

# Richmond Supporting Families Program:

## Our Stories



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## Dr. Rob Lees “Nothing About US – Without Us: Why Listening to Families is Essential if We Really Want to Serve Them.”

Murray Bowen, a seminal family therapist, is reported to have said, when we studied families, they got better. When we tried to help them, they didn't. As I've tried to understand this saying, I think the difference is likely an attitude of curiosity rather than the assumption of “knowing”. As a consequence of curiosity, we are led to collaboration that respects the unique humanity of each family and their self-determination.

If we don't involve families – we build on our assumptions – these are often the assumptions of middle class professionals who are not in a precarious state of vulnerability, such as the vulnerability of families seeking help. Jean Vanier said, there are two types of people in the world; those who live in security and those who live in insecurity. Although we have all experienced insecurity and vulnerability, perhaps because we find helplessness so noxious, we quickly try to forget it. We can forget what it means to be on the receiving end of assistance. This then leaves us open to designing services that may be insensitive or inefficient given the reality of help-seeking families. Sometimes this can be the most obvious things, such as the planners of a new intake system who hadn't thought about informing clients how long they would need to wait. A parent in residence noticed immediately that families would need to know so they could make arrangements for child care if they needed to wait.

Involving families reduces tensions for professionals. Natural self-interest dictates that professionals will wish to please the system, to create processes that appeal to those who are above them within management structures. Wanting to please one's boss and be a team player within systems is a natural part of career development. This becomes problematic for those trained in helping professions where one's initial career choice and later career advancement can come into conflict. If we stay close to client experience and collaborate with them, the clients remind the helpers of why they became helpers. Clients can identify problems in systems that require fixing but these issues can become impediments to organization policy and practice. Professionals will want to transmit this insight to those higher within the system without challenging management or organizational wisdom. If families have direct and frequent links to decision makers and system designers in meaningful ways, this takes front line professionals somewhat out of this conflict. In this way continuous collaboration with families around service design and quality monitoring allows for a healthy tension without compromising front line practitioners and managers.

Involving families helps systems to be culturally and family appropriate Families are complex social systems. There are recognizable patterns of course but time, culture, developmental stage are but a few variables that make each family unique. In order to be culturally appropriate, there needs to be a way for organizations to know if they are responsive to the changing needs of their families. Programs like the F.O.R.C.E. Parent in Residence are an example of involving families so that organizational practices are held accountable and informed by family members who know the system. Family involvement needs to go beyond tokenism to true partnership. In

order to have authentic family involvement systems need to allocate resources to train and support the involvement of family's with "lived experience" of the problem the organization is seeking to address.

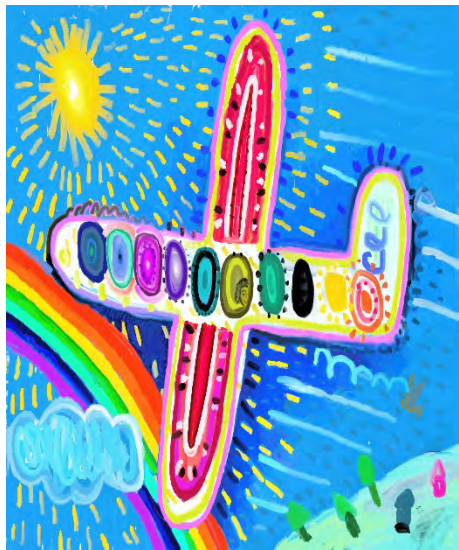
Meaningful family involvement enhances a family's agency. Agency is empowering. Whether the involvement means having clients sign off on treatment goals and assessments or having parent/client representatives on service planning committees, involving families in all aspects of service will, over time, enhance family member sense of agency – control over the direction of their own lives. If we assume that people seek help for their families because they need help and that this leads to a sense of vulnerability, genuine collaboration leads to an increased sense of competency. If people are agents, not "patients" in their lives, they are more likely to do those things most helpful to themselves.

