



Displaced Workers Project: Case Studies

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Working together for literacy

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Decoda Literacy Solutions' Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

The Enhancing Displaced Workers Literacy and Essential Skills project is a collaborative project managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions and supported by Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix. The project is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program.



Closed Port Alice mill | Photo by Trish Weatherall

The overall goal of the project is to enhance knowledge and raise awareness of promising Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) interventions for workers who have been displaced in Canada to improve their employability.

The three-year project (2019-2022) will research the needs of and potential tools for workers who have been displaced, have low literacy and essential skills and are seeking new employment.

Workers who have been displaced from their jobs are from all parts of Canada, from all sorts of jobs, and are in all phases of their employment.

They are workers who have been displaced through planned or unplanned circumstances, such as mill closures, industry slow-downs, tourism decline or natural disasters.

Their lives and those of their families are often thrown into crisis when their job disappears. Finding new employment can seem like an impossible task.

The Displaced Workers project is designed to:

- fill knowledge gaps about what does and does not work for LES training and support for displaced workers to improve their employability, and
- develop promising practices and programs to support Canadian workers who have been displaced from their jobs.

The project emphasizes workers who are hard to reach or reluctant to access skills training or employment services.

The following case studies are an important part of understanding the situations that workers, employers and service providers find themselves in when employment is disrupted.

Introducing the Case Studies

By Tracy Defoe: [The Learning Factor](#)

These nine case studies were written during the 2020 survey stage of Decoda Literacy Solutions' Displaced Worker research project. They tell the stories of workers who have been displaced from their jobs, the impacts on these workers, their families and communities, and the skills and service gaps that make finding new work difficult. As you read, remember the pandemic. One of the most remarkable things about these case studies is that they were all written by Decoda's BC Team of Literacy Outreach Coordinators (LOCs) or sometimes, their designated staff writers, during the COVID-19 global pandemic. It is extraordinary that these case studies were written at all. They serve a double purpose now as part of the history of the pandemic in Canada, and as local perspectives on what it is like to be out of work and on a life journey you never expected. The writers also share what is it like to be the people who are asking questions, listening, and reflecting on what they see and hear.

Why case studies?

Early in the Displaced Workers research project we knew that the strength of the research would be grounded in communities, and in the people who lived there. At a November 2019 meeting, the BC Team shared some of the experiences they were having in their towns. The members of the project advisory committee suggested that these stories should be written down and shared to enrich the congregated data and individual interviews planned in the research design. The team members were enthusiastic; the case studies were set in motion early in 2020. I was tapped to support and encourage, and sometimes edit and draw out their stories.



Campbell River wharf | Photo by Kat Eddy

Research in practice

In particular, the BC Team set out to write in the tradition of Research in Practice. This social science research method sets aside the research myth of impartiality or neutral perspective and instead forefronts the experience of the person who is taking action or practicing. Often this has meant teachers or tutors writing about the ways they work with learner participants; in our suite of case studies, it means the BC Team members wrote about what they heard and saw, and the ways they made sense of the experience of being part of the research team. I asked them to pay attention to the moments in the experience that stayed with them. I suggested they keep a journal and notice contradictions. Each writer is situated in a particular place, with a personal history and a role to play; those are set out in each case study.



Lion's Park, Port Alice | Photo by Trish Weatherall

Themes and unique perspectives

Whatever order you read these stories, you will encounter themes, and unique perspectives from the writers, the workers, and the towns they describe. All the families and communities have experienced job losses, life-changing industry closures or hard times before and during the pandemic. Some found new paths, and some are still in the process of changing. We sought out those stories to tell in this personal form.

One theme to notice is the situation in resource industry and mill towns that have experienced major job loss. British Columbia, like many parts of Canada, has a long employment history of secure, well-paid resource jobs that disappeared with industry downturns and closures. That familiar story though, details differently in Sooke, in Port Alice, Fort St. John or Fort Nelson. Self-described as isolated

communities, the writers each look at the impacts of job displacement on families, on people's mental health and on children growing up in towns with limited services and sometimes, a sense of hopelessness. These case studies shake any perception I might have had that rural or isolated communities shared a sameness. Up close, economic forces, social services and opportunities are personal.

Three case studies flip the displacement stereotype of an older worker struggling with career change by telling the stories of people who go toward simple living or self-employment. The theme of self-employment plays out differently in Quesnel where Rebecca Beuschel introduces us to a learner whose journey to successful self-employment started with literacy tutoring. Fraser Lake's case study tells us the story of how a Mexican restaurant became the highlight of a former logger and miner's working life. In a unique case study set in the Indigenous community of Mount Currie, Amanda Walker spotlights people who dream of monetizing their passion and crafts to support their family in a town with few full-time jobs. She also makes the pointed observation that Indigenous adults are displaced from their traditional way of life by colonization, and then further displaced from paid employment. This has stayed with me as a white settler and I believe, sets the entire project in a new light.

Tourism and food service were halted or greatly curtailed by the pandemic. Communities and workers who rely on travellers are featured in the Sooke, Fraser Lake, and Campbell River case studies. Kat Eddy relates stories of the build up for a tourism season that never comes to Campbell River in 2020, and the moment when businesses that 'don't even close on Christmas Day' shut the doors to help a national effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. Part two of that story is still unfolding at the publication of these case studies in 2021; tourism is still sparse and far from a return to pre-pandemic levels.

Another theme to watch for is the gaps in services and supports in rural communities. All the case studies touch on this; in the East Kootenay, we read of a woman's educational aspirations and career dreams hemmed in by the lack of learning options and childcare in her town.

Why the case studies matter

Adult Literacy is associated with prosperity, poverty, family struggles, health and mental health. Decoda's Displaced Worker case studies show the repeated interplay of community services, industry shifts and job loss, and an individual's foundational skills in their options and choices. The case studies show us that the resilience of a displaced worker is about more than their literacy, numeracy or digital skills. Those are important, but so are community supports and services, outreach from helping neighbours and available focussed teaching where and when a learner is ready to take a step toward their next chapter. The case studies are important, in my view, because they give us readers a way into the human complexity of work and community life, very specifically situated in real towns in 2020. The deliberate and careful disclosure of the writer's viewpoints and perspectives as community members and literacy workers also makes these important and well worth your time to read. The voices of the women, and their courage in telling these stories makes them unique in our research project and in our field. I hope it is a beginning of including research in practice in projects that explore Canada's workforce. We have so much to learn from each other.



Mill across the Fraser River from Quesnel | Photo by Rebecca Beuschel



Photo by Kim Bellavance Photographe kimbellavance.com

About the author

Tracy Defoe is an adult educator, researcher and consultant from Vancouver, BC. Most of the time Tracy is puzzling over learning at work. She has worked with Decoda projects over many years and was part of the team that conceived the Displaced Worker project. She is part-time faculty at Capilano University, Department of Community Outreach and Development.

Campbell River: A Year Like No Other — Impacts of a Pandemic on Food Service Industry Employees

By Kat Eddy: Campbell River Literacy Association

Preamble – A bit about the author.

Kat Eddy moved to the community of Campbell River, located on the mid-eastern shore of Vancouver Island in late summer 2002. Her first employment opportunity was in the food service industry at a long standing, popular, and family-owned pub/restaurant. She has continued to work part time and seasonally in the local travel and tourism field throughout the last 18 years and reflects often on the changes of an industry now at the forefront of the economic development plan for her region.

Professionally, Kat Eddy is the Executive Director of the Campbell River Literacy Association and has worked in the field of adult education for over 10 years. This work has served to enlighten her to the challenges faced by adults with low essential skills as they access employment and education opportunities, interact with everchanging technology and self advocate for services at all levels for both themselves and their families.



Ocean view from Campbell River | Photo by Kat Eddy



Campbell River wharf | Photo by Kat Eddy

March 2019

Daily postings of summer employment opportunities in the community of Campbell River, BC spring to life in late March to early April on the local Work BC-North Island Employment Foundation job bank.

“Small northern fishing resort seeking seasonal food server, cook, housekeeper for the 2019 summer fishing season...”

“Hiring Fair for summer season at Painter’s Lodge/ April Point. All positions...”

“Local restaurant seeks full-time line cook, hostess, front of house food servers...”

“Wildlife tour company seeking experienced, ticketed deck hand for summer season.”

“Local hotel seeking night auditor, housekeeping staff, line cooks please bring resume to...”

Conversations on the docks focus on getting the boat ready, fully booking fishing charters, what salmon species runs are looking best this year and the newest rendition of regulations mandated by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Water

taxi companies are booking supply runs to remote camps. The marine maintenance industry is going full tilt as individuals and businesses re-launch their boats and ready them for summer tourism season. Local fishing supply stores have stocked their salmon summer tackle inventories with names like hoochies, flashers and plugs - the best equipment for catching that prized fish. The excitement of another great season welcoming visitors from all over the world is almost palpable.

It typically begins with a trickle about mid-May, with a few US retirees touring around Vancouver Island accessing the local ice cream shop on the pier, picking up seafood at the local fish monger, and stopping by local restaurants to dine. Some visitors come equipped with their massive motorhomes and start to fill the local RV parks, while others arrive by boat. You can see a vast array of international flags bobbing in the local marinas. Others rent cars and cruise around the Island, stopping at all the touristy spots. As a local, you notice a bit more activity downtown, traffic is a bit heavier, and the highways are full of RV’s and rental cars. It’s the beginning of the Campbell River/Northern Vancouver Island tourist season.

The Discover Campbell River travel and tourism office is abuzz with phone and email inquiries. Some of the popular hiking trails, beaches and gift shops are starting to get busier. The whale watching companies, local museum and most

businesses are now open seven days a week. The Downtown Business Association has planted beautiful gardens. The local arts and music scenes are scheduling and promoting the Thursday evening free community shows. It seems every weekend has some kind of event happening downtown. All the storefronts are putting on their best displays looking to attract the tourists that will likely carry their small businesses through leaner winter months.

Local restaurants are bringing in more staff to meet the crazy dinner and lunch rushes that are happening every day now, not just on Fridays and Saturdays. They advertise live music and local seafood, hoping to attract some of the tourists that by late June regularly flood into town. Locals begin to take the back way to avoid travel through the downtown core with its crowded sidewalks and busy traffic. The BC Ferries routes require a reservation if you need to travel by boat without a wait. Hotels and resorts are now charging their summer rates, although locals know if they wait until early October, they'll get a much better deal. Instead, they pack up their own motorhomes, launch their own boats and venture into the wilds of Northern Vancouver Island. They're headed to the secret spots that Discover Campbell River doesn't promote, the spots where locals like to spend their two weeks of vacation around a campfire.

It is another summer season in Campbell River, not unlike any other — busy, fun, and overrun by visitors. These are the months that many local businesses have prepared for all year, the short four months where the beauty of their community will help them generate enough income to make it through the rest of the year. They are ready and are welcoming, creating a hometown atmosphere for those who have travelled to enjoy the season.

March 2020

“We need to work together to slow the spread of Coronavirus...”

I go to work on a Friday evening at my part-time “fun job” serving in the public house attached to the local casino. This is a pretty new spot here in Campbell River, having been open about two years. The casino gaming floor adjacent is a local hotspot and it is busy there every night with an always interesting mix of locals and visitors. The public house/gaming floor is brand new, and well run. It employs over 70 local folks in a variety of positions related to gaming and food service. The staff is a diverse mix of mostly career food servers and kitchen staff, and some young employees just

starting out in the industry who are saving for education or their first apartment. The casino floor is staffed by a large number of middle-aged folks for whom Canada is not their first home. I often see these same people working a second job in fast food, grocery or retail and know a number of them personally as they have accessed language services through our organization - The Campbell River Literacy Association. Working here is a good service job, as it is a busy and popular venue, offers full time employment at a decent wage and provides health benefits for families.

Just down the main street is another restaurant — much different in scale — a family-owned business catering to the breakfast and lunch crowd with good hearty homemade meals and a discount for seniors. The breakfast crowd is always brisk and at lunch it can be difficult to find a seat. The employees there are much older, many at the end of their service careers, displaying a slight limp and producing a pad of paper for writing down your order. The owner of this business cares deeply for her employees and will go out of her way to ensure they have what they need to survive. For a lot of these folks this is just that, a survival job in an industry they have worked in for decades. It's not, 'let's save for school' or 'make great tips' work in a fast-paced, modern, large scale food service operation. This is employment that keeps them one step from the street or living with family. Many are in their late 50s and early 60s. A large proportion of the front of house workers are women, with an equal divide of mostly men in the kitchen. Most have minimal access to retirement programs like Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) because they have always worked in minimum or below wage jobs. Maybe they can slow down when they reach 65 and old age pension begins? The owner of this business has been struggling for the last couple of years, but she keeps her doors open because where would her family of loyal, loving employees go?

Mid-March 2020

“The federal government announces a complete business shutdown to flatten the curve of admissions to hospitals due to the spread of Covid-19.”

The atmosphere at the public house is strained - business is not as usual. The casino floor emits its still excited beeps and buzzes but there seem to be fewer and fewer folks coming in. We've been hearing the whispers of a lockdown from the federal government, but no one really understands what that means. The general manager of the building informs staff that



Local salmon in Campbell River | Photo by Kat Eddy

although she doesn't really know what the future holds, it looks like she's going to have to close the doors for a couple of weeks. There's a sense of confusion and panic rippling through the full-time staff who rely on their incomes to pay rent, feed families and pay bills.

“What do you mean shut down? We don't even close on Christmas Day.”

Management promises to keep everyone informed as they await further direction from the corporate team, but it seems like a closure is inevitable. Shifts are cut, hours are shortened and, within days all staff are informed that until further notice the business will be shuttered. Not enough notice to stockpile some of those tips you made last month, and you were counting on a good weekend to gather together the last couple hundred dollars you need for rent.

There is no working from home for this industry, and no moving it to an online environment. You go home hoping your landlord will understand that rent this month will be a bit late and that BC Hydro knows you will get that payment to them as soon as you can. And you watch – you watch national news to see what the federal plan is and you watch the numbers of active cases rise higher and higher. The Coronavirus has been renamed COVID-19 and it looks like we're in for the long haul – this isn't going to be a short-term closure. You worry, you hug your kids close and you hope that things will work out and your workplace will re-open soon, because what are your options? You really don't have many other skills. You've

worked in the food service industry for 30 years, starting as a dishwasher in Grade 10, moving up to full-time at the end of Grade 11 when school wasn't really working out for you. You worked hard, learned a lot about the industry, customer service, safe food handling, balancing an evening work schedule and raising your kids. But you really haven't learned how to make a living from your computer at home. You just bought one last year for your Grade 6 daughter because she needed it for school. You watch the news alerts on your phone, and you wait.

Down the road at the much smaller family-run restaurant, the big-hearted owner is reaching out to other restaurants, spending hours on the Canada.ca website, speaking to friends in other industries and trying to make sense of what each new announcement means to her business. In two weeks, sales drop by over 60 percent.

She worries about the most recent delivery from her food supplier and all that fresh produce. How is she going to pay for it with no sales?

How is she going to cover the payroll this period?

What will she tell her aging staff as they worry about whether there will be a job at the end of this week?

She sifts through wage subsidy information. Do we qualify?

Should she talk to her landlord?

CERB? Canadian Emergency Response Benefit? What will my employees need to access this?

Where is Joe? The 87-year-old senior that comes in everyday at 11 am for the soup of the day. She always gives him a bit extra because she suspects this could be the only meal he eats.

What about her own mortgage?

What will her family do if there is no income from the business? She can't just roll up her sleeves and work harder to earn some extra income. There is no business.

She makes the decision that she cannot afford to stay open. Every day she is bleeding money and she knows she will not be able to make payroll. She pulls together her staff, her family, and delivers the news. There are tears, there is anger, there is fear.

