

## HEART &amp; SOUL

## “This is no ‘home for unwed girls’ ”

When Dr. Christine Davies moved to Saint John, NB, 19 years ago, she was struck by the number of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in her family medicine practice. This May, that observation was transformed into the First Step Housing Project, a renovated, former convent that up to 14 pregnant teenagers or teen mothers now call home. “I see a lot of very young moms,” says Davies, “and I’m concerned there’s a very adverse effect if they don’t have a lot of support.”

Until 1997, the question nagging at Davies was what to do to help those young mothers. A *CMAJ* article (1998;158[3]:294) on care for teens helped answer the question for her. At the time — and until First Steps opened this year — New Brunswick had no facility for high-risk pregnant teens.

Over the past 5 years, Davies and a small committee have been raising funds and planning First Steps. Last year they found the ideal building, a 100-year-old convent belonging to the Sisters of Charity. “It’s next to a local hospital in the centre of the city,” says Davies. “It’s close to high schools and to a lot of facilities that these young women will need.”

The convent now has 14 single bedrooms on 2 upper floors, where 7 full-time employees help the young women develop skills ranging from shopping wisely to studying well. They also receive infant-care training. Staff

also collaborate with local addiction counsellors, since drug and alcohol abuse is a common problem. The facility, which has no religious affiliation, will provide the young mothers with everything from meals to diapers for their babies.

But primarily, says Davies, First Steps is a home. “Our goal is not to go back to the pejorative ‘home for unwed girls.’ This will be a place where kids can really feel at home. They will have a lot of support.”



Saint John Telegraph

**Davies: taking those First Steps**

Davies, who has 3 grown children, including 2 daughters, hopes First Steps will also relieve much of the worry family, friends and the community at large have for these girls.

As an active part of the Saint John community — and with financial support from many local and provincial organizations — First Steps is considered one step on the road to self-sufficiency and good health for these

young women and their children. The staff works with social service agencies, and each young woman is assessed by a social worker. In many cases the teens were living in abusive situations or trying to escape from them.

“It’s amazing the number of kids you find who are moving from one friend’s house to another,” says Davies, who estimates that on average women will stay at First Steps for 6 to 8 months, spending time there before and after the birth.

Round-the-clock support, maintaining the building and meeting the needs of pregnant and new mothers is a time-consuming and expensive task. “When I first cut that article out of *CMAJ*, I had no idea what was involved,” says Davies, a native of Northern Ireland who moved to Montreal in 1972. “Fundraising is very time consuming. It’s been huge, but it’s been very fulfilling.”

With First Steps now up and running, it would seem an appropriate time for Davies to take a well-earned break. However, following on the heels of First Steps is Second Steps — the provision of safe, inexpensive housing for young mothers. “It’s hard for young people to find affordable housing,” explains Davies. “We are going to build a small apartment building.”

Judging from past results, you can bet she will. — *Donalee Moulton*, Halifax