

Merilee Clarke still busy in retirement

BY JOHN CURRY

If your child has grown up in Stittsville or Richmond over the past three decades, chances are Merilee Clarke has played a role in their upbringing.

Clarke retired last September after 28 years working with children in one way or another.

It all began back in 1991 when she started the Building Blocks Play School. Initially, it

was a pre-school program offered through the Goulbourn recreation department. It alternated one day a week in Stittsville and the following week in Richmond before settling in Stittsville for 10 years until 2001.

With the creation of the new city of Ottawa that year, Clarke struck out on her own, starting a licensed pre-school she called Merrily We Go. It grew to operate four full days a

week.

She sold the business in 2008 and stayed on in a supportive role until 2010. Merrily We Go continues to operate in its longtime home at St. Thomas Anglican Church in Stittsville, with Jayne Tanner as its teacher/director.

While Merilee was growing the pre-school, she started working in 1993 with the Kumon after-school learning program, then operating in Stittsville out of the same church hall. So, for Merilee, it was just a few steps from her pre-school to her Kumon work.

This continued until March 2010 when the Kumon franchise became available and was acquired by Merilee and her husband John who was tiring of working in the high tech

sector. They decided to go into business together and moved the Kumon learning centre to the Stittsville Shopping Centre where they grew the program. Merilee focused on the reading and John looked after the math, assisted by a staff mostly comprised of former Kumon students.

This continued for six years until John's death. Merilee could not continue to operate the business by herself. She sold it, staying on for a year and a half to help with the transition. This ended with her retirement last September.

But don't think she is sitting back now and doing nothing. She is looking after her grandchildren every day and continuing her long-time involvement with the Sunday School at St. Thomas Anglican Church. She recently

organized the Christmas pageant presented at the church on Sunday, Dec. 22.

She makes it clear that she has no thoughts from retiring from this Sunday School role.

"I have to have my hand in with kids somewhere," she says.

Clarke says there may be a children's book in her future.

Her long involvement with children in Stittsville, either through the Merrily We Go pre-school or the Kumon learning centre, has brought her together with many children and parents over the past nearly 30 years.

"So many people know me," she says, with many approaching her in the community to share their common experiences.

Clarke lived in Munster before she and John and



John Curry photo

Merilee Clarke

their family moved to Stittsville 20 years ago, taking up residence in the former Anglican Church rectory on Carleton Cathcart Street adjacent to St. Thomas Anglican Church.

During her 18 years in Munster, Merilee was a volunteer with the Munster library, looking after the children's section and leading the story time program for about 10 years.