

## A slap in the face of every Canadian Meet Lizabell. She is 15. Her baby is dead. And still the men won't leave her alone. 'I wish my son were here. He would love me forever.'

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### MARGARET PHILP

The catastrophe of native life in Canada is old news. Decades pass, reports are drafted, articles are published, and nothing happens. Canadians have become as remote to the suffering as spouses in a stale marriage.

But now something extraordinary has happened. One of the international humanitarian agencies that fight malaria in dusty refugee camps is training its eye on some of the isolated, alcohol-drenched reserves here at home. Two international relief workers from Save the Children have just finished a tour in Canada -- a country ranked sixth on the United Nations' Human Development Index -- that takes a hard look at the poverty and hopelessness in the wilderness of Northwestern Ontario.

That communities so close to home could be candidates for international aid is a rude slap to Canadians who have donated billions of dollars over the years to building new schools for tsunami victims and shelter for African orphans. "Canada should be cleaning up the backyard at home before they go out and fix other places," says Michael Hardy, executive director of Tikinagan Child and Family Services, the native-run society responsible for protecting youngsters in the 30 first nations scattered across the province's Northwest. "I'm not sure what world we fit into here. Whether it's Third World or Fourth World or whatever. But something has to take place."

Death taunts Krystal Shewaybick like a schoolyard bully. She thinks of it now as she hunches over a sheet of paper in the school library, carefully writing the names of her four sisters. "Just the 5 of us 4-ever." She flips the page, scribbling in the corner: "R\*I\*P David Thadeus Shewaybick. Miss yah so much my cousin!!"

And she thinks of it again after school when she gets home, bursts through the door with its broken window and gaping hole where the doorknob belongs, and sweeps her year-old sister into her arms.

At 13, she might be thinking about clothes or movies. But not here on the Webequie First Nation, far from the theatres and shopping malls of Thunder Bay,

which is 540 kilometres by air to the south. Since her 15-year-old cousin committed suicide last winter, hanging himself in the penalty box of the outdoor rink where he played hockey most of his life, she has lived in fear of death. Not only her own, but that of her four little sisters, whose pictures are plastered across her bedroom wall.

David Shewaybick was a popular traditional drummer and dancer whose death was the 24th suicide in two decades -- most by the hands of the young -- in this remote community of 700. At that rate, 4,250 Torontonians would have killed themselves last year -- more than the toll for the entire country.

"I don't want to commit suicide," Krystal murmurs, barely above a whisper. Two long braids tumble from underneath a black tuque pulled down to her eyes. Her eyes flicker for an instant from the library floor.

These are among the few words she utters in response to the questions being asked by curious strangers who have travelled thousands of kilometres from the South -- one from the United States -- in an attempt to understand what life is like for children in Ontario's remote native reserves.

One of the strangers is Barbara Ammirati of Save the Children, which specializes in trying to spare children the harrowing aftermath of war and natural disaster. For 18 months, she was deputy leader of the agency's Hurricane Katrina response. Now, not a week after packing her suitcase in balmy New Orleans, she has landed in the sub-zero North.

A reserve is unlikely turf for international aid workers, but Ms. Ammirati is here with Nicholas Finney, emergencies deployment adviser with Save the Children in Britain, to start work on an unprecedented partnership between northern first nations and southern social agencies. It's a project launched by a handful of child-welfare leaders whose frustration with a legacy of government failure on reserves had finally boiled over.

The two visitors, along with seven Canadian specialists, are spending a week conducting the sort of rapid-fire economic and social assessment of

Webequie and the even more troubled Mishkeegogamang First Nation that each has done in devastated places from New Orleans to quake-ravaged Pakistan.

Their draft report, to be presented to the two communities next week, will become the marching orders for an unprecedented campaign to pair reserves seeking help with aid agencies that have access to vast charitable resources, in some cases global, that have never before been tapped to aid native Canadians. Government remains on the sidelines.

Judy Finlay, the province's official child advocate, co-founded the project after 12 trying years of working with native children, and has high hopes. "This is a turning point," she says. "It's the beginning of a movement, and that's not overstating it. . . . What's different is that this is not a story of a disempowered, hopeless group of people. It's a story of an empowered group of people, and here's what you as a civilized society can do.

"Whenever I talk to people about the issue, their mouths drop, but they think, 'There's nothing I can do about that.' Yet there is. This will allow people the opportunity to take action."

Life is good for most Canadians, and they know it. Every year, they donate about \$360-million to relief agencies working overseas. At home, another \$8.9-billion is handed over from individuals, along with \$14-billion from charitable foundations, to Canadian churches, synagogues, hospitals, and charities whose social programs deal mostly with urban issues, such as inner-city homelessness.

But native poverty, alcoholism and suicide are almost never championed as a charitable cause. In the eyes of many, first nations are entirely Ottawa's responsibility. And under tax laws, charitable foundations can't give money to agencies not legally registered as charities, and no first nation is.

So it is easier for Canadians to write cheques for relief efforts in Afghanistan than to donate to struggling reserves in their own country, despite the overwhelming need.

