



Photo: John F. Phillips

Jessie's: Young Moms & Thriving Babies

June Callwood

June Callwood, écrivaine célèbre de Toronto, parle de l'établissement de Jessie's, le premier service d'urgence pour les mères adolescentes. Basé sur des idées égalitaires les adolescentes y sont respectées, trouvent souvent de l'aide pour retrouver leur amour-propre et voient leur bébé soigné à souhait. La croissance de mères adolescentes qui gardent leur enfant a rendu la création de Jessie's nécessaire.

American writer Norman Cousins has called the phenomenon of teenagers' raising babies "the bombshell that has hit America." In Ontario, according to the Ontario Medical Association, there are about 20,000 adolescents each year who become pregnant. About 9,000 will have abortions; most of these are from stable, middle-class homes. Of the remaining 11,000, almost 90 per cent (many of these from fragmented family backgrounds) will decide to raise their babies.

Times have changed. There is tolerance now of unwed mothers who keep their babies instead of placing them furtively for adoption. Girls begin to menstruate earlier: there are ten-year-olds who are biological women. What has not changed is that sexual willingness is still the price-tag for holding the interest of a desired male.

Birth-control programs are working. The birth rate among adolescents is going down, particularly in areas where family-life programs in schools are specific about contraception. The boom is in what social workers call the retention rate (mothers keeping their newborns)

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and in the youth of these mothers. In Kitchener, Ontario, last year a twelve-year-old took her teddy bear into the delivery room; Jessie's now has two thirteen-year-olds awaiting the birth of their babies.

Jessie's is a comprehensive service which concentrates on teenagers younger than nineteen. It began late in 1979 when a group of people involved in direct services to teenage mothers began to meet regularly in a basement room in Nellie's, a Toronto shelter for battered women. They were alarmed at their inability to meet the needs of these vulnerable families. Out of two years of planning sessions, which eventually pulled in representatives of provincial and municipal governments and health departments as well as every agency in Metro Toronto concerned for adolescents, a holistic approach was developed.

Somewhere in that process the program acquired the name Jessie's. Jessie is Everywoman. The planners reviewed the short list of prominent Canadian suffragettes and decided that Agnes, Emily, and Nellie already are well represented in feminist undertakings.

It is appropriate that Jessie is Everywoman because Jessie's is everything. The one-stop service for young mothers opened in January, 1982, at 154 Bathurst Street in a two-storey former Toronto car-repair shop which now contains a basement swap-shop (where mothers can borrow cribs, toys, baby clothes, and other supplies), a main-floor lounge, kitchen, baby-bathing area, and an enormous nursery available for parent-relief and parent-child drop-in and an

upstairs space for pre-natal groups, parenting groups, reading and math upgrading, life-skills training, family counselling, vocational counselling, adoption and abortion counselling, and follow-up. Two public-health nurses, one full-time and one part-time, are available, along with counsellors, teachers, birth coaches, housing placement, nutritionists, and a roster of screened and trained volunteers.

Underway is the country's first 24-hour emergency infant-care service. Mothers in acute distress can arrange at Jessie's to place their babies temporarily in private homes where caring, trained, and supervised people will look after the babies until the mother is able to cope again. This already unique service has an additional unique feature. It is a joint project of Jessie's, one of the newest agencies in town, and Family Day Care Services (FDCS), founded in 1851. Since Jessie's is a feminist collective, it is quite remarkable that the directors of FDCS (which is structured in the traditional way) were willing to make their employees responsible to Jessie's egalitarian staff.

Jessie's funding is another miracle. The project's planning group received immediate support from the then-Minister of Community and Social Services Keith Norton. Later Ontario's then-Minister of Health Dennis Timbrell also was encouraging. George Thomson, a former Kingston family-court judge with a reputation for social innovations while on the bench, was highly placed in Ontario's civil service at the time and expedited a guarantee of provincial funding. Frank Drea, who

succeeded Keith Norton, bumped the guarantee from \$100,000 to \$150,000 commencing in April, 1982.

Funding the 24-hour emergency infant care was another saga. Since there is no legislation to cover such a service, there is no government funding apparatus. Paul Godfrey, Metro Toronto Chairman, met with June Callwood, President of Jessie's, and John Pepin, Jessie's board member and Executive Director of Family Day Care Services, and was so impressed with the need for emergency hostels for babies that he pulled together joint funding of \$50,000 from the province and Metro Toronto. United Appeal Special Projects Committee put in another \$18,000. Dr. Gordon Chong, alderman in Jessie's ward and chairman of Metro's Community Services and Housing Committee, steered the funding through the shoals of red tape.

