

MHR *Connections*

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Stone, fire and water inspire students



“When Betty Vallejo asked students to pass a candle from one to the next repeating the phrase ‘you are the light of your community’, I wondered how many kids have ever been told how important they actually are, and that what they do matters in the world,” says Pam Roberts, an investigator with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and one of the leaders of the *Celebrate Your Rights* Northern Youth Conference.

Betty Vallejo was the guest speaker at the conference. At the beginning of her presentation, “From Colombia to Canada - A Journey of Human Rights” she put stones and candles around a bowl of water on a table. She asked the students to break into small groups and to select a stone. Each stone had a word painted on it and the students were to share their thoughts on how the word related to human rights. Words included listening, respect, love, compassion etc.

Ms Vallejo said that the rock represents life, its smoothness good moments, rough parts, difficulty. The candles signify opportunity and encouragement. Those that hold the candle are the light in their community. Water symbolizes the chance for us to clean and heal ourselves, she explained.

Ms Roberts also reflects on the many other memorable moments at this year’s northern youth conference. She described one of the workshops “Rights=Responsibilities” as one that relays information to the students “that isn’t something they can use ten years from now, but rather knowledge that can be used right now whether shopping, going to a movie, attending school, or working.”

Another great moment, according to Ms Roberts, was the performance by singer/ songwriter Roxy Flett. This yet to be discovered Thompson talent wowed students, teachers and Commission staff with her music when she performed during the lunch break. As one teacher said, “Kudos to Roxy for a wonderful performance and the Commission for the opportunity to showcase local talent.”

Students from Thompson, Split Lake, Wabowden, South Indian Lake, Grand Rapids, Oxford House, The Pas and St. Theresa Point participated in the conference held in Thompson on April 15, 2009.

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The Rights Connection by Jerry Woods - Chairperson

Is there a need for Human Rights Commissions?

When the Human Rights Code was legislated in 1987, there was broad support for the advancement of human rights. Over the years the Commission has continued to fulfill its mandate of enforcing *The Code* and educating and promoting the principles of human rights.

And yet, some are asking “Are human rights commissions still needed?” My simple answer is yes.

Or you could ask the young Aboriginal boy who was accused of stealing a shirt, humiliated in a store by being told by the manager to remove it, and then sent home, shirtless. The shirt was his. Commission mediators negotiated a settlement which included \$2500 in general damages.

Or ask the man who insisted that the standard driving test in Manitoba discriminated against him because of the restrictions that were placed on his right to drive. He felt that a blanket standard had been imposed based on his particular disability, without regard for individual differences. As a result of his human rights complaint, an individualized testing procedure is in place for Manitobans with disabilities who wish to take a driving test.

Maybe you could talk to the young woman who filed a sexual harassment complaint against her store manager, or the many women at the Portage Correctional Centre who, without the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and their advocate, The Elizabeth Fry Society, would still not have access to the same services available to incarcerated men.

Some of you may not understand the procedures that take place at the Commission or the balanced, objective work of its mediators and investigators. You may not know that an individual complaint can result in changes that benefit many people and help put an end to systemic discrimination.

Cases of discrimination, harassment and refusal to reasonably accommodate people continue to be filed at the Commission. Many find a negotiated settlement, a few go to a public hearing. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled some time ago that the process used by human rights commissions, like Manitoba’s, has sufficient safeguards to ensure fairness to the parties involved.

I look forward to the day when our work is done. That time, however, is not now.



Banner comes full circle

Students and teachers from across Northern Manitoba were present at the Northern unveiling of the “Peace by Piece Banner”, which took place at R.D. Parker Collegiate in Thompson the evening before the *Celebrate Your Rights Youth Conference*.

Jerry Woods, Chairperson of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and host of the *Celebrate Your Rights Conference* said the Peace by Piece Banner has come full circle.

“Northern students were the first to work on pieces for the banner at our last Youth Conference in March of 2008 in the Pas,” he said and added, “The students put human rights messages on pieces of material. A month later, students in Winnipeg and the Brandon region did the same thing.”

Over 40 Manitoba schools contributed “Peace Pieces,” making this banner a very impressive size! It was first unveiled at the Manitoba Legislative Building on December 9, 2008 and subsequently displayed at the City Hall Building in Brandon on December 10, 2008.

“This Peace by Piece Banner symbolizes the commitment of youth in Manitoba to human rights today and tomorrow,” says Mr. Woods.

Diary of a youth conference leader

“Sometimes things just don’t go as planned”

by Lorraine Lambert

The days were going to be busy and long, but the plan was simple and everyone was looking forward to the Northern Youth Conference. We would fly out of Winnipeg to Thompson early Tuesday morning and have a human rights workshop for employers and supervisors in the afternoon. We would be at R.D. Parker Collegiate by 6:00 p.m. to hang the Peace by Piece banner and prepare for the “Meet and Greet” evening with the students and teachers attending the *Celebrate Your Rights Youth Conference* the next day.

The youth conference would end about 3:00 p.m and we would be back in Winnipeg by early Wednesday evening. I’ve done this many times without a hitch.

This year however, would be different as we found ourselves in the air, then on the road, cancelling our seminar, yet determined to arrive in time for the Meet and Greet event.

It all started fine. We boarded the plane to Thompson at 7:20 a.m., but after a leisurely flight we circled the Thompson Airport just one too many times. We were then told the fog was too thick to land and made a U turn back to Winnipeg. Once there we decided not to chance another flight. We loaded my truck and were on the road by 10:30. Jerry Woods, Chairperson of the Commission and host of the youth conference, took the wheel. Even flood waters would not hold us back. He had a purposeful look in his eyes. Colleague Pam Roberts was in the crew cab, I was sitting beside Jerry. Pam and I were constantly on the phone with staff in Winnipeg and our colleagues from The Pas, one of whom had arrived in Thompson. All were helping to rearrange the next two days.

In Winnipeg, the staff was trying desperately to reschedule the employment seminar to Thursday. It wasn’t going to work. We arrived in Thompson at 5:30 p.m., checked into the hotel, and made it to RD Parker by 6:00. The evening was terrific and worth every moment of anxiety. By 9:15 we were relaxing and joking about the day over dinner.

At 7:00 a.m., Wednesday morning we were at it again. The youth conference was brilliant and as we were cleaning up afterward, we decided that rather than staying another night in Thompson we would hit the road and find a motel en route.

The journey back had its adventures, like arriving at the motel and finding out that the only restaurant in town would be closing in five minutes. We ate the last three pieces of fried chicken available. I won’t even go into the unique experience of the motel we stayed in, or getting up at the crack of dawn only to have to return to the motel hours later to retrieve a forgotten cell phone. It was one of those “oh no” moments.

The trip was exhausting, trying, and exhilarating. We were tired, hungry and at times a little frantic, but to see all the northern students at the youth conference was worth every moment. And thanks to the participants who told us how much they appreciated our efforts to make sure all went as planned.



**Law Day
2009
Jack found
guilty of
stealing hen
that laid the
golden egg**

Liam Beauchamp takes the stand for the defence as Xavier Stone, the farmer who sold Jack (from Jack and the Beanstock) the beans for payment of a cow. Jack was charged with theft and break and enter for stealing the hen that laid the golden egg and the golden harp. He was found guilty of theft but not guilty of break and enter.



I BELIEVE is a dramatic musical concert based on the Holocaust. The premiere will be in Winnipeg, May 21, 2009, 8:00pm at Winnipeg’s Centennial Concert Hall. **I BELIEVE** is the work of Canadian composer and lyricist, Zane Zalis.