

In this edition of *real leaders*, **Erica Watts** and **Caitlin McRae** lead their public school in an initiative to raise funds for victims of Hurricane Mitch. As founder of the Family Abuse Crisis Exchange (FACE), **Nancy Toran-Harbin** works to assist women fleeing from violent situations to enter the workforce. The Tetra Society was spearheaded by **Sam Sullivan**. It is his way of ensuring that persons with disabilities lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Erica Watts and Caitlin McRae

“We always think we don’t have enough, but then we saw the children in Honduras. They didn’t have much to start with, but after the hurricane, they have so little left,” says Erica Watts, a Grade 6 student at Briargreen Public School in Nepean, Ontario.

Erica’s sense of sorrow at the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch isn’t unusual. What is unusual is what she and her friend, Caitlin McRae, did about it. They also collected non-perishable food, clothing and medicine. Beginning while the devastation was still occurring, the girls created posters, developed a newsletter to parents and made daily announcements on the school’s public address system to provide a tally of what had been collected to date.



Caitlin McRae (left) and Erica Watts

“We decided to be very enthusiastic in our advertising to encourage people to participate,” says Caitie. “We weren’t sure if we could pull it off, but we decided to get all the students in our class involved and have them speak on the PA system too. That way, everyone could see there were lots of people involved — it wasn’t just the two of us.” Their strategy worked. Students and parents kept reaching further into their pockets. One student donated her entire penny collection of \$27.

“Our teacher, Mrs. Harper, said she would match whatever our class donated. And then our French teacher, M. Landart,

wrote a cheque to round off the donation to an even \$1,000,” says Erica proudly.

Both Erica and Caitie credit their families for providing an example to follow. Erica says that both of them hear about social justice at home. “It’s something we talk about at the kitchen table all the time. Both my parents are police officers, and they often talk about their jobs, what they see at work and how some people just don’t have what we have.”

Caitie’s parents are both writers who are actively involved in their community. They believe they have taught their daughter values that some people may consider old-fashioned.

“We believe that if you are fortunate, then you have an obligation to share that good fortune with others. Caitie sees us involved with a wide range of causes, from established charities to helping our neighbours. For Caitie, this is not a duty, it’s just part of who she is,” says Caitie’s mother, Bev McRae.

For her part, Caitie laughs when she recalls the surprised looks on her friends’ faces when she asked them to bring donations for the food bank, instead of gifts, to her last birthday party.

Briargreen Principal Jacques Toijman says Caitie and Erica became involved for obvious reasons: They saw a disaster and felt they should do something. But he marvels at what they have achieved. “These two young students developed a plan of action that demonstrates what Grade 6 students can accomplish. They led the school in the initiative and became role models for all the students.”

Jacques says that Erica and Caitie first discussed the idea with their teacher, and then with him. “Initially, the girls were thinking of involving only their class, but when I asked them for more details,

they developed a plan that included all 540 students in the school. And they pulled it off. They didn’t allow any obstacle to get in their way.”

“These are two really neat kids, and I guess that in some ways, their dedication shouldn’t surprise me. They are both very involved with school activities and by nature, they are very sociable, self-assured and confident. But it was pretty impressive to watch two 11-year-olds making a presentation to the Parent Council !” Jacques adds.

The Parent Council did more than just listen. “We were very surprised,” Erica says. “They usually say they are interested, but this time they really were. They really got involved.” Many parents helped out by transporting the donations to Canada Trust and the Salvation Army at the end of the week.

Sue Harper is the girls’ teacher. She beams when she talks about how this experience transformed her class. When she began discussing current events with her students in the fall, it was obvious that they were not reading newspapers or watching the news on television. But the vibrant, dedicated teacher did not give up, and bit by bit, her class became more engaged.

“When Erica and Caitie saw the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Mitch, they were shocked and determined that they could make a difference,” she says. “These young students have a strong sense of community responsibility that is fostered at home and at school. They learned what it felt like to help others and they are to continue offering their assistance.”

The parents of both girls are equally proud of them. “I would like to think that some of this was due to our positive influence,” says Erica’s father, Bruce Watts. “But in reality, this campaign seemed to be



Grade 6 students at Briargreen Public School are proud of what they've done to help Hurricane Mitch victims.

totally self-motivated. Erica has always been determined to get what she wants, and this time what she wanted was for someone else.”