The points noted above are not exhaustive of all the reasons to involve families in service planning. Hopefully they are a start and as more client/family/system partnerships develop around system planning, other benefits will be identified. My own experience of working with family organizations led to new programs, such as Kids in Control developed with BC Schizophrenia Society. Families identified the need and we worked together on a solution. I observed the development of the Parent in Residence positions of the FORCE Society for Kids Mental Health. These positions have demonstrated how capably parents can be in helping us provide service and analyze outcomes. I've also observed how well-meaning patronizing attitudes, of which I have been guilty, can limit family involvement and leave us all the lesser for it. Hopefully, as the Family Smart initiative takes hold in British Columbia, including families as true partners in service and organizational planning will become a commonplace standard. The **Richmond Supporting Families** Program is another demonstration of this collaborative, partnership model. Listening to families through the focus groups allowed for this manual to be family-informed and the benefits that come from it, to be moving towards "family smart". This project went a further step though; having family members collaborate on community presentations, be involved in writing this manual and providing yearly evaluations to insure the services are on track. This is the richer kind of partnership that puts families at the centre.

Dr. Robert Lees, R.Psych, a Presenter at the Vancouver---Richmond Conference on Supporting Families impacted by Parental Mental Illness (2005)

## Rosalie (Roz) Walls – Facilitator Supporting Families

Thinking about what my work with supporting families meant to me is like thinking about what my family means to me. Both had such an impact on my life and contributed to who I am as a person. Without my family background I might not have had the interest and commitment to mental health and the strong belief that collaboration with others especially child welfare is so important. It is from my family that the commitment to ensuring family members and selected love ones are included and that service providers do everything possible to prevent families getting lost in our service delivery system.



Over my five years with supporting families I shared the joys and the sorrows that come with watching those we care about learn and at times struggle with living with an illness that often others don't see or have any sense of. It is a familiar journey to my own family history but one that supporting families provided the opportunity for me to try to work with others to a built a different path through the mental health system. This journey provided the opportunity for me to move beyond the shame and stigma that surrounds mental health and integrate the knowledge I had gained through my family members' journey, my academic training and what I as a sibling learned about shame and internalized stigma of both my sibling and some that were there to serve him.

For my sibling if there had not been family to provide emotional and financial support and advocate on his behalf he would have been invisible. His internalized shame of having a mental illness silenced and isolated him from others who he viewed as normal. His belief that educated middle class men don't get mental illness helped me understand many of the fathers and mothers who seek support.

Supporting families provided the opportunity for me to treat families differently than how my family had been treated, what a gift this has been. The opportunity for healing can happen in many ways.

Rosalie (Roz) Walls, Richmond Support Families Facilitator 2008 – 2014

## A Youth's Story

I got involved with Supporting Families through my crisis counsellor. I was apprehensive. Honestly I was on the fence for some time and my counselor told me to "give it a try" and at some point it seemed I should just go for it. And when I showed up I got more out of it than I thought I would.

I continued to come because of the information, the kids, and the welcoming atmosphere. The group provides support for kids who need it. If you're down, need help, it's the place to go. There were many similar personal challenges between group members and we helped each other find a way to do things in a manageable way and stay operating in life and home.

The group helped me by teaching me about relationships and how to get your point across in a respectful manner, how to better communicate. It helped me to identify my strengths and how to utilize them to the full extent in dealing with the stresses I was dealing with at home.

Youth, Supporting Family Program

## A Young Girl's Story

The Resilient Kids program made me feel better about the situation that I was in. I made some friends that were having the same problems as me and I soon felt less alone and sad. The leaders made me feel welcome and safe from the second I stepped in the room and I knew and still know to this day that I can go to them if I have any problems.

The Super Saturday group is something for me to look forward to every month. On Super Saturday we do things that that I would not usually have the chance to do with my family such as: rock climbing – going to Cypress (skiing), and the PNE! I have learned about taking risks and getting out of my comfort zone. I have made great friends and have been able to stay in touch with some leaders from the Resilient Kids program.

Over all I think that the Super Saturday program and Resilient Kids group are very useful groups.