She tries to explain, as well as she can, the CERB program, letting them know she has already contacted the bookkeeper and that their Records of Employment will be issued as soon as the end of the final business day. Eighty percent of her employees come to her for help. They don't have computers, don't know how to use one, and many are barely literate. They need to have this money because they don't have any savings. There's not a lot of food in the cupboard, as they were waiting to shop after payday. They usually eat at work where she allows them to run a tab. She spends the next three business days clearing her coolers of fresh food, freezing what she can and creating take home food care packages for all her staff. She then spends long hours into the night trying to navigate the Employment Insurance website trying to access benefits so she can help her staff fill out the forms for the emergency money to carry them through. She knows she must help her staff with the government forms because no other businesses are allowing people in for help. She knows if she doesn't help this family of hers will be hurt more than most Canadians. They do not have the technology and literacy skills to self advocate, and no one is answering any phones.

Her bank accounts are in the negative because she's tapped everything accessible to cover payroll and pay out any vacation pay. On her final day of business there are no customers – hers is one of the last restaurants to close. People have begun to shelter in their homes, the grocery store shelves are pretty bare, and the downtown streets of this busy tourist town are eerily quiet. She closes earlier than usual, hugs all her staff, and for those who she hasn't yet helped fill in the forms, makes appointments to meet at her house the following week. She then locks the front door – perhaps for the last time. She thinks to herself as she walks to her car, "I hope that old Joe will be OK without us for a while – maybe forever."

Afterward from the author

This piece was written as a true-to-life narrative and the choice to end at the closure of business due to COVID was intentional. Part two continues to evolve as the fall season begins and businesses in the travel and tourism industry continue to falter. It is hoped a more optimistic piece about recovery and a return to normal is still to be written.

The year 2020 has highlighted the vulnerabilities of those individuals working survival jobs. Those folks are everywhere in our cities and towns. Perhaps it has taken something as extraordinary as a global pandemic to gain a shared empathy for the fragility of opportunity when safety nets surrounding us and our families weaken. We are all experiencing a shared trauma that those living with lower literacy and essential skills face every day. Absence of choice, financial worry, fear, a lack of understanding, inability to plan for the future, few resources for self-advocacy, frustration with complex ever-changing systems, and a constant struggle to survive on unsteady ground have challenged most. This is our shared experience – for a time – but 42% of our society experiences these limitations every day.

As we adjust to the innovations helping us navigate these times, find hope in overcoming the challenges we face, and restart our normal lives, I hope we do not lose the compassion gained by walking a mile in someone else's shoes.

East Kootenay: Learners Need Flexible, Affordable Childcare

By Andra Louie: [Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy](#)

The geography of the East Kootenay region of south eastern British Columbia is stunning and dynamic. Home to the Ktunaxa and Sepwepemc peoples, the forested lake lands are unique and rugged. Explorers, settlers and pioneers began steadily arriving throughout the 1800s mapping the river systems, trading with First Nations and staking claims in hopes of striking it rich during gold rush times.

Much has changed in two centuries, yet the landscape continues to attract those seeking adventure, beauty and prosperity.

Modest small and mid-size towns dot the mountain valleys. The local economies are mostly dependent on tourism, forestry, mining and agriculture; however, bigger centres have more robust economies that include the public sector, construction and transportation. Cranbrook (population 21 000+) serves as the leading distribution and service centre for the mining industry in the area. Local manufacturing primarily focuses on lumber and wood products, machinery, equipment, fabricating, and food and beverage products.



East Kootenay in winter | Photo by Rod Lafond

Housing prices in the East Kootenays can range depending on how desirable the locale is for second homeowners. City dwellers love to retire in the Rocky and Purcell mountains, close to golf courses and serene lakes; young families are drawn to the small communities for a fresh start, affordability, and safety. Recently, newcomers have brought their jobs with them as they work remotely and only rely on a strong Wi-Fi signal and a flight from the Cranbrook airport to Calgary, Kelowna, or Vancouver. Young people move to the area for seasonal jobs, usually at the golf courses, resorts, and ski hills. Many stay in hopes of establishing themselves, starting businesses and finding bigger opportunities. It is quite common to meet people who juggle two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet. For some who have lived in the region their entire lives, ensuring full time employment has meant adapting, re-training and even remote working to ensure that bills get paid and their families needs are met. It's also common to meet people who live passionate lives and are dedicated to a mountain lifestyle that includes time in the backcountry with secret and hard to access camping sites and fishing holes.

In 2015, the Canfor sawmill in Canal Flats closed because of lack of fibre supply combined with depressed market conditions in the oil and gas and lumber markets that left 74 workers unemployed. As Canfor was the town's main employer, this greatly affected the community both financially and socially. The workers were offered opportunities to transfer to other operations, the closest being 62km away. Re-training and upgrading programs were provided by College of the Rockies in partnership with WorkBC.

In the 2016 Census, the East Kootenay population was 60,439. Since 2015, job losses in the East Kootenays have been in response to mill closures, industry slow downs, forest fires and tourism decline because of COVID-19 in 2020. The region has sufficient medical services and a reputable college in Cranbrook with satellite campuses in five smaller communities.

I grew up in the scenic East Kootenay town of Invermere. This attractive and sunlit community is set on Lake Windermere between the Rocky and Purcell Mountain ranges. Many people, such as my parents, earned a living working in the mining and forestry industries in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. As a teenager, I began noticing how divisions in the community emerged: those who wanted to keep the tourists out and preserve our resources and small-town way of life versus others who earned a living from tourism, second home construction and business development and they fought to create greater amenities and opportunities to cater to tourists and vacation homeowners. It was difficult to merge the two ideologies without creating a lot of animosity.

As a child, I fully intended to move away when I became an adult to gain a bigger perspective on life. I sought bright lights, busy streets, tall buildings, and greater diversity — I craved adventure and excitement. However, during my travels overseas I loved describing my quaint hometown to people and feeling nostalgic. When I was a university student and later started my career in Calgary, then Edmonton and finally Vancouver, I craved the quiet time of being in the mountains and fresh air. Fortunately, my husband and I were able to move from metro Vancouver to Kimberley, BC in January 2014 when our daughter was three years old. My husband had a full-time position, while I worked part-time, juggled jobs, searched for reliable childcare options and persevered amidst all the surmounting hurdles. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it. We now both have gainful employment and enjoy our neighborhood, community and region immensely. We are now those folks who are tight-lipped about our camping spots and fishing holes.

My husband works for BC Hydro in the role of Vegetation Maintenance Coordinator and he oversees all of BC Hydro's tree removal and pruning program in the East Kootenays. He is hopeful that he will be promoted into management position in the next five to eight years. I work for the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL) as the East Kootenay Regional Program Manager and I support seven Community Literacy Coordinators and their staff in their communities. My organization and my position fulfill me greatly and I intend to continue working for CBAL for many years. At some point there may be an opportunity to move into another management role or even the Executive Director role.

CBAL is a recognized and valued non-profit organization in southeast BC in the Columbia Basin and Boundary region. The organization focuses on strengthening partnerships and connections in the region through community literacy and settlement programs that are offered at no cost to participants and clients. There are 16 Community Literacy Coordinators who work in 77 communities throughout the region.

Through my job, I was introduced to Monique Gagne (not her real name) at the Kimberley CBAL office in 2018 on one of the occasions when she was meeting with a volunteer English tutor. In subsequent conversations, I learned that Monique moved from Quebec to Kimberley in 2004 as she sought a lifestyle change in the beautiful Rocky Mountains. Back home in Quebec, she worked full time in the service industry as a bartender and banquet server; she did not have any formal education or training and got by working as a server. After she moved across Canada to Kimberley, she found work as a landscaper which was easier for her because her first language is French, and she only learned beginner English in school.



Invermere and the Columbia River wetlands | Photo by Eternalsleeper.

Monique settled into Kimberley, got married and has a child now; her husband works a 9-5 job in Cranbrook which is less than 30 minutes away. Monique likes that he is home for dinner and doesn't have to work up north or far enough out of town to not come home at night. Monique continues to work at a local golf course in Kimberley as a landscaper from April to October, however this year she didn't start in the spring on account of the pandemic. She had been unemployed since October when the golf season closed in 2019. When she was called back to work at the end of July 2020, her hours were reduced, and she worked part time until the middle of October.

Monique also lost her English tutor at CBAL in spring 2020 as the tutor moved away to Edmonton to be closer to family on account of concerns over COVID-19. Monique does not have a replacement tutor yet. She has gained the confidence to speak English frequently now but recognizes that her reading and writing both need greater practice. She admits that she defaults to using Google for spelling assistance.

Since having her child five years ago, Monique has not worked in the winter off-seasons because she couldn't find any part-time spots open in the local daycares. Over the years, Monique and her young daughter attended many free community-based children's programs together, such as StrongStart, an early years program funded by the Ministry of Education, where they learned English songs, talked about parenting, and she made connections with other moms.

Monique has been working to become fluent in English and told me that she wanted to learn English so that she could read to her daughter, be able to talk to her teachers and support her daughter once she entered the public school system. In September 2020, her daughter started kindergarten, and Monique joyfully told me that, "She's loving it!"

Like many people I meet these days, Monique has not thought about making any winter plans yet. She has considered looking into enrolling in an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program and is interested in working at StrongStart and offering some of the programming in French. Monique likes the hours as it coincides with her child's school schedule. She has Googled ECE programs, but only checked into it once because she was distracted by her parenting obligations. Monique also admits that the tuition cost, doing it online, and needing a tutor are all barriers to overcome. She told me that, "If I was a super Mommy I could do it." As she and her husband are living off one income currently and additional home improvement and vehicle maintenance expenses are looming, she feels that it's probably not going to happen in the near future. Monique says that she is happy to watch their daughter grow and enjoy Kindergarten this year noting, "Everything is about her; she is my life. As long as we are together, everything is happy."



Downtown Kimberley | Photo by Royalbroil

Monique shared with me that her ultimate dream is to open a French-speaking daycare in Kimberley. This is a service not currently offered in the community but is one that parents have expressed interest and excitement about.

Unfortunately, Monique's challenges are far too common; women forsake their career ambitions and personal goals while they are raising young children and then sacrifice their dreams further when childcare and daycare options are limited. Communities need affordable, flexible, and convenient childcare options available outside of regular business hours. Parents work multiple jobs and have an overwhelming amount of responsibilities once they start a family and incur debt. Post secondary education, re-training and upskilling can be lofty goals when systems are not in place to support people and their families to be successful. By providing post-secondary grants, reasonable childcare options, living allowances for post-secondary students and

small business start-up funding, the chances of achieving dreams would actually have a shot. There are many people like Monique and her family in the Kootenays and across the country who deserve a chance to succeed. This would be good for all of us.

Fort Nelson: Holistic Approach to Learning in Remote Northern Community

By Seanah Roper: [Fort Nelson Literacy Society](#)

Community Context

Fort Nelson is a small, remote community in the Northeast corner of British Columbia. The population has traditionally hovered around 5000 but has now decreased as a direct result of ongoing economic decline. The 2016 census placed Fort Nelson's population at 3500, and the coming census will likely indicate much lower.

Fort Nelson sits on the traditional territory of the Dene people and is home to many First Nations and Metis people and communities. There is a vibrant and rich Indigenous culture in the area. The arbour at Fort Nelson First Nation often hosts beautiful evening tea dances with drummers, an annual Hand Games Tournament where people come from all over to participate, and wonderful cultural events throughout the year. With COVID-19, these things have mostly paused.



Aerial view of Fort Nelson | Photo by Tracy Rondeau



Welcome to Fort Nelson | Photo by CanadianEman

The town experiences long, cold winters. Winter usually begins in mid-October and will stretch into March. The winters can be challenging for many who struggle with the limited daylight and the isolating cold. Despite its darkness and biting temperatures though, the winter holds a quiet beauty, where the Northern Lights often light the sky to dance in their green and purple grace.

Fort Nelson has limited health and medical services. There are no maternity services in Fort Nelson and families must travel to other communities at least one month prior to their due dates and live elsewhere at their own expense while waiting for their babies to come. Fort Nelson does however have excellent general practitioners. It is easy to obtain a family doctor and if one needs to get in to see a doctor, they may do so in the same day, sometimes within the same hour that they call. The doctors are caring and rooted in the community and have personal and emotional investments in the work they do.

It is important to note that Fort Nelson is 370 kilometres north of Fort St. John, the next urban centre. This equates to about a four-hour drive which in the winter can be dangerous. Central Mountain Air offers flights in and out of Fort Nelson. Flights are significantly more expensive than air travel elsewhere. The BC bus offers service one day per week in Fort Nelson.

We are often lumped into the category of “Northern BC” which includes Prince George (a ten-hour drive away) and up. It is notable to say that many people do not understand the distances involved when looking at our region. Even the city

of Fort St. John is difficult to access during certain times of the year due to our remoteness.

Despite the difficulties faced in recent years, Fort Nelson is a caring and vibrant community. Many love Fort Nelson for the simplicity of lifestyle – there is no commute to and from work, there is little traffic. Families can use this time to spend more quality moments together. The Northern Rockies offers beautiful nature in near proximity. Many enjoy outdoor lifestyles and engage in hunting, hiking and camping in the vast area of the Northern Rockies and Muskwa Ketchika. The town prides itself on being close and connected, a place where folks take care of each other, where people know each other and watch out for one another. It retains a kind of old-fashioned sentiment that seems to have disappeared from many places, and usually cannot be found at all in larger centres.

Economic Context

Fort Nelson was once a thriving industrial town. It was known as a place “out west” where people could come and find work either in the oil and gas industry or the forestry industry and make a high income with little to no education or experience. Many people migrated from the eastern provinces and the Lower Mainland in the 80s-early 2000s to make a better life and raise families. During this time, local businesses did well and employed many temporary foreign workers.

In 2008, the two major mills closed in Fort Nelson leaving hundreds of people out of work. The mills tended to employ family people, in many cases both parents in a household

were employed with the same employer. During these closures, many families left town to move elsewhere for work, but many stayed, having set their roots down in the community and not wanting to leave their home.

Many of the mill employees had been working there since their teen years, having opted out of high school graduation to go directly into the labour market where they could make good money and start their lives early. When, the technology boom occurred with the explosion of the internet, personal devices and information became accessible only online. The unemployed mill workers found themselves suddenly without work, without a high school education, and facing the challenges of computer literacy. Many could not use a computer at all. They needed to create resumes, create email addresses to include on those resumes, and access online job boards. They could receive some services from WorkBC but needed real support in their learning to adapt these skills so that they could function independently. Many returned to school to complete their GED hoping to increase their employability and to open up their career options, seeing an opportunity in the difficult times.

Many mill workers transitioned to the oil and gas industry. This was especially difficult for employees with families as they started working in remote camps where their schedules were three weeks in, one week off, and other similar arrangements. Families were now separated much of the time, parents at home were challenged with being single parents most of the time, and stress was felt throughout the entire family unit.

In 2014, the oil and gas industry began to decline, reaching a peak over the course of the next few years as companies began to make cuts. This impacted those working directly in oil and gas, and also those working in related fields (local businesses, hot shotting, etc.). It eventually trickled out to all businesses in the community including restaurants and hotels. We saw an increasing demand at the Fort Nelson Learning Centre for these unemployed workers to receive support with computers to apply for Employment Insurance, and to receive other employment and literacy services. Computer skills were at the forefront of challenges, as well as other literacy skills.

In the subsequent years and leading up to today, the community has continued to struggle under depressed industries. The population has decreased by what some feel is nearly 50% now and the housing market has declined dramatically. Many had to claim bankruptcy and walk away from their homes, and many lost significant equity in their investments. Local businesses have faced devastating closures due to population decline and there are many empty and boarded up lots in the downtown area.

