

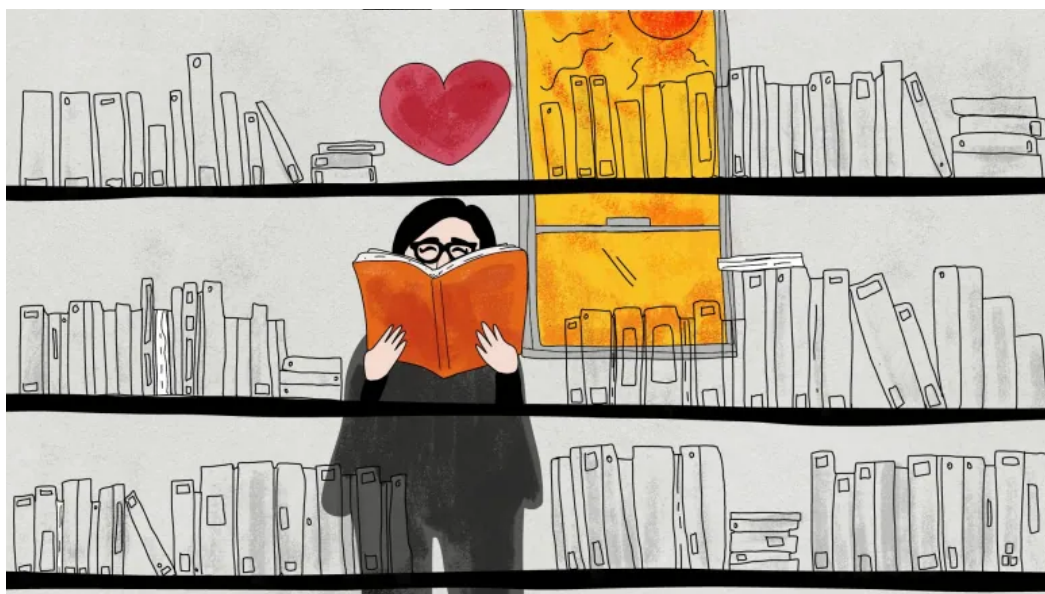
Canada · First Person

How a public library helped my family cope with the effects of climate change

As a low-income kid, I could take refuge from extreme temperatures without having to spend money

[Carol Eugene Park](#) · for CBC First Person ·

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With the ongoing climate crisis, public libraries are a temporary refuge from extreme temperatures for low-income families like my own, writes Carol Eugene Park. (Allison Cake/CBC)

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This First Person column is written by Carol Eugene Park who lives in Vancouver. For more information about CBC's First Person stories, please see [the FAQ](#).

This past summer, as I ran ice cubes over my arms and legs in a desperate attempt to cool down during the heat dome suffocating Vancouver, my mind inevitably turned to my dad.

Every summer, my dad pondered whether he should install the air conditioning (AC) unit on the first hot and humid day or wait it out in case the summer months ended up abnormally cool.

I don't know how much the monthly AC fees were but even as a kid, I knew that cost per use was important to my low-income family. My parents weren't frugal with their money, but having a family of five meant that every expense needed to be a worthwhile investment.

If we turned on the AC once a week, the extra money to run it wasn't worth it.

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As an adult with her own bills to pay, my dad's logic makes sense to me today. But as a teenager who hated Ontario's sweltering, humid summers with a fiery passion, I couldn't help feeling frustrated with my parents. I seemed to be the only one melting into a puddle of sweat while the rest of my family bore the heat well without an AC unless the temperature was in the high 30s.

To find some relief, I spent a lot of time at my public library, enjoying the cool blast of the AC, likely with others who either lacked access or felt dissatisfied with their own cooling options.

When I moved to Vancouver in 2018, I was stunned by the mild summers. The hottest days in the coastal city had nothing on the humid heat back home. I never needed an AC unit to stay cool, whether I lived in a basement unit or on the third floor of an apartment building.

I assumed that the mild climate would be permanent. But then the heat dome walloped the Pacific Northwest this past summer [with unprecedented high temperatures.](#)



Damaged structures are seen in Lytton, B.C., on Friday, July 9, 2021, after a wildfire destroyed most of the village on June 30. (Darryl Dyck/The Canadian Press)

Wildfires ravaged [towns like Lytton, B.C.](#) Nearly 600 people [died due to extreme temperatures](#) in British Columbia over the summer.

The unbearable heat was all anyone talked about. In desperation, I Googled different ways to keep cool: placing a bucket of ice behind one's fan (don't bother), laying in a dark room on the floor (decent if you have concrete floors), putting up aluminum foil on windows to block out the heat (great idea). But nothing measures up to an AC.

As it turns out, many homes on the West Coast [aren't built to withstand heat waves](#) because these heat waves didn't happen regularly in the past.

Whether I realized it or not as a teenager, I wasn't the only one who understood the value of public libraries as a refuge for extreme weather. In fact, [more than half of Vancouver's cooling centres](#) were public libraries this summer.



A woman who goes by the name ChillyBean hands out bottled water to residents in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood in Vancouver on June 28, 2021. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

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As for me, I decided that an AC unit is essential after living through the heat dome. Extreme weather is only going to become more frequent as the climate crisis continues and even though I grew up on my parents' cost-per-use formula, I'm happy to overlook the expenses if it means I'll stay cool and sane in the summers.

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