11 year old girl





## A Parent's Story (1)

I first heard about Supporting Families through my family counsellor at Touchstone Family Association. As a parent I had been in the mental health system personally for the previous three years, and ten years with my partner's mental illness. During all this time, I was not made aware of any available support for my three children who were all experiencing the impact of having parents with mental illnesses. The mental health system had helped me as an adult, but no one talked to me about being a parent dealing with the effects of mental illness or suggested how to guide my children in their understanding. Not only was it a major challenge dealing with the effects of mental illness on myself and my spouse, but I was missing a way to help my kids make sense of it. Finding the services available through Supporting Parents was a breath of fresh air, for both my kids and myself. Without reservation I would recommend Supporting Families to any family with parents dealing with mental illnesses or addictions.

Following the initial referral by my family counsellor, the Supporting Families facilitator and my family counsellor came out to our home to talk with us about the services available. My partner initially expressed concern about the types of children and families who would make use of Supporting Families programs. The facilitator reassured us that our children would be safe and well cared for in any of the programs. We decided to give the programs a try, and enrolled our oldest child in the weekly group for children aged 8 to 12. She had a great time, made long-term friendships, and developed her coping skills!

Subsequently, I participated in the parallel parents group that met every other week. This program really focused on parenting from the place where we were at as individuals. It was a relief to meet other parents who were dealing with some of the same things I was. In this group we worked through many strategies for dealing with anxiety, stress, fears, anger, to name just a few. We also took time to delight in our children, and spent time focusing on the positives they brought to our lives. We developed strong supportive relationships in the group, something that was really tested when one of the group's members committed suicide. Following this tragedy, each member of our group received individual support from the program's leadership. In this painful moment we were reminded of the fragility that often accompanies mental illness and addictions. Then it was very helpful to work through our grief together as a group.

Following the first kids group we began attending "Family Fun Nights", a bi-monthly get together where our kids had a BLAST playing games, doing crafts, and reconnecting with friends from the groups. As parents we had the pleasure of enjoying a stress-free evening (and cooking-free!), and it was a place where I made a new friend myself.

From our first foray into the initial kid's group, all three of my children have now made their way through the kids group with excellent results. This is a testimony to the calibre of the program leadership as our kids are all very different in their needs and personalities. My youngest was particularly happy, as she had to wait until she turned eight to join in.



Our children have also participated in the weekend groups ("Super Saturday/Sunday") which involved the child being picked up first thing in the morning, having fun all day with a group of other kids, and coming home tired and happy at the end of the day. The group provided the kids with a nutritious lunch at a popular eatery, and topped the day off with an activity that the kids might not have been able to participate in due to stress or other factors, go-karting comes to mind.

As a final thought, I can't say enough positive things about the benefits of having access to a program like Supporting Families while navigating the challenging waters of mental illness or addictions.

Excerpt from an interview with a Parent

## A Parent's Story (2)

I was concerned about my son and Supporting Families was suggested to help him. Knowing that my son has support is a major thing. To deal with it all alone is overwhelming and not helpful in a lot of ways, so to get him to go to someone who wasn't quite so close for different information and perspective was quite useful for him, and for me too, to know he was getting support he needed. There's tangible evidence it helps. I talked to him on the weekend. His (previous) way of coping was through escape, either fantasy world of monsters or heavy into video games. Now he is actually not doing the escaping, he is actually facing issues and allowing himself to feel his appropriate emotions, rather than escaping everything. And that is good. It doesn't feel good for him when it's bad but in the big scheme of things it is much better that he is learning to do that now rather than avoiding it all his life and then finding he isn't equipped to deal with it later.

We are still struggling, but Supporting Families is making a difference for our family. In my son's understanding it made a big difference. It helped my understanding through the family and parent groups, especially communication skills and boundaries. It's all helping.

The other thing I noticed is his communication skills; he does and says things he didn't learn from me. He's got the ability to stand up and communicate his feelings without hurting the other person (and) without going on attack mode, which is part of alcoholism – learning as a young kid the attack mode - but he doesn't do that. He's very good at communicating without the need to defend himself. I use him as an inspiration.

Excerpt from an interview with a Parent



## A Parent's Story (3)

I first met with the Richmond Supporting Families Facilitator (Roz Walls was Facilitator at the time) when she came to our home after my husband was discharged from a month long stay in the psych ward of Richmond Hospital. It was comforting to speak with someone who obviously had a great deal of experience and was interested in ensuring we had what we needed to cope with our situation.



