

THE FOUNDING YEARS

1981 - 1999



SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGE
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Giving kids a chance to dream



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By Lois Bouchard

The Beginning

In the late 1970's, a 15 year old girl came into our lives. Through having Julie around the house with our family and their friends, we learned that she was in foster care, that she'd been apprehended from her mother's care with 5 of her siblings in Ontario when she was only five years old. She and two of her sisters had been adopted, and moved to the west coast with their new family; things didn't go well for the family here and they returned to Ontario – leaving Julie behind in BC's foster care system. Her journey hadn't been a good one; she'd experienced every kind of abuse along the way. She was a bright and pleasant girl, and was welcomed to our family circle.

During the next six months, she was moved through 3 foster homes. When we met she was with a couple where the father abused alcohol; she was often asked to care for their 2 year old when the mother went out. She was nervous of the father's drinking, so David often stayed with her. The placement broke down, and she was next placed with a family with 3 young children. The family had no understanding of Julie's distress and needs, expecting her to be a helpful baby-sitter and a model student. Surprisingly, she'd managed to get to grade 10 in spite of having moved through far too many schools. She was even managing Hugh Boyd's football team. But she was too upset to concentrate, and it affected her school performance. Soon that placement had broken down. Julie's final foster home was with 'Auntie Lil', a tough-talking rough diamond of a woman. At times there were 12 kids in her home, two severely disabled. She was always on their side, and I credit her with saving Julie's life.

The month before she turned 19, Julie was informed that on her birth date she would receive a cheque for \$400 and would thereafter be an independent 'adult' – no longer supported by foster care, and she would have to leave Auntie Lil's house to make space for another foster child. She was utterly unprepared for that move.

This had all been new life material to me. I'd met children in care before, and often wondered what their lives must be like, but had never had a long relationship with one of them, nor witnessed first hand the chaos, instability and injustice of their young lives. I was accustomed to research, so undertook a study of foster care in this country and beyond.

Finding SOS Children's Villages

My search led me to the SOS Children's Villages and the amazing work they'd been doing since 1949 with children in need of both temporary and permanent care. In 1981 I began to correspond with Dr. Hans Reinprecht, Secretary General of SOS Kinderdorf International [KDI] in Vienna, without whose kindly direction SOS BC would not exist. Gradually, I built a file of information about both KDI and Canadian children in care. I hoped that some well-established organization or high profile individual would put the two ideas together and lead a movement to create better lives for a lot of deserving Canadian kids. I began by sharing the file with my church choir colleagues and friends, asking whether they thought I was over-reacting, or if they thought someone should think about some systemic changes. Almost without exception, everyone knew at least one disturbing story about a kid in care and loved what SOS KDI was doing in other countries.

Strengthened by that, and encouraged by Father Jeremiah's permission to use St. Joe's copier to create mailing packages I began to write to media personalities when they wrote or produced a piece on kids in trouble. If they responded, they liked the idea, but no-one offered to run with it. Everyone cautioned me that the government would never go for it. Since I was looking for someone else to take on the project, not feeling capable of doing so myself, I eventually tucked the folder away in my office, disappointed that my hopes appeared to be in vain.

Small Miracles

One morning in March, 1982, after morning mass at St. Joseph's, a gentleman I hadn't seen before stood in the back of the church. He was looking at posters, and seemed rather alone. I said good morning and asked if he were new to St. Joe's, and he told me it was his first visit. He attended St. James Anglican Church in Vancouver [noted for its social commitments in the Downtown Eastside] where he'd just joined The Companions of St. Francis. One of his initiation duties was to attend a Franciscan mass and since there are no Anglican Franciscans in the area, he had come to St. Joe's. His name was Traff Green. I was interested in learning more about the work of St. James' Social Services. We chatted so long that we decided to go for coffee to continue our interesting conversation.

When he told me about the drop-in centre for street moms that St. James had recently opened and about the feisty Scots woman, Mae Gutteridge, who headed up the agency, I shared my story of trying to find a group to take on some new ideas about caring for Canadian children in foster care. We talked for two hours or more and he gave me permission to mail him some info on the SOS Children's Villages.

Six months later Traff called, inviting me to a meeting to tell The Companions at St. James about SOS. Gilles showed a film we had acquired from a retired Abbotsford teacher, Edith Schendel, an Austrian woman I'd connected with through information from SOS KDI. She had also been hoping someone would begin an SOS Village in BC, and had shown the film in her community.

Founding an Organization

There began the history of SOS Children's Village BC. The Companions of St. Francis, supported by Father Ritter, Mae Gutteridge [later awarded The Order of Canada] and Robert White, executive director of St. James Social Services, decided to become the nucleus of a founding committee dedicated to creating an SOS Children's Village for BC kids. Their one stipulation was that I should be the one to coordinate the activities of this new entity, and they were quite willing to come to Richmond for meetings if I would accept.

