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# ROOTS OF EMPATHY

Mary Gordon

If **Mary Gordon** needed validation after 27 years of battling for the creation of an emphatic society, she got it recently from the World Bank Institute. After mulling over a bevy of options to make the world a better place (address human trafficking, natural disasters, microfinancing to end poverty, to name but a few), “guess what they chose,” she asks—rhetorically, of course. She’d realized long ago, as a kindergarten teacher witnessing the heartbreaking repetition of violence and poor parenting across generations, that empathy would break the cycle.

In 1981, she launched Canada’s largest school-based Parenting & Family Literacy Program in centres across Ontario (now policy of the Ontario government) to affect change. But she knew she couldn’t break the cycle on a mass scale unless she reached young children in their schools. So in 1996 she launched Roots of Empathy, an evidence-based classroom program that has shown dramatic results in reducing levels of aggression among school children. “I know why I get out of bed every morning,” says Gordon. “I have a chance to change the world.”

Gordon’s passion for the cause has enabled delivery of the programs to 2,200 different classrooms in nine provinces, reaching 55,000 children in the 2007/08 school year. The Order of Canada recipient, first Canadian female Ashoka Fellow, and Canadian representative in the World Health Organization’s Knowledge Network on Early Childhood is also a savvy social entrepreneur. She increased total funding to \$4.6 million in 2007 from \$2.6 million in 2005. Roots of Empathy is offered in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. And very recently, all 450 chiefs at

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Mary Gordon, Founder and President

the Assembly of the First Nations Annual General Assembly agreed to endorse and support her programs in their communities.

“The water is just about to boil,” says Gordon, who has persevered, believing the world would someday see empathy as the turnstile. But she could be patient indefinitely.

“The Dalai Lama told me that if we don’t do what Roots of Empathy does, which is working through hearts and mind, we will never move ahead in the world.”

**Define success?** Success is people understanding globally the need for us to understand one another.