

## A CONVERSATION WITH LISA GILMOUR Emergency Management Coordinator, City of Winnipeg

As part of IAEM-Canada's mission to advance the emergency management profession, the EM Profiles Series aims to illustrate the breadth of experiences of emergency management professionals across Canada, share knowledge and insights into the field, and promote continued professional development.

In our inaugural profile, Lisa Gilmour discusses how she got her start in emergency management, why it's important to branch out to other disciplines, and offers advice for those entering the field.

**Sarah Delisle:** To start off, tell me a bit about how you got started in emergency management.

**Lisa Gilmour:** After graduating with an advanced degree in political science, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. My aunt was working with the Canadian Red Cross in British Columbia and told me about her work in the disaster management field. It sounded interesting and she pointed me in the direction of some of the degree programs. So, after some research, I enrolled at Brandon University and completed a Bachelor of Science in Applied Disaster and Emergency Studies (ADES) with a minor in business.

**Sarah:** What is it that attracted you to the field?

**Lisa:** That's a good question. When I was studying political science, I thought I would go into a profession that would help people. I worked for a non-profit for a year and I really wanted a job that would make a difference. Emergency management was an interesting sort of approach to that. I think a lot of people that go into disaster management want a career where they help people.

**Sarah:** Had you had any personal experience with large-scale disasters before beginning the ADES program?

### BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Gilmour is currently the Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Winnipeg. Prior to joining the City, Lisa spent six years in business continuity and emergency management in the telecommunications sector and two years in disaster management with the provincial health department in Manitoba. Lisa has a Bachelor of Science in Applied Disaster and Emergency Studies from Brandon University (minor in Business Administration) and an Advanced Bachelor of Arts in Political Studies (minor in Anthropology) from the University of Manitoba. She has her CRM and ABCP designations and is currently working on her CEM. Lisa loves walking her dog, dark chocolate, hipster coffee shops, jigsaw puzzles and playing board games with her husband and 5-year-old daughter.

**Lisa:** I grew up in southern Manitoba and when I was in grade eight the flood of 1997 happened in Winnipeg and my junior high class went out and sandbagged. It was such a great experience with everyone coming together in a community and helping out. You would show up at a small town community centre and they would give you an address, you'd show up at the house and there would be cars all up the drive and people who didn't know each other would just get out of their cars, take their spot in the sandbag line and then that dyke would be built and you'd move on to the next one. So that was an amazing experience and probably one of the reasons I was so interested when my aunt was talking to me about disaster management.

**Sarah:** What was your first job in the emergency management field?

**Lisa:** It was with Manitoba Health's Office of Disaster Management. I was a summer student. It was a great opportunity and reinforced that I was in the right field. I learnt a lot. I was there in the summer, so it was forest fire season.

**Sarah:** In your experience, what are key skills needed by EM professionals?

**Lisa:** That's a tough question. I think emergency management professionals need to be a little bit of everything. A bit of a jack-of-all-trades. I think an underestimated skill is the ability to listen and understand because emergency managers need to really bridge the gaps between numerous groups and the ability to really listen and understand where different groups are coming from and their concerns really helps you do that. I think good emergency managers are also really good networkers. Not in the sense that they can work a room fantastically but that they can make connections. They realize how others can impact their work and what they're trying to do. Emergency management is a small, under-resourced

field and so we need help from everybody. Emergency managers can't do it alone since it's not a big department in any agency and so you need to be able to understand how you can leverage your connections across the whole organization or group you're working in to get good results.

**Sarah:** What educational preparation would you recommend for someone who wants to advance in this field?

**Lisa:** Any EM course or program. I also think geography is essential to understanding the physical hazards. Anywhere you go in EM you need to understand the physical hazards. I think business administration is highly underrated in any EM department as well. No matter where you work you probably need to figure out a budget. Once you get to a certain level in an organization you need to be able to do your own budget and business planning, so having some background in business administration is so critical. Then I would say economics and psychology, especially behavioural economics and psychology, are important because a lot of what we do in EM is trying to influence how people understand the world around them. There are so many lessons we can learn from those fields.

