



A Parent For All Times

Fran Porter was a long time advocate for parents of children with developmental disabilities. Her commitment to parents, lead her to become a co-founder of the Pilot Parent Program at The Greater Omaha Association for Retarded Citizens (GOARC), now known as The Ollie Webb Center. Soon the program's principals and mission spread across the United States into Canada and to many other countries who replicated it for their communities.

Fran was born in Toronto, Ontario. She moved to Omaha when she was married. She met her husband Tom, through a correspondence during World War II. "A cousin who was in the Canadian Military served with Tom in Egypt, and urged the two to exchange letters," said daughter Terry Mayne of Omaha. "They got engaged through the mail, and were married for 40 some years" she said. Her husband Tom, also an active volunteer for GOARC, died in 1991.

Fran and Tom Porter had five children: Terry, Patty, Kathy, Tom Jr. and Dana. It was because of Dana that Fran first got involved with GOARC and developed the idea for the program. The first four years after Dana was born was an agonizing time for Tom and Fran. They knew something was wrong with him but did not know what it was. After two years there came a diagnosis of Down Syndrome which found both parents agonizing again over how to help him and what to do. Two years later Fran met Rose and Dick Meile parents of a daughter with Down syndrome and everything changed. Fran wrote about this experience: "For us, it was the moment when our isolation ended, when we found that there were others who could understand what we felt."

Based on this experience, Fran had a dream that parents who had a newly diagnosed child with a disability would receive support from an experienced (veteran) parent who had a child with a similar type of disability. She thought there should be a systematic way to make this kind of connection between parents possible everywhere in the country. Fran knew the value of parents helping parents. She wanted to ensure that new parents could meet experienced parents soon after the initial diagnosis of disability and not have to experience years of uncertainty or lack of emotional support like she and her husband had. Through the development of the Pilot Parent Program it ensured that parents simply made an initial phone call to the program and could then receive a one to one or family to family match with other trained veteran parents who demonstrated a positive attitude about their children with disabilities and truly understood the pain and grieving that often goes along with this kind of life experience. The social activities the program offered gave parents a means to meet other parents. Professionals in the community were provided with information about the program so that they could refer parents for assistance.

On April 29, 2004, Fran died in her sleep at her daughter's home where she lived. Fran died just five weeks after her son Dana died of complications from a seizure. When Dana's life ended, Fran's life work was complete.

Fran, thank you for your vision, your wisdom and your years of volunteer work in creating and implementing this program. Countless people around the world have received emotional support and information because of you. Programs like Pilot Parents go on helping parents—because of you.

Truly a parent for all times.