



PHOTOS BY JUDITH SILVERTHORNE

# Ken Stephen

## A custodian with a big heart

BY JUDITH SILVERTHORNE

When Ken Stephen became the custodian for St. Luke School in north central Regina in 1997, he had no idea the extent his caretaking role would take in shepherding the fluctuating flock of 100-plus students. Though he's always had a big heart and generous spirit, it's obvious that the positive connections he has with the students will impact them throughout their lives.

Some of Ken's extracurricular work started with the Z99/Salvation Army Adopt-a-Family program at Christmas. The school decided to do this as a project and as a way to teach the kids about giving back. To raise funds, Ken and the staff baked treats and sold them to the kids for 10 to 25 cents apiece. The first time they raised \$150 per family and were able to help two families. The next year, Ken and the office

manager, Sylvia Heidt, decided to adopt families at their own school, because 90 percent of those attending are in need. Though the amount has risen to \$200 to \$250 per family now, this past year they were able to assist 15 to 17 families with the generous assistance of others, for which Ken is especially thankful.

### Generous local businesses

The staff at Bennett Dunlop Ford collected \$200 in the first year and now donates \$1,000. This year Rhoda Keil from Rhoda's Elegance Again also donated to this cause when one of her consignment customers didn't want any return from her clothes. Rhoda, who gives to many charities, used the proceeds and added some of her own funds, then contacted Wal-Mart, which matched the initial \$500, donating another \$2,000 at the grand opening of its new supercentre in February.

Some years ago Ken also worked part-time at St. Gregory School, where he started his habit of collecting leftover runners. From whatever wasn't claimed at the end of the year, he chose the better pairs and personally cleaned them up to look as new as possible. He distributed these the following fall for those students without any gym sneakers or indoor shoes. He's continued this tradition over the years at St. Luke's, adding winter mitts to his collection. The school also has a little money set aside to buy runners on sale to have on hand for those in need. Sylvia takes care of these purchases, along with the grocery shopping.

She and Ken are part of a team, and any staff member who has time pitches in to help with things like the food preparation or taking care of answering the phones when Sylvia is at her volunteer post over lunch time. Board members and families are also invited to share meals with the students for four major holidays: Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter and Shrove Tuesday. The whole school becomes involved making decorations for these special occasions, and a team of staff supervises a chosen classroom in decorating the gym.

In his spare time and during breaks from his employment at the school, you'll find Ken in the gym shooting baskets or kicking soccer balls with the older kids, or playing floor hockey with the younger ones. That is, if he's not in the kitchen helping to prepare lunch for the city-wide students from kindergarten to high school at St. Luke's.

Ken's full-time work day starts at 6 a.m. and he's there until 5 p.m., with a morning break from 10 to 12, which is when he helps prepare meals. On Wednesdays there are always hot lunches for the students. Sometimes it's soup and sandwiches, but every other Wednesday one classroom picks a menu and the students and their teacher work together with Ken and Sylvia to prepare the meal, serve it and clean up afterwards. Luckily they have a grant to help pay for the food served on these days. Mondays and Fridays, Chili for Children comes in with hot meals. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Ken sells foods basically at cost for the kids to heat up in the microwaves—things like pizza pops and noodle bowls—along with chocolate milk and other beverages.

### Teaching youth to have pride

Ken also teaches the youth to have pride in their school, and it shows. He says 95 percent of the high-school students now take off their shoes when they enter the building, which is rare for teen students. The youth of all ages also help Ken with moving tables or whatever; though he constantly gets them involved, it's not a way to get out of classes, but a learning experience of another kind. "I don't fool around with them," he says. "If they don't want to help, I send them back to the classroom."

Every once in a while Ken will buy treats, like five dozen drinks to distribute in the classrooms as thanks to those kids for helping him with tasks and taking off their shoes. Those who don't get any quickly learn what they need to do to be rewarded. Ken spends incredible amounts of time with the students, making connections, developing relationships and setting posi-



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tive examples for them. Through his actions and the activities at the school, the students learn to share, to help and give back, and to respect one another.

In typical generous style, Ken says he

wouldn't be able to do any of this without good staff, students and friends. "We're a big team, and that's all there is to it." flr