

School psychologist Beatrice Wickett-Nesbitt cared deeply for troubled children

BY MOHAMMED ADAM, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN SEPTEMBER 29, 2012



Beatrice Wickett-Nesbitt was honoured with the Order of Canada for her pioneering work in the field of children's mental health.

She was by all accounts, an amazing woman whose life touched so many others. And as family, friends and colleagues last week mourned the passing of Beatrice Enid Wickett-Nesbitt, they remembered a trail-blazer and a "true humanitarian," who made an enormous difference in the lives of young and old alike.

Bea, as she was popularly known throughout a remarkable career in psychology, died Sept. 10 in Calgary. She was 95.

“She was really quite an extraordinary person, and a truly remarkably caring individual. I’ve often described her as a legend in her own time,” said Tim Hogan, supervisor of psychological services at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, who, fresh out of school in 1966, met Wickett-Nesbitt and became a cherished friend and colleague.

“She was just an exceptional human being who made enormous contributions to psychology in Canada. She just really was a shining light for what it means to be a caring health professional,” added Karen Cohen, the chief executive officer of the Canadian Psychological Association.

“Bea was a psychologist in an age when females weren’t doing that kind of work. She forged a path for women.”

Wickett-Nesbitt worked in several areas including training, mental health and palliative care, but her calling card was educational psychology, particularly the development of innovative programs for emotionally disturbed and autistic school children. She was a major player in education psychology, and her pioneering work in the school system, most of it at the old Ottawa Board of Education, became the model for schools across Canada. For that she was awarded the Order of Canada in 1986. She won numerous provincial and national honours, including an award for outstanding professional achievement, and the Canadian Rehabilitation Council’s most innovative program award. In 2007, the Canadian Psychological Association gave her a distinguished lifetime achievement award. She also received honorary doctorate awards from Acadia University and Carleton University, and served on numerous boards.

“A true humanitarian, Bea devoted herself to making this world a better place for everyone, particularly for children and the disadvantaged,” a family obit said.

“She lived by her strong belief that ‘the very cornerstone of our profession is compassion’.”

Born in Alberta, she went to Acadia University where she was a star basketball player. After graduating with an honours degree in psychology, she earned a master’s degree at Brown University.

She began her career in psychology during the Second World War, working with Dr. Wilder Penfield, the famous Canadian brain surgeon and founder of McGill University’s Montreal Neurological Institute. Taking time to raise a family after the war, she became executive director of the Canadian Mental Association in 1961. But it was from 1962, until her retirement in 1983 as chief psychologist at the Ottawa public school board, that she made her mark. Hogan, whom she hired straight out of the University of Ottawa in 1966, remembers her enormous energy, passion and commitment to disadvantaged children. He said her particular focus was the well being of “students in need, students that had learning problems and those that had emotional needs.”

Among her proudest accomplishments, family members say, was an innovative program that matched volunteers with emotionally-disturbed children and helped pull them back from the brink. She also established an in-house staff counselling program that was the first its kind in the country. After her retirement from the school board, Wickett-Nesbitt turned her attention to palliative care, helping to

establish the Ottawa-Carleton regional palliative care association and becoming the resident psychologist with the palliative care unit at the Elisabeth Bruyere Health Centre.

“She developed what is often described as one of the premier school psychological services in all of Canada. She moved forward psychological services for children and youth, and set new standards not only in Ottawa and Ontario, but across the country,” Hogan said.

“I often say about her that we in our day and age, stand on her shoulders.”

But Wickett-Nesbitt was not only an accomplished professional, but a loving and resilient mother who helped raise three children. When her first husband, John Cameron Wickett, was reported killed by authorities during the Second World War,

she soldiered on as a single mother until he miraculously reappeared at war’s end — he’d been held in a German prisoner-of-war camp.

Wickett went on to become a doctor, and when he died in 1976, she married Herbert Hugh John Nesbitt, the Carleton University scientist for whom the Nesbitt building at the university is named.

Only surviving daughter Marni Laird said the woman she knew growing up was not the accomplished professional many people talk about today, but a “caring mother” who loved people and always had a “full house” of family and friends.

“She was an incredibly caring person and she really enjoyed people. She loved parties and she loved meeting people,” Laird said.

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