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Giving kids an early boost

DEBBIE BELL launched the Canadian version of HIPPY, an acclaimed program that helps disadvantaged children prepare for kindergarten and beyond

JANICE TIBBETS CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

In Debbie Bell's ideal world, no preschooler would be left behind. To that end, the director of continuing education at Simon Fraser University has left her post for a couple of years to pursue her dream of building a Canada, community by community, that gives disadvantaged children an educational boost to prepare for kindergarten and beyond.

Bell is the founder and executive director of the Canadian version of HIPPY, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, an internationally acclaimed program that counts Bill and Hillary Clinton among its enthusiastic champions.

In the decade since Bell got to work to create the country's first HIPPY from her office at Simon Fraser, it has blossomed into a 10-program venture with a head office in Vancouver.

Dozens of "home visitors" fan out once a week in poor neighbourhoods from Vancouver to Montreal to teach parents, many of whom are newcomers to Canada and don't speak English or French, how to equip their preschoolers with skills that will help them when they start school.

The home visitors leave behind an easy-to-use curriculum for parents to follow with their child daily.

"We're not trying to make rocket scientists," Bell said. "We just want kids to be able to ... hang in there when they go to school."

Bell says she stumbled upon HIPPY during a trip to Mexico when she was part of a team looking for grassroots ventures to help women. While visiting Tijuana, on the Mexico-U.S. border, someone talked her into a quick jaunt to San Diego to check out HIPPY.

Bell concedes she was initially skeptical. The program, which originated in Israel in 1969, seemed too structured to fit into her idea of a ground-up venture. But there were a couple of immigrant women along on the trip who relentlessly pressured her to start a program in Canada.

"They were saying: 'This is important, our kids aren't doing well at school and we don't know how to support them, we don't understand the Canadian school system' " Bell recalled. "When we came home, those women kept phoning me at SFU. The reason they came to Canada in the first place was to see the very best for their kids and they said this was a concrete, practical way to help them do that."

The first Canadian HIPPY program got under way at the Britannia Community Services Centre in Vancouver in 1999.

There are now HIPPY programs in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Oakville, Ont., and in several aboriginal communities. Ventures in Ottawa and Winnipeg are expected to get off the ground in 2008. The program has served 1,600 families since its inception.

DON MACKINNON CANWEST
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