It was a terrifying personal moment. I knew that if I stepped over the line, I couldn't retreat. You can't give people – especially children – hope and walk away when things get scary. With great trembling but full of hope and supported by grace, I committed, and over the next 25 years learned so much about an oft-quoted observation: *"Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: **that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.** Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now."*

The Founding Committee worked diligently for 3 years. St Joe's pastors and parishioners joined St. James and St. Albans [Richmond], providing every possible support: meeting and event space, fundraising activities, volunteers. Dr. Reinprecht from Vienna and Dr. Kalteis from Munich visited us in 1985 to assess and encourage our efforts. By 1986 we were affiliated with SOS Kinderdorf International, registered as a society in BC, with Traff Green as president of the Board and I as voluntary coordinator, and given federal charitable status in Ottawa, with permission to accumulate funds for 10 years toward a building project. Barb Davis became our devoted part-time staff member, and continues volunteer SOS work to this day.



And Then the Work Began...

From '86 to '92 we organized up to seven fundraising events a year and mailed quarterly newsletters to 10,000 British Columbians, using purchased mailing lists. The envelope stuffing teams and Sally, who organized the intimidating postal code sort recall those days fondly. No-one who worked the midnight to 2 a.m. Bingo shift will ever forget it, nor having to defend our right to participate in Casino fundraising. When we had to appear before the Gaming Commission to appeal their denial of a gaming license, Reverend Allan Bush of St. Albans spoke on our behalf, and we won the appeal.

Each year St. Joe's supported a Choir BBQ at Ruscheinski's, bake sales, and a two-day Valentine Carnival in the Parish Centre; Cannery Café & Art Knapp's supported fashion events by Devine Elden of Jet Lag Boutique; musical events were put on by organist Fred Carter and the Austria Vancouver Choir; and Colin Foo sponsored Talent Shows at Gateway Theatre. Visual artists, performers, all threw their talents into the mix. By '92, \$38,000 was in the bank for Village construction.

That year we opened the all-volunteer Treasure Cottage Thrift Shop in Steveston to replace many of our events. Over 100 volunteers from Edith Schendel's Abbotsford recruits to North Van willing hearts were regularly available for events and activities. An annual pot-luck celebration of Hermann Gmeiner's June 23rd birthday, held at the Austria Vancouver Club in Richmond, brought the supporters together as a family – up to 175 of them. The Mayors of Richmond, Surrey, West Vancouver and Abbotsford issued annual proclamations of SOS Children's Village Day.

1994 saw the purchase of 2.5 acres of land in Surrey for \$630,000, funded by KDI. The first executive director, Joyce Kyi, was engaged to lead SOS BC through the development process.



Helping Kids, At Last

Those who had warned us to expect resistance from government child welfare authorities were right. From the beginning we had attempted to get approval in principle for an SOS Children's Village, but it was repeatedly denied. Nevertheless, we pressed on toward the goal because of unfailing community support; phone calls and letters came from social workers, children's health professionals, foster parents and adults who had been in foster care, all begging us to continue. In its long history in over 100 countries, SOS had, at times, experienced early resistance, so there was precedent.

By 1998 SOS BC had engaged the first Village Director, Jan Siwinski, had completed the development application process and had raised enough to build the first home on the Surrey site, but the board was split on whether to proceed without government approval. Finally, by a very narrow margin – one vote - they agreed to move forward while going into hard negotiations with the Ministry. In 1999, Traff and Julie, together with Surrey's Mayor McCallum, cut the ribbon to open the first home, and the Ministry referred the first child to the Village. Throughout the years their objections had centred on the 'congregate' model: having a number of foster families living on the same property, which is the core of the success of the model because of the mutual understanding and support that helps to heal the children, giving them a sense of community such as they've not been able to experience. Thus, the Village is a 'bridge' to the broader community where children learn to take their place with confidence and self-esteem.

Today, there are five homes in the Surrey Village, with capacity to house 25 children, from infants to high-school students. Community outreach to other children in care and their foster families has been in place since 2003: literacy support, anger management, therapy, recreation and camp experiences, parent education. SOS BC has provided support for young people in transition from foster care to independence - Bridge 19 - and works with the First Nations to serve aboriginal children.

Over the years the Founders' lives and many others have been enriched beyond measure as we've lived out this spirit story; the challenges have been fearsome, accomplishments astonishing, given our humble beginnings. We had heart, intelligence, courage and commitment and we always kept the children at the centre of our Vision. Together, and with the support of SOS International, we built a strong foundation.

Going Forward

This personal memory of the Founding Years doesn't attempt to document in any significant way the Operational Years, filled with wonderful young people and foster parents, dedicated Board, Staff, Volunteers, generous Benefactors and Community Donors and Supporters. That's another day's work...



Gilles and I cutting the cake at the SOS BC 25th Anniversary Celebration in 2011

The Founding Members

Lois Bouchard

Gilles Bouchard

Traff Green

Edith Schendel

Robert White [deceased]

Cynthia Green

Philip Green

Phyllis Lavallee [deceased]

Bill Lemon [deceased]

Johnna Chan

Maureen Lange

Patricia Balfour

Peter Simon

Edna Smallman [deceased]

Madeline Caruso

Elizabeth McWilliams

Honourary Founders: Julie Bouchard, David Bouchard

