

By Jennifer Bell
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Jean Cunningham says it's unfortunate that adoptions sometimes receive negative publicity.

"It seems that you only hear about the adoptions that have problems," said Cunningham, who has worked in both the public and private fields of adoption for more than 30 years. "But what you don't hear about are the numbers of very good, successful adoptions that occur all the time."

This former nurse, Children's Aid Society employee and parent of two adopted daughters has assisted more than 100 people in all aspects of private adoption: adoption homestudies, placement of infants and older children, birth parent counselling, stepparent adoptions and counselling adult adoptees as operator of Four Counties Adoption Service since 1992.

And because Belleville is a small town, it's not unusual for Cunningham to watch the infants she helped place with families grow up before her eyes.

"Technically, I don't have ongoing contact with adoptive families after the process is completed. But, informally, we see each other at stores, etc. It's great to see how happy people are, and I enjoy watching the children grow."

That love of infants is what led Cunningham from a 15-year nursing career at Belleville General Hospital into foster parenting in the 1950s, when she and husband Alex fostered half a dozen children in between having sons Sandy and Robert.

There was a deluge of Hastings County infants that needed fostering in the 1950s, recalled Cunningham, adding most young, unwed mothers were giving up their children for adoption.

The need was so great, she added, that when Cunningham put her fostering on hold while raising her two little boys, she opened her home instead to unwed mothers, "who really didn't have places to go where they could receive good care before giving up their children."

She and Alex adopted two daughters in the early 1960s and a few years later, Cunningham received a call from the Hastings County Children's Aid Society.

beginning of a 26-year career with the CAS that initially had her working as a nurse with physically and mentally handicapped children and later placing children for adoption.

Both her nursing and CAS careers were "very rewarding," Cunningham said.

Neither, however, would have been possible without the assistance of her husband.

"I couldn't have done any of this without his support," she added.

Cunningham's early work with disabled children may have prepared her somewhat for caring for son Sandy, who became a quadriplegic at the age of 20.

She and Alex were instrumental in forming a steering committee for Cheshire Homes, which provides support to physically disabled individuals to live in their community.

Sandy died in 1992 and her husband Alex in 1995, and Cunningham, suddenly on her own, continued with her adoption work but wanted to explore her horizons.

"I had always wanted to use my nursing background to help others, and in 1996 and 1997, I had the opportunity to volunteer at a 28-bed hospital in northern B.C. for a total of six months."

The assignments, co-ordinated through the United Church of Canada, were "an incredible opportunity," said Cunningham.

In the mostly Native community of Hazelton, B.C., the hospital community is quite unique, she said.

"There are 14 houses on the property and many of the doctors live on hospital property and have their office at the clinic in the hospital. Of the hospital's 28 beds, 13 are allocated for long-term care, and the majority of long term patients are elders with chronic health problems. The hospital auxiliary is very active, raising funds for the hospital in various ways."

Cunningham may return to Hazelton for another three months next year.

She also finds time for her hobbies, which include quilting, cooking, gardening and writing histories of both the CAS's early years, her home village of Deloro, and the Hazelton experience.