



Photos by Carla Buckingham

DARE to play in Field's dreams

Marilyn Field was teaching at an elementary school in Scarborough; an inner-city school with a plethora of at-risk students.

She'd arrive at the school to start her day around 7 a.m., and already there'd be a few students waiting outside for her to let them in.

She recalls a time when one of the students was waiting on the doorstep of the public school without any shoes on.

These students came to school early to work on whatever art or music project Field had conceived for them.

These kids, students that had been marginalized and written off by others, developed an appreciation of the arts because of Field.

She took them under her proverbial wing and taught them to love the things she loves — classical music, fine art, literature, architecture and dance.

But she didn't just teach them about art inside the classroom. Field took students to experience high culture in the world outside of school.

For the first adventure, she took six students to the Espirit Orchestra in downtown Toronto, where she was a volunteer, to see a concert. What amazed her was how many of these Scarborough kids didn't know how to get into Toronto's downtown core.

"I was taking them so far out of their world," she recalls.

When the students sat in their seats, waiting for R. Murray Schaffer to take to the stage, many of the patrons sitting around them got worried looks on their faces.

"They thought these kids would disturb them, ruin their night," Field says, laughing.

They were wrong.

When the concert began, the students watched

MARILYN FIELD

By Karen Martin-Robbins

intensely — mesmerized by the performance.

Afterwards, Schaffer came into the foyer to greet his audience and the students were ecstatic.

"They all wanted pens to get an autograph."

Field says she realized at that moment how easily kids can recognize excellence.

"These kids need heroes. They will find heroes in their own world — be it from television or the drug-dealer in their neighbourhood with all the bling — they will find them. Let's give them as many different heroes as we can... Why hold back from these kids. Let's expose them to excellence as much as possible."

By the time the next cultural field trip rolled around, there were 30 students vying for a spot.

"These kids need the arts in their lives. It emboldens them to be strong."

Field, 57, is sitting on a bar stool in her airy kitchen at Chateau Windrush, near Hockley Valley, where she lives with her husband, JC Pennie. Her step-son and daughter-in-law live in a separate house at the edge of the 184-acre property. She's dressed in an elegant violet pant suit, her blond hair loose.

As she recalls her days as a teacher, Field's eyes tear slightly. Although she says she doesn't regret those days — working so closely with inner-city students — the long hours took a toll.

She left the profession in the mid-90s with a new plan — a program that would expose students to the arts in urban areas across Canada. She wanted to select delegates from schools across the city who would go to visit various cultural spots and report back to their class.

Sandra Bussin, Toronto city councillor and speaker, was still a Toronto trustee when she met Field at a fundraiser for the Espirit Orchestra. Field shared her ideas with Bussin about bringing the arts to inner-city youth and it struck a chord with the trustee. Bussin had been trying to get an arts school started in Toronto and wasn't having much luck.

"I felt what she was proposing would be an opportunity for some kids to get exposed to the arts," Bussin said.

The Toronto District School Board wasn't initially jazzed about Field's idea — so the women hit the street. They went door-to-door to all the schools in Bussin's Beaches district approaching principals with the idea.

All the schools signed on and in November 1996 DAREarts — which stands for discipline, action, responsibility and excellence — was born.

"The response from the kids and the parents and schools was phenomenal," Field recalls.

There's physical evidence of the hard work she put into that first year. At DAREarts headquarters, a heritage house that sits on her property, there's a mural adorning the wall created by that first group of students.

Working with students from the University of Toronto music program the summer following that first year, the students came up with stories around

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the theme of “celebration.” The university students took those stories and composed songs which, in turn, school bands were taught to perform by university students and renowned musicians, including the St. Lawrence Quartet.

But it didn't end there.

DAREarts followed up with workshops at the Art Gallery of Ontario featuring artist Lupe Rodrigues who helped the students translate the stories into pictures on the mural. Then, the bands all came together in an evening performance.

“I'm good at coming up with crazy ideas,” Field says.

It's a warm evening and Field, a young child at the time, is sneaking out of her house near Brantford, Ont. She's making her way to the farmer's field across the road. She's going into the field in the dark with a very special purpose in mind — to imagine she's dancing with her mother.

As the young girl twirls, humming a tune in her head, her nightgown flapping in the breeze, she feels close to her long-dead mother.

Doris Field died of cancer when Field was just two years old.

But Doris left behind some tangible gifts for her daughter — her mandolin, her piano and her art work. These items gave Field a profound connection to her mother and inspired in her a passion for the arts that she wanted to pass on to others.

With the encouragement of her father, Norman, Field could read music before she could even read a book.

Not allowed to watch television, Field spent her free time drawing the sunset or creating music. The art helped fill the hole in her soul that her mother had left behind.

DAREarts is now offered at close to 75 schools across the GTA as well as in pockets across Canada. And Field is always expanding the program, which is run mostly on money generated through fundraisers, corporate sponsorship and donations. (It did get a three-year Trillium grant and some financial assistance from the Ontario Arts Council.)

“We don't get as much government funding as you would imagine,” Field says. “We rely heavily on generous corporations, individuals and private foundations.”

These days the Toronto District School Board advocates in support of the program.

