

Penny Curtis

When Penny Curtis retired from Emmanuel Child Care Centre at Brighton she was honoured as a pioneer, a child advocate, a model citizen, and the heart and soul of one of the oldest childcare centres in Waterloo.



However, it was a short, single tribute that truly illuminated the magic of Curtis: “Children love Penny Curtis.”

The sentiment was echoed in countless ways by parents, politicians and teachers during Curtis’ retirement gathering last year. However, it is a combination of gifts that brought hundreds of people together to honour Curtis.

Curtis embodies the gentle, spontaneous nature to which children are drawn and the steadfast strength a community leader requires to make changes.

“More women should be as stubborn and courageous as Penny Curtis because the world would be a better place,” said Catherine Fife, an Emmanuel parent and trustee of the Waterloo District School Board.

In addition to creating a warm and stimulating environment for the hundreds of children she served over her 33-year career, Curtis also found time to publicly advocate for quality, affordable childcare.

In the mid-1990s, the government proposed increasing child-teacher ratios to save money. At the time, Curtis said, “I’m very fearful for the health and safety of our children. It hits at the very core of what we do . . . We couldn’t possibly meet the needs of the children.”

Born in March 1941, Mary Anne Patterson became known as “Penny” because her mother often said she was “bright as a penny.” She grew up in Montreal and the Eastern Townships with a mother who was a nurse, and a stockbroker father.

Penny was a dancer with the Grands Ballets Canadiens before going to a nearby high school in Vermont where she met her husband Jim Curtis, who passed away suddenly in 2005.

The couple were married and had four sons. In the early years, Penny stayed home to care for the children while Jim attended university in New York. The family moved to Waterloo in the early 1970s so Jim could pursue a teaching career at the University of Waterloo.

While spending the early years at home with her sons, Curtis realized her passion for young children and took the program in early childhood education at Conestoga College.

Her first placement was at Emmanuel Child Care Centre when it was located on the corner of Bridgeport Road and Albert Street.

Her career took off quickly from there. After graduating, Emmanuel offered her a teaching position and within a year she was promoted to supervisor. Curtis was instrumental in helping the centre make the transition to their current home in the former Brighton Public School in 2004. The centre is now known as Emmanuel Child Care Centre at Brighton.

Curtis, who was honoured as Waterloo Region's Woman of the Year in 2002, was relentless in her pursuit of quality childcare for all children saying once, "Imagine a country where all children are brought up in a caring and stimulating environment. There would be no poverty or crime."

Her vision for Emmanuel was powerful yet simple." We have one focus, all of us, and that's quality child care for every single child, every single day."

Curtis commented once that places, like people, tend to have a personality of their own. Her goal was to create an environment of warmth and caring for children and their parents at Emmanuel.

Curtis was indeed successful. Many of the parents who have used the centre say simply, "I really like the way this place feels."

Photo courtesy of Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre.