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Bernadette Thomas

Ryder Wright Blair Holmes LLP

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Becoming and Building Community in Toronto: 1980 to Present

BERNADETTE THOMAS*



I LEFT GRENADA IN DECEMBER OF 1980 to visit Canada. Like many other Caribbean immigrants, when I first came up to Canada I was shocked by the cold and unsure of what my life would look like. Forty years later, I look back at the life I've built in Canada and see how my community experiences led me to be a community leader.

This is my story, but it is the story of many others as well. I reflect here on the role of women as leaders, the difficult conditions for immigrants, the history of domestic work, and on housing as a human right. I hope my story will explain what policies and actions I have seen that actually help support families, and how we can learn from this for the future.

I. DOMESTIC WORK IN 1980S TORONTO

*Bernadette Thomas is a housing advocate, Member of Tenants for Social Housing, Grandmother, Mother, and world traveler living in Toronto, Ontario. She has worked at the law firm, Ryder Wright Blair Holmes LLP for many years.

When women were hired to look after children at that time, they were called “nannies.” If they had to cook and do housework, they were called “caregivers.” When I talk about “domestic work” here, I mean both nannies and caregivers.

I worked as a domestic worker for about four families. Some of the families were good employers and some were not. I mention the religion and culture of these families below because we thought about those things at the time. I guess we thought about where people came from because we were brand new in the country ourselves. Also, since our work made us part of the household, the nature of our job and the schedule of our work was often decided by the family’s culture, religious practice, and social network.

A. EMPLOYER FAMILY #1

The first family I worked for was in Markham near Don Mills and Eglinton. They had two children. I was offered the position after putting an advertisement in the *Toronto Star*. There was no transit out there at the time, so on Sunday night I would take the bus to Don Mills and Steeles, and the family would pick me up from there. Without my own car, I relied on them and often felt very isolated. On Friday night they would take me to Fairview Mall at Don Mills and Sheppard. Since domestic workers usually only had the weekends off, we had to do all of our errands then. If your employer family only paid you by cheque on the weekend, you couldn’t deposit it until the following week because banks were not open on the weekends at that time.

One day while working I received a call at the house. It was the family’s previous domestic worker. She called to warn me that the employer family had already sponsored someone else, and the family had done the same thing to her. The previous worker told me that the English au pair called the house one day and told her that she was coming to Canada and had already been sponsored by the family. The motivation for a family to not tell the truth to a domestic worker is because all domestic workers need to find a sponsor job, so employers would lie and tell us they would sponsor us so that we would agree to work for them. The woman on the phone warned me that the employer family was using me until the English au pair came. I was shocked because when I interviewed with the employer family the mother didn’t tell me that they had already sponsored someone else. Not knowing this changed my entire life plan because it impacted whether or not I would be able to live in Canada. Soon after the English au pair came to Canada, I understood that she wanted to get away from the employer family because they treated her badly.

One of the most difficult parts of doing domestic work was that you had to depend on what your employer decided to give you for your daily basic needs. The family that I worked for rarely kept much food in the house. Once a week, on Thursdays, they made chicken wings, mashed potatoes, and corn. The rest of the time, eating with the family was unpredictable; I usually ate breakfast food for dinner, like frozen bagels and cereal. I remember sitting on the couch watching TV during dinner time one evening and the family came in. The mother told me to move around so she sat down on the couch with the husband on the other side of me and they began eating. It looked like they were eating Subway. They were passing the food to one another directly over me. It was shocking to have people pass food directly on top of you and never offer you anything to eat, especially when you are legally forced to rely on them for your food and shelter. I never ate dinner that night. It was very strange for me coming from the Caribbean as I was not used to not sharing cooking or meals, especially not to exclude someone that you are supposed to feed. Coming up here, that was a shock.

