

Helping labour spread community empowerment

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he old adage -Think globally, act locally" is nicely embodied in the person of Thalia Vesterback. As an HSA Member at Large for Region 9, Vesterback appreciates the opportunities union activism gives her. When she can help improve conditions for herself and colleagues, she is satisfied.

Thalia Vesterback Member at Large Picture Archiving and Communications System Administrator Kootenay Boundary Regional Hospital

When she can influence the politics of health care in BC, she is gratified. But she always keeps one eye on the big picture ... a picture bigger than health care, bigger than the labour movement, bigger than Canada: for Vesterback, union activism is one strand of a larger weave that includes justice, economic equality, and an empowered citizenry all over the world.

-Im tired of unions being thought of as a bunch of greedy people," Vesterback said. -People dont get the bigger picture. Not everyone is going to be in a well-paying union job, but the unions create a standard for what wages and conditions should be in a profession. Really, not just union people but everystance, one should be making those good wages. I see my goal as trying to raise the bar for everyone.

-HSA does lots of support for groups in third world countries as well as working locally. For in stance, we support womens and union groups in Central America. This lets us take a good look at global politics, such as the growing gap between rich and poor, or the privatization of utilities and energy companies," Vesterback said.

Unions spread empowerment through the community, she said. -We provide education, encourage people to get involved, teach people skills so they can stand up and speak up."

People take new skills and attitudes out into their lives, bringing energy and know-how to other civic groups or charities they are part of, as well as to their interactions with power structures in general. Unions promote the whole idea of standing up - not just for your own rights but for those of everyone in our human community, Vesterback said.

Vesterback, an X-ray and Ultrasound Technologist by training, is currently the Picture Archiving and Communications System (PACS) Administrator for the Kootenay Boundary area. As the name implies, her job

involves complex computer technology, but ultimately it is about improving patient care, sometimes in dramatic ways.

Over the past ten years or so, digital storage has been replacing film in medical imaging. PACS is a centralized computer system for the storage and distribution of these images.

-It used to be that when someone went in for an X-ray or ultrasound, the patient would have a bag that the film went in. This is a fancy masterbag, but instead of having an actual bag, its all computerized," Vesterback explained. -Anyone hooked up to the PACS system can look at it, so its really improved patient care. Its actually saved lives.

-For example, there was a case where the patient was supposed to be transferred from Grand Forks to Kelowna. The doctor in Kelowna was able to look at the images immediately rather than waiting for the patient to arrive, and based on that he said, no, this patient has to go to Vancouver right away. He was in the OR in two hours. It saved his life. Its nice to be part of a good news story in health care these days," Vesterback said.

It was the bad news stories, however, that spurred her to become active in HSA.

-It was Bill 29 that motivated me. The unilateralist position of the government, the changes in health care, the creation of the health authority were all happening and I wanted to learn more about the system. There didnt seem to be a lot of respectful treatment of people in some places and I wanted to make sure people were being treated properly," she said.

-And then the whole reorganization of the lab in this area with lab technologists being given their pink slips and then having them rescinded twice ... youre laid off, not laid off, laid off, not laid off. Due process was not being followed."

Vesterback became a steward in early 2002, and a Member at Large later that year. She is now is in her second term as Member at Large.

One experience Vesterback particularly values is participation in HSAs Constituency Liaison program, where Vesterback learned how to effectively lobby MLAs. -This is one way I see I can make a difference. We met with the MLA for Kootenay Boundary, which went well, and last December we met with Colin Hansen. The politicians are the ones controlling the money coming in so we need to include them in our sphere," Vesterback said.

Meeting with politicians was scary at first, says Vesterback. -I took co-workers with me. The first time I was really nervous but the more you do it the more comfortable you get." She has learned valuable lessons about effective communication along the way.

-Theres so much Ive learned through different workshops, things like effective letter writing, public speaking, going to BC Federation of Labour conventions and listening to people talk there," she said. She has learned new skills ... -Be prepared. Learn your message. Dont use notes. Memorize what you need to say so it feels natural" ... and also new attitudes, such as the value of keeping a cool head.

-Ive realized that if you come out with an effective voice and clear message then youre much more apt to get the attention of people versus if youre doing a lot of emotional ranting. HSA has taught me that.

-I think its really good to try to see the other side, not to think your argument is the only valid one. I used to be very strong in my opinions but now•well •Im still a type-A personality but Im definitely learning to be more aware of other people," Vesterback said.

The rewards of activism are clear and immediate for Vesterback. For instance, although she was nervous going into meetings with MLAs as part of HSAs Constituency Liaison program, she felt great walking out.

-Afterwards you feel really good. You really feel youre part of the solution. Youre trying to make people pause. If that makes even one person change how they think about something, you get the ripple effect and it will change more peoples perspectives," Vesterback said. 

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