My daughter and I took advantage of many of the Richmond Supporting Families programs and I believe that they played a major role in helping us learn to live with my husband's condition.

As a mother, it contributed to my peace of mind that we were doing something to help my daughter, who was 8/9 years old at the time, to understand what her dad was going through and that many other kids are in the same situation. I know the Resilient Kids Program lived up to its name for her. For me, the parent's discussion side of the program provided me the opportunity to meet others in a similar situation as well as others with the same diagnosis as my husband. This provided me a new perspective on how other people deal with their situations.

I expect that it's a known hazard of group work that you may end up introducing people to each other who might have been better off had they not met. I don't know what can be done about this, other than at the adult level having a frank discussion about it. I am not convinced that this would be appropriate, but it warrants some thought.

You may be curious where this sentiment comes from. I worry that when my daughter is older (in her teens) and out in the community on her own that she may run into someone she has met through one of these programs, but the other child may not have fared so well despite best efforts. I worry that the familiarity will cause her to trust someone who she otherwise wouldn't and cause problems for her.

We did have a very disturbing outcome occur when a girl my daughter had befriended through a Canadian Mental Health program went through a crisis. In retrospect, the friendship did put my daughter at risk both emotionally and physically as I was not fully aware of the situation. On the other hand, we may have been instrumental in helping the girl's father understand the crisis she was in.

Perhaps a little coaching on managing risk would be prudent, especially for parents in my

position who are in constant battle with an overprotective spouse. I fear I swung too far in the opposite direction and narrowly escaped a tragedy.

As a family, it has meant a lot to us to know that there is someone who we can call and talk with or meet with when we encounter bumps on the road. This access to someone without it becoming a medical consultation or a referral to a centre or a new psychologist has helped us resolve problems quickly and, before they became critical. I can say with confidence that it has saved our marriage and our family.

Parent, whose family has attended Resilient Kids Group, Super Days, Family Fun Night and was a Community Table Member

## A Parent's Story (4)

Being involved with various Family and Mental Health agencies in Richmond over the past 5 years has meant a lot to me and my family. There are really not a lot of programs to support families going through difficult times, be it a parent or child. Through Touchstone Family Services, I was able to access the Resilient Kids Group for my daughter, which I feel has been a blessing as it has opened so many more doors for her and I. She has now branched off into the "Super Saturday" group, which is a fantastic opportunity to connect with other kids in similar situations.

The staff are remarkable and the programming is superb. My daughter has been to places that I probably would not be able to take her to and in such a safe and caring environment. The Family Fun Nights have also been so enjoyable. The volunteers are lovely and so committed to making sure everyone is fed and having fun. My daughter loves the craft table! During the Resilient Kids Group, parents were provided with education and resources to help them in their own unique situations, but it was great to be heard and know that others shared similar stories. The Parent Education workshops have also been very interesting and the fact that childcare is provided, makes it possible to attend. The staff has been truly amazing and have made a positive change in my life. The relationships that my daughter and I have made will not be forgotten. We will always be grateful for the support we have received.

Parent whose family attended Resilient Kids Group

## A Volunteer's Story

My interest in Supporting Families comes from my own personal experience with the Ministry as a young person. I was given more love and compassion from social workers in my youth than anyone I had ever known. I gained so much from those formative years that I always kept that glimmer of hope that, in the future, I would like to give back to a cause that was so pivotal in my own life.

Families are so important in our lives. We often are plagued with challenges that are either within or beyond our control. Family Fun Night is an evening that gives that chance to families to step away from all the challenges they have in their lives and connect with others in a fun and loving atmosphere. It is amazing what I see as a volunteer every time I am there. I see amazing people connect with other amazing people, and form camaraderie. I see kids develop friendships with others in a carefree and fun environment. The smiles and connection I see on those evenings puts warmth in my heart that lasts and always puts a smile on my face. I have been given a gift to spend time with these families, and the amazing social workers and caregivers in the Community on those evenings. I have seen so many of the parents and children gain so much over the last 3 years – just in the simple joy of these nights as they show so much happiness by taking the time to return.

Thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of something so special. I am grateful.

