



First Nations Students To Climb Mount Kilimanjaro



Story by Frank Larue

“As you know, we have various stereotypes in our community of inner-city east side teenagers, of Aboriginal youth, of alternate-program students, etc. And some of our students have internalized these stereotypes; we start to believe the stereotypes. For example, we start to believe that inner city students and First Nations students have lower graduation rates.

Actually, if we look beyond the superficial statistics and adjust for the effects of class and income, our students have among the highest grad rates (all things considered) and are among the most resilient students in the city. So, us teachers are forever looking for ways to challenge the stereotypes—it’s in our professional blood. The other stereotype is that alt-program kids are not quite as good or able as regular-program students. This is silly. We all learn differently, and we are all unique. But communities define and self-define ourselves. In this case, alt-program kids define themselves as ‘on the margins’ and they ‘look in’ on mainstream/regular-program students. We want to shift the margin to the center of achievement; we want the students on the ‘margins’ to achieve something that no other public school kid has ever achieved. We feel that this kind of transformative experience is what public education should really be all about; in fact, it is what public education is about,”

says Andrew Schofield, vice-principal of Britannia Secondary.

Several Native students attending the Streetfront Alternative school at Britannia Secondary have been selected to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. The trip is the first in a series of expeditions that the Street2Peak students will participate in over the next decade. The purpose of the trips is to give disadvantaged students an opportunity to share their stories of struggle and success with the rest of the world. Kilimanjaro was chosen because of its size and scope. The trip had to be of such significance that the world would take notice of their accomplishments. The students would learn that it doesn’t matter where you come from; it matters where you go.

Vice-Principal Andrew Schofield was responsible for choosing the destination. “It would be pointless to simply go to Tanzania, climb the mountain, and come back. Near Kili is the town of Moshi. What if we did volunteer work at an AIDS orphanage? The Serengeti plains are quite close, along with Olduvai George, the Cradle of Humanity. Perhaps we should try to expose our students to these sites of great ancestral resonance. Lastly, a short flight/bus ride from the Serengeti/Moshi/Kilimanjaro area is Dar-es-Salaam and the Slave Forts of East Africa. This was the site of one of humanity’s great tragedies: the center of

the slave trade and the great African Diaspora. Our students, representatives of a colonizer and colonized family histories, would surely benefit from travel to these sites. The education that really shakes up our kids and our communities must start with a dream. Our dream is to really transform the lives of these students and their families. One way to do that is by putting them on top of Kilimanjaro and on the Serengeti.”

Most of the students headed for Kilimanjaro have not had the opportunity to travel anywhere; taking an airplane will be a new experience. Alannah Wong, one of the students making the trip, told the Vancouver Sun, “I think this trip to Mount Kilimanjaro is not just sending a couple of kids from the alternative school to go to Africa. We’re actually showing people you can rise up above whatever’s going on in your life.” The trip will last 19 days (seven days on Kilimanjaro, three nights on the Serengeti, five days of volunteering in an AIDS orphanage, three days in Dar-es-Salaam). The trip will make an impression on the students, and Schofield believes it will help the students on many levels down the road. “Self perceptions changed, inter-generational transfer of narratives of despair



and defeat disrupted, vision of self worth and agency emerges. We can already see these transformations occurring among the students as they meet fundraising targets (\$24,000 raised at first Family fun run event thanks to community support) and fitness targets set by Streetfront.”

Britannia Secondary has been very sensitive to Aboriginal issues. Their administration deserves recognition for coming up with original and ground breaking solutions for Aboriginal education. Last year, 24 out of 26 Aboriginal students graduated thanks to the assistance of private mentors, and now Aboriginal students are getting ready to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. “To take away a man’s hope is the cruelest of evils,” Winston Churchill once said, but to give people whose souls have been trampled on not only hope but also a sense of self and a belief that anything is possible if you truly want it is a major contribution.