

# A Great Idea:



## THE CREATION OF BRITANNIA COMMUNITY SERVICES CENTRE

**Patricia J. Davitt and  
Karen Martin, Editors**



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Finally, we would like to thank the Board of Management of Britannia Community Services Centre for commissioning this work in celebration of twenty-five years of successful operation.

They say that people who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it; perhaps in this case, we should rather hope that when we know our own history, we *can* repeat it.





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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

This is the story of the creation of a community centre, but not just any community centre. This is a community centre that is known around the world in social planning circles and at the conferences where urban planners meet to share ideas. Britannia Community Services Centre serves as a model of how recreational, educational, and social services can be provided for a community in the most effective and integrated manner.

This is the story of how local activists responded to the needs of their community, and worked together with governmental and non-governmental bodies to build this unique complex. It is a story told in the words of people who were there, who remember the struggles and the victories. It is a story that needs to be recorded, before memories fade or become completely unreliable. As one of the participants, Maurice Egan, recounts:

“My experience has been that for most of us, including myself, when we become involved with a venture of this kind, it only starts when you get there. And there’s not much attention paid to what happened to bring it to this

point. People come on board, and it's almost as though nobody was ever there before them. That's kind of natural. I'm sure I'm guilty of that myself sometimes. But at Britannia, they haven't allowed that to happen, so they do invite us back once in a while, and you know, the longer you've been away from it, the more lies you can tell about how great you were! You give a lot of anecdotal stuff and you build up the fantasy and so on. It's kind of fun. There were Enzo and Margaret Mitchell, saying: 'Aw, that wasn't quite like that, you know!' So our memories are all very selective, and mostly good!"

This good story is a tribute to the women and the men, the young people and the old, the medley of ethnic groups, and all the citizen committees and groups and organizations who volunteered their time or dedicated their working lives to making the dream become a reality. Someone called it 'Selwyn Miller's Dream', after the man who brought us the over-arching concept of an integrated services centre, but when we read the words of the people who worked so hard to develop the idea to reflect their community and their concerns, we see that the dream belongs to all of us.

And the story shows us where we come in, and what happened before we came on board.

# Chapter 1:

## The Way We Were: the social and economic background



It was the '60s. The war was long behind us; the economy was booming. Everything was possible in this best of all possible worlds. Which was good, because there were some things that needed improving.

In this era of possibility, the citizens were on the move, but not by freeway. Margaret Mitchell, then a Community Development worker in East Vancouver, recalls, "There were a number of issues that came up at that time. One of the big ones, of course, was the east-west freeway. I think that was a great rallying point for all East Enders. Particularly the leadership came from Strathcona and Grandview, because they were organized into citizen groups by then. They organized busloads of people to go down to City Council. They loaded the City Council chamber and really put pressure on the Aldermen not to have the east-west freeway, which would have destroyed many homes and cut through all the school districts. It would have been really detrimental to the East End. That was a motivating and activating issue."

One of those citizen groups Margaret Mitchell was referring to was the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA), which led the fight against the proposed freeway through their district. Bessie Lee, a SPOTA activist, recalls that they were not alone in their struggle:

"There was this very strong youth group called

ATTAC [the Association to Attack Adverse Conditions, centred in Britannia High School]. We worked together with them in stopping the freeway. I think that's one of the main reasons why the Strathcona community felt so strongly aligned to Britannia. We learned to share and became more neighbourly from that point. Stopping the freeway pulled all the different communities together and that helped. Everyone of us was involved, because if we didn't participate, Strathcona would lose the two blocks by Prior, Union, and Georgia. Then there would have been no more community down there. It's a very small community: I think twenty square blocks. We were forced to participate.”

Joe Ferrara, one of the student leaders in ATTAC, highlighted the role of the media in promoting their point of view. “I remember we had a debate about the freeway on the Jack Webster show with one of the Aldermen who wanted the freeway to go through. There was energy, because it was literally where we were living, and the plan was to have a freeway come right up from the Georgia viaduct, up Prior and then Venables and then we'd be living right beside it. It wasn't hard to get motivated.”

It also wasn't hard for others in the community to get motivated on their issues. Mothers at Raycam, the urban re-development project undertaken by the Federal Government, were organizing as well. Enzo Guerriero, another student activist in ATTAC, pointed out, “Raycam just started to develop at that time, and the safety of children walking over the railroad tracks was an issue.”

There was also academic and charitable support for change. Darlene Marzari recalls vividly how she came to be involved in the area, as a student from the School of Social Work at UBC. “I first went to Commercial Drive in '67/'68 in my second year, in the days when the School of Social Work decided it wanted to change the world for the better. (Those days have disappeared; it's been changed to the model that wants to change the individual.) Anyway,

when we wanted to change the world, the School sent a handful of students out into communities around the city. Grandview Woodland was one of the communities, labeled by the United Way, who at that time, also wanted to change the world. (That was before it started to carry a tin cup around and ask people to put dimes in, rather than change the world.) “I had studied Citizens’ Advice Bureaus (in England) and I wanted to duplicate that exercise in Vancouver. The United Way and the School of Social Work supervised me as a student on Commercial Drive, 1112 Commercial Drive, setting up the Citizens’ Information Centre, two days a week. People could come and bring their top bureau drawer filled with papers they hadn’t dealt with, with deadlines long since gone, and dump them on your desk and say, ‘Please help’. Or they had questions about access to an agency they needed. It also turned out to be a centre for social activism where tenants got together with similar problems; that is, increasing rents. In the ‘60s there was a housing shortage. So we became a hub for social activism as well as a place where information was dispensed and lonely souls came and drank coffee.”

In their efforts, they were being aided by the City of Vancouver. Through the new Social Planning Department, they were funding community development workers hired by the Neighbourhood Services Association. That’s how Margaret Mitchell came to be involved. “I was one of the first community development workers. I was the head of the department at that time, and was in there trying to start things before we could get funds for a full-time worker.

“We were working pretty intuitively, just in what comes up when you’re talking to somebody, you never really plan. One of the things I was concerned about was that there had been too much top down planning. The United Community Services had these Area Resource Councils; they were so bureaucratic. It wasn’t the way that I work, and it wasn’t the way that I think community

development people should work. You start with the people and listen to them; and then see what they're concerned about; and then help them to come together and do something about it. That was my role."

In those years, it appeared it was the role of municipal government as well. Maurice Egan had been hired to head up the new Department of Social Planning and Development. His position was "a wonderful opportunity to apply some of my thinking, some of my convictions about the importance of social factors in the decision making process in local government. There was no other city in the country that had any department like that at the time. So it was really a pioneer in the whole social planning field." Maurice Egan, through the City of Vancouver, established the Neighbourhood Services Association and staffed it with community development workers to help citizens organize themselves and make their needs known. He hired Margaret Mitchell. He hired Darlene Marzari. He hired Michael Clague, who was later to be very intimately connected with the emerging community centre called Britannia.

The Feds were pouring money into urban re-development. The East End got Raymur and MacLean Housing projects. We almost got a freeway from the City, but the citizens rebelled. We did get community development workers, who helped develop more community activists. And when the community activists in East Vancouver looked around, they saw a community deficient in many core services. They saw many needs which had to be addressed, and they would have to tackle the problems. As Bessie Lee sums up the attitude in those days of change, "It was out of necessity. It's surprising that when there is something that you have to face and do it, you either do it or you fold up your tent and disappear. I wasn't willing to fold up my tent and disappear."



## **The Times, They Were a'Changing**

Major Bruce Halsey of the Salvation Army wrote a report that documented the dearth of services and facilities on Vancouver's East Side. John Minichiello, a Social Studies teacher at Britannia High School, showed that report to a group of his students for their consideration. "There was a group of young people that formed what they called Association To Tackle Adverse Conditions: ATTAC. They were interested in improving the community through providing various activities for younger people. They sponsored some dances and they ran a track meet for elementary school kids."

But they wanted to do more. The question was: what?

Joe Ferrara remembers what led to the formation of ATTAC. "We began to just talk with friends or people who were just hanging around, about what it would be like to actually organize some things. Our discussion was about recreation and what was available to us. Actually, the school hadn't been available to us outside of school hours. Our community centres were the pool halls, or the parks; that's where we just hung around."

Enzo Guerriero attended the first meeting of ATTAC. "It was a small group that was originally put together. Also in the room was John Minichiello, who at that time was Social Studies Department Head here at Britannia. One of John's new initiatives was built on the concept of getting students engaged in local initiatives. The whole philosophy was that the more students were involved within their community, the more interest and the more pride they would have within the community.

"And why we came together: we came together to look at a report that was done by Major Halsey from the Salvation Army, that identified this particular geographic area from Main Street almost up to Renfrew, that was very much devoid of any social, recreational facilities. There

was a little recreational project in the foyer of the gymnasium, called the Vancouver East Recreation Project (VERP). There was no public library; there was a little hole in the wall at the Lions, in the basement. The only thing at that time was a Boys and Girls Club, a very, very small facility right next to Strathcona School. And I think it's very important to realize that Strathcona did not have the Community Centre; there was no Community Centre at Strathcona. There was no Community Centre at Raycam, and Carnegie was still a museum in those days. So there weren't any amenities in this particular community. One of the reasons we came together was, in fact, to look at why there weren't any."

John Minichiello recalls, "The kids approached me and said: 'What do you think? What can we do?' Well, I had at that time an innovative Social Studies program in the school, where kids were allowed to work on their own, in groups, on issues within the community – to research them and come up with solutions, rather than just being in the classroom with a book. So they had already gone out and done some interesting work; they were interviewing politicians and architects and whatever. I suppose because of that, they had a better view of the community and what it lacked and they said, 'Well, now that we have this information, what are we going to do with it? Let's do something. Let's continue this outside of school.' So that's probably where it began.

"We had funding from the Canada Studies Foundation to do this innovative project. I had a group of people with me in Social Studies who were all committed. We worked with teachers in the summertime, on our own time, to develop the program. So the kids benefited from that, I think. It led to their involvement, which was exactly the purpose of the exercise. It worked very well.

## Chapter 2: Door-Knocking and Vote Chasing: citizens begin to organize



### ATTAC!

Joe Ferrara was one of the main organizers of ATTAC. “I remember when we were in school, there was talk about the idea of a Britannia Community Services complex. Part of this complex was a track and a skating rink and a swimming pool. It was just an idea, but it caught our fancy because we thought, ‘Man, imagine what it would be like to have a swimming pool here, a rink, a track.’ Our ‘track’ was William Street; we’d run up and down the street or around the field. The prospect of all those things really caught our imagination.

