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Leading with Passion:

The Joy of Teaching and Learning in Alberta



A Labour of Love

By Teresa Di Ninno, Brian Celli, and Jeney Gordon, CAPE

The sense of disbelief was palpable! Why, after nearly 10 years of retirement, would I even consider returning to work? Well, the answer lies in a small charter school nestled in the heart of Medicine Hat, Alberta. It is a school that truly focuses on meeting the academic and personal needs of each student, a school where people really count. All it took was one visit and I was hooked. Following her recent tour of the school, the Premier of Alberta reflected on her visit saying, "...it is so calm and focused and comfortable here," almost the same words I used after my first visit.

Well, it has now been six months since I went back to "work," and I have loved every minute of it! What follows is the remarkable story of the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) Public Charter School, a 30-year labour of love that has produced a truly marvelous learning space in which there really is a place for everyone. (Brian Celli)

In 1994, CAPE's personalized, integrated, flexible, responsive learning environment was launched to address the unmet needs of students with diverse and unique profiles, especially the gifted and twice exceptional. Our first-year cohort consisted of these students, which became our experimental group, allowing us to test various pedagogies; the project approach, cross curricular teaching and learning, expansion of concepts

to challenge, adding relevance through experiential hands-on teaching and learning, and application of this learning within the local and global community. A small, dedicated and passionate staff explored, learned, planned, failed, and celebrated together. Parents were extremely involved. With such a small group, everyone stepped up.

The very first Alberta Charter Schools Regulation was dropped on my desk by a still unknown individual in early February of

1995. It seemed obvious that our school fit the criteria, and, with the support of parents and staff, the first charter document took shape. We were granted our first charter in September 1995, making CAPE one of the first three charter schools in Alberta. Our population exploded and we got to work adapting the original concept to meet the needs of a much more diverse and larger population. What a moment it was when we realized that the program was as effective in



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supporting this broader new group as it was with our first cohort! Enrolment grew and so did the staff.

As a new teacher, what attracted me to CAPE Public Charter School in 1995, was not just its philosophy but more so the way it was implemented. For thirty years, the work in this small charter school has provided me with immeasurable experiences and opportunities to learn and grow as an educator and a person within a collaborative community of life long learners; classroom teacher, gifted education programmer, schedule maker, year-plan coach, literacy and numeracy researcher, program designer, AISI coordinator, article author, PD presenter, human resources mentor, and principal educator to name only a few. This investment has had profound returns for me. (Jeney Gordon)

As our population grew ever more diverse, we responded by refining our program and processes to include a Kindergarten class, a Grade 4 through 9 gifted strand, and tiered literacy and numeracy programs by acquiring new knowledge and skills as student needs arose, by becoming adept at creative problem solving to do the seemingly impossible with practically nothing, by securing the services of an educational psychologist, by encouraging and supporting professional development within the staff. The school hummed with enthusiasm!

CAPE's students have and continue to flourish. They are scattered across the world, in extremely diverse careers, each pursuing their personal goals. They give back to the school and the community, they contribute positively to society and the world. In short, they have become good people and good citizens.

Over the years, as word spread, CAPE has outgrown two buildings and is currently looking for a third, a facility that will better support our program and the uniquely diverse student population we continue to serve.

The school still hums with the excitement of learning, like my little friend that routinely comes oh so very eagerly to the lab to ask math questions. Even though CAPE has been my 30+ years labor of love, it has also been one for each and every staff member. It has been a true collaborative effort by the amazing people who, over the years, have collectively and individually positively impacted the lives of so many CAPE students and the families who entrusted them to our care. I know that CAPE will continue to support its students and encourage life-

long learning and the pursuit of personal and academic excellence, ethical citizenry and the development of respectful and respectable members of society. ■

Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. Teresa began her teaching career in Alberta in 1980. She is the founder, past principal and, for the last 19 years, the superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Teresa has just retired after 45 years in public education.

Brian Celli, B.Ed., M.Ed., CEC, is an alumnus of U.B.C. He began his teaching career in Fox Creek, Alberta, in 1988, and retired as the Superintendent of Wild Rose School Division. He recently "unretired" to join CAPE as the new Superintendent.

Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., is an alumnus of the University of Lethbridge. She was born and raised in Medicine Hat. She started her teaching career at CAPE in 1995 and spent all but three of those years teaching there. Jeney has been the principal of CAPE Public Charter School for the past 19 years.



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