

## Books honour piano teacher Mrs. Foster

*Left a lasting impression on students: author*

By **Stephanie Hounsell**  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Judie Laird received the gift of music at a very young age in the form of piano lessons.

From the age of four to about 15, Laird studied under the ever-patient, ever-encouraging Helen Foster, who lived next door to her on Charles Street.

Thanks to those weekly lessons, music became an indelible part of Laird's life and more recently blossomed into her very own piano teaching career.

Although she moved from Milton when she was in Grade 11, Laird kept in touch with Foster and said she never forgot the older woman's influence.

When Foster passed away in April at the age of 98, after having taught young students piano for almost seven decades, Laird felt compelled to put pen to paper to pay tribute to an incredible woman.

"She was a great teacher. She was patient and she loved music," Laird said.

At first, she was simply scribbling down memories and thoughts. But before long, those snippets began to take shape as children's stories inspired by Foster.

Recently, Laird — whom long-time Miltonians will remember by her maiden name, Smith — decided to publish those stories.

"These books are in memory of her (Foster's) remarkable life," said Laird from her home in Calgary, AB.

The fictitious books, which are written for kids aged four to eight, each centre around a child taking piano lessons from — who else? — Mrs. Foster.

Throughout the pages, Laird mixes memories of Foster together with some of her

own piano-teaching experiences, and then adds a touch of imagination.

The first book, *I Don't Want to Play the Piano!*, features Philip, who attends his first lesson with more than a little reluctance. But by the end, he's looking forward to the next one.

Although Philip could be any number of little boys, Laird created his character with her grandson — who doesn't always appreciate his lessons — in mind.

The other two titles are *Jane's Special Day* and *Lori Takes Piano Lessons*.

Publishing a series of books was foreign territory for Laird, who said she didn't have a clue where to start.

After hearing discouraging reports from people who'd tried unsuccessfully to snag a publisher, Laird decided to go the self-publishing route with AuthorHouse, a U.S. company.

She found an eager illustrator, Chris Padovano, on Craigslist and he brought the characters to life in colourful fashion. She now sells the books on her website and through AuthorHouse.

Laird's journey toward becoming a teacher was a longer one than her journey toward becoming an author.

When she left Milton — she moved to Montreal — she had completed Grade 8 through the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Although she never stopped playing piano, and showcased her talent at family events and weddings, she didn't take any steps to further her skills.

Until several years ago.

"Thirty-two years later, I decided to pick it up again," Laird said.

Nearing retirement, she committed to upgrading her skills so she could teach piano.



### CREATIVE TRIBUTE:

These books by Judie Laird (at left) were inspired by long-time piano teacher Helen Foster, who gave her and countless other Miltonians the gift of music.

It took seven years, but Laird completed her Grade 10 piano as well as advanced theory and began teaching.

"I love it," she said simply.

Laird said she sometimes finds herself remembering methods Foster used, or wondering how her former teacher would've handled certain situations.

"I could only hope to be as encouraging as she was," Laird said.

Remarkably, Foster continued teaching piano well into her eighties.

She moved from Charles Street to Court Street and had four children with her husband, Ken, who passed away a number of

years ago.

When she gave up teaching, she moved to Allendale and then, about four years ago, to Eden House in Rockwood.

At her memorial service earlier this year at St. Paul's United Church, Laird said many former students were on hand to remember their teacher.

"I felt so fortunate to have had her as a teacher and I think everyone else who had her as their teacher felt the same way."

To order the books, which cost \$6.25 and \$7.50 US each, visit [www.fosterbooks.ca](http://www.fosterbooks.ca).

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