

Why good day care is a matter of luck: Without government support, successful centres like Quayside won't survive. Are you listening, Mr. Campbell? [CA-BC] ^[1]

Author: Brook, Paula

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EXCERPTS

Benjamin Ranieri is one of the lucky ones. He arrives at Quayside Children's Centre in a Cheetah bike trailer pulled by his dad, and when he runs into the sunlit playroom to join his two-year-old friends, his cheeks are pink and he has that drunk-on-fresh-air look.

Most days Benjamin arrives this way -- having traversed the Burrard Bridge from his Kitsilano home hitched to the back of Frank Ranieri's mountain bike. Frank is an interior designer who continues his daily commute from the day-care centre in the Concord Pacific lands on False Creek's north shore, south over the Cambie Bridge to his office on Quebec Street. He keeps a car parked at the office so he can visit clients around town, but he's always back in time to change into his spandex, jump on the bike, head back over the Cambie Bridge and pick up Benjamin before six.

The scene this morning at Quayside sends me back 16 years, when my elder daughter was one of the lucky ones to have a semi-regular spot at Granny Y's infant/toddler day-care centre run by the YWCA at St. Andrew's Wesley Church in downtown Vancouver. The Y would later move the facility to its main building on Hornby, and would eventually close it around the time my daughter was learning to drive -- having written off close to \$1 million in deficit financing over its 18-year life.

"We used to say, if the YWCA can't do it, no one can," says Marion Taylor, the YWCA's director of children's and family services. "It" is high-quality licensed group care for the under-three set, and the fact that the Y did it without significant government assistance for more than 18 years (underwriting as much as \$600 a month per child in order to meet the 1:4 staff/child ratio and pay fair wages while capping fees at \$880 a month) seems like a minor miracle today. Ditto, the fact that my daughter got in on it.

Like we "won the lottery," is how Taylor describes the response she used to get when families made their way to the top of Granny Y's wait list. That's exactly how Frank Ranieri describes his good fortune at scoring a spot for Benjamin when the child was eight months old and it was time for his mom, Jennifer Oulton, to return to work. Jennifer was "lucky" to be able to take eight months off with the baby, says Frank. Benjamin was "lucky" to be admitted to Quayside, which had a 300-plus waiting list then and has more than 600 names on it today.

And they were "lucky" again, a few months ago, when 18-month-old Benjamin was ready to graduate from the infant program at Quayside and another child moved out of the toddler group, making room for him. It's too bad that quality child care has so much to do with luck. Benjamin stretches out the morning bye-bye time with his dad to the max, exactly as my daughter used to do at Granny Y's. A mild whimper, a trembling lip nets him an extra cuddle from Frank who is forced to double back after the first failed exit for one last kiss.

One of the care givers approaches Benjamin with a large picture book. "Do you want to read this with me?" she asks, and the boy reaches for the book, giving Frank his cue to a painless exit. If this were all they teach in early childhood education classes, it would be worth it. "Transitions" are hard for small children, equally so for their parents. There are few moments more painful than the unpeeling of a glued-on child from his guilty parent's leg at the day care's door. (More painful, though, is the unpeeling of that same child at five o'clock -- from the caregiver's leg.)

You rise above the guilt, the misgivings and the fatigue of life under the tyranny of round-the-clock scheduling because this is by far your best option. It allows you to work, and your child to thrive. You've explored alternatives: some didn't work out, others you couldn't afford to try. You've done your homework and, despite the chronic headline wars between pro-care lefties and stay-at-home hawks, all the best research shows that high-quality care promotes healthy social development and readiness to learn.

The trick is to figure out what "high quality" means. (Checklist: city licensing, staff continuity, ongoing professional development, parental involvement, financial transparency...) The bigger challenge is to find it, and the acid test is getting in. Which explains the 6/49-winning smiles on the faces of Quayside parents who gathered yesterday morning to celebrate the official opening of one of the relatively few day-care centres -- not only in Vancouver or B.C. but I'd venture in all of Canada -- that can afford to do it right.

I wish I could report that Quayside's early success has nothing to do with luck -- that it's a sign of a better day dawning for working parents

who want and deserve such support to help them through one of life's toughest transitions. In fact, Quayside is the end-product of an extremely lucky convergence of forces that may or may not continue to produce such results. Some of those forces are political, and the political winds are shifting.

In the midst of the Quayside celebrations, executive director Sandra Menzer talks to me grimly about the fickleness of such forces, and her worries about the future.

The Vancouver Society of Children's Centres, which operates Quayside, is a non-profit agency mandated by the City of Vancouver to run all the day-care facilities created downtown as a result of megaproject rezoning requirements. Developers are obliged to set aside 25 percent of housing for families, and provide amenities including play areas and day-care centres. The city also charges development levies to support civic endowment grants which are used to subsidize day-care operating costs.

"The city did some wonderful planning," says Menzer. "Build housing, build services like child-care facilities, plan for schools and community centres and they shall come -- and boy did they come." In the case of Concord Pacific, three centres were planned, Quayside being the second. As many as 15 more centres are scheduled to be built around the downtown core, including two in the new Coal Harbour development, and Menzer predicts they'll fill up as quickly as they go up.

Families are pouring into the area -- proof of the city's success partnering with the private sector to create "complete communities." And those families are growing. The downtown now has the highest birth rate in the Vancouver-Richmond health region -- and the highest number of dual-income families.

The hitch is that the money to operate the day care centres is shrinking, fast. Because of the levels of subsidy required to make day care affordable (especially in labour-intense infant/toddler facilities), the civic endowment funds are being drawn down and are expected to last only a few more years.

"It's great that the facilities will be there and they'll be furnished and fabulous, and we have the waitlists to fill them," says Menzer, "but operationally it's going to be a huge challenge for us. How do we make the bottom line?"

In the dying days of the NDP government, there was hope that an injection of provincial cash for day care would support and eventually supplant limited civic funding. The first phase of the ambitious Child Care B.C. program was instituted in January, with major subsidies for before and after-school care. The March budget included \$45 million to roll out the 2002 phase for pre-schoolers.

It appeared, fleetingly, that luck was about to give way to solid public policy.

Ironically, one of the seminal forces behind the civic child-care strategy is the same man who now appears to be standing in the way of provincial support. As opposition leader, Gordon Campbell attacked the NDP day-care plan, and as premier he is expected to axe it.

City councillor Gordon Price, who attended the Quayside opening, suggested Campbell's change of heart may be the simple result of growing up with his kids. When he was a mover and shaker on a child-friendly council, his children were small and his sympathies attuned to other young families. Now, as Sandra Menzer points out, the premier-elect seems to have turned a deaf ear.

"The one clear message we've heard from Gordon Campbell is that he's not hearing from parents that they want a publicly funded child care system. A number of us are challenging him on that. When the NDP did their consultations two years ago, they heard from plenty of parents. They had something like 19,000 responses -- the most ever to any kind of social policy consultation. We're saying to Mr. Campbell, you've consulted us. You've heard us. The numbers speak."

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