

Nomination for Bill McFarland Award
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Dear Members of the Board of Parent Support Services:

Re: Nomination of Ms. Carrie Gelson for the Bill McFarland Award

It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that I submit this nomination for the Bill McFarland Award on behalf of Ms. Carrie Gelson, grade 2/3 teacher at Admiral Seymour School in Vancouver.

I had the honor of working for Bill McFarland as a brand new social worker in child protection in 1974 in Vancouver. Bill was the head of Children's Aid Society at the time and a pioneer in the field of child abuse and neglect. Bill mentored me and inspired me to follow a career that has been devoted to child abuse education, prevention, intervention and treatment. I was honored to be the first recipient of the Bill McFarland Award and it sits on my bookshelf over my shoulder as I write this nomination.

To me, this award symbolizes and honors the beliefs that Bill had about children, their families and the responsibility that each member of society has to care for the most vulnerable of our citizens. He was a passionate advocate and a well respected leader in the field of child welfare and specifically, child abuse and neglect. He devoted his career to speaking out on behalf of children and mentoring many professionals who have followed in his footsteps. He was an inspiration to everyone who cared about children and worked tirelessly on so many levels to make a difference. He was a social worker, an educator and an advocate.

As I think about Carrie Gelson, I believe that she embodies and lives by the values and beliefs that the Bill McFarland Award represents. There are many reasons why I think that Carrie is a very special person and professional who deserves to receive this recognition and I will do my best to give you a snapshot of who she is as a person, a teacher and a brave advocate for children. She believes that one person can change the world and she has been trying to do so for the past 16 years, one child at a time in the past and more recently, as an advocate and public voice for social change in our Province so that all children can have their needs properly met and their rights respected.

I first met Carrie in 1999, when, as an Instructor in the Social Service Worker Program at Langara College, I arranged a student placement at Admiral Seymour School, a community inner city school located in the heart of Chinatown. Carrie and a couple of other teachers volunteered to have a student in their classrooms. Over the years, I have been in and out of her classroom and have come to know her as an exceptionally caring, compassionate, creative and inspiring teacher in the Inner City. Her students come from extremely deprived circumstances and over the years Carrie has quietly attended to their needs and their family's needs. She approached her job as more than being an educator but focusing on the needs of the whole child and as the years went by, she began to be very concerned about the deterioration in the lives of the children in her classroom and in other inner city schools. The children in her school reflect the dismal conditions of living in extreme poverty and subjected to instability, abuse, abandonment, addictions and violence. After 16 years of hearing and responding to their situations and their stories day in and day out Carrie decided that she needed to do more than meet the needs of one child at a time. She had the courage to speak out and has galvanized the whole community to become involved in solving the pressing issue of child poverty.

In September, 2011 as Thanksgiving was approaching Carrie Gelson felt compelled to write an open letter to the people of Vancouver. She wrote it because she was overwhelmed with the needs of her students. She went out on a limb as a unionized teacher, and spoke out about the dire situation of her children and those of the other inner city schools. In her letter (which I attach) she outlined the situation of the children who are not getting enough to eat, who live in fear, who live in squalid circumstances, who cannot count on a parent to watch over them, who have no warm clothes to wear, no socks, shoes with holes, experiencing abuse in the inner city...in essence she tells their story in a very honest and passionate way. She asks the citizens of Vancouver..."What do you think?" What can you do? She makes the point that it is not enough to drop off a Christmas Hamper or a box of clothes. She demands solutions. She tells how these children cannot learn or develop into healthy individuals who can sustain themselves in society. She pleads for people to commit to finding long term solutions. She asks: "would you be willing to advocate for a child who is not your own?" This is the challenge that goes out in her letter. She gets the responses she is looking for very quickly.

In fact, Carrie's letter went viral, was published in the Vancouver Sun, and was the catalyst for a myriad of responses from the press, from professionals, from the public, from families in the neighborhood and people who were touched by her message. Many of them said they did not know about the plight of the children.

The children's stories of need began to be told by many other teachers, doctors, social workers, mothers of inner city children, the children themselves. Carrie had galvanized a movement which continues to grow and develop to end child poverty in British Columbia. People came to her school and wanted to donate their time, their money, goods, services and all the support they could muster up. One man has donated \$10,000.00 twice! There are countless stories from the Principals and the teachers throughout the inner city about the incredible response to Carrie Gelson's letter. She shared the donations with other inner city schools. She gave interviews...she put a face

on poverty. The citizens of Vancouver were galvanized into action. The Vancouver Sun did a series on child poverty featuring the stories of the children at Seymour School and others.

Carrie, with the help of the Vancouver Public Library and her colleagues, organized a public forum in November 2011 to shine a light on the issue of Child Poverty. I attended that forum and heard Carrie Gelson and her colleague speak frankly about the needs of the children and the depth of poverty they are experiencing. I was so inspired by her speech and her call to action, that I organized a public forum at Langara College in January about ending child poverty. Carrie spoke at that forum. More than 300 people attended.

Carrie has written letters to the Editors of the various newspapers, done numerous interviews on television and radio about the plight of children living in poverty. She has inspired others to speak out, to respond creatively and to keep on demanding an end to child poverty in this Province. She is the inspiration behind the "Adopt a School" campaign which was launched by the Vancouver Sun in 2012 and resulted in massive community response to the needs of inner city school children. This campaign will continue in 2013. It is not the answer, but it has helped to resource the underfunded schools of the inner city that are unable to fundraise for the children because the parents are too poor to donate. She also inspired the creation by Dr. Barbara Fitzgerald of a program called "Moms to Moms." This program connects Moms who can help with Moms who need help.

Carrie Gelson is a dedicated teacher and a strong advocate for the rights of all children to have their needs met...for all children to NOT live in poverty. She keeps on telling their stories that she knows very well with the hope that things will change. She is a courageous leader and a person who has taken professional risks in order to speak out against the systems which oppress the children and their families. She has given voice to an unrelenting and tragic issue which cannot be fixed by giving Christmas hampers once a year to needy families.

Carrie Gelson still goes to school every day and takes care of the children in her classroom with love and compassion. She shares her food with them, she shares her energy, her compassion and she teaches them. She advocates for them as individuals and families in need. She does this because she cares to make a difference. She continues to be a very public advocate for ending child poverty. She continues to tell the children's stories and inspires others to do so. She will not give up until a solution to child poverty is found.

I feel strongly that Carrie Gelson would make a fine recipient of the Bill McFarland Award. She exemplifies what I think Bill McFarland valued most.....to have the courage to make a positive difference in the lives of the children of British Columbia. Carrie Gelson is doing this every single day. Bill would have liked and admired her very much.

I sincerely hope that you will give full consideration to honoring the work that Carrie Gelson is doing by awarding her the Bill McFarland Award.

Respectfully submitted,

Frances Grunberg MSW RSW