



Her no-nonsense manner made children feel safe, while her warmth let them know they were accepted.

Betty Ewen

EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER 1965 – 2000

BY GILLIAN GILMAN CULFF '88

Each day, when I enter Betty Ewen's "fours" classroom at the Early Childhood Center, I set up the painting station. Everything in Betty's classroom has pedagogical importance. I place a large sheet of white paper on the spacious bay window seat. I gather six glass coasters with rims, place them on a tray, and pour in the primary colors: red, blue, and yellow.

All other colors are left for the child to discover in the process of painting. There are no easels; paint running down the paper would interfere with the child's creative intent. A container of water and a large paintbrush finish the setup, and I turn my attention to greeting the arriving children.

I came to work for Betty Ewen in 1985, doing field work for my "Introduction to Child Study" course. I had already taught 3-year-olds in my hometown, but nothing I had learned in that school—where favoritism, enforced conformity, and angry outbursts by the head teacher were the norm—prepared me for the semester to come.

As children enter the room, Betty greets them warmly and asks where they'd like to start the day. One runs straight to the house corner, another to the books. A child hesitates, uncertain. Betty squats and surveys the room. "Would you like to paint?" The child shakes his head. "Blocks," he whispers. "Gillian will take you to the block room," she tells him, and together we walk to the sunlit porch.

Elizabeth "Betty" Ewen came to the ECC in 1965. She taught for many years, then became an ECC administrator, first in admissions, then as assistant director. She remained in this last position until her retirement in 2000.

A hurricane is coming, and the room is filled with tension. Betty calls everyone to the gathering area. "Some of you have heard a hurricane is coming," she starts. There is an outburst of chatter, and she quickly redirects their attention. "Do you know what a hurricane is?" Some children offer responses, then she continues, "That's right; it's just a big storm with lots of wind and rain." Discussion ensues about storms the children have experienced. Reassured, they return to their activities.

Betty was remarkably even-tempered. Her no-nonsense manner made children feel safe, while her warmth let them know they were

accepted. Tantrums left her unruffled; her tone of voice always remained calm and firm. To Betty, every behavior was a coping mechanism arising from a particular set of circumstances. Every child's perspective was important. Students in turmoil needed clear boundaries and reassurance, not punishment.

The morning has come to an end; after saying goodbye and washing the paint coasters, I accompany the other teaching assistants to the ECC's basement lounge, where we reflect on the children's behavior and record observations on file cards. Betty offers possible motivations behind one child's aggressiveness. We discuss how things might look from his point of view, and Betty describes some strategies for supporting him.

Betty Ewen passed away on March 23, 2010, at the age of 89. In her 35 years at the Early Childhood Center, she guided countless children, and her influence rippled outward through the many assistants she taught. Says former ECC director Sara Wilford, "Betty Ewen was an inspiration. ... She was a consummate professional, a supportive colleague, a gifted teaching artist who could set up a room and invite her children to partake of each activity's richness."

This diminutive woman with her black-rimmed glasses, short gray hair, raspy voice, and cable-knit sweaters was, for me, an odd fusion of grandmother and mentor. She taught me to see all children as evolving individuals with minimal tools for responding to challenges, and teachers as stable, kind, and supportive adults helping them along. Betty Ewen made me a teacher, and every day in my classroom, I hear her voice speak through me. ☺

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