



# Be The Change You Wish To See

*By: Catherine Fife*

**O**n an old Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care t-shirt I found my favorite quote: “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle Needs to Rock the Boat”. It’s a matter of fact statement that captures my perspective as a public servant, a politician and a parent. For me, becoming a mother crystallized how my own small actions connect to a bigger picture: the way I parent affects who my children will become, and my civic involvement hopefully affects the world that they will inherit.

I learned early in life that if you want something done, you’d best get going; change rarely happens on its own, or quickly. For as long as I can remember I’ve been fascinated and frustrated by resistance to change. As a child I remember questioning everything and feeling so demoralized with the response, “That’s just the way it is.” How can that ever be the right answer?

This curiosity and quest for information led me to politics. Although I was extremely reluctant and went into it kicking and screaming, my natural curiosity to see what it’s like to be in the boardroom making decisions, won over. Despite the general tide of cynicism, I still believe that the political arena provides true opportunities for change; the challenge is maneuvering through the obstacles that exist at personal and systemic levels.

My interest in politics was sparked in the mid 90s in Toronto where I was working to encourage new immigrant parents to participate in the school system. Getting new Canadians involved in their children’s schools is an important first step for civic engagement and a way to inspire student achievement. I loved sharing information and building trust with school councils and leaders; sharing knowledge can be an empowering experience for all concerned. Timing also played a role in awakening a sense of responsibility to participate in what was at that time a grassroots movement to protect education.

When government cuts in the late 90s threatened public education, I became part of movement trying to preserve funding. In fact, I didn’t know how strong I felt about public education until it was threatened. This coupled with watching parents take new information and put it into action; I liked this power of educating and sharing. I was hooked.

After moving to Waterloo, I stood for election in the municipal election in 2003, and won a seat on the school board. I was off and running, finding a new voice with which to pursue positive change in the education system. My enthusiasm was short lived.

In reality, politics is often a mad dash to stand still – sometimes the most electable politicians are those that balance the status quo with manageable, bite sized morsels of change. Needless to say, it was a tough first-term.

Politics is about creating and establishing policies that put into action what our society wants to achieve. Policy making may sound dry, and it certainly can be, but the consultation involved can be invigorating. Staying in touch with community members is, for me, one of the most rewarding aspects of public life; you’re afforded new opportunities to learn each day.

This learning can be easily transferred to your children; certainly my son and daughter see the world in a new light. They have a whole new repertoire of language that connects to their democratic responsibilities and rights. Each night when I come home from a community, board or provincial meeting, I'm greeted by my children who invariably ask, "Did you get what you want?" Sometimes the answer is yes, more often no, but the lesson is the same – democracy will not thrive without our participation.

My children are learning a crucial lesson: if you want to inspire or guide positive change, you need to get out there and use your voice.

It is this lesson that I am most proud of – our children are watching us; they put their faith in us and I feel we have a responsibility to demonstrate hope through action. It's what will make them into hopeful people who aren't afraid to stand up and do the right thing, on the playground and throughout their lives.

I learned early and late that I would be taking my family along for the race, and that finding some balance for myself and my young family was going to be equally challenging. I didn't want to acknowledge the personal cost of what is a very steep learning curve, and these lessons took place in the public's eye, through the media, in the grocery store and on the playground.

While building new relationships was crucial to furthering any agenda or ideas, ensuring time for friends and family was a balancing act without a handbook. Making the balancing act a priority has thus far been the most salient lesson, and it has paid off in dividends.

When we're respectful of the love we have in our lives, we're empowered to share and live life with greater strength.

In 2007, I sought the opportunity to run provincially in Ontario. The whole concept of running was terrifying and the chances of success were slight; still, there were many reasons to be the candidate instead of an observer. Giving voice and insight to issues that might not be raised, like child care, source water protection and the importance of a strong publicly funded education system was invigorating.

The challenges of each debate were empowering as were the relationships that were created through the campaign. After knocking on almost 10,000 doors you get a very strong sense of what you believe in, especially if you've been challenged with each knock.

Although I didn't win, I learned again that my family is my strongest support... no matter what was reported in the media, or how the polls and debates went, my life was anchored by a strong loving marriage and family. Losing is painful, but it's also character building, and my family helped me through both sides of the process.

School board politics have a strong emotional component; trustees make difficult budget and resource decisions that affect your children's education. Our educational philosophies come from our varied and diverse life experiences. Those emotional experiences extend to the board table, and sometimes finding a respectful dialogue was more difficult than expected. Keeping this negative energy outside of the home proved to be almost impossible at first, especially with constituents calling the house.

Such is the life of a politician; the work is never over; you never take off the hat but you can find those quiet moments to be a better parent and partner. I learned that you have to ask your family for help, and my kids are quick to remind me to exercise and sometimes they challenge me to lead a healthier life, which they successfully argue includes spending more time with family. My priority is to listen, give them my full attention and time whenever I can and never respond with, "That's just the way it is."