On the weekends, when I wasn't working, I used to be sick and I didn't know why. My friend's mom said the reason I was sick is because I was not eating or drinking during the week. On the weekends, we would cook or order Chinese but after I ate I would often feel sick for a different reason. My body was not used to having normal amounts of foods. One day when I was very hungry at the employer family's house, I called my friend Petra and asked how to order the pizza. I had never ordered pizza before, so I ordered the pizza with everything on it. When the pizza came, I folded it up in a towel and hid it under the bed so I could save it for later.

B. EMPLOYER FAMILY #2

The second family I worked for was culturally very different from the first family that I worked for. The wife was very inclusive and would go out in public with me and allow me to eat dinner at the table with the family. I always had enough food to eat, which for me was a big deal. It was so hard being in a home where you didn't have enough to eat. Where I come from, even if you don't have a lot, you share what you have.

The family had two boy children, and the wife did all of her own cooking. I was paid \$65.00 each week, paid by cheque at the end of the month. The family needed a domestic worker right away and had previously sponsored a Filipino woman. The wife told me upfront that every other Saturday night she would be out of the house to play a game and that I would have to care for the children. I went to synagogue with them around Eastertime and went to the mall with them and bought clothes and a hat. They always had food and would share food, so I was never hungry.

I was usually able to sit at the table with her family to have dinner. However, one day she had her friend come over for dinner but, when it was time to sit down, her friend stayed in the living room and wouldn't come eat. The mother went and talked to her friend, and they both came back and sat down and ate. When we finished eating, I carried on as usual and helped the mother tidy up and took one of the children to get ready for bed. Later on in the night, the mother and I sat down and watched TV. She told me that her friend would not sit down for dinner with us because she believed that I should not be allowed to sit at the table. I was surprised she would have friends with this belief as the husband's best friend was a Black man who he went to school with. They used to say that that man once saved the husband's life.

C. EMPLOYER FAMILY #3

I also worked for a family at Sheppard and Leslie. They had six children with two sets of twins, the oldest being six years old. They had two nannies. I worked at night, and the other nanny worked during day. The other nanny would make dinner, and I would serve dinner, give the children a bath, put them to bed, tidy up, do laundry every night, walk the dog, and change the beds. I remember that one night when I was walking the dog, I heard some violence in the neighbourhood, like a gunshot. I was scared and told the family, but nothing came of it.

D. EMPLOYER FAMILY #4

I responded to an advertisement in the paper and got an interview. Another girl from Trinidad and I were interviewed by the mother that day. I went to the interview and the baby, Matthew, was there, and I immediately went down on the floor to play with him. It was a natural thing because I had left my own family to work in Canada. The mother told me that, even though she had

interviewed someone else, when she watched me play with Matthew, she knew that I was the right choice.

It was a great family to work for. I had fun because I was part of the family. The two boys, Matthew and Andrew, would come into my room and were always happy to see me. The background of the family was Italian-English. The wife taught me how to shop for clothes in Canada, but I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing! The husband would always joke with us. He'd tell us to leave our purses at home before we went out to shop so we wouldn't spend money. We moved in with the wife's parents for three months, which meant that the family and I were all living together downstairs. Then we moved to Mississauga in the winter. Once the kids became school age, I stopped working for them. Even after I stopped working there, we'd exchange Christmas cards, and I would go and visit them.

E. LAST EMPLOYER FAMILY: GETTING MY PAPERS AND BECOMING A MOTHER

The fifth family I worked for was very special because they were a good employer and sponsored me to get my papers. I was pregnant then. The family was a husband and wife with one son. I looked after the child as a nanny. The boy was on the waitlist for daycare when the couple got pregnant with their second child. This meant that the wife and I were pregnant at the same time. The husband joked with me that he could only handle one delivery of a baby at a time, which was very funny.

The timing worked out so nicely because the son got into daycare in July before my daughter was born in September. The family's second child was born in October, and the husband was sick. When you work for a family, their problems are your problems to help with, so I remember these details about how they were doing.

F. REFLECTIONS ON DOMESTIC WORK

Domestic work in Toronto in the 1980s was unstable and difficult. As a domestic worker, you do not have real status in the country. Also, it is a job that always changes because children age out of care and family dynamics change. Getting fired or being let go as a domestic worker was very common because employer families used our services as a stepping-stone for day care. I saw very few domestic workers who worked for one family for more than a couple of years.