**Sarah:** What are some ways you stay abreast of developments in EM or some of these supporting fields?

**Lisa:** I don't think I read enough books, but I like podcasts. I'm a big fan of the [This American Life](#) podcast. There is a devastating [episode on the impacts of school shootings](#) in the United States. That's an amazing episode that I would totally recommend to anyone. They've also done a few others on emergency events. They really delve into who people are, tell people's stories, and focus on understanding different people and perspectives. Lately they've done a lot of work on the impacts of

what's going on in the United States with asylum seekers. [Freakonomics](#), [Hidden Brain](#), and CBC's [The Current](#) are all great podcasts that are often really thought provoking.

**Sarah:** Looking back on your experience, what is something you wish someone had told you when you first started working in EM?

**Lisa:** I wish someone had told me that sometimes the answer to something is not as obvious as I think it is. When you come out of university, you often see things in black and white and you want to do the obvious thing to help or assist people. But the more you get involved the more nuanced the decisions become. I thought emergency management was going to be very black and white, like it's always going to be obvious what you need to do to help people, but it's not. And sometimes doing one thing means you can't do something else. There's a lot more of a balancing act.

Also if you work in government have patience because stuff moves slowly. But that doesn't mean stuff doesn't get done or isn't done properly, it just doesn't always go as quickly as you want.

**Sarah:** I think that's a very honest answer, especially the part about government. Continuing with the theme, what professional publications or organizations should those new to the field be aware of?

**Lisa:** I think you should do some research into the area you are living in and find out which organizations are active there. Whether it's an [IAEM](#), [DRIE](#), [DRI](#), or [RIMS](#) group, whoever is meeting in your area see if you can join because there is a lot of overlap between the different organizations' areas. Just because it doesn't seem to be directly related to EM it could be worth your while to be aware of what they are speaking about. It's an opportunity to see who's in that field in your region.

**Sarah:** Do you have any advice for those starting out in the field?

**Lisa:** Number one - everyone in the field is really nice. So, if you have a question, ask someone out for a coffee. I think there's a lot of pressure on younger people to find mentors, but sometimes you can just say "Your job sounds awesome, can I take you out for coffee and hear more about it." People are generally really nice and I find emergency managers are really supportive of other emergency managers. They're willing to talk and help out young professionals in the field. So, if you want to be brave and approach someone, I would say most people will say Yes. Number two - don't be afraid to not work in government for a while. I think there's this feeling that the government is the happening place for emergency management. I know when I moved to the private sector and into more business continuity and enterprise risk management, I was worried that I would never be able to move back to government and that's where I would be for my career. But that's not the case. The skills do transfer and I think it makes me a better government employee to have the private experience. So just because it's not the cool job with an EMO there are still important jobs and you can learn a lot.

**Sarah:** I know what you mean. Going from working for the province to working at McGill [University] was a culture shock. I was working on large events and then went to working on smaller events. However, because the university is a smaller setting with a smaller team and because we're responsible for the whole university, there are a lot more projects that I have an opportunity to work on.

**Lisa:** Exactly.

**Sarah:** What are some key lessons you've learned during your career?

**Lisa:** Well everyone always says that communications are critical, and that good communication is key to good response. I don't think I've ever gone through an incident or an exercise that hasn't had that identified in the after-action report. This is super frustrating but also true. I think people always feel like they are communicating well but every after-action report begs to differ, and I'm not sure what the fix for that one is. Another one would be the value of relationships and networks and friendships. I have a fantastic group of friends from university that have all gone into different parts of the EM field, but I can call any one at a moment's notice if I have a question, to get feedback, or to ask about a resource. I think that's invaluable to my ability to be a good emergency manager. Through events, responses, conferences and training I've made other connections and the value of those are immeasurable. Once again because EM is so small and we don't have huge resources within our organizations, having those resources to call to say "How do you do this?" or "Have you seen a resource on this?" or anything like that is so important and makes everyone better at what they're doing.

