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From 'Me' to 'We' Sandra Woitas on Edmonton's City Centre Education Project

By Scott Rollans

In celebration of Edmonton's centennial year as a City, 100 individuals who have made significant contributions to our community were honoured. Sandra Woitas was one of the individuals chosen to receive this special award – congratulations, Sandra!

When you first meet Sandra Woitas ('80 BEd, '96 MEd), she strikes you as a woman who tackles life head-on. A woman who won't back away from a problem. A woman with high expectations, both of herself and of those around her.

As coordinator of Edmonton's unique City Centre Education Project (CCEP), Woitas puts those attributes to work every day.

If you're going to improve the education – and the lives – of the city's most marginalized children, you need a great deal of persistence, self confidence, and determination.

"We want to show the world that poverty is not an excuse," Woitas declares, sitting in her Eastwood Elementary School office. "An urban myth exists about poor kids. The myth says that our kids are not capable. It's not true. Given the right support, and having the best teachers and principals, we can provide those kids with the quality of education they deserve."

Four years ago, such a vision would have seemed utopian, even to Woitas. As the principal of Norwood School, she had already developed a reputation for innovation, working with outside agencies and private sponsors to expand horizons for her students and their families. Even so, she struggled with the daily knowledge that Edmonton's school system was letting many of its most vulnerable students down.



"Teachers were working really, really hard at trying to provide kids with the same kind of experience that the kids across the river were getting," she says. "At McCauley Junior High, they had microwave cooking as an option. It was held in the staff room with one microwave, two bowls and a teacher. Meanwhile, across the river at McKernan, they had a home ec specialist and a home ec lab."

The tide began to turn in 2000, at a Thursday evening supper meeting hosted by the then-Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools. "Dr. Emery Dosedall, a brilliant man, brought nine of us principals together," recalls Woitas. "We were all principals of high-needs inner-city schools: Alex Taylor, Norwood, Eastwood, Spruce Avenue, Delton, McCauley, Parkdale, Queen Mary Park, and John A. McDougall.

"Emery said, 'You know what? I'm tired of hearing you guys whining and complaining. There are definite trends going on in your schools. You've got declining enrolment, you have some challenging students and families, and your programming is limited by your small numbers, especially when it comes to junior high. You guys have a problem. I trust that you are all very smart people. I want you to come up with a solution.' And he left us." Woitas smiles at the recollection: "We looked at one another and said, 'Oh yeah, easy for him to say.'"

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The principals began to hold regular meetings to grapple with Dosedall's challenge. They soon came to a painful conclusion: there simply weren't enough students to go around. "The first thing we recommended was to close schools," says Woitas. "This came from the principals; it didn't come from some bureaucrat in planning, or some bureaucrat at Alberta Learning. We needed to have a new plan for these kids. We were competing against one another for enrolment rather than working together."

The group decided to close two elementary schools – Alex Taylor and Queen Mary Park – and to shut down the junior high programs at McDougall and Eastwood. Then they set about creating a structure in which the remaining schools could work together towards their common goals. The CCEP began to take shape.

As Woitas describes it, the project is about "moving from 'me' to 'we'." Principals, teachers, staff, and families have gradually begun to view the city centre schools as a single, interconnected unit. Instead of seven small schools working on their own, CCEP is a seven-campus collaboration encompassing 1700 students. Woitas hopes that, one day, they'll even share a single budget.

The collaboration has opened up new opportunities for students. If kids at Parkdale are interested in music, they ride a bus to McCauley to take band. Likewise, kids travel to Parkdale for art and to Spruce Avenue for home-ec and industrial arts.

While addressing the schools' common needs, the program also gives individual schools some extra help in meeting the specific needs of their students. Much of CCEP's focus is on reading and writing, with a Balanced Literacy program in the early grades and a half-time teacher-librarian in every school.

Parents have gotten into the act as well. All of the schools report greater parental participation in school activities, and representatives of all seven Parent Advisory Councils meet regularly to discuss common issues. Says Waitas, "Maybe the reason that parents haven't been involved before is that we haven't invited them the right way."

The project's growing energy has attracted plenty of outside support. Organizations such as Big Brothers and Sisters and the YMCA work directly with CCEP, and private donors have stepped up to fund field trips and extra programming. "Last year we had over 100 kids taking violin lessons," marvels Waitas.

Changing the world will take more than four years, but Waitas remains pleased with the progress thus far. "We've made some gradual, steady improvements in achievement. Slow and steady. Attendance has become better, we have greater involvement of families, and we have a whole bunch more community support. So it's coming together."

Clearly, she's not the only one who thinks so. Schools in other parts of Edmonton have begun to ask Waitas to help them form their own collaborative structures. And *Today's Parent* recently singled out the CCEP in an article about Canada's best schools, saying, "Few schools excited us as much as this one."

When you tackle life head-on, the excitement is contagious.

Scott Rollans is an Edmonton freelance writer and editor with a special interest in education.

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