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Douglas Todd: 'Please bring us more books,' First Nations librarians ask

"The young people are learning not only where they're from, but where they can go. Books show there's more to the world than just here," First Nations librarian Naomi White

Douglas Todd

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Stoney Williams, centre, is the librarian at Toosey Reserve at Riske Creek. Her library, and 18 others, were made possible through the volunteers of B.C.'s Write to Read Project. PHOTO BY HANDOUT COURTESY MICHAEL MCCARTH /jpg

Naomi White still remembers her delight when she saw a barge full of books moving across the inlet to her village of Lax Kw'alaams, north of Prince Rupert.

"It was amazing," the First Nations librarian said.

Six volunteers from Metro Vancouver helped haul in 14 pallets of books and library furniture so that about 150 school-age children in the small village, 1,000 kilometres north of Vancouver, would get the chance to enhance their literacy.

"If you don't know how to read, you don't know how to do anything," White said, explaining how literacy is the key to more First Nations people advancing into higher education and holding down jobs in the trades, businesses and professions.

"We're just so remote here, especially during COVID. Now we're better able to foster the love of learning. And to pass on that reading is power. The more you know the better off you are," said White, describing how many young people in the village are keen to learn about the larger world through the library.

The community library in Lax Kw'alaams is one of 19 learning centres that have been built for small Indigenous villages through the efforts of a volunteer project inspired by former B.C. lieutenant-governor Steven Point, a one-time chief of the Sto:lo nation, and retired police officer Bob Blacker. Both men are leaders with the Rotary Club.

Without relying on government money, more than 50 B.C. male and female volunteers with the Write to Read Project (W2R) have used trucks, boats and airplanes to distribute more than 70,000 books onto reserves throughout the province, says Blacker, the project manager. Three more libraries will be erected as soon as the pandemic subsides.

Since the Write to Read Project installed the first library on the Tooney reserve at Riske Creek in 2011, Blacker said, it has found donors to provide modular buildings, furniture, shelving and scores of computers — as well as crucial high-speed, fibre-optic internet connections — to Indigenous reserves including Metlakatla, Metchosin, Nooaitch and Gitsegukla.

Michael McCarthy, a North-Vancouver-based travel writer who helped design the W2R Project and made a documentary about it, said, “It costs W2R less than \$50,000 to build a library in remote communities, where we have to pay barges and trucking fees as well. We don’t waste money on bureaucracy.”



Bob Blacker (yellow coat) and another volunteer load a pre-built library module onto a barge to get it to the village of Metlakatla near Prince Rupert. People on reserve call the little building "The Hobbit House." PHOTO BY SEE NOTES / DIRECTION / PNG

McCarthy and other W2R organizers join First Nations leaders in stressing that enhanced literacy is one of the keys to young people overcoming the kind of despair that has ravaged many often-remote Canadian reserves, where educational opportunities can be limited and chronic unemployment normally runs high.

A recent C.D. Howe study by Simon Fraser University professor John Richards found that, while the two out of three Indigenous people who have moved into Canadian cities generally do better with jobs and education than those who remain on reserves, deaths by suicide, alcohol use and homicide remain unacceptable across the population. Indigenous People's literacy levels remain well below the Canadian average.

"Among the provinces with large First Nation populations, B.C. has indisputably been the most successful over the last quarter century in achieving high-school certification among young adults living on-reserve," says Richards. But only 50 per cent of B.C. First Nations primary school students read at the level expected of Canadian children their age, Richards and his co-researchers found. And even that fragile reading success rate falls to 20 per cent by Grade 8.

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"Studying, holding meetings and filing reports is all well and good, but with Indigenous issues perhaps it's time to take some positive action" and simply offer more libraries, said McCarthy.

He emphasized the R2W project has no association with Ottawa's Department of Indigenous Affairs and collaborates directly with Indigenous people apart from all political structures.

"Unlike emergency aid, which grabs the headlines, the benefits of literacy take time to show," McCarthy said. "Yet profound changes are occurring in remote and impoverished Indigenous communities around Canada — off the radar of the mainstream media, which lacks the resources to explore them."

