

Closing of community day care end of an era: Edmonton's first public, non-profit centre provided quality care for generations of kids [CA-AB] ^[1]

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Source: Edmonton Journal

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 Mar 2001

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Ask four-year-old Melody Valaire what she'll miss when the Community Day Nursery closes today and she points to her friend Baillie Ayotte. Then she abandons the butterfly picture she's drawing -- as a gift for staff she's known for three-quarters of her life -- to run around the room introducing other children she'll miss.

"I am going to miss everyone," Melody said.

"Me too," said three-year-old Baillie, explaining that she and Melody will be in different day-care centres from now on. Jackie Selinske was born in April 1966, the month the nursery opened, and she plans to be at the nursery today with her four-year-old son Ricky, when this pioneer program passes into history.

"My son was here for two years," she explained. Every day Selinske drove in from Sherwood Park with Ricky. He stayed at the nursery while she went to work as a secretary at the Edmonton city police headquarters. She praises the warm environment and admits she cried when she heard financial pressure was closing the nursery.

Director Mary Borthwick Hull joined the nursery four months after it opened and 35 years later still speaks with passion of the original vision. This was Edmonton's first public non-profit day-care centre, intended to serve children from all cultural and income backgrounds, using trained staff to set a higher standard for early childhood development.

Her British training gave her work a new focus popular with Edmonton parents. "Children always learn through play," she explained, and they benefit most if tasks are challenging without being frustrating.

Thousands of children have received care here over the years and Hull said they were all taught to play fair, care and do what is proper. "You give every individual child a chance to realize his or her potential. Look at the whole child. That is the secret.

"The history of non-profit child care started here," she said sadly. "It was considered a model program. Everything has its time. Maybe it has served its time. I am going to miss it dreadfully."

Where there were 60 or 65 children back in the 1960s and 1970s, there are 30 now. Competition got tougher as the number of child-care centres grew. And in this era of per capita funding and volunteer fund-raising, the nursery could no longer make a go of it, Hull said. "If you don't have the numbers, you don't get the funding."

The converted maintenance shop at 9641 102A Ave. has an outdoor playground at the back, a kitchen and bright, cheerful rooms for the children. "From the outside, it is nothing," Hull said. "The magic is when you open the door."

Staff are cooking a turkey for the children today and families and friends have been dropping off sweets, presents and flowers to celebrate their memories of the nursery.

Hull hasn't decided what she'll do next. "I will just take some time for me. This is a very emotional experience."

Susan Wissink feels a sense of loss, both as a mother who sent two children to the nursery for three years and as executive director of the Edmonton Downtown Development Corporation.

Wissink called the nursery a gem of Edmonton's downtown core. She said it is a real loss at a time when the Downtown Development Corporation and other groups are working to revitalize the city centre.

"It has touched a lot of lives."

-Reprinted from The Edmonton Journal

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