

CAS isn't family's enemy, program co-ordinator says

By BEN DUMMETT
the Herald

The Halton Children's Aid Society, as a protector of children, is ironically thought of by many as a family's enemy, a CAS official says.

"People think the CAS snatches babies," says the co-ordinator of the CAS Mothers' Morning Out program, Susan Stewart.

"We're in a no-win situation, we're either seen by the public as taking babies or leaving them with their parents who people think are abusing them."

The CAS executive director Ron Coupland echoed Ms. Stewart's statements saying, "I've heard people tell stories like the CAS took away a baby while the mother was pleading with the CAS worker not to."

As the CAS celebrates its 75th anniversary, the public's misconception of the CAS is a problem it has been facing and will continue to face, Mr. Coupland said.

He said "we're one of the only social agencies that can be blamed for everything."

Other community agencies use the CAS as the "big stick," telling their clients that if they don't fulfil certain requirements, they will call the society. And although parents, who have their child taken away by the CAS, might agree with the CAS actions, they have to outwardly appear to oppose the agency's actions, or they will be perceived as bad parents, he said.

Mr. Coupland says the CAS can't eliminate people's misconceptions but he worries public opinion, if allowed to go uncontested, will become "so distorted and larger than life that people won't call the agency."

Ms. Stewart attributed the misconception to a lack of community awareness and to the media.

"Too often the public only reads about the CAS's big battles or a massive abuse case or someone complaining about us."

Unfamiliarity with what the CAS does is another reason for people's

misconception, she said.

Mr. Coupland said many people in North Halton don't know of the CAS because there isn't a building in the area. He explained there are no funds or the demand to justify CAS buildings throughout the Region.

In January the CAS moved into its new office on Morden Road in Oakville. The CAS chose this location because Oakville is one of the more populated areas in Halton and it can be accessed by public transportation from all areas in the Region, he said.

But Mr. Coupland stresses the CAS is prominent in all areas. Most work is done in people's homes and not at the central office, he said.

The CAS runs some of its programs in different parts of the Region where there is a demand. In Georgetown the CAS runs the Mothers' Morning Out program for those mothers who want a place to go where they can meet other mothers and have their children participate in organized activities.

Mr. Coupland said the CAS recently started up a community education committee that is meeting with community groups, schools and the press to discuss the CAS activities and its public image.

One such group is the Acton Women's Action Group. Charlotte Hendry, a founding member of the group, said "some of the women were surprised that CAS' role wasn't just to take kids out of the home." The CAS spokesperson told them one of its main objectives is to keep the family together, she said.

The CAS Foster Care Initiatives Worker, Kim Elliott, said a child will only come under CAS care as a last resort. And if the society has to take custody of the child it is usually only on a temporary basis, she added.

Although community agencies, doctors and members of the public inform the CAS about children who need help, Ms. Elliott stresses many times the parents themselves ask for CAS support.

The CAS takes custody of children who are sexually or physically abused. It also takes in children who have serious confrontations with their parents. The CAS will also act in cases in which parents are having financial difficulties.

Some parents, especially single mothers, find the burden of finances and bringing up a child alone too great, said Ms. Elliott.

She said the CAS' priority is always the child. And since CAS believes the child needs stability, usually the best place for a child is with the family, she said.

Ms. Elliott said when CAS is first called in the social worker acts as a counsellor for the children and parents. Only if counselling is unsuccessful will the CAS take the necessary steps to temporarily take custody of the children, she added.

Over the three year period from 1986 to 1988, the number of children that have come under CAS custody has increased from 117 in 1986 to 132 in 1988. However the 132 admissions last year marks a drop from 143 in 1987. The CAS didn't have statistics for children in its custody who came only from North Halton.

The CAS will always be necessary, Mr. Coupland says.

"Only if man was perfect, would the CAS not be needed."

Foster parenting is 'unfashionable'

By BEN DUMMETT
the Herald

Foster parenting nowadays "is unfashionable" for many people, says a Children's Aid Society Foster Care Initiative worker.

Kim Elliott attributes the current shortage of foster parents in the Region to "people being very busy and not seeing volunteering as really important."

An Acton couple, however, decided two years ago that they had the time to become foster parents.

Frank and Meg Antonini, who have three children, two girls aged 14, and a boy aged 12, said "we like kids, and we had the space and time."

"There was no magic moment that told us to become foster parents. We just wanted to give something back," Mr. Antonini said.

When asked what has been the most rewarding part of being a foster parent, Ms. Antonini paused and said, "There are many but they're not obvious."

"It's the little things you notice. Some days it might seem as if you are not helping the child and then one day she'll give you a picture or come up and hug you."

"You see the kids' self-esteem build, where they can say 'hey, I'm a someone.' You see this in their school work and in the

friends they make."

The Antonini's adopted two girls aged eight and 11. They still care for the eight year old, who is now 11. But for all the rewards foster parenting isn't easy, they say.

"A little naivety helped," Mr. Antonini said.

"No child wants to be with a foster parent," he said. When you take in a child the person is going through turmoil, so it's an ongoing process, he said. Ms. Antonini said in their case there was a two to three week honeymoon period with the children. They tried to "see what they could get away with."

When this happened, Mr. Antonini said they didn't force the children to act exactly like their children but they told the foster children there are certain rules they had to abide by.

"You have to give them space to be themselves while at the same time make them understand there are rules," said Mr. Antonini.

