

A century of care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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Since 1911, mothers and fathers in Ottawa have relied on Andrew Fleck Child Care Services for the daytime care of their children. Through war and peace, prosperity and depression, the agency has filled a void in the city, offering much-needed, yet often overlooked community services.

In the century after its founding in Lowertown, it has grown from humble roots as a two-room day nursery for the children of working mothers -most of whom were poor or immigrants trying to support their families -to a city-wide, multi-service childcare provider with a solid reputation for innovation and stability.

As another century dawns, the agency is poised to forge new pathways in order to give children the best start possible.

It is and has always been, after all, about the children.

"Early on, there was the understanding that children are valuable, that as a society we want our children to be successful. There was an understanding that children learn through play and that they deserve to be safe and have an enriched environment in order to reach their full potential," says Kim Hiscott, a longtime early childhood educator who joined the agency as its executive director three years ago.

Today, she oversees a full-time staff of 120, a multitude of programs at half a dozen sites across the city and an annual operating budget of more than \$11 million.

Looking back at where it all began makes this centenary all the more impressive.

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The nursery was established on Nov. 7, 1911, to provide daycare for the children of working mothers. To be eligible, the women had to be Ottawa residents who were forced into the workforce to support their families because of their marriages had broken down, they were unmarried or widowed, or because the father's salary wasn't enough to meet the family's needs.

Rows of clothes baskets served as cribs for the infants. Fees were set at 10 cents a day per child and were often waived depending on a family's circumstances.

As more women entered the workforce to fill labour shortages during the First World War, there was a greater need for daycare and funding, prompting the day nursery to separate from the settlement house in 1916. Soon after, the day nursery received a \$400 grant from the city.

It was around this time that Gertrude Fleck was elected president of the day nursery's management committee.

She was the eldest of five daughters born to famed lumber baron John Rudolphus Booth and the wife of prominent businessman Andrew Fleck. The organization may bear his name, but it was her life's work, having served as president in its founding year and again between the years 1932 and 1937.

Though her efforts helped make it easier for less fortunate women to work outside the home, it's an irony of the times that Fleck and the other women who breathed life into the organization in those early years did so as volunteers because women in their social circle didn't take paid work.

"Many of these women were doing this work despite the fact that they themselves came from a family of means," says Hiscott. "It was their contribution to the community."

In addition to caring for their children, the day nursery also provided jobs for some mothers before and during the Great Depression. In 1928, women were offered 13,000 days of work, and earned some \$26,302 to support their families.

Fleck, who was a friend of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King but often shied away from publicizing her good deeds, likely made her largest contribution in 1931 with the announcement that she would donate a new building and its grounds in memory of her husband, who died in 1924.

The two-storey brick building, opened in July 1932, still stands at the corner of George Street and King Edward Avenue, in the shadow of a sleek, modern condominium tower. It continues to serve the Lowertown community by offering childcare programs for toddler, preschool and kindergarten-aged children, but the organization itself has, over the years, grown into something much, much larger.

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After the Second World War ended and many women returned to the home, the federal government pulled its funding for wartime day nurseries and the province forced many to close. The dozen that remained, including the Ottawa Day Nursery, survived with the help of funding provided by the new Ontario Day Nurseries Act in 1946.

The legislation, a first in Canada, established service standards for nurseries and training for staff, and introduced a funding model, a licensing and inspection system and a more formal routine for the children in care. This is the beginning of what we know today as early childhood education.

By the 1960s, the demographic served by the Ottawa Day Nursery hadn't changed much: More than 50 per cent of the children came from single-parent families, in some cases families headed by a father. The daily fee ranged from 25 cents to \$2 and families whose income exceeded \$5,000 annually were excluded.

Hiscott says this was a time of great innovation for the day nursery, which was renamed after Andrew Fleck in 1970.

It opened the first Head Start program in Ottawa, offering an enrichment program for preschoolers from low-income families in Lowertown.

It also launched the province's first home childcare program in 1969, designed to provide daytime care for infants and toddlers in the home of another family, selected and supervised by the agency. In a nod to the agency's roots in developing and supporting women's employment, the program created an employment opportunity for mothers who chose to stay in the home with younger children, in addition to giving parents another childcare option. Today, 200 licensed providers across the city provide in-home care to up to 500 children.

In the early 1980s, staff noticed they were getting a lot of calls from parents asking about childcare services in the city. The reason? Andrew Fleck was the first name that appeared in the phone book under the heading "child care."

Having seen the need, the agency did what came naturally -it filled it, creating the Child Care Information hotline, a one-stop shop for parents with childcare-related questions.

It began taking calls in September 1982 and by March 1983, had fielded some 1,200 calls and made 1,300 referrals. By 2009, the call centre had received close to 54,000 inquiries.

