

# The Governor General's Caring Canadian Award



## B. Evelyn Florendo

Vancouver, British Columbia

For Evelyn Florendo, it's hard to turn her back on the teens at the Burnaby Youth Services Custody Centre, especially at Christmas. For twenty eight years, the mother of four has been organizing special Christmas dinners for the province's incarcerated youth.



In November 1984, Mrs. Florendo read a news story about young offenders cutting themselves, sometimes even attempting suicide, at the jail. She contacted the director of the Centre to say she wanted to do something that would ease their pain and add a little joy to their lives.

The result was a Christmas dinner for over a hundred teenagers, something that has since become an annual tradition. Residents enjoy a big meal, including turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing, pizza, salad, pasta, ice cream and desserts. Mrs. Florendo recruits women from the Catholic Women's League of her church to help prepare the food and Archbishop John Miller blesses the meal.

After dinner, the Centre holds an open house to which the teens' parents are invited. The dinner is the only time of the year where all of the youth come together in the same room, ranging in age from twelve to nineteen. Some are in for serious crimes such as murder, while others are in on short terms for lesser offences. Mrs. Florendo invites guest speakers and politicians and the kids provide the entertainment with skits, dancing and singing. She hugs them and tells them that she loves them. "Many of the kids laugh or smile and respond in kind: I love you, too."

Phil Vanloo, a program officer, started working at the prison around the same time as Mrs. Florendo and says the dinners mean a lot to the kids. Roger Bissoondatt, a volunteer, agrees. "Sometimes when kids

are that age, a lot of people turn their backs on them. There needs to be some sort of hope for kids like this, because fundamentally I believe that people can change if they're given the right guidance, the right structure and can see a different point of view."

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**Phil Vanloo, program officer  
at the Burnaby Youth Services Custody Centre**

At 75, Mrs. Florendo may not be able to do this much longer and she hopes someone will step up to take her place. "I feel that they will be forgotten, that they are neglected. I wanted to show them that I still care and I love them. It really bothers me to cut it off." As a devout Roman Catholic herself, she says her faith provides the core motivation for helping the teens. "If God has forgiven, who are we that we cannot forgive and forget," she says simply.



The Caring Canadian Award was presented to Evelyn Florendo on April 17, 2012, at Rideau Hall.  
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