

She changed the way we teach [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Bettye Hyde described herself as a "little old lady" with the tenacity of a bulldog.

She was a pioneer of early childhood education in Ottawa as well as being an activist, persistently lobbying a local Ottawa branch of the Royal Bank in 1998 to try and stop it from closing.

"Just imagine what it would be like if there were more Bettye Hydies in Canada," said then NDP leader Alexa McDonough during an April 1998 session in Parliament. "Bettye Hyde: mother, community volunteer, early childhood educator and environmentalist."

Mrs. Hyde, who died on Thursday of unknown causes at age 88, played a key role in revolutionizing how Canadians think about early childhood education. But she started her career humbly, after answering a help wanted ad in 1943 for Rockcliffe nursery school. She had no children of her own and no teaching experience at the time.

Her entrance to the field came at a time when the very concept of nursery schools was in its infancy. However, Canada's war efforts had flooded the labour market with women and, for the first time, there was a demand for child care outside of the home.

Mrs. Hyde became convinced of the need for "fruitful play" that allowed children to learn and develop their curiosity.

Her expertise earned her an invitation in 1948 to study at Yale University's prestigious School of Child Development for one year.

When she returned to Ottawa, Mrs. Hyde helped establish an association for nursery education, which eventually became the Early Childhood Education program at Algonquin College in the late 1960s -- one of the first such programs in Canada. Mrs. Hyde coordinated the program for 13 years.

"Our children must have eyes to see with, ears to hear with and language with which to clothe their discoveries," she said in a 1964 speech to the Ottawa Nursery School Association.

"We must allow the children to explore and experiment with both ideas and materials, and we must tolerate the mess that such experiment brings in its wake."

For 25 years, Mrs. Hyde served as director of the nursery school that started in a family home in Rockcliffe. When she finally left the school in the late 1960s, the institution was renamed in her honour: It became the Bettye Hyde Co-Operative Nursery School.

"She started the school over 60 years ago," said Shirley Diener, the vice-president of the board of directors for the Bettye Hyde Nursery School. "And she was incredibly active in early childhood."

...

"It's really quite unique," said Mrs. Diener. She added that the idea of a nursery school might not sound remarkable to many Canadians but when the school was established in the 1940s, it was a strange idea.

"It was very unusual at the time," said Mrs. Diener. "Women weren't out working at the time, so people didn't see a need for it."

But there was a need, according to Mrs. Hyde. Although children could theoretically stay home with their mothers, Mrs. Hyde saw the value of socializing children with other children as an essential stepping stone in childhood development.

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Bettye Hyde spent her life fighting for the things she believed in -- big or small -- and her interest in children and her fervour in the importance of early childhood education, in the form of nursery schools, continued until her death.

In a Citizen article in 1999, she perhaps expressed it best.

"It became a lifelong passion for me," said Mrs. Hyde.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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