Bev McRae isn't surprised by what the girls accomplished either. “Erica and Caitie are very individual thinkers. They are determined, and they are girls who have been taught that they can do anything. Some mountains may be higher than others, but you just have to work a little harder to climb them. It wouldn't occur to them that they couldn't do anything that they set their minds to.”

With all the excitement around the campaign, Sue was careful to help the girls stay grounded. “I warned them that this was something you do from within — not to expect a big reward or even a thank you. This is something that you do because you want to recognize your responsibility as a citizen of this community, this country and this world.”

Nonetheless, the girls' effort did not go unnoticed. They were interviewed on television and an article appeared in *This Week*, the local newspaper. “We received a letter of commendation from the Mayor of Nepean, Mary Pitt, from MPP John Baird and from MP Marlene Catterall,” Caitie adds proudly.

“Their achievement is something the girls will remember for a long time, and they will take this learning into their community at all stages of their life,” says Jacques.

Erica and Caitie have one piece of advice for other children: “Go for it. If you really want it, you can be successful. You can do it!”

As for themselves, with a taste of helping others under their belts, Caitie and Erica have developed an appetite for more. “They didn't stop with Hurricane Mitch,” Sue points out. “Before the holidays, they collected food for FAMSAC, an interdenominational initiative organized by local faith groups.”

The girls say that although they were tired after the week-long campaign to raise funds for the survivors of Hurricane Mitch, they felt very satisfied with what they had accomplished. And the girls said: “When we saw coverage of the earthquake in Columbia on TV the other day, we immediately thought: ‘Now, here's another group that could use our help!’”

Nancy Toran-Harbin

As a young lawyer, **Nancy Toran-Harbin** kept extra clothes at her office to lend to her clients, mostly women fleeing from violent situations, for court appearances. Today, she is the moving force behind a unique service that helps women in similar situations put their best face forward.

The Family Abuse Crisis Exchange (FACE) provides slightly used professional clothing as well as make-up, accessories and interview tips to women who are preparing to enter the workforce. It's a relatively small service, but one that can make all the difference to women getting ready to start their lives again.

“Because the women we serve usually don't have a lot of work experience, they often apply for receptionist positions,” says Nancy. “And dealing with the public means that they have to appear well-groomed and present a professional image.”

Social worker and FACE Board Member Rosemary Elstone adds: “Without ‘the look,’ many women would never get more than a service industry job paying minimum wage. But with their limited budget, low-income women are forced to choose between buying a new outfit or putting food on the table for their kids. Obviously, the clothes fall down the list of priorities.”

So, several times a week, women walk through the halls of the Yorkdale Shopping Centre to the stairs that lead them through a maze of storage rooms and offices, until they reach the place that will help them change their lives.

“You have to remember that the women we work with have been through a lot,” says Nancy, shaking her head when she says that many of her clients walked away from abusive situations with only the clothes on their backs.



Nancy Toran-Harbin thanks FACE supporters at her CD launch in 1998.

“But since these women left, they have done a lot of healing at transition homes and in therapy. When we see them, they are ready to start their lives again.”

Rosemary has been involved with FACE since its inception in the early 1990s. She says it is an agency of which to be proud. “Sometimes it seems like such a small thing. But over the past five years, we have seen that we are making a real contribution both to individuals and to society. Some of the women we have worked with have seen tremendous success reentering the job market.”

And it is Nancy who is responsible for the venture. She says the idea is rooted in her childhood. “While I grew up in a relatively affluent Toronto neighbourhood, my father died when I was very young.” Even though she had all the essentials, “I did feel that I lacked all the extras that the other kids in the neighbourhood took for granted.”

Her insecurities became heightened when she graduated from law school. “I had to go to articling interviews in clothes I made

myself. Not being a tailor, I was very self-conscious in my creations. I realized at that point how much confidence comes from looking good.”

A car accident followed by the birth of her son gave Nancy the opportunity to reevaluate her priorities. She knew that she wanted to continue to work to help victims of violence. “But the longer I thought about it, the more I realized that the adversarial legal system was not the most effective or compassionate way to deal with family problems and issues related to violence.”

As Vice-Chair of the Ontario Film Review Board and concerned with violence in the media and its impact on women and children, Nancy built a network of contacts within the film and television industry. When she decided to take the next step, she already had a network in place.

