



COMMITTEE OF 25: A LIFELINE FOR NEEDY CHILDREN FOR 70 YEARS

CHARITY HAS A REMARKABLE LEGACY SUPPORTING FAMILIES – AND ITS WORK CONTINUES TODAY



Carrying the baton: The Committee of 25's team continues to raise vital funds to help families in need today. From left: Patrice Minors, Larry Dean, Susan Moore-Williams, Robert King, Peter Borland.

'ANGELS ON EARTH' WHO HELP FAMILIES IN THEIR HOUR OF NEED

THE COMMITTEE OF 25 PROVIDES DESPERATELY NEEDED SUPPORT TO PARENTS OF SICK CHILDREN



Volunteers help raise funds for disabled children during the earlier days of the Committee of 25.

“

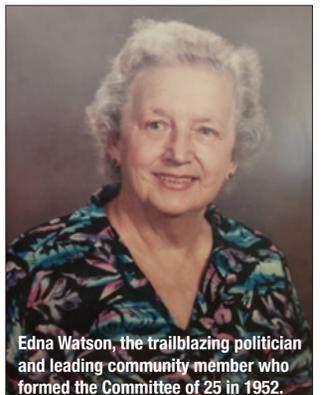
When you think nobody is there for you, and then you realise the Committee of 25 can help – that's an unmatched feeling.

“

Parents don't just need assistance to go overseas, they also need help for the basic medication and physical apparatus they need to buy. It just warms my heart that we are able to provide this assistance.

When she grew frustrated that the Bermuda Government of the day was not investing enough money to tackle social issues, Edna Watson took matters into her own hands.

Rather than wait for the politicians to come up with funds to help children with disabilities, Ms Watson gathered 24 like-minded women to embark on their own project to build a hospital dedicated to their needs.



Edna Watson, the trailblazing politician and leading community member who formed the Committee of 25 in 1952.

So it was in May 1952 that the Committee of 25 was formed – and a remarkable legacy of transforming the lives of disadvantaged children and their families began.

Now celebrating its 70th anniversary, the Committee of 25 has continually evolved since that historic day to provide essential support to hundreds of young people with medical and intellectual needs over the years.

Today, the charity covers the costs of airline tickets and hotel accommodation for a child and their parent when they need treatment overseas and helps with expensive prescriptions and physical apparatus such as wheelchairs.

But while the needs of families have evolved during the past seven decades, one thing has

remained consistent: when life throws you a curveball, there's nothing quite like the support of your community to help you bat it away.

The foundation of the charity was but one chapter in the extraordinary life of Ms Watson, a Canadian physiotherapist who became a trailblazing politician after moving to Bermuda.

She first hit the headlines for her heroic actions after a tragic plane crash, in which three people died, as she made her way to the island from New York in 1939.

Ms Watson was hailed as “the bravest woman alive” for her incredible courage, resourcefulness and determination to help others, after The Cavalier, Imperial Airways' luxury flying boat, suffered a failed engine, lost altitude and sank nearly 400 miles off Bermuda.

As 13 passengers clung to just six life preservers for 11 hours, Ms Watson was credited with keeping the captain afloat, massaging people's muscles that had gone stiff with cold, and generally buoying everybody's spirits.

“Edna Watson was the life of the party,” Bermudian survivor Nellie Smith later told The Royal Gazette. “She absolutely kept us going, talking and joking.”

In 1948, four years after women won the right to vote, Ms Watson decided to run for Parliament.

She won, despite admitting friends had only asked her to stand as a joke and revealing: “I had never even been to Parliament.”

Ms Watson became the first woman to speak in Bermuda's Parliament, and it was her appointment as chairman of the Social Welfare Board that ultimately led to the foundation of the Committee of 25.

Unhappy that Government refused to allocate funds for the social issues she had identified, Ms Watson invited 12 friends to a meeting, telling each of them to bring a companion. In July 1952, the Committee of 25 was incorporated by an Act of Parliament, with fellow founders listed as Queenie Penboss, Doris Pedrolini, Yvonne Bowker, Rosemary Mitchell and Rea Wentworth.

The Bermudian magazine wrote in July 1954: “A group of 25 women, all non-Bermudians, who had come here to live, met to form a committee dedicated to charity.

“They were prompted by a desire to show their appreciation for these islands which had become their adopted home and whose welfare had now become their own concern.

