



CELEBRATING BLACK CANADIANS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH



A Conversation with Randy Ash, CPHI(C)

Why did you pursue a career in public health? I finished my undergrad Bachelor of Science, University of British Columbia in 1988 and wasn't sure of my career path. While attending university I lived with my grandparents who suggested I think about a career as a Public Health Inspector like my Great Uncle Fred Alcock, who was the Chief Public Health Inspector in Kelowna BC. I touched base with George Harvie who was a family friend and had been pointed on this path by Uncle Freddie. He recommended I consider the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) Environmental Health program and helped me arrange an interview as part of my entrance requirements. I found I liked the idea of a career that involved protecting people's health and it was a good choice. I received a Diploma of Technology, Environmental health, BCIT in 1990. My first student field placement was with what was then called the Vancouver Health Department, and my second placement was what was then called the Upper Fraser Health Unit. Through those practicums I realized what an interesting career I was about to embark upon and that I would be able to work with a great group of colleagues. Towards the end of my 2nd practicum in 1990, Nick Losito, the program Director, Vancouver Health Department offered me a position as an Environmental Health Officer (EHO). In 2006 I completed a Master's Degree, Environmental Toxicology, Simon Fraser University. In 1999 I moved up into the position of Senior EHO until 2014 when I was promoted to Environmental Health Manager and since 2019, I have been a Regional Manager, Health Protection, Vancouver Coastal Health.

What work during your career is the one that still stands out for you today? I have had a lot of unique opportunities but the one so far that stands out and was a challenge at the time was the April 2015 oil spill in English Bay from the M/V Marathassa a bulk grain carrier. I was initially assigned to the Vancouver Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) and then for two weeks in the Unified Command to represent public health and participate in the Unified Command, the leadership group that oversaw the fuel spill response. My experience assisted with the Health Authority strengthening our partnerships with many agencies and the region's emergency response plan for such events.

During the pandemic I was very proud of the Communicable Disease Team of EHOs, and Public Health Nurses I managed. They were the initial group responsible for all the case and contact tracing of Covid +ve cases within the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority at the outset. Very quickly almost all our staff in our Health Protection offices (EHOs, Licensing Officers, Tobacco & Vapour Enforcement Officers, and Reduction Coordinators) were trained as case and contact tracers and were instrumental in our response to the outbreak.

Do you have any advice for students pursuing a career in public health?

- When considering a career, it is important to find something that you are passionate about and believe in.
- Ours is a well-respected profession and believe coming out of the pandemic that respect has been amplified due to the important role we played and how that raised our profile and identity.
- This career provides a lot of variety and opportunities. A big part of what makes it great is the people you meet and work with. It is not just about protecting public health but also helping businesses succeed. It is all in your approach to people.
- This career is one of continuing education from the day-to-day interactions to formal continuing education. Not everyone can further their formal education but there are always courses like leadership training such as webinars and workshops that will benefit you in your work and personal life.

What volunteer service have you been involved with during your career?

- CIPHI BC Branch Board of Certification (BOC) corresponding member for several years and sitting member for one year. During this time the committee completely revamped the Learning Objectives and was involved in the accreditation of three new schools.
- Early in my career when our two sons were young during a discussion at work, my colleague Richard Taki agreed with my wife's suggestion, that I get involved and take an active role in their sport activities as it would provide the important time to be engaged in their young lives and to encourage them. I took their advice and was involved with both of their teams for 17 years in both baseball and soccer a sport I loved and was still involved in an over 50 soccer group until the start of the pandemic. Looking back, I appreciate that wise advice as being involved in coaching their teams has given me many happy memories of the time spent with them.

Have you been honoured with any awards for your volunteer service?

- BC Branch Member of the Year in 2001 for volunteer service on the CIPHI Board of Certification
- Baseball Coach of the Year Lynn Valley Little League
- Recognition for 17 years of volunteer service as a soccer coach