Ellen Davidson, Vice-President of Communications for TMN Networks Inc., an Astral Communications company which operates TMN, The Movie Network and Moviepix, was particularly moved when she heard Nancy talk about her ideas for FACE. “I thought it was a terrific idea to help women who left an abusive situation get their feet back

on the ground. And I was not alone. Before long, many of the women at the network became involved. We realized that there was a unique contribution we could make.”

Ellen and her colleagues organized the first clothing drive for FACE. “The women at the network have taken this cause to heart,” says Ellen. “In addition to clothing, we make an annual donation to FACE and provide it with media opportunities to promote its work.”

Other networks were quick to follow their example. Canadian Women in Communications, the Fashion Council, Matinée Fashion Foundation, Global TV City TV and CTV offered their support. Public service announcements and a video showing interview tips were produced. Make-up lessons were offered with models who volunteered their time.

Nancy also has enlisted the support of Revlon and hairstylists who offer half-price haircuts to the women. One member of her group convinced the owner of a lingerie store that was going out of business to donate some of his stock to FACE. “We’re talking



Nancy Toran-Harbin (left) and colleague Dorothy Feidner show off clothing available for women in need.



FACE is thankful for its volunteers who are always eager to help.

boxes and boxes of pantyhose that are still being distributed a year later!”

Nancy had a similar effect on Kathy Jacobsen. Kathy met Nancy just as FACE was growing out of the basement space it was occupying in her husband’s medical practice. Thanks to a memo Kathy put out to her contacts in the shopping centre industry, the manager of the Yorkdale Mall came through with an offer of free space.

Kathy and the other members of her informal networking group were attracted to FACE because they believe in the ripple effect of giving women the tools to help themselves. “We think it is a wonderful cause, and always keep an eye open for how we can help FACE. We organize clothing drives and talk to retailers about making donations.”

Nancy is proud that FACE serves women from every culture and income group in Toronto, including Aboriginal women and recent immigrants.

FACE responds to the special needs of immigrant women by having volunteers who know about the kind of support women need and recognize the special challenges faced by

new Canadians from different ethnocultural communities.

The women involved in FACE have nothing but praise for Nancy. Rosemary has known Nancy since they started law school together. She says that while many people come to volunteerism only after they have achieved professional success, Nancy has demonstrated her commitment since she was a teenager. “Nancy really believes in our collective responsibility to create and maintain healthy communities. And she has a real commitment to women and families.”

Kathy, meanwhile, says she is a great fan of Nancy. “She has done some wonderful things. She follows her heart and achieves so much. She is a good role model — a real inspiration!”

Nancy’s creativity extends beyond realizing how clothes can change a life. Trained as an opera singer before entering law school, Nancy has just released a CD featuring her own ballads, with the proceeds going to FACE.

The Marvelle Koffler Breast Cancer Centre at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto is using the soothing CD for music therapy.

FACE also has given copies to the Casey House AIDS Hospice and the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, and is responding to requests for it from hospitals across North America as well as Europe and South Africa.

Nancy calls the project a realization of her lifelong dreams and hopes to use the CD's popularity to make FACE known around the world. Indeed, that process already has started; FACE is now the model for similar programs in dozens of communities across Canada and the United States. Sam the Record Man, a large music retailer in Canada, also is helping with the marketing and promotion of FACE's CD: *Follow Your Dreams*. Nancy currently is working on a second album.

The entire journey has been a learning process. Nancy recalls that during FACE's early years, she had to deal with hostile reactive behaviour from her clients. "Some of the women who came to FACE still hadn't dealt with their anger and upset." After consulting with social workers, the Board of Directors of FACE realized that they were trying to intervene too early.

'We learned that many of these women were coming to us at the wrong time. Having just left an abusive situation, they were very hostile. When it became clear to us that they would never get a job until they learned how to direct their anger, we decided to encourage women to come to FACE only after they had therapy or completed a job training course [and were] actually ready to look for a job,' Nancy says.

Yet, throughout, Nancy's commitment to FACE has never wavered — even when she turned down a judgeship; accepting it would have meant severing her ties with FACE because of a perceived conflict of interest. And while being the only full-time volunteer staff of FACE is stressful, Nancy accepted her Women of Distinction Award from the YWCA of Metro Toronto in May 1998 with pride at how FACE has developed into an essential part of the volunteer social safety net.

