

Teachers visit to learn about First Nations' culture

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Last week, 46 teachers made the trip from Thunder Bay to Big Grassy River First Nation as part of Teach for Canada's summer training program.

Teach for Canada is a non-profit organization that works with 18 First Nations' communities in Northwestern Ontario to recruit, prepare, and support teachers working in northern communities.

The teachers arrived in Big Grassy last Wednesday and left Saturday morning as part of the three-week training program that is held largely in Thunder Bay.

Each week has its own theme and the first week is focused on culture, with the teachers learning about indigenous history and traditions, the colonization of Canada, and exploring their own education.

The next week, the focus is on community, in which the teachers get an opportunity to meet members of the communities during a conference in Thunder Bay.

During this week, they also visit one of the partner First Nations' (this year being Big Grassy) to learn about life on a reserve and meet local community members.

Then they'll return to Thunder Bay for the third week of the program to focus on the theme of classrooms.

This involves taking what they have learned and figuring

out how to share it with their students and communities before being sent to one of the 18 partner First Nations this school year.

Kurtis Hansen, one of three teachers hired by Big Grassy, already has taught there for a few months before joining Teach for Canada.

He joined the training program to improve his teaching in the community.

"I've gained new tools and new resources to help out, as well as learned more about the culture," Hansen told the Times.

"You gain a better understanding of issues surrounding the education gap and become more sensitive to it all," he added.

For Hansen, the goal always has been to make a difference as a teacher in indigenous communities.

"The principal has been saying I was destined to be here and that I really fit here," he noted.

"It's been such a positive experience."

Hansen said he has been very impressed with the summer training program and the support he's received from the other teachers.

"We all share the same goals and motivations for being here, so we have sort of built this support network," he noted.

"In university, it almost feels like a competition to get a job, but here we are helping each other out and supporting each other."

Amy Hockenberry is another teacher who will be at Big Grassy this fall. But unlike Hansen, last week was her first visit to the community.

"I've been super impressed by the people and how kind they were," she remarked.

"I guess I am a city girl and not accustomed to that, but it was really cool to see," laughed Hockenberry, who originally is from the Toronto suburb of Pickering.

Something that stuck out to Hockenberry was their bus driver from Thunder Bay, Elvis Adams, who she said was very kind and always smiling.

When they visited the Manitou Mounds, and she found out he was a respected artist, Hockenberry recalled being struck by his humility and couldn't understand why he would "waste his time" driving them around.

Hockenberry decided to join the Teach for Canada program after working as a student ambassador raising awareness about the education gap between First Nations' communities and other schools, and the different opportunities for teachers.

"As I was graduating, I was looking at different options and wanted something engaging that I could be passionate about," she explained.

Hockenberry said she wanted to make a difference, and is looking forward to getting a real sense of the community and engaging with the youth while teaching in Big Grassy.

"This is a great chance to



During their stay in the district, the teachers made a visit to the Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung Historical Centre to learn more about the local history. Teach for Canada takes these trips to teach about indigenous culture and history, as well as reduce the "culture shock" some teachers experience when they travel to work in northern communities.

learn and grow, and I am sure I will be taken out of my comfort zone," she admitted.

But Hockenberry said she thinks it will be easy to transition to Big Grassy because it is not as far north as some of the other communities—something she said she's grateful for.

"I think it will be a great fit and the principal, Lyn Blackbird, has already been so welcoming," she noted.

"I can't wait to meet the

kids." While in the Big Grassy area, the teachers went fishing, watched a baseball tournament, received a Manitou Mounds tour, built a sweat lodge and

participated in a sweat lodge ceremony, and camped in tents on ground—a first for many of them.

It's all designed to prepare these teachers for their assignments in the fall.

"The whole overall goal is to help retain teachers in First Nations' communities to provide stability for students," said Liz Halina, director of teacher development for Teach for Canada.

She said that teachers often will go in not understanding challenges like isolation and culture shock.

"The majority of the teachers we work with come from

southern big cities, so going into a very small, fly-in reserve can be very challenging personally or even professionally," Halina noted.

She said Teach for Canada prepares these teachers for the unique assignment of a northern community school and helps the teachers build the support system they need to thrive.

"I tell them, 'When you go to your new community and new school, ask questions, introduce yourself, say hello, get involved, start extra-curricular activities, get to know people,'" stressed Halina.

"Just get out there."



Camping out and sleeping in a tent was a completely new experience for some of the teachers, who mostly came from cities in southern Ontario. The experience allowed them to get a better feel for the land and also take part in quintessential camping activities like sitting around a fire, singing, and roasting marshmallows for s'mores.



The teachers were able to view some local history during a boat tour as they admired photographs on Lake of the Woods during their three-day visit to Big Grassy First Nation area as part of their Teach for Canada community visit.

—Submitted photos



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