Doing Literacy Work in this Climate

As literacy practitioners, we were able to watch the unraveling of our local economy through the learners and clients that came through our doors for technology help. The needs included help to learn how to use a computer to apply for Employment Insurance, to create resumes, to upgrade tech and other skills to enhance job market opportunities. At first, it was difficult to keep up with the demand for services. We have no Service Canada in the area, and our Learning Centre was forced fill in these service gaps. To handle the volume of people, we had to condense EI application support to small group sessions where many people could come at once and complete their applications instead of having a steady stream of learners coming all the time.

As things progressed, we came to know many community members. Some of them joined learning programs, but most used our drop-in services. We found that the Learning Centre was becoming somewhat of a neighbourhood house. People felt comfortable there. They would sometimes stop in for a coffee or just to chat and leave us small change as an act of gratitude for offering some help and some conversation.

We began to encounter learners who were struggling with mental health and addictions issues. We noticed small signs of deterioration each time they came in. The story was clear and simple: work had kept people out of trouble. As long as they could keep their employment, they could keep clear in their minds and keep addictions at bay. Many people worked in remote labour camps and during their two weeks in, lived very well. These camps had full services including kitchens that served excellent food, fitness facilities and other recreation. Most importantly, these were dry camps. There was no drinking, and certainly no drug use permitted. When workers came out of the camps for their one week off, they would often go on binges of alcohol and substances, spending the week this way. But at the end of the week, they would return to work, sober up and get healthy again. For many people, work was the reason they were staying alive.

Many community members moved away for work. The ones who stayed tended to be those who had deep family roots in the community, a property that they could not afford to leave, or those who were unable to obtain work elsewhere and who faced multiple personal and systemic barriers.

In the 2016 year, five of our regular learners passed away. We were shocked and heartbroken. Two passed away of medical reasons, one took his own life and two passed away as a result of alcohol related exposure, ultimately freezing to death after passing out on their way home. One learner had made it home, sat down on the front steps and had simply fallen

asleep before she could get in the door. With temperatures dipping down to -40 at times, the winter can be a major threat to those with serious alcohol addictions.

As literacy practitioners, we were not prepared for the high needs we were seeing among our learner base. We have had to source out training in conflict management, dealing with secondary trauma and working with individuals who struggle with mental health and addictions issues. It has been a journey, but not one without hope.

Key Findings

- Employment keeps mental health and addictions issues at bay. We have seen this over and over again with our learners and through conducting the surveys. When people are out of work, these old ghosts take over and present difficult challenges.
- Bridging the digital divide is paramount. Nearly every single learner we have encountered struggled in some way with computers and technology. These struggles rendered them powerless in pursuing the tasks they needed to do, and led to feelings of helplessness, frustration, and low confidence.
- Displaced workers tend to be happy in the work they were previously doing, even if the pay is minimal and the labour is hard. We did not encounter many who wished to do training outside of their scope of work experience.
- Expired tickets and certifications are an issue for many. When these tickets expire, the individuals often cannot afford to renew them, and if they receive a call for work in the meantime, they cannot go because their tickets are expired.
- Stress and instability are common among all the workers we encountered. Even if individuals can find short-term work, it only provides temporary relief and they still must live with the uncertainty of what comes next.
- Cheap rent is changing the community. We are seeing new people arriving in Fort Nelson having caught onto the fact that rental units are inexpensive, as low as \$425 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. People are migrating from the Lower Mainland and elsewhere and looking for work here. They are giving up their Starbucks and Walmarts for a simpler, more affordable lifestyle. Many who are arriving face other barriers as well, including disabilities and mental health issues. This is putting stress on local RCMP members who are tasked to respond to different situations and do not have many resources at their disposal.

Conclusion

As we move forward, I feel optimistic about the community and what may be in store for our region economically. There are several projects in the works that will help to restore the broken economy here. Fort Nelson First Nation is starting a large geothermal project which promises to create local employment, and a renewable energy company has signed a memorandum of understanding with FNFN to open a pellet plant in the coming year. I feel there is hope for people who are out of work right now.

That being said, I feel this is an opportune time for community members to do important work to help enhance their chances in the job market, and to ensure that they are better prepared to endure the unavoidable cyclic nature of northern industries. The issues facing displaced workers in our region are complex and we must approach them in a holistic way, looking at the whole person in their totality, and not just what they look like on a resume.

Literacy work for us has always looked different, especially in our approach to employment issues. We know that a one size fits all approach will not get us very far. Quantitative focuses that we see in funding streams that aim to get folks back to work often miss the mark completely. If we want to see real success in getting people back to work, we need to look beyond the technical requirements of obtaining a job and investigate the socio-emotional aspects that can be strengthened and focus on this in tandem with technological literacy and skills training.

Fort St. John: Creating Achievable Learning Goals in a Challenged Natural Resource Economy

By Taylor Mills: Fort St. John Literacy Society

Fort St. John (FSJ) is a beautiful city located in Northern British Columbia. Known for its landscapes, mountain peaks and rivers, Fort St. John draws many tourists worldwide.

The economy also brings people from various walks of life, looking to take advantage of the thriving oil and gas industry. At one time, the opportunities were endless and allowed for families to grow and build happy and successful lives. The people here are kind, caring and welcoming, noticed especially when we come together to help a person or group of people in need. In Fort St. John there is an excellent sense of a collectivist attitude; there is always someone willing to help, as long as you are ready to ask.

Impact of COVID-19

During these new times, COVID-19 has caused the economy to steadily decrease over the past six months. The decline has affected the job availability in this region and impacted the overall sense of community. This is now replaced by the desire to help oneself due to unforeseen circumstances. Most jobs were shut down unless you were considered to be an “essential” service. This left some people feeling defeated and let down by the government. Others who were told to continue working were torn between wanting to collect benefits to be home with their families and working due to society’s needs. During this pandemic, Alaska Highway News released an article detailing the 12,000 jobs lost due to closures in Northern British Columbia. Compared to other parts of the country, this is minimal.



Peace River Valley | Photo by Emma Gilchrist, DeSmog Canada

Our resource sectors such as oil and gas, forestry and agriculture are required globally. While this was a positive for the region, before the pandemic, the Peace Region suffered from mill closures, and employment in the construction industry decreased by 31% when Site C and LNG no longer required construction services. With job losses in other sectors too, individuals without employment felt helpless. Trying to understand where the needs were to help individuals, we at the Fort St. John Literacy Society decided to take part in the Displaced Workers Survey. Our goal was to see what was needed in our community and offer supports.

The Author's Perspective

Specifically, my role in this society is to help support individuals with literacy needs through a variety of domains, which include writing, math, job application and training (understanding the materials) and mental health literacy, to name a few. Moreover, my department is in charge of fundraising events aimed to bring community members together. These events include the Spelling Bee, 5k Run and the New Years' Eve Bash. The events and services offered are provided to help support, bring people together and bring in funding to support our vulnerable populations. Within this research project, especially during the pandemic, my roles have changed slightly because I cannot provide face-to-face support; I can assist people virtually or electronically to focus on goals that will aid them mentally and financially. More specifically, I can help people feel a sense of ease by creating realistic expectations that are achievable while also offering services to help achieve their goals. Our society and the case study are grounded in this place by providing individuals with a stable environment to express their concerns and make plans. While responses were low for the interviews, clients' need for help and support were not. Clients felt safe to speak with individuals in our society and knew they would and will continue to be supported. There have been some highs and lows on this journey with various community members. These experiences give a glimpse into the new normal of Fort St. John.

Lower Income Families Affected Most

Throughout the pandemic, it has been evident that families and people of lower socioeconomic status are affected the most. With the closure of schools and daycares, single-parent families had to stop work to take care of their children. For these individuals, it was a blessing and a curse. After speaking to many families, I learned that in the beginning stages of staying home with their children, it was exciting to be creating new memories and having more time to bond. However, this was quickly taken over by fear. The fear came of the uncertainty of re-employment when restrictions lifted, accounting for the taxes on the government funds

provided to those without work, and the additional work of homeschooling. These fears led to depression and anxiety, stressful home lives for both parents and children and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness.

Furthermore, these feelings and fears seemed to be higher with individuals considered to be part of the lower socioeconomic status. It was evident that mental health, combined with financial instability, would be the two main factors these two vulnerable groups would face. Families started to feel isolated and alone due to a lack of societal support from schools and local organizations such as the community library, daycares and other recreational facilities. Unfortunately, these facilities were under government regulations and were advised to cease operations; this left families feeling alone in a battle that they believed they were destined to lose. Fort St. John's community started to become an area where individuals were focused on the well-being of themselves and their families. These changes were not selfish but were more of a survival tactic. People did not have the resources to help others, as this would run their resources thin. Previously, when the economy was doing well, you would notice strong community involvement. The lack of a collectivist attitude seems to be temporary as we see some restrictions being lifted. During difficult times, the families who needed the most support struggle to keep their heads above water. As schools are now open, these families have the opportunity to try and get back to a "normal" without the additional stressors from lack of childcare and homeschooling responsibilities.

Community and Individual Impacts

How will family isolation affect young individuals' social development? Social development occurs with consistent human interactions outside of the immediate family circle. I fear if restrictions are placed back on our community, we will see a significant decline in young individuals' social skills. After discussing with parents from various walks of life, there is a common theme that children tend to be uncertain about how to play appropriately with others through sharing and pretend play. With an emphasis on social distancing, children view sharing as a negative, which has led to negative social interactions amongst the younger population. If this trend continues, there may be negative implications for young minds' social development, specifically the ones who are just starting to create friendships. I am curious to see how we as a community will combat this dilemma and how long it will take our community to re-establish a normal once the fear has subsided.



Site C Dam construction site | Photo by Jeffrey Wynne

Earlier in the year, we had experienced mill closures in this region that resulted in many individuals leaving town for work as there was a lack of jobs in their preferred field. Unfortunately, all individuals who disclosed information regarding their need to relocate for work declined direct quotes surrounding their decision to move but were willing to share details of their choices. Individuals affected by the mill closures felt that there was no immediate work in this region that could match the income they were receiving at the mill. With high house mortgages and schooling required to enter a career that would provide similar earnings, individuals decided to source elsewhere to avoid going into debt.

One individual that disclosed his decision to move had to sell his property to ensure he could get a leg up in his new community. They chose to move to Victoria, where the cost of living is more expensive, but job opportunities were abundant. Essentially, due to the closure, this individual felt pressure to uproot his family to create a life that was best for the whole family. Unfortunately, not long after the move, a pandemic hit the region, and this individual had to move back, unable to afford the cost of living in the Victoria region. Due to government support and resources at our local employment support office, Employment Connections, this individual is now choosing another avenue to help re-establishes his career in this region. With the continued support and the slow reopening of jobs, this individual has the opportunity to re-establish himself in his hometown.

In addition to the mill closure, pipeliners and carpenters have lost employment; these job losses were due to the slow down or completion of projects within the area. For instance, Site C and LNG started to slow down the need for certain employees due to projects slowing down or becoming completed.

With the demand for fewer employees, individuals were left reaching out to supports such as employment connections for jobs in this region. Unfortunately, there was not an abundance of work available for locals at this time, as companies sourced experts from different parts of the world. While this had frustrated some locals, others took the time to focus on continuing their education or utilizing unemployment until work became available again. With the pandemic, most individuals are using government support to get by.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the effect on the economy, and the availability of work were common themes in most individuals' stories. While some continued looking for jobs and expanding their knowledge. While others used unemployment to get by temporarily, these solutions were immediately interrupted by work site closures as a result of the pandemic regulations. Individuals in the community were willing to find resources to help grow and expand their knowledge to acquire other employment opportunities, but unfortunately, these options were non-existent. Individuals were now forced to rely on the government for support: this caused a lack of motivation in individuals due to months without work availability. Another theme that developed was hopelessness.



Park in Fort St. John | Photo by Qyd

Hopelessness

Hopelessness was one of the most predominant themes in conversations with people in the community. They described feelings of loneliness, overwhelming doom, a lack of support, and no opportunity to move forward. These feelings were described by individuals in lower-income families or families who have a single- parent in the household. Moreover, from these conversations, parents discussed how their children were coping. Parents have started to notice changes in behavior resulting from a lack of societal interactions. If these trends continue in this manner, I hypothesize that mental health services will see an increase in demand and a decrease in what we consider typical child interactions.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, increasing mental health and child supports are the next step in achieving a sense of normalcy. Parents and families have struggled the most during these times and have experienced an overwhelming amount of stress. They have taken on responsibilities that has been typically shared across various organizations. With more facilities opening up, it is essential that we start to advertise and reach out to our vulnerable clients and offer supports aimed at wellness, stress relief, relaxation, self-love and coping with mental health. Having these supports readily available and advertised across various locations will help bring back a sense of community and decrease the loneliness and helplessness we see, specifically in our vulnerable populations.

Fraser Lake: Señor Duggies Tacos and Pizzeria: from Miner to Restaurateur

By Elaine Story: [SD #91 \(Nechako Lakes\)](#)

When first contacted and given details about this project, I was eager to know more.

Living in 'small-town-rural' there is a curiosity to know how the other half lives. People in 'rural' doubt the platitude of city dwellers who unilaterally control the planning, the arguments, and most workplace details right down to the logo design.

To be asked into a project where our data would not just be heard but could have the potential to change federal employment initiatives, felt like a twisted form of restorative justice. "Ask the victims of unemployment how it feels to be shuttered."

Give the microphone to the truck driver, the labourer, the single parent, the dads, the near retirees ... let's hear what they have to say.



Rocky shoreline of Fraser Lake | Photo by Elaine Storey

In isolated under-served communities such as ours, there is a 'make-do' philosophy among us. Most industry-based towns labour under the 'best-guess-philosophy' of the remaining ore body, the health of the forests, the run-off, freeze-up, not to mention swings in the stock market. We are pawns in the employment game.

Our industry-based community matched the displacement criteria when the largest employer – a Molybdenum Mine, closed in 2015, displacing 300 workers. Our research would focus on many of those workers who were reluctant to access skills training or employment services due to low literacy skills.

There would be many requirements during the three-year project. I was worried that such a commitment would take from my other jobs and our family time.

The project seemed doable — name a task force, hold information sessions, collect data, enlist displaced workers to fill in a survey, write a case study from a community perspective and be involved in beta testing a new model to address future displacements.

The opportunity put into doubt my personal insecurities.

Was I the best person for the job?

What was my personal skillset?

How would I measure up to the research team and other team members?

In consideration of the opportunity, I could argue that I knew the subjects well, I had first-hand knowledge of the events that led to the displacement, and the project presented like an opportunity to help.

Going with the "If not YOU then WHO? line of thinking," I and all the study group leaders were constantly reassured that we were indeed up to the task and we were 'rock stars' in our own right. "We" were to be a part of a collective story. A story with an ability to reach far into the future and influence displacement standards for the employer, the worker, and the community.

When the original questionnaire surfaced and I shared it with our literacy outreach teams, I had no idea how this one email could elicit such power. From the first phone interview I envisioned where we could go with our story.

As I shared at the meet-up in Vancouver, I was all-in from the first call. In the past I have never said 'No' to questionnaires on health in rural communities, politics, pipelines,

infrastructure, environment, and education. But, when I hang up the phone, I give an "As IF" into the speaker as it goes dead, expecting never to hear from them again.

What was different with this interview was the excitement in Heather's voice. The "No shit Sherlock" tone as the offer was made. The research could only be as good as the subjects and the details. And I had details in spades. And so many subjects to expound upon.

In 2014, when my husband phoned from work and said, "We just got notice. They are stopping production. All the staff will be the first to go. It doesn't look good." It was December 14th. I was devastated!

It felt wrong and somehow shameful that we were powerless to such an announcement. There was nothing we could do about it. And yes, THEY could walk in and say, "The price of molybdenum has dropped substantially, and we are cutting production until further notice!" Virtually overnight we became a "Mining Town" without a mine. There was more at stake than job losses. There was a need for a whole new rebranding, a new identity.