She says with a smile: "This is really the culmination of what I was hoping to do."

For more information about FACE, see the organization's website at: <http://www.wiredkingdom.com/face> or call (416) 787-7165.

Sam Sullivan

When Sam Sullivan first moved into subsidized housing, he couldn't open his front door, his freezer or his curtains, and he had to drive to the rehabilitation centre to use the washroom.

Sam is a quadriplegic, the result of a skiing accident at the age of 19. But rather than let his frustration limit his ability to live independently, he decided to do something about it. The result is Tetra — an organization dedicated to ensuring that people with disabilities live independent and fulfilling lives.

Before Tetra, Sam felt helpless and frustrated by the fact that he had to depend on others to accomplish even the simplest tasks. And he thought he was the only one living this nightmare. But after talking with three other quadriplegics in the basement of the G.E Strong Rehabilitation Centre in Vancouver, he realized he wasn't alone. "At first we discussed the unfairness of it all — the lack of support accompanying the recent trend to deinstitutionalization. We wanted to advocate for social change."

Their liveliest discussions centered around bafflers to everyday living. "There were just so many things we couldn't do and so few

assistive devices out there that could really make a difference in the quality of our lives. When we looked at what could make a real difference, we realized how important the technical aspect was," Sam says. "We wanted to change the world, but we thought maybe we should start by helping ourselves."

The four set out to find an engineer who could help them develop devices that would assist them in their daily lives. The first barrier they encountered was the hourly rate of engineers — certainly not something they could afford as welfare recipients.

Undaunted, Sam wrote to the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia, signing it on behalf of Tetra — even though the organization didn't formally exist. "I thought being part of an organization would give us credibility," he explains.

Paul Cennak responded to the call. Paul was a professional engineer with some spare time on his hands and he was looking for something meaningful to do.

"It was like finding a saviour," Sam says. "When I showed him how I could open the freezer



Sam Sullivan (left) and the Honourable Garde B. Gardom, Lieutenant Governor of BC



Sam attended a Ground Breaking Ceremony for a housing society for the disabled in November 1997.

only to have it slam shut again, Paul solved the problem by bending a hanger and attaching it to the lower shelf to keep the door open. When I showed him how I could get butter on my bread but couldn't spread it, he heated the knife and gave it a twist that makes spreading easy."

Over the next six months, Paul helped Sam overcome the barriers that were preventing him from living independently. He created a device to enable Sam to open his front door, and used a sailboat cleat to rig the curtains so that Sam could open and close them.

"Finally," says Sam, "I could see that I was starting to achieve some of the independence I wanted so badly."

From Sam and Paul's experience, Tetra was born. Tetra recognizes that people are not handicapped by their disabilities but by obstacles in their living environment. Within two years, four engineers were helping a dozen quadriplegics. As word spread, requests came in from across North America — e.g., a flute holder for someone in Arizona; mud flaps for the wheelchair of an individual in New

Brunswick. Along with the requests came offers from people who wanted to help.

Tetra's volunteer engineers, design technicians and health professionals work one-on-one with their clients to create the required assistive aids or modifications to their environment. "Our volunteers are gems," Sam says proudly. "It is so great when they come forward, and it is very powerful to meet disabled people who reach out and try to take control of their lives — that is a great gift for us all."

Tetra has turned into an organization that brokers and facilitates relationships, and provides a mechanism for people to reach out to others. It doesn't try to compete with private industry — indeed, it is careful to avoid doing exactly that. Public and private organizations often fund assistive devices for basic survival needs, but devices that are not considered 'essential' are generally not funded and are quite costly, especially when they have to be tailor-made. Tetra's goal is to fill this gap in service.

Tetra boasts many success stories. One volunteer constructed a desktop 'lazy Susan' for a self-employed accountant who had difficulty reaching office supplies and textbooks. Now he uses a mouthstick to turn the circular platform to flip through his rolodex or pick up a ruler or pen from a cup.

Sam explains: "Sometimes disabled people are shy about asking for help, but when we talk about our services from a technical perspective, they are more open," he says. As for the volunteers, Sam adds: "I have noticed that skilled engineers and technicians aren't always comfortable reaching out in a social or public way. But through Tetra, they can make a real contribution."

Today, Tetra has chapters across Canada. Elizabeth Dolan, the founder of the Calgary chapter, agrees with Sam.



