

Rocked into action: VANCOUVER | Doctor quietly tended practice, family until earthquakes abroad shook her awake to the danger to B.C. schoolchildren

Gerry Bellett
Vancouver Sun
December 26, 2004

Dr. Tracy Monk, co-founder of the Families for School Seismic Safety, overcame her fear of speaking in public to campaign tirelessly to get B.C. schools, like Kitsilano high, earthquake-proofed.

By November 2019 -- if the government keeps its promise -- all B.C. schools will be earthquake-proof thanks to the efforts of a shy and reticent Vancouver physician who lists her greatest accomplishment as being the mom of two daughters.

And if a mom is someone who puts her children's safety above all else, then Dr. Tracy Monk has become mom to tens of thousands.

As it stands today a moderate to strong earthquake could collapse or seriously damage many schools across the province.

In Vancouver, half the school buildings are considered at risk.

There are 30,000 students in schools for a good portion of the day in an area where there's a 20-per-cent chance of a major earthquake within the next 50 years.

The Families for School Seismic Safety, of which Monk was one of the founders, is demanding that B.C. follow other areas such as Seattle, where seismic upgrading of schools has been made a priority.

On Halloween 2002, Monk was quietly running a family medicine practice, looking after her family and happy to be anonymous, when a school collapsed in Italy during an earthquake, killing 27 children in a town where it was the only building to fall.

"I'm ashamed to admit that until then I wasn't the slightest bit involved in my community. I didn't even go to [parent advisory committee] meetings at school. As for speaking in public -- when I was expected to do that at school I stayed home sick," she says.

A few months later a Turkish school collapsed in disturbingly similar circumstances and it sent Monk to the school board to inquire into the state of Vancouver's schools.

What she found horrified her.

"When I realized the risk of damage for unreinforced masonry schools in Vancouver was 100 times higher than a wood-framed house I felt physically ill," says Monk.

Monk pictured her Kitsilano neighbourhood after a serious earthquake -- all the wood-framed homes still standing but the schools in the middle collapsed into piles of rubble.

And if it happened during classes, it didn't bear considering.

"I phoned my family and all my friends to tell them because I couldn't believe no one was doing anything about it," she says.

But it wasn't really news, as it had been known to other parents and students for years and different groups around the city had been trying to catch the provincial government's attention, but with little success.

"I, too, was fatalistic about earthquakes. But children in school face a disproportionate risk during an earthquake compared to people in other government buildings," she says.

"Twenty-five per cent of the province's entire school building inventory is at high risk, while the risk is only two per cent for the other buildings owned by the B.C Building Corporation," she says.

Over the years the federal, provincial and municipal governments have been quietly fixing up their buildings to survive a major quake, she realized.

"They've fixed government buildings, prisons, bridges, tunnels, community centres, water lines, even liquor stores, but because they stuff the cost for fixing schools in the education budget -- where it competes with providing education services -- nothing much was being done," she says. It was an awful example of how "the many layers of bureaucracy can distance us from our essential nature," she says.

"If you lived in a village, making sure the school was safe would be the top priority. That's because you don't need equations or calculations or cost-effective studies to tell us what our guts already know and what millennia of evolution have wired us to feel -- that there's no greater treasure to society than its children and they must be protected at all costs."

From what Monk could see, the government's timetable for fixing the problem would take 60 years.

"The work was being done at a glacial pace. That's a powerful symbol of how children and education are at the bottom of the social agenda," she says.

And you don't need to be a Las Vegas odds-maker to realize the probability curve of an earthquake arriving before schools are ready looks a lot worse over 60 years than over, say, 15 years.

"We'd like to get it done even quicker than 2019 and we're hoping to convince the federal government to help. There's no reason it shouldn't. This is a public safety issue similar to what Manitoba has with the Red River.

"In a country where we are happy to spend \$660 million to build the Red River floodway I think people would be just as happy to pay to keep B.C. children safe," says Monk.

In the spring of 2003 Monk help found Families for School Seismic Safety along with Eugene Hodgson and Nathan Lusignan, who at the time was a Vancouver Technical College student.

"I was really inspired by Nathan. He had led a student seismic action group at the school, which was really the locus for our city-wide coalition, and Eugene has worked very hard on this," she says.

It's difficult to get her to take any credit for forming the coalition that, in little over a year of lobbying, would wring a commitment from the provincial government to fix the problem.

On Nov. 6, Premier Gordon Campbell announced a \$1.5-billion program to upgrade the seismic safety of schools over the next 15 years.

"There are many parents all over the city who worked hard on this. It was not just me. And I'm not comfortable being profiled," she says.

But UBC political science Prof. Kathy Harrison says that's typical of Monk.

"She's such a sweetheart and one of the most modest people I know. But she was right in the middle of it and inspired many people, myself included. It would never have happened without her," says Harrison.

Monk has spent countless hours on the campaign and now finds herself thrust into the global movement to repair unstable schools as a result of the worldwide connections she's made.

She had been invited to speak at a United Nations disaster reduction conference Jan. 18-22 in Kobe, Japan -- which experienced an earthquake in 1994 that caused 5,400 deaths and \$100 billion in damage -- but was unable to go.

B.C. is capable of having earthquakes of that size and larger, which is why Monk and the coalition are impatiently waiting for work to begin on schools.

"We want to be at the finish line no later than 2019.

"Ideally we'd like it to be sooner and that's what we will continue to work towards but we have to ensure the work doesn't ebb and flow with the political tides of government and school boards.

"November 6 is our anniversary and every year we'll be seeking updates on how many schools have been fixed. And we're not going away," she says.