

## Theparent helper

Advocate buoyed by strong belief that, with support, teen moms and dads can build strong, healthy families

BY LESLEY MACDONALD, FREELANCE    SEPTEMBER 5, 2009



Karen Mottershead is executive director of the Terra Centre for Pregnant and Parenting Teens.

**Photograph by:** John Lucas, The Journal, Freelance

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Karen Mottershead feels blessed to have grown up with strong, resilient, inspiring women who taught her about seizing life's opportunities.

At an age when many people start to slow down, Karen's mother graduated from university. She sailed and biked around the world and ran a little newspaper in Uranium City, a fly-in community in northwestern Saskatchewan. Even today, at 75, when many of her peers are being cared for, she's still caring for others and working with people with disabilities.

"That helped me realize that you really have to take some risks in life," says Karen, Edmonton's Woman of Vision for September. "You have to be willing to put yourself out there, leave all the doors open, and then when you walk through them, they take you to amazing places."

Karen brings that openness to her work at the Terra Centre, a 38-year-old non-profit organization that provides counselling, housing and support for 600 pregnant and parenting teens each year. As executive director since 2003, she is respected for her dedicated leadership, infinite energy and passion.

"The needs of the families we serve are really complex and they are great," she says. "They're all living in poverty and highly vulnerable. They don't have support in their lives and you wonder how it is their kids are going to do well. It's not a great recipe for success without the right kinds of support."

But Karen believes teens have the potential to be successful parents of happy, healthy children. In the past few years, she and her staff have worked hard to connect with Terra alumni to gauge how well they are doing several years later. They established a Facebook site and within two months, had over 200 alumni join. Their stories have been inspiring, with the vast majority of parents and children doing well.

But the alumni say society's bias against teen parents hasn't changed much.

"Twenty years later and they still feel the stigmas," says Karen. "You're always the teen parent because when your kid starts school, someone does the math and they go 'That must have been a teen parent.' It follows them through life and to some degree, those judgments really scar the kids. That's why we want to start changing societal views."

One year ago, Karen launched a youth leadership program where Terra clients advocate for the agency and other teen parents in the community, by speaking to the public during the United Way campaign, meeting with MLAs and participating in agency events.

She also engaged corporations to build affordable housing for Terra clients, including a 14-suite apartment building with an emergency apartment to provide short-term housing in a crisis situation. Hope Terrace also includes family suites that welcome fathers, a first in Canada.

"There are a lot of young parents where the mom and dad are together and the dad is involved," says Karen. "A child deserves to have a relationship with the father."

But Karen's biggest priority is education, a crucial factor in the success of teen parents, many of whom haven't completed Grade 10, and a huge barrier. Terra has a partnership with Braemar high school, but only about 150 out of 600 teen parents attend per year. Girls get only three weeks' maternity leave from the school and are penalized if they miss more than three days in one month, which can happen easily if they have a sick child or no access to child care.

If a teen parent is under 16, she can't apply for financial support from the government, and the system is so complicated, Karen has one full-time staff member who does nothing but fill out forms and help clients navigate it.

"We have 65 amazing staff who do amazing work and they fight the battles. They take on the systems, they do the advocacy work and they say 'Hey, that's not right and this is why this young person was out of school. And we need to put it right.' "

Karen has lobbied the provincial government to have some of these barriers to high school completion removed. She was instrumental in increasing Terra scholarships to assist clients with the cost of post-secondary education.

In October, Terra will run a three-week campaign and diaper drive to raise awareness about the issues facing teen parents and to garner public support. She hopes to elicit help from more businesses like Bon Ton Bakery and owner Hilton Dinner. Bon Ton has donated bread to Terra every week for years and raised \$50,000 for the child-care centre to mark the bakery's 50th anniversary two years ago.

"One person's enthusiasm and energy I think really illustrates that there is so much more that really is possible when we join together in partnership," says Karen. "I think it's about people and businesses being challenged to think about 'what part of my little world can I impact and where can I be the difference?'" "

For Karen, her work is not a job; it's a way of life. "I never feel like I'm going to work. It just feels like I'm having another good day."

Watching what teen parents are able to overcome inspires her. She has started an endowment fund to ensure her vision of long-term sustainability for Terra and its work building a healthy, strong community.

"It doesn't matter whether I'm 50, 60 or 70, just like my mom. As long as you're breathing and walking, you can still keep doing your part. There's my curse...(I'll be) delivering bread for Terra at 75 years old. And that's an amazing contribution." Lesley MacDonald is the producer and host of the Woman of Vision series. Watch for her television story about Karen Mottershead on the news hour on Global Edmonton at 6 p.m. Monday and at [www.womanofvision.ca](http://www.womanofvision.ca).

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