

# Fostering Love and Blessings, the Louise Stevenson Story

By Janine LeGal

For five decades, long-time Winnipeg resident Louise Stevenson nurtured over 600 foster children, providing a safe environment and a place to call home for each of them. Over the years, she fostered love and the belief that love could make everything right again, for all children, no matter what.

In an interview with Holli Moncrieff of the Winnipeg Free Press a few years ago, Stevenson shared these words, "The greatest reward this side of heaven is to see little children blossom up in front of you when all you're doing is loving them. Could there be any better blessing in my life than to see this? Nothing, nothing," said the woman renowned for living life with passion and intensity.

For social workers having to apprehend a baby and needing a place for that child to go, 'Mrs. Stevenson's House of Love,' as it was called, was both a relief and a chance for that child to thrive and to grow in love. Stevenson believed wholeheartedly in the power of love. She knew that with enough of it, the babies could heal from the neglect and abuse they had experienced, and grow to be happy, healthy children, and she made that happen, time and time again.

Stevenson passed away peacefully on Friday, April 13, 2012 at age 93. Born to Paul and Ann Brown in Broad Valley, Manitoba on October 9, 1918, she is survived by her children Norman, Raymond, Shirley Ann and Carole Lynn,

as well as numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She was predeceased by her husband, Christian and her son, Douglas.

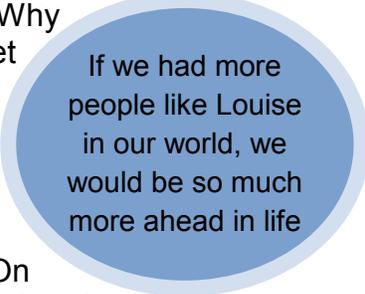
One of the hard things in life was losing Mom a little piece at a time," said her youngest daughter, Carole Brite, noting that her mother developed Alzheimer's in her later years.

But the legacy of love left behind, of transforming the lives of all who knew her in one way or another, will remain for many years to come.

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Social Worker Mario Rojas works for Winnipeg Child and Family Services (WCFS), and knew Stevenson for about ten years while he worked with WCFS Central. The loving care and nurturing she provided to countless children left an indelible mark on Rojas. "I have never seen someone like her in my 26 years of working with the agency. Any time that I had a child to be placed (especially a baby), a lot of the burden was lifted just by knowing that Louise would be taking care of the child. I always wanted to provide an initial clothing allowance for the child in care. However, I wasn't successful since she would reply that she had plenty of clothing since her friends and people from her church were always donating to her."

Rojas recalls the time he asked Stevenson to claim for mileage since she had taken a baby to the doctor. She replied saying: 'Why should I get money When I needed to take the child to the doctor because he was sick?' "On every occasion that I would explain to Louise what the agency was planning in terms of the child-in-care's parents, she would say that she hoped that they get better so they could take care of their wonderful baby. More than once, Louise mentioned that she cared for children because they were a gift from God. She has been the most wonderful human being I have ever met in both my professional and personal life. If we had more people like Louise in our world, we would be so much more ahead in life," says Rojas.



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As a foster home social worker, Leslie Johnston was responsible for overseeing Stevenson's home from 1990 to 1996, and placing children there. "Louise was a grateful person with a very positive, uncritical attitude toward life. She would tell you that it was her relationship with her God that gave her her strength and her ability to love her foster children so deeply. She was a very gentle soul, but with incredible personal strength underlying her calm exterior, a very positive person who never, ever complained or griped. As a foster mother, she was incredibly loving, calm and patient. She was also completely accepting of children from any race or ethnic background." Many of Stevenson's former foster children sought her out and came back to see

her years later, even though most of the children she cared for were infants and toddlers, making it almost impossible to track their history and find her.

"They would have been unaware of the gift that they had been given by having spent their early months or years in her care, but our knowledge of attachment theory tells us that whatever emotional health they are experiencing as adults is likely due in large part to her loving care in those early years," says Johnston. "Many of the babies and toddlers that came to Louise were coming from circumstances involving abuse, neglect and abandonment. Many were what we call 'failure to thrive,' which is a condition that results when an infant's basic needs are not regularly met. These babies lose weight, fail to meet developmental milestones, and in fact can even die. So there were many times when Louise had the joy of seeing such a child recover and blossom under her love and care. She also had the joy on many occasions of helping to transition an infant or toddler to a permanent adoptive home, witnessing at the same time the happiness of a childless couple receiving an infant or toddler as their own," Johnston explains.

Stevenson's May 18th Memorial Service highlighted the depth of her unconditional love. "Many children came to her home with challenges and unique needs requiring special attention and care. Remarkably, she never asked for a child to leave her home. If the child's needs became arduous, Louise's philosophy was to love them more. She would say if you give children your love they will heal," read one tribute.

Stevenson showed compassion and empathy towards birth parents as well. She would feel sympathetic when birth parents would miss the opportunity to watch their child reach their developmental milestones, like a first step or a first smile.

In 1998, the year Stevenson turned 80; the Government of Manitoba recognized her contribution to fostering by presenting her with an award of recognition, acknowledging that her love for children was without limit. Stevenson's granddaughter Pam captured the essence of her grandmother in a story she titled 'Angel on Earth.'

"Everyone should get the chance to meet a really good person in his or her lifetime. I would like to tell you about somebody I greatly admire and that is my Granny.....When you meet my Granny, you can feel the gentleness in her eyes that is coming from her heart and you can feel it in her hands when she touches or hugs you. She is not hung up on appearance, has never worn makeup or even nail polish and can usually be found in a dress she bought 10 years ago at a thrift store for 25¢, with an apron around her waist. They say everyone has a purpose and is put here for a reason. I know Granny is truly one of the lucky ones who found her calling and that was simply to be a Mom."

Carole Brite, Stevenson's daughter, reminisces about being raised in a farmhouse with no plumbing, a hobby

farm where her parents grew all their food, both plant and animal.

"My mother truly believed love could conquer all adversity. Mom sewed all our clothes, washed all of them, including all the cloth diapers, in a wringer washer, saw to it that we were all clean behind the ears with the aid of a tub brought out into the middle of the kitchen. Through all this she found the time to teach us all to dance. I remember how rough my mother's hands were as we whirled around the living room floor. When I was young, it was simply an observation. When I grew older and understood the labour of love those hands represented, it became admiration," says Brite.

"My mother taught us what it truly means to be rich and to share the wealth. We were fed and cared for modestly, but loved extravagantly!"

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The Foster Care Program at Winnipeg Child and Family Services is proud to announce the presentation, this fall, of the first annual Louise Stevenson Memorial Award, to a deserving, long-standing foster parent. The award will be given out at the annual Foster Parent Appreciation Dinner in October. It will be awarded to a foster parent who exemplifies Stevenson's qualities of love, devotion and commitment to foster children.

Stevenson will be profoundly missed but her love will continue to shine through all who knew and loved her, and through the many her example continues to inspire.