

# VALLEY

# A nurturing soul

## Susan Christofferson makes strong families her first priority

By HEIDI GAISER  
The Daily Inter Lake

When Susan Christofferson listens to her phone messages each morning at The Nurturing Center, she steps instantly into the role of unofficial counselor to worried parents.

On Thursday, she was greeted by the voices of mothers and fathers concerned about their children's behavior and divorce situations, and on a lighter note, someone interested in volunteering.

Though she respects the gravity of each situation, family crises are never a drag on Christofferson's day.

"I love coming into contact with parents," she said. "There is rarely a day I don't come into the building looking forward to what's next."

As the executive director of KallsPELL's Nurturing Center for more than 20 years, Christofferson, 53, has been one of the valley's leading voices for families and children. She has advocated for their interests through formal legislative channels and, equally as important, through the intimacy of personal contact.

Since it was formally incorporated as the nonprofit Glacier 4C's (Community Coordinated Child Care) in 1978, The Nurturing Center has grown from a place that originally provided meal support and referrals for childcare providers to an organization that promotes healthy families in a multitude of ways.

The motto for the 15-employee center, which changed its name in 1988 when it moved its offices into a historic home on Third Avenue West, is "Families are our business."

The center backs that up by providing training and materials for local child-care givers, assisting parents looking for child care and offering a mentoring program for teen girls, support groups for parents and hundreds of classes on parenting topics.

Christofferson said the need for a parenting resource center became evident while she was a volunteer in the late 1970s taking calls from parents looking for day care.

"Parents would call to ask a question about day care, and they'd stay on the line for 45 minutes talking about potty training or a biting child," she said.

Now Christofferson and her staff provide face-to-face support for parents. They also have developed a number of long-term relationships with families, including one family that has sought the center's guidance for 15 years.

"Family change doesn't happen quickly," Christofferson said. "It's all about relationships, and we develop those relationships when families learn we are trustworthy."

IT WOULD SEEM the issues involving families and children are inherently benign, but because interpre-



Karen Nichols/Daily Inter Lake

SUSAN CHRISTOFFERSON and her staff at The Nurturing Center provide support for parents. She was recently honored by the Missoula Independent for her efforts.

tations of what's good for families vary so widely, Christofferson has been at the center of a storm or two.

"The very nature of our services is controversial. We live in a culture in which there are intense privacy issues. 'What happens in the home is our business,' people say."

"Our services can be perceived as being invasive. People sometimes have to spill their guts to us."

For example, Christofferson said the center occasionally finds itself in the middle of volatile divorce situations and custody disputes. She has been asked for her testimony about which parent a child should live with, and though she doesn't have as much influence in those situations as some would believe, she's been a target of anger from disappointed parents.

In her quest to strengthen families, Christofferson tries hard to respect each member of every family that crosses the Nurturing Center threshold, even in situations where abuse or neglect are in evidence.

"I'm a person who recognizes every family as unique and I try to treat them with dignity," she said. "I'm just one small cog in the wheel of

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what they need to be successful," she said. "It was viewed as glamorizing teen pregnancy."

The Nurturing Center took more heat with "Dollar a Day" in the mid-1990s. Research had found that teen mothers around 16 years old were at high risk of having a second child, so the program paid teens a dollar for each day they did not become pregnant. The participants had to attend weekly support meetings to collect their \$7 check, a fact which Christofferson said was often lost on those who criticized the program.

After the two-year commitment for grant money was not renewed, the center's work with teen girls was transformed into the noncon-

troversial Gemini program, matching teens with adult mentors.

CHRISTOFFERSON'S LONG-LIVED commitment to families recently earned her recognition as one of three "Freedom Fighters" for 2003, as designated by the Missoula Independent weekly newspaper. The paper uses the award as a way to profile those fighting for political, social or environmental causes. The paper's headline called Christofferson "one-woman peacekeeping force for families in crisis."

"I was very grateful," Christofferson said of the award, though she would prefer that the spotlight shine instead on the organization. "Nonprofits are always scrambling for any way to promote what they're passionate about."

Christofferson has had no trouble maintaining her own passion for her job, even though too much of it involves dull administrative duties and long meetings.

"My parents told us to find our place in the world and contribute," she said. "They said it was a waste of resources not to find what talents we had and give back."

Christofferson modeled their own advice. Christofferson was born in Illinois, but her family moved a few times before her father, Bob, took a job with the U.S. government as a public health educator working to eradicate malaria in Saigon, South Vietnam. The family moved there in 1960 when Christofferson was 10. In 1965 they were forced to evacuate in the face of impending hostilities.

"There were armed guards on the school buses, and sometimes we were holed up in our house with artillery cannons going off around us," she said.

While life in Vietnam added some excitement to her childhood, Christofferson also learned some lessons there about treating people with dignity.

"We had servants there, and not everyone treated their servants the same way my parents did," she said. "Even as an adolescent, I could see that."

Her mother Lois' career as an early childhood educator helped drive Christofferson's interest in the field. Christofferson never finished her degree in social work, marrying Wayne Christofferson in 1970 and dropping out of the University of Utah to support him while he finished school.

They moved to the Flathead Valley a few years later. "We were hippies — we wanted to get back to nature."

Christofferson began working at Smith Memorial day care in KallsPELL when her first child, Megan, was about 3. (Megan is now an early childhood educator in Seattle.) She also has a son, Connor, a 24-year-old student and writer in Northern California, and a daughter, Hannah, 16.

Though Christofferson said her childhood family had as many problems as any other, she and her siblings have remained close both emotionally and geographically in adulthood, partially, she believes, as a result of living and traveling in foreign countries. Her sister Ann lives in Whitefish, her brother Charles is in Darby and another brother, Jim, is in Spokane.

Christofferson's love for travel has lasted. She is fascinated by the way other cultures treat their children, and she's learned some lessons for American parents.

"We're very unique in the way we raise our children," she said. "We're all about image. We want kids with clean shining faces and clean clothes. If a child throws a tantrum in the grocery store, we judge the parents. We should think about how we can help."

When her son dyed his hair purple, she was unconcerned because he still treated adults with respect. She hopes parents place their focus on building character, turning kids into responsible adults who contribute to society and live a healthy lifestyle.

And, she said, it never hurts to admit that raising kids is a job that may be too big for one or two people. "I think increasingly that people share the view that it's OK to ask for help," she said. "We weren't intended to raise children in isolation."

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