

NHS 20th

21 years ago our family had a problem. We wanted to move from Calgary to live on our family farm in Strathcona County, but there wasn't a school program in this area for our daughters to attend. They were happy in a school for gifted kids in Calgary, and I wanted the same great experience here. My oldest daughter had been so subdued and shy in a regular class and she'd wondered, "When am I going to learn anything?" My other daughter had such a terrible time in grade one that she started having horrible dreams called night terrors. It was awful. We couldn't go back to that! The school board here agreed to bring some people down to Calgary to see the gifted school, but they didn't start a program for gifted children. Then the provincial government decided to allow people to start charter schools, if the schools would meet an unmet need.

We could have home-schooled, but we'd talked to so many parents whose gifted kids had had rough school experiences that we knew this wasn't just our problem. However, the opening of New Horizons to solve that problem was a ton of work! We had to move fast, too, because the government wasn't necessarily keen on gifted schools, but they did want a charter school to open in 1995. I had to study the school act, school curriculum, and the charter school regulations. I had taught in a program for bright children, and had seen a gifted school at work, but I also had to do research to determine what the studies said were the best things to do for gifted students. There was no internet, so I printed stacks of studies from the university and consulted with the Centre for Gifted Education. I phoned the charter school man at the department of education so many times we became friends. The principal of the gifted school in Calgary, Janneke Ruysanaars, (now Dr. Janneke Frank) also helped.

Our family presented to prospective families up here about the school, and Ms. Ruysanaars-Frank even came up to support what we were saying. At the end of January in 1995 I got together with a group of total strangers who agreed to form the Education For the Gifted Society (EFG) the night of our first presentation. I also applied for charity status – and we had our charitable number by the spring-the day we needed it. We had to make presentations to the school board to be

approved by them – which involved providing 200 pages of information required by the provincial government to meet the charter requirements. The school board wasn't sure the province was ready to start charter schools. Fortunately, I had a personal letter from the premier that I'd gotten only the day before, which encouraged me to go to the school board to approve the school. They did approve us, but they weren't sure if they could provide any school space. Patti Weir-Brown and Colin Brown, the other main volunteers helping us, looked for a place. Our charter board chose Dr. Marian Stelmaschuk to be the principal of the school. At that point she became a volunteer, too. In June we were told that we weren't going to be given a school space. A county school board and council member, Sten Berg, promptly said he'd help us get on to the county agenda for their last meeting before summer break, to get a building space approved for use, but we had only 24 hours to make a deal to rent somewhere, to obtain and fill in the county forms, and get the right people's signatures - and the building owner was in the US and the school had no money. There were no start-up funds and no facility funding then. We lobbied for those later. I negotiated with the realtor while he talked to the owner in the States and we personally paid the \$15,000 to secure the site. Meanwhile, Colin Brown ran the application papers around for signatures and into the county with seconds to spare. The county decided to have all three readings to rezone the building in late August. If they approved our site, we would have two weeks to renovate it.

In the spring we were putting up ads to get students – our family had moved here, so everyone was phoning my house. We didn't have cordless phones then, so I had the world's longest phone cord because I spent up to half an hour telling each prospective student's parent what we were doing and why – while making supper. We had qualified committees hiring staff and teachers, doing student intake, and all of us were hunting down desks and equipment which we moved in a bull trailer into people's garages. Everything was done by volunteers.

Colin Brown kept saying, "If we build it, they will come."

In August we filled the county meeting room with students and parents and they approved our plans! That same day, we reached 75 students, the minimum

required. Just two weeks before the school start, we had met the conditions to open. How did we get the renovation done in time? One dad was a contractor and he and my husband, Ross, directed everyone, working from early in the morning until late at night to turn office space into a school – even little children were helping to screw in the light sockets after the new walls were painted.

Can you imagine everything that had to be decided at the start of the school? Discipline policies, school rules, timetables, report cards, and most importantly, how to run this school so that each student's needs would be met. The students were to have individual education plans, and we'd do pretesting so they were learning the things they needed to learn. They'd be encouraged to pursue special interests through Independent study projects, and mentorships, with a project – focussed, challenging and integrated approach to their learning.

Did we solve our problem? Within days the parents were telling me how happy they were. Their kids had friends! They could relate to each other and they were having a good time. And the academics? Over time we showed that our students were thriving. One year I watched at the local high school as our handful of former students took almost every academic award and others.

You know those two daughters of mine? Both girls made so much money in scholarships we never paid anything for their university education. Our oldest is a researcher with a dual doctorate in biomedical engineering and chemical engineering, and our younger is a doctor in her fourth year of surgery training in the US. Both happily married. What about those other early students? I know there's a pharmacist, a vet, an artist, a speech writer, one guy studies the brain, and one is the spokesperson for an institute. They are pursuing all different dreams, being themselves, and I believe we prepared them well to do that.

Students, cherish this school. So many people have done so much to make it happen. Do your best with what you've been given. You will be rewarded, and you have the potential to do much good in our world if you put your minds to it.

Note: This address was delivered by Coleen Taylor on the occasion of the 20th anniversary celebration of New Horizons School, held on February 24, 2016.