The local sawmill employed 200-250 workers and some dual industry-equipment operators and labourers took the opportunity to seek employment there. But that wasn't the case for 250 members of the mining workforce.

Miners and loggers were fairly unique to their environment— while both plied the earth for riches, ore was specific to a landscape, and brought in professionals from all around the world. Miners were an international mix from Australia, the Philippines, and many from eastern Canada — there was a lot of diversity in the mining population. Loggers were more likely to be born and raised in the area. And several under their employ worked an entire career at the same mill. Miners moved around more. With mining towns scattered across Canada, many moved from Flin Flon, to the Yukon, to Gibraltar, to places like Granisle, Huckleberry and Endako.

The December issue of the Phraser Connector showed two fully loaded Haul trucks driving away from the worksite.

...DENVER, COLORADO (Marketwired – December 10, 2014)

Thompson Creek announced today that it and its joint venture partner Sojitz Moly Resources Inc have agreed to place the Endako Molybdenum mine on temporary suspension effective December 31, 2014 due to continued weakness in the molybdenum market. Approximately 50% of the salaried employee's will be terminated resulting in estimated severance cost of \$1.7 million. Hourly employees were notified today that their employment will be temporarily suspended in 60 days and will remain so suspended while

the Mine is on temporary suspension. ... We will closely monitor markets ... re-evaluate ... express our gratitude to our employees during this challenging time.

I queried in the December editorial I wrote “What does this mean to me and you and to the town and the neighbourhoods and the business community and the high school and the clinic the police station and the tree on Mouse Mountain? What will happen to families? What about the smiles and Dad’s lunchbox by the front door? Undoubtedly a new normal will be reached and both the optimists and the pessimists will have their day. Quotes will be quipped, and speeches will be spieled, and another door will open.”

The final Endako Mine Christmas party followed three days later. Employees made an effort to suspend the ‘gloom’ and enjoy festive food, dancing and drinking. There were bittersweet moments where the mine manager posed in group pics. This latest one had been the charm. Managers had circulated through the site so quickly they were given numbers not names. But the Aussie with a broad smile had befriended many.

He often enjoyed a night of drinking with the lads and won the hearts of many staffers. There was speculation he came to the mine knowing of the upcoming suspension. There are protocols in place to handle mass layoffs — job placements within the company, early retirement packages, and in some cases, there are re-training opportunities. Following mass layoffs such as this in 2014, governments step in with some kind words to temper moods and WorkBC sets up skills training courses for impacted workers.

When a small-town experiences “a shift in the labour market due to a curtailment of operations,” the effect is far-reaching ... everyone hurts. The announcement burned across the phone lines and by nightfall the whole town felt like they had been let go and letdown.

By sunrise, these pink-slip employees were in mourning. It was not a secular event. Workers grieved, friends and family grieved along with them. We shared this collective event—the mine closure affected us all. Job searchers scattered in hundreds of different directions. Some went north to far and away camps with a ‘21 & 7’ or a ‘7 & 7’ or a ‘month in & month out.’ Others stayed local and went back to the forest industry. Some kicked back and took early retirement and some locked into unemployment insurance benefits. In the years since, hundreds of resume-brandishing, lunchbox-toting men and women found their way to new opportunities and for some, new towns.

One story stood out amongst the rest. This was the story about Doug. He was an industry-based worker with an accumulation of on-the-job skills and an aptitude for driving all pieces of heavy equipment. Doug worked in the forest industry which gave him equipment training that was transferable to the mining industry where he would end up.

Doug was a friendly and likeable guy who was quite recognizable through all the seasons in his long shorts, wool socks, and sandals. His trademark signature outfit instantly made you think of ‘warmer climates’ no matter how low the mercury dropped.

Prior to his job at the mine, he ran yarders in logging. Hi-Lead logging on steep slopes. With equipment and ropes, stiff spars, and yarders they would drag huge logs down off steep slopes to the landings below. He worked all over BC ... North Coast, South Coast, the Interior and the Okanagan. “It was a dangerous career, it was fun. Ropes and yarders, I knew I was meant to be a yarder after the first choker I set.”



Duggie with the green driftwood cactus he built for the front garden | Photo by Elaine Storey

Doug didn't know much about Fraser Lake other than it was one of many communities he passed on his way to the Terrace and Kitimat area where he worked. When he got a job there in 2006, he was soon to learn all about the community. He settled into shift work and the demands of a full-time truck driver. Hauling ore from the various pits to the crusher day in and day out. The pay was good and with four days off there was lots of time for hanging out with his buddies.

Right up to the December announcement, Doug, like many others had no idea they were about to become just another casualty of stock market fluctuation. Following the notice, some upper staff were let go quite quickly.

"We worked right up 'til mid March that year. Some guys in the pit were doing clean-up jobs from February on. There were still 200 some odd working right up until March. After March it was pretty much a skeleton crew."

After nine years, Doug worked his last shift at Endako Mine on March 14, 2015. "I figured it was time to go on a holiday. So, I took off for six months to South America." Calling it a sabbatical, Doug flew to South America for half a year, came back to Fraser Lake for two weeks and did all the paperwork for the buyout and took off back to South America.

He left Fraser Lake not thinking about a career but more about the buyout and what it could buy him in South America. "I was thinking about opening a store in South America. A little corner store with liquor and groceries." Doug had pretty good friends down there. Two Latino friends in Chile and a bunch in Mexico. He understood the culture there. "While I was yarder logging, I would go to South America five to six month every year. I rented a house down there for the whole year. When we were closed down and I had time off, I would go there for two weeks at a time several times a year." "I just loved the cooking. I loved the culture and learned how to cook their food." Doug lived with a Mexican woman and always paid attention to what spices she used.

"I learned how to cook Mexican food by eating many of the traditional dishes she served."

When he came back to Fraser Lake after a second time in South America, he had no idea what he was going to do.

"I kept driving by this place (it was a Greek Restaurant called Stavros) and wondered if they would be interested in leasing it to me. I approached the landlord and she said yes." Not one to sit too long on an idea, Doug did up a business plan. He began in March 2016 'looking into it' and one year later he opened his doors.

"I started talking to Community Futures about getting help with a business plan and everything grew from there."

The provincial government offered a Bridging Employment Program, and Doug received help from them to get his plan off the ground.

"I think I made \$220 a week but it was enough to get me started. I did this partly on a dare. I had good parties at my house at Super Bowl and things like that. I cooked Mexican food and packed the house every time. Everybody said I should open a restaurant. So, I did."

When he opened his doors to *Senor Duggies Tacos & Pizzeria* in 2017, the first few days were fairly quiet. Within weeks it was crazy busy, and it was all he could do to keep up.

"In the spring of 2018, I thought about packing it in. And then at the end of July, the wildfires started. I don't know why I didn't just throw in the towel. Too stubborn I guess."

In our area, the summer of 2018 was the driest on record. With humidity close to that of an arid desert, at the first sign of an errant spark and lighting, the bush exploded. Wildfires ravaged the community for almost four months that year. Beginning at the end of July, the Shovel Lake and the Island Lake fire threatened the community from the west and from the north. Raging to within five kilometers of the village virtually overnight, the air filled with putrid unrelenting smoke that had streetlights coming on at 2 pm in the afternoon.

An evacuation displaced several hundred homeowners, and with everyone else on high alert, people were in a fight or flight state with bags packed and ready by the door. Throughout the days and nights, townsfolk gathered at many viewing spots along the lakes to watch columns of flames eat their way down mountainsides and explode in the water below.

A huge work camp was set up in town behind the arena and at its fullest capacity over 900 out of province workers from as far away as Australia and Mexico were housed there. Destroying over 200,000 hectares of raw timber, the 2018 fires left the area devastated.

Duggies was a refuge for some of the helicopter crews who were stationed at the near-by airport. Unlike all of the workforce sleeping in tents and being fed from the camp kitchen, the pilots were sleeping in air-conditioned hotel rooms and eating on their own. For a group of them, Duggies became their hangout after hours spent either in the air or sitting on stand-by at the airport. He was happy to accommodate their erratic hours and their smoky clothing. He grew to know them by name and was happy to prepare meals for them long after the doors should have been closed.

Running a restaurant was something clearly out of his wheelhouse, and it definitely was an undertaking considered by no others. But in the back of his mind were the urgings of his friends.



Señor Duggies sign | Photo by Elaine Storey

“Yeah, you can’t do this! I dare ya!” He thought with a good business plan, good staff and great service, he could do it. “When you have this vision, and great support, it can be done. My waitress Jananne has been with me since the beginning. She looks after the front-end stuff, does all the training and really, she had more experience than me.”

Doug admitted that cooking is such a small part of the whole success of the restaurant. “You need that continuity in everything. Jananne has my back. Some of the new trainees are only there because of the tips. And sometimes the tips are absolutely stupid. But the tips are only good when the service and the food is good. It has to be good to get big tips.”

From the beginning Doug only took what he needed to keep afloat. “I am a proprietorship—I only take enough to live by and pay my bills.” He was asked to expand to Prince George and take over the restaurant at the PG Golf and Country Club.

“I thought about taking it on as a contract, but then I would have to give this up.”

At the beginning he came up with the Mexican menu and Jananne came up with the menu on the western side. She did the salads and burgers, and he came up with the burritos, tacos, and enchiladas. The restaurant walls are written with messages from some of the hundreds of patrons who have eaten there. The writing has always been on the walls in the colourful restaurant.

“When I took over the lease, I agreed I would leave the existing writing and not paint over it. It’s a legacy to Stavros who ran it as a Greek restaurant before me.”

“It’s pretty cool when a guy puts a great comment on Heck Yeah Fraser Lake ... saying he always stops in here on his way through and it is great, great food.”

He admits there are always complaints but “you gotta take those with a grain of salt. Some people have nothing better to do than to complain.”

In the first year, he re-built and added the licenced patio. And last year in 2019, he began to climb out of the hole.

“But, then COVID-19 hit in March and business dropped by 80%. To stay alive, I did take-out and delivery. That really helped and I had to cut the staff down by three, which cut costs as well.”

Doug is hoping to be out of the hole by the end of the year, but he fully understands there are always unexpected replacement costs when things break down.

This year, to stay afloat, they have cut back staff, cut back hours and had to cut back seating. Plus, he has purchased new signs to put on his vehicle and wherever he goes; it draws a lot of attention to the business even when he is out of town.

“I have regulars from Houston to Prince George. We had quite a few of the helicopter pilots eat here in 2018 during the fires, and since then we’ve had some business from some of the gas-line crews.” In talking about training possibilities Doug admits that to become a chef you have to train where you are going to be super, super busy.

“You have to be where it’s so busy you just want to yell! If the customers get mad it’s put on the kitchen. You have to deal with that kind of stress!”

During COVID, the wage subsidy helped for those slow months. Once the federal government began their Canada Emergency Response Benefits (CERB) laid off workers opted to stay home rather than go to work and get paid the same.

“I employ 11 people in a small community. It’s amazing really. But in a bigger centre it would scare me how busy it would get. The second weekend I was open it scared me, I was so busy. In 2019, they were double parking out here. They were lined up to the pole from the Crisis Centre this way.”

It doesn’t freak him out anymore. And he’s adjusted overhead costs to include replacing things like a dishwasher, three microwaves, a meat slicer, four blenders and this summer — new chairs.

Keeping up with the balance sheet is how to stay alive. “We do spreadsheets. Since COVID we do them weekly. I can see trends. In March when it first hit, we took a nosedive. It went down, down, down, before it levelled off. We made \$200 to \$300 a day. Then it leveled off. Then it came back up.”

While they are nowhere close to their normal summer numbers, they have less staff, and we do more take-out and delivery. “Some days it’s 80% take-out. It’s a great atmosphere

and I have no regrets. I just jumped in and said I am going to do this!” Would he ever go back to Mexico to open his little store? The answer is no.

In looking to the future of the town and the possibility of job training and Doug says computer training, environmental, reforestation, fish and wildlife would work here. It would put good local people to work. Any type of training that builds people’s confidence so they can fulfill their dreams and build a career based on a dare.

“Teaching good waitressing skills is as important as teaching someone to cook. You need all that when you run a business like this.”

While there are chefs and there are waitresses, it takes gumption and a great partnership to keep a business running in a small town in the middle of a global pandemic. It’s stories like this that demonstrate how to truly be entrepreneurial. To take the dare, to adjust and downsize when times get tough, but to always follow your dream.

Throughout the north, every town has at least one Chinese restaurant and most of us are accustomed to the menu of deep-fried prawns, chicken chop suey with rice, soy sauce and sesame seeds. When Duggie opened his restaurant in Fraser Lake, many queried if people would even dine there. Within weeks of opening, the naysayers had checked it out, and tried the enchiladas, chimichangas, tacos, the pico de gallo and the pizza, and found every dish to be delicious and memorable.

Since opening in 2017, Duggie has established a very loyal fan base of customers not just for the great taste of his Mexican food, but for his cheery greetings and the friendly atmosphere. Passersby are surprised to find a truly authentic restaurant in a small town, and it is not unusual for customers to make special trips from the city to get a taste of their favourite tacos or enchiladas.

There have been numerous ups and downs and as alluded to earlier, there were nights after all the ink dried, the former ‘yarder’ slash heavy-equipment operator had to question his decision to invest in a small town or Mexico with a population of 128 million.

His story is a true testament to the power of a dare and how it can lead you to living your life’s dream and surviving a work displacement that affected you and 500 of your closest friends.

Mount Currie: Small Business and Entrepreneurism Literacy in Indigenous Community

By Amanda Walker: [Capilano University](#)

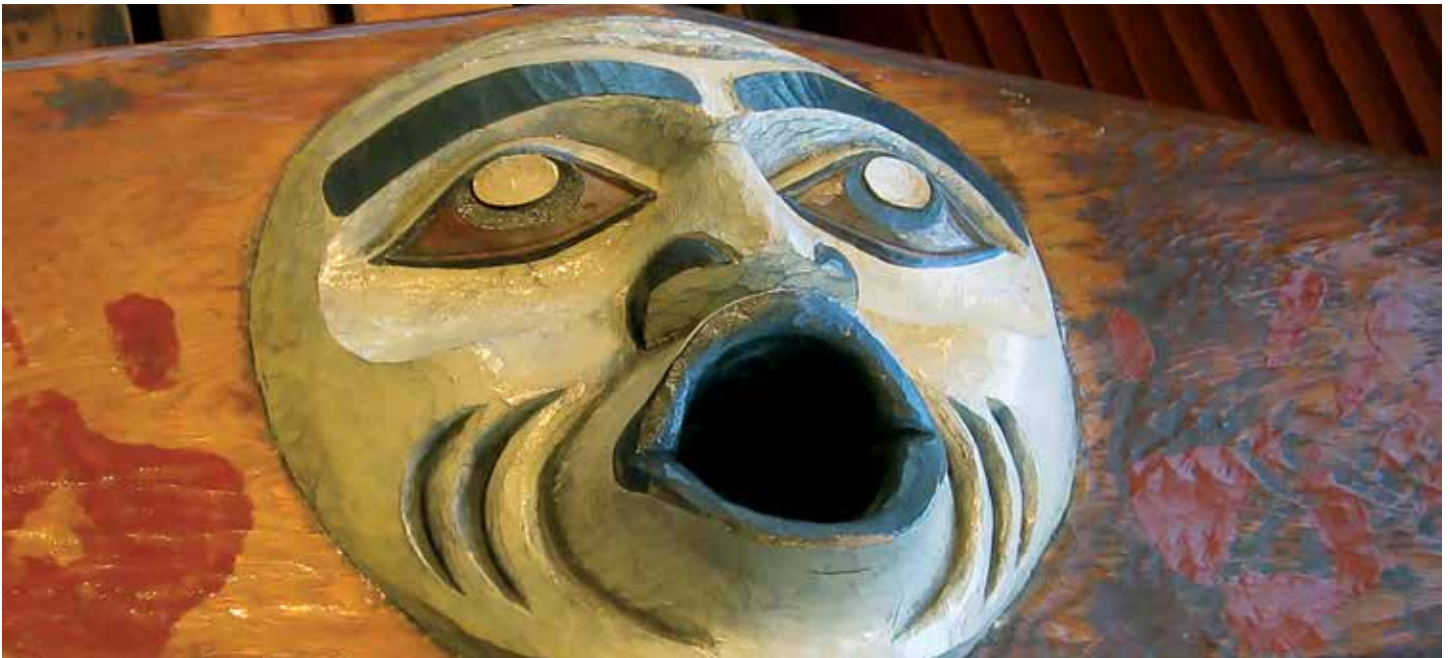
“Going to the mountains is going home.” John Muir

From the Trans-Canada Highway 1 I exit left toward Highway 99 North, the minute I make that left toward home, tension leaves my body. After 14 years in the mountains, the stimulation of the city overwhelms my senses. The stretch of land between Horseshoe Bay and Pemberton, BC is called the Sea-to-Sky Highway. Perhaps one of the most beautiful drives in the world, this area is a place which takes a hold on people. Highway 99 passes through the traditional unceded territory of the Squamish into the territory of the Lil’wat and the St’at’imc First Peoples. I came to live within the traditional territory of the Lil’wat on November 9, 2006.

