

'I wanted to graduate': Teen mom from 1985 recalls help of Balfour daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The first support centre and daycare in Regina for teen parents is honouring all the people who have passed through its doors over the past 45 years.

Balfour school is home to the Shirley Schneider Support Centre and the connected daycares. The support program for pregnant teens first opened its doors in 1972 under the name Balfour Special Tutorial and has helped thousands of young women over the decades, including Klarissa Leitchman.

Leitchman is graduating from Balfour Collegiate this year and credits the school's free daycare for enabling her to do it.

"I wouldn't have had a way to pay for daycare and this makes it easier so I can actually get my work done," said Leitchman.

The Grade 12 student said she feels fortunate to have the support, noting that her own mother became pregnant when she was a teenager and – not having access to such a program – was unable to finish high school.

Jasmine Machiskinic is another Grade 12 graduate who said the Support Centre helped her turn her life around.

"Before I was pregnant my marks were low and my attendance wasn't the best, but since I've enrolled in the program my average is high and I'm eligible for a lot of scholarships," said Machiskinic.

She has enrolled at First Nations University of Canada for the fall and said her baby has given her a renewed sense of purpose.

"I realized it wasn't about me anymore, it was about my daughter," she said.

Machiskinic said the SSSC program offers her additional supports to focus on much more than just her marks. For example, a health nurse is available at different times of the week and there are prenatal classes and parenting classes.

"All that support really helped my transition into parenthood," Machiskinic said.

In addition to all the supports, the infant care centre (across the street from the school) can help with babies as young as two weeks old.

Times have changed

But it wasn't always like this. When the centre (under the previous name of Balfour Special Tutorial) first opened in 1972, support for pregnant teens was hard to find.

"When you were pregnant your family either hid you or sent you away, you were a pariah," said one of the program founders, Shirley Schneider.

And while the school was helpful to pregnant students there was a need for even more support so that new mothers could remain in school even after their babies were born.

In 1986, the Mackenzie Infant Care Centre opened its doors in a house across the street. The school now has space for 36 infants and 15 toddlers.

The centre was named after Alex B. Mackenzie, a former principal who – while he was principal and even after he left the administrative ranks – was a strong advocate of the importance of education and support for young mothers.

"He [Mackenzie] came across as a gruff disciplinarian but he made provisions for young women who were pregnant to be in school," explained Schneider. "Some was innovation, some was revolution."

Mother comes full-circle

Beth Woodard was one of the very first women to graduate from the program.

In 1985, she was 15 years old and pregnant. She hid her pregnancy from her family for a long time and didn't tell her friends.

"One day I was going to school at Thom Collegiate. The next I was at Balfour. My close friends stuck with me, but I was pretty much on my own."

Her parents thought the best thing for her and her baby would be to give her daughter up for adoption. For two weeks after the birth, her daughter was in the care of social services.

"It was not good. I didn't sleep, I was not doing very well," Woodard recalled. She changed her mind and brought her baby daughter Colleen home to live with her.

In September 1986, after six months at home, she was offered a spot by Shirley Schneider at the newly opened infant daycare. Now, years later, she realizes the impact that had on her.

"It was a safe place to be. As a teen mom it was the only place to be," she said. "I didn't want to become a statistic. I wanted to graduate."

Woodard is now the director of the daycare at Carpenter High School in Meadow Lake. She said attitudes have changed since she was in high school.

"There's more supports, there's more acceptance, there's more help," she said.

On Friday night, Woodard was set to join other graduates of the program — along with staff and caregivers — at an anniversary celebration in Regina. As part of the event, the MICC board is announcing scholarships totaling \$80,000 to be added to an education fund that helps young student mothers attend post secondary education.

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