

A Legacy of Learning

A lifelong educator's lesson plan includes curiosity and fun

by Marisa Procopio

DR. GILLIAN (RICHMOND) KYDD '63 was awarded the 2024 York House Lifetime Achievement Award for her groundbreaking work in elementary school education. Her innovative “site school” model fosters critical thinking skills and extends across North America and beyond.

“There were eight of us students who just clicked,” says educator Dr. Gillian (Richmond) Kydd '63 of her York House classmates. “We wanted to take physics, but no girls’ school in British Columbia had ever offered it before. YHS scrambled and found Mrs. Young, who was trained as an engineer. There was no money for equipment, so she had us make our own.” When staging an experiment that included a ball rolling down a track and needed to be timed, Dr. Kydd remembers that one of her classmates was assigned to serve as a makeshift electric timer. “She called out, “Tick, tick, tick,”” says Dr. Kydd. “It was hilarious. We had a really good time.”

A love for science and learning, coupled with playful improvisation, has been the throughline of Dr. Kydd’s career. She went on to study science at The University of British Columbia,

Right: Dr. Gillian Kydd accepts her flowers.



then worked in a laboratory. After the birth of her first child, she went back to school for education and later taught elementary school students. “I really enjoyed it because you can dabble. I’m a dabbler,” she grins. “I love to make connections and have fun.” Teaching was much like the culture at York House, “where things were open-ended and we could go in different directions and enjoy learning.”

Dr. Kydd next took a position as a science consultant, where she served all the elementary schools in the Calgary district. In 1993, the Calgary Zoo invited Dr. Kydd to a meeting to discuss fresh ways to connect with students. “They wanted to go the technology route,” she says, using computers to show classes what the zoo offers, from a distance. She had a better idea.

The experience “has to be firsthand; if it’s on a screen, it doesn’t work the same way,” she told them. “I suggested that we have a classroom at the zoo where teachers could bring their classes for an extended period.”

Classes commonly visited the zoo for day-long excursions, but that model doesn’t foster knowledge retention. “Research shows that very little learning happens on a normal field trip,” says Dr. Kydd. “My idea was to have the teacher pick up their classroom and move it to an interesting place. The site would be the classroom. She or he would tailor a weeklong experience to their curriculum.”

Her friend and fellow educator Angela Rokne helped flesh out the concept, and enthusiastic teachers quickly raised their hands to take part in the program. Sure enough, students flourished in the deeply immersive experience. One teacher measured and drew animals to scale while the students marvelled at their sizes. Another class met a live boa constrictor, then drew it.

Investors began to take notice. Calgary philanthropist Don Harvie “loved the idea” and provided the seed money to start the program’s first iteration: “Zoo School”. The following year, Dr. Kydd realized the model would work beyond the zoo grounds and extended it to Calgary’s Glenbow Museum, along with the Science Centre (now TELUS Spark Science Centre). Harvie tapped Chevron

Canada for more substantial financial support, and the company funded all three sites. Under Chevron’s steadfast, 30-year partnership, the program has added at least one new site school annually.

Other successful locations include Calgary City Hall, where students meet the mayor, city planners, architects, and emergency response teams. The Edmonton Oilers hockey team’s new stadium is another, as well as The University of Alberta. The latter “focuses on high-needs schools,” says Dr. Kydd. “Students see what it’s like and it gives them a dream of what they can accomplish.”

Now under the umbrella term “Beyond the Classroom,” site schools dot the North American map and beyond. 20,000 students participate in the



These Beyond the Classroom Grade 3 students followed up their week at Bird School by adopting trees outside of their school.

program per year. “There’s a new generation of people running the program, and they’re so passionate about learning,” says Dr. Kydd. “They get support as they work with their students in ways that are often new to them: journalling, inquiry, group work, and giving students time and choice.”

The program, geared primarily toward students aged seven to twelve, sets them up for success by engaging them with the community and teaching them essential life skills.

“Our main goal is critical thinking,” says Dr. Kydd. “Today, people are fed information, but it’s in quick sound bites or images on social media.” When students journal at a site school, “there’s dead silence, and they will do that for an hour,” she says, “even those who have behavioral problems in the classroom. It’s because they can make choices about



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DR. GILLIAN KYDD

what to pay attention to, and now have the skills to be able to pay attention. They don’t get pushed into blind acceptance of what the world offers.”

A breast cancer survivor, Dr. Kydd co-founded Sunshine Coast Dragon Boat Club and coached the breast cancer team for 15 years. “It’s been a huge part of my life,” she says. Another huge part is her York



Class of 1963 members at the 2024 YHS Golden Alum Luncheon. Gillian Kydd in the centre first row and Brenda is the second on the left side beside Gillian.

House friends; the women have stayed in touch since their school days, regularly gathering in person or on Zoom. “The atmosphere at the school helped create that feeling of friendship and depending on each other,” she says. In February 2024, Brenda (Agnew) Beckstrom, with whom Dr. Kydd became “fast friends since Grade 9, through thick and thin,” nominated her friend for the 2024 York House Lifetime Achievement Award.

“Presented to an alum who, through extraordinary dedication and lifelong commitment, has utilized their talent and passion for their profession to make outstanding contributions to their field and community,” the 2024 award celebrates Dr. Kydd’s groundbreaking work in education. She dedicated it to her YHS physics teacher, Mrs. Young, to whom she attributes her “drive to be curious and to look at the world carefully.”

Last Christmas, Dr. Kydd and her family visited a gallery show in Lyons, France, that included a piece by her artist son, Owen. The group also visited Paris and the newly renovated Notre Dame Cathedral, where Dr. Kydd witnessed something unexpected: “The first thing the grandchildren did was to get their journals out of their backpacks and start drawing and writing,” she says. “I thought, ‘Yes!’” 🌀