Volunteer for Richmond Supporting Families



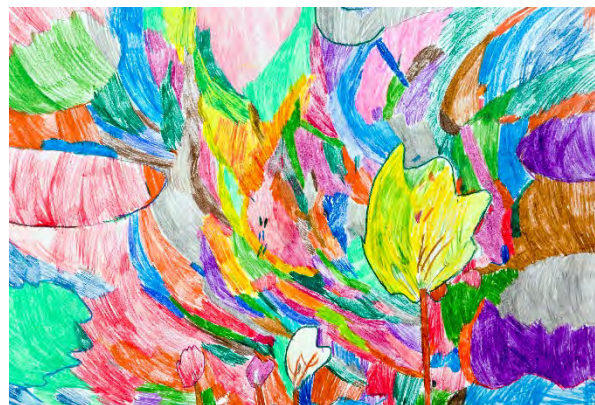
## Kristina Dixon: Assistant Coordinator Supporting Families

I have a unique perspective as the Supporting Families Community Table contracts me as Assistant Coordinator. I am employed by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), a non-profit community member of the Table. Within my role with CMHA I manage and develop the Super Groups in partnership with Supporting Families. As a Supporting Families Coordinator I organize and facilitate many of Supporting Families programs, such as Family Fun Night. I am also a Resilient Kid group leader.

With a background in community family mental health and child and youth care, my practice focuses on building relationships within the community that supports the families that I work with. I feel a sense of responsibility and desire to collaborate with others to support our families with the ultimate goal of empowering, engaging and listening. Families need better services that are family centered and done with heart, compassion and collaboration.

As a community practitioner the importance of working from a collaborative lens is the most valuable work I've done. It has enabled me to build partnerships, relationships and an understanding of different areas within the helping profession. It has given me a resource to turn to if a question or concern arises with families. I can contact anyone on the Supporting Families community table for support. To me this valued knowledge is priceless as it enables me to say to a family I can help. It allows me to say, let me pull in resources, let's brainstorm together, and let's provide the best service I can. I believe it helps families be healthier, happier and stay well.

Kristina Dixon, Groups Coordinator Supporting Families Program (2009 to present)



## Barb Fee: Community Table Member (CHMA)

As the Public Education Program Manager for CMHA Richmond Branch my job is to create education events that helped to raise the awareness and understanding of mental illnesses. Long has it been known that stigma about mental illness precludes individuals and families from getting the support in their life that they need in order to live confident, successful, healthy and happy lives, mental illness or otherwise.

Having worked in Public Education for twelve years and the mental health field for fifteen I had become used to hearing from those living with a mental illness how little they actually knew about their illness, that the clinical staff supporting them, due to large caseloads, wasn't able to provide the education they needed to better help themselves. Additionally, those living with the illness often spoke of how few people understood what they were going through, never mind the "secrets" they kept from neighbors, family, friends and potential friends and employers.

We determined from family members' input that there was a vast array of topics on which to present at community education events. Families also requested that education events be provided in a neutral and community friendly environment and Richmond Library joined in sponsoring the evenings. Speakers were also suggested and community members interested in presenting on specific topics were invited to present. In order to ensure that we were providing the education topics wanted by audience members' regular feedback was invited as part of the evaluation process. This created a lengthy list of topics on mental health and substance use issues.

At some point it was determined that we would provide three education events per year. Since the Public Education program had already created relationships with a number of other agencies from previous events, we had access to a pool of organizing partners, presenters and mental health experts.

At each education event we request audience members fill out our evaluation forms and invite them to join our mailing list to be informed of future activities. In addition we ask them for their suggestions on topics.

Barb Fee, Public Education Program Manager for CMHA Richmond Branch and  
Supporting Families Community Table Member

## Richard Dubras: Community Table Member (RASS)

Richmond Addiction Services Society (RASS) has always included those members of the community impacted by substance use/misuse and addictions. When the Supporting Families Table began in Richmond it was clear that this table would be focusing on the family members being impacted by mental health and substance use/misuse. Our collaboration and partnership began early in the development process as the focus groups and information was being collected from the community. It was important to hear the feedback from the community about how services were and were not meeting the needs of the community we were attempting to serve. Personally, my involvement began in supporting those focus groups and directly hearing the resounding and significant feedback about the important gaps in services for families impacted by mental health and substance use/misuse. These focus groups led to many planning meetings and discussions on how we as service providers would adapt and commit to change and how we would adopt a 'family lens' in all services.

