

By Julia Lovett

METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

A woman who has dedicated her life to bettering the lives of children and their families was recognized with a national award.

Mary Beth Jonz recently received the Friends of Children Award during a special breakfast ceremony in Milton to honour her dedication and commitment as an early childhood educator and advocate.

"From a very early age I loved being with children and anything I did gravitated around being with children," said Jonz, former director of Children Services Division with the Region of Halton.

Now retired, Jonz was educated at Purdue University where she received her degree in child development and family studies. It was throughout her 40-year career that her passion for children's education took flight and under her leadership, Early Childhood Education (ECE) changed and developed into a community-minded initiative.

"This award equals Mary Beth," said Roxanné Young, manager of children's developmental services for Children's Services, Social and Community Services with Region of Halton. "We really felt that this is exactly the kind of person that should be honoured for this."

Jonz developed her passion for early childhood education through her first position at a child-care centre in Michigan and later as education director for Headstart in Indiana.

"I was the education director but I learned much more from the staff there in that position than I could've taught them, really."

During her tenure in Indiana, Jonz worked with the children during the day and also visited the families at their homes.

"So it was kind of looking at the child and the family as a whole ver-



Canadian Association for Young Children Ontario Provincial Director Dr. Randa Khattar (left) presents Mary Beth Jonz, the former director of Halton Region's Children Services Division, with the Friends of Children Award at a ceremony at the Milton Community Resource Centre last month. *Nikki Wesley / Metroland*

A true friend of the children

sus just the child and that's what really appealed to me," she noted.

Once she married and moved to Canada, she earned her credentials and took a temporary child-care job as a way to get her foot in the door. Later she became the parent educator for Hamilton family services' child care-parent education program.

"I loved that," said Jonz, a resident of Waterdown.

Young said her former colleague was a mentor who provided strong leadership and put a great emphasis on collaboration — and never lost sight of why the organizations she worked for were there.

"Children and families and child-care providers were always foremost and we knew that was what we were striving for in terms of better quality of life for them and opportunities for children and families," she added.

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Mary Beth Jonz
Award recipient

Our Kids Network (OKN) nominated their director for the award that was established by the Canadian Association for Young Children (CAYC) that honours someone each year who demonstrates an "outstanding contribution to the well-being of children and their families" according to an OKN press release.

Jonz will join a list of influential recipients that includes musician and children's advocate Raffi Cavoukian of "Baby Beluga" fame, author Robert Munsch and Jim Grieve, former assistant deputy minister of the Early Years Division for the Ontario Ministry of Education, the latter whom Jonz counts as a mentor.

"I'm thinking 'How do I fit into that category? These are really people who are much more influential than I am,'" said Jonz. "I'm humbled and honoured."

The educator who spent 30 years with Halton Region — 18 as director — said this is not an award for her alone but rather for her team and the community who supported the work. That response, Young said, shows who Jonz really is.

"That sums up Mary Beth," she said. "She would never take congratula-

tions for anything, she would always reflect that back.

"But we can only work at the top of our game when we have the leadership and the trust and respect that we had through Mary Beth."

Jonz's influence and drive to develop state-of-the-art child care led to educators from countries such as Japan visiting the region to tour and study the methods at places like Oakville's Margaret Drive Child-care Centre, Sedgwick Childcare Centre and Maple Avenue Child-care Centre in Georgetown.

"She took the time to stop and talk and discuss, and I think that was really important," Young said.

Throughout her tenure, Jonz witnessed a dramatic change in the way young children are taught, including in the common curriculum and services for children with "special exceptionalities" that are now recognized through earlier intervention.

"There's been an expansion of funding and support so I've seen a huge gain," she said, noting Canada is fast becoming a leader in recognizing the importance of early years education and adding that the one-year maternity leave policy is playing a role in a child's development.

Jonz is proud of what the region has accomplished and noted that a large part of her success was through the support of her husband Vic and children Alexandra and Andrew. Her current plan is to spend more time with her grandkids — but she has some other projects in the works.

Young said she continues the work with Jonz's voice in her head.

"She was a mentor to so many of us and I say I am who I am because of her," she said. "Her legacy will go on and on and on."

The event was hosted by Our Kids Network Early Years Committee at the Milton Community Resource Centre.

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