

Dynamic teacher takes Me to We to new level

By Heather Hudson

Walk a mile in Beth Carey's shoes and you'll probably come away with sore feet.

The dynamic Westview Middle School teacher is known for her passion for sharing the secrets of Shakespeare, enthusiastic involvement in the board's social justice programs and above-and-beyond commitment to her students. Not just a force at her day job, she's also active in her church and is training for her ninth and 10th marathons this year.

"My daughters and my students would say I'm nuts because I'm always busy. Multi-tasking works; it's how I survive and I love it," she laughs.

In honour International Women's Day, let's get to know one of the board's most inspiring teachers.

Some people are born to teach; others grow into the job. For Carey, both forces were at play. Her father was a principal in the system for many years – he was founding president of the Hamilton Teachers' Federation – and her mother taught Grade 1 for more than 30 years with the board.

Despite her lineage, Carey's first love was English literature. It was only after she had completed an English degree that she truly considered teaching. "I loved working with kids."

She was a supply teacher for two years before she got her own classroom at Gibson Elementary School as one of only four hires with the board in 1985. Over the years, she has taught a Grade 3-4 split, Grade 1, Grade 6, learning resource and drama before joining Westview in 1997 as an English teacher. Today, she has a Grade 7-8 class of gifted students, as well as a regular Grade 7 class.

While nurturing her many students and two daughters, Sydney and Jenna, Carey also completed a master's degree in education. It took six years to complete part-time, but she says she enjoyed the challenge and was able to incorporate her passion for literature into her thesis study. All the while, she didn't hesitate to encourage her students to take on the classics, especially Shakespeare.

"One of my favourite parts of teaching is sharing Shakespeare. I taught Shakespeare in Grade 6 and my kids absolutely loved it and so when I ended up with gifted classes – and even my regular classes – it's just great. You can't beat Shakespeare's words.

"I have kids that come back from high school and say, 'We're so glad we read it with you, we're so glad we know it. You're right, they're really cool stories.'"

Carey works at making Shakespeare come alive by supplementing her students' knowledge of the era, complete with an Elizabethan feast each year which includes wild boar, venison, quail, pheasants and eel. "Our classroom is an old family studies room, so the students can cook. They make the bread the day before, eat from wooden spoons only and just enjoy."

But perhaps Carey's greatest impact is in her work with social justice programs like Free the Children's Me to We and the Oprah Ambassadors programs. She has been encouraging her students to get involved in helping others since her school participated in a Heart and Stroke Foundation charity event many years ago.

"My dad died of a heart attack in 1995, so I wanted to get involved for that reason, but the other incentive was the student leadership component. I felt strongly that the kids should try this out. And my students won it over the three years we did it, including once across Canada when we raised \$17,000."

She found her niche when she realized how rewarding it was to support students as they make a difference. One of the pinnacle events in her life was the introduction to Free the Children's Adopt-a-Village program several years ago.

"I thought, this is awesome, not only are they helping globally but it's really local-focused because it's about creating leaders in our children. I was so supportive of this because it was about changing our students and taking our own students from me to we, empowering them."

After being "blown away" by national Me to We day, which she attended with Director of Education Dr. Chris Spence and other teachers, she began working with a team to bring the day to Hamilton. Along with running a social justice fair at Westview, she was part of organizing HWDSB's first social justice program and helped put on Hamilton's inaugural Me to We day last November.

"Over 2,000 students sat there from all over city and there wasn't one behavioural incident. It was because there was something they could be inspired by."

Carey's seemingly tireless efforts to support her students' altruism has also meant a Raise the Roof campaign this year, a Free the Children committee and an O Ambassadors group at her school. She acknowledges that it can be a lot of work, but says she is fuelled by supporting others.

"Hearing others' stories is what inspires me and, when you see your own students becoming better citizens, it takes you to the next level. I want to see how I can make this happen for more students."

Expect to hear more from Carey this spring when she helps her students put on another social justice fair – including a film festival this year – and prepares for the second annual Hamilton Me to We Day Nov.5.

And if you see a blur making its way from an after school meeting to her car, it's probably Carey, off to her weekly yoga class. She could use the down time.