Members of the Tetra Society at an event in Montreal.

“There are no strict or rigid rules, so Tetra attracts some very creative people. It is wonderful to see the types of requests we receive,” she says. “When a project is first discussed, you wonder what the volunteer will do. But one thing is a constant: Every time a volunteer is successful, it is really like a miracle — you know it will change someone’s life.”

Tetra has a huge impact on the lives of people with disabilities, but the impact is also great for the volunteers who help them. Paul Cermak has gained a lot from his 11-year relationship with Sam. “Sam wants to expand his life and the lives of others like him. And he asks for assistance in a way that is difficult to refuse. He has such vibrancy that you just have to go along with him,” Paul says.

Sam’s leadership and inspiration have been major ingredients in Tetra’s success — as has his belief that there is a role for everyone who wants to get involved with Tetra.

Jean Suit) first heard Sam being interviewed in 1992 and thought: “Now there’s an initiative that I wouldn’t mind helping out with when I have some time.” But the adjunct professor of engineering at the University of Western Ontario had a full schedule working in the industry and championing the cause of women

in engineering — and the note she made to herself only resurfaced a year later.

“When I called Sam to ask if there was a local group that I could offer my services to, Sam responded, ‘There isn’t one yet. How would you like to start one?’

“Sam is so inspiring,” Jean says. “Nothing deters him. He cares about people, he really listens and gets to the heart of the matter. And his concern goes beyond the individual. He has a genuine concern for community that really drives him.”

Sam got Jean started in Tetra, but she is clear about what keeps her involved: “The clients keep me going. It is so clear when you have a successful project — the client’s pleasure is so obvious. And that is a big motivator.”

Sometimes, it doesn’t take much to produce that pleasure. Sam tells of a request that Tetra received last summer from a quadriplegic working in an old building.

“Because he couldn’t open the window, he was sweltering. When I brought the problem to a meeting of volunteers, we started to develop this elaborate mechanical

solution. By the end of the meeting, we had worked out most of the details. When we went to meet with the fellow who made the request, we saw that the reason that he couldn't open the window was because he couldn't get close enough. Once we moved the filing cabinet, there was no problem!"

"I guess we got a little carried away," Sam says sheepishly, "and forgot one of the most basic principles of Tetra — you have to listen to people."

People who have worked with Sam marvel at his energy and his ability to get things done. Says Tetra Project Coordinator James Scanlan: "Often I get telephone messages from Sam that are sent at 3:00 in the morning. His mind is always working, and he is not afraid of challenges."

It is this drive and energy, James says, that drove Sam to earn a Bachelor of Business Administration. Sam became fluent in Cantonese in less than two years because the riding he was representing as a city councillor had a large Chinese population. "He does radio interviews in Cantonese as part of the two- and-a-half days he spends at City Hall," James marvels.

In 1995, Tetra won the prestigious Peter Drucker Award for the most innovative charity in Canada. The increased profile that resulted from the award meant that a growing list of supporters, funders and partners became involved, enhancing Tetra's credibility. This publicity translated into grants from the public, private and charitable sectors. Most recently, Tetra received \$66,000 (US) from NEC

Foundation of America and Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation to support the stand-up of the newly amalgamated Tetra Society of North America.

With growth, however, came growing pains. In its early years, Tetra encouraged anyone to establish a local chapter under the auspices of Tetra. But the organization became concerned about liability when its name was used inappropriately on a few occasions.

Sam concluded that a more formalized structure was needed, with volunteers supported by a paid, part-time administrative staff — a model used by a similar program in Australia. By relieving volunteers of administrative work, they would be free to concentrate on the more rewarding work of invention, public awareness and fundraising.

Today, there are local chapters in cities across the continent (including Calgary, Ottawa, Medicine Hat, London and Los Angeles), all of which enjoy administrative support from Tetra's head office in Vancouver.

No matter how large Tetra grows, however, Sam always remembers what started him down this path: "The memory that haunts me the most is being surrounded by blank walls, being all by myself. I wanted to participate in life so badly. But my life was so wretched that I couldn't even open the door."

"The fact that there are still people out there who are living that same experience, the existence that I wanted to break free of so desperately, is a real motivator."

For more information about the Tetra Society of North America, see the organization's website at: <http://www.reachdisability.org>

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