

From the Window of West Windsor House

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Over the past year I have spent countless hours at my large window looking out onto Windsor Park. I have seen many people come and go as the snow fell and melted, and the leaves grew and fell. Now as the cold wind is once again returning I am left pondering all that I have seen. The one thing that has been consistent no matter the season is how alive the neighbourhood feels from a western window. The tall glass panes look out over the hockey rink and community league, playground, soccer field and elementary school, and the view stretches on past the thick forest of the river valley out to the roofs of West Edmonton Mall, the river valley mansions, and glimpses of the QE2 highway in the southwest.

In the cold, snowy, long evenings of last winter I developed a one-sided friendship with the rink master, who was one of the few people outside my window keeping the same hours I was. Caffeinated and tired, sat at my laptop grinding through university homework, I kept an eye on the floodlights of the hockey rink outside my window knowing that in all weather conditions one brave soul would make the trek to keep the ice pristine. From the first day they arrived with their children in early November to flood the rink to the final time I saw them in late March, they were a constant presence in my life throughout the fall and winter semester.

Though I'm sure to them I was just another illuminated window in the giant apartment across the street, to me the rink master became a familiar and welcome sight. I would sometimes pause my work upon their arrival and sit under the glow of my christmas lights at the window with a warm tea, quiet instruments from my study playlist hazily plodding along in the background, watching them as they diligently cleared the entire rink of snow. Some nights they would be labouring until well past midnight and I worked alongside them on my own tasks, waiting for the floodlights to shut off and lay the rink to rest for the night before shutting down my laptop and retiring to bed myself. One night in particular comes to mind where the rink master arrived in the middle of a snow storm, opting after around 20 minutes of shoveling to get a snow blower as the heavy snowfall and strong winds continued. The brave master of the ice battled the elements for well over an hour and a half at -28°C before coming out victorious around 1am and grabbing the long hose from the community league, covering the ice in a fresh coat of water and walking off into the night like a true winter hero.

I am not much of a skater myself, but one of my regrets from that long semester is not taking the time to head out to the rink one evening and telling the rink master how appreciated their hard work was. From when the sun rose in the mid morning to when the sun set, and well into the floodlight hours of the evening, I was able to observe the community of Windsor Park from my western window out on the hockey rink. Children, hockey teams, families, university students, figure skaters, even the occasional dog owner playing fetch on the ice - the beautifully maintained rink drew the community for a variety of purposes. The one constant was that looking out onto the ice inevitably led to seeing someone joyful and having a great winter experience outdoors.

I hope the rink master knows just how appreciated their hard work was. I'm sorry I didn't come tell you myself one of those freezing nights while you were bravely shoveling the large rink by yourself, but seeing you out there working hard under the glow of the floodlights made me feel less alone over the course of that endless winter and helped me stay motivated to work towards my degree. The ice you worked hard to produce was treasured by the community, and your dedication kept the rink alive throughout the entire winter. Thank you for your service.

As the ice melted in early spring and the buds started slowly forming on the trees, the majority of people outside the west window were concentrated around the playground and school grounds. Three times a day the entirety of Windsor Park Elementary would be out in the field and on the playground, supervisors in shiny reflective vests spread out among the children and keeping them safe as they explored the world. Though I could not hear the bell through my locked balcony door, I always knew recess had ended when suddenly from every corner of the school grounds children spun around and began running at high speed toward the large green and white building below me. After school, the playground stayed alive with families exploring the playground equipment, young soccer teams getting warmed up and playing games out on the field, and children climbing along the wall of the hockey rink just like I had done over a decade ago when I was a student at Windsor Park Elementary.

The first time I ever looked out onto the school from the 10th floor lounge of Windsor House, it felt almost like being given forbidden knowledge. Seeing the school from so high up made it look very small, which my brain refused to reconcile with how large the space had seemed as a 12 year old child the last time I had walked the halls as a student. Somewhere between the mid 2010s and the mid 2020s, the doors had been painted blue and the Beansprouts had become the Windsor Wolves, but the passion and care from the students was clear to me every time I saw them outside in the field with their teachers, learning and growing just like we had back then. The school still holds a special place in my heart, so the first pictures I took with my degree upon convocating in the early summer were right underneath the large Windsor Park Elementary letters on the brick wall to the left of the front entrance, tossing my cap in front of my first school after making it to graduation all these years later.

The dawn of spring also brought the dog owners back onto the community league rink, and watching the various dogs of the community play while their owners converse has become a favourite window watching activity for me. Tall and small, colourful or solid coloured, the dogs of Windsor Park represent a wide and diverse mix of breeds, temperaments and playstyles. From early spring to now late autumn I have watched them race around the rink joyously, keeping track of those which return day after day.

As spring became summer and school ended, I saw an increase in foot traffic around Square One, a favourite new location for students and first responders. The first few times I saw the ambulances, police cars and fire trucks parked outside the building I watched from my window nervously, wondering what crazy incident had befallen the school or apartment building. By now I know to expect the first responders to return to their vehicles happily with coffees and snacks, a pleasant visit to Windsor Park's coffee shop a brief stop on their way before resuming

their service to the city. The sound of ambulances coming up 118th street on their way to the University Hospital is a regular feature of my west facing view, and I've started mentally cataloguing all their various colours, emblems and specialties as they pass by.

The picnic benches outside the coffee shop were also a great addition, expanding its reach as a community third space to those with pets or a preference for the outdoors. Thanks to these benches I have encountered numerous neighbours I hadn't seen since the pre-pandemic and had pleasant chats with them as they enjoyed sunny summer and early autumn evenings. From the earliest, sleepiest mornings dragging myself off to an early shift to the latest evenings coming home as the coffee shop closes, I have never once seen it empty. I love watching the community gather around the building both from ground level and from my window, and knowing that it is a space of community building for both Windsor Park and the University of Alberta, our valuable and inextricably tied neighbour.

As the smoky orange hazes and beaming sunny days of summer gave way to autumn, I watched as the children returned to school and the leaves all around the neighbourhood began changing colour. The neighbourhood became a sea of green, gold, red and orange as one by one the trees changed colour and released their leaves, preparing for the winter ahead. As the days grow shorter and the nights grow longer, the view out my window remains alive after dark with occasional cars making their way down 118th street and various young people enjoying the playground under the flood of streetlamps as the world around them is quiet and calm. In early October I saw the floodlights of the rink on for the first time this season, and thinking back on how special it was to finish my last semester of my first degree at my western window alongside the hustle and bustle of the neighbourhood is what inspired me to sit down and write about it.

My window shows me what I find so valuable about Windsor Park. Its life, its trees and river valley, its community and the huge prairie sky that lights up in various shades of sunrise, sunset and northern lights for those who love to look out and see it. From Windsor Park Elementary to the University of Alberta, this neighbourhood is one of learning and education. We are tied to the hospital district and the first responders who come through both on and off duty. We find community in coffee shops, playgrounds and community soccer leagues, connecting in the rink over dog walks and hockey games. I love the view from my window in west Windsor House and all the joy and wonder it shows me every day, and look forward to seeing what I might find behind those tall glass panes this next year as winter is once again closing in.

