

Obituaries

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MARGARET KIDD, 89 » EDUCATOR AND ACTIVIST

She was the godmother of daycare centres in Canada

Trained in Boston because early childhood education was unavailable at home, she helped launch the first federally funded daycare centre and never looked back

BY NOREEN SHANAHAN TORONTO

Margaret Kidd was one of the earliest teachers in Early Childhood Education in Canada. Her life's work began during the Second World War when she helped establish the first federally funded daycare. It was a time of desperate need, when mothers tied their young to fence posts and set off for their jobs at munitions plants.

Ms. Kidd later taught in early childhood education at Ontario community colleges, and served as a childcare consultant in India, Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia and the Philippines.

The youngest of six children born to a British immigrant family who settled in Toronto during the final days of the First World War, she was a bright and ambitious child. Years later, she always felt grateful to her elder siblings; they quit school early and went to work, but insisted she continue on with her studies.

In 1939, she was in the first graduating class at the University of Toronto's new sociology department. Strongly influenced by Tommy Douglas and the Canadian Commonwealth Federation, she hooked up with other idealistic students who became activists fighting for the creation of social institutions such as medicare and daycare.

At that time in Canada, there were no training programs for childcare workers. Undeterred, Ms. Kidd headed down to Boston's Tufts University where a rudimentary course was offered, focusing mainly on healthy nutrition and probably directed more toward mothers than to working professionals. As a result, she became an advocate of healthy eating long before it was fashionable.

In 1938, while in Winnipeg at the first national conference of Canadian University Students, she met J. Roby Kidd. He was the first Canadian to earn a doctorate in adult education. Early in their relationship, the couple made a deliberate decision, based on a shared vision and commitment, which helped shape Canada's social and political landscape. Dr. Kidd set up the institutional infrastructure for adult education, basically popularizing the idea of lifelong learning. Ms. Kidd, meanwhile, played a key role in bringing the institution of quality daycare to thousands of Canadian families.

They were married in 1941, and while Mr. Kidd quickly moved ahead with his goals, she helped launch a nursery in Montreal that became the first daycare centre to be funded by Ottawa. Through her experience there she resolved to make the notion of daycare centres grow and flourish.

By that time the war was raging and daycare as we know it today simply did not



Margaret Kidd: 'She was like a supermom.' In 1965, below, she congratulated her son, Bruce, at his graduation. An enthusiastic supporter of her children, she encouraged him to become one of Canada's premier track-and-field athletes. KIDD FAMILY PHOTO



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Bruce Kidd

exist. Huge numbers of women entered the work force and took up war work of all descriptions, filling a labour gap caused by so many men having joined the armed forces and being sent overseas. Although it sounds outrageous, some war-time working mothers actually did tether their children to the fence in the front yard, leaving their neighbours to check on them during the day. At the time, it was accepted that they had little choice. After all, there was a war on.

According to CBC archives, some working mothers also left their children in orphanages during the war, usually on a temporary basis. Others were lucky if they found neighbours or relatives to care for their children. The federal government soon considered war-time nurseries an essential war-time service, charging eligible women 35 cents a day.

By the time 1943 came around, the couple was living

in Ottawa, where Dr. Kidd took a position as director of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education. In July, their son, Bruce, was born. The eldest of what would become an eventual brood of five children, he grew up to be an Olympic athlete. His brother, Ross, followed a couple of years later. In 1946, they moved back to Toronto where Alice, David and Dorothy were born.

Ms. Kidd insisted that her children push themselves just a little bit harder physically. She trained her youngest child, Dorothy, to walk further and further distances along Queen Street. If she heard one of the others whine for a streetcar ticket she'd say: "If your little sister can walk that far, so can you."

Bruce Kidd remembers the early days of his mother's mission, back in the mid-forties when she toddled him off to St. Aiden's Church in Toronto's east end - not to pray, but to play. He often sought out his friend John Sewell, perhaps over by the building blocks. (Mr. Sewell became Toronto's mayor a few decades later.)

Her energy for political activity also grew during these years. Her daughter, Dorothy Kidd, got her political start as a six-year-old on her neighbour's doorstep, listening to her mother eloquently pitch for local CCF candidates.

