

February 20, 2019

Dear Steve,

When I was a brand-new teacher, in a community that I had just moved to, you were there. Twice. The first time was when I was literally brand-new - to everything. I had just moved to a community comprised of two small villages, both remote and rural, Masset and Old Masset. Everything was new to me, having just left metropolitan Vancouver for a new career as a public-school teacher in the North Coast. At that time, you were the social justice contact for the Haida Gwaii Teachers' Association, and while we'd not met face-to-face, I received an email from you. In your role, you brought facilitators to discuss issues and barriers facing LGBTQ2S+ students and educators. As it turned out, this email and the facilitators came at a time when I needed to know that I was welcome. In that week, I faced a difficult conversation about my status as an out gay man. And you, through your activism, provided needed support in a moment when I needed this most.

A half year later, we'd meet again. But this time it was face-to-face. I remember it well because I had just moved to another village in Haida Gwaii, 125 km south of my first placement. My husband Ron and I had recently found housing in a school district teacherage, which had been a precarious process given a housing shortage in the village. I was still learning how to teach in Haida Gwaii, how to live in a remote and rural community, and how to navigate the school district. All of this was hard. And that's when you knocked on my door, just to say hi and to welcome Ron and me to the community. You also invited us to dinner (taco night, my favourite). I cannot tell you how much this meant to us. Once again, you were "there" when I needed support, even without knowing each other or me asking for anything in return. This is the kind of union activism that often goes unnoticed even though it sustains and strengthens the union.

This pattern keeps repeating. Later, you were elected as our local's president. Your style to leadership, focusing on listening, building relationships, and thinking carefully about what matters most was, again, welcoming and supportive. It brought out the best in our Executive, opening it up to more members. At the core of your leadership was helping us work together, innovate, and address the challenges and issues that our members faced. Your leadership helped me reach out to TTOCs in my role as TTOC Chair. At our first meeting, you joined us. And you listened. Later, you helped me in my role as Social Justice Chair to organize a series of forums on trauma and community supports for students. Again, you opened up an inclusive and engaging process that directly supported this work. The same was true for the Summit on Healthy for Food for Students and the Justice of Place conference that you initiated and helped organize. Again, it was your welcoming approach, integrity to the core, openness to varying perspectives, and humility that made our local stronger and more effective.

While I deeply value and appreciate your approach to leadership and community-building, what I appreciate most is your commitment to equity. You understand why public education is a matter of survival for many students and communities. You also recognize the need for our union to change how we approach ending racism, sexism, colonialism, and all other forms of marginalization in our own structures and decision-making processes. Your combined commitment to building a strong, united, and just union, and to leadership that embodies this commitment, stands out. That is why I not only endorse your candidacy for 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President of the BCTF but why I am also committed to helping your campaign in any way that I can.

Tom Kertes