The Beginnings of a Wonderful Partnership

Two grannies, Irene Clarke and Doris Thomas from the Region had just retired. With lots of energy and enthusiasm they volunteered in Missions in Peru, India and Cuba. Someone asked why don’t you do something in your own country? Why not? But, how do you get started?

How do you build trust? Our northern brothers and sisters have been betrayed with forked tongues, broken treaties, and endured residential schools. Indigenous people have reason to be leery of well-intentioned whites.

Begin by learning the culture. Cataraqui United Church hosted a warrior/activist from Tyendinaga to present on his involvement in activities that support Indigenous rights. Meeting Jonathon Maracle, a renowned Mohawk musician in a tipi in Deseronto was empowering; he said: “Go into the community and be with (rather than for); get to know the people. With your heart and soul in the right place, the trip will be productive.”

In 2012 we were ready. After several calls Jay Monture, from the Moose Factory Youth Centre, not only agreed, but was most receptive to having someone from the south visit his community. Moose Factory, an island along James Bay was our destination. Water taxi access during the warm months, ice roads during the winter, and only helicopter in between seasons.

Jay was polite, but reserved. We learned there had been six suicides in the past six months – the youngest a twelve-year old girl. You can certainly understand the grief this close knit 2,500-person community was experiencing.

Jay introduced us to Charlie Cheechoo, who was deputy chief. He spoke openly about the suicides, but Charlie wasn’t about doom and gloom. Charlie told how a young troubled youth named George had sauntered into his office and said that if only he could get out on the land, perhaps life might be a little better. Realizing the desperation in the teen’s voice, Charlie agreed. Later George told Charlie this experience had saved his life.

Project George was started. Charlie leads groups from 12 to 22 kids, into the bush for up to one-week. All provisions are provided, without, most would be unable to attend. The time is spent fishing, sharing their concerns in a safe and caring environment and most importantly experiencing the healing power the Creator provides. Again, generous people assisted by providing sleeping bags and warm blankets. Charlie partnered with the OPP, who transported youth to the camp on the mainland, a tremendous step for kids to see officers in a non-threatening role. Project George has resulted in a reduction in suicides, which has impacted the community positively. As a respected Elder, Charlie’s acceptance of us with a hug and invitation to coffee demonstrates to the community we are welcome.

Reverend Norm Wesley, St. Thomas Anglican church suggested we lead a Vacation Bible School. Bible stories, skits complete with costumes, action songs, and a full lunch, were included in the program. One of many sweet moments was when the boys were tussling and one ended up crying. I was hugging him, and he stopped crying, so I released the hug. He started to cry again; he wanted more hugging.

Acting out the Bible Stories was great fun; the Lost Sheep was the best. One little fellow always wanted to be the lost sheep. Going through the story skit more than once was a must. Everyone wanted a turn playing a key role.

Children began sharing stories with us; some who had been hesitant participated; on Thursday, one little girl said she wished it were just Monday. We felt blessed to have the opportunity to spend a week with these wonderful children.

As Lisa drove us around the community, she told of how she and her group of helpers, hold SWAP. This is where people donate what they no longer need to share with others; like a free garage sale. From generous donations from the Region we supported SWAP by sending eleven twenty-five-pound bags of clothing. Following SWAP this is the beautiful email we received FROM LISA

“I cannot thank you enough. your support had such a great impact. The best part was when the kids came in walking around with bags and their treasures, an elder watching the children was so filled with love; she couldn’t believe what was happening in her community. This SWAP was different, I’m not sure why. it just felt like Love.”

Lisa mentioned the Christmas Hamper initiative. The previous year, some families had asked if it was possible to have assistance for Christmas. She was able to provide thirty-nine – only a portion of the number requested. She said she felt that some families who donated should have been receiving. The next year we sent over one hundred bags of food valued at $15,000 to Moose Factory. A very big thank you to the congregations who very generously donated food, especially Grace United in Napanee.

Our new friends were shocked when we kept returning – it seems many people say they will return and they don’t. Just being there, and showing you care means so much.

The full day of travel each way, the cost of transportation and limited accommodation provides challenges. For the first three years, we visited our new friends, we went to their church, we toured the community, we built trust. Only after Charlie, Norm and Lisa suggested what might benefit the community did we respond. The information shared by Jonathon Maracle in the tipi has been invaluable “go and be with, not for”.

We, Irene Clarke, Castleton United Church and Doris Thomas, Cataraqui United Church are eternally grateful for the welcome we have received by this generous and kind Cree community. We are now Friends of the North.

The next chapter of Friends of the North will be in an upcoming edition

Submitted by

Doris Thomas