“I guess it was around January of ’69 that we contacted the student councils of Templeton and Notre Dame. I can remember that we put around posters that said: ‘You Live in a Slum; Do Something About It!’ You can do that when you’re eighteen and especially since it was our community anyway. So we formed this group called ATTAC, around 1969. The point was being provocative.”

Enzo Guerriero takes up the story. “We finally decided to have a public meeting, inviting youth from Britannia, Templeton, Tech and Notre Dame to a meeting here at Britannia. The part that was so amazing: over 120 people came, and it was a really horrible, stormy day, a lot of snow, and still there were a lot of individuals that came.

“From this meeting, there was an article in the paper that BCTV picked up, and that took it from print to

television, and that's partially how momentum started to build. And as we started getting going and organized, we started to look, a little more in depth, at the report that Major Halsey had documented about the lack of services in the area.

“There was also a second report that was floating around at that time, by Dr. Selwyn Miller of the Vancouver School Board. He was in charge of planning, and he had just come back from the States with an idea of integrating schools and public facilities as a single entity. So that second report added a little bit more focus, saying, ‘Here we have a secondary school. Let’s look at how we can integrate facilities around a secondary school complex, and create this multi-faceted facility that will be utilized all day twelve months of the year, and will be very effective in utilizing public space and public facilities.’ So that was a second discussion that started to take place.

“This is when we started to approach Social Planning, and the City of Vancouver, because in those days, all initiatives that required public facilities had to go to local area voting. So it was not a city-wide vote on money referenda, but it was in fact an area vote. Historically, the East Side corridor that we were looking at had never voted in favour of a money by-law, because it was simply said that, ‘We’re going to increase your taxes’. So two things happened. One is that we convinced City Hall in putting Britannia on the next Capital Plan, and at the same time, we convinced City Hall that these are public facilities open to every single resident of the City of Vancouver, and therefore they should be voted on by every single resident of the City of Vancouver. So Britannia became the first centre that had a city-wide referendum.”

### **Meanwhile, back at City Hall**

Maurice Egan met Dr. Selwyn Miller. “He came to my office, and we became familiar with each other,

became friends, and talked about this concept. He had been to an educational conference of some kind, and discovered this: multiple-use facilities, that is, a number of facilities working together under similar, or sometimes different, auspices but nevertheless, co-operatively. And he was a very strong advocate of this concept.

“Anyway, Selwyn was nearing retirement age, and when he did retire (it would be around '68, '69), I hired him to come and work with me at City Hall. And he did that; I guess it was on a part-time basis. So we worked together on putting the concept together for City Council, and of course, we did it in co-operation with people in the Grandview Woodlands area.

“Selwyn Miller and I drafted a resolution for Council that allowed the local area (in this case, it would be Grandview Woodland) to vote on a capital project of this kind without it necessarily having to be approved or included in a five-year capital plan. So we wouldn't have to wait until the next five-year capital plan. And the City Council, much to our... well not maybe surprise, but to our pleasure anyhow, approved that right away. So that allowed us to get on with the planning and the spending of some money at Britannia.”

The time was right for the City of Vancouver to be on board. The recent election had produced a new civic government, The Electors' Action Movement, or TEAM. According to John Minichiello, “TEAM had the majority on City Council, and they were supporting these kinds of activities.” Perhaps that's why it was less of a surprise to Maurice Egan and the Social Planning Department when they got Council support.

## **Board Games and Partners**

Now the initiating mechanisms were in place, with some funding attached, so that preliminary concept development and planning around the site could begin. The

centrepoint of the new complex would be the existing high school, and in Maurice Egan's opinion, Selwyn Miller's advocacy was a key factor in gaining School Board support for the project:

"Selwyn Miller was [retired from] the School Board, but he had had support there for it while he was there. He was very, very prominent, a very influential person in the School Board Administration. He'd been a teacher, and I don't know if he'd been a Principal or not, but he was their Director of Research. So any of the projects the School Board would come up with, he would be responsible for researching all the information and data they would need."

Selwyn Miller had another connection to Britannia which Joe Ferrara recalls, "What's interesting to me is that his picture is actually in the school office. He used to be a track coach here and I hadn't known that!"

In order to have the integration of services desired by the community and the planners, several other major players in addition to the City of Vancouver had to be on board. Maurice Egan: "The School Board put the concept plan together. And then of course you had the Parks Board, who had a separate budget and a separate administration and a separate Board, and of course, you had the Library Board and so on. Everybody came on board except the Parks Board, partly because the Superintendent of Parks was a wonderful parks man, but didn't think that much about recreation. His focus was on parks. He didn't block the funding or budgeting, but he thought this was a crazy idea and he would lose some of his power and his jurisdiction, so he wasn't keen about it at all. But they came in eventually, of course; they just didn't want to be left out of the picture."

### **The Five-Year Plan Campaign**

After the preliminary planning was accomplished, and the partners were in agreement on the concept (more

or less), the question of financing an integrated services centre around Britannia High School went to the voters in a city-wide referendum, part of the five-year capital plan. Joe Ferrara remembers how ATTAC kicked into high gear. “We did door knocking. I remember we loaded up a truck and had the school band on the back playing music and saying: “Support the Five-Year Plan”, driving around the city. We drove around Stanley Park. Gimmicks, you know!. There was a lot of support.”

John Minichiello adds, “Britannia Centre was a concept that was included in the five-year plan. The campaign was in 1969. ATTAC, SPOTA, REACH (a clinic for Research, Education & Action for Community Health), I think, and other groups got behind it. I think it was the first time that the east side of the city, at least the northeast sector of the city, had supported a five-year plan. I think that finally there was something in it for them.”

For Margaret Mitchell, it was a great exercise in community development. “I think that it was really marvellous that ATTAC got actively involved in a campaign to get the voters out, not just in Grandview, but in the whole city, to support a five-year plan. One of the major things in the five-year plan was to develop Britannia. They [the students] certainly made it a very public issue. I’m sure they had a lot of newspaper stories because it was really interesting from an East End community which was usually pretty apathetic. And here was all this wonderful activism and from kids whose parents were immigrants, most of them. ATTAC was largely credited with getting the five-year plan through. That, in turn, gave them a lot of leverage with City Hall.”

As we shall see later.

## **The Over-Twenty Crowd**

But you didn’t have to be seventeen and going to high school to take part in the campaign for the new

community centre. You could be an adult member of the community, and serve on the Area Council, and get involved that way. Joe Ferrara discovered this later. “In the very beginning, we weren’t aware of the Grandview Woodlands Area Council. We were, you know, kids.”

Margaret Mitchell was quick to recognize the potential of those kids. “By then ATTAC (Joe, Enzo and Shirley Chan from Strathcona) were beginning to organize. I worked with them and encouraged them to actually do a take over of the Area Council. They infiltrated; they joined, although it was still a professional group. When the elections came along, they got a slate of citizens and, in effect, took over the leadership of the Area Council. It was the Area Resource Council at the time, and then it became the Grandview Woodlands Area Council. They developed the constitution, and their main focus was citizen involvement to deal with different problems.”

Enzo Guerriero remembers the Area Council as well. “There were a lot of individuals who were very, very keen in providing the services to the east side of Vancouver, and very, supportive of that process. At the same time, we also had some excellent community development workers who were in the area at that time, because there was an area council that was very active. A little different than now, but this is where Al Stusiak was involved. He came from the Area Council.”

Bea Ambrose, a community activist, recalls, “My first introduction to the idea of Britannia was at an Area Council meeting in the late sixties. I think it was Major Halsey (he was with the Salvation Army) who came to speak to us, and told us about Selwyn Miller’s idea, or as I called it: ‘The Dream’. So we started from there. My remembrance is that: This is such a great idea! And I guess it went from there, to there, to there...”

Enzo Guerriero continues, “ATTAC got involved with the Area Council in helping support some of the Area



Council initiatives. One of the things that came with the Area Council was the Information Centre that was on the Drive, where Bea Ambrose was involved. And at the same time, it got a community development worker attached to the area, and this is where you had people like Margaret Mitchell, who was a community development worker at that time, and of course, Darlene Marzari, and later on, in the more formal sense, you had Nancy Cooley from the City and then, more specifically, Michael Clague.”

Margaret Mitchell notes a particular role that youth played on the Area Council. “The young people from ATTAC made a very important contribution as activists and Area Council leaders with lots of energy and troops to back them, and with indirect support from the Chinese and Italian speaking parents and neighbours. They were the link back. I can remember them interpreting what was going on to their parents.”

### **In That Moving Time**

Al Stusiak describes it like this. “In that moving time, the hippy philosophy of people working together maybe had not really gotten through until the ‘60s and ‘70s. I’m not using hippy in the derogatory sense; I mean the awakening of people about things. The change (and maybe we don’t give enough credence to what happened in those three or four years) was the change of thought processes in government bureaucracies as well, because these things couldn’t have worked if there was anyone who was adamant [in opposition]. There were some very, very adamant people at City Hall, but interestingly enough, they weren’t around two or three years later. A lot of people said, ‘Maybe we should start listening to communities.’ There was the realization that maybe communities weren’t going to waste the money. There was a time for maybe twenty years that elected people did listen and bureaucrats did listen to people. I don’t necessarily think that’s the case

today.”

Bessie Lee remembers it well. “I think that the time was right for the community development of that area. There was community action all over the city. It was the communities helping themselves. Cedar Cottage, Mount Pleasant, everybody. It was across the city that it was happening.”

Looking back, one can see the convergence of so many factors that enabled the project which would become Britannia to occur. It was a moving time, a time when change was possible, when change seemed almost inevitable. There was societal enthusiasm and support for citizen involvement and for community development. Citizen Information Centres and Area Councils chewed over the countless ideas that could transform their communities. A Salvation Army major prepared a report that would ignite a brushfire of activity, following a path charted by a School Board official. High school students would take the ball and run with it. And governments at all levels thought this was no bad thing, this engaged citizenry, and supported it.

Darlene Marzari recalls, “Maurice Egan was very instrumental in setting up the infrastructure and basic framework and philosophy at the City, and the people flourished inside that framework and actually carried the ball. The kids [ATTAC], with John Minichiello, were very instrumental at the very grassroots, and there was a marvellous group of growing citizenry who had a whole lot of things on their plates but saw the vision, saw what this could do, and really went to bat for it.”

As a result of heroic efforts on everyone’s part, the five-year plan passed, thus assuring Britannia of the necessary funding to keep the process moving along. Only things didn’t move along. John Minichiello recalls, “So when that five-year plan passed (in 1969), then there was basic funding in place for this Centre. Then nothing

happened for a while, so the citizens got together and began to lobby City Hall to get on with this planning process. What we were concerned about was that if it drifted for a while, then the five years would be over, and nothing would have happened. And the money would probably be used for somewhere else. So there had to be some community involvement.”