That amount of high-level backing is eloquent evidence that the community is worried and that Jessie's had done its homework. The planners had good statistics, a thought-through program, and letters of praise from children's-aid societies, maternity homes, public-health officials, mayors, and community centres. The feminist approach of respect for teenage women and encouragement to enable them to achieve self-worth and independence happens also to be the most effective way of helping their babies to thrive.

A frequent response to the public's perception that all teenagers are likely to be inadequate parents, a prejudice that is flatly untrue, is that there should be mandatory supervision of adolescents who raise babies. Apart from a civil-liberties issue, mandatory supervision of young moms and their babies simply would not work. The most vulnerable, the least able to mother, would simply hide from contact with health professionals, teachers, and social workers.

Jessie's is the same proposal turned around. It provides what young moms, what *all* moms, need: friendship, information, relief. It is worth a try in every community.

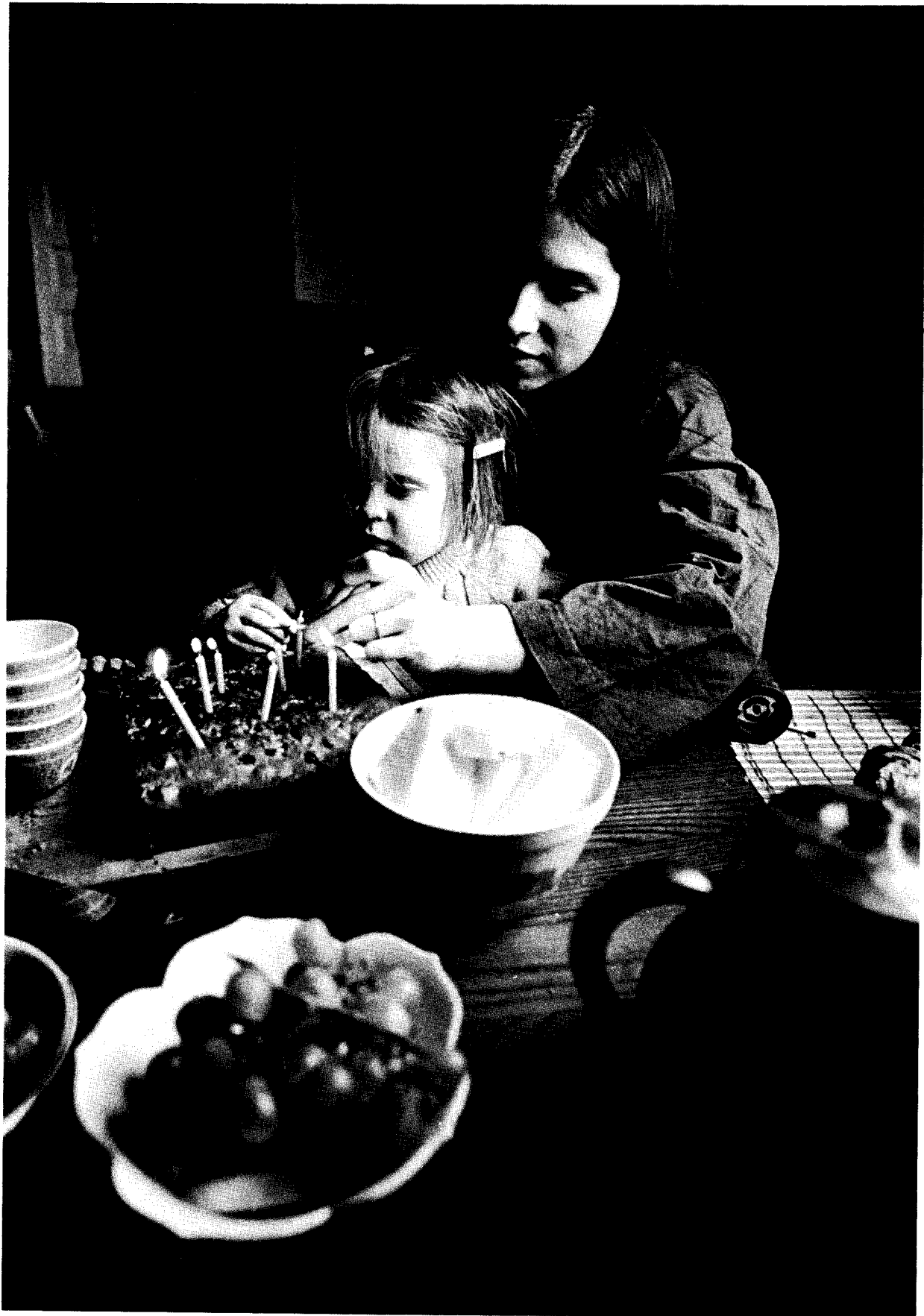


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