

# Teach for Canada puts educators in the community

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Beneath a cacophony of voices filling the Lakehead University cafeteria on Tuesday, Wendy Kiar explained with enthusiasm how privileged she feels to be a part of what she calls a great model created by visionaries.

Kiar is one of 46 teachers taking part in Teach For Canada's three-week training program held at Lakehead's Thunder Bay campus to prepare for teaching in remote First Nations communities.

A teacher with 34 years of experience teaching in different parts of the world, Kiar said she can see herself never retiring from the profession, instead striving for new experiences.

When she heard about Teach For Canada, she was excited to apply.

"I looked internationally again," said Kiar about looking for work after an 18-month hiatus in Canada. "But then I saw Teach For Canada and thought maybe it's time to have an adventure in my homeland and be part of a solution to this inequity in education for our indigenous people."

Teach For Canada is a non-profit organization, explained Kyle Hill, executive director, that networks with northern First Nations communities to, "Recruit outstanding teachers, prepare them for the north, and support them for a minimum of two years teaching commitment in the communities."

The three-week training program immerses the teachers in the history and culture of northern First Nations communities, through group activities, guest speakers and representatives of the communities where they will be teaching. They are introduced to the languages, challenges and successes they will face when they travel to the communities and begin teaching in September.

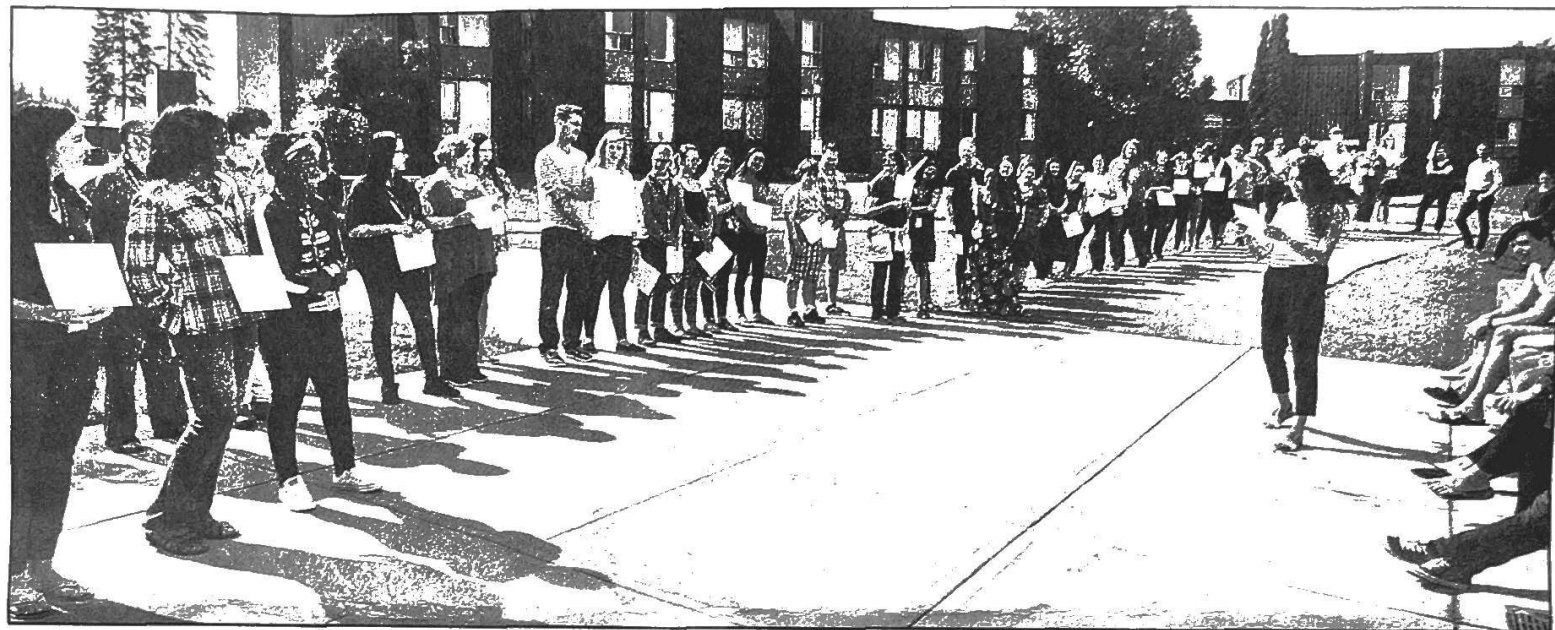


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**Indigenous history 101: Teachers' knowledge of Indigenous history is tested as they create a timeline of events based on when they think historical events happened.**

In its third year, Teach For Canada began as a seed of an idea in 2011. Hill was part of a group of young Canadians participating in a program called Action Canada that asked them to spend a year thinking about Canada's greatest public policy challenges.

"First Nations education on reserve came up through members of this group of indigenous and non-indigenous people," said Hill. "And the best thing we did was spend two years listening and learning about why First Nations education on reserve is a challenge."

They heard a lot about how reserve schools are underfunded, about 30-50 percent lower than provincial public schools, and they learned about the impact of the British-North America Act, the Indian Act, the 1960s scoop and colonial policies.

"Those are huge. Those challenges should be addressed by gov-

ernments and by institutions," said Hill.

"But we also heard about teachers, a lot of teachers who go north last a day, a week, a month, and it's even hard to find teachers who want to go north for a whole bunch of complicated reasons and we said this sounds like an addressable challenge."

The model for the program was in place by 2014 and, with private funding, they launched in 2015 with 31 teachers going to seven First Nations communities.

This year, 18 First Nations communities will be welcoming 46 teachers.

The program works, said Hill, because it is run in partnership with the communities it serves.

"We've tried to reverse the traditional power dynamic that often exists between outside organizations and First Nations communities," said Hill. "We've heard from a lot of

communities that is missing in outside organizations. That willingness to listen and learn and adapt."

A First Nations advisory council made up of at least one person from each of the participating First Nations communities is what directs the course of Teach For Canada.

"They meet in Thunder Bay or Toronto twice a year and they tell us here's what's working well and here's what's not," said Hill. "Here's a new idea for consideration that we think would work well."

Kurtis Hansen is relatively new to teaching, just four years into it, but he has already had a variety of experiences, teaching in London, England and in India. Hansen had the unique opportunity to take over for another teacher working in Big Grassy River First Nation through Teach For Canada last November.

The post came up unexpectedly, but Hansen jumped at the chance, buying a car and driving 20 hours to

get to the community, explaining that teaching in a First Nation school was always one of his goals.

"I wanted to do something within my own country where I can make that difference. What a great opportunity," said Hansen, adding that going to a First Nations community wasn't a big adjustment for him because the community was so welcoming.

Hansen, who taught kindergarten last year, said when his students graduated, their parents were so proud.

"You could just see how proud they were on their faces," said Hansen. "And the school is so central and centric to the empowerment of the whole community."

Kiar, who will be teaching at Grassy Narrows First Nation for the next two years said, "I do believe everything starts with education. Equal education, equal opportunity."