



Leah Hennel/Calgary Herald

Cheryl Doherty, CEO of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary, does some crafts with Angela Lin, 10, Appollo Schochenmaier, 6, and Eleanor Martin, 7.

Champions of the children

Three women share a century of service to society

VALERIE FORTNEY
CALGARY HERALD

While the numbers alone are impressive — each has devoted more than three decades to their chosen careers — it's what they do, and why they do it, that is the most impressive part of their stories.

To kick off the 2012 Calgary Herald Christmas Fund, Herald senior columnist Valerie Fortney sat down with the three, discovering the personal and professional journeys that led them to being champions of the city's children.

Giving the youngest a fighting chance

The little girl looked dejected and defeated, her black eye the most visible, and the latest, indication of a turbulent home life. Ilona Boyce sat down beside her and asked about it. She fell down the stairs, the girl insisted. Boyce reminded the child that while there is hurt in the world, there is also a lot of love.

The child looked up at Boyce

and through her tears told her: "I know you love me like mothers should."

Over the past two decades, Boyce has had countless moments with children, from the silly and endearing to the heart-breaking and profound. Yet hearing such wisdom from a nine-year-old girl has long stood out for her.

"The stories and backgrounds of some of our children are so tragic, you wonder how they survived," she says. "If a child can engage with just one caring adult, they can become resilient."

As the mother lion of a fiercely protective, defiantly optimistic team of teachers and support workers at Calgary's Heartland Agency and Educational Services, Boyce has nurtured and educated several generations of the city's most needy youngsters. Through her EvenStart program, preschoolers with slim hopes of even making it to Grade 1 have been brought up to a level that gives them a fighting chance to survive, even thrive, in the mainstream school system.

"Not all children in poverty have trauma, but all of our children in trauma also have poverty," Boyce says of the more than 200 students at EvenStart's three locations in the city that provide a safe learning environment for



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children of preschool age. "If we intervene early enough, it's our greatest chance to break the cycle."

The passion with which she speaks is enough to convince even a casual observer of Boyce's dedication; her long path to where she is today confirms her as one of Canada's trailblazers in early childhood development.

By the early 1990s, Boyce was already a veteran on the front lines of child welfare. After getting a master's degree in social work, she spent the two decades working in everything from family court services to daycare.

Those experiences formed beliefs that would be validated

decades later by the world's top researchers in neurobiology: that early, traumatic childhood experiences hardwire the brain in damaging ways that are nearly impossible to reverse down the road.

"We now know that birth to five years is the most crucial," she says. "But we couldn't get anyone to buy into that philosophy back then."

Undeterred, Boyce found support from a government official who approved a three-year pilot project.

"We started on a wish and a prayer, literally," she says with a laugh of her first digs at St. Stephen's Anglican Church in Calgary's Beltline district. In 1995, she and a small group of staff welcomed its first 30 students.

Since then, the organization has grown to about 60 staff, everyone from bus drivers and cooks to teachers, play therapists and other specialists in child development. Boyce's three daughters — Jenny Boyce, Mandy Goldau and Brianna Parkhill — today work beside their mother, ensuring her legacy continues.

"We helped out when we were kids, and my kids have been helping out with the Christmas hampers since they were two," says Parkhill, EvenStart's director, who each year must find donors for the more than 100 Christmas

hampers they distribute to their students' families. "We're proud of the fact we never turn away a child who is in danger, even if they're non-funded. We find a way."

The giving philosophy Boyce has clearly passed on to her children is one that she learned as a child growing up in the rural Manitoba town of Roblin. The daughter of immigrants from Czechoslovakia and Ukraine, she learned early the virtues of hard work. "They also taught that you always give back to the community, to others," she says. "There were no formal social programs in a small town, but somehow everyone helped out when someone was in need."

A self-described "helper" who was passionate about social justice, she found work with troubled teens in northern Manitoba before making her way to Alberta.

Today, Boyce is ready to pull back from her 14-hour, six days a week schedule.

"One of the things I've had to work on is balance," says Boyce, whose husband Greg, a constant support who helped transport kids after he retired, died unexpectedly in 2009. "It's only as you get older that you realize it's important to have balance."



