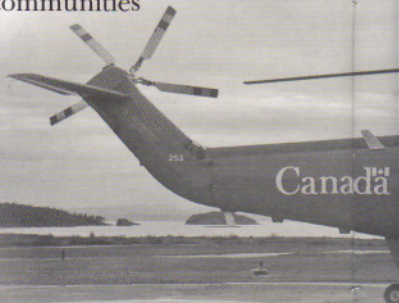


Reaching First Nations

Rotarians drive literacy and development in remote communities



Like many big things, the British Columbia First Nations literacy project began with a small conversation. In late 2007, Lieutenant Governor Steven L. Point, former chief of the Skowkale First Nation and the province's first aboriginal lieutenant governor, was chatting with his aide de camp, Bob Blacker, past governor of District 5040. He asked Blacker what Rotary was doing to promote literacy.

Wonderful things, Blacker answered. There was a project in Indonesia, another in Malaysia, and some great efforts happening in Africa.

Very nice, said Point, who had made literacy a key focus of his term. And what was Rotary doing on the issue in British Columbia?

According to Blacker, a member of the Rotary Club of Steveston-Richmond, the question transformed his thinking and shifted his attention to the creation of "an international project in our own backyard."

That backyard lies in the shadow of British Columbia's coastal cities, in a vast landscape of tiny, remote First Nations communities that are as removed from Victoria's tea shops as they are from the moon. On Point's recommendation, Blacker visited some of them and discovered how truly isolated they are.

One of the communities, Penelakut Island, was where Point had started a children's book distribution effort. Says Blacker: "It's a 25-minute ferry ride from Chemainus," a tourist town with an outdoor mural gallery and a theatre festival. But, in terms of infrastructure and development, the two places are worlds apart. "It amazed me, going out to Penelakut Island," he adds. "You could say it's 3,000 miles away."

Blacker's conversations with Karen Milanese, school principal on the island and a member of the Carrier Nation from mainland British Columbia, made it clear how much support the community needed.

"I came to realize that quite a few people were non-readers," recalls Milanese of her first days on the island, which has about 350 residents, 55 of whom are students in her school. "I started getting resources for the



Left: Rotarian Doug Nielsen volunteers at the dental clinic on Penelakut Island. **Right:** Rotarian Doug Deeks (far right) and Skatin community members celebrate a school playground the Rotary Club of Whistler helped build.

Below: The Coast Guard prepares to transport a Rotary team to Rivers Inlet. From left: Rotarian Elizabeth Chong, Blacker, pilots, and Point.



students in grades 10 to 12, but by January, I wondered why they weren't getting things done."

The reason was that most of them were reading at an early-elementary level. And their parents' reading level was low as well.

"We also realized we'd like to have a library on the island to help the elders," Milanese says. "All they want to do is read to their grandchildren."

Point says that when Blacker brought members from the Rotary clubs of Chemainus, Ladysmith, Parksville AM, Qualicum Beach Sunrise, and Steveston-Richmond to visit the island, they said they "could help with at least eight projects right off the bat" in addition to building the library. One of those efforts was conducting a dental clinic. Staff, students, and alumni from the University of British Columbia's school of dentistry spent three days treating 73 island residents.

Milanese and the Penelakut community also decided that the island, where most of the population is on public assistance and young people are unable to find work, needed a youth centre. Rotarians and local residents have

begun working with an architect and hope to begin construction on the facility later this year, Blacker says.

As Blacker visited other communities, often accompanied by Point, what he saw underscored the need to carry out development work in his own province. "We're hearing of communities so isolated, it's hard to understand how they exist," he says. "I've been to some communities – the majority of them – where I thought I was in the developing world."

Blacker brought Point to speak about his literacy work at a Rotary institute in Victoria in 2008. "Before I left the room," Point recalls, "clubs were coming up to me, saying, 'We want to help.'"

Rotarians' efforts on Penelakut Island have provided a model for Rotary clubs' involvement with other First Nations communities. Clubs help establish libraries and meet regularly with local leaders to identify their needs. Books are just the beginning, although literacy – including projects to stock libraries with materials for a variety of reading levels – remains the focus.

Britco Structures, a supplier for the 2010 Winter Olympics, donated a trailer used for the Games to

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E ROTARIANS are proud of our diversity and the more than 200 countries and geographical areas represented in Rotary. Diversity, along with service, fellowship, leadership, and integrity, is one of Rotary's core values. These values are expressed in how we manage our clubs and our service projects.

As Rotarians, we seek diversity in our membership, the vocations represented in our clubs, and the service projects we undertake. This issue of *Rotary Canada* reflects that diversity. The story on the First Nations literacy and development projects that Rotary clubs in British Columbia have initiated is an example of Rotarians lending a hand to their neighbours. First Nations communities in both urban and rural parts of Canada face many difficulties. Joining with these groups is one way Rotary can reach out and offer assistance.

The story of Ramesh Ferris, a polio survivor born in India who is now a Rotarian in Whitehorse, is another example of Rotary's diversity. Ferris' journey across Canada and his commitment to polio eradication can inspire all of us. This issue also reminds us of the historical ties between Canadians and Louisianians. The RI Convention this May in New Orleans is an opportunity to appreciate this unique connection between Canadians and Americans.

Rotary offers us a way to celebrate our diversity and discuss our differences without fracturing our communities. A Rotary club that reflects the diversity of business, professional, and volunteer leaders in the community and carries out a variety of service projects is a strong club with a secure future.



CHRIS OFFER

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RotaryCanada VOL. 2, NO. 3

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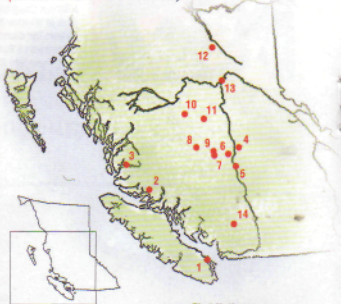
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(First Nations continued)



First Nations
communities visited

1. Penelakut
2. Tsawataineuk
3. Oweekeno
4. Williams Lake
5. Canoe Creek/Dog Creek
6. Toosey
7. Stone
8. Alexis Creek
9. Tl'etinqx-t'in
10. Kluskus
11. Nazko
12. McLeod Lake
13. Lheidli T'enneh
14. Skatin

support Rotarians' efforts. Orca Book Publishers has provided discounted or donated books, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police has offered to help volunteers reach communities accessible only by boat or plane.

Blacker and Point already have visited 14 communities on the coast and deep in the provincial interior, from the Oweekeno in Rivers Inlet to the Lheidli T'enneh near Prince George. The duo also are developing a project with the Tsawataineuk in Kingcome Inlet, about 175 miles up the coast from Vancouver, in a community with no road access and powered only by diesel generator.

"We've moved exponentially," Blacker says. Point is equally enthusiastic about the effort: "I'm ecstatic. It's blossoming out now."

Though the two men have made significant progress identifying communities in need and finding partner clubs, the project is still in its infancy.

"The biggest step is that Rotary clubs want to help the community, want to help in their own backyard," says Milanese. Though not a Rotarian herself, she observes that Rotary club members "have a real big heart and a real understanding of people."

And a willingness to start conversations and see where they lead. — DAVID SARASOHN 