Subsequently, this led to how RASS would commit to supporting the programs that were created. I firmly believe that the 'right people' must be involved in these programs and when RASS staff began to demonstrate the 'right fit' according to the table and the facilitator, I was not going to interfere and but instead would shift and adapt the RASS mandate to the table and community needs. This is the non-profit advantage, we can shift and flex according to the mandate of the community allowing for the 'best fit' for the community. There is no point in running programs for the community when the community does not utilize the programs. It was clear that these programs being developed by the Supporting Families table would match the needs of the community and therefore, RASS as a non-profit, would adapt and commit to supporting these initiatives. Another key element to my involvement was to support the table with funding. As the table began to grow and develop programs it was clear that funding was becoming a limiting factor. In creating this opportunity, I believe RASS has demonstrated the civic mindedness and the commitment to the program and what it stands for and has taken on the responsibility of administering the funding despite the complications and risks. Without this financial resource the table would have been distracted by fundraising, inconsistency and instability of funding which would have taken away from the direct service of its mandate.

Without the trust, the openness of relationships and belief in the tables work, RASS' commitment would not have been at the level that it has been. I have made this commitment for RASS and RASS, its employees and the community have mutually benefited from our commitment and work with the table.

Richard L. Dubras, Executive Director of Richmond Addiction Services  
and Community Table Member

## Clay Tang: Community Table Member and Group Leader (CHIMO)

The first time I attended a Supporting Families community table meeting I didn't know quite what to expect; I sit here now with a lot more insight and in the favour of hindsight. I was worried that I would be sitting on another committee that would offer a lot of lip service but little action. I stand corrected.

I feel very fortunate to be part of this unique group, a collection of knowledgeable, passionate, and committed people who sincerely care about individuals and families. The word "collaboration" is one that buzzes around and is often tossed into the wind to describe any time someone works with others. It is heavily over-used and often incorrectly so. Shared goals, shared purpose, and working together synergistically, this sort of team effort is what collaboration is made of and is what I feel I have recently found. My contribution to the group early on was at an arms-length away, I helped with booking rooms and aided in miscellaneous duties left unassigned, such as, creating the Supporting Families brochure. However, as I became more familiar with Supporting Families, the programs offered, the people involved, and their guiding principles such as a family-centred approach, the more I became convinced that this is something I needed to continue to be part of and is the reason why I chose to be a Group Leader. I have always had a love for children and this ardour has consistently guided me in the things I have chosen to do.

I feel that meaning is derived from contributing to others. Of course this is not completely altruistic because I have come to understand that in engaging in compassion, care, and empathy with others is one of the surest ways I can care for myself also. This work with Supporting Families is meaningful, it is fulfilling, and it nurtures my spirit.

Clay Tang, (Coordinator, Community Engagement, CHIMO Community Services)

## **Teresa Vozza: Community Table Member and Group Leader (Touchstone)**

I first heard about the Supporting Families group several years ago. At first, I heard about focus groups being held for families and professionals in the community. After that, I heard about the free Resilient Kids group for the children of parents struggling with mental health and/or addiction issues. As a Registered Clinical Counsellor working at a non-profit community agency in Richmond, I referred several clients to this group and they loved it. The kids enjoyed the kids' groups and the parents enjoyed the parents' group. However, they all raved about the family fun nights! They reported that it was a great place to go as a family to relax, enjoy a good meal and have some fun in a safe and welcoming environment.

When I made a referral to the Resilient Kids group for a tentative family a couple of years ago, I was asked by the Program Facilitator (Roz Walls) if it would be helpful if she accompanied me to a meeting with the parents to better explain the program to them. I was very impressed by her offer. I was even more impressed with the care, kindness and respect that Roz extended to the family. She fully explained the program to them and answered all their questions. The family later told me that Roz had alleviated their fears which made it possible for them to allow their children to participate in the Resilient Kids group.

