

Snapshot

SERIES OF INFORMATIVE TEXTS ON THE CONSEIL SCOLAIRE CENTRE-NORD WRITTEN BY GLEN TAYLOR

FAMILY LIFE IN THE MILITARY

Fow do you define a “conventional” family life? For many of us, it means parents who are busy much of the time, either with a job or at home, ensuring that our children have everything they need in order to grow, learn and have fun.

Parents who have a job usually commute between home and work several times a week. As for those who are at home taking care of the children, there is never a shortage of things to do.

A “conventional” family life also includes time spent at home eating with the family, playing together, relaxing, sleeping...

If this more or less describes your life, can you imagine leaving for work one day and not returning home until six months later? What would your spouse do for all that time? How would your children deal with this reality? More specifically, what issues would arise if the children attended a francophone school in an anglophone area?

Welcome to family life in the Canadian Forces!

A SCHOOL SERVING MILITARY FAMILIES

The community of École Saint-Christophe in Wainwright (located two hours east of Edmonton) knows all about “nonconventional” family life. Despite the fact that some francophone families have lived in the area for a century, the vast majority of students in the school have at least one parent who works on the Forces base located beside the town.

To better understand military life and its impact on a school community, we met three people involved in the school. Alexandra Lemmetti teaches students in grades 2 and 3, and her husband is in the military. Cathy Pellerin is the educator at “Les Coccinelles” preschool, the

regional school-community coordinator for the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, and mother of two children in grades 1 and 2. Her husband is also a member of the Canadian Forces. Steve Mazerolle is principal of the school, which is attended by some 50 students from kindergarten to Grade 12.



“First, in order to understand military life, people should know that Canadian Forces families really are nomads,” says Alexandra, “that fact alone has a profound impact on us. For instance, did you know that there are very few separated or divorced couples in the military?”



Cathy continues: “It’s probably because when people move so often, both members of the couple must be able to rely on each other. Plus we go through a lot of intense experiences together. But at the same time, francophone families quickly form communities everywhere they go.”



“I’ve been here for only two years,” says Steve, “but I’ve noticed a tendency among military families not to become attached to a place, not to let themselves put down roots. What they do instead is get involved according to their areas of interest. There are a lot of informal groups that spring up spontaneously, such as when several families decide to go camping together.”



A COMMUNITY FOR EVERYONE

The rhythm of military life creates challenges on several levels for the staff at École Saint-Christophe.

"As a teacher, I have to be patient and understand what these kids are going through," explains Alexandra. "They need to be reassured, to feel safe, right from the beginning of the year. And it's not only in September: one of their parents can leave, for either a month of military exercises or six months abroad, at any time.

"Children react to these absences differently," she adds. "Some are okay one day and depressed the next. Others become restless or aggressive, or sometimes more emotional. Some stop doing their homework or start daydreaming... These children have seen and lived a lot for young people their age, and we have to be aware of that."

Cathy knows the situation well, having gone through it with her family. "The parent who stays here — usually the mother — can help her children by keeping a positive attitude. We do everything we can so that our kids feel the presence of the parent who's far away. For example, we'll put his photo on the wall, but at the children's height so they can see it closely.

"Since the couple works together as a team, it takes a major adjustment when one person leaves for a long time. In fact, we have to change the family routine twice: first, when the other parent leaves and, later, when he returns home.

"Fortunately, the Forces help us by providing services such as counselling, emergency babysitting, and logistic and emotional support. There are also many family activities."

Steve believes that the school has both an educational and a community role to play. "The school becomes a focal point, a place where francophones and francophiles can get together. I'd like to expand on that by building a community for everyone, including people who don't have children. There's an assortment of knowledge, expertise and cultures here. A community could help people discover the good things about the region and to feel at home."

FRIENDS BECOME FAMILY

Being far from their families, Canadian Forces personnel help each other a great deal. "We can count on our friends the way we'd count on our family if they lived closer" says Cathy.

"In that sense," adds Steve, "military families are like many francophones who move to Alberta. When the extended family is absent, people look more to others who are in the same situation."

Alexandra continues: "I'm originally from Quebec, but I understand now why francophones in Alberta and elsewhere fight so hard to maintain French and to have access to French-language education. I also know how important it is for students to be able to speak French outside of school."

"One of our strengths at École Saint-Christophe is that the teachers are aware of what's being done elsewhere in Canada," concludes Steve. "Since many of our students will find themselves in another francophone school at some point, we try to give them as much as we can. While we do follow the Alberta curriculum, we want our students to have the knowledge they need in order to succeed no matter where they go."

