



WHERE THE HEART IS: THE NURTURING CENTER SUPPORTS THE MANY ASPECTS OF FAMILY IN THE FLATHEAD

By Christine Hensleigh



To anyone walking past it, the two-story Craftsman house nestled on a quiet Kalispell street might seem like just another home in the neighborhood. But if you walk inside The Nurturing Center's headquarters and witness the coming and going of mothers, fathers, children, and even an occasional grandmother or grandfather, you'll realize that The Nurturing Center isn't just a home for one family—it's a support system and home for all of the Flathead's families.



Its logo—a home with a big red heart inside—perfectly captures the non-profit's philosophy: Home is where the family has opportunities and support.

The Nurturing Center prides itself on helping with any problem or question a family or parent may have. While it offers more than a dozen programs that help with all aspects of parenting, as well as a network of state, local, and federal programs that also aid families and children—if The Nurturing Center doesn't offer a program that can help, then it will find a program that can.

At The Nurturing Center's headquarters, a feeling of home, support, and nurturing prevails. From the plants that thrive in the sunlight of the parenting resources library, to the toys for kids and toddlers in a living/conference room where mothers, fathers, and grandparents receive answers and information—The Nurturing Center is clearly not your run-of-the-mill service center. There's even a cat wandering the rooms.

What's even more amazing is that this comfortable and inviting environment fielded more than 40,000 calls last year alone.

Since its beginnings 28 years ago, these comforts of home have been both intentional and integral to The Nurturing Center's success. Kids who come to visit with a parent have been known to refuse to leave—proof that those homey touches work.

"We want people to see us as a resource and a safe place to come," founder and executive director Susan Christofferson explains, emphasizing that the Center serves all economic backgrounds. "We lack an institutional feel. We want to maintain a safe and dignified environment."

A dignified environment is determined by more than just décor; it's based on a philosophy that Christofferson believes pays dividends to families and the community, particularly in a world that can often seem hectic and hostile.

"When people are treated with dignity,

they pay it forward—to their children and to their family. It's the beginning of a culture where we teach tolerance and respect. We meet parents wherever they are; we don't mandate or legislate."

The dignity, resources, and information are geared toward adults, but ultimately, it is all aimed at benefiting children.

"People have problems if all of their needs are not met [within] the first three years of their life. What happens to kids [in those years] shapes them forever," explains Christofferson.

To that end, The Nurturing Center takes calls about any parenting issue—if they don't have a program that can help, they can refer you to an organization that does. Their services extend into the childcare sector, where they provide training for childcare workers, support and materials for childcare center owners, and a childcare referral center for parents seeking quality care.

Behind all of those homey touches and comforts is a no-nonsense mission: Nurture opportunities for the family, which Christofferson sees as having direct correlation to a family's bottom line.

"The Nurturing Center is about economic development. Whether that means providing the workforce with adequate childcare or helping parents better themselves or their children," explains Christofferson.

That sort of simple sentiment is exactly what got the Center started years ago. As a stay-at-home mother of two young children and a busy volunteer in the field of social work, Christofferson found her calling in 1978—just as mothers were starting to enter the workforce en masse. After initially heading up the 4Cs (an organization that helped families find childcare), she discovered that providing support for other families quickly became her life's mission.

"I found a niche that I have a passion for. Nothing is more important than families and children, and I believe in investing in them," she says.

When a lecture on child discipline drew almost 200 parents, it was obvious that childcare was the tip of the iceberg. Ten years later, Christofferson moved The Nurturing Center to its current headquarters in Kalispell.

"It was on a wing and a prayer. We made curtains, bought furniture, and had an open house," recalls Christofferson. Many prayers and successes later, The Nurturing Center has blossomed to 15 employees and four build-

ings, all of which have that same homey feel. Christofferson's two children are all grown up, and she has been a foster parent to three children.

Christofferson credits collaboration with other agencies as one of the keys to The Nurturing Center's success. And with the Flathead Valley growing at one of the fastest rates in Montana, she's looking toward growing its existing programs.

She'd like to see an increase in services available for fathers, such as a mentoring program that matches experienced fathers with brand-new dads. She would also like to continue connecting with schools and businesses in order to expand services for employees. And always, Christofferson looks to increase her volunteer base.

After the satisfaction of watching her concept of support for children and families grow, Christofferson now takes pleasure in little things, such as watching a family or individual achieve personal goals.

"I'm hard-pressed to think of just one story," she replies when asked for her most satisfying moments. "Sometimes it's just a family reunion in stable housing or seeing clean and sober parents and children out of foster care. I'm really proud when people say that The Nurturing Center made them feel good."

While the Center's focus is on the family, it is the attention to each individual that has meant the success of the Center. Christofferson recalls one doctor who was so ashamed of his divorce until a Nurturing Center program made him feel good about himself again.

"Sometimes you see a family succeed; sometimes it's just one person."

Multiply that by the 40,000 people who called the Center last year, and it adds up to one big difference and one big heart. ♦



THE NURTURING CENTER'S MISSION: STRENGTHENING FAMILIES & SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES

PROGRAMS

Parent Support

Offering the ParentShare and ParentCare programs, in-home parenting assistance, parent education, divorce education, and a resource library.

Safe Havens visitation and exchange center

Providing a safe and supportive environment for parents and children to reunite.

Childcare resource and referral

Offering childcare assistance, referrals for out-of-home and in-home childcare, and a library with resource materials.

Childcare training and development

Offering professional education for childcare business owners and childcare professionals, child development information, and a toy and equipment lending library.

Mentoring

Gemini Program—a program for ninth-grade young women, providing opportunities to develop confidence and promote personal and social responsibility through mentorship with adult women.

Beyond these in-house programs, The Nurturing Center can help you find assistance through their network with state, local, and federal agencies.

Contact The Nurturing Center at 406-756-1414 if you are interested in participating, volunteering, or supporting any of these programs, or visit them on their web site at www.nurturingcenter.org.