Following the family meeting, I was invited by Supporting Families to join the Supporting Families Community Table. Based on the positive feedback I had received from families I had referred to the Resilient Kids group in the past and on my own observations, I jumped at the chance to join the Supporting Families Table.

In addition to attending the table meetings and Family Fun Nights, I have co-facilitated the Resilient Kids' Parents' group for over a year. It has been a rewarding experience to work with this amazingly resilient and resourceful group of parents. Although the parents in the group changes from session to session, many of their struggles are the same. They all love their children very much, they want their children to be happy and they want to be the best parents they can be. In the safety of the group, they are able to share their personal struggles with other parents who understand what they are going through. It is an honor to be witness to their stories and to provide encouragement and support to them. Seeing the happiness that the parents experience by hearing the laughter, joy and fun their children are having in the next room is one of the reasons that I continue to be involved with this amazing program and outstanding group of people.

Teresa Vozza, MA, Registered Clinical Counsellor,  
Touchstone Family Association, Richmond, BC.

## Tina Lee: Mental Health Clinician and Supporting Families Group Leader

Why Supporting Families? With our full caseloads and the long waitlists we face at our own agencies, who has the time to add another role to our work? It is a conflict that many of us have faced in our decisions to participate in Richmond Supporting Families. So why have we all chosen to become (and to stay) involved? In short, it is because being part of Richmond Supporting Families truly enhances our own practice as professionals.

First, working together as a community benefits all of our agencies. When we look past our individual workloads and at the larger picture of our community's needs, pooling our collective resources has been much more efficient than working in isolation. Richmond Supporting Families programs have pulled our clients from crises and kept them off of our waitlists. We have also facilitated referrals to the appropriate agency and supported collaboration rather than duplication of services.

Second, working as a part of Richmond Supporting Families is particularly rewarding because our work is solely focused on meeting the needs of our families. We are directly connected to the families we serve, meet them wherever they are at, listen to what they need, and connect them to what they ask for. It is energizing to know that we are providing exactly what the client needs because it is what they themselves have asked for.

Also, as a truly collaborative interagency and interdisciplinary team, Supporting Families provides a unique and valuable opportunity to work side-by-side with professionals who come from a variety of disciplines but share our passion for helping families. While we work towards this common goal, we are able to bring together our different perspectives into a broad knowledge base of resources and learn from one another every day. This collaboration naturally spills over into our own work as well, as our interagency relationships in turn facilitate further consultation and collaboration for our other work.

Thus, being part of Richmond Supporting Families supports the community we are all serving, benefits each of our agencies, and enhances our own individual practices. We gain more than we give, and the program as a whole becomes much more than a sum of its parts. None of us on our own would be able to accomplish all that we are able to as a united group.

So why are we part of Richmond Supporting Families? Because, we don't have the time not to be.

Tina Lee, Mental Health Clinician and Supporting Families Group Leader



## Dr. Deborah MacNamara: Consultant Supporting Families

It has been a sincere privilege and delight to work with the group leaders, youth workers, social workers, mental health and affiliated professionals in Supporting Families Affected by Parental Mental Illness and/or Addictions. The role of an outside consultant has been to provide support for the work they do with children and youth who have parent(s) with addiction and/or mental health issues. It has been a collaborative approach that has brought together many adults responsible for caring for kids and unified them in making headway with a child. The belief is that many of these families face multiple challenges and can benefit from outside support in hanging onto and providing for their children.

The approach taken is relational and developmental based on the work of Dr. Gordon Neufeld ([www.neufeldinstitute.com](http://www.neufeldinstitute.com)). The aim is to get adults into the driver's seat where kids are concerned by making sense of their behavioural, learning, and emotional issues. The language used to make sense of kids is intuitive, distills the dynamics to the root, and does not divide parent from professional. The belief is we cannot make headway with a child or youth without first making sense of the dynamics that drive them.

The role of consultant has been to provide a lens to understand the behavioural and learning issues displayed in the children and youth they serve. The focus has been on making sense of the emotions and instincts that stir each child or youth up. The primary intervention has been to help group leaders in cultivating strong relationships with the kids they serve. The relationships they form are the main vehicle through which immaturity is compensated for and developmental "stuckness" is addressed.