### **When Push Comes to Shove**

Margaret Mitchell felt that the times were right for the citizens to get moving. “The multiethnic nature of Grandview was terrific, and everything was just right for getting citizens involved. If there hadn’t been all the preliminary work, like the fight against the freeway, the whole concept of citizens involved in the planning process would have been difficult. If the citizens hadn’t been involved, Britannia would have been just bricks and mortar.”

Enzo Guerriero, Joe Ferrara and the students in ATTAC were instrumental in moving the process along. Darlene Marzari remembers their organizing activities. “I certainly remember Joe and Enzo coming into the Citizens’ Information Centre with their questionnaire, and bustling and being busy, and if we’d had a photocopying machine they would have been copying. They knew exactly where to go and who to talk to.”

Al Stusiak remembers their energy and effectiveness. “One of the outstanding things that was done was through the Social Studies Department that John was involved in, partly with the ATTAC young people and with other young people at the school, was a survey they did of the community. They did eleven hundred, they actually knocked on eleven hundred doors. That was the official information we got back. The information was culled, put together, summarized, analyzed if you want, as to what the community wanted. Out of that, the programs and services

that were going to be delivered here were actually evolved.”

Enzo Guerriero describes the whole process rather tongue in cheek. “It was interesting how ATTAC became sort of a spearhead. As it turned out, you go to Council, you make a presentation, and strangely enough, the Social Studies class has a field trip that day. And strangely enough, the seniors from Strathcona also had a bus that was available to them, and they also did a field trip to City Council. So that’s how the community was able to be involved with that process. It was a very formal process: formal in that we phoned the clerk; we asked to be put on the agenda; we made a presentation; we phoned the aldermen and found out where they were on the vote. So we used a very structured process in there.”

Joe Ferrara adds, “It got to the point where each person was assigned a City Councillor and so you’d phone up your councillor. We made petitions to City Council.”

## Chapter 3: Getting the Show on the Road: plans and designs



With a little bit of a shove from the community, things were on the road again. Enzo Guerriero continues, “After the by-laws were all passed, what happened was that there was the concept of the need for public involvement in the planning, and that was rather new to the City of Vancouver. So again, Britannia opened up that wedge, to say, ‘OK, how do you plan a facility?’ And the City indicated that they were willing to bring forward an advisory group (we used the word “advisory” still, in those days), of having some citizens work with professionals in designing the facility.”

### **The Britannia Planning Advisory Committee**

Enzo Guerriero continues, “The Advisory Group – it was an interesting formula that we used. It was six citizens and four professionals: professional meaning a planner from the Parks Board, a planner from the City of Vancouver, a planner from the School Board, and then there was a social planner on that particular group. That was Nancy Cooley. The six individuals were very, very strategically appointed. You had a person representing Strathcona, Bessie Lee. You had a person representing Raycam, John Kurbatoff. You had a person representing education, John Minichiello; and also he lived in the area; he was a resident. You had Carrie Thodeson, who was around the Raycam/MacLean area.

And then you had Millie Lynch, who also was in the area, but was also involved with day care. And then you had myself, who was a youth at that time. So that gave you the cross-section of the community. It gave you a bit of a profile of who the community was all about. Then this particular group, with the four professionals and the architectural group, met on a weekly basis at the corner of... Well, was it 1191? I think I still remember the address: 1191 Commercial Drive, every Wednesday night.”

Bessie Lee was clear about her role on the Planning Committee. “I was to bring back what was happening with the concept or ideas with Britannia back to Strathcona and also, to make sure that Strathcona could fully participate in the activities and the centre.”

Conrad Man, the Parks Board representative also remembers some of the members of the group: “I recall us meeting before the architects were involved. We met at the elementary school. There was Don Pritchard from the School Board, John Minichiello, Harry Pickstone from the Planning Department, from Social Planning there was Nancy Cooley, then myself. From ATTAC there was Enzo, and there was Michael Clague. There were an incredible number of social services in the area, and Michael represented some of them. There was no one from the Library Board. From early on there were community representatives as well, like Al Stusiak. All these groups had various interests in what was to be Britannia. Our approach was: how could all these interests be pulled together? That group became the Britannia Planning Advisory Committee.”

Michael Clague remembers the citizen committee. “Yes, oh yes, I worked with the Citizens’ Planning Advisory Committee. Then officially there became a Planning Advisory Committee that included citizens and public officials from the City, Parks Board, and School Board. Then I was a resource person to the committee itself, from

1971 until '74.

“There were some cliff-hangers in this process. If we got the City on board, could we hold the Parks Board, and where would the School Board come in?”

Byron Olson, one of the architects, characterized the situation from his perspective. “One thing that stood out in my mind: the School Board, the Parks Board and the City all had to come into one administrative body, but the Parks Board and the School Board had their own territory. At one point, well actually it happened three times, there were problems with this. It was about the integration of the facilities; we were designing it as if there was one client, one pail of money. By the time I was finished, they had negotiated the various parts of the integration.”

Michael Clague: “The Parks Board really wanted Britannia to be managed as another Park Board Community Centre. It was clear from the start that other people wanted it to *not* be managed by the Parks Board. There would be a Community Management that would have much more voice and say than any community centre at the time. A very, very important principle, and similarly, that the direct access to City Hall was an important consideration too. So there was a fair amount of work which had to be done to convince people about that. Parks Board was primarily the main one. But also I think there were others, officials who felt that basically what you needed was a Clerk II, an administrator to handle room bookings. But it’s clear that the whole philosophy of the place was that it would be citizen-led and managed, which meant that there had to be a separate society with its own staff, who wouldn’t be beholden to the Library or the School Board or anybody else, whose job it was to create an orchestration of all the different agencies on site. So that took some work as well.”

Enzo Guerriero agrees: “The interesting thing that happened there was really the strong commitment to

Britannia, regardless of where you came from. You know, the planner from School Board or the planner from Parks Board, or the City: we all parked our hats and we all came together with this really strong commitment to build something very, very unique here, that really reflected the needs of this particular community. When we knew that there were going to be roadblocks or some difficulties, all of us pitched in and developed a strategy on how to deal with that. Everyone was very, very supportive of that strategy; it was not as if one person went on their own. It was really the group, and here's how we go forward as a group.”

Conrad Man of the Vancouver Parks Board was very positive about the results. “Britannia was a great example of collaboration of grassroots community participation with traditional government structures that proved to be very successful. You had to get over your own turf protection and understand this was a new approach, and I think this happened, obviously. It was a tremendous experience for everyone involved.”

## **Designing the New Centre**

Al Stusiak was an alternate representative from the Grandview Woodlands Area Council. “By 1970, I would say, the planning committee had had innumerable meetings. We were all involved in this great idea of a community-built and community-designed services centre surrounding a school. The school was here; it was going to be expanded. The library was going to be added on to; the elementary school and all the things that we got. Designers were brought in to lead, to teach people a variety of things that were required. The people who were involved in the Advisory Committee were really just ordinary people; they were not planners, architects, or anything else, but had ideas, were nurtured, learned new vocabulary, learned to argue specifically for what they wanted, with good taste.



An example: that the low profile of the buildings not be overwhelming and standing out like a sore thumb in the community.”

Conrad Man continues, “One of our roles was to select the architects. Ultimately we chose Ron Walkey and Associates, which was Ron Walkey and Byron Olson. The approach that Ron Walkey proposed was “Pattern Language”, an architectural language by a professor of architecture, Chris Alexander. This pattern language seemed to intrigue the committee because it was non-conventional.”

John Minichiello: “Ron Walkey and Byron Olson formed a group called Britannia Design, rented a space that’s now the tapas bar on the corner, and that was the Britannia Design building. Before meeting, there was an extensive survey done of the community, in two forms. One was like a drop-off questionnaire, where people ranked their priorities, and then a random sampling of in-depth interviews with people to find out what they wanted.”

Byron Olson remembers that questionnaire: “We got the process underway with a questionnaire with the community. We did it in three languages: Italian, Chinese and English. We had a young Chinese girl as our secretary, Alice, and English was her second language. We used her to test out our questionnaire. We had her read it to see if it was okay. One of the items that people had said they wanted to see happen at Britannia was a flea market. In the translation, it said ‘a place to sell small bugs!’

“After that, we went into the schematic design phase, and we did that with the planning committee. The design was developed out of what came out of the questionnaire. We’d keep going back to the community; there were many sessions back and forth with the planning committee. An interesting part was watching the committee members grow in their understanding of the process and their knowledge. They all grew in different ways.”

John Minichiello takes up the story. “All of this [information] was compiled by Britannia Design, and we had the priorities: Library, Swimming Pool, Ice Rink, Seniors, Preschool. And there was a need for another elementary school. So with these priorities, then, the Committee met and we looked at the proposed site, and we looked at the location of the facilities, and communication patterns between them. That’s what it was called, ‘Pattern Language’ for building design.”

Enzo Guerriero explains it more fully. “Pattern Language was based on an interesting concept that you can take a very complex design or a very simple design, regardless of the complexity, and a group of lay people, without knowing anything about architectural theory and walk them through a series of patterns. And through those series of patterns, design a building, a complex. That’s where that whole concept of the Pattern Language was developed.

“What happened with the patterns: we started to look at how did people interact and how do people communicate? From the patterns, we were able to look at where the boundaries of Britannia would be. Do you expropriate at the street, or do you expropriate at the alleys, as an example. We looked at how people communicate. Do they communicate from the front streets or the back alleys? Here, on the East Side, the back alleys became the path of communication, not the front.”

Michael Clague also referred to some of the debates about design. “There were issues around design of the facility: it was the East End; it should be built like a fortress, with few windows and barbed wire. I exaggerate, but nonetheless, there was tension between having a very open and welcoming design that was simply an extension of the streets of the community versus a much more institutionalized one. That was a big struggle that everybody worked on.

“ I guess it was the [School Board’s] architects’ side that was pushing strongly for a more institutionalized approach. Even in small ways: not just the amount of windows, but the low, overhanging eaves – you know, the low roof lines, because kids could climb on there. That shouldn’t happen. Just have fluorescent lighting in the building; you don’t need the softer, incandescent light. I mean, the things that make it more welcoming were things that had to be struggled with.”

