

## **2005 Children's Champion Awards**

### **Nomination for The Champion in the Trenches Award**

**Elizabeth Bloch**

**Ramapo Community Nursery School**

In the minds of hundreds of parents whose children have attended Ramapo Community Nursery School at some point over the past 30 years, there is no greater "Champion in the Trenches" than Elizabeth Bloch. As members of a cooperative nursery school where parents and teachers work together in the classroom day in and day out, we all know what it means to be in the "trenches," and Betty Bloch has undeniably been one of our most beloved treasures. Generations of families have been touched by her. She is a naturally gifted and dedicated teacher who, through her longevity and spirit, has sustained and repeatedly revitalized a cooperative nursery school community that is now entering its 50<sup>th</sup> year.

Betty Bloch first entered the "trenches" of early childhood education when she joined RCNS, one of the first cooperative nursery schools in Rockland, in 1973 as a parent. She quickly became a vital part of the RCNS community as an active, participating parent. Before long, she became a Board Member and later, she took over as Board President, a job where the importance of she inevitably became fully immersed in the cooperative experience and philosophy as both parent and administrator. Her role as Board President helped give her an understanding of both sides of the nursery school experience – the teacher's side and the parent's side – and it helped open doors to other ways that she could continue to contribute to the RCNS community once her Board term was completed.

In 1978, Betty accepted a teaching position at RCNS as a drama specialist, conducting a weekly program for the 3 and 4-year-old classes. Her theatre background and natural ability with children, made this a wonderful transition toward becoming a pre-school educator. Children are absolutely entranced by her. They feel connected, respected and truly heard by her. So it was no surprise that when RCNS needed to hire a new teacher for the 4-year-old program, Betty immediately came to mind as a viable, if not, perfect candidate. Without much fanfare or hesitation, the RCNS Board hired Betty as a teacher 1987. Betty brought to the job, at this point, over

20 years of experience in early childhood development, and an unfaltering understanding and dedication to the cooperative approach to pre-school education.

As the teacher of the fours, Betty has continuously amazed parents with her innate ability to get into the mind of the four-year-old, and to create a unique and safe environment for children class to explore and learn on their own terms and at their own pace. For parents, it is an unparalleled opportunity to learn about their own child, and what it's like to work with other children. To watch her in the classroom, which she likes to refer to as "kid utopia," is to watch a master at work, to witness a woman who has made it her mission to give every single child in the classroom the tools to express and accept themselves for who they are. She does this in innumerable ways throughout the day, and with activities like "home visits" where every child has the opportunity to play "tour guide" to his or her peers on a class trip to their own home. The look of pride and sheer excitement on these kids' faces is priceless. As a community of families learning together, it is our goal to help our kids find their place and, as Betty always says, with our "hard work, love and cooperation, that place has no boundaries."

Betty is always on the look out for new and exciting ways to introduce science, art and nature into the classroom. She works closely with specialists to enrich the program with special presentations, field trips and small group experiences. Even when there aren't specialists on hand, Betty is always finding those teachable moments. She is forever pointing out to the children the marvels of the world around them from walking interested children to a brook to find its source and taking the class on a hike to rambling under the enormous cables of the Bear Mountain Bridge and riding a metro-north commuter train to take a look at the celestial ceilings of Grand Central.

The importance of a sustaining a diverse, inclusive and supportive community inside the classroom and out, is also a driving force for Betty. She stresses the importance of diversity, of the beauty of difference in the classroom. She is adept at identifying children with special needs and is quick to step in as the child's advocate. She is tirelessly committed to working with the parent, providing unlimited guidance and support in order to help meet the child's needs in the classroom, if at all possible. On many occasions, Betty has accompanied the parent to outside evaluations, and has petitioned the RCNS board to help arrange for a specialist to work with the child during a classroom session. Over the past few months, for example,

there has been a special needs teacher working with one of Betty's students on a regular basis. Under Betty's supervision, this teacher even involves the other children in her planned activities and exercises for the special needs child. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive for EVERYONE in the classroom.

Betty's commitment to the families of RCNS goes well beyond the classroom. She attends every general meeting, every Board meeting, and runs regular class meetings, called "coffees", to give the parents in her class an opportunity to discuss classroom issues, child development topics and parenting strategies, to name a few. She makes herself available to parents around the clock, spending hours over the phone if necessary. During general and Board meetings, she does more than report on the happenings in her classroom. She is the embodiment of the RCNS cooperative philosophy and she is not afraid to speak her mind when it comes to issues of fairness and a show of community support. She often conducts parenting workshops and presentations, further extending her reach and influence in ways that continuously shape and strengthen the RCNS community. She also assists the school with their fundraising efforts, working in conjunction with a local farm to coordinate annual plant sales and Farm Days to help benefit the school.

In times of crisis, Betty is always right there along side the Board and member parents, looking at the problem and working together to resolve it. When the school was faced with eminent closure one summer due to the discovery of black mold in the facility, Betty made herself available to meet with countless vendors and specialists to determine the degree of the problem and the best solutions. Throughout, Betty provided her unlimited support, and brought much-needed levity to the situation. Her positive outlook and simple life wisdoms, helped the Board find the strength, confident and drive to muddle through. With Betty at their side, the Board rallied the membership together and in a whirlwind, community effort, the school was opened only a few weeks after the problem was originally discovered. Again, Betty went above and beyond to champion the needs of RCNS families. As she would quickly say, "that's what a cooperative is all about."

So one can imagine the excitement shared by many parents, when Betty announced that she would be supervising a summer program, based on the RCNS philosophy, for children ages 4 and 5. , so it was a natural and exciting step for her to take. Her summer "pre-camp," as she likes to refer to it, incorporates the RCNS approach of "learning

through play” and in many ways, further extends the school experience over the summer. Although it is no run as a cooperative, the benefits for the children are boundless. Children gain confidence as they are gradually introduced to the concept of attending a day camp in a small, comfortable environment where it's challenging enough for each child to grow at their own pace. Response to this program has been overwhelming.

Betty makes it a point to share her experience and wisdom to the outside educational community as well. For over a decade, she has also worked as a Personnel Director and drama specialist for the Nature Place Day Camp, and as a Site Supervisor for Lime Kiln Elementary School. Betty frequently conducts workshops in parenting skills and creative responses to conflict, and she has mentored student teachers from RCC.

One of Betty's more interesting and unique roles at RCNS is as Director of The Rainbow Repertory Company, a group of RCNS parents, all amateur performers, who write, produce and perform in plays specifically geared toward children ages 2 to 8. The process is a painstaking one, taking months of hard work and diligence from start to finish. During this period of time, Betty works with the parents on a weekly basis, actually writing the play along with them, guiding them as actors, supervising scenery and costume design, and even figuring out ways for the children to get involved by helping them to paint sets or practice some of the featured songs. The final result is a wonderful production of professional quality that is open to the entire local community with all proceeds benefiting the school.

Betty Bloch is, without a doubt, our “Champion in the Trenches” not only because of her dedication and commitment spanning over 30 years, but because she has touched the lives of more children and parents than we can imagine. She's rolled up her sleeves and stood by every single one of them, making certain that they receive the kind of supportive, respectful and caring attention that they deserve, no matter what. Betty is a gifted teacher and a remarkable human being whose mark on RCNS is undeniable, and whose educational legacy will live on in generation after generation for decades to come.