

CATHY MCFEE: CNIB OPENS INNOVATIVE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM FOR CHILDREN

BY SARAH FABBRI

A young boy in a playground giggles when he discovers that a special water fountain he is playing with makes different sounds when he moves his fingers – like a keyboard.

The boy is blind and he's playing on something called a hydraulophone which is helping him learn more about the world around him. He's in the CNIB's (Canadian National Institute for the Blind) recently opened Outdoor Classroom in Calgary. It's the first facility of its kind in Canada.

"We have created something that has tremendous meaning for these children and their families," says Cathy McFee, Director of Services and Operations, CNIB - Alberta NWT Division. McFee received her Leadership Development Certificate of Excellence last spring and says her Banff Centre experiences played an important role in the development of the Outdoor Classroom.

The idea for the classroom started more than two years ago when employees with Urban Systems, a Calgary consulting firm, participated in the United Way's Day of Caring by painting fences in the CNIB's Family and Children's area, says McFee.

"We invited the Urban Systems team in for a tour, to share information about CNIB, and this led to some discussion

about developing a sensory playground to better meet the needs of children with vision loss," she says. Currently CNIB Calgary has about 80 preschool children registered with its services.

"We started to ask ourselves questions such as: Who uses this space? How is it used? How does it compliment the services of the CNIB program?" says Leighton Ginther of Urban Systems.

There was a lot of enthusiasm and creativity, recalls McFee. "We pulled together an exciting plan. We designed an educational facility where children with vision loss could explore, develop skills, and build confidence in a safe, interactive and accessible environment."

Plans featured a tactile map at the entrance to help children mentally map the outdoor space, a looped pathway system to give children the opportunity to develop their orienteering skills, a xylophone, and a sound bench.

"We were faced with a number of challenges," says McFee. These included securing approval from the CNIB's national office and securing the resources to fund the project.

At the time, McFee was just about to start her fourth



Leadership Development program, *Leading Teams for High Performance*.

During *Leading Teams*, McFee says she had a chance to present the Outdoor Classroom plans to her learning group. "I gained more confidence about how to communicate a plan to our national office, highlighting the benefits and outcomes to the organization. I (also) learned about staying focused, connecting with my own sense of values, and leading others with both purpose and passion."

The national office gave McFee the nod of approval to go ahead with the project.

McFee and her project team then secured additional partners in addition to Urban Systems, including WestJet. The tasks expanded, from creating a fundraising strategy to organizing volunteers.

"I learned about facilitating a new team that involved both internal and external stakeholders," explains McFee. She now had to build consensus and foster collaboration around a common goal.

In November 2007, McFee took *Art of the Executive Leader*, her fifth program. "One of the things I have learned is that

for nonprofit organizations to be competitive and successful you need to be innovative and mobilize every sector of society."

On October 3, 2008 McFee's shared vision became a reality and the CNIB Outdoor Classroom officially opened. The most memorable moment for McFee was watching several of the young children with vision loss engaged in play with the many components of the Outdoor Classroom.

"One very small child stood quietly – head bowed, eyes closed, tiny hands grasping onto the smooth xylophone bars – enjoying the calming vibrations of sound as his father delicately struck the instrument," McFee says.

McFee says she is grateful for the support she has received along her 10-year learning journey, one made possible thanks to the generosity of others. "It happened because of the Centre's scholarships for non-profit leaders and I want to express my gratitude and appreciation."

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