

Living the union credo: United we stand

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It's a familiar story, but one that in HSA usually has a positive outcome. In this instance, we go back to 1992 when a newly unionized pre-school teacher attended her first union meeting and volunteered for the assistant chief steward's job — because no one else wanted it.

Renie Groome Supported Child Care Teacher South Fraser Child Development Centre

Today, Irene — Renie — Groome is a Member-at-Large representing members in HSA's Region 7, having long ago found satisfaction being active in a union that unites workers' rights with caring professionalism.

Groome says she was reluctant to take on a union responsibility at first because, like her colleagues, she was unfamiliar with unions and didn't really know what was expected of her. — But after I started, I found I really liked union work. I could see that the process really does work, in creating an equal playing field for all members. —

Groome has recently moved from working at a community social services facility to a daycare in the health sector. She now works as a supported child care teacher at South Fraser Child Development Centre, going out into the community and working with children who require extra support in child care settings.

She began her career in Surrey working with a severely autistic child. In those days, special needs children were placed in segregated centres. Groome experienced the integration of those children, a move she describes as positive for everyone — children, parents, and caregivers. — At that time, parents did not have a choice as to where their child was placed. Today, we realize that children belong in the community, and that the parents should be the ones to choose the child care setting that best suits the needs of the family. — Groome attests.

As a supported child care teacher, Groome supports children with delays or difficulties in social skills and behaviour, speech and language development, motor skills, and cognitive and intellectual skills. — These children may also require extra support due to hearing or visual impairment, or physical challenges, — she said. — One of the main focuses is to ensure the inclusion of the special-needs child in a child care setting; children on the whole are usually quite accepting of children who require extra support. —

Groome has more than 14 years' experience working with special needs children. For autistic children, the key task is teaching social skills and — compliance — with the rules set for all the pre-schoolers. Children such as those who are autistic do learn social skills, and progress is sometimes displayed in amazing ways, says Groome. She relates an incident when a child in her care wanted to hug another child while waiting in line. — I

explained to [the autistic child] that you have to ask permission. He did, and the other child accepted. Then he told this child, "You have to hug me back." He showed that he appreciated what the hug meant. I could've jumped 10 feet.

When Groome's earlier workplace - Surrey Association for Early Childhood Education - unionized, it was mainly because of members' desire for equal access to job advancement and recognition of seniority. "Before that, it depended whether the employer liked you," Groome relates. She believes the acceptance vote was 100 per cent.

Does she see a conflict between being a professional and union member? "I think they complement each other. We have always been proud of the fact that the union that represents us is the union of caring professionals."

For Groome, the union support has a personal edge. She oversaw the introduction and passage of an emergency resolution at an HSA convention some years back, when her facility faced layoffs due to budget cuts. Subsequently, the union was able to negotiate the transfer of several senior employees into another facility in the South Fraser region.

Groome thinks the cutbacks looming with the current Liberal government will be disastrous if they affect care for special needs children. "I can't imagine what that would do to the children and their families. They look to us for support. A single parent I know told me she couldn't imagine how she'd cope without us.

"By taking that support away, it's not going to help that child. It's going to be more expensive, somewhere down the line." 

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