



The Tale of a Little House

The MPA residence on 10th. Avenue is found in a quite ordinary-looking house with a beige front on a pleasant, tree-lined street in Kitsilano. This is the old Kitsilano of single family homes in wood and stone, a remnant now when developers routinely bulldoze the old homes and green lawns to make way for luxury condominiums with Jacuzzi bathes for the chic set. But the condominiums cluster further down towards the beaches and, for the time being, the neighbourhood of the MPA residence is left in peace. Only the buzzing of traffic from nearby Broadway and the occasional dog disturb the serenity of 10th. Avenue.

Damp mattresses and unwanted bed frames clutter the residence's veranda, testifying to movement in and out of the house. After the respectable beige facade, the pink and apple-green staircase in the hall is a surprise, although the kitchen and living room are spotless and soberly furnished to the point of sterility. However, a big, new stereo softens the austerity of the furnishings with good music.

There is space in the house for eight people who share four bedrooms. At present, only six people live there, Ivan, Marvin, Dawn, Francis, Mike and Sandy. They arrived there through various routes, perhaps referred by the Vancouver Resources Board which runs a boarding house directory or perhaps through Look-out, an emergency housing project which puts up homeless people in emotional crises. Many people find their way to one of the six MPA residences after a stint in a mental hospital. The residences provide a period of transition in which an ex-patient gets used to being on the outside again.

In its early days MPA used to rent houses for its members but reluctant landlords

and the generosity of the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation soon convinced it of the advantages of owning them. Now MPA owns five of its six residences, including the one on 10th. Ave. which it set up about four years ago.

The Vancouver Resources Board provides block payments to MPA to cover the housing and good costs of people in each of the residences. MPA, in turn, administers to its residences scattered throughout the city through residence co-ordinators like Charlene and Eve of the 10th. Ave. house.

An important point - Charlene and Eve are elected by the people in the 10th. Ave. house. They do not live there. MPA's housing programme, like all its other activities, runs on the principle of participatory democracy. In fact, the 10th. Ave. residence is a communal house in which all members are expected to help make decisions, cook meals and do chores. No one lives in the residence without first being elected to a vacant place by other members of the household. The average person stays about four months.

Unlike boarding houses where ex-mental patients often find themselves governed by an almost military discipline of curfews and reveilles, people at the 10th. Ave. house mostly govern themselves, although sometimes under the guidance of the coordinators.

Marvin, who after a year's residency is the senior member, says that he likes the house because there is less supervision than at a boarding house. But some people, he says, may need the structure and supervision of a regular boarding house.

"I was real lazy when I first came here and they really had to push me " he smiles.

At a weekly Monday meeting, the people at the 10th. Ave. residence plan out the week's

meals, the shopping list and household chores. These are handed out to each member of the house on a rotating basis.

One major meal a day is planned, usually for supper-time. And washing up duties are also spelt out clearly.

The fare at the 10th. Ave. house is simple but substantial, a "meat and potatoes" diet as Charlene says but then quickly adds that people in her house also eat fish, fresh vegetables and good cereals. Breakfast and lunch foods are also stocked in the bright kitchen but individual members prepare these for themselves. There's room, too, on the shopping list for personal requests if they're not too expensive.

The emphasis at 10th. Ave. is on *DO!* rather than *DON'T!* People are expected to take an active part in running their own lives, a skill that people can forget during periods of institutionalization. Naturally, there are a few prohibitions. Booze and drugs

are outlawed on the premises. Sleeping on the couches down in the living room is discouraged for fear of creating a crash-pad atmosphere, though house guests are occasionally put up in the members' bedrooms. People at the 10th. Ave. house seem to regard these rules as necessary.

Of course, as in all communal houses, some people just don't work out. There are currently two vacancies in the house due to the expulsion of two women in November. As in admissions, expulsions take place through a democratic vote by the people in the house.

One woman was kicked out because she was "too self-indulgent with her madness" which, at one point, involved gross behaviour on the front porch. Marvin said they were afraid she would frighten the neighbours. "Normally" he said "we get along with the

Continued on next page...



House, Cont.

Continued from previous page "Tale of a Little House"

neighbours real well. In the summertime we used to talk a lot with them out in the yard."

The other woman was kicked out because she was "ripping off the house of energy and even money".

The house is now rather shaken by the episode and not in a hurry to fill the vacancies without considering applicants very carefully. As Charlene says "Houses have cycles and when a house is shakey because it's had to deal with a couple of real bananas, it gets choosy about who it's going to let in."

The remaining members of the house regard it as a good thing. Dawn says it's the first home she's ever had after years spent in foster homes.

Mike says the house offers him security. "I'd like to get some money together" he says. "I'll worry about what I'm going to do later."

While all residents in an MPA house, not all members take an equal part of MPA's other activities like the drop-in centre. Mike even

complained that there were too many "weirdoes" over at the drop-in centre. Maybe was joking.

Ivan and Marvin, on the other hand, regularly attend MPA business meetings and outings. Ivan particularly likes the weekly MPA Mystery Trips.

Marvin enjoys playing basketball with his friends. He used to drink and smoke heavily, he says, but now just goes and gets drunk once in a while.

People at the 10th Ave. house seem determined to overcome their recent problems and get the house going again.

As Sandy says, "I think there's a kind of core group in each house which determines the character of the house. In our house, for example, a lot of us are interested in getting off medication. We are definitely not interested in having people in the house who only use it without contributing."

And people at 10th Ave. are proud, too, of the home that they've made for themselves. As one enthusiastic member exclaimed, "This place has got a lot of class!"