South Korea, I've come to realize that small and rural communities experience a lot of the same planning issues that major urban centres do, but rural communities have less resources, capacity and tools available to address their issues.

A good example is density bonus - this tool works well in urban centres where you can leverage development but in communities where there is little development, it's often not feasible to make it happen. Today, I work in both major urban cities and small communities and I have a better appreciation for the complexities of planning in small towns.

It's funny how things go - I had worked so hard to break into the urban market and now that I'm in, I gravitate towards projects in smaller communities because they are both interesting and challenging.

If you can go back 10 years and can tell your younger self one thing, what would it be?

That's a fun one! For me, colouring, playing with Lego, pondering, wondering, and giving high-fives are all part of the job! But most importantly, I'd tell my younger self and others to: Show up. Speak up. Look up. Team up. Never give up. Lift others up. ■

Please note: For space and clarity, some answers from the interview for this article may have been summarized or paraphrased.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JADA BASI, CITYSPACES CONSULTING