I arrived here in a way that is similar to many; my husband and I were expecting our first baby and thought raising our children in a ski town would be fun. Born on Vancouver Island, I moved several times as a child and at 14 my American parents moved our family to Houston, Texas. I spend the next 14 years living in large cities in the United States and Canada. At the time of my son’s birth in 2006, my husband and I were living in Toronto. Since graduating from university five years prior, I had been working for a labour union. I was ready to leave the grind and pressures of activist work. My husband had always enjoyed the chill, slow-paced life of a ski town, so we set our sights on Whistler; after a look at the cost of housing we settled on Pemberton, BC, a village with a population of 1500 people. Six weeks after our son was born, we arrived in Pemberton, sight unseen. Having spent my formative years in cities, I can remember being afraid of the mountains. At the time, I did not know I was arriving in the Lil’wat Territory, and I did not have a concept or understanding what it meant to be a settler on this land.



Pemberton Valley near Mount Currie | Photo by Dave Steers



'North Wind' Lil'wat carved mask | Photo by Ruth Hartnup

The Sea-to-Sky corridor refers to a 137 km stretch of highway which includes Horseshoe Bay, Squamish, Whistler and Pemberton, characterized by its incredible beauty and work abundance. The region has more jobs than workers to fill them. Whistler, home to Whistler Blackcomb, is one of the largest ski resorts in North America. Employers depend heavily on foreign labour from the UK, Australia, and Japan to fill these positions.

Mount Currie is a reserve located two and half hours north of Vancouver. It is a remote community situated seven minutes north of Pemberton, BC and 35 minutes north of Whistler. Mount Currie is currently home to 1300 Lil'wat. In this piece, I will refer to Mount Currie as Lil'wat or the territory or Nation. I have worked with the Lil'wat First Nation for close to a decade, initially as an Educational Assistant at Pemberton Secondary School and later, when I gained employment at the Ts'zil Learning Centre (TLC) as an Indigenous Education and Career Facilitator. TLC is owned and operated by the Lil'wat Nation and offers a variety of programs which include academic upgrading, post-secondary academic, trades, and training opportunities for adult learners eighteen and older.

Where the Sea-to-Sky corridor has low unemployment rates, Lil'wat continues to see higher unemployment in comparison to surrounding communities. The Lil'wat Employment and Training department receives funding from Service Canada to address unemployment and underemployment and yet, unemployment persists. This phenomenon was so curious to

me, and through this project, I set out to understand what was happening within the communities in Lil'wat and the St'at'imc Territory.

My discovery was fascinating. While many people may not have traditional employment, a whole economic system operates beneath the surface. One does not have to look very far in the territory to find someone running their "side hustle." These businesses range from selling crafts and Avon, to selling slices of pizza on the Mount Currie Buy and Sell page on Facebook. I would guess that most families have some small businesses operating out of their home. As an Indigenous Education and Career facilitator and in other roles working within the territory, I have had the privilege of learning about these businesses and will share the story of three people who are described under pseudonyms: Penny, Sara and Jason.

Penny Wilson

In March 2020, Penny lost her position as Elders Liaison Worker after her employer, the Southern St'at'imc Health Society, lost their funding for her job. She was in her role for four years and loved the work. "I never understood why people didn't like going to work. I loved my job." Penny drove elders from four remote communities to their medical appointments in Lil'wat, Pemberton, Squamish and Vancouver. Because many of her clients did not have the opportunity to leave their small communities very often, they would always make a day of it. She would stop to shop and run errands or to grab lunch at a favourite spot.

Penny was gutted when she lost her job. Her job loss coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic. While her husband continued to work, they were dependent on two incomes. Her Employment Insurance barely covered their expenses, and she got behind on payments for her son's braces. The financial pressures and inability to support the family took a toll on her mental health. Penny is also a woman who is always on the go. Her son plays soccer in Vancouver, and she's used to being busy and productive.

COVID-19 put an end to soccer, and Penny entered a depression. She came to me in September to discuss her idea for a small business. Initially, we had a conversation about small business in general, and after several meetings, her vision started to take form. She wanted to be her own boss and to give back to the community. She started paying attention to the problems in Lil'wat and the surrounding Indigenous communities and realized there was a real need for a driver. Many people within the community do not have cars, a driver's licence or the ability to pay for car insurance. Public transportation in the area is practically non-existent. While there is a commuter bus, it runs infrequently and is inconsistent. There is one taxi service operating between Pemberton and Mount Currie; however, it is expensive. Many people favour hitchhiking, yet folks were having difficulty getting picked up amid the pandemic.

For these reasons, Penny started offering rides to people in need and charging them a small fee. She would post on the community Facebook page when she was available for hires and to run errands for folks when she headed into Pemberton.

As Penny's business slowly gained momentum, a tragedy took her off course. On October 22, 2020, two men from Lil'wat went missing while mushroom picking. In the fall, many Indigenous people go mushrooming as a way to make extra cash. Immediately Penny put her life on pause. She set up a Facebook page to support the rescue and to help coordinate the search efforts. Within 24 hours, she had 1200 followers. Because all people within Lil'wat are connected, this incident shut down the community for seven days while they searched for the men.

I include this story because employers outside of Indigenous communities may not understand why an employee would take three weeks off work to search and grieve for a person who is not an immediate family member. Penny, who is at present her own boss, did not have to choose between her employer and her need to support the community.

Sara Jackson

I met thirty-year-old Sara Jackson in September 2020, when she came to discuss her ambition to start a small business. As the Education and Career Facilitator at the Ts'zil Learning Centre, community members often inquire about entrepreneurship



Joffre Lakes Provincial Park | Photo by Chris Montgomery

and small business start-up programs. Sara, a wife and mother of two boys aged sixteen and three, had her first baby at just sixteen years old. Without adequate child support, Sara left high school to care for her child. While she does not have a high school diploma, over the years, she has taken advantage of the Nation's training opportunities, including a Building Services Certificate and an Introduction to Cooking program.

Currently employed as a cleaner at the Band Office, Sara longs for more. "I don't want to be a cleaner for the rest of my life. I want more for my family. Finding work in Lil'wat is difficult – there can be a lot of job opportunities but yet some you don't advance in the business, or they're only seasonal jobs which makes it tough in the winter." Transportation, and wages make it challenging to work outside of Lil'wat. "Transit has always been an issue ... you don't get paid enough to make the trip with bus fare, lunch and a babysitter. It's two hours on the bus to Whistler and two hours back home."

Sara dreams of starting a home-based meal delivery service. With rich and fertile soil, the Lil'wat Territory, is a producer of some of the province's most beautiful vegetables. Using local produce and beef, Sara is committed to creating healthy meals for her community. In recent years, she has perfected her baking skills, and her love for food comes through when she speaks of baking bannock, loaves of bread, and desserts. "Since I was a child, I always wanted to be an entrepreneur ... even more as a struggling teen mom. Scraping by and handing out resumés from Mount Currie to North Vancouver, I work hard and go to school to create a business for my Nation, to help those struggling and to find work close to have career at Lil'wat." For Sara, starting a business is about more than making a better life for her children; it is about building capacity within the Nation. This is a sentiment echoed the majority of Indigenous entrepreneurs I speak with, their desire to build and grow their business is related to lifting up the community.

Jason Jones

Jason may be one of the most interesting clients I have worked with to date. He is a 31-year-old man from the N'Quatqua First Nation which is located 35 kilometers north of Mount Currie. With red and black tribal tattoos on his face, his hair cut into a mohawk, he looks like a warrior. Exuding kindness, there is nothing tough about this guy. Jason, a descendent of warriors, has always felt a deep connection to his ancestors. In 2007, he felt a calling to create traditional tomahawks and arrows. He sold his first warclubs to the N'Quatqua First Nation's and, they were given as gifts to the visiting St'at'imc chiefs. When he is not creating, he works at the local steelhead farm. While he has worked there for six years, he's lucky to get a few days a week. "Three years ago, we had 800 lbs of fish orders and now it's 300 lbs."

To supplement his income, Jason sold his work on the powwow circuit. As a vendor, he sold his war-head clubs, medicine bags, chest plates, necklaces, and Indigenous movies like, Dance Me Outside and Smoke Signals. "I buy the movies for the people because they like those movies, and they're hard to find. I make a tiny profit, but I buy them for the people, and they are so happy to have them". This year, Jason was hit hard by the global pandemic. The powwows were suspended and with that he lost the ability to make money. Jason needed support to find a new market for his crafts. Living remotely without access to a vehicle, created an additional barrier to selling his work. Together we looked at ways to move his business to an online platform. Watching him operate a computer was concerning and I worried about his digital literacy skills, but like many of my clients, he can operate his smart phone like a pro. Within a few weeks, he had an eBay account and started posting his work online. Jason had an established following on social media and was comfortable making the shift to online sales. For many, COVID-19 created new opportunities and Jason is one of those people. Because he reached out for help, he was able to make the shift and once the pandemic ends, he will be able to grow his business.

In October, I was confronted with another reality. I knew one of the men who went missing. I met him when I was an Educational Assistant, and he was a student in a grade nine science class. I watched him grow into a man with a beautiful, gentle soul. I sat in a drum circle at Ts'zil the week of the search; I looked around and recognized that many of my colleagues had lost brothers, fathers, husbands, and children. A loss in the community has a ripple effect that cannot be measured. A Lil'wat colleague said of the events, "Yes, the surrounding communities came and supported us. They searched and delivered food, but they do not understand the collective grief and trauma within our territory. They don't understand that while these men may not be our brothers, they represent all of what we have lost." I do not have this lived experience and my privilege has protected me from this deep trauma.



Joffre Lakes outside Mount Currie | Photo by Kelen Loewen on Unsplash

Final Thoughts

“The mountains are calling, and I must go.” John Muir

This project has enabled me to look at my work with a new lens. Indigenous Peoples are inherently displaced workers due to colonization. For over 150 years, they have been trying to fit into a system which was not set up for them to thrive and yet when one takes a closer look, one will see an intricate ecosystem of business that exists. In order to turn these “side hustles” into flourishing businesses people need support, digital literacy, basic bookkeeping, a community of people with a common goal and person-centred wrap around. Penny, Sara and Jason would all benefit from a fundamental small business bridging program.

Reflecting on my work over the years I am left with a few thoughts. There are times when I leave my community, to work in Lil’wat and I feel like an outsider. As a woman with significant privilege, I rarely have the opportunity to feel uncomfortable. When leaving Mount Currie to work outside of community, many Indigenous people have to leave who they are. They are forced to adapt to a new culture, to be on guard and be careful. Working within the community, I have witnessed the “lift.” The lightness that comes when people are free to be themselves.

I moved to Pemberton to raise my children. I still do not ski, nor mountain bike, and when the snow comes, I am mildly irritated until its majesty captures me. My son Sam, who was born with a rare disease, is a person with special needs. Diagnosed at two, my husband and I divorced a year later. There were times when I contemplated leaving and moving closer to my family; however, I could not imagine Sam growing up in another place. At four, I enrolled him at the daycare in Lil’wat. The teachers and staff embraced him and treated him with love and care. He continues to have a deep connection to Lil’wat.

I am grateful to be welcomed to work in Lil’wat and within the St’at’imc Territory. It is a privilege to learn alongside students like Penny, Sara, and Jason and share our collective knowledge. Through colonization, they have been displaced and yet continue to move forward. The resilience showed by each as they navigate the global pandemic and losses within the community is a testament to their commitment to building a sustainable economy within the Nation and a pathway to self-governance.

Port Alice: Remote Industry Towns Need Digital Literacy Programs

By Trish Weatherall: [Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society](#)

Remote Industry Towns Need Digital Literacy Programs

I am both the daughter of pulp mill workers and the life partner of a pulp mill worker. I've lived in two remote Vancouver Island villages whose sole purpose was to house the pulp mill employees and their families. Those mills, in Gold River and Port Alice, are now permanently closed. These villages, like many in Canada's resource industry towns, have fallen into an economic and social depression from which they will likely never recover.

In resource industries, like forestry, mining, and fishing, there is an inevitable boom and bust cycle. In a bust (strikes, layoffs, closures), the thousands of displaced resource industry workers in rural and remote 'one-horse towns' across BC are left with few employment or re-training alternatives.

Often multiple generations of a family are affected. Older workers preparing for retirement have a difficult time finding new employment. Younger workers with families are left with huge mortgages. The housing market crashes. Workers can't relocate for a job because they can't sell their house, and they can't afford to carry two households. There are no local jobs to replace the ones they lost. In fact, more local businesses close in a ripple effect.



Port Alice from the water | Photo by Trish Weatherall

At the 100-year-old Port Alice Neucel Specialty Cellulose pulp mill, about two-thirds of the former workers do not have documented transferable skills, so their job prospects are bleak anywhere. The 'lucky' ones with trades certification now leave their families to work away at camps.

As with most of the forest industry, the Port Alice mill had an older workforce. The BC Council of Forest Industries says that 50% of their workforce will be retiring in the next decade, and WorkBC Statistics from 2016 Census show that 39% of labourers in wood, pulp and paper processing were between the ages of 45-64.

There is a noticeable digital literacy gap for these aging workers that hinders online training possibilities and makes job search more difficult.

There are no adult education programs in the village, and only a few at the North Island College branch in Port Hardy 45 minutes away. There is no consistent basic digital literacy programming available.

In this case study, I'll give examples of several workers displaced from the Neucel Pulp Mill in Port Alice, how these layoffs affected their finances, families and lives, what helped them find new work, what was missing, and what their lives look like now.

The details are gathered from a displaced worker survey and telephone interviews conducted from June through September 2020, information gathered at a roundtable forum with local organization representatives, a 2018 community learning needs survey, as well as my personal experience working with locals to prepare their resumes, and informal conversations with friends and acquaintances throughout my life.

Port Alice background

Port Alice is a remote oceanside village on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in the Regional District of Mount Waddington which covers a land area of 20, 244 km². Known locally as 'The North Island', the region's population in 2016 was 11,035 and has a 27% First Nations population, although only 1% in Port Alice. In the region of Mount Waddington, 24%, or one in four people, are unemployed. Port Alice's unemployment rate is about 10%.

The population of Port Alice has fluctuated from between 2500 residents in the booming 1980s, to 1126 in 2001, to 664 in 2016.

Port Alice originated at the mill site in 1917, but was relocated in 1965 to what was known as Rumble Beach, to get out from under the shadow of the mill's smoke stacks. The town had many amenities including a bowling alley, a dentist, and several shops.