Meanwhile, in an effort to shift away from a segregated childcare system where preschool children diagnosed with special needs had to travel long distances to find the support they needed, the agency founded Children's Integration Support Services.

It had a simple goal: To ensure that whatever program a parent chose for their child -either classroom or home-based child care -had the supports and tools in place to welcome the child.

It started with 45 kids in 1991 and has grown exponentially. By 2010, it was serving 500 children annually.

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After years of growth for the agency, Elsie Chan took over as executive director in 1994 and soon found herself leading an organization at a crossroads.

The provincial Progressive Conservative government under Premier Mike Harris had downloaded childcare funding to municipalities, forcing the organization to make deep program cuts and fear for the future of childcare funding.

Meanwhile, the George Street centre's playground needed some work and Chan also had her eye on an adjacent building, which Andrew Fleck had been renting from the city since 1967.

The question was whether to sell the highly valuable land and relocate elsewhere or stay put in Lowertown. Chan says the answer was clear.

"These are our roots and this is the population we serve," she says. "We're needed here."

The agency bought and renovated the building, turning it into a bright and welcoming centre for toddlers and junior preschoolers. The front room has huge, street-facing windows, a kitchen area where children eat a hot lunch every day and a gorgeous stone fire place, lending it a warm, homey feel.

Outside, children play on the grounds between the original and the new building, which bears Chan's name.

It is, as she envisioned, an oasis in the middle of a busy neighbourhood, with brightly-coloured playground equipment and children's laughter filling the air.

Her larger vision as executive director was to transform the agency from its primary role as a childcare provider to a multi-service organization constantly striving for excellence in its programming.

Chan oversaw the rollout of new programs for school-aged children at Riverview Alternative and Stittsville Public schools, the opening of an Ontario Early Years Centre in Ottawa's south end and, in 2005, the launch of a centralized waiting list for all licensed childcare centres and home childcare programs in the city.

The centralized list is a godsend for parents. It helps them navigate the system and saves them the time and trouble of calling around to childcare providers to get on individual waiting lists. But Hiscott says it's also a valuable planning tool because it sheds light on how great the demand for childcare spaces is at any given time.

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Kim Hiscott knew she was inheriting a legacy. That she is only the agency's eighth executive director in 100 years -five of her predecessors collectively served a total of 90 years -speaks to its stability and the strength of its governance model.

But being stable, at least at Andrew Fleck, has never been about maintaining the status quo. Instead, it's been about blazing new trails. "Each one of those women has done something pretty special," Hiscott said. "They've all contributed something to the agency that has taken it forward."

Prior to joining the organization, Hiscott was executive director at the Kanata Research Park Family Centre, which opened in 2000 to serve employees at the west-end campus. It was there she devised, in partnership with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, a seamless, full-day kindergarten program in which teachers and Early Childhood Educators worked together to provide a play-based curriculum.

After moving to Andrew Fleck, she saw an opportunity to create a similar program at Riverview Alternative School. The day begins with 2 1/2 hours of instruction in the morning led by a kindergarten teacher. At 11: 45 a.m., a pair of early childhood educators takes over and children stay until their parents pick them up by 5: 30 p.m.

Parents were thrilled and children have thrived.

If that scenario sounds at all familiar, that's because it is: Hiscott's centre in Kanata was one of the places Charles Pascal, the premier's special adviser on early learning, came when he was developing Ontario's new full-day kindergarten program, which began rolling out in elementary schools last September.

But the provincial government chose to implement a slightly different full-day kindergarten model -a teacher and an early childhood educator, both employed by school boards, working in partnership in the classroom -so the Riverview pilot project will end next year when the school board takes over.

Hiscott believes her model was effective, but is quick to add children and families will benefit from full-day kindergarten, regardless of the particulars.

She's now focused on the future, taking steps to tackle the next piece of Pascal's early learning pie.

Hiscott, in partnership with the OCDSB, wants to develop a pair of child and family centres on school grounds. The concept will prove invaluable for families because it will bring a range of services -everything from pre-and postnatal information and childcare to parenting support and nutrition counselling -under one roof.

"There will be one door and (families) will be provided with a breadth of services," she says.

Too often, Hiscott says, she hears from parents who learn about a specific service long after it could have been a real benefit to them or their family.

Pascal, who says both Hiscott and the agency have superb reputations, can think of no other organization in Ontario like Andrew Fleck that has been around for as long.

"The most distinguishing feature is its ability to reinvent itself in terms of continuing to meet the needs of kids and families," he says.

He credits the agency's enduring focus on offering quality, comprehensive programming and creating partnerships, as well as its humble nature.

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