Enzo concurs. “The Committee felt very strongly that we did not want Britannia to be this white, institutional facility. That we wanted Britannia very much to blend in to the community. It would be a community centre that would be very much residential-looking in nature. And that was one of the reasons why it did not go on the Drive. So if you see Britannia in the present format, you see the concept of a mini-city: a mini-sidewalk, a mini-road; that people can walk down the open area between the pool and the gymnasium and see what goes on. Always this openness, of seeing what goes on in buildings. That was one of the conceptual ideas that I think worked very, very well. So if you look at Britannia, you have these massive facilities, but you can’t really see them, in a way. You can see the entrances; you can go into the entrances and participate, but you don’t see the bigness of them, as at Killarney, for example. You can see Killarney, standing up there, but you can’t really see Britannia. That was part of the concept of building in Britannia.”

In the end, how did it all work out? Margaret Mitchell referred to the Planning Committee having a ‘village concept’ when they did the design for the Centre. Al Stusiak enlarges on that assessment. “I think putting things together in the structural way it was done forced people to interact. Even if you look at the way the buildings are designed, there’s a dynamic interplay. You can’t isolate yourself away without meeting someone else from one of

the other buildings. So even if you don't want to participate, in an indirect way, you are. I think the planning was far reaching at the time: the idea of people able to move around and within. You're not shut out of any place. You can go into the rink and observe if you want, even if you don't want to skate. You can go and have a look. You can do the same thing with the pool. And nobody says, 'What are you doing here?; it's my little empire and get out of here.' "

The result of all this energy put into planning by all the players – the professional architects; the urban and social planners and the citizens – was a major success. The use of Pattern language in designing the centre gave a large and motley group of individuals the tools to create a complex series of buildings that would permit the integration of people and services into a dynamic whole. It was a wise choice of method, not because it was non-conventional, but because it would work in the way that people needed it to work. And in the end, the initially somewhat skeptical Conrad Man acknowledges: "From the technical side of things, it gave me a sounder footing on understanding architectural design. It certainly increased my understanding of community participation processes in developing a facility of this nature."

John Minichiello sums up the planning process. "We planned it all, and after we got the plan worked out with the Pattern Design, the architects Downs-Archambault were hired to do the final design of the buildings, to try and keep them low profile and sort of blend in with the community."

## Chapter 4:

### Critical Issues: buildings and bosses



#### **Sink or Skate: The Pool and the Rink**

Agreement was reached about the shape and design of the complex, but there were still major questions to resolve concerning what exactly was going to be built. The ambiguity swirled around two facilities, the swimming pool and the ice rink.

Enzo Guerriero remembers the bind the City was in. “When the money by-law went forward, the City of Vancouver put themselves in a bit of a box, in that they made a commitment to build Britannia, but without necessarily identifying specific facilities. But they also made a commitment to building the Templeton Pool. There was a questionnaire that went to every single household in the area, and then on top of that the students from Britannia, from the Social Studies Department, did questionnaires on a random basis, more in-depth questionnaires. Then there were also smaller focus-group questionnaires. And after doing the public consultation and once all of that was tabulated, the pool was very, very high on the agenda, so it was strategically planned that we go with the pool, even though there was going to be a pool up the street, and put pressure later on to get an ice rink.”

John Minichiello continues. “The people in the Templeton area, led by the Principal of the Secondary School, felt that if they put the pool at Britannia, Templeton wouldn’t get its pool. So they basically began to have a

campaign against the Britannia Pool and for the Templeton Pool. So we thought, well, this is our community and we're already dividing it, so we met with them. I went, personally, with the Vice Principal at Brit., who knew the Principal at Templeton, to try to tell them: 'Listen, you've had the promise of your pool; the pool's included in ours; let's go forward with both pools. They have a commitment to both pools.' Of course, he didn't believe that we could do this, so he was still opposed. But eventually, the Parks Board realized that they'd made the promise and they had to keep it. It was integral to Britannia to have a pool. So we did get both pools, in spite of Templeton's efforts to the contrary. That, I think, was a critical area that was possible to resolve.

"And then the rink. We didn't really have the money for the rink. So there was talk about not acquiring the land for the rink, so that we could use that money to build the other facilities. Because it was a time of considerable inflation, and the longer we waited, the higher and more costly the buildings became. Anyway, our group advocated, in spite of a lot of reservations from some of the representatives of various agencies, to acquire the land for the rink, and that's what we did. We did acquire the land for the rink, and we were very fortunate."

Enzo Guerriero recalls more details. "The ice rink came as part of an interesting discussion at the sod-turning ceremony here at Britannia that involved the Mayor, Art Phillips, the Premier, Dave Barrett, who was a Britannia graduate, and of course, the other respective politicians at that time from the School Board and the Parks Board and so forth. And a very simple question was asked: 'Was the province willing to fund the ice rink?' And a commitment was made, at that time, to fund the ice rink."

Al Stusiak also remembers that occasion. "We indirectly got the rink, actually, in front of the Information Centre, I believe, when the speaking was taking place [at

the sod-turning ceremony]. People were talking, and then Dave Barrett made the commitment at that time.”

John Minichiello clarifies where a lot of the money eventually came from. “Within a number of months, the Federal Government approved funds for community facilities – I think specifically rinks, and Vancouver was allocated five, enough money for five rinks, and we got one of those, of course. So then, basically, our facilities and the funding for it was complete, and construction could proceed. A bit of fortuitousness, a bit of foresight, and a bit of... a LOT of citizens just sticking to their guns and remaining involved.”

### **Expropriation: Houses Come Down**

Britannia High School stood amidst a neighbourhood of wooden-frame houses, some dating back to the turn of the century. John Minichiello remembers what it looked like. “What was on the site at that point was the old school, the High School, and what we called the Old Gymnasium, which are now Gyms A and B. And then, about ’67, through some Federal grants, they added a science wing and what would now be the industrial [wing]... sort of where the new office is now, the main school office, and the shops and the Business Ed. area, and the counselling offices. That was added in ’67.

“So we had the High School. Where the main parking lot is now, was houses, and where the main field, where the Oval is, was all houses. What we call the elementary school field, that gravel, that was the main High School field at that time, and it was grass. They changed it to what for a euphemism they call ‘All Weather Surface’ which is that boulder dust! Where the rink and pool and the main offices, the Information Centre, Seniors’ Centre are: that was all housing.

“Where the Oval is, that’s one city block; that was all houses. The path from the cafeteria where the mural is now,

that was Woodland Drive. The road just went right through there. Same with Napier. You see, the trees that are there in front of the Information Centre? Those are the original trees that were on the street.”

Bea Ambrose’s son Ken was a student at Britannia. He told his mother: “I remember all the houses that went down.” For Bea, “that was the heart-breaking thing, the houses that came down.”

John Minichiello identifies the expropriation of land as one of the critical issues. “We were concerned that if people weren’t treated fairly, that there’d be a lot of opposition to the project and people would get turned off. You know, the community would be split with those that didn’t want to sell their homes and those that wanted the facility. We were involved in that, and insisted that the bureaucrats treat the people fairly. There was some talk that they could be relocated and they would help to be relocated, but that tended to be impractical. But I think all of the property that was expropriated, there were only one or two or three that actually went through an appeal process. Most of it was settled, you know, quite amicably. So that was a critical factor at the beginning, to keep people positive.”

Michael Clague also remembers this as a key concern. “A large number of homes had to come down in the community for Britannia, and there were some home owners, two or three, who held out for more money than what the City was offering. So that was a difficult time, because, in effect, they were giving up their homes, hopefully for a good compensation, but in order to have this community facility developed. But that meant going to Council to make sure that there was fair compensation for those people.”

Maurice Egan was the point man at City Hall on this issue. “We went to City Council the first time. We had to acquire some property and demolish it, residential property.



I had recommended that we do that. So Council members questioned me. ‘You mean, you’ve got support for acquiring this property and demolishing it?’ They didn’t believe me, and I didn’t blame them. They didn’t approve it at that first meeting. They said, ‘We want to be sure about this.’ So the next meeting some time later, I can remember Enzo, but there were others there too, and Enzo was the spokesman. He came on very strong to convince the Council that, yes, this had to be done. Everybody that was involved had been talked to, and they all supported the project, even though it meant disrupting their own lives. And that was quite an eye-opener for the Council. It was for me too. I couldn’t have done that from City Hall, but it was an indication of how well the local people took ownership of the project, and people who lived around there did as well. So that was an amazing time.”

### **Who’s the Boss Around Here?**

But a community centre is not just the bricks and mortar used to build it. Arguably the more important element is the people who move into the buildings and make all the programs happen. Throughout the period of designing the physical attributes of the new Britannia Community Centre, attention was also being paid to the management structure that would animate the centre and oversee its performance.

John Minichiello was very aware of the importance of governance. “As the building was going on, the citizens were also concerned that they continue to have a voice when the building was completed and it was managed. So a consultant was hired to come up with a management report. His name was John Roberts, and it was known as the Roberts Report.”

The kind of questions John Roberts posed, according to Enzo Guerriero, were: ‘If we’re going to have this complex here that’s going to be multiple partnerships, how

do we develop the administrative structure to allow this complex to be successful? How do we marry the administrative structure with the physical structure, so that no one can take their tents and walk away at the first sign of a conflict?' One of the things that the management report stated very clearly is that, in fact, it is a marriage between the community, the different agencies and both the officials and the politicians.

John Minichiello continues: "With a lot of interviewing again, and community involvement, he [John Roberts] came up with the idea that we would have a Board made up of citizens and the heads of the agencies on site. So the senior School Board official would be the Principal of the Secondary School, the senior Parks Board person, the senior Librarian. And at one time we had the concept that other agencies [should be represented], because in the Information Centre, there's that pit area and there's a whole bunch of agencies there, and they should represent one. Eventually, that, I guess, fell by the wayside. They couldn't continue it, because the people in the pit come and go. Some are only there for a matter of months. So that position pretty well no longer exists. But the ratio was twice as many citizens as agencies, bureaucrats or staff. And that's continued to this day.

"Also there are restrictions on who can run for the Board. There was the concept that everyone in the City or almost the Lower Mainland could use it, so maybe we should have someone from outside the geographical catchment area, but it had to be most people in that geographical area. So I think the Constitution is such that it allows two or three people that are outside of the geographical catchment area. I'm not sure, they may have changed that."