In Webequie, everyone has lost a close relative or friend, and yet almost no one -- including parents of the dead -- has sought out the handful of crisis counsellors, often neighbours, employed at the local nursing station. Death is so lodged in the collective psyche that parents refuse to discipline their children for fear of inviting suicide.

After her cousin's death, Krystal Shewaybick threatened suicide several times. The threats stopped only when her father, Christopher, who had drummed with his nephew, exploded: "I'll watch you. Go ahead and do it. I've seen a lot of people hanging. I've seen my friends hanging. Why don't you just do it and I'll

look at you?"

Looking back, Mr. Shewaybick says: "I was all burnt out. I couldn't handle it any more."

But his outburst struck home. Krystal broke down in tears for the first time since David's death. Still, the family pulled up stakes and moved to another reserve to escape Webequie's despair.

That lasted less than a year. They returned after Krystal started drinking and hanging out with a tough crowd of girls. The family arrived carrying almost no belongings, their furniture too expensive to move by air. Homeless for a time, they eventually moved into one of the smallest, shabbiest houses on the reserve.

Mr. Shewaybick collects employment-insurance benefits, pocketing a little money on the side by borrowing his brother's snowmobile to hunt marten for furs he can sell to the Northern Store. He hopes for a job when long-awaited renovations on the water-filtration plant begin. (There has been a boil-water advisory on the reserve for as long as anyone can remember.)

He remembers his nephew waving cheerfully to him the day before he died. "I don't know why he did it," he says, tears welling in his eyes.

David's was one death no one saw coming. Warm and happy, he was a gifted athlete as well as a proud drummer and dancer -- an emblem of the band's push to counter decades of drinking, drugs and violence by restoring native traditions and spirituality. He was not like the bored, brooding youth with nothing to do but watch TV, drink and smash windows.

"He was more of a loving person," says Susan Okeese, one of the reserve's two crisis-intervention workers. "He didn't have suicide characteristics or anything."

Since David's death, Ms. Okeese's son, Leslie, one of his close friends, has refused to attend school. He sleeps most of the day and goes out at night. His mother, still afraid she missed some sign of David's anguish, has no idea where he goes.

Webequie still depends on hunting, fishing and trapping to supplement what groceries a welfare cheque can fetch at the U.S.-owned Northern Store, where a four-litre bag of milk costs \$12.89 -- nearly triple the price in Toronto. The nearest town, Pickle Lake, is a 250-kilometre flight south, and Oji-Cree is so prevalent that children are loath to speak English.

The team conducting the assessment sees all this. They visit small houses crammed with three generations of families, stunned to find mattresses covering nearly every inch of the bedroom, rotting holes in the floor and spongy, water-damaged ceilings.

Even if people can feed themselves, those with snowmobiles must pay \$2 a litre for fuel, more than twice the cost in the South, which makes a hunting excursion expensive. With the mild temperatures until lately, the winter road used to truck in goods more cheaply is only now being built.

Prospects for economic development are dim, but a few enterprising souls have started businesses. Located in a plywood shack beside the band office, the Coffee Shop offers groceries and coffee to customers who sit at a lone table in the corner. And in the surrounding bush there are a few fledgling tourist lodges for sportsmen, guided by locals, go to hunt and fish.

Lillian Suganaqueb, the local health director, owns one of the lodges and a convenience store near the school. By reserve standards, she is positively wealthy, and drives a shiny pickup truck. The neighbours, she complains, have been less than gracious about her good fortune.

When Ms. Ammirati sits down with Emily Jacob, who serves as the reserve's mental-health worker, she sees why people who need therapy rarely seek it. In such a close-knit community, it is hard enough to reveal their private pain to someone they have known since birth. Harder still when three desks are crowded into a tiny office.

"It gets really frustrating," says Mrs. Jacob, who also lost a son to commit suicide. "I can't really do much. We've had so much trauma over the past 15 or 20 years. There are only two of us, and the cases are so overwhelming. We're just dealing with day-by-day crises."

At the police station, one of the two Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service officers posted to the reserve says most of the crime stems from alcohol, but drug use is on the rise. More and more teenagers are becoming addicted to the prescription painkiller Percocet, which they snort like cocaine through empty pens.

But his biggest headache is a gang of teen girls -- some as young as 13 -- who are sniffing gasoline and drinking hairspray when they can't find liquor. "Their parents can't deal with them," he tells Ms. Ammirati. "The parents are scared to discipline for fear of suicide."

The doctor, Naseem Janmohamed, who has flown into Webequie every six weeks for six years, tells the team about the rampant diabetes and respiratory problems living in crowded, wood-heated, sometimes mouldy homes thick with cigarette smoke. Diets are rich in fatty, processed foods, with fruit and vegetables both expensive and never part of the traditional diet.

As well, she is always struck by the level of

depression, anxiety disorders and massive unresolved grief: "Most people here have had experience with quite significant trauma, either through loss by the suicide of family or friends. Everybody in the community has experienced this multiple times," she says. "I often come across people who have had one trauma piled against the other."

None of it is new to Maurice Brubacher.

