

# Kathy MacMurdo & Brenda Wilton

Friends of Keystone are friends for many different reasons. Each year when staff are asked to put names forward it is a chance to think about individuals who have helped Keystone with its mission of helping children and families in Grey and Bruce Counties. Since I have been here for 20 years, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with a lot of wonderful people who have put much time and energy into making Grey and Bruce Counties a better place to have and raise children. This year I thought about two individuals in particular who I have been sitting across community tables from for the entire time that I have been at this agency. They are Kathy MacMurdo, Children's Services Manager for Grey County and Brenda Wilton, Children's Services Manager for Bruce County.

When I first met Kathy and Brenda back in 1994, they each sat on separate Child Care Planning committees, **for their respective counties**. Those committees, which I had the job of chairing, were run quite differently back in those days. The spirit of collaboration had yet to be the norm. Around the same time, Kathy and Brenda were part of a group of service providers from about 10 different agencies who put together a proposal to the federal government, for two programs, Parent Mutual Aid and Cradlelink based on an understanding of what we, as a rural community of Grey and Bruce Counties needed, and what research-based models would help to address these needs. The project was called the Bruce Grey Parent Mutual Aid project; this is because both of these programs depend on parents helping each other (in Parent Mutual Aid) and in volunteers helping new parents, in the Cradlelink program. It would only be accepted for funding by the federal government if it was conceived of as run in partnership.

Funding for the proposal was approved initially as a pilot and it was decided that our agency (which was called Bruce Grey Childrens Services at the time) would be the host. Although it was only supposed to be a pilot and has continued to this day (twenty years later). These unique programs are some of the only ones of their kind. Cradlelink is the only nurse led, volunteer homevisiting program of its kind in Ontario and one of only a few world wide. We have a number of volunteers from that program here today. You will notice how many have been involved in this very unique and valuable program over a long period of time.

The Parent Mutual Aid part of the program chose sites to offer these facilitated groups for parents of preschool children in locations which were underserved. These were initially in Warton, Port Elgin and Meaford. As these programs got underway, Brenda and her colleagues argued that Kincardine was at least as needy as Port Elgin and succeeded in getting the resource split on the lakeshore so that families who really needed the extra support were able to access it. It continues to be one of the very well accessed programs.

About 8 years later in 2003, when the Provincial government came along with a new program to provide support to ALL families with preschool children, Kathy and Brenda, joined forces (on behalf of their municipalities) and took on the task of implementing this program throughout all of Bruce and Grey counties, called the Ontario Early Year Centre programs. Kathy and Brenda went above and beyond the mandate, which would have been satisfied with a a main program in Walkerton and Owen Sound. Instead they worked to make sure that any family would be able to access a program within a 15-20 minute drive of their home. The way this was able to happen was by having many different agencies take a piece of the work. It was like a potluck supper. Each agency according to their geographic placement and with their existing infrastructure were given a mandate to do the

program in their area and the municipalities flowed the funds accordingly. In those days, Kathy and Brenda worked closely together to make sure these programs followed the provincial mandates as well as our higher local standards for accessibility.

Kathy and Brenda went beyond advocating for the families in their individual counties to the families in Grey and Bruce as well as rural families throughout Ontario. Brenda's represented a strong rural voice on provincial committees that she sat on.

While Kathy and Brenda were responsible for enforcing the mandates of the Ontario Early Years programs, Kathy was also willing to allow us to respond to community needs and implement the very successful Alpha Street program which uses Ontario Early Years centre funds and staff to implement a Parent Mutual Aid style program in the Alpha Street housing complex in Owen Sound. This embedded program has been well accepted and helped the families in the complex make significant changes in their lives as well as support them in their parenting role. Its success has helped to inspire a similar program which is being planned for Victoria Village in Meaford.

When I think about the Keystones of Service, Leadership, Values, Partnerships and resources, I think the work they have done over the past couple of decades really exemplify these. They have worked to ensure excellence and responsive service, sometimes holding our feet to the fire. Their leadership in choosing to have the 15 minute drive rule for Ontario Early Years centre sites is an example of this, utilizing the partnerships throughout our two counties to make this happen. In so doing they have done a remarkable job of stewarding resources as many agencies were able to do what one or two would have struggled to do. And finally they have shown care, compassion and integrity in working on behalf of children and families in both counties. All of these things make them truly friends of Keystone.