When I came to Canada, an employer family could send a domestic worker out of the country for a minor problem, without a reason or when a contract was finished. I believe this was changed in the 1980s, but it meant that domestic workers who wanted to stay in Canada were made to feel that they had to make their employer family happy no matter what. I think now recruiters are not allowed to take fees, but in 1988 my friend came to Canada and paid a Filipino agent one hundred dollars and she got a sponsor job with a family at Bathurst and Steeles.

Working without real status in Canada is very stressful because your future depends on your employer. In my experience, once you had a work permit to work for a family you had to complete your time with that family or have a new employer family hire you. If a new family hired you, and they didn't assume all your worked time, you lost your earned work time towards being eligible for permanent resident status in Canada.

Working for a family was all-consuming because you had to live with them between Monday and Friday and work pretty much whenever they said. When your boss can tell you that

you have to work anytime without restrictions it means you can only have one job and that job is your life. Many domestic workers were treated like they did not matter. I don't think it makes sense to treat the person taking care of your precious children badly. How parents treat the person taking care of their children impacts the quality of care that the children get.

The lack of stability and high turnover of domestic work makes it very important that domestic workers stay organized and connected with other workers. When I started doing domestic work I only knew two people also doing the work and they became important supports for me. One of the girls had a work permit, and she helped me apply for my own work permit. The other girl, who didn't have a work permit, helped me tell my families that I shouldn't be working over weekends. Having these kinds of social supports is important, especially for immigrants.

II. SHARED PROBLEMS OFFER SHARED SOLUTIONS: BUILDING HOUSING COMMUNITIES

In the late 1980s, I lived in a rooming house at St. Clair and Oakwood in Toronto while pregnant with my daughter. At that time it was a very diverse area, and Oakwood and Eglinton was the Caribbean place to be in Toronto. I was hoping to get my papers. The family who owned the house lived on the first floor and there were four women renters, including me. All of the other renters were Caribbean women from Jamaica doing domestic work. We renters shared one bathroom and two kitchens. We were cool. It was one of the best places I stayed in Canada because I felt protected and like I was living in a real home. Nobody could just walk into the house because the owner was there and they were protective. In those days, I didn't have my papers yet but was hoping to get them, so I felt safe there. When I was working as a domestic worker and living with an employer family it was the most insecure place to be.

I knew this girl in the Jungle (a neighbourhood in Lawrence Heights), and she told me to put my name on the waiting list for Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) because the wait list was so long. I went to the TCHC office at Yonge and Eglinton and applied. When I went to the TCHC office to put my name on the list, they told me to call when I had my daughter and give the baby's name and date of birth. At that time, I didn't have to wait for housing for years and years like people have to wait now. I moved into the only social housing community south of 401 highway and north of Dixon. Right now, the TCHC waitlist is more than one hundred thousand people and you only get three chances to look at a place and select another option.

Years later, around 1992, once my family and I were settled in our building, I started volunteering to help the TCHC recreational department that held programs for small children in my area. My daughter was young at the time. Kids from my area went to school in the Royal York. Our TCHC community was located in a rich area that only had expensive extracurricular programs that families in social housing couldn't afford. It was a big recession and was hard to find work. Although TCHC did programming, there were no affordable camps or programs around because it was such a rich area. During the summers, there would be so many kids hanging out at the buildings because opportunities for youth were too expensive for most families. Parents didn't have an extra one hundred dollars per week for extracurricular activities. I volunteered with the recreation workers, and we took the children to different parks, libraries, the Sky Dome, and other activities in Toronto. Women in the community and some men would have a barbeque in summer and car washes to raise funds to take the kids out of the community in order to give them broader experiences. It's also important that kids have a chance to have fun and gain positive experiences in their community so they can learn, grow, and avoid trouble. One of the most important lessons

you learn from being in social housing is that women are often the centres of communities and you need to make everyone feel included, especially the children.

Around that time, we got an organization in the building called “Kids In Creative Stuff” (KICS). The organization was originally named, KICS Not Drugs, but the “drugs” part was removed. It was an after-school program by the Children’s Aid Society who started it after realizing that there were no children-friendly community programs and spaces south of the 401 and north of Dixon.

In 2006, when my daughter was older and I had volunteered for some time, I was elected as a Tenant Representative for TCHC. I served for eight years. I started getting really involved in community advocacy around the same time. Our community got more diverse over the years, with new groups of immigrants, including from Somalia. Around this time, a new manager also started at TCHC who was responsible for the buildings in my community. She was Jamaican and her mother was living in social housing, so she had a direct tie to the community, which was great. She understood the racism many of our children faced. She told us that, when she was growing up in Toronto, her school told her mother that she didn’t speak English just because she had a Jamaican accent. At the time that the new TCHC manager came on board, many tenants were very upset because the private company that ran the building allowed it to fall apart. The private company would not respond to requests to fix stuff. The building’s state was so bad, and so different from the surrounding rich area. I encouraged the community to at least give the new manager a chance as she came from the community. She held a meeting to meet the tenants and find out about issues. We hadn’t had a meeting in a long time at that point. That’s when I started dedicating more time to helping.

After decades working with Toronto social housing, I see that there have been so many negative changes. City planning and housing is actually worse than it was before. People can’t afford to live here. There is a lack of planning to have more housing areas. There were plans to build community housing north of Finch, but no one is adding rental units and there is little investment in low-income housing. There was a school at Jane and Lawrence, and the government sold it to a private developer at a time when we desperately needed social housing. The government needs to release parcels of land to build communities. We need mixed income neighbourhoods so we are not isolating communities, but they have to include libraries, schools, and banks. If you’re going to have everyone in the dumps, they’ll stay in the dumps. We need communities to be exposed to the good things about the city—go explore down by Ontario Place or the library. There is a cautionary tale of Regent Park. The mixed housing that they built there only benefits the rich builders like the Daniels Corporation who made much more money than planned on the Regent Park “revitalization” project.

A. USING PARTICIPATORY BUDGETS TO TEACH AND BUILD

One of my favourite parts about being a housing advocate has been working with the Participatory Budgeting Project (PB).¹ PB is my baby. I love it. I understand that PB was introduced to the TCHC by Derek Ballantyne, former CEO of TCHC, after he saw the model that was started in Brazil. In order for PB to work, instead of looking down on people, political leadership has to give people the chance to be a real part of their communities.

¹ Participatory Budgeting Project, online: <www.participatorybudgeting.org> [perma.cc/7KJS-45VT].

PB is when regular people who live in the community choose how, and what, to spend money on for their community. It puts people in a position to lead and gain skills making decisions based on the needs of their community. People who live in social housing gain transferrable leadership, project management, and financial skills. This avoids the problems of having a stranger come in and make wrong decisions, which I have seen, like when they decide to give people new doors when they really need new flooring.

Josh Lerner is the Executive Director of the Participatory Budgeting Project.² Josh is great. TCHC hired him to do research for PB and be part of the research team. When Josh finished and went back to New York, he brought some lessons with him that he saw work in Toronto. In New York City, they use PB even to make decisions in hospitals.

The TCHC used to have a budget of \$10 million, and tenants would contribute to deciding how funding would be spent. Communities could apply for money to address community needs. A tenant could go in front of a big crowd and speak about the community, and each community had a chance to propose something. PB is so important because you build community by serving community needs. Now, PB is not as big for TCHC as when it first started.

Around 2012, I met Councillor Shelley Carroll for the first time at the first international conference on PB in New York. Councillor Carroll's ward was Don Mills and Sheppard, and she started PB in her ward. I was on the steering committee for the PB in Councillor Carroll's ward for a few years. In 2016, I went to the PB conference in Boston. The mayor there has eighty youth members on the youth council. The youths are amazing. People who wouldn't think of doing anything with the community got involved in PB. One young guy said he went to the conference because PB got him to take ownership over where he lived, to have a say of what he wanted done in his community. I think there were more trial periods of PB across Toronto.

