



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **For 30 Years, the World's Youngest Teachers Have Been Helping Children Learn Empathy**

**Toronto-founded Roots of Empathy celebrates milestone with call to nurture emotional literacy and mental health.**



TORONTO, ON – Screens are getting smarter. Children, research suggests, are getting sadder and having difficulty making friends. Into that gap, for 30 years, Toronto-founded Roots of Empathy has been sending an unlikely intervention into classrooms— a baby.

Families, educators, volunteer parents, Instructors and supporters gathered at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection to honour the infants who, through monthly classroom visits, have helped children develop the empathy and emotional literacy that underpin healthy relationships and mental health.

Founded in Toronto in 1996 by Mary Gordon, recipient of the Order of Canada and the Governor General's Award for innovation, Roots of Empathy has reached more than 1.2 million children in Canada and around the world. Independent research has shown that children who participate demonstrate increased empathy, kindness, caring and inclusion, alongside reductions in aggression and bullying.

The impact was perhaps best captured by **one Grade 7 Market Lane student** who reflected on the role played by her classes' baby, volunteer parent and instructor:

"Keziah (the baby), Kelsey (the mother) and Jemma (Instructor) were such big parts of me learning how to become the best version of myself."

"Empathy isn't soft. It's one of the most powerful human skills we have," said **Olympic champion and mental health advocate Tessa Virtue**. "I don't just hope my son grows up to be successful. I hope he grows up to be kind."

"It takes a village, but I can tell you in Roots of Empathy, it takes a baby to raise a village," said **Mary Gordon, Founder, President and CEO of Roots of Empathy**. "When you're well-loved, you learn how to love well. The children of today are without question the heroes of tomorrow."

For **veteran teacher Tom Veenstra**, who has hosted Roots of Empathy in his classroom for nearly half of his 25-year career, the impact is profound.

"The baby gives them permission to set aside the middle school angst and drama and to really think about emotions," he said. "You won't remember us, but we'll never forget you."

**Child and youth care worker Ben Schifman**, in his first year as a Roots of Empathy Instructor, witnessed the impact firsthand when students spontaneously erupted in cheers as baby Jack reached a new milestone.

"That spontaneous collective joy at someone else's achievement—that is empathy," he said. "My students didn't need me to teach it to them. They just needed Jack."

**Mary Gordon is available for interviews on:**

- Why emotional literacy matters more than ever
- The importance of empathy for early relationships and mental health
- The 30-year journey of a made-in-Toronto idea that has reached children around the world

## **ABOUT ROOTS OF EMPATHY**

Roots of Empathy preventative evidence-based programs foster empathy and emotional literacy in children creating classrooms where children are kinder, more inclusive, and less aggressive. Since its founding in Toronto in 1996, Roots of Empathy has reached over 1.2 million children in communities around the world and continues to work towards a future built on more caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults. More information at [www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)

**MEDIA CONTACT:**

Heather Sargeant

Director of Communications and Marketing

(416) 710-3785

[hsargeant@rootsofempathy.org](mailto:hsargeant@rootsofempathy.org)