

Steel April 5/03

Saturday p. D2

Donna Dewar loves being around children. And she is fortunate to own and operate her own business that enables her to be surrounded by many children every day.

"Sometimes I have to pinch myself to see if it's all true," she laughed.

The 46-year-old Dewar operates Playtime Plus Child Care Centre on Howard Street in the Belleville's west end.

Even though she has only owned the business since 1999, Dewar has already devoted more than half her life helping children develop into strong adults.

"I love children unconditionally, regardless of their background or status," she said without a slight hint of hesitation.

"I am trying to help children develop healthy lifelong habits and give them a good start in life."

Dewar, the businesswoman, gets a lot of support from the Belleville Business and Professional Women's Club — she is the club's first vice-president — as well as the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario, where she is an active member and advocate for quality, accessible and affordable child care.

The Prince Edward Island native was only a teenager when she embarked on a career in child care.

After graduating from East Northumberland Secondary School in Brighton, she enrolled in the two-year early childhood education program at Loyalist College.

Armed with her college diploma, Dewar moved to Toronto in 1980 to pursue her career.

"Within two years in Toronto, I was supervisor of a child care centre at the YMCA. That's something I'm extremely proud of so early on in my career," she said.

Dewar moved to Halifax in 1986 to become the executive director of a child care centre at a public housing project. After six years in that role, she launched her own home day care operation there.

She returned to Belleville for family reasons in 1998 and, within six months, purchased an existing day care operation on Howard Street from one of her early childhood education classmates.

The licensed day care has room for 22 children, ages 18 months to five years old. Dewar employs three full-time and one part-time people.

She operates her child care centre on the following premise.

"We believe all children have a right to high self-esteem through good nutrition, positive guidance, planned exercise, proper rest and healthy environments," she said.

This month marks her fourth anniversary in operation.

"I am really happy with the business," she said. "It's quite fulfilling in terms of being able to provide quality child care to families in our community."

"My goal has always been to succeed in my own business and I'm living my goal. I have been very lucky to have this success in some-

thing I love doing — that is working with children and families."

Even though she operates a small business, Dewar said she still faces the same challenges as other business owners.

"I have employees who I am responsible for. I face the responsibility of satisfying licensing requirements. That includes public health, fire department, Ministry of Community and Social Services and playground inspections at any time during operating hours."

Dewar said she's also concerned about the rising costs of operating her business, like electricity and salaries.

"I don't want to pass on these costs to families, many of whom cannot afford increases in fees for service."

It's that concern that prompted Dewar to join the Belleville Business and Professional Women's Club in 2000 so that she could learn how other women in business are coping with the challenges.

The club has 24 active members and Dewar is currently serving as first vice-president.

"My goal is to continue to serve as an executive member," she said.

Dewar is proud to be associated with the club because of its mandate to promote the interests and improve the status of women in business, the professions and in industry.

The club meets once a month and invites a guest speaker.

"It gives me a chance to meet with other members and discuss issues of mutual concern. What I am learning is helping me become a better business woman," Dewar said.

Equally important, she added, is that "it makes me proud to be a woman in business and see how far women have come."

Dewar also belongs to the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario.

"This group advocates for quality child care and that's why I am involved with them," she said.

She has attended many conferences to deal with issues in child care.

"And one of the biggest issues is being able to provide accessible, affordable and quality child care for all families."

Dewar said she couldn't run the business without the help of her husband, Terry Field.

"He does all my maintenance and he also maintains the outdoor play equipment, in addition to holding a full-time job. He is a strong supporter of me as a business owner."

"It really is a family business."