When the children first arrived the Antonini's sat down with them and explained to them their children's bedtimes, chores and what time everyone got up in the morning.

To become foster parents the couple went through an extensive

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Children's book week in Georgetown

By ALAN MACKIE
Herald Special

This week is Children's Book Week in Halton Hills and one of Georgetown's more artistic people will enter the spotlight.

Joanne Fitzgerald has recently completed illustrating her first children's book entitled "Plain Noodles." She will be at the Oxbow Books store on Main Street between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. this Saturday to sign books, read and give demonstrations of her art.

Mrs. Fitzgerald said she has been drawing and "doodling" for as long as she can remember but as for illustrating children's books, "I never planned to do this."

"Plain Noodles" was written by Betty Waterton. Mrs. Fitzgerald said, "I felt fortunate that I was chosen to illustrate one of her (Ms. Waterton's) books." According to

Mrs. Fitzgerald, the book is being produced in a number of other countries including West Germany, the United States, and some Scandinavian countries.

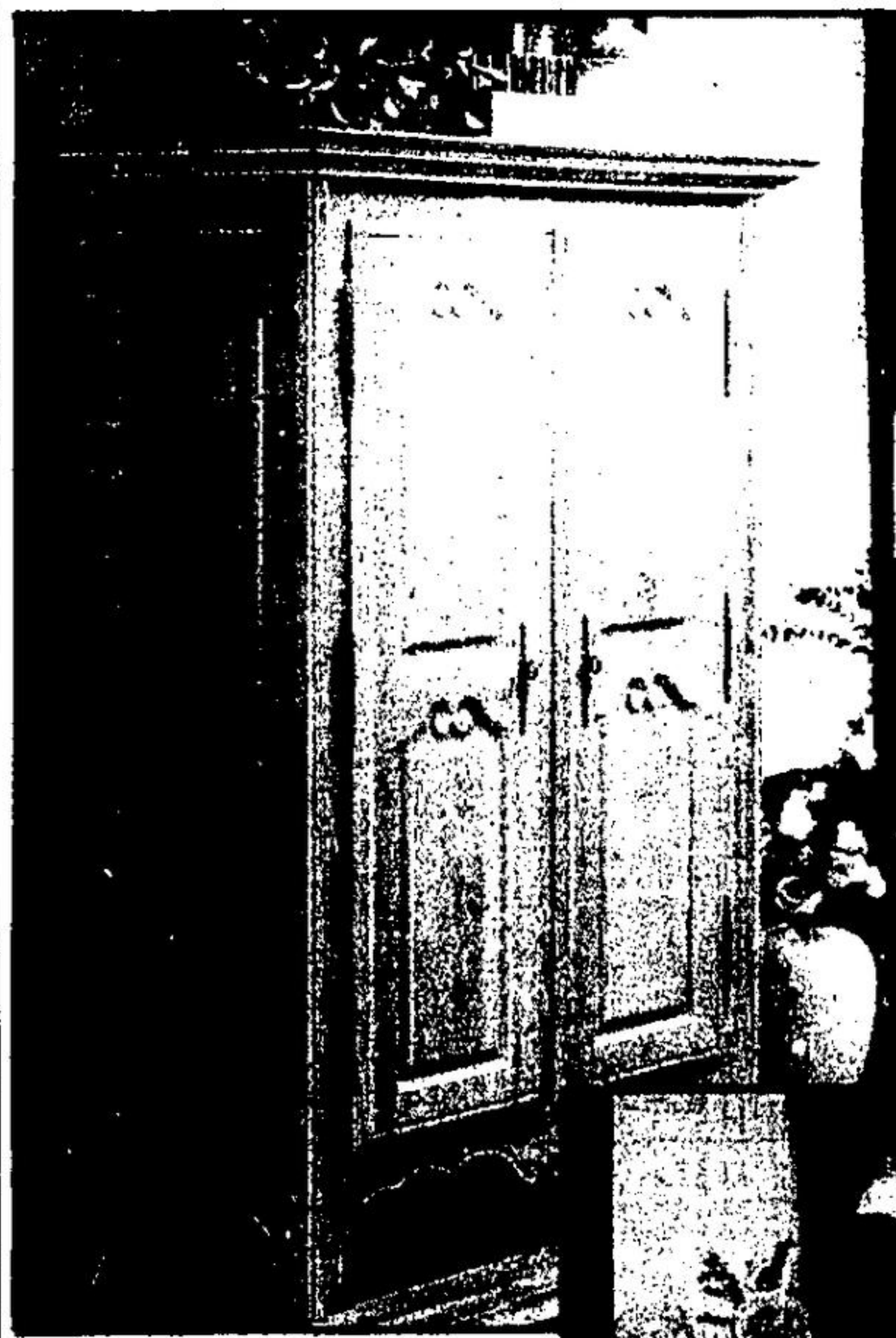
Mrs. Fitzgerald came to Georgetown four years ago. She moved here from Toronto. She says she's lucky not to work in a business that forces you to live in the city. Mrs. Fitzgerald works in a studio at her home and said it allows her to be there for her five-year-old daughter, Laura.

She obtained a bachelor of fine arts from Mt. Allison University in New Brunswick. Mrs. Fitzgerald has drawn for many established companies including the Royal Ontario Museum, the Globe and Mail, Chatelaine, Owl and Toronto Life. She is currently working on a second book with a working title of "Emily's House."

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