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B.C. ELECTION 2017: Why Keli Westgate ditched an advertising job in the city, moved to Vernon, and felt compelled to enter politics

By *Charlotte Helston*

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Green Party candidate Keli Westgate is running in the riding of Vernon-Monashee in the 2017 B.C. election. (CHARLOTTE HELSTON / INFOnews.ca)

April 21, 2017 - 6:30 PM

VERNON - B.C. Green Party candidate Keli Westgate was a 30-something mom living in Vancouver and working in the ad business when she and her husband decided to make a change.

"After we had our son, we really started to deal with the issues facing a lot of us: affordable housing, job security, child care," Westgate says from her campaign manager's eco-friendly home in Vernon. "It got to the point where whenever we hung out with friends, the conversation would be around 'we're all broke, we can't afford to move.'"

Family connections often brought them to Vernon, and soon they devised a plan to leave the city and set roots in the North Okanagan.

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"Every time we came here, by the time we got to Wood Lake, we just felt ourselves relax and felt our smiles return," she says.

But it wasn't that simple: they need jobs, housing, security.

"It took a long time because there are no jobs here," Westgate says.

Finally, opportunity came in the way of a job at Gatzke Orchards and they took it.

"It came with a tiny little two-bedroom cabin," Westgate says. "We put everything in storage and lived there all summer. I remember my first night there, it was so dark. You don't realize how much light pollution there is in the city."

From the cabin, they continued their hunt for a home.

"There we were, in the housing crunch in Vernon," she says.

They looked and looked, and ended up moving where they could afford: a trailer park.

"I'm not comfortable with huge amounts of debt. Housing is important, but it's not the be all and end all for me. Life is about experiences too," she says.

It's a relatable story in the Okanagan, and it's one of the reasons Westgate decided to run for the Green Party in the upcoming provincial election.

"I think the generation coming is more interested in experiences and living within their means and not having an over-abundance when you see people that are going without. It's about balancing things a bit better. Obviously, the disparity now is pretty out of control."

She's a big supporter of living sustainably — both environmentally, and financially. While there's no silver bullet, she believes changing building codes to allow tiny homes would provide at least one affordable housing alternative.

"We've had a couple talks about the tiny house movement, and they have been standing room only, spilling out the door. There is so much interest," Westgate says.

Since moving to Vernon, Westgate got a job as the sales and marketing manager for Spa Hills Compost, a company that collects food waste from businesses and individuals and makes it into fertilizer.

Westgate, who previously worked in Toronto for a video production company, admits she never saw herself finding a career in waste management.

"I never imagined myself being a politician either," she says. "But here I am."

The 40-year-old doesn't have past political experience, but she says she has something else: the perspective of middle-aged, working mom.

"I don't see people like me represented in government very often. I think that's part of the reason the younger generation doesn't vote. It tends to be the over 50 crowd that runs. But you're not facing the same issues at 60 as you are at 40," she says.

Another motivator for her to join the Green Party is she refuses to compromise on matters of the environment. While she's voted for the NDP in the past, she can no longer do so because of the party's stance on pipelines and energy projects.

"We're at a point where you can't be soft on some of these issues and I feel the NDP has been," she says.

She believes in the Green Party's approach to big issues like health and the environment.

"The Green Party sees health as not being in a silo, but connected to many other things: transportation, housing, nutrition. So, if we create the type of town that makes it easy to bike around, we can improve the air quality. If we have lots of community gardens, then we have the ability to take care of our own area without relying on exports as much."

Parked next to all of Westgate's passion and enthusiasm is of course the hard fact that Greens have never done well in Vernon-Monashee. The best the party did in the past 20 years was in 2009 when Huguette Allen rallied almost 17 per cent of the vote.

"The big difference in this election is we have Andrew Weaver. He's a game changer," she says. "He's attracted a really high calibre team this year. He's focussed on going all the way, not just gaining a couple seats."

Weaver was elected in Oak Bay-Gordon Head on Vancouver Island in 2013, making him the first Green MLA in the B.C. Legislature.

"Many of us who are running have been really disillusioned by politics and the traditional parties fighting against each other and not getting enough work done," Westgate says. "I think we're going to see some sort of history be made in this election."

Westgate is running against two-term MLA Eric Foster of the Liberal Party and NDP candidate Barry Dorval. The fourth candidate in Vernon-Monashee is Don Jefcoat of the B.C. Libertarian Party.

[Find more information about election in Vernon-Monashee here.](#)

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Gage Reynold

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