Sarah Walker, executive director of Hospice Calgary, next to the memorial wall where young clients remember their lost loved ones. Leah Hennes/Calgary Herald

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Still, she has one major goal to fulfil before she considers retirement. She recently kicked off a capital campaign for a permanent home for the agency and EvenStart; funds raised through the Herald Christmas Fund will go to this campaign. Their current digs at Currie Barracks, is rented.

"I grew up learning to provide, not to ask, so this is a new experience for me. I have had a hard time asking."

She knows, though, that what she, her daughters and her staff have built is desperately needed — and what they're doing makes a difference.

When asked what became of the little girl who talked of a mother's love, Boyce's face lights up.

"She's 18 now," she says of that memorable child who is now one of the program's success stories. "She continued on in school and did very well."

Letting grief speak

Ask Sarah Walker how she can face her job every day and the most serene smile spreads across her kind face.

"To go to bed at the end of the day, to know that you've made a difference in the life of one person," she says, "is incredibly powerful."

Such a response is typical of those who work in social agencies, a field populated with individuals who define success as doing work that nourishes the soul. Still, the challenges Walker has been meeting and overcoming for more than three decades is unique.

Each day, she stares death in the face, and confronts the complex, confusing emotions it engenders. "We work here with everyone, from every age and background," she says of her role as executive director of Hospice Calgary. "Death affects us all at some point; there isn't any one of us that is getting out alive."

As she gives a tour of the agency's headquarters, Walker quietly points to memorial tiles painted by children, as well as a "Heaven" wall in one room, dedicated to artwork depicting lost loved ones, their images created with crayons and felt markers. "Children need to express what they're feeling," she says. "Teenagers, too — they travel in a world where their peers really don't get it."

Walker, who has been with Hospice Calgary for more than 20 years, has overseen its growth and diversification of services, which assist not only the dying but also survivors who range from small children to the elderly.

She's proud of the organization's programs for grieving children and families, and money from the 2012 Calgary Herald Christmas Fund is earmarked for that.

"A few years ago, you could not find services for a healthy grief program for children and teens. All that was out there was psychiatric care."

Walker's passion for her work can be traced back to a childhood infused with love, security and high ideals. Her father, a corporate psychologist, walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. at a civil rights march in her hometown of Rochester, N.Y. A few years later, her family moved to Columbia, Md., a planned community with the lofty aim of eliminating racial, religious and class segregation.

It was a bold idea that made for a happy childhood. "Its model was all about giving back to the community, so it was a natural thing for me to later step into that role," she says.

She was also influenced by her mother Mary, who campaigned for an interfaith cemetery in the community, and who helped form a community-based hospice. "She



EvenStart for Children Foundation clients Ian and Matthew frame staff Mandy Goldau, Jennifer Boyce, Brianna Parkhill and Ilona Boyce. Stuart Graddon/Calgary Herald

felt death was very much a part of our life, that it should be integrated into the community," says Walker.

As part of her social work practicum at Cornell University, Walker was assigned to work at a local hospital. "Of course, there were a lot of dying people there," she recalls. "The other social work students didn't want to work with the dying. I had no problem with that."

The experience opened her eyes to the rewards of spending time with people at the end of their life. "I learned every bit as much as I offered, probably more," she says. "You cut through all the other mess that's out there and really focus on the things in life that are important. I knew then that I wanted to work with people at the end of life."

It was at Cornell University where Walker met her husband, Bruce Herdman, a Canadian. They moved to Toronto, where Walker got a master's degree in social work before being hired at Toronto Western Hospital.

Her first job, caring for AIDS patients, continued her learning path. It was the era, she says, "when dietitians would leave food trays outside the patients' rooms." Her patients were gay men, many of them in their twenties. "These young men completely changed how we practised medicine," she remembers. "They had an incredibly strong network of advocacy and not a lot to lose," she says.

"The people with cancer were laying in their beds, not asking questions. It's 100 per cent different from where we are today."

When her husband's company, TransCanada Pipelines, moved to Calgary in 1990, Walker saw it as a fresh start. "We were pretty excited — Toronto was too big for us, it was a hard place to crack." She was immediately embraced by her neighbours in the southwest community of Roxboro, along with some board members of Hospice Calgary.

