

Marguerite Butt, 81: Crusader for child care [CA-ON]^[1]

Obituary

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EXCERPTS

She always looked and acted like a lady; however, this was one lady who was also a crusader.

Just because the men were coming home from the war and the women were expected to leave their war work at the factories, Marguerite Butt wasn't going to let the government close down six of Toronto's wartime day-care centres.

She marched, along with outraged parents, to city hall and right into the room where the special advisory committee on day-care services was meeting. It was February, 1947, and it was the beginning of a battle for funding and facilities for child care that continues to this day.

It was also the beginning of Miss Butt's legacy. Bellevue and Jesse Ketchum were two of the wartime day-care centres that stayed open then and are in existence today. In large part because of that post-war walk, there are now 58 child-care centres directly operated by the City of Toronto, as well as 45,000 licensed spaces in another 830 facilities, with government subsidizing the fees for 22,720 of the spaces.

One of the facilities is the innovative Marguerite Butt Child Care Centre on the site of the Lakeshore Lodge Home for the Aged, which was named for her when she retired after 43 years working in Toronto's children's services section.

Miss Butt's friend and former boss, Marna Urbanski, hails her as "the first lady of child care" and the "matriarch of the children's services family."

"So dignified, but she had a will of steel. She always preached the importance of child care," Urbanski said.

Miss Butt died last month at 81. She had been living in Providence Centre.

Miss Butt graduated from the University of Toronto in 1941, and was one of the first to study early-childhood education, a pioneering course at U of T's Institute of Child Study. She was centre supervisor at the now-defunct St. Mary's, one of the first child-care centres in Toronto, before becoming an assistant to the supervisor of the city's child-care unit.

She helped form the Nursery Education Association of Toronto, which encouraged the Institute of Child Study to offer six-week summer and eight-week fall training courses for people to staff the child-care centres. They were the forerunners of the early-childhood education courses now offered at universities and colleges.

Miss Butt was also a driving force in the group's toy committee. Her long-time colleague, Hedy Gotsche, remembers how the day-care staff would gather on weekends at the house on Merton St. to make toys for the centres and to sell to families. Miss Butt's mother would feed them homemade pies as the women wielded jigsaws, sandpaper and paint to build toy stoves, fridges, puzzles and toy boxes out of old orange crates.

"Sometimes we would make \$200, \$300 from the toy sales," Gotsche said. "We used the money for the staff training courses."

Because funding was always an issue, budgets were stretched. The day-care staff routinely cut paper towels in half to make them go further — so, too, with facecloths and the scratchy gray nap-time blankets left over from the war.

"It was a fight all the time," Gotsche said.

Three years earlier the city's welfare department had cut back the number of subsidies available to families using child-care centres, instituted a new means test and raised the rates — thereby setting off a firestorm of protest. Even though the province was paying 50 per cent of the operating costs of day-care centres, the city refused a proposal to establish 12 new centres to deal with the 2,600 children on the waiting list for its 681 day-care spaces.

Gotsche said Miss Butt was always fighting on behalf of the parents, writing reports, encouraging community members to attend and speak out at political meetings. By the 1970s, when an infusion of money from the federal government resulted in the creation of many new community-centred and parent-operated day-care centres, Miss Butt helped create a day-care advisory committee for the city.

"Marguerite was always a reasonable ally," said Julie Mathien, who was on the new advisory committee. "I think she understood what

place the community was coming from."

It was more than that. She loved her on-site visits with the children in centres and never complained when small, sticky fingers smeared playdough over her Ultrasuede suit.

Toward the end of her life, although suffering from Alzheimer's, Miss Butt was always thrilled when she received a parcel of drawings from children attending the day care bearing her name.

Said Urbanski: "She always perked up when it had anything to do with kids."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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