Enzo Guerriero points out that the nature of the Britannia Board represents one of the most radical differences between this community centre and all others,

“in that the Committee felt very strongly and the report reinforced it, that in order for Britannia to be successful, the Board was not going to be an advisory group, in the old format of the Parks Board or any other City facility, but in fact it was going to be a management group. They were going to have the responsibility to manage the facilities. And after several, several, several presentations to respective Boards, the Boards bought into the concept. The bureaucrats, not necessarily, but the politicians did, which was very, very important at that time. So this is where the Britannia Board was created, as a management board versus an advisory committee. Through the management board, Michael Clague developed the Master Agreements and the Operating Agreements between the community and the respective organizations: the School Board, the City, the Library and the Parks Board. They indicated the operational guidelines, the responsibilities of all. So Britannia is still probably a unique centre in North America when it comes to that management/operational responsibility in partnership as it is right now, versus an Advisory group, as it is with some of the other community centres across North America.”

## Chapter 5: Just Before the Buildings Opened: construction & operating agreements



John Minichiello: “Just before the buildings were opened, twenty-five years ago, an Interim Board was established. The concept was that there would be elections every year for half of the citizens on the Board. Those of us on the Planning Committee who were willing to serve, served the first two terms, and then eventually we would have to run for positions. I was only there for two years, as Interim President. Then I didn’t run for the Board because I didn’t feel that I would be eligible. I wasn’t living in the area. Previous to that, I’d lived at Pender and Templeton, and previous to that, in the Strathcona area, Keefer Street.”

Britannia Community Services Centre was moving closer to being reality. No longer only a matter of bricks and mortar, the Interim Board began hiring staff. Michael Clague became Britannia’s first Executive Director.

Thelma Lindsay enters the story at this point. “It was the time when things were really starting to get rolling, that the City cut off the funding for the Community Development Department. We had done such a good job in developing communities to come and express themselves at City Hall, that they didn’t like us any more. By that time, Michael Clague had been selected as the first Director of Britannia. Just as the funding was cut off for the Community Development Department, I was approached to see if I was interested in coming to Britannia.

“Michael Clague and I met, and I can still remember

it. You know that building right on the corner of the lane that goes from Commercial Drive right almost to the Teen Centre; there's a lane there between the two buildings? Michael Clague and I went to that building that's on the corner of it, went up to the balcony (you recall there's a balcony looking right over?) and that was my first glimpse of Britannia Centre in the making.

“Construction was already on at that point, and the construction crew was very busy getting the buildings finished. At that point, then, I was selected to work along with Michael Clague as the Manager of Administrative Services. People would say, ‘Now, where would you work?’ when the Centre wasn't even finished. Well now, that's interesting too, because right at the back of the Grandview Woodlands Information Centre, they put up some plywood partitions and had a little space about, like 10' x 10' and that's where Michael and I had our office.

“There were the two of us, with desks and typewriters and so on, and a phone. Well, it wasn't very long before we had two students working with us, one from the School of Social Work, and one from Recreation. So if you can imagine a space like that, and four people trying to work in it! It was almost like every time you wanted to move, you had to put up your hand and say: ‘Please, may I move?!’

“But it was a great time, because that's when Michael and I were going back to City Hall and working on the agreements for the Centre. We would go, and we would meet with representatives from the Manager's Office, the Finance Department at City Hall, and if it was pertinent, somebody from the Personnel Department. There would be somebody from the School Board, from the Library Board, from the Parks Board.”

Michael Clague remembers those meetings too. “I must say, the challenge we had, which was pretty tough, was to get buy-in around the Master Agreement and the

Operating Agreements: that is, the Master Agreement between the Society, School Board and the City around the management of the property and the maintenance of the property; then with the Library Board, the School Board and the Parks Board around the provision of their services. Some of those were particularly complicated, especially with the School Board, around community education services. It was really tough slogging to convince them to come into this [signing on to the agreement]. There was a strong view generally that we'd just get together and work together. But the advice we'd been given by our management consultant, John Roberts from B.C. Research, who did the management design for Britannia, was to get things in writing. You may have the right combination of people now, but people come and people go. So I'm really happy that we insisted on, in fact, having those signed agreements with all of the parties."

Thelma was impressed with the overall level of cooperation that everyone demonstrated. "Britannia had been sold to them at that point to such an extent that they were, on the whole, willing to go along with what Britannia wanted to provide for the community. But at the same time it was interesting to see the way these persons tried to hold on to their own turf. I must admit that it was the representative from the School Board, a little Scottish man, who was very strong in protecting his turf. But you can understand that, because the School Board is a very vital organization and a very strong organization.

"Anyway, the agreements got signed, and as far as I'm concerned, they are the lifeblood of Britannia in so many ways. When there has been a difference, even, say, in selection of staff by one organization, it's going back to those agreements and saying who will be involved. And then going back to the parent body. I think that is one of the things that has made Britannia strong, because the Board hasn't hesitated in going to those agreements, to make sure

that they have input in every way that they should. So those were the beginnings of these trips back and forth to City Hall to work those out. But at the same we were establishing a good relationship with City Hall for what was to come.”

### **Once More Into the Breech: Citizen Support for the First Budget**

Wouldn'tcha know. What was to come would be squabbles about money. Michael remembers it well. “I guess the big issue we went with was Britannia's first operating budget. That was a huge exercise, incredibly complicated, because we had to prepare budget estimates for everything, including the Library, the Parks Board, community education component, that sort of thing. In the end, we were successful, but a great deal of credit goes to the citizens like Miniciello and Enzo and Al Stusiak and others who could really work the system successfully to make it happen.”

Thelma Lindsay also remembers this major encounter with City Hall. “I guess the first crisis came when one of the representatives at City Hall decided that the budget looked a little too rich, and it should be cut by one-third. It was something like: Council had said this on Monday, and the Interim Board met on Tuesday, and it seems to me that it was Wednesday we had to be at Council. Because I know the Board sat until midnight to work out what they wanted for their presentation. Mike and I worked until four in the morning to get it all typed up and prepared. And the two of us were back in the morning; I was out on the Drive recruiting people, and he was recruiting other people by telephone. So by the afternoon, including the seniors, we had Council chambers packed. It was exciting, because at a point like that, your blood gets up, and your adrenaline is all going, and you're just so keyed up. Of course, we were thrilled when they accepted

our proposal. That's the other thing: Britannia has always had a very strong Board of community representatives, who did not hesitate to go to City Council. They always went prepared and spoke well about their requests. That was the first time we had that success with Council.

“The outcome was that we got the original budget returned. One of the things I've commented on in the past is that one of the seniors got so indignant. She directed it all to the mayor, who was Volrich at that time, and shook her finger at him and said: 'I was born when you were just in diapers, and I didn't come here to hear you tell me I wouldn't have services at Britannia!' But you know, that's the support you can get from the community. Probably what she said had much more of an impact than what maybe somebody might have taken two minutes to say. It was just one of the times when you saw that involvement, and it made you feel that you were in a place where you had somebody behind you, that you weren't doing things on your own.”

John Minichiello smiles when he remembers some of the lively meetings between the Community and the Council. “There were always threats to the funding, and threats to commitment. Some of the meetings were in the main Council Chambers, and some were in committee. I remember one in particular. The alder/councilors didn't like the idea that there were so many people there watching how they were going to vote; they felt that we were turning Council into the Roman Circus! But the people were pretty cranked up. Some of the seniors started yelling back at them from the gallery! I think they weren't used to this kind of community involvement! Especially from the East Side, where people generally didn't have the influence of some on the West Side, where they actually knew the councilors personally. Though a group of us got to know them fairly well. We did lobby them personally at the time and used whatever connections we had.”



Michael Clague wraps it up. "I can still remember the City Finance meeting where our budget was there, and (they were called aldermen then), an *alderperson* turned to me and she said, 'Now, is this the last time you'll be coming for money?' And Alderman Puil just mimicked a violin playing back and forth! He'd heard this song from Clague before, you see! So the budget was certainly a large start-up issue. We were just really lucky all the way through, I think, in the agencies coming on board in the end."

### **Who's Here?: Hiring the Staff**

Thelma takes up the story again. "I guess things were rolling along nicely as far as the building was concerned, but a group of boys were hanging around in the evening. I say boys; nothing against the girls, but it seemed to be the boys that get into the trouble. We employed an activity coordinator and that was Steve Mok. He was the first person employed, and he's still there! At that point, Steve was more like a security man, but also, he'd had experience in youth work and was developing a relationship with these kids who were hanging around. He worked an afternoon shift, and he would come in to our little cubbyhole in the Information Centre and that would be his office. He spent a lot of time around the Centre as it was being developed.

"So the Centre was built, and it was a matter of getting staff, and it was a matter of starting to open up programs. Britannia was involved in the selection for recreation staff, and of course, in the development of programs as well. By that time the Britannia staff had been employed, who included accounting and clerical staff, cashiers for the Pool and the Rink, and the Childcare Centre."

Britannia also anticipated another need that not every social services centre might have to meet. They realized that people from all over the world might come to the door, wanting to see this unique complex in operation, so they

hired two tour guides. Thelma recalls, "They were Allan Ross and Gabrielle Fayad, who were the hosts (tour guides) and then became the relief activity co-ordinators."

"From there it went on to the hiring of recreational staff, with Dick Cave being the first recreation co-ordinator, and working out the agreement for the custodial staff, because it was to be the School staff that would handle everything. And there, Don Mossop was very much involved. I think that Don's involvement was also very good, because he was not only a supporter of Britannia, but also a strong union man, and so he made sure that his request would cover an adequate amount of staff to do a good job in the Centre."

By this time, some of the Centre buildings were open for use. Bea Ambrose describes her first day on the job as the new switchboard/clerk typist and receptionist. "I remember the first day. I was in the day before, looked at the building, looked through the building to see what it was like. Mike Clague was here, and he said, 'When you come in tomorrow, Bea,' he said, 'make sure you wear what you're wearing [a heavy sweater], because we don't have any heat! Yet. But,' he said, 'you will be able to go over to the Seniors,' (because I guess they were open then) ... 'and have coffee.' So that's what we did the first day."

Thelma Lindsay was happy to be "out of our cubbyhole; and we had breathing space. We were involved in working out arrangements with the School, regarding the facilities. At that point, Anna Niven represented the School, and Bill Vance, and Enzo Guerriero, as the Education Co-ordinator, and Dick Cave and I would meet. I was representing the community and the Britannia Board, and Dick, of course, recreation. So that's where we worked out all these agreements as to who would have use of Gym D and who would have use of Gym C, and how much we would be able to use the School, and so forth, and they would be able to use community facilities. Those were

exciting meetings, because we had some real key people in there, and people who were very voluble. But it was fun! You know, most of the time there might be yelling or screaming in the meeting, and you would go out and it was all over and forgotten. It didn't matter what happened in the meetings; we'd still come away friends and laughing about it."