The mill employed Port Alice residents and also many North Island residents from Port Hardy, Port McNeill, and even further south. Other major employers in the region include forestry (in Port Alice the Jeune Landing Logging Division and the Quatsino Dryland Sort employ 80 people, about half reside in Port Alice), aquaculture, a gravel pit operation, Island Health, and School District 85. Tourism is a growing industry, made more difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic. Port Alice struggles with wanting to invite tourists but not having the infrastructure (accommodations, food venues, entertainment) to support them.

As an example of its remoteness, Port Alice is approximately six hours from Victoria, almost three hours from the nearest Tim Horton's in Campbell River, and 45 minutes from its 'Tri-port' communities, Port Hardy to the northeast and Port McNeill to the southeast. At the base of Quatsino Sound on Vancouver Island's west coast, it's approximately 40 km from where survivalists were camped on the 2015 season of History TV's Alone.

There wasn't a paved road until 1976. Mudslides, road closures, power outages, bear and cougar encounters are to be expected in the region.

Lifestyles lean toward rugged outdoor activities like fishing, kayaking and hiking, and hockey is the king of indoor activities. Several NHL pros were made in North Island arenas.

Port Alice pulp mill

The century-old pulp mill, built in 1917 by Colonial Pulp & Paper, is 5 km south of the present-day Port Alice.

The mill went through multiple ownerships – Rayonier, Doman, LaPointe, Western Forest Products, Fulida — and multiple layoffs and shutdowns.

In 2008, the mill was renamed to Neucel Specialty Cellulose when it was acquired by Fulida, a company based in China. Local workers were rehired and some new workers moved into town. The housing market was refreshed, and local businesses and restaurants were able to keep their doors open.

Then, in February 2015, the Neucel mill went into a 'production curtailment', citing three years of unfavourable pulp prices, combined with the high cost of oil, energy consumption and operating chemicals, plus a low US/Canada\$ exchange rate. By November 2015, the company announced temporary layoffs due to market conditions. As the months progressed, more employees were laid off and by March 2016 about 90% of employees were without work – but the mill was not considered shut down permanently.



Lion's Park, Port Alice | Photo by Trish Weatherall

This kept employees hopeful, and likely contributed to people staying in Port Alice for years to wait it out. Some salaried employees continued to work in the office and a handful of union employees were kept on to perform building and equipment maintenance.

The curtailment lasted almost four years, until in February 2019, Neucel announced it was officially permanently closed and laid off the last 20 employees.

The Neucel Cellulose Pulp Mill near Port Alice stopped producing pulp in 2015, laying off more than 400 employees over four years before finally closing forever in 2019.

The mill workers' demographics

Unifor Local 514, the union for mill employees, provided the following Neucel employee demographic estimates:

- 430 employees – 100 salaried – 330 union
- 330 Union employees – 130 trades and skilled – 200 without job-related transferable skills
- 35% women; 65% men
- 75% older workers (age 40-65); 25% younger workers came from recruiting after the 2004 closure/ re-opening in 2006
- approximately two thirds have a digital literacy gap
- education – most have a high school diploma or GED but includes “some % of low-level readers”

The main reason that 200 workers did not have transferrable skills is due to the 100-year-old mill's ancient equipment. The mill had not been upgraded to new technologies, so

these employees have no experience with the technology used in most modern mills. (One employee talked about seeing equipment – a pulp rewinder – in a museum in England, which was still being used in the Port Alice mill!) Operating a machine in the Port Alice mill does not qualify them to operate equipment in newer mills that use updated instrumentation such as programmable logic controllers and energy efficient motor control centres.

Other industry economic impacts

Compounding the economic suffering of the region were the shutdown of the island's last logging train in 2017, an eight-month logging industry strike in 2019 and early 2020, new restrictions on the commercial fishing industry in 2019 that limits income for fishers and tour operators, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

My connection to Port Alice

I lived in Port Alice from September 2011 until March 2017, where my partner was a labourer (machine operator and service crew member) at the Neucel Mill since 2001. I had several work experiences that contributed to my knowledge and understanding of the townspeople, the mill, and the impact of its closure.

I worked part-time at the Scotiabank, at the Village of Port Alice municipal office, then as a literacy outreach coordinator for the Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society and a freelance writer covering North Vancouver Island businesses and lifestyles.

Shortly after the first round of mill layoffs in 2015, I started a side-business providing a resume service in town. I helped 27 former Neucel mill workers create their resumes and

gained some valuable insight into the skills, mindset and needs of these people. More than half were over age 40, almost all have a high school diploma, and about two-thirds were classified as machine operators or labourers without transferable skills.

Lessons learned from resumes: I spent on average two hours in-person with each worker as we discussed their work experience and future job goals in my living room. I saw a lack of self-confidence in many of them, who started our resume session saying: “There’s nothing else I can do.” or “I have no other experience or skills.”

I asked questions that helped them see some of their skillsets. In most cases, once they were able to break down all of their experience, responsibilities and training and see it on paper, they felt more confident about the possibility of finding a new job.

The aging workforce face another barrier to re-employment. Based on these 27 resumes and eight displaced worker surveys and interviews there is a noticeable lack of digital literacy – the ability to use computers, internet and social media.

About 66% of the workers I spoke to are unable to create a resume, search for employment or submit an application or resume online.

Local agency services, supports and research

Currently, North Island Employment Foundations Society (NIEFS) is the provincial contractor for the Vancouver Island North region delivering WorkBC Employment Services. With offices in Port Hardy and a satellite office in Port McNeill along with a dedicated Outreach Coordinator, they connect clients and employers to a range of services including job search tools, skills training, wage subsidy, labour market information, job postings and other workforce development services.

With nearly 35 years in operation as a non-profit registered charity, NIEFS has built extensive partnerships with businesses, other agencies, communities and individuals across the Vancouver Island North region. These partnerships are integral to their ability to assist people to build self-sufficiency through active and sustainable participation in the labour market and assist employers to hire the right people, with the right skills at the right time contributing to a strong, resilient and healthy community.

Over the course of the curtailment at Neucel, NIEFS case managed just under 100 Neucel workers and worked with many more through in-community information sessions and in their self-serve resource areas in Port Hardy and Port McNeill.

NIEFS was a key partner in the Community Transition Team coordinated by the provincial government which was created

specifically for Neucel workers and the community of Port Alice to provide coordinated support during the curtailment. This team met regularly and included: local governments, health agencies, Service Canada, North Vancouver Island Aboriginal Training Society (NVIATS), North Island College (NIC), Community Futures, Industry Training Authority (ITA), the employer (Neucel Cellulose) and the union (Unifor).

As a result, many initiatives to support workers were rolled out including hosting community information sessions ranging from providing general information and resources to targeting areas of interest such as job search support, self-employment, and re-training. Each information session often included a number of organizations with different roles. For example: the information session focused on re-training included NIEFS, NIC, and the ITA so we could all speak to the services and supports available. We also held drop-in times where workers could just drop by the Port Alice community centre to meet with staff on site.

Other initiatives that came about from the work of the Community Transition Team included:

- The one-time federally funded Barriers to Balance program which was a partnership between North Island College and NIEFS that was offered in the fall of 2016 to upgrade workers essential skills, including digital literacy with all participants finding employment upon completion. Geared to move selected social assistance clients back into the workforce, Barriers to Balance was 120 hours of class time plus an unpaid local work placement of up to six months.

Barriers to Balance classes included:

- Career and Job Readiness
- Worksite Diversity
- Conflict Resolution
- Office Procedures
- Navigating Windows and email applications
- Bookkeeping for Beginners
- Sage 1 Computerized Accounting
- Word Level 1
- Excel Level 1
- The one-time federally funded New Directions for Older Workers program offered in Port Alice by NIC in 2016 was available to unemployed people from ages 55-64. The full-time 3-month program ran from May 9 – July 29, 2016, Monday-Thursday from 9 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. in Port Alice and Port Hardy.

New Directions for Older Workers curriculum included:

- English/Math Assessment & upgrading
- Career Exploration and Assessment
- Navigating through Change
- Employability skills – time management, goal setting, communication, customer service
- Job Search Strategies – resumes, cover letters, networking, interviews
- Microsoft Computer Training, including Word and Excel
- Managing conflict, workplace diversity
- Online Skills Training
- Team Workshops
- Self-Employment Options
- The Resource Workers cohort program at NIEFS in 2017. Although this program was offered out of the Campbell River office a number of Neucel workers participated in the month-long program that included everything from essential skills and digital literacy to career planning and transition.

During the production curtailment, the BC Ministry of Advanced Education also provided additional funding to support a number of training opportunities through NIC on the North Island including: Marine; Coastal Forest; Industry Certifications; and Building Services Worker in which some Neucel workers participated.

Another successful project that came from the North Island Coordinated Workforce Strategy, in a joint project with the Workforce Planning and Action Committee (WPAC) and the Mount Waddington Regional District, led to funding through the Provincial Rural Dividend fund to create the Vancouver Island North Training and Attraction Society (VINTAS) in an effort to create a Centre of Excellence for Forestry Training in Woss (a village approximately 30 minutes south of Port McNeill). To date, three cohorts of 12 students have completed this 12-week program with a majority finding employment.

Economic and societal impacts

Right from the initial curtailment, the local economy suffered a trickle-down effect as people bought less to balance their loss of income and prepare for uncertainty. Local restaurants and other small businesses teetered on bankruptcy, reduced hours or closed altogether. In Port Alice, the main full-service restaurant, The Victorian, closed in 2016. The Quatsino Hotel — which had a lounge and a restaurant — and the town's only convenience store closed in 2017. Scotiabank — the town's only bank — closed in late 2019. The nearest bank is now 45 minutes away.

The Legion stepped in to provide a morning café run by volunteers, so that people had somewhere to meet and have a cup of coffee or breakfast. But the Legion is plagued by a Canada-wide drop in membership, and volunteers can only do so much before burning out. The grocery store opened a snack bar with some seating in the store and a pizza shop. However, there is not enough business to make a profit, and it's more of a service to the community.

A few years into the mill curtailment, the cheap accommodation rentals brought social assistance recipients. But the small community doesn't have the support systems in place. There are no government agencies, no soup kitchens or daily food banks (though it does now get some support from Port Hardy food banks through the school). The village has seen a noticeable increase in mental health crises and crime in the past two or three years.

The low population contributes to a nearly annual fight to keep health and police services.

What are they doing now?

The Neucel workers, more than 400 of them, were all caught in the same storm of the curtailment/closure but were in different boats.

Several Port Alice families relocated to Mackenzie, BC, to work at one of four mills in the area. In a familiar *déjà vu*, in July 2019, three sawmills closed, and the pulp mill shut its doors in 2020. One family has since moved to another mill area of BC and one family has returned to Port Alice, where they had an unsold home they could live in and are now looking for work.

Some Port Alice residents have found lower-paying jobs in aquaculture or labour in the region, but still outside of Port Alice. Some, who had stayed hoping the mill would re-open, are now hoping another industry will come along to take its place. Some took early retirement after an exhaustive and fruitless search for employment.

The lucky ones, usually ticketed tradespeople, usually men, find work away at oil fields, mines and dam projects. They leave behind family to now become part-time single mothers and fatherless children.

The luckier ones, mainly the younger workers – free to move, digital friendly and willing to retrain – were able to start new lives with new work in new places.

Here are a few of their stories. (*Names have been changed and ages are current. They were five years younger at the first mill layoff in 2015).

Mike, 55

Mike* worked at Neucel for 15 years and planned to retire from the mill in another 15 years. Due to the mill's lack of technology, much of his knowledge and skills are not transferrable. He is a homeowner, so it made financial sense for him to stay in Port Alice. He has found lower-paying part-time work, but nothing comparable to his former mill wages.

He has upgraded Math and First Aid through an EI program and has also attained his Trucker Class 1 certificate.

His frustration is around the lack of support services available to him and other workers. He was unaware of any information sessions or services offered in the region. (Although WorkBC and NIEFS did provide some, as mentioned earlier).

Mike has low digital literacy skills, but he does use an iPhone for emails and taking photos. I helped Mike create a resume.

Cole, 43

Cole* is a tradesperson in his early 40s. He found work at a comparable wage within a few months of his Neucel layoff, but it comes with sacrifices.

"I was blessed to have a trade apprenticeship," he says. "But there is nothing I can do in town."

Cole now works in Alberta, doing 12-hour shifts for 16 days on and 16 days off. He flies back and forth at his own cost. "My first three days of work are free due to the cost of travel."

He lives at the work camp for those 16 days, where the best he can say about it is that they are well fed.

The biggest cost, he says, "Is being away from my family. I've been away for deaths in the family and my boy's education. I'm not there to support my wife. It's really hard on everyone."

He is competent using the internet, email and social media but needed assistance creating his resume.



Neroutsos Inlet | Photo by Trish Weatherall

Jim, 58

Jim* was a machine operator at the Neucel mill. He is a homeowner and single. "I can't afford two places – that's the big killer."

He has remained in Port Alice and says he gave up trying to find work two years ago and thinks ageism may play a factor.

"I applied for job after job after job. Is it my age?"

He also felt that the Neucel mill "had a chain around my ankle" after being laid off, when he was expected to be available for a callback or lose seniority and any possibility of severance. In fact, the mill did recall 32 workers, including Jim, in August 2018 for several weeks.

Jim used as many local resources as he could find. He attended a WorkBC information session and worked with NIEFS on his resume and job search skills.

He also participated in North Island College's New Directions for Older Workers program in 2016 in Port Alice and Port Hardy, which he felt was extremely helpful in upgrading his job search, computer skills and soft skills. He attended the full-time program for months in 2016. He says it helped him connect to other unemployed older workers and gave him confidence in his digital skills and his potential to find new employment.

He did his best to upgrade his skills, attended local job fairs and training opportunities, although he says most training he was interested in (such as an aquaculture or transport driving program) was three hours away in Campbell River. He took a janitorial course offered locally and a security course through the Justice Institute.

Exhausted from the job search and rejection, he ended up taking an early pension.



Closed Port Alice mill | Photo by Trish Weatherall

Sam, 45

Sam* was a 30-year-old mill worker when he was caught in the 2004 shutdown.

“I thought I had a job for life. What am I going to do now?”

At the time, Sam was a labourer without a trade or certification.

A homeowner, married with three children in school, Sam couldn't afford to pay his mortgage. And he couldn't sell his house because there were no buyers. Even if he could find a job at another mill, he couldn't move because he would have to pay rent in the new place in addition to his Port Alice home mortgage. He found lower-paying work locally, which at least gave him a reason to get up in the morning.

When he was re-hired by new mill owners in 2006, Sam applied for and achieved his millwright apprenticeship.

In 2015, he was prepared with experience and a resume and just before the first round of layoffs, he found work in Alberta's oil industry. He works three weeks on and three weeks off, leaving his wife to handle all their family responsibilities for half of the time. He has mid-range digital skills, with the ability to surf the internet, access social media and send emails. I assisted him with his initial resume in 2016 and his wife updated it for additional job opportunities. He would take a local job if one in his field were available.

Carl, 69

Carl*, a 4th Class Power Engineer, had worked at the Neucel mill for eight years and was six months from retirement age when the mill laid him off in 2015. A single person, he had planned to work beyond age 65. Now he felt financially strapped and was “left with a pile of bills.”

“I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under my feet.”

This wasn't the first job loss Carl had experienced.

“My whole work history is full of closures across Canada. Every place I ever work has shut down. I've lost more than one house.”

Although he worked with me on customized resumes and cover letters to apply for nine different jobs, he has not worked for five years. He feels agism may be a factor. He recently applied for a low-paying (\$18/hour) security job at the mill site but doesn't expect to get it.

He is angry and fed up with the job search struggle and the high competition for low-paying jobs. Most of the anger is directed at the mill owners, who left the door open to possible rehiring by not officially closing for almost five years.

“The company should have been up front instead of stringing us along.”