One of the key strengths of this program is that the staff has a genuine interest and strong desire to build relationships with the kids and families they care for. Given that many of the children and youth in their programs have faced attachment and separation issues, building connections with them must take into account the vulnerability inherent in this. It is not so much their program as the people who work that is behind the secret of their success. It is the relationships the kids have formed with their group leaders that make these groups a place of refuge where they can count on safety, connection, guidance, and support. In other words, it is not so much what they do but who they are that matters.

When behavioural issues arise in the groups they have worked hard to address incidents in a manner that preserves the dignity of the child as well as their relationship with them. One of the primary strategies used has been to anticipate issues that will arise among the children and work in the antecedents to prevent and deescalate problems.



Consultation has also included how to support the parents in holding onto their kids and how to matchmake kids to the adults responsible for them wherever possible. The hosting of parent education evenings as well as family events serves to create a community like feeling for the kids and parents. In fact, one of the strengths of the program has been that they do not try and serve the children devoid of their family attachments; rather, they play matchmaker to strengthen the whole community that cares for the child.

Dr. Deborah MacNamara Consultant for Supporting Families and  
Faculty at the Neufeld Institute.

## Sara Raouf: Community Table Member (Richmond School District)

In September 2012, I returned to work from maternity leave as a Learning Resource Teacher at an Elementary school in Richmond, BC. I was dismayed to see how many students were struggling with mental health issues either in their families or themselves. As a new mom and as someone who had a dad who was mentally ill, I felt more sensitive than ever to my students dealing with these issues. I started to wonder what schools could be doing to address these challenges that our students were facing.

Through my sister who works at the CMHA branch in Vancouver, I was introduced to Dave Macdonald from Pathways in Richmond. We sat down together to brainstorm some ideas about how to bring support and awareness for mental illness into schools. Dave immediately suggested getting in touch with the Facilitator of Supporting Families (Roz Walls, at the time). I also approached my school counsellor who also told me about the work that Supporting Families was doing in the community such as Super Saturdays and Resilient Kids.

Dave Macdonald asked Roz Walls to take part in our meetings and brainstorming sessions and together with Larry Antrim from the school board office, we came up with a plan for our project. We were going to bring a play to Richmond Schools that dealt with mental illness. CMHA Richmond, Supporting Families and the Richmond School District co-applied for a \$12,800 grant from Pacific Blue Cross Community Connections to cover the expenses of the play. Roz invited many mental health community members to work together on the project, and I invited several teachers from my school. Our committee included people from CMHA, Supporting Families, Touchstone Family Association, Richmond Addictions Services, CHIMO Community Services, Vancouver Coastal Health, and Richmond Infant, Child and Youth Mental Health. It was a wonderful experience to meet so many mental health professionals in Richmond and to learn more about all of the services available to Richmond families.

Our project consisted of bringing a Green Thumb Theatre play entitled “People Like Vince” to Richmond schools. The play showcased the relationship between a ten-year-old girl name Myrtle and her uncle Vince who suffered from bipolar disorder. With the help of several school counsellors, our committee created a study guide to accompany the play. The study guide included pre-play and post-play activities for teachers to do with their classes, general information about mental illnesses and a list of all the mental health services available to students and their families. It also included a short evaluation for teachers to complete and submit regarding their experience with the play and the activities. We received evaluative feedback from parents who attended the play, students who saw it and the teachers of these students. The collaboration between the various mental health professionals around the brainstorming process, the grant application, the study guide and the evaluation process was indispensable to the success of this project.

We are now in the process of completing a report to submit to Pacific Blue Cross about the successes and challenges of this project. In looking ahead to future plans to support the mental health needs of students in Richmond, I am looking forward to continuing the collaborative process of working with the contacts I have made in the mental health community in Richmond. I have an awareness of the various organizations in Richmond that support the needs of kids dealing with mental health concerns and I now know how to better connect kids with these services. Overall, my experience of working with Supporting Families has been very positive and I look forward to continuing to work with them in the future to support our kids.

Sara Raouf, Richmond Elementary School Teacher who spear headed bringing Green Thumb Theatre into the 25 elementary schools in Richmond with Richmond School Board, Canadian Mental Health Richmond and Richmond Supporting Families