“They have seen the results...they are now very supportive,” Field says.

And DAREarts has brought several well-known artists on board over the years — including prima ballerina Karen Kain, actor Gene Hackman, artist Ken Danby, actor Edward Asner and former Stratford director Richard Monett.

“I'm not afraid to ask people to help,” Field says. “I'm not afraid to pick up the phone and call people and say, ‘Hey, I've got this idea, want to get involved?’”

Charles Pachter is a visual artist who has worked at DAREarts for many years. He says so many artists get involved because of Field.

“She is a truly dedicated woman who has inspired so many young people to turn their lives around,” Pachter says.

He remembers watching one of the DAREart groups of visible minority inner-city kids dressed up in powdered wigs and silks singing excerpts from various Italian operas at the Royal Ontario Museum.

“It's one of my favourite memories,” he says.

“Watching Marilyn in action is truly heart-warming. She is, simply, amazing.”

Field and DAREarts changed Shamin Mohammed Junior's life.

Mohammed, a student at Runnymede Collegiate Institute in Toronto, was selected to attend DAREarts in 2000.

One night, he was walking through his neighbourhood when he was attacked by two local gang members carrying guns.

“I literally drew on my new confidence (as a DAREarts student) to evade the challenge,” he says. “I remember thinking, ‘I am DAREarts, I can do this’ as I told them to back off and began making as much noise as possible.”

The gunmen backed off — but regrettably shot another teen later that day.



“As a teen growing up in urban Toronto, I know first hand of the need for survival skills in the struggle against drugs, gangs and ghettos. DAREarts taught me those survival skills in a way I would never have expected,” he says.

“It pulled me up into the international community of Toronto and the world beyond my neighbourhood. Once I saw the light by learning about many cultures, art, music, dance, as expressions of self, my vision and friendships have become global.”

These days Mohammed, who is Guyanese, is no longer evading gang members in the streets of Toronto. He's in his first year of a baccalaureate of health and sciences at the University of Ottawa. As well, he founded his own charity, Children's AIDS Health program, which benefits children with HIV and AIDS in underdeveloped countries. The organization has over 400 volunteers from coast-to-coast. All the executives and directors are under the age of 25.

“I want other kids to share this great gift, to know that there is always someone out there who will support their dreams and that there is an organization which makes that possible,” he says, of DAREarts.

Living in the Headwaters region, Field wanted to expand DAREarts to include children in her community but felt it should be geared toward their unique needs.

A seed was planted in Field's head when she was

approached by Bela Gran Jensen, founder of Children for Peace, from the Czech Republic who had heard about DAREarts. Children for Peace, which includes about a million youth from many European countries, were raising money for children in war-torn Bosnia.

The Czech youth made cards to sell and sent the proceeds to Bosnia to benefit children for projects such as rebuilding schools. When Jensen invited Field to take part, it seemed a perfect fit for local kids.

Over 10,000 children in Canada create cards in the DAREarts Children for Peace program, including about 3,000 from the Headwaters region. The recipients of the funds have changed over the years — going to areas in need.

For the last two years, the children decided to send 2,000 cards for Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. Normally the cards don't have a message, but for these ones, the children decided to include a message for the soldiers — instructing them to enjoy the card and pass it on to an Afghan child. One DAREarts student who immigrated from Afghanistan also translated a message for the children in the war-torn country into its two official languages. The message says, “We love you, from Canadian children.”

Through Children for Peace, Field had the opportunity to meet Canada's top military commander, Gen. Rick Hilliard. The Canadian general got Field involved with helping Aboriginal children in Canada's north.

Anne-Marie Warburton, who runs Gallery Gemma in the Alton Mill, originally met Field through her son Kristian, who was performing in the Younger Company at Theatre Orangeville.

“She asked a group of these children to perform at an arts festival in the area, and at that time I heard her speak about DAREarts and the difference the arts were making in at-risk children's lives. Since I had first-hand experience, through my own son, of how much the arts meant to him and how growing up in Orangeville — where we have so much to offer through Theatre Orangeville — I knew that not every child had access to the arts and was interested in what Marilyn had created...”

The local jeweler was touched by Field's passion and began attending fundraising events. She was also invited to teach children in Toronto how to make jewellery.

“I grew tremendously through that experience,” she said. “Marilyn is a true leader, she inspires people in such ways that she leads a team of outstanding volunteers from the highest echelons in the arts to give of their time and talents to help at risk children.”

Although the government hasn't yet stepped up with sustainable funding for DAREarts programs, Field has been recognized for her contribution to the arts. In 2003, she received the meritorious service medal from the Governor General of Canada Adrienne Clarkson. That same year she was given the Queen's Jubilee Medal by then-Premier Ernie Eves.

In 2001, she conducted 60 children from 24 countries at the 100th celebration of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, which is the first time young people have ever been invited to attend the auspicious event.

DAREarts children are also invited every year to Prague in the Czech Republic to sing in the Centipede Children for Peace concert, which is televised throughout Europe on Christmas Eve.

But Field refuses to take all the credit for these achievements.

“I feel proud. But I also feel humility. Nothing is you alone. I am a product of an incredible team of supporters be they artists, teachers and children.”

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