### **Solidarity Forever: the Unions**

Thelma recalls: "After the Centre had been in operation a while, the staff applied for union certification and they went to the Operating Engineers. But that was challenged by the City of Vancouver. The reason was, the City of Vancouver, of course, had the VMREU [Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union] at that time, and they did not want to have another union to have to deal with. So the Labour Relations Board decided that the City of Vancouver and the Britannia Board of Management were Employers in Common and therefore, it should be one union that they were dealing with. We had worked out an agreement between the Britannia Board and the Operating Engineers, but of course, that had to go by the way."

Michael Clague remembers this as a thorny question. "The issue for us was not whether they were unionized, it was that the process and the result would reflect the spirit of Britannia as well. It got messy, because VMREU went in, really seeing it as an extension of the Parks Board, and there was no signal from them that they were going to treat this place any differently. I was quite open in saying: we'll support whomever the employees choose. But I was pretty open about saying that I hope it's not the VMREU, because I saw that as eroding the autonomy and the model of Britannia in some respects. I probably should have stayed out of it more."

In the end, it worked out well enough, according to Thelma. "Britannia was involved with the Personnel

Department of City Hall, in working out an agreement with the VMREU. So again, it's the Board involvement cutting in, and the community having their say. One of the things, as you probably are aware, is the fact that the part-time staff at Britannia can apply for a job when it's vacant, and be considered prior to outsiders. That is something that was worked out between the Britannia Board and the Union, and City Hall."

## Chapter 6: Firsts: opening day & the first election



Of course Britannia opened piecemeal, as each building was completed and ready for use. But with such an important addition to the community, there had to be a grand celebration, and there was. It was June 5, 1976.

Thelma Lindsay thinks back “to the opening ceremonies at Britannia, and there is this feeling of excitement and the community being involved. The community had worked on this Centre for so many years, and here it was, something that was alive. One of the things we did that day was, we had employed two people as hosts, so that they would be able to not only direct the community through the various buildings, but take them.”

Allan Ross was one of the hosts on opening day. “I can remember so well. Up to that day it had been miserable, cold weather, rain, rain, rain. That particular day, the sun came out. It was the most beautiful day. The sun shone the whole day and the next day the rain came, and it never quit after that. So that it would appear that somebody upstairs was very pleased with the whole situation.”

Michael Clague will never forget that day. “It was absolutely magic. I can remember, I got up about five o’clock that morning. I was so excited. And I walked the dog before I headed into Britannia for seven o’clock. Well, I’m sure you’ve seen the photographs and so on, maybe even the movie... I mean, the place was jammed. And yes there were some kids sitting up on the roof! I was glad they were there. It was just like a real village feeling to it. We

got this ribbon and strung it around the whole plaza in the center, and every twelve inches, it said: Grand Opening, Britannia Centre. And we handed out hundreds of red plastic scissors.”

Were the people all lined up in a row? John Minichiello smiled at the notion of a long row of dignitaries. “Nothing in Britannia was quite that organized. Everybody was standing, as I recall, where the seniors have their computer room now. It was open; it was a balcony area. I was there, along with the mayor and I think Grace McCarthy represented the Provincial Government. I can’t remember who was representing the Feds. I know Art [Phillips] was there. We all made our little speeches. Michael Clague had this big roll of ribbon. We didn’t line up; we just ran that through the crowd, you know, like a worm, ribbon all over the place. So we weren’t lined up, necessarily, but we all had our plastic scissors and the ribbon running through the crowd. It was a great, great event.”

Michael Clague continues, “So there were dignitaries up there, but they were simply part of the ribbon cutting. They weren’t the only ones. At a signal, everybody cut the ribbon and Britannia was open. The School band, with Victor, played mightily; the music was there and everybody was excited.”

And John Minichiello adds, “There were tours of the whole site, all day, and there was cake and the usual kind of Britannia celebration.”

Allan Ross was busy touring people all over the site, and saw it all. “The whole community centre was open. There were demonstrations in the school, and the gymnasium had programs, and of course, the pool. We had the Chinese group doing their Lion Dance, and then we had karate and the martial arts demonstration. The seniors had a demonstration with arts and crafts. The flags were flying; the bands were playing. They had a length of ribbon and it

went amongst everyone in the courtyard. At a given moment everyone had a pair of scissors, and they all snipped the ribbon. We all did it, which I thought was rather extraordinary, because most functions of that nature are always by someone of importance like the mayor or the king or the queen or whoever. We all snipped the ribbon, a beautiful red ribbon with gold print on it that said, ‘Britannia Centre Opening.’ I think everyone was quite astonished, and they really enjoyed it. For me, that was a very important day because the whole community was able to participate and they were all excited and quite happy. I grew up in the area, and there was never anything like this. They all went home with a very good feeling to know that: ‘We’ve got a community centre.’”

Enzo Guerriero is able to add a particularly amazing grace note to the proceedings. “The one classic thing I remember about the opening hasn’t been duplicated since: water-skiing in the pool! Where they put a VW Volkswagen car on one end of the pool by the door, and wound it up and someone water-skied across Britannia Pool! That was a Dick Cave special! I still remember that so vividly.”

Michael Clague gets the last word on opening day: “I’ve described it as, in some respects, every urban planner’s dream, kind of utopia, of how things can work sometimes for the best.”

## **The First Elected Board**

Up until now, the Centre was being managed by an interim board composed of representatives from the partner-agencies and people appointed from the community. Michael Clague remembers when and how that changed.

“Not long after opening, we had the first election for the Britannia Board, because it [had been] interim. And we got the Social Studies class, Grade 11, as part of their project, to actually organize that election. It was great fun. We went out with the kids. We selected sample

neighbourhoods around Grandview Woodland-Strathcona and did door-to-door knocking, urging people to become members, if they wanted to run for office, whatever the case was, and this was the big event: the annual meeting for Britannia. The kids really got into it. Then when we had a slate of candidates, the kids learned all they could about Britannia: its budget, its programs; and they presented it to the candidates, this information briefing about what the Centre was all about. All the candidates, theoretically, had to go to this. So we had a good bunch of candidates (I think John Minichiello chaired the Nominations Committee; we had a Nominations Committee and a slate). But the next funny thing happened at the first annual meeting. Well, let me tell you: this is East Vancouver. As soon as the idea of a slate being proposed, democracy rose up from within the audience. 'Whaddya mean, you're telling us who we should vote for? We're going to make up our own minds! Who here wants to run as well for the Board of Britannia?' So of course, there were nominations from the floor! And people had to give their speeches, why they wanted to be there."

Bessie Lee has good reason to remember that first election. "I stayed involved with the Britannia Community Centre until it was opened, and I stayed with the Board three or four years after. After John Minichiello resigned from the Board, I took over temporarily as President. I didn't want to do it, but I did it for one year.

"Every moment was important at the time. There always seemed to be a specific item that we needed to lobby the City for. On the whole, I think the Board did a pretty good job in achieving what they wanted. I think my high point was being able to get the ice rink opened up to community use. The priority was changed around. Instead of minor hockey taking the lead, the community took the lead, and I was quite involved at that level."

This was an issue which Al Stusiak also remembers



well. “There was a tremendous discussion about how we were going to use the rink. We chose to have an introductory [hockey] program, so that we could access the number of children in the community to come and learn how to skate. One of the concerns was not to have a wonderful new rink and have it taken over by hockey groups. We had the kind of people, parents, who couldn’t spend hundreds of dollars on gear to have their children involved in things like that. I think that was a telling point in terms of how people thought of programming. There’s no use in having a program if there are only three people who are going to take it.”

### **Something For Everyone!**

In some respects, Britannia was trying to be everything to everybody. Allan Ross describes a “cradle-to-grave” scenario that demonstrates just how all-encompassing the Community Centre could be. “Actually, on the Britannia site you could go to childcare, spend your years there, and then you could go over to grade one through grade seven; and then you can go over to the high school. In the meantime, you have the pleasure of using all the facilities, and you have the learning experience of being at school and the library. Then after that, you can belong to different committees such as the rink committee, the pool committee, or the teen centre committee. And, of course, after all is said and done, you can eventually return someday after your days of work, and go to the seniors centre. And there you are, right back at the Centre again! So you see, your whole life could be involved around here. It’s a little world of its own. I feel it’s done a lot for the community. I think it’s helped the community a lot.”

Joe Ferrara grew up in the neighbourhood, and thanks to his efforts with ATTAC, things for the next generation of students would be different. “What it has meant is that you have kids who can actually walk over to

an ice rink and learn to skate at an early age, and can go swimming. There is this sense that there is a place you can drop into, get a translation, or if you have a question about dealing with the bureaucracies around government, that kind of difficulty, it is an area where you can get support. It is the people part behind the information.”

Al Stusiak couldn't agree more. “We had an information centre. We had a person here from the immigration department, because we had landed immigrants. I think in the early days we had a policeman in here for a while. We have a seniors centre. We tried to be inclusive, we had from seniors to children. There has been some form of childcare from its opening days and, of course, we had after-school care, obviously, because there was a need for it in the community because of single parents or both parents working. And we pushed the library component as well.”

The development of the library showcases the spin-off effects of working in close harmony with other agencies. Enzo Guerriero is a great library booster. “Thora Howell was, at that time, the Librarian here at Britannia. [Integration] really brought Britannia Library to a different dimension; the Library is a lot more than a place for books, it's a place for people and a place for celebration. So if you look at a lot of the early things, here is the band playing in the Library. And part of that tradition is carried on with the [Art] Gallery Project, for example, and now it's been picked up with the world-music initiatives. So those are some unique things that happened, and the other unique thing that also happened was the Adult Learning Centre that was developed originally at Britannia. The whole idea was that there is no better place for people to come if they can't read than the Library, and give them the tools to read. That whole concept of positive self-esteem is very, very powerful, and a place to bring them in and get them involved is through the Library. If a person did not have the

ability to read, and you asked them where they were going, 'Well, I'm going to the Library'. So, you know, there's a lot of positive aspects to that."

### **Local Enthusiasm/International Recognition**

The Centre was open and operating. Services and programs covering a wide range of options and ages were being offered and accepted. Al Stusiak sums it up: "I think the objective that Britannia set out to do was to provide services for the community, and it did that very, very well."

This was a model of service delivery that was not lost upon the international urban planning community. Visitors come from all over Canada and the world to view this unique experiment in social planning. In the early days of the Board, Bessie Lee remembers, "Britannia Community Centre became like a showcase for other communities, for other cities which came to investigate us and see how we developed it."

Thelma Lindsay remembers the national visitors. "When you would get people coming from across Canada and see how they would say: 'Oh, I wish we had something like this where we are!', it made us all realize how very fortunate we were, that the people had the vision and insight back in the '60s when, perhaps, it might have been a little easier to get money."

