



## Politics meets community at the emotional opening of North Bay rehab centre

September 25, 2009

**Jim Coyle**

NORTH BAY

In one of his best-known poems, the Irish Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney recommends belief in "miracles and cures and healing wells."

In North Bay, they believe.

After the emotional opening this week of One Kids Place, a gleaming treatment centre offering community-based rehabilitation services for the special-needs children and youth of northeast Ontario, they believe in many things often said but infrequently achieved.

They believe it takes a village to raise a child. They believe people are better together. They believe the physically strong have lessons to learn from the most challenged. And they believe the most challenged and their families deserve the best the rest of us can give.

They believe because, in North Bay, those values came to life.

So joyful was the opening this week, so palpable the pride in the new facility, it was as if someone had served up chicken soup for the soul of an entire region.

Local MPP Monique Smith, burbling with tears and laughter, told the story of a project that began as a dream, of the need and dogged commitment that drove it, of the wide range of people and agencies and businesses and governments that collaborated (as, in theory, it is hoped they will) in making it happen, and of the children and families who will have their lives changed as a result.

When, knocking on doors while campaigning in 2003, she met parents of children with special needs and heard their hopes for better futures, "you couldn't help but grab that magic and run with it," Smith said.

By 2004, there was a business plan, by '05 approval to proceed, by '07 a temporary site, by '08 a fundraising campaign, and by January this year a cornerstone laid for the new building.

To the families, she said in OKP's jammed gymnasium, "this is for you."

Premier Dalton McGuinty struggled with a quavering voice as he talked of what love – a risky subject for politicians – can achieve.

Politics was about more than budgets and policy, he said. "It's about people." This day was about the people whose vision inspired One Kids Place, the people whose hands built it, and "the love of children at the heart of it."

Asked later why he'd grown so emotional, the premier said "there are parents out there into whose arms is born a child with special challenges, and I just have the greatest admiration for them.

"It's 24/7, 365 days a year. They can never let up. And they fight and they kick and they scratch and they claw when it comes to securing government services, because they want what you want and I want for our kids. They just want the best."

Judy Sharpe, executive director of One Kids Place, said the dream started with "parents sharing their experiences" of being pretty much left on their own to find services, of having to drive to Toronto for treatment, of therapists and doctors saying "they could do things better" with the right local facilities and support.

The integrated, multi-service, non-profit, charitable corporation that resulted can stand, she says, as a model of partnership.

What it really is was probably best put by Dr. Joseph Madden, a local pediatrician who was at a family wedding in Ireland and missed the ceremonies.

One Kids Place, he said in a letter, "represents the best that the human spirit can create."

As North Bay celebrated its own local miracle and "healing well," it was impossible to disagree.

*Jim Coyle's provincial affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.*

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