



WORKING (AND LIVING) AS AN ACTIVIST

by Angela Cowan

AN ACTIVE VOLUNTEER since her mid-teens, Arielle Houghton, BCom '18, has always had a powerful sense of connection with her community and environment. That connection has only grown stronger through her years at Gustavson, and it appears to be here to stay: Houghton starts a full-time position at grassroots organizer Dogwood BC this fall.

Houghton found early on that Gustavson aligned closely with her own ideals.

“It was very focused on leadership and human resources, and they talked about the importance of knowing yourself and what you want to do with the start of your career,” says Houghton, adding that one instructor even touched on meditation and other holistic approaches.

“And there was an entire class dedicated to business and sustainability,” she says. “Not just green, but what does it mean to take the environment and people and profit all into consideration, and build a business

which is one of integrity, and delivers value not only to the shareholders but also their stakeholders.”

That focus on the triple bottom-line throughout the program strengthened Houghton’s already strong sense of social responsibility and drive for connection, some of which was forged on a backpacking trip through southeast Asia. The trip, taken between her second and third years at Gustavson, left a deep impression and searing awareness of her own privileged position. “It was my first time in a developing country. The poverty, the pollution, the child labour, the sex industry – I was really challenged by that,” she says.

As she reflected afterward, “This trip was one of many formative moments for me — now, having travelled to nine countries and lived in three, I have become explicitly aware of my culture, history and privilege. It has shaped the way in which I interact with the world and the responsibility I feel to create a more inclusive place that respects all life.”

In a twist of fate, the trip to southeast Asia also introduced her to the executive director of Dogwood BC—the province’s largest nonpartisan citizen action network, with a formidable track record of tackling high-profile issues such as resource extraction and political party campaign finance laws—who happened to be sitting in the seat next to her on a connecting flight.

“For the next five hours I got to pick his brain,” she laughs. When he found out what Houghton was studying and that she’d already begun volunteering with Dogwood, he encouraged her to apply for an internship in future. She walked away from the conversation, and the trip, with an inkling of where her young career might go. It was also a connection which ultimately led to ongoing work in a field that has meaning for her.

“Business is the kind of thing where I can take those skills and apply them to the non-profit sector and really help out,” says Houghton. Her passion for the work led to her deferring her last year of university for a one-year contract with Dogwood,

and a permanent position at the non-profit when she graduated.

In the long run, Houghton hopes to influence people to look beyond their own doorsteps and engage with their larger communities. “Just looking a little bit bigger than what your wants and your needs are, at what’s the broader community need.”

She’s lived her advice as well, particularly since becoming involved with Dogwood. As a volunteer, Houghton started the Dogwood UVic club, which was Dogwood’s first



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fully functional university campus club, as well as organizing students on campus to motivate and educate their peers on where and how to vote. As a staff member, Houghton helped organize and execute a phone bank campaign that mobilized

approximately 10,000 people to attend the Protect the Inlet peaceful demonstration in opposition to the Kinder Morgan pipeline. She also assisted in mobilizing Capital Regional District constituents to participate in the public consultation period on oil spills in April, resulting in thousands of people submitting their feedback.

“If I were to pass something on to business students, or really just anyone who’s living a fairly comfortable lifestyle—it would be to think about, ‘What is the privilege that I have here that other people don’t?’” says Houghton. “What are the challenges that I never have to look in the eye, and how can I be of service?”

She also advocates for some self-reflection. “What are the things you care about? Then do some research. Find out what’s going on in your area and see if you can get involved,” she says.

“I’ve realized that there are so many incredible, good things we can do in the world—things that have personal significance and can help you connect with the opportunity in your local community.” ■

Photos: Courtesy of Arielle Houghton, iStock