Carl has few computer skills, although he does use email. He says he would have been interested in career counselling or training but was unaware of what was available.

Darren, 51

My partner was a machine operator at the mill from 2001-2012 and then on the Service Crew from 2012-2015. He was also caught in both shutdowns.

A few months after Neucel's initial curtailment in November 2015, he found employment locally as the groundskeeper for our strata complex, at about half his mill wage. He supplemented that with a part-time job in Port Alice's only grocery store. These two jobs still didn't add up to a full-time mill job.

In 2017 we moved to Denman Island, where we were fortunate to have family with room for us, where we could live for free while still paying the mortgage in Port Alice.

We both work as independent contractors and earn about 50% of our previous combined income.

He does yard work and clam digging on a family commercial lease; I have multiple small contracts for writing, editing and promotional work, which I supplement with gardening work and clam digging.

We finally sold the strata in July 2020 at 25% less than its original price in 2008.

Darren has limited digital skills. He uses an iPhone for email and social media and is able to Google information but is not comfortable with apps, updates and online forms..

The literacy-related problems

The low-tech nature of the 100-year-old Port Alice mill meant that employees don't have training on the type of equipment used to run modern mills.

There is limited education and training available in the Mount Waddington region through North Island College in Port Hardy and Community Futures in Port McNeill, and nothing in Port Alice.

Factors affecting retraining opportunities include awareness, availability and access, transportation, cost, cost of living while going to school, lack of digital skills, fear and initiative.

Lack of digital literacy reduces their ability to search for jobs, apply online or create a resume.

The social-economic problems

- **Mental health.** The financial concerns of being out of work with no foreseeable local job options affect families and create mental health issues like stress, depression, anxiety, and anger. The suicide rate in the Mount Waddington region is more than double the standard Mortality Ratio at 2.7, compared to 1.21 for Island Health and 1.00 for the Province.
- **Health is affected by reduced living conditions and costly or lack of access to healthy food.**
- **Food security is an ongoing issue.** There is no ongoing food bank in Port Alice, but there is a community garden. Due to shipping and transportation costs to the remote community, grocery prices tend to be higher than on southern Vancouver Island, and items less fresh. Regional food banks and community farmers' markets are available in Port Hardy and Port McNeill.
- **High drug and alcohol use.** The Mount Waddington region has a high rate of alcohol and drug use that impacts finances, work and family. According to the 2015 Vancouver Island North Health Profile, North Island residents purchased an average of 15.8 L of alcohol each annually, compared to 10.9L for all of Island Health and 9 L for BC residents. The added pressure of unemployment and the current stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic has likely increased many people's use of drugs and alcohol.
- **Family disruption.** As more men and women must travel far away for work at oil fields and other large-scale projects, families are split up for large portions of the year, the parent left behind has added responsibilities and stresses and the children are raised in single-parent homes for the majority of the time.

Support for regular digital literacy programming

The Communications Technology Council in 2016 estimated that around 84% of jobs in Canada currently require the use of a computer and basic technical skills.

In addition to what we know about the Neucel employees' digital literacy gaps, there are several other indicators of a need for digital literacy programming in the general Mount Waddington population.

In April 2018, the Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society conducted an online Community Learning Needs Survey in which 98 residents across the region participated. Respondents were asked to choose the top three learning programs that they felt were needed in their community.

Results showed that almost 60% of respondents felt that digital literacy was the top priority for adults (age 19-64).

*It should be noted that because this was an online survey, promoted on social media, it eliminated participation of potential respondents that do not use technology, and therefore the number is likely higher.

Overall, the North Island residents' technology savvy may be even more behind than those in urban areas simply due to accessibility and cost. For years the Mount Waddington Regional District and local governments and businesses lobbied for improved bandwidth and wireless coverage. Port Hardy and Port McNeill were finally connected to Telus fibreoptics in 2018. And while Port Alice still does not have fibreoptic connectivity, it did finally achieve highspeed internet in August 2016 through Brooks Bay Cable internet service, which charges by usage.

Based on the demographics that 75% of Neucel workers are over age 40 and the estimation that 66% lack digital literacy skills, an accessible and easy-to-follow digital literacy program could make an impact on a wide range of issues, including improving their ability to seek work and attain a job.

There is also a misconception that younger workers, under age 40, are digitally literate. While many may know how to surf the net or social media pages, they are often not familiar with how to effectively use email, navigate word processing or spreadsheet programs, or use online communication tools like Zoom and Skype.

Anecdotal reports from NIEFS and the Mount Waddington Health Network also indicate that they see a low-level of digital literacy in Mount Waddington residents.

I received this statement of support from the Mount Waddington Health Network:

“As a network of more than 250 people, Governments, organizations and First Nations, the Mount Waddington Health Network has been doing a deep dive into understanding the role of the key determinants of health in our community, and juxtaposing them against some of the more challenging truths about rural life such as the question “Why do rural populations, on average, live shorter lives than our urban counterparts?” And we query: “Why, despite living in a resource-rich environment, do we still have 24% unemployment and the second highest rate of child poverty in the Province.

In accessing statistics and qualitative and quantitative data, we can draw concrete parallels that indicate education, literacy, and access to technology services are root causes of many rural health issues. We see a snowball effect impacting the most vulnerable in our communities – without access to a good education or technology, job options are limited. Without a good job, finances are limited. Without stable or adequate finances, access to nutritious food is limited. Without high quality food, health suffers – and the documented correlations go on.

In 2020, education and literacy have become synonymous with “Digital Literacy, COVID-19 intensified this situation. Job searches, health services, banking, and basic communication is all happening online. We know that our displaced workers, aging workforce, and underserved community members have trouble in accessing all aspects of technology and we need a solution. We are supportive of initiatives that help us support people with low levels of digital literacy, and we will support and partner on initiatives and programs that help our community have equitable access to technology. It is needed.”

In 2019, the MWHN helped coordinate a digital training for seniors at the Port Alice branch of Vancouver Island Regional Libraries as a drop-in program with one-on-one assistance. Training was tailored for users’ specific needs and was implemented largely to address the Scotiabank closure, to get seniors more comfortable with online banking.

The Vancouver Island Regional Libraries branches do have computers available and staff can provide some support to users, however, there are currently no basic digital literacy classes in the region on a regular basis.

Programs that included similar digital literacy and employment related goals like Barriers to Balance and New Directions for Older Workers showed promise but were one-time funded. About two dozen Mount Waddington region residents accessed and benefited from the local

programs. There are hundreds, possibly thousands more that could benefit from a consistent, locally available – and free – beginners digital literacy program.

Conclusions

Workers in remote, single industry resource towns have depended on high-paying, low-education jobs, and fully expected to work at that job until retirement. The remoteness and low population make it difficult to bring a viable variety of training to the community that would result in similar high-income jobs. The lack of digital literacy skills makes online training intimidating and unlikely.

Without access to education possibilities, they are doomed to any low-paying job they can find or to social assistance. The lack of digital knowledge also creates a barrier to navigating government services online.

North Vancouver Island was already leading the provincial statistics for mental health and addiction issues, but the current economy, lack of jobs and lack of training opportunities, combined with the new pandemic limitations that have closed many businesses and post-secondary institutions, is likely to show even further increases in drug and alcohol use and mental health issues at the next reporting period.

Increased digital literacy skills could also help workers access health and mental health services, including online counselling and support groups.

And finally, low digital literacy skills impede the job search process. There are many major job search sites as well as local job boards like NIEFS’ Job Bank. Jobs may also be advertised on local community social media boards, like Port Alice New & Views on Facebook. The old concept of ‘pounding the pavement with a resume in hand’ doesn’t work well today. Large employers have full-scale digital hiring processes that require online applications and pre-sort and prioritize applicants based on key words in the resume. Even small businesses expect resumes to be emailed to them and might further check out applicants on LinkedIn or social media.

The benefits of having some digital skills could have made the situation easier and led to more productive outcomes for the Neucel employees. A basic digital literacy program could pave the way for learners to be more comfortable with technology and to take risks by venturing into new ways of using technology for continuing education, access to health and government services, and connection to family and community.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have made these skills more important than ever before.

Quesnel: Learning Resources for New Paths to Success in Resource-based Community

By Rebecca Beuschel: [Literacy Quesnel Society](#)

In the summer of 1996, I caught my first glimpse of Quesnel from the window of a Greyhound bus. I was two-thirds of the way through my year-long work and travel visa and was doing what many Australians under the age of 30 do, wandering from seasonal job to seasonal job while exploring a foreign land. Quesnel did not strike me as particularly special, but was a necessary stop because it was the only way I could reach my actual destination of Bowron Lake. As I sat in the passenger seat of my new employer's truck and drove along highway 26, I became mesmerized very quickly by the stunning scenery all around me. It was so vastly different from what I had already seen in Canada and it was beautiful. Twenty-five years later, Quesnel is my hometown. It is where I have shopped, voted, played, worked, volunteered, raised kids and animals, cemented friendships, and been happily married for half my life.



Mill across the Fraser River from Quesnel | Photo by Rebecca Beuschel

Working in the literacy field is my chosen path. It has inspired and frustrated and fulfilled me in thousands of ways. Being involved with the Displaced Workers Project has given me time to reflect on what it means to be displaced from the workforce. The knee-jerk-reaction image is one of a person who has lost their job due to downsizing, or limited production, or lack of funding, or curtailment of resources, and who then seeks employment in the traditional or typical methods of scrolling through ads and responding to relevant ones. But working on this project has taught me there are diverse approaches to re-entering the workforce. Here are two stories of resilience, perseverance, and success. All words in quotation marks are the direct words of our case study participants (we have called them Case A and Case B).

CASE STUDY A

Case A is a hard-working, determined, self-driven entrepreneur. A few years ago, he was working at a fast-food restaurant and feeling dissatisfied with his outlook. He did not want to be working in that environment into his 40s and 50s. He decided to make a drastic change. Rather than go and job seek for what was already being advertised, he decided to start a business of his own. He knew the rural community he lived in did not have regular, reliable access to garbage disposal services, so he decided to launch his own business.

Case A faced several barriers. He was not a “good student.” He did not do particularly well in school. He was not a “natural” reader. He had difficulty comprehending from seeing the words alone. But he understood how things worked and the sequence of actions to reach a goal. He thought about what he wanted to do and what would give him satisfaction and he came up with a plan. He sought help from WorkBC employment counsellors and the Community Futures loans manager, and essential skills support from Literacy Quesnel Society.

For his business idea to come to fruition, he needed to obtain his Class 3 driver’s license. He studied the workbook and sat the learner’s test. And he failed. He did it again and he failed. He sought help from a tutor at Literacy Quesnel and together they worked through each question at a pace conducive to his individual learning style. The two of them took apart each question so that he understood what the question was asking, so that he could answer it from different perspectives. He sat the test several more times, over a period of 18 months, before he passed. Once he was an ‘L’ driver, he registered for lessons. Once the instructor felt he was ready, he booked a time for his test. He failed it. Due to scheduling conflicts, he had to drive over 400 kms to the location of the next available testing site. His dad went with him as his support person and fellow driver. Again, he failed the test. He rebooked and a few months later his dad went with him again, this time driving



“Case A” in one of his trucks and the author | Photo by Nancy Lillienweiss.

the 400 kms+ in wintery conditions. He never lost sight of his end goal. He made good use of his support network: his family, his friends, his tutor, and his WorkBC employment counsellor. His mom helped him organize appointments, often adjusting her schedule so he could use her car to get forth and back. Each time he failed, he would smile and say, “I’ll get there one of these days,” and he did. With his license in hand, he went back to Community Futures and pursued his dream of launching his own business.

Case A’s company is now flourishing. Thinking outside the proverbial box, he was able to read the market, apply for permits to operate in areas of the region that were not being served, and he adjusted the pick-up process to make it easier for people with accessibility issues to leave their garbage out for him. He developed a regular schedule for customers and was always on time. This is important to him still; he strives to provide reliable, punctual service. He gave his customers the option to pay by cheque or by e-transfer. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, his clientele doubled as people looked for ways to access garbage disposal service with minimal physical contact. Case A is currently buying his third truck and business is booming.

CASE STUDY B

Case B’s story provides a unique perspective on what it means to be a working person. Three years ago, Case B “fired” his employer. His decision to take this action was years in the making.

Case B has varied work experience. Mostly, he has worked in security, in IT and as a driver. He worked for years in an Information Technology department. During a sale and a subsequent restructuring of the company, many people lost

their jobs. Case B was one of the people shuffled over to the newly restructured company. During the transition phase, when safety plans and policies were being discussed, he started asking questions, mostly about safety protocols. He describes himself as “not one to sit back and wait to see what happens.” Sometimes his questions are uncomfortable, he thinks, but he asks them anyway. He was let go shortly after he asked too many questions in a meeting with the “new” crew. He received a severance package, but even with a payout, he asked himself the question, “Personally, how do you cope?” He knew his severance pay was not enough to live on for more than a few months. He might make it stretch one year at most. He asked himself what he should do. He had walked away from a career in IT, in a small town where people talk and reputation matters, and from an industry he knew well, but he was not suited to an environment where safety is ignored.

Together with his wife, he looked at what they had and where they could save money. They sold their home and moved further away to a more rural area. He looked at what work experience he had accumulated and how he could capitalize on those skills and that experience. He found a job working for a company where he utilized all of his skills; his technology knowledge, his security training, his safety experience, and he worked there for eight years; until he “fired” his employer three years ago because he was tired of the poor management.

During the chaos and craziness of the COVID-19 pandemic, he started reflecting on his working life and contacted me to share his musings. The advice he can offer to people looking for work is this:

- Look at the skills you have. Most of Case B’s life, he applied as an employee. Now, he realizes, he should have applied as a seller of his skills “you have skills, skills they want, skills to sell.”
- Find something you can put your heart into and think of ways to get yourself out of a situation.
- Connect with community, your community.
- It is not necessarily bad to leave a job.

Case B talked about times that were hard. He had times without food, so he would barter services for food. He had to get creative and take chances on unconventional ways to make a living. When he fired his boss three years ago, he reframed it into “early retirement.” Sometimes success is a matter of changing our attitude.

He is now doing home renovations to keep himself afloat. He is applying a lifetime of knowledge and skill gathering, alongside a positive attitude, to create work for himself. When we talked, he had just completed a major electrical upgrade

on a house. He learned to be a perfectionist from his former boss. So, even a situation of not enjoying the management style was able to teach him something.

Case B has two children. His daughter is multi-lingual, has studied as an exchange student, completed her university degree and is now translating linguistics in Europe. His son is the hands-on type. He loves gaming and skateboarding. Case B encouraged him to look at what skills he gained from those activities and transfer them to real-world applications. Through skateboarding his son learned balance, perseverance, the value of practice. Through gaming he learned how to focus and has applied the depth of understanding complex systems to his workplace skills.

Case B had a tough time at school. He had a “hard, Catholic upbringing” and now at 65 years old feels “strong, confident, outspoken, brave.” The best advice he can offer is “be good enough for you.” When he was responsible for selecting workplace students who wanted to gain experience, he always chose from the middle – he never went with the best, he never went with the worst. He chose from the middle. We don’t need to be experts at things, he says, just good enough to get the job done well. Persevere. Be You! Let go of failed dreams – failure will happen but don’t dwell on it. Find the positive. Sell your skills. The employee-employer relationship is a balance of skills, needs, and wants.

Case B is happy working in house renovations, living and farming with his wife, advising his kids, and being his own boss.

As with most of the literacy projects over the past two decades, the Displaced Workers Project has challenged my ideas and stretched my thinking. Through the networking and surveying activities of the project, I have met a diverse array of people and have heard snippets of their stories. Literacy is one of the constant threads in a person’s life and living with low literacy skills often presents overwhelming barriers. Being involved with this project has afforded me the privilege of witnessing the resiliency and tenacity of individuals as they weather hardship and learn to adapt to new circumstances.