"I'm not sure when the penny dropped for her to make a career out of engaging developmental opportunities for children at the earliest possible

age, and fighting public institutions to do that," Bruce Kidd said. "It became the theme of her life from the late 1930s until she stopped actively working."

In 1961, the family moved to Ottawa where Dr. Kidd took a job as director of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education and Ms. Kidd dove into child-development issues, including setting up nursery schools. Passionate for political activism at this time, she also formed a women's group that met regularly to discuss the Vietnam War. Dorothy Kidd remembers a film about the Mekong Delta in Vietnam at one meeting, and discussing the impact of the war on Vietnamese women and children.

The once-radical notions of universal daycare and adult education were closer to becoming realized, as the couple spread their implacable vision for social reform onto the popular psyche. In many ways, Ms. Kidd practised her child-focused philosophy on her own children. Bruce Kidd still remembers the one and only time he ever heard his mother swear. It was on the phone with his high-school principal, who suggested that Bruce stay in school rather than travel with the Olympic team. Ms. Kidd told this man that the competition was an important experience for Bruce; that he wanted to go and would learn a great deal from it. Plus, she said, he'd ace his spring exams. She was right.

Ms. Kidd's work as an international childcare consultant began in 1965, when the family lived in Jaipur, India. Her husband was hired to work in adult education at the University of Rajasthan. When they returned to Toronto a year later, Ms. Kidd decided to pursue her masters degree in sociology, graduating from the University of Toronto in 1970. She became an early childhood education instructor, first at Centennial College and later at Seneca College, both in Toronto. She also insisted that the quest for new professionalism didn't wipe out the years of unpaid childcare work women had been doing.

At Seneca College, Ms. Kidd helped launch a project called the MILE (Mobile Intensive Learning Experience) where a group of students from various disciplines climbed aboard buses and travelled across the country. Instead of learning only from books, they met the real-life key players behind an issue. For instance, while studying Canadian labour, they went down into the mines or walked the picket lines and interviewed people who were making do without wages. If they were studying early childhood education, they visited daycare centres to witness how different communities applied their understanding of

child and community development.

"I was so proud to see her direct a fleet of students and buses and to see how the students were transformed by this," said Bruce Kidd, who joined her on a MILE project on sport and recreation policy. "She gave them a visceral, intellectually critical sense of this country and realized that there was more to Canada than just Toronto."

In 1977, Ms. Kidd became an inspector with the Ontario government's Community and Social Services Ministry, Children's Services Division. Throughout her tenure, she remained hopeful at the same time as being wise to the system's imperfections. But rather than close down troubled centres, she set her sites on problem-solving with them. Waiting-list numbers convinced her that fewer daycare centres was not the answer.

She once demonstrated for daycare reform at Toronto's City Hall. While her students gathered with their freshly crayoned picket signs, many of whom had their own toddlers underfoot and joining in with the chants, Ms. Kidd unpacked sandwiches and doled out juices. "She was like a supermom," Dorothy Kidd said. "She was teaching the next generation to look after kids while at the same time mothering them."

Ms. Kidd began working as an instructor in Ryerson University's ECE program in 1980, as well as running the school's on-site daycare and children's learning centre. In 1982, her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. At that point, he was an educator and founder of the adult education department at the Ontario Institute for Education, as well as a professor of comparative studies in Adult Education.

In 1986, Ms. Kidd was invited to India by a group of women construction workers keen on establishing a daycare for their children. Upon her retirement in 1987, she returned to India, this time with a small delegation of Canadian women that included Julie Mathien, current director of Early Learning and Child Development for the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services. "Because [Ms. Kidd] had lived there, we had a view of India we never would have had otherwise," Ms. Mathien said.

MARGARET KIDD

Margaret Kidd was born Margaret Edith Easto on May 25, 1918, in Toronto. She died of Alzheimer's disease on March 4, 2008, in Toronto. She was 89. Predeceased by her husband, J. Roby Kidd, she is survived by her children: Bruce, Ross, Alice, David and Dorothy. She is also survived by eight grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

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