Things have really changed in recent years. They say there is no money to cover all of the needs, but we see the city spending money in other places. The truth is, if you look at who lives in TCHC, the head office doesn't represent them. That needs to be addressed. The people running TCHC should be reflective of the community. People who are making the decisions must be held accountable to community needs.

I am part of the group, Tenants for Social Housing, and we work to protect the families that live in TCHC communities. We got started when the city wanted to sell TCHC houses so that instead of having one house per family, they would sell properties and force families to leave the community. The families the city was trying to evict were big families, and they needed a large house for all of their family members.

B. BUILDING CONNECTIONS ACROSS BORDERS

When you get involved in communities and listen to them, you learn something. In January 2007 I attended the World Social Forum in Kenya for two weeks as a representative of TCHC. TCHC had a partnership with an organization for housing in Kenya. I went to a meeting, and the Black community encouraged me to go. I took my holidays so I could go as one of the Tenant Representatives along with some managers. And I went even though I had the flu! I didn't have time to go to the doctor before I left, so I went to a chemist in Kenya to get antibiotics. Sitting on the plane from Toronto to London and then London to Nairobi was great because it was filled with

² Josh Lerner, online: <www.joshlerner.net> [perma.cc/6BXH-J3XY].

people from all over the world going to the World Social Forum. For the first day of the conference, I could barely move because I was so sick, but thankfully I recovered pretty quickly.

The rural areas in Kenya were beautiful—fresh sugar cane, avocado, bananas, and pineapples. There were three youths in our group, all Black Canadians. We visited a rural school and stayed overnight in the area. We went on a little road and track through a forest and the bus had to pass through a stream. All of a sudden, we came up on a village and they told us the village was waiting for us and they would drive ahead to let the village know that we had arrived. The first thing we saw is a church, and we could hear the kids singing. The kids lined up at the entrance of the school and sang us welcoming songs. It was very beautiful. All the villagers probably expected to greet white Canadians, but our group was all the Black people. They were really curious about us and we had nice conversations. They asked us how we got to Canada, where we came from, and how long we had been in Canada.

The school was two rooms with a bathroom. They brought water in from the stream. The kids would go to school in shifts. A German organization built the school. The uniforms were spotless. The kids were so well behaved and happy to see us. The children who welcomed us were really happy to see Black people. We also visited Kibera, a Kenyan slum.

We visited the Somalian area in Nairobi. They were even more embracing. The Kenyan and Somalian community there seemed so far apart and nobody was coming together. It takes effort to know someone's culture and feel embraced. We saw the community working together in some instances.

My trip to the World Social Forum in Kenya led to other connections in Canada. I remember a meeting we had in our TCHC building after we came back. When I shared about my trip to East Africa with Somali residents in our building, they were like, "Oh my goodness you know where we are coming from." I brought back teas from Kenya for them, and it helped to build bridges between the Caribbean community and East African community in the building because I had been to their homeland. At another community event, a Somali girl came and shared her storytelling and poetry with the kids. The kids were sitting down listening very closely and loved her art.

One of the most special connections I built because of that trip was sponsoring a student in Kenya. A friend of mine was giving a presentation about the trip at a church. She introduced me to a pastor in Canada who was also connected to the World Social Forum and who helped make these sponsorships. The student I sponsored has now finished school successfully and has her first adult job. We stay connected through social media, and I am so proud of her.

C. MOVING FORWARD

As I look back, I see how my life experience brought me to advocate for others because I had to advocate for myself. Housing is about treating people with respect and can be a way to unify people from all over the world.

When we support communities to identify and solve their own problems, we bring people together. When there's a problem in one family in social housing, it is a problem for the whole community. It reminds me of my time in domestic work. Sharing my experiences with other domestic workers and getting their support was important for me, and I was happy that we were together. Instead of just coming together by our problems, however, we should also come together by our shared solutions.