Another key lesson would be that it's okay to be "off" when you're not at work. Emergency managers tend to get a bit of a hero mindset, but if you are in a structure where someone is on-call, and it's not you, then it's ok to turn your phone off and disconnect. I think emergency managers tend to always be "on" and that's not healthy. It's hard for me too but it's something I'm trying to do more. Your own mental health and overall health is important too.

**Sarah:** Yes, I think we've all been there where we're going on vacation for example but make sure our colleagues know we're available if there are any major events. It's hard to shut that off.

Are there any publications that you consider essential reading for EM professionals?

**Lisa:** There are so many good books out there now on emergency management related topics. I just finished reading Amanda Ripley's *The Unthinkable* which was really intriguing. I also read David Key's *Catastrophe* and I loved that one. Have you read that one?

**Sarah:** I haven't but I'm making a note. Why did you love it?

**Lisa:** It's an investigation into the origins of the modern world so it's about how emergencies shape the world and I just thought it was fascinating. I really liked Romeo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil* about Rwanda and I think it's important to understand the impact of trauma on people and how quickly situations can escalate – whether a disaster or something else. I think it was so interesting from that perspective. For general reading, anything from Malcolm Gladwell or Stephen Dubner (*Freakonomics* books) really help you understand society better. That's the space we work in in emergency management so the more you understand how society works the better. I think nudge economics are just fascinating in what it could do for emergency management. I think that is a very under-tapped area that we should be incorporating more. Imagine if we could figure out what nudges people to understand their situational awareness better and to know their risks better and then we prepared our public awareness programs based on that. You know how people check their smoke alarm batteries when we turn the clocks back; we need something like that.

I like Marq De Villier's book *The End: Natural Disasters, Manmade Catastrophes and the Future of Human Survival*, and his book *Water*. They're pretty geography focused. And everyone should read something about a pandemic or an epidemic.

**Sarah:** Do you have any words to live by as an emergency manager?

**Lisa:** I have two quotes that I have up on my office wall. When I was trying to decide if I would take the job with City of Winnipeg my daughter was four and my job at the time was quite comfortable. I was moving more into enterprise risk management which was a lot less response-based and didn't require much on-call. On the other hand, I really loved the idea of working for the city and being back in emergency management and involved on the frontline level. My daughter was big into Dr. Seuss' The Lorax and at the end of the book there's a quote by the Lorax that says, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it's not." And I said that's why I want to move to the city. So, I have that up on my wall. Then I also have "Even a broken clock is right twice a day." So, the first one reminds me why I do my job and that it's ok to care and be invested in your work. And the second reminds me never to dismiss anyone outright because everyone brings some value.

**Sarah:** Looking forward, what do you see as emerging challenges for emergency managers?

**Lisa:** Climate change. We don't really know what's going on. We have some guesses, but we don't really know. The climate is changing, the hazards are changing, the risks are changing, and those historical records are not going to be as useful as they were in the past. So that's going to be a real challenge because we base a lot of our work on historical records. Social media and the connectedness of society, while having positive aspects, is going to be challenging too because social media connections are replacing neighbourhood connections and the loss of neighbourhood fabric and resiliency is going to make the vulnerability of the population higher. The social media connections are just not replacing the neighbourhood connections and resilience.

And budgets. In general, emergency management is underfunded so I think funding will always be a challenge. There are so many great ideas that could have such big differences, it's always a challenge to decide where the funding goes. //

#### WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING TO MEET GREAT EM PROFESSIONALS

If you would like to nominate a colleague to be profiled, please communicate with [EMProfilesProject@gmail.com](mailto:EMProfilesProject@gmail.com). We are looking to showcase a variety of emergency management professionals including practitioners, researchers, and academics, as well as those working in the public and private sectors, community organizations, First Nations communities, and in remote regions across Canada. Let's connect, share and learn from each other.