

FROM EIGHT-YEAR-OLD ACTIVIST TO A LIFE OF PUBLIC SERVICE

By Rachel Cooper ('89)



At the age of eight, Joanne Bernard ('00), knew she would run for public office one day. "I wrote a letter to (then Prime Minister) Pierre Elliot Trudeau complaining about the seal hunt, and I got a letter back," she says. "It inspired in me something that told me I could make a difference somehow."

Bernard did run for public office in 2013 – she turned 50 on the campaign trail – and served as Nova Scotia's Minister of Community Services for nearly four years. After an unsuccessful re-election bid in 2017, she was approached by Easter Seals Nova Scotia and named President and CEO in July 2017.

Pursuing studies in political science, first at Mount Saint Vincent University and then at Acadia, helped to prepare her for public service. However, her road was far from easy.

SUPPORT THROUGH TRAGEDY

"I was a university student with a child – a single mum on income assistance," she says. "It was a difficult time. My first day at Acadia, my dad was diagnosed with lung cancer, and he died on my Christmas vacation, two days after his 59th birthday. Then, in the middle of writing my

thesis for Acadia, my mum was killed in a car accident at the age of 56. I had no brothers or sisters, so I was left alone with a 10-year-old boy who was as devastated as I was."

Good support from her classmates and faculty at Acadia helped to get her through, she says. "They were wonderful. I was in the accelerated program for my Master's, and I only had six classmates, all of whom stepped up to the plate and helped me with childcare and anything I needed during the rest of that year. And I had a very supportive thesis advisor, Agar Adamson. I think my experience of going through those two personal tragedies while at Acadia cemented my determination that I could do whatever I needed to do."

A CAREER OF SERVICE

After graduation, Bernard became project manager for the Marguerite Centre, a place for women recovering from addictions; then director of client services for the Arthritis Society; and then Executive Director for Alice Housing, which supports women and children recovering from domestic violence.

Having lived as a single mother on income assistance



Joanne Bernard, President and CEO of Easter Seals Nova Scotia, with clients.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOANNE BERNARD

for nine years, she appreciated the opportunity to lead the government department that got her out of poverty. “My goal was to transform the system that wasn’t serving people well anymore,” she says, “and I’m proud of my record in office.”

Like so many women in politics, Bernard experienced misogyny and personal comments, but these were compounded by homophobia and even death threats related to her ministerial portfolio. “I was the first openly gay MLA elected in the history of the province. I had three-and-a-half years of death threats and a lot of stress on my partner and my son. I didn’t run as a gay candidate; I just happened to be a candidate who was gay.” Today, she is often asked to speak publicly to groups on the experiences of women in politics.

She credits her parents with setting her on the path to public service. “My mother was brought up in an orphanage in Halifax, and my dad was brought up extraordinarily poor with a large family,” she says. “I remember both of them telling me, ‘Always offer a hand up, not necessarily a handout.’ My dad was a tremendous volunteer, and that was instilled in me very young. I was given a lot of attention and encouragement, even though these two people had Grade 3 and Grade 5 educations.”

EASTER SEALS

Bernard’s connection with Easter Seals began while she was in government. A visit and tour in July 2014 inspired her to rappel down the 22 storeys of Halifax’s tallest office building as part of the Drop Zone fundraiser for people with disabilities. “I did that as minister. I spoke at their AGM. I really liked the work that was done here,” she says.

After Bernard’s first year at the helm, Easter Seals Nova Scotia is moving and expanding. In June of this year, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) committed \$350,000 to help renovate a new and larger facility that will enable Easter Seals to deliver more training and create more opportunities for employment and skills development.

A BITTERSWEET TIME

“Bittersweet” is the word Bernard uses to describe her time at Acadia.

“On his deathbed, my dad said to me, ‘You’ve got to finish this degree.’ It was a very, very trying time in my life,” she says. “But I think I was probably at the right place at that bad time, and I’ll always appreciate Acadia for that.”

Acadia Reminiscence



As a single mother with a young son, moving to Wolfville felt far from home, even though it was only an hour away. “Further raising my anxiety and fears was my father’s lung cancer diagnosis. Very quickly, I learned of the camaraderie of my six Master’s degree colleagues, who wrapped their support around me and my son. The professors were kind and caring,

especially my thesis advisor, Agar Adamson. He cut me no slack, but taught me I was strong enough and smart enough not to need it. Dad died during my Christmas vacation, and the support I received from my colleagues and professors will never be forgotten as I worked through the grief and returned full-time to my studies. Their support made that possible. Today, I look back in amazement that I ever made it through that painful time in my life.”