Blacker and McCarthy were on hand, for instance, when R2W, an offshoot of the Rotary Club, installed the library at the Tooney reserve. Since then one of the main messages the librarian, Stoney Williams, has wanted to get out to Canadians is: "Please bring us more books."

"Pretty much everybody here uses the library," she says. "From the kids up to the adults. We even get

people coming from down the road.”



Librarian Naomi White from Lax Kw'alaams went to Nanaimo Correctional Centre and was pleased to meet the mostly Indigenous inmates who have been building the furniture and shelving for almost all of W2R's libraries. PHOTO BY SEE NOTES / DIRECTION / PNG

Since the community library in Lax Kw'alaams came into existence about five years ago, White has noticed a stream of younger Tsimshian students coming in and absorbing books about Indigenous culture while also enjoying such things as graphic novels, including Geronimo Stilton, Captain Underpants and the Bone and Amulet series.

“The young people are learning not only where they're from, but where they can go. Books show there's more to the world than just here. You're not limited to being stuck in one place. You can go wherever you want, as long as you work for it.”

Blacker said people who visit the libraries ask for the same kinds of books that are popular elsewhere, including mystery novels and even Westerns by the likes of Zane Grey. “The kids get really excited.”

Through donations R2W has also been able to supply the libraries with more than \$30,000 worth of

titles from Indigenous authors.

Caden White, a high school student in Lax Kw'alaams, said he loves the new library because it gives him access to more science books and he can use it in his spare time to prepare for college or university. "When it comes to what else I'm reading," he said, "I read about my history."

The initial brainstorm for Write to Read began with a conversation in 2007 between Point and Blacker, who was then the lieutenant-governor's honorary aide.

When Point heard Blacker describe how the Rotary Club, a service organization with more than one million members, was providing books to low-income people around the world, on continents such as Africa, the former judge asked the retired New Westminster police officer: "But what are you doing in your own backyard?"

At that point, Blacker said, he had never been on a First Nations reserve. Since the fateful conversation, however, Point has travelled to more than 30 reserves, organizing the logistics for each library project. He's helped recruit librarians, architects, engineers and a host of others to work with First Nations people.



This well-used library building was donated by Britco Modular Solutions. The First Nations community in Bella Bella installed a small coffee and gift shop beside it. PHOTO BY SEE NOTES / DIRECTION /PNG

To date W2R has distributed more than \$226,000 in donations from foundations and Rotary Clubs to support Indigenous literacy.

“The 12 modules we received from Britco International, which were donated and driven to each of our sites, are alone valued at more than \$500,000. Without Britco, we would not have been as successful as we have been so far,” said Blacker, 71, who lives in Richmond.

Telus, Windsor Plywood, Coast Guard staff and many RCMP officers have also made significant contributions to W2R. So has the Nanaimo Correctional Centre.

White, the Lax Kw’alaams librarian, said that during a recent tour of Vancouver Island reserves it was gratifying to meet some of the mostly Indigenous inmates who have been building the furniture and shelving for almost all of W2R’s community libraries.

“The men at Nanaimo Correctional Centre have been a critical component,” said White. “It’s been amazing what a group of Rotary Club members have been able to coordinate. The help they’ve given us has been immeasurable. We couldn’t have done what we have without them.”

McCarthy, who has worked with Indigenous people around the world and in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, said some people may carry around assumptions that “people who have used only the spoken word for 10,000 years might take ages to adapt. But, in fact, for children it only takes minutes.”

Reading, McCarthy said, stimulates the imagination and creates the yearning for more understanding. “Nothing changes a community for the better than literacy. For a few million dollars, we could build a library in all 700 Indigenous communities in Canada.”

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The Write to Read Project has provided scores of computers to the libraries its helped construct in small First Nations communities. PHOTO BY SEE NOTES / DIRECTION /PNG



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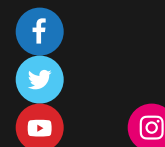
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