Sooke: Delivering Business and Digital Skills in Community with Evolving Economy

By Sarah Richer: Edward Milne Community School Society

#MeanwhileinSooke

I would like to underscore that Sooke is a community with a strong sense of place. Historically, Sooke has been seen as a wilder and more unruly place by other communities on South Vancouver Island – Sooke residents were the outsiders on the South Island. As an isolated and traditionally impoverished community, initiatives in our area over the years have been developed by volunteers, and a strong local sentiment remains today that Sooke is a community that takes care of its own.

This sense of place has transmuted itself today into a pride in its history as the working-class community of Victoria. For example, driving around Sooke you can't help but notice the ubiquitous local bumper sticker, VOS 1N0. People wear this bumper sticker on their car to signal they are from Sooke, and it is my belief, to signal their pride in their community. Another example is the local company 642 Wear which makes clothing emblazoned with 642. This harkens back to when people had telephone land lines, and in Sooke, everyone's telephone number began with 642. It was a custom when you gave out your phone number to only give the last four digits, and as a population migration occurred, and Sooke grew, giving out the last four digits of your phone number remained a way for locals to separate themselves from newcomers, who didn't have a 642. What does this represent? It is my contention that these are indicators of a very strong sense of place for Sooke residents, which is reinforced by relative geographic isolation, and a history of lack of services and poverty which has necessitated ingenuity and community resilience. Today people in Sooke are able to commute (with difficulty) for work into Victoria, but express their pride of place as a marker of identity on their cars and in clothing. Residency in Sooke could be seen as being a part of a certain tribe.



East Sooke Park | Photo by Brandon Godfrey

The lay of the land

Sooke is a small seaside community located on the southwest tip of Vancouver Island. It is reached by one two-lane highway, approximately 38 km distance from Victoria, the closest major urban area with health and other extended services. The Sooke region is comprised of the District of Sooke, with a population of roughly 13,000, and outlying areas including East Sooke, Otter Point, Jordan River and Port Renfrew. The District of Sooke is located on the traditional territory of the T'Souke First Nations, who have two reserves in the area. The town amenities include a library, a recreation centre, a museum, a family resource centre, an employment centre, retail stores, four elementary schools, one middle school and one secondary school/ community school. The total population for the region is approximately 17,000 across a 90-kilometer span of mostly coastline and forest (Statistics Canada Census, 2016).

Port Renfrew is the last community at the end of Highway 14. It is another tourism-based economy and is both the starting location for the famous West Coast Trail and a number of fishing charters and adventure touring businesses. This area is the ancestral home to the Pacheedaht First Nations.

In my interview with Mayor Tait, she explained that the primary focus in municipal government at present is to develop the local economy in Sooke, and that the principal mandate of Sooke's new Chief Administrative Officer is to increase local economic development. Sooke has recently acquired the fibre optic cabling that would support this initiative. In addition, the community has a burgeoning craft sector, with examples such as the award-winning Sheringham Distillery, Sooke Brewing and Sooke Oceanside Brewery, several cannabis retail providers and the local Canna Park for micro-growers to service the craft/artisanal marijuana market creating small pockets of employment.

Alongside this burgeoning craft industry in Sooke, the culinary industry is also evolving and growing in Sooke. The Sooke Harbour House played a seminal role in creating a local food movement across North America. After their tenure at the Sooke Harbour House, many former Sooke Harbour House chefs chose to settle down in Sooke and start businesses, including Edward Tuson of our local butchery, Black Market Meats, Ollie Kienast and Brooke Fader of our local fine dining restaurant, Wild Mountain, and others. All these industries are supported by the local citizens, but they also depend on tourism. Traditionally in Sooke, this tourism has centred on recreational fishing. Finding a way to reinvigorate the local recreational sport fishing economy is an important piece in sustaining Sooke's tourism economy.

Geography and infrastructure

In 2019, I began graduate studies in Communications at Royal Roads, and I closed my two businesses, teaching yoga and the skincare company Wild Hill Botanicals, to begin a contract as literacy outreach coordinator (LOC) for Sooke. A native Montrealer, I have lived in Sooke for 20 years. During this time, I have watched the community grow and have observed its characteristics change alongside this growth. In my time as a resident here, and as LOC, I have observed a distinct need for literacy support, as well as digital literacy and media literacy for parents of young children in Sooke. For example, Sooke region youth do not transition into post-secondary at the same rate as the rest of the province (Assessing Post-Secondary Education Needs in the West Shore, 2019). With long commutes to the city for their jobs, many Sooke parents have told me they find it hard to make time to read to their children, and really appreciate the author visits I organize at the library because they find their kids are getting addicted to screens, one of the consequences of which is that encouraging reading as an activity becomes more difficult. Parents have also relayed to me their alarm at how "addicted" their kids are to their tablets and screen time for amusement in the evenings, which suggests to me the need for teaching media and digital literacy awareness and good consumption habits.

In recent years Sooke's small community characteristics, relatively affordable housing market, and proximity to Victoria have made it an attractive option for young families. This population surge of families seeking a quieter life and more affordable housing has occurred alongside Sooke's ongoing shift from a resource-based community, with commuters, retirees and young families becoming the predominant demographic. It is fair to say this is a community undergoing rapid development and transition from rural area to outlying suburb, and this has created tensions.

In the last century, the mill was the primary employer in Sooke. It shut sometime between 1983-1986. Today, Sooke has several small and medium-sized employers. Much of Sooke's logging sector workforce moved away after the mill closure, or moved into the trades, so forestry layoffs (perhaps not including logging truck drivers) have not really been impacted our region. The largest local employer today is likely School District # SD62, followed by various health services and medical services providers, and the service sector. The service sector includes local grocery stores, hardware stores, gas stations, hospitality and restaurants, all of which hire mostly minimum wage/subsistence level remuneration positions. The Municipal District office, which at present employs close to 50



Sooke Basin | Photo by Michal Klajban

employees, ranging from administration, finance, wastewater plant operators, and park maintenance offers a living wage to its employees, and is a desired employer. Seaparc, the local recreation and leisure complex, also offers a living wage to its employees.

According to Statistics Canada, the West Shore, including the Sooke region, is one of the fastest growing regions in Canada. The area has experienced a population increase of 49% between 2001 and 2016, with the District of Sooke experiencing population growth of 13.7% in that same period. Additional growth of 27% is projected for the next decade (Assessing Post-Secondary Education Needs in the West Shore, 2019, p. 9). One consequence of this rapid development in the region is a serious traffic problem. There is a project underway to enhance sections of the one highway which is the only access to Langford and Victoria.

Indeed, within Sooke in pre-COVID-19 2020, as per Sooke city councillor Jeff Bateman, 71% of Sooke residents commuted to Victoria for work. There is a single bus route along the one highway which services Langford/Colwood with connections to Victoria. The daily commute to Victoria takes 60-90 minutes during rush hour. However when accidents occur that single highway can be shut for hours. In my meetings with survey participants, concerns about travel on our sole highway were mentioned several times: “It’s too stressful working in Victoria, because you have no control over whether you can actually make it in to work on any given day. If there’s an accident the highway it could just be shut for hours and you’re not going anywhere, and then your employer says I knew I shouldn’t have hired a Sooke person,” said Leree Docherty. Public engagement on the upcoming roadwork project

showed people who self-identified as commuters were the majority of responders, and their primary concerns about this and other projects were an increase in traffic and commuting times (see Appendix).

The winding, two lane highway that services Sooke was built in 1953. It was not built to service the volume of commuters it experiences today. In addition, further west of Sooke, forestry extraction and logging industries continue, with raw logs travelling through Sooke to further processing or shipment sites, meaning the highway is also heavily used by logging trucks. Tragically, every year there are logging truck accidents on this highway, trucks topple over and spill their load, resulting in injury and highway closure that creates traffic standstills on the highway for many kilometres. These events strand people away from home, strand children on school buses, and effectively cut off Sooke from the rest the Island (see Appendix).

The population growth the community has experienced without adequate infrastructure investment is making commuting from Sooke increasingly onerous as well as dangerous. This is a serious issue. In February, I interviewed Mayor Tait, the District of Sooke mayor, and she relayed to me her take on the issue: “There is not enough local employment in the region” (Richer, 2020).

The needs of women seeking employment training

In my work as LOC, I have come to know that it is common in Sooke to have a family member who “works away.” As oil and gas, as well as forestry, faces downturns the entire household in many homes falling on the shoulders of the women who stay home while their partner works away. Many of these women work the subsistence wage level positions in the local

grocery stores, retail shops and restaurants. It is my belief that an important aspect of best program design and meeting the needs of Displaced Workers in Sooke would be to conduct some focused research on the needs of local women in our area, in particular those who are underemployed at present and struggling. Questions to ask include will women reach out for help more, or less? As the commute to Victoria becomes increasingly untenable, what promising fields and occupations that women are more drawn to actually exist in Langford and the West Shore? Focusing skills development on employment outcomes in Langford and the West Shore will be important in creating successful innovation that gets people sustainable employment.

The characteristics of Sooke are such that we see many women still fulfilling most of the family and childcare duties while also finding themselves needing to work to sustain the family overhead. In these circumstances, particularly now that we are in pandemic for the foreseeable future, providing training for women so they may obtain telework and work from home at a living wage is a strategy which I believe holds potential to improve the quality of life for entire families in an impactful way.

The disenfranchised older worker

The second target demographic I would pinpoint in Sooke is the older worker needing a career change. In my meetings at WorkLink for this project, several staff have relayed to me a pattern of older workers from the trades, sometimes women in healthcare and other physically demanding occupations coming in for employment services. Jane Wakefield, an Employment Advisor at WorkLink, relayed to me that she sees a lot of older workers coming in who can no longer meet the physical demands of their occupation, and need help retraining to find less physically demanding employment. She noted that she has observed a correlation between these older workers needing to transition into a new occupation and low literacy digital skills, but not low literacy.

Six out of seven survey respondents to the Displaced Workers survey were over 50 years old, and four cited either an inability to continue to meet the physical demands of the work they were doing or being the victim of ageism as a reason for loss of employment. It is my belief that this represents a phenomenon within workforce displacement in our region and retraining which supports older workers moving into less physically demanding occupations will be useful and in demand. For example, one survey respondent was a nurse and could no longer work on her feet, so wanted to retrain to become a 911 dispatch operator. Another man, in his sixties, had sustained a concussion and was working with post-concussion syndrome but could not find work that was accepting of people who

have this disability. One woman over 60 with 20+ years of retail experience experienced job loss due to ageism/new ownership and was finding it very impossible to secure a new retail position within Sooke. None of the survey respondents seemed confident of their computer and software skills, yet broadly speaking they possessed significant people skills and still held much of value to the marketplace.

The importance of workplace cultural awareness and evolving workplace norms

Another element to consider in program design for displaced workers in Sooke is addressing culture and class issues. With regard to a demographic of older workers seeking job change, it was suggested to me by Mayor Tait and others that etiquette and developing an awareness of changed social norms would be a wise aspect to include in the trainings (Richer, 2020). In Sooke, many may still be ascribing to outdated cultural values and be holding views about heteronormativity or possess racial and gender biases which will present a barrier to successful re-employment. Including a section in trainings on evolving workplace norms, today's appropriate conduct and language is a recommendation for successful program design in Sooke.

Meaningful moments I have experienced

In conducting the conversations to set up our Focus Study for the project, I interviewed Ron Nietsch of 2Reel Fishing Adventures, one of the most longstanding local fishing charter businesses in Sooke. I believe Ron's story can help clarify an important piece of the picture of the tourism economy and profile of the needs of disenfranchised older workers in Sooke.

Ron and his wife purchased a fishing charter business in Sooke in 1998 and grew it to the point where they decided to take the risk to see if the business could support them. They were motivated by the chance to live and work in their community. In 2006 Ron left his job as a prison guard at the Wilkinson prison, they purchased the local fishing and tackle shop, Eagle Eye Outfitters for 150K and a second fishing boat. Based on the numbers, they decided to jump in and pursue charter fishing full time.

They ran 2Reel with two boats from 2007-2020, providing full-time employment for one person running the second boat, with Ron's wife staffing Eagle Eye Outfitters and doing the bookkeeping for both businesses. When I met with Ron, he stoically described watching his successful business slowly begin to unravel when the fishing restrictions came into place. In the beginning, he told me, the restrictions were in place March-May, which was easy enough to work around. The next year, however, it was March-June. After that the restrictions were lengthened further and by 2015 started going into July. In 2019, he told me, for the second time in 22 years, the Chinook sport fishery was closed from April 18th to August 1st.

As these restrictions increased, Ron and his wife saw sales in their tackle shop decline. They were losing money running the shop. The charter business was able to float the losses in the tackle shop, but then as restrictions lengthened, the charter business began losing money as well. Ron described how he and his wife incurred debt as they held on, hoping the restrictions would lessen. He described trying to sell Eagle Eye Outfitters, a tackle shop now located in an area with a near-ban on sport fishing. They finally closed Eagle Eye Outfitters in May 2019 and moved their inventory into a shipping container on their property.

Ron's wife got her Class 1 driver's license and has since been hired by School District #62 as a school bus driver, and Ron himself was working a temporary position as a day labourer on a development construction site when I met with him in July to conduct the survey. While he has applied for a custodial position with School District #62, when I asked him about a dream job he discussed promoting recreational fishing tourism to the area, or working for the hatchery in a management capacity, and when asked what he needed to find this work, he expressed a need for more small business management training and digital and online marketing skills.

Ron was quick to point out that the impact has not just been on his family but has rippled out to all local businesses that are based on recreational fishing. Local marinas and trailer parks, for example, used to fill up in May, he reported. Now most anglers only put their boats in in August, which represents a huge loss for local marina owners and operators as well. This effect has also been a huge blow to vacation rental businesses, Airbnbs and bed and breakfasts. At present, Ron is trying to pay back debt, and at time of writing had not yet found permanent employment.

Ron believes that federal support to increase the capacity of the local hatchery and the volume of fish it can release could positively support the local economy in our community as well as support the natural environment. Essentially, in his experience, recreational fishing is the heart of the economy in Sooke today, and many other industries turn on it. The recreational fishing industry in Sooke may have thrived because of our hatchery, so increasing its capacity is a reasonable method and attainable strategy for fisheries recovery in our area.

It struck me that a local with intimate knowledge of our local fishery and many ideas based on experience for promoting and increasing local fish stocks is looking for work now as a janitor and has lost his business. Providing training and support for persons such as Ron to facilitate moving into work that remains within their area of their expertise, could re-equip our community with its tourism engine.

Conclusion

To summarize, it is important to consider the effect of a history of geographical isolation, insufficient infrastructure, the needs of women and the needs of older disenfranchised workers when designing a program to serve the needs of the displaced workforce in Sooke. Furthermore, Sooke is a community with a deeply rooted sense of place. For program design that is truly sustainable, it needs to occur in Sooke, and it is my recommendation that implementing Asset-Based Community Development will support a successful program implementation that capitalizes on the strong social networks that exist in Sooke. I cannot emphasize enough that program delivery as well must occur within Sooke or attendance will suffer. Focusing on unique community assets instead of weaknesses, gaps and flaws will ground program delivery for success; initiatives developed within the community will be embraced much more quickly than those brought in from outside sources. If the project can compile a team with local understanding, connections and expertise with an intent to develop targeted digital and skill sets this program holds much potential to assist our community with its demonstrable need for employment supports.

REFERENCES

- Assessing Post-Secondary Education Needs in the West Shore. (2019).
- Richer, S. (2020). Interview with Maja Tait.
- Statistics Canada Census. (2016).

APPENDIX

- Engagement Summary Report: Hwy 14 Corridor Improvement
Connie Road to Glinz Lake Road
- CTV News: Hwy 14 Study

Notes

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Displaced Workers Project: Case Studies

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