

JoAnne Connors retires

by Ana Merkureva

If JoAnne St.Amour-Connors were a character, she'd be Mary Poppins: a highly skilled, almost magical woman who arrives in a new place, changes things for the better – and moves on when the time is right.

When JoAnne was 19, she moved North in search of work. She arrived in a small town of Hay River with little money, no job and no place to stay. Relying on kindness of strangers for shelter, she worked early shifts at a local bakery before securing a position in one of the shipyards. Over the next three years, she saved enough to become the first in her family to attend university. After graduation, she returned to give back to the community.

Community firsts

She created a few local "firsts": the first culturally-aware preschool with Katlodeeche First Nations and the first francophone school. Both came with their own challenges.

The preschool was a race against time. "They received full funding, but had to spend it by the end of fiscal year." JoAnne stepped in and turned a handful of rooms into a working preschool: recruiting staff, securing licensing, arranging a van so children who lived far could attend. For some families, it became the first Indigenous preschool within reach. She ensured no child was left behind, adjusting the curriculum to include kids with special needs, with elders as advisors.

The school was a fight for a community. "I met parents interested in French Immersion. The English school board said if we get enough people to sign up, we can make it."

Though they secured signatures, the board withdrew support. The community split: some backed a French school, while others feared it would drain resources from the English system. Three years of meetings and paperwork followed in the fight for funding and approval.

"I learnt how the personal is political, because politics were bleeding into my home. I was personally attacked at school board meetings, in public, even at the grocery store." Despite the pushback, the school eventually opened, and her daughter Renée was among the first nine students.



Photo: some of the first students of École Boréale, 1998



Photo: classroom in Rawlins, Wyoming, 2016

Filling the gaps

JoAnne valued accessible and engaging education, especially in rural areas. When her husband Rick got an opportunity to work in rural US, JoAnne followed – and soon became essential to local libraries and schools.

Within months she went from stocking shelves as a volunteer to **running children's programming** across eight libraries in the county. She filled empty corners with craft bins, brought books by Indigenous authors and designed hands-on programs that made kids curious about their state's history, culture and nature.

She also became a **coveted substitute teacher**. "Substitute teachers in Wyoming were rare. Often they were kids coming out of high school." In class, she challenged students to see history from multiple angles – asking who was missing from the narrative and why, and using humour to make classes memorable.

Supporting families

For over two decades, JoAnne supported those who care for others.

At the **Family Resource Centre**, she helped parents in rural Cape Breton feel more confident – and less isolated – through programs on everything from child development to positive parenting. One special initiative, Maggie's Magic Cupboard, was "all about nutrition, shopping on budget, reading labels and understanding them better" – skills especially important in a community where many families face food insecurity.

At **Caregivers Nova Scotia**, she introduced two educational workshops: "Caregiver Stress Management" and "Understanding Dementia Behaviours", helping caregivers support both their loved ones and themselves. She helped the organization expand to Cape Breton, organizing the first support groups on the island, and later ran support groups in Halifax.

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"Support groups and workshops were important, but mostly, I loved giving caregivers a place where they feel supported, heard and seen."

JoAnne was a true ally and a fierce advocate for all caregivers. And a fantastic colleague.

"JoAnne has been more than my mentor, she's been my steady anchor. JoAnne's legacy for me is her unwavering support, care and love that I received so freely," shared Ben Robertson, Outreach and Caregiver Support Coordinator.



Photo: JoAnne St. Amour-Connors at her last support group, Spryfield, 2026

Wind changes

"I'm leaving work that I absolutely love. But I feel comfortable knowing it's in good hands."

Whenever JoAnne leaves, she always leaves something behind to remember her by. A school that became a true francophone hub in the North. A preschool filled with laughter. Books on the shelves. Workshops that make people confident in themselves. And communities of caregivers, who met in her support groups.

Thank you, JoAnne. And happy retirement!

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Caregiver Appreciation tea

May 21 | 1-3 p.m. | Kiwanis Grahams Grove

Join us for a cozy caregiver celebration.
Delicious tea in vintage cups, sweet treats, flowers and lots of cheer!

RSVP: Info@CaregiversNS.org
seating is limited



Annual general meeting

June 8, 2026 | 4:30 p.m.

Canada Games Centre, Halifax

RSVP: Info@CaregiversNS.org

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- JoAnne Connors
- Therese Henman-Phillips
- Ben Robertson
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