Allan Ross's memories expand to span the world. "I've met many, many wonderful people who were very impressed with Britannia Centre. There have been people from South America, Great Britain; we had congregations from China and Japan, and even from the Scandinavian countries."

The last word goes to the architect, Byron Olson. "It was a real landmark, that integration, the overlapping in the running of the facilities. I had a direct hand in that whole process. It got a lot of international attention. That was an enjoyable part, meeting people from the United States,

South Africa, and other places.

“I spent a lot of time co-ordinating the work. It’s rare that such a group of people would get together to create Britannia. I think the stars were in the right place to make it happen. That kind of thing doesn’t happen very often.”

## Chapter 7: Leftovers: what didn't happen, and why



At the completion of such a massive project, what questions were left unanswered? What needs were still unmet? What could (or should) have been done differently, to get a better result? The answers range all the way from the very specific to the more general. Bea Ambrose “probably would have had a bathroom upstairs in the social studies area of the library. And, when we first opened, there was not too much availability for handicapped. In fact, we had a member of the Board who was handicapped; he was in a wheelchair, and we used to have to let him in the back door, because there was no way in the front. And when you hold meetings upstairs at the Library, then handicapped people aren't able to go up there.

“I'm sure we saw lots of things after that: ‘Well, we should've done this; we should've done that’, but I think overall, we covered quite a bit. In the original idea of what we should have here, there were many things that people checked and listed; a chapel was one thing that I always hoped they would get here. That's probably because of my own faith, but it always struck me that it would be nice to have this quiet place in this very busy Centre.”

One of the things that they might have done, but didn't, was to purchase land on Commercial Drive. Enzo Guerriero thinks that it's “one question that still haunts Britannia to this day: Do you build Britannia on Commercial Drive or not? It was felt that if we bought those three blocks of land on the Drive, it really would have

hampered the whole infrastructure of Commercial Drive the way it is right now, if it was simply this vacant green space. Also, a lot more money would have gone into land acquisition versus building.”

Al Stusiak wonders “whether it would have made us even more successful if we had had a presence on the Drive. I don’t know if a storefront would have helped us. I think it would still be beneficial because it makes people aware: ‘Okay, that’s where Britannia is, and they have a pool; that’s right.’ Even though people find their way here who want to use it.”

John Minichiello doesn’t think it was necessary then or now. “There’s still some movement to try and get a spot on the Drive but I personally don’t see the need. I don’t think you need walk-by traffic. I don’t think the place is that hard to find. I can see the Greening of Napier Street [mini-park] right at the entrance, maybe; it might make a better entry. I’m also concerned that the Eastside Family Place/Britannia joint building that’s proposed somewhat restricts the connection between the Centre and [Grandview] park and that was very deliberate, to leave it open that way.”

On the people-side of the ledger, Al Stusiak speaks to the need for continuing dialogue. “Clarification is always an interesting exercise to go through. Even though we spent hours setting up objectives, as new board members may have come on and were not aware of even some of the history (and we encounter that even today), we have to be very clear in what is taking place. Silence does not mean agreement; I have to hear what you say.”

Thelma Lindsay remains very positive about the developing strength of both staff and Board members over the years at Britannia. For one thing, there have been on-going clarification of the roles of the Board and the staff which were important to both, in the smooth operation of the community centre.

“That’s one of the things that I can recall about the Board in the latter days that I was at Britannia. They were becoming much stronger and much more aware of their role, and didn’t hesitate to tell staff when we were out of bounds, and almost going into their area. They made it very clear that their role was to make policy, and ours was to implement the policy that they determined, and that we would bring requests to them. That was also true in finance, because many times by default, you’re taking on responsibilities which may not entirely be yours. And it’s good, every once in a while, to be sharpened up and realize, ‘Hey, somebody else should be doing that!’

“And I think that was one of the other things that I admired about Britannia, is seeing the development in Board members. You know, they would come on the Board; and you could just see that they were very hesitant, and felt they didn’t have much knowledge about it. And just as it’s always rewarding to see staff grow in their role, it was so rewarding to see the Board members develop through their knowledge of Britannia. In that respect, Britannia is known across Canada, because of the community involvement. Very few places, if any, have a community board managing funds and programs the way the Britannia Board does. So it’s a tribute to the original people who had the idea.”

## Chapter 8: Eyes on the Prize: what did happen



What we won and have kept through our efforts is Britannia Community Services Centre, the busy heart of a vibrant community. Thelma Lindsay: “Looking back, to me, it was a real privilege that I had, really, in being involved in Britannia at that time, and being able to see a dynamic community at work in developing that centre, in maintaining it, in ensuring that it was carried on with the same goals in mind. And yet, it is still the only centre, I would think, that has that strong community involvement.”

Enzo Guerriero: “Most of us still believe (and some of us are still here) in the concept of what Britannia’s all about: that it talks about the importance of integration. In order for us to go forward as a society, we have to integrate our services, because not one agency has a monopoly or the answer as to how we work and how we develop things within a community setting. Public buildings have to be utilized fully; they can’t sit there for three-quarters of the time, not being utilized. So the effective use of public buildings is one that Britannia really speaks to. Britannia is still the only place that really implements it. Which is unfortunate, because it is a very effective vehicle. It has its ups and downs; I’m not saying that we don’t have problems. We have a lot of dialogue and because we’re on site, most of that gets resolved. But Britannia, looking back and looking forward at the same time, is a threat to bureaucracies, to institutions, because Britannia is management, and manages their own budgets



here. The Parks Board did give up a lot of their autonomy. So has the School Board, and so has the Library Board. And the City, for that matter. In some cases, people see it as a challenge and a threat. Hopefully, as we go into the second twenty-five years of Britannia, we might be able to go beyond that.

“You know, what we said twenty-five years ago, or almost thirty years ago now, is still as valid now as it was then. So that’s the highlight for me: that what we said in theory is still there, is still operational, and it’s still working.”

There were spin-off effects from the new community centre. Bessie Lee remembers an important issue in the early days. “The prime concept when we were on the Board was how do we develop this [area] enough; we closed off the street and created a dead end. We want it [Britannia] to create activity and reintroduce life into Commercial Drive. That was a very important concept at that time because I think Commercial Drive was losing business. The people were starting to move away. It was tied to my feelings for Chinatown at that time. Chinatown had also been going downhill, but by saving the community [the fight against the freeway], people moved back in again, and that reinvigorated Chinatown. We wanted to reinvigorate Commercial. I think Commercial Drive is doing really well now.”

John Minichiello adds: “What the Britannia Centre did, I believe, is stop the decline or at least retard the decline so that now other forces can help revitalize the community. It doesn’t mean that we’ve solved all the issues. You know, social issues in some ways are out-stripping the facilities, but I think it would have been a lot worse. Maybe Commercial Drive and some of those places wouldn’t be revitalized if we didn’t have the Britannia Centre.”

What we also have gained is a large group of citizens who still (or now have come to) feel that they are

responsible for the community centre, and that they have ownership of it. Over a generation of local people have worked at Britannia, volunteered at Britannia, governed Britannia.

Thelma Lindsay notes the continuing involvement of citizens in the governance of Britannia. "I've noticed the development of the committees of the Board. That started just around the time that I was leaving, where committees were very much involved in developing policies and they would bring them to the Board for approval. It was after they had been through the committee and Board processes that staff would implement them. And of course it's at the committee level that new Board members have a wonderful opportunity to learn about the operation of Britannia."

Darlene Marzari thinks of it this way: "In the aftermath, in the retrenchment from the heady days, Britannia did not become a jewel on the path to the grand restructuring of the politics and the mentality of the City of Vancouver. It became a golden goal which was achieved and which still is a benchmark, rather than a piece of a total program, but it's still a highlight. And thirty years later, I'm happy it's still a highlight."

John Minichiello and all the others knew they were part of something very special. "All the research showed that there wasn't a facility like this anywhere, not only with the integrated site, with all the facilities on one site, and the concept of co-operation at least, if not integration between the elementary and secondary schools, etc. But there was no doubt in my mind, I think everybody on that Committee was convinced that we were doing something that was absolutely unique, and we were hoping that it would be the forerunner, like a lighthouse project that would provide guidance and a pilot project for others."

But neither he nor Margaret Mitchell express optimism that it could happen now. Margaret says, "I think

it's really wonderful that Britannia is still very active and does a tremendous service in that community. I don't think you could ever do it again."

## Chapter 9: The Road Ahead: what's next for Britannia and the community?



Enzo Guerriero is a firm believer in getting on with new initiatives. “The challenge to Britannia is really a challenge for the Board. Their goal is to look at these facilities and manage these facilities on behalf of the Province or on behalf of the City. But at the same time there is a responsibility of being advocates for some key issues that don't necessarily translate into programs, but are key issues that can have an impact on this community. Transportation – very, very high still, in this particular community; the concepts of housing, of poverty. Some of those areas are ones that Britannia will have some interesting opportunities to either be directly involved or help facilitate or implement or enable the dialogue to take place within the community. That's one thing that Britannia does well. It really provides an opportunity for people to come together. It is that true centre of the community that everyone recognizes, regardless of what end of the spectrum you're from. It is very much open, and people, I think, feel fairly non-threatened here. I think that speaks fairly highly for Britannia, that the community has accepted it.”

How will new initiatives be moved along? Judging from the past and learning from it, we might conclude that we will need first to identify the issues that will unite the community, as ATTAC and Major Halsey did thirty years ago. Then we will need to develop community activists like Bessie Lee and Bea Ambrose, Joe Ferrara, Al Stusiak and

Enzo Guerriero. Perhaps we will need to have professional people in our area who are employed as Community Development workers, people like Margaret Mitchell and Darlene Marzari, who can help us get organized, and show us how to operate within various bureaucracies, and innovative architects like Byron Olson and Ron Walkey. We will need to recruit dedicated staff to carry the plans forward, like Michael Clague, Thelma Lindsay, John Minichiello and Allan Ross. Almost certainly we will need to have friends in government at the local and higher levels, friends like Maurice Egan, the social planner, Conrad Man in Parks, and a civic government more accepting of the need for change and reform, the role that TEAM played in the 1970s.

And in the end, we'll need to keep on keeping on, until the work is done, like Bessie Lee. "When I got involved, I carried on with all the daily happenings and special events. You didn't have time to reflect and think, 'Why am I doing this?' You just know that there is something to be done, and you got involved and you just kept going. When I look back, I think, 'Would I have the energy to do all that?' I don't think so. I think I was crazy! I'm kind of pleased to see the results. The Strathcona community is there, and is being improved on. The community centre at Britannia is operating successfully and people believe in its concept. And I helped the community share their needs and feelings with another community, and I think that's very important."

