

Inspiring teacher leaves legacy at HWDSB

By Heather Hudson

What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monument, but what is woven into the lives of others.

-Pericles

As the sun rises on the first day of her retirement, Dr. Janice Tomlinson will no doubt begin the latest chapter of her life the same way she infused a challenging career. With an empathic ear, boundless energy and an irrepressible smile.

One can expect nothing less from the woman who helped transform special education in the HWDSB and across Ontario.

“To know Janice is to know that she is the face of special education at the board. She lives and breathes it 24 hours a day and would give the world to any and all of her students,” said Eto Corcione, former colleague and retired principal of special education.

Indeed, Tomlinson’s impact is widely felt across the board and the province. As a tireless advocate for children with special needs, in 18 years with the HWDSB she has taken special education to a higher level. Her legacy includes a groundbreaking review on special education for the board, enhanced supports and programs for students with challenges, more educated parents, teachers and administration about the value of special education and the assurance that no child at the HWDSB is left behind due to a disability.

“She was a visionary for special education—she saw what needed to be changed, continued to push the envelope and always followed through. She worked on the belief that it doesn’t matter how disabled you are, you have strengths and they should be identified and nurtured,” said Dianne Parr, manager of communications and a former colleague.

Tomlinson began her career in 1969 in a Grade 1 classroom in London, Ontario. She taught in schools across Canada and even North Carolina before joining the HWDSB in 1989. Throughout it all, she balanced the demands of a busy family, an active life in her church and community, chipping away at earning a doctorate and putting all of herself into a job that ensured every child with special needs was carefully considered. Her tenacity—and endless energy—opened doors for students who may never have had a chance to flourish in the school system.

“Janice was a such strong advocate. She did a tremendous job educating people about special education and the needs of those students and always with a sense of humour and incredible aplomb,” said Carol Camponella, a former colleague, retired principal for the HWDSB and close friend.

With a demanding job that garnered upwards of hundreds of emails per day, countless meetings and, of course, careful deliberation about the kids who needed her most, co-workers often wondered how she kept it all together. According to her colleagues across the board, it was not unusual to receive an email from Janice at 1 a.m. on a weeknight or to find her hard at work in her office Sunday morning before dashing off to church.

“How she managed to balance it all—and always with a smile—is a mystery to most of us,” laughed Corcione.

Others are equally astonished. Dr. Marie Bountrogianni, current MPP for Hamilton Mountain, remembers the awe she felt when riding in Tomlinson’s car back when they worked together at the board in the early 1990s.

“Whenever I was in the car with Janice, it felt like I was in her office. At the time, I thought I had a busy life but she is the ultimate multi-tasker. She would simultaneously consult the schedules of her four kids and church volunteer activities while discussing issues important to her job. She was always able to balance her career, family, friendships and giving to the community with optimism and a smile on her face.”

Though it’s clear she always put the kids first, those who worked closely with her say her approach in the office was truly collaborative.

“She never dictated, there was always a discussion. You always knew that she respected and admired the expertise of others,” said Corcione.

To others, she was a mentor. Parr’s first job out of school was under Tomlinson and she says she couldn’t have asked for a better role model. “I learned a lot from Janice and most of it is based on the values that she carried through her career. She always treated everyone she worked with—from superintendents, to educators to parents, to the kids—with dignity and respect.”

Retired life will no doubt allow Tomlinson to let her juggling skills take a backseat. Director of Education Dr. Chris Spence recommends that she take some time to reflect on the deep impression she has left on the board and special education across the province.

“Janice Tomlinson didn’t just have a job, she found a calling. As she brings closure to a career that spanned nearly 40 years and touched thousands of children, she can take great pride in knowing she leaves a lasting impression on special education across Ontario.”