“These women from Canada, Great Britain, Norway, France, Australia and the United States became the Committee of 25.”

Task number one for the new charity was to create a home and nursing care for people with physical disabilities.

This was achieved within a year when they opened the Children's Convalescent Hospital on Ireland Island at the location now known as Lefroy House. As an added benefit, the move also helped local student nurses get formal training overseas.

Although the facility closed four years later due to lack of funds, the Committee continued to strive for a better Bermuda and was a driving factor in the creation of the Friendship Vale School for children with disabilities.

The Sheltered Workshop was then set up in Serpentine Road, Pembroke, in 1965 – in a wooden building acquired from the US Navy for one dollar – to meet the mental and physical challenges of children leaving school.

It was a great success. Demand was such that the service was filled to capacity and many young people learnt the skills they needed to find jobs in the community. By 1969, the project was taken over by the Department of Health and Welfare.

At that time, 3 per cent of all children were born in Bermuda had mental disabilities and were being housed in a wing of St Brendan's Hospital, which is now the Mid-Atlantic Wellness Institute.

A special wing, appropriately named the Edna Watson Wing, was built in 1970, and remained a top priority for the Committee until it was absorbed into a teaching hospital.

Committee members also raised cash to build a swimming pool for people with disabilities at MWI in 1981, sponsored by Sean O'Connell's swim around Bermuda.

Fundraising efforts for MWI have continued through the decades, including a contribution to a therapeutic garden for children introduced about two years ago.



Committee of 25 members Bea Stott (left) and Cecely Manders (centre) serve a happy customer in the early days of the Bargain Box thrift store.

A major moment in the history of the Committee of 25 came in 1975, when the Bargain Box opened in that same wooden hut on Serpentine Road.

One of the island's first thrift shops, Bargain Box enabled committee members and their friends to donate quality clothes and household items to be sold at reasonable prices – raising vital funds for the charity and offering a helping hand to families struggling to make ends meet.

Bargain Box was run for nearly 30 years by avid volunteer Bea Stott, who received the Queen's Certificate in 1982 for her role in raising more than \$1 million in “nickels, dimes and quarters”.

In 1985, it was upgraded into a large building with an upper floor that could provide rental income. Six years later, it was further developed to create office space for the Committee and another rental unit.

The facility was modernised once more in 2009, adding an additional floor which allowed Bargain Box to operate on the whole ground floor, with tenants and the Committee's office on the first and second floors.

The shop is still open on Saturdays and Thursdays, and raises up to \$4,000 per month.

As families increasingly feel the pinch of the economy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Committee has seen growing numbers of requests for assistance, meaning volunteers, support and donations are needed now more than ever.

To offer your support, time or resources to the Committee of 25, visit committeeof25.org, call 292-4324 or e-mail admin@committeeof25.org.

“

They were prompted by a desire to show their appreciation for these islands which had become their adopted home and whose welfare had now become their own concern.

Life is tough enough when your child needs urgent medical assistance.

It's even more difficult when you live in Bermuda, where the treatment your little one desperately requires often comes at a price you simply cannot afford.

That's why, for people like Delijah Symonds-Johnson, the Committee of 25 is a life saver.



Delijah Symonds-Johnson and Tre Govia, with their young daughter Aryah, who have received invaluable support from the Committee of 25.

“I always tell them, you have literally been my angels on earth,” said Ms Symonds-Johnson, whose 18-month-old daughter Aryah suffered a stroke during delivery.

Aryah is a happy baby with a smile for everyone she meets – but she has recently been diagnosed with cerebral palsy and requires physiotherapy and occupational therapy to maximise her development. She frequently needs to visit Boston's Children's Hospital due to lack of paediatric care on island.

Luckily, many of the medical bills are covered by her father Tre Govia's insurance.

But Ms Symonds-Johnson needed to give up her job to become a full-time carer for Aryah, leaving a huge shortfall when it comes to meeting associated healthcare costs, such as air flights, hotels and physical apparatus.

The Committee of 25 has helped bridge the gap by providing funds for several

we are in this together. The community of special needs is not very large. I'm so grateful that the Committee of 25 are here to support.”

Families are referred to the Committee by doctors, social workers, teachers and other professionals that provide services to children. So far this year, 11 families have received help.

Patrice Minors, the deputy chairperson at the Committee, said the need has never been greater.