And Bea Ambrose says, "We just kept on, working, fighting for it."

# Chapter 10:

## Introductions to the Players: biographies



**Bea Ambrose:** First switchboard operator/receptionist.

Bea was a mother, housewife and community activist. She met both Margaret Mitchell and Darlene Marzari in the course of her work outside the home, and became active in the Citizen's Information Centre established on the Drive. From there she went to the Area Council, where she first heard about 'Dr. Selwyn Miller's Dream': Britannia. She was the first switchboard operator/receptionist when the new centre opened, and worked there until she retired.

"I was a person who never believed you should give up on things. I believed in fighting for something. And I liked the idea of Britannia Community Centre so much that, if I had anything to do with it, I wasn't about to let it die."

**Michael Clague:** First Executive Director.

Michael was originally from Vancouver, but was working in Ottawa for the Senate Committee on Poverty. At hearings in Vancouver, he heard about the possibility of Britannia, and intrigued, he came back and worked first for the City of Vancouver as a Community Development worker in the area, and then as the first Executive Director of Britannia Community Services Centre. Currently, he is the Director of the Carnegie Centre.

"It was one of the best personal and professional experiences I've had. I felt really, really honoured and thrilled that I've been able to continue to have an

association with Britannia through all these years. They're a heck of a bunch of people to work with, just great."

**Pat Davitt:** Co-Editor.

Pat has been the Learn to Skate co-ordinator at Britannia for over twenty years. When not in the rink, she writes books and songs, does consulting in psychological assessments, sings, and pursues interests in art and photography. In her spare time, she helps to make parks in the neighbourhood as a member of Britannia Neighbours, a group of community activists.

"I wish I'd been here in the early days of Britannia; what a phenomenal legacy to leave to a community."

**Maurice Egan:** Head of Social Planning for the City of Vancouver.

Maurice was from Eastern Canada, where he worked for the Children's Aid Society in Ontario, in child welfare, and in the Corrections field as a probation officer and a parole officer. Prior to coming to Vancouver, he had been Director of the Youth Services Bureau in Ottawa, and had also served two terms on Ottawa City Council. He was hired by the City of Vancouver to head up the new Department of Social Planning.

"The intensity and the hard work that people put into it [the Britannia campaign], and the commitment they had to it, I'd never had that kind of experience before, so it was a wonderful thing to be associated with, and a wonderful thing to sit back and watch it evolve."

**Joe Ferrara:** High School student activist.

Joe grew up in the neighbourhood and attended Britannia High School. He was President of the student body for two years running, in both Grades 11 and 12. He was one of the organizers of ATTAC and a major spokesperson for that organization. He is currently a

teacher at Britannia High School.

“It was amazing to be nineteen and be taken seriously about political issues. The biggest thing was the people I met and the coming together of people that were very, very different, but were brought around one project or one aim and getting that done, working as a team, and how much you can get done, bringing together very different

“It was amazing to be nineteen and be taken seriously about political issues. The biggest thing was the people I met and the coming together of people that were very, very different, but were brought around one project or one aim and getting that done, working as a team, and how much you can get done, bringing together very different personalities for one common goal. That’s the biggest thing that I got from that.”

**Enzo Guerriero:** High School student activist.

Enzo was a Britannia High School student, and one of the main organizers and spokespeople for ATTAC. He became a teacher, and is currently the Community Education Co-ordinator at Britannia High School.

“The whole concept of ‘coming back’, and the commitment to Britannia: you’ve got the alumni who are still playing here, who were here in the ’60s and ’70s and ’80s. You’ve got a group of Britannia graduates who now have formed a non-profit society, the Hearts of Gold, who are putting things back into the community, helping kids not only from Britannia but elementary kids in some of the surrounding schools. Then you’ve got a lot of individuals who’ve now come back, myself, Joe [Ferrara], Bill Woods, the Principal currently, was here in the ’70s. Now this is his second time back. You’ve got John Minichiello, second time back. So there’s a tremendous commitment to Britannia and it is very much a very, very special place. There is no other place like it that we know of. That warmth that does come through, and that commitment to the kids and to



this particular community: it's there, and it's very, very strong. So I just wanted to be sure that's captured, because that's what makes this place unique."

**Bessie Lee:** Community activist.

Bessie lived in the neighbourhood; her children were attending Britannia High School. She was the mother of eight, and was kept very busy at home, raising her family. As she describes it, that why she "never worked". In spite of her commitments at home, she was also very involved in her community, in SPOTA to stop the freeway from tearing up Strathcona, and in the campaign for Britannia.

"I learned to accept other people's concepts besides my own, and how to adapt and work together, and how to co-operate. I think Britannia has come a long way."

**Thelma Lindsay:** First Manager of Administrative Services.

Thelma worked at Cedar Cottage and started the first daycare centre in Vancouver for seniors. Then she went into Community Development in the Sunset area, and developed an Information Centre there. She had heard about Britannia, and when the opportunity presented itself, she applied and was accepted for the position of Britannia's first Manager of Administrative Services.

"I thought it was a place where I could really feel worthwhile. Also it would provide an opportunity for me to see if these goals were workable, that a dream that people had had for so many years could be made practical. So just talking about it now, you can see the privilege that I had in being there at that time."

**Conrad Man:** Vancouver Park Board representative to the Planning Committee.

Conrad's educational background was in administration, focussed more on Parks rather than

Recreation. He had to research his contribution to all the discussions by talking to the Recreation staff at the VPB, and to his superiors.

“It was a real learning experience because social concerns dominated the meetings. Britannia was a great example of collaboration of grassroots community participation with traditional government structures that proved to be very successful. It was a tremendous experience for everyone involved.”

**Karen Martin:** Co-Editor.

Karen has lived in Grandview Woodlands for sixteen years. She was the Co-ordinator of Our Own Backyard, the Grandview Woodland Community Mapping Project. She was involved in the research, writing, and editing of several publications in partnership with Britannia Community Education and SFU Institute for the Humanities: *Stories From Our Own Backyard: the history of Grandview Woodland as told by neighbourhood seniors*; *A Pictorial History of Commercial Drive, 1912-1954*; *Walking Tours of Grandview Woodland*; *Our Community Atlas: Journeys Through the Neighbourhood*.

“The ‘60s and ‘70s, the making of Britannia, it was an amazing time, and I want to thank all those people whose stories are in this book, and those whose stories are not, for their commitment to this community. They have given us so much, and paved the way for all the community development that followed.”

**Darlene Marzari:** Community Development worker.

Darlene trained as a social worker, and part of her internship was the establishment of a Citizen’s Information Centre in Grandview Woodland, where she met and worked with many of the participants in the Britannia campaign. Later she was elected as a TEAM alderperson

to City Council, and as an NDP MLA to the Provincial Legislature. She served as Minister of Municipal Affairs.

“Looking back, it had huge meaning. It formulated who I was and how I would approach the world. The notions about power being decentralized and power being best delivered at the most local possible level has never left.”

**John Minichiello:** Teacher at Britannia.

John was the Social Studies teacher who was mentor to the student group, ATTAC. He lived in Strathcona as a youth, and had deep roots in the community. He ended his teaching career back at Britannia as Principal, and also served as the Interim Executive Director of the Britannia Society, thus coming full circle in our story.

“I think the citizens who were on the Committee really needed to be complimented; it was amazing. I think we met almost weekly for about a year and a half. And that kind of dedication... very seldom did anyone miss a meeting.

“It’s certainly a highlight, when you think of community involvement and leaving something of lasting benefit. For me, personally, that was a great achievement.”

**Margaret Mitchell:** Community Development workers.

Margaret lived in the Hastings area, and was working throughout the East End as a Community Development worker. Her role was to help low-income families help themselves through various governmental programs. Later Margaret was elected the NDP Member of Parliament for Vancouver East, a post which she held for many years.

“It was very important [working with low-income people], if I can talk personally. It was out of that that I got involved in politics. If I hadn’t been doing a lot of the community things, and Britannia was certainly one of them,

perhaps I wouldn't have been asked to run. I certainly wouldn't have thought of it. And my reason for running was largely to represent the community."

**Byron Olson:** Architect.

Byron Olson was an associate of Ron Walkey. Together they formed Britannia Design, the architectural firm which guided the Citizens' Planning Committee through the Pattern Language process that established the look and the layout of what was to be Britannia Centre. Directly because of their work on Britannia, the Federal Government asked them to go to Nova Scotia to work on a similar project. Byron later moved to Cranbrook, and he lives on a farm.

"It's rare, such a group of people that got together to create Britannia. I think the stars were in the right place to make it happen. That kind of thing doesn't happen very often."

**Allan Ross:** Host/Activity Co-ordinator.

Allan had worked in the printing trade for many years, but was on a sabbatical when he saw the advertisement for tour guides for the new community centre. He applied; he had an interview with Thelma Lindsay; and he was hired. He's never left! Now a part-time activity co-ordinator, Allan is known to all as Mr. Britannia, or sometimes Santa Claus.

"The idea about Britannia is to make people happy when they come here. It's a place where they want to come to have sports, learn in the library, meet people. They belong to different groups that come here. It has been a very rewarding experience to be here."

**Al Stusiak:** Community Activist.

Al has lived in the area for over sixty years, and attended Britannia High School. He was on the Grandview

Woodlands Area Council in the late '60s, and became involved with TEAM because of the freeway issue. Al was an alternate representative on the Britannia Planning Advisory Committee. He has served on the Britannia Board of Management off and on for the past 25 years.

“The objective of the Britannia Board of Management was that we should have an integrated centre: schools, parks and library; all those things should be there. We had to marry people into situations where they may have been autonomous in a different type of community centre, where the school wouldn't have been part, recreation wouldn't have been part, the library would have been on the street as a branch and would not have to cater to school children through the day, and adults in the day and the evening.

“I'm sure there were occasions of tension. I'm sure there were times that maybe it didn't go as smoothly as they appeared, but in spite of that, the model does work and is based on the fact of commitment and maybe that people realized that there is some commonality in the whole thing.”







## A Great Idea:

When the needs of an urban, disadvantaged community met the visionary concept of a school planner, sparks flew; a community ignited. High School students in ATTAC, community developers, activists on the local area council: all united with civic staff to press for the creation of an integrated services centre that would form the new heart of the community. This story is told in the words of the people who built Britannia Community Services Centre.

Twenty-five years later, this story is still an inspiration, and a testament to the power of citizens, professionals and governments working together to build something greater than any one group could have achieved.