"I saw an ad in the paper and decided to volunteer," she says of the then-fledgling organization that operated out of an apartment near Foothills Hospital. They invited her to dinner, giving her the impression that Calgarians were even friendlier than she'd dreamed. "I was too goofy to realize they were interviewing me for a job," she says with a hearty laugh.

Starting out as a volunteer coordinator, Walker worked her way to the top job seven years ago. "Here I am, more than two decades later not looking back," she says of her role in providing a wide variety of services that also includes outreach, caring for care-

givers and educational programs. "I've been surrounded by the greatest staff, people who share this passion. It's never been an option to do anything else," she says. "Stock options are nice, but this is more powerful. It is the kind of work that feeds the soul."

Putting personal experience to work

She was a happily married young woman, preparing for the arrival of her first child. So when Cheryl Doherty read about the young, single mother who had to give up her baby, she couldn't help but cry.

"She really tried her best to keep her," she says. "But when the baby got scarlet fever and nearly died, she was told there was a loving family that wanted her."

There was another reason Doherty was overcome by the sad story. That baby, she says, could have been her. Doherty and her brother were both adopted.

"I had two of the very best parents and I grew up thinking I had been chosen," says Doherty with a chuckle of her childhood in Shawinigan, Que. "As a teenager, though, I wondered why my mother had given me up."

It wasn't until she was grown up and married that she took action to find out what she could. "I always thought my mother was a teenager, but she was 27," she says, adding she learned that her American father had gone back to the U.S. before she was born.

Doherty didn't find out any identifiable details, but it was clear to her from the "very well crafted" letter accompanying her file — penned, she believes, by a caring social worker — that, like so many young women on their own in the late 1940s, there were few options for her birth mother. "There were no social safety nets back then, nothing for a new mother in her situation," she says. "I felt terrible for her."

Knowing that she could have easily wound up in an orphanage, it's no wonder this vibrant woman has devoted her career to children and youth. Doherty has been with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary for nearly 40 years, the past 14 as its executive director.

For the 73 years of its existence, the agency has played an instrumental role in the lives of tens of thousands of Calgary kids and youth, putting them on a path to a brighter future through a wide variety of programs and services.

With a mission to aid and empower society's youngest citizens, it has offered culture camps, after-school activities, outreach to local families, shelters and group

homes for children, along with a host of other services. Its Food and Nutrition in Schools (FANS) program — where its portion of the 2012 Calgary Herald Christmas Fund money will be dedicated — provides more than 12,000 local children with much-needed nutrition during the school day.

"Our bottom line is about kids reaching their potential," says Doherty. "The returns for us are a healthy society. Luckily for us, we are in a magical city that gets it."

The city gets it, in large part due to the charismatic, passionate delivery of Doherty. But the way she tells it, being able to lead an organization filled with equally passionate, hardworking people is a humbling privilege. "Here, everyone's bottom line is about helping kids reach their potential," she says. "Our returns are a healthy society."

When Doherty looks back on her four-decade career with the Boys and Girls Clubs, she sees it filled with mentors and supporters, without whom she never would have accomplished her goals. Her first job after moving to Calgary with an arts degree was an assistant to a University of Calgary medical researcher. He quickly saw Doherty's potential. "He said, 'Cheryl, we love having you here, but do you want to be doing this 20 years from now?' He helped me focus in on what I was interested in."

She enrolled in the university's social work faculty and upon graduation was recruited by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary. There she found another invaluable mentor — then-executive director Keith Pattinson. Every few years, she says, he'd throw a new challenge her way. "I never imagined I'd stay so long," she says. "I say to staff that I've had nine unique jobs in this agency."

Along the way there was time for family — husband Patrick and daughters Jennifer, 34, and Megan, 31. The family also took in foster children over the years. "We continually learned from these kids," she says. "It allowed us all to understand what it was like to come from such a chaotic life."

Calming the chaos for children, both in her personal and professional life, has kept Doherty youthful and filled with an energy and enthusiasm that is infectious.

"I hope to stick around for the 40th anniversary of this organization," says the woman who knows how easily she could have been one of those have-not children. "Every day, we work to change the lives of children in a positive way ... it never gets stale for me."

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