

The woman pushing for better care for Ontario children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Imagine a big city daycare with a goat, a sheep and a flock of chickens. Real ones.

When Carolyn Ferns happened upon the children and their child-care teacher taking the goat for a walk, she knew anything was possible.

"I thought, what is this? This is fantastic," recalls Ferns of the extraordinary scene in the Swedish city of Lund, where she was taking a university gap year in the early 2000s.

Ferns thinks about that daycare often in her new role as head of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the voice of non-profit, affordable child care in the province.

The 700-member advocacy organization is gearing up for what Ferns hopes will be a pivotal year when parents, policy-makers and the general public debate new possibilities for child care.

"I want to expand how child care is thought of by everyone," she says. "I want to be able to explain to people who aren't parents and who don't work in the field why they should be interested in child care, why it is an issue for all of us."

With about three-quarters of women with young children in the workforce, child care is a necessity, she notes. And yet there are licensed spots for barely 22 per cent of Ontario children under age 5.

Ontario leads the country with full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds. It's time to focus on children from birth to age 3, Ferns says.

The day the Star met with Ferns in December, Queen's Park was passing the first rewrite of provincial child-care legislation in 30 years, including tough new measures to rein in unregulated home daycares.

In October, federal NDP Leader Tom Mulcair put child care on the 2015 federal election agenda with his party's eight-year plan to create 1 million child-care spaces at no more than \$15 a day.

A week later, Stephen Harper's Conservative government announced a beefed-up baby bonus of \$160 a month for every child under age 6 and \$60 a month for children under age 18, drawing the battle lines in the fight for the family vote.

Ferns, 38, who holds a master's degree in early childhood studies from Ryerson University, is armed and ready. She cut her teeth at the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit, where she worked as a university placement student and then a full-time researcher with policy guru Martha Friendly for about a decade.

"I've always had one foot in advocacy. But this is such a big time right now for child care - with the federal election next year - that it's time to jump in with both feet," she says of her move to the coalition.

Unlike child-care advocates who became engaged in the issue as mothers, Ferns and her longtime companion, General Leung, a research scientist at St. Michael's Hospital, are childless.

They live in Kensington Market with their Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever, Mira, named after a river in the province popularized in a favourite Maritime folk song.

When people find out where she works, Ferns says, she is often asked about having children of her own. Leung, whose research involves MRI and strokes, has helped to put the question into perspective. No one has ever asked him if he has had a stroke, Ferns says. "It's time we looked at child care in the same way."

Ferns is one of a new generation of young, educated child-care champions who is taking the issue to the next level, says Friendly, her old boss at the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"Carolyn has a solid understanding of child care across Canada and internationally as well as an understanding of the major policy issues and how they fit together," Friendly says. "She is the right person at the right time to be leading the coalition."

If I were the city of Toronto, my New Year's resolution would be to build a city that works for children - a Toronto that's good for children is good for us all.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: advocacy ^[4]

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