

Running for office to improve health care

April 1, 2005

The Report: April / May 2005 vol.26 num.2

by CAROLE PEARSON



ix years in Brazil taught me a lot," says Jenny Stevens, a retired Mission physiotherapist. -It gave me insight into how wrong a health program can go, particularly when its multilayered as that one was." She is alarmed to see BCs health care system heading along a similar route. Thats one reason Stevens is running as the NDP candidate in Maple Ridge ... Mission in the upcoming provincial election.

Jenny Stevens Physiotherapist (Retired) Mission Municipal Councillor Candidate, Maple Ridge ... Mission Riding

Born in Devonport, England, Stevens was 12 years old when she was diagnosed with a juvenile form of ancholosis and was blind by18. When considering career options, Stevens decided to become a physiotherapist. -I thought, as a person with a disability myself, I might link well with people needing rehab which proved to be the case."

In 1974, Stevens, her husband, and five children set off from England in a 64-foot West Country Trading ketch to sail around the Atlantic Ocean. After enjoying stops along the way, they crossed the ocean in 35 days and landed in Cabedelo, Brazil.

When their boat was irreparably damaged by well-intentioned villagers, their brief stop became a stay of six years. Stevens found modern rehab techniques were largely unknown in that part of Brazil. Poliomyelitis was rampant and affected the poor -more savagely" than the rich but only the latter group could afford treatment. - I found the situation offensive and, taking the plunge, I opened my own clinic and let it be known that when it came to treating paralysis, cash was not a prerequisite."

Stevens adopted her youngest child, Xico, from a local orphanage when he was 15 months old. -He was a polio victim, the result of a bad vaccine as were many of the children at the orphanage," she explains. -When I found him, both his knees were up under his left armpit." After an osteotomy and tendon lengthening, Xico ended up with two straight legs. -Because of all that, his scoliosis was horrendous so I taught him to walk on his hands to build up his trunk." Today, at 32, he wears only one below-hip brace ... and can still run on his hands!

In December 1981, Stevens came to Canada with her youngest children and settled in Mission, BC. Her two eldest were in post-secondary schools in England and Stevens husband chose to remain in Brazil. Now a single mother with four children at home, she found employment at Mission Memorial Hospital in 1982, where she worked as an HSA member for four years.

Stevens retired as physiotherapist in1998 but her retirement lasted only three months. -I didnt like it," she

says, -and thats how I got persuaded into going into municipal politics." In 1999, Stevens ran successfully for Mission municipal council where she has served her community on numerous boards and committees for nearly two terms.

-When you are doing physio, particularly rehab, you see patients over a considerable period of time so you get to know and share their concerns. Very often you have to advocate for them against the system. All that led me towards getting into community involvement so when I did retire, it was a natural progression to get into municipal politics - and Im hoping to progress again. Ive had five years on council and I think Im ready to take on the bigger problems."

Stevens is highly critical of changes made by the Campbell government to BCs health care system, including the way regionalization has been implemented to the detriment of health services in smaller BC communities. Stevens says, -I am not opposed to regionalization but it will only work if adequate regional facilities and ambulances are in place before the local ones are removed or slashed."

The emergency department at MMH is -stripped to the bone" and unable to handle more than minor problems. -Essential emergency services should remain within rapid reach of each community," Stevens said.

A couple of years ago, an 80-year-old woman was struck by a car outside MMH, Stevens recalls. -She had head injuries but the ICU had been closed at MMH and the nearest bed, at that point, was in Kelowna. She was flown there at considerable cost. Even economically, this doesnt make sense."

The patient was discharged in Kelowna and left to find her own way home. -Clearly, something is wrong with abandoning an 80-year-old patient hundreds of miles from her community." When patients are transferred out, Stevens is adamant that they should be transferred back to the original hospital when they are discharged. She suggests having a subsidized shuttle service between hospitals for all patients, including those with day-surgery and outpatient appointments, and for visitors.

Stevens also wants long-term care patients kept in their communities when re-location is necessary. In Chilliwack, for example, the Fraser Health Authority closed one facility so it could be converted into additional office space. -They shuttled the residents here, there and everywhere," Stevens reports. Because elderly patients can get confused easily, it is difficult to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings. It is even worse when sent outside their community. Stevens says, -They lose their family and community support. The result? They deteriorate rapidly and, unfortunately, die very soon. Its cruel, totally cruel."

Stevens wants to be elected on May 17 to help put the health back into BCs health care system. And, because she has 12 grandchildren ... six of whom live in Canada ... she is also particularly concerned about the impact of cuts to public education. She says, -Women are often more directly affected by political policies than are men. Women are the ones who cope with the elderly relative who is discharged from hospital, incontinent and unable to walk."

Thats why Stevens encourages women to participate in the electoral process. -Governments can make it easier or more difficult for women to manage," she says, -so its absolutely vital we get involved. It doesnt have to mean running for office. It can involve helping out in smaller ways. Women have the ability to influence what happens." 

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