“We have noticed during Covid and post-Covid that our numbers of referrals have increased,” she said.

“Parents don't just need assistance to go overseas, they also need help for the basic medication and physical apparatus they need to buy. It just warms my heart that we are able to provide this assistance.”

The Committee, which formed in 1952, is celebrating its 70th anniversary by stepping up its fundraising efforts and generating awareness about its work over the decades that continues today.

Hundreds of families have received such vital support from the Committee since it was formed by Edna Watson in 1952.

In recent years, its main role has been to provide a total of more than \$30,000 a year in financial assistance to children who need medical or intellectual treatment.

It does not pay for the medical procedures, but covers the cost of airline tickets, accommodation for the child and one parent and helps with expensive prescriptions, wheelchairs and other recommended apparatus.

“They genuinely care,” she said. “They'll ask how you are making out, there's always a follow-through. The energy they give and the support they give you is heart warming.”

“I know I can always go there and get support. It doesn't even have to be financial support. Just knowing that someone is there for us makes such a big difference.”

It's all helped Ms Symonds-Johnson appreciate Aryah for who she is.

“She's a very happy, social baby. She has the sweetest smile that keeps me going. She's happy, and that's the main thing. I'm grateful for her energy.”

“There was a time she would cry and cry and cry. To see her now, she's so ready and committed to trying. She wants to crawl, she wants to walk and she will.”

Another grateful family are Deshae Edness and Sinclair Smith, whose four-year-old son Masai has Down's

syndrome and needed his tonsils and adenoids to be removed at Boston Children's Hospital in August.

“That need will always exist in Bermuda. These families just want the best care for their children. But it needs to be a community effort. One can't always rely on the government to meet the needs of those who have challenges.”

The Committee's work goes beyond simply providing financial support.

Ms Symonds-Johnson thanked office manager Juliette Rogers and nurse Bernie Wilson for their compassion and empathy.

“We have noticed during Covid and post-Covid that our numbers of referrals have increased,” she said.

“Parents don't just need assistance to go overseas, they also need help for the basic medication and physical apparatus they need to buy. It just warms my heart that we are able to provide this assistance.”

It's all helped Ms Symonds-Johnson appreciate Aryah for who she is.

“She's a very happy, social baby. She has the sweetest smile that keeps me going. She's happy, and that's the main thing. I'm grateful for her energy.”

“There was a time she would cry and cry and cry. To see her now, she's so ready and committed to trying. She wants to crawl, she wants to walk and she will.”

Another grateful family are Deshae Edness and Sinclair Smith, whose four-year-old son Masai has Down's

syndrome and needed his tonsils and adenoids to be removed at Boston Children's Hospital in August.

“I'm so glad the surgery went well. It's already made a difference. I can't believe it!” Deshae said.

“He's not snoring at all now. Even his voice has changed a little bit. It's like he's got more room back there.”

There are 3k and 5k routes, and cost is \$25 for adults or \$10 for children and seniors. Visit racedayworld.com to register as an individual or team. A goodie bag is up for grabs for



Deshae Edness and Sinclair Smith, with their son Masai.

“The Committee of 25 assisted us with medical expenses and hotel stay. The customer service was excellent and the whole process was fairly easy. They were very efficient.”

As for Masai, his mother said: “He's such a happy little boy. Happy is his middle name. He's very sociable and very loving – oh my goodness, he's amazing!”

The Committee of 25's thrift shop, Bargain Box on Serpentine Road, is open on Saturdays,

from 10am to 4pm, and on Thursdays, from 5pm to 7pm.

The first celebratory event, the Committee of 25 Fun Run & Walk, starts and finishes at Bargain Box, on Thursday, September 22, from 6pm, with warm-up at 5.45pm.

There are 3k and 5k routes, and cost is \$25 for adults or \$10 for children and seniors. Visit racedayworld.com to register as an individual or team. A goodie bag is up for grabs for

the first 100 registered.

The Committee of 25 Anniversary Golf Tournament takes place at Belmont Hills Golf Course, Warwick, on Friday, November 4, from 12.30pm.

Entry is \$150 per person. For registration details or to submit a team, call 292-4324 or e-mail admin@committeeof25.org.

Refreshments will be provided before and after the tournament, and prizes will be handed out.

The Mid-Ocean News reports on the Committee of 25's fundraising efforts back in 1957



ENJOYING THE SUN—Four young patients bask