

Celebrating family: a place to call home

Feb 13, 2008 06:58 PM

By: Patrick Lake

For the first time Monday, the people of Ontario will officially celebrate the family with a statutory holiday.

About time, too, some would say.

Certainly, we can thank Premier Dalton McGuinty on the grounds a ninth statutory holiday, particularly a holiday in February, is long overdue.

Finally, we're on a par with Manitoba, British Columbia and Alberta.

But there's more to it than that.

As the premier said when he announced Family Day, "There is nothing more valuable to families than time together. And yet it seems tougher than ever to find, with so many of us living such busy lives. That's why ... Ontarians deserve a new statutory holiday — Family Day."

Family Day in Canada was first celebrated in Alberta.

Officially, the holiday was created by Premier Don Getty to recognize and preserve the values of home and family on which pioneers built the province.

But, according to several sources, including Toronto Star columnist David Olive, Family Day had an inauspicious beginning.

"Getty proclaimed Canada's inaugural Family Day, first celebrated in 1990, shortly after his son was revealed to have a cocaine addiction. Getty publicly confessed to neglecting his family. He then imposed on the province a holiday theme that served his own purposes of expiating the guilt he felt."

Those of us who work in the interests of the family wouldn't agree with Mr. Olive.

In fact, it's a very auspicious beginning – the public acknowledgement that a person's future may well rest on the nurturing he or she receives within the family.

If we believe, as we say we do, healthy families are at the heart of healthy communities, then an annual reminder in the pleasing shape of a holiday is much more than a justification to stay home from work.

It's an opportunity to attend not only to our own families, but to the ways we can help others in our community strengthen their families.

That's why the York Region Children's Aid Society chose Family Day as the occasion to celebrate and honour two people in our own community who understand what it means for a child to have a place to call home.

Tomorrow, we're dedicating Kennedy Place, our new building in Newmarket.

It's named for Jane and Frank Kennedy, foster parents who opened their home and hearts to more than 100 children from 1972 to 2008.

They nurtured some of our community's most needy and damaged children, from toddlers to an entire family of five siblings.

Here's how Jane and Frank tell the story.

"The agency had a sibling group of five to be fostered," Jane says. "I said we didn't have the room, but, foolishly, added, 'I hope you don't have to split them up.' The next day we had a phone call."

"At first we turned them down," Frank says, "but that evening, while we were watching the baseball game, someone said, 'We could put a bunk bed here'. Then someone else said, 'Well, we could get a second car.' Finally, we said we could take all five until the agency could find another home."

"After six months," Jane adds, "we told Children's Aid not to bother to look for another place."

The Kennedys kept that family intact and, to this day, one of the children, now a young adult, is still with the Kennedys.

Of all of the challenging work of the Children's Aid Society, I often think it's foster parents who have the most to give and the most to lose. They are the heroes of child welfare.

As you celebrate Family Day with your own children, give a moment's thought to the children who aren't as lucky as yours and to all the foster parents out there who give them a family to call their own.

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