Now retired as executive director of the Children's Aid Society in Guelph, he first travelled to the North a decade ago, seconded from his job to head Tikinagan after its senior management suddenly quit. He was stunned by the monumental work of protecting children on reserves where two-thirds of the population was younger than 25, one-quarter of those suffered from prenatal alcohol exposure, suicides stood at six times the national average, houses were rickety and overcrowded, and native social workers were required to maintain foster-care standards drafted in Toronto.

He still is. Five years ago, he started Friends of Tikinagan, which has shipped used clothes and sporting equipment north to Sioux Lookout. Most years, Mr. Brubacher drives the truck himself.

But he wanted to do more, so he called Ms. Finlay. Long upset about northern child poverty, the provincial advocate agreed to help him and Tikinagan's Mr. Hardy arrange a meeting of social and humanitarian agencies that might set their sights on the North. Most have.

"If you look at a community and you see the poverty, the first impressions somebody would have is that these people don't have it together," Mr. Brubacher says.

"But when you get to know the leaders and you see the strengths they have and how hard they're working and what they're doing with what they have, you're impressed with the potential that's there. If we can mobilize some resources to provide more support, then there's great potential. There are also great challenges."

If dogs can be a measure of a native reserve's health, it's immediately apparent that the problems on Mishkeegogamang First Nation are profound. Gone are the lustrous coats of the friendly hounds at Webequie. Here, the dogs are mangier and meaner; visitors are warned to beware.

"The year 2006 was hard for us," band councillor Lauren Wassaykeesic tells the assessment team. "We hope to have a new beginning. But we're struggling. A lot of things have happened that we're really struggling with. At this point, we're not able to do it on our own."

Surrounded by an achingly beautiful landscape cut through by the headwaters of the Albany River, this

sprawling Ojibwa reserve of 1,510 is 250 kilometres north of Sioux Lookout by road. Formerly known as Osnaburgh House First Nation, it is infamous for having succumbed over the years to the temptation of the liquor store in nearby Pickle Lake -- a down-on-its-luck former gold-mining town a half-hour's drive away. Most people don't have vehicles, but there is a thriving black market run by bootleggers who charge more than double the liquor-store price.

Alcohol's toll is steep. Children have drowned, drunken men have been stabbed, car accidents have killed some, and a young mother and a teenage boy committed suicide in the last year alone.

While accidents are blamed for about 6 per cent of deaths in Canada, they account for more than half of Mishkeegogamang's staggering death rate.

Run-ins with the law are frequent, with band members incarcerated last year for a combined 3,000 nights -- an average of about two nights for every person on the band list.

At the school, where the curriculum includes classes in the Ojibwa's language and culture, the children score on average between three to four grades behind kids their age in Southern Ontario. While the school is a towering new \$7.5-million building with a teepee-shaped roof tall as a steeple and framed by pine timbers, Ottawa provides only about half the student allotment for education that schools elsewhere in the province receive.

"How can you expect that kids up North are ever going to be able to compete academically . . . if you're only prepared to spend half as much on their elementary-school education?" Mr. Brubacher demands.

About 60 children are in foster care with Tikinagan, the native-run agency -- a disproportionate number even in these parts -- with about 30 more legally declared Crown wards who may never return. Those numbers have dropped by more than half from a decade ago because the agency has a policy of placing children with extended family wherever possible to avoid shipping the children out. Still, few such foster homes are found here.

"Most of the children are in care because of alcohol," Tikinagan supervisor Jessie Duncan says. "Usually neglect and abandonment."

Lizabell Kwandibens has suffered more hardship in her 15 years than her sweet face would reveal. She was barely in school before she was sexually assaulted and sent to outside foster homes. As a teenager, she returned to live with her mother, a drinker.

Still a child, she gave birth to one of her own. Son Justus arrived in September, and it was only three

weeks later that she awoke one morning to discover him lying cold and lifeless next to her. His sudden death was another shock to a community still reeling from a suicide two months before.

Autopsy results are pending. But without an official cause of death, Lizabell has been humiliated by rumours that she threw the baby at her former boyfriend. No one can defend her. No nurse ever visited the girl after the baby's birth. Likewise, there are no prenatal classes on the reserve. Whether she was fit to care for a baby is anyone's guess.

"I wish my son were here," she says, rubbing her eyes with nail-bitten fingers.

"He would love me forever.

"I feel so lonely without my baby. It just hurts inside. Sometimes I just feel like killing myself, but I don't want to hurt my family."

She slumps in a chair in a safe house, where she has lived for the past week. She was "almost raped," she tells Ms. Ammirati, by a man who threatened to beat her up if she told anyone, and she worries she is pregnant again. But it was hunger that drove her here. "There was no food. I was thirsty. The pipes froze. We got no hot water."

At the safe house, she has received counselling and spent time with a visiting traditional healer, who "makes me feel better inside." But before the visitors leave Mishkeegogamang, she is sent to a foster home in Sioux Lookout, where she is to return to school, leaving the counselling and healing behind.

"Lizabell is a victim," Ms. Ammirati observes, "yet it seems the system continues to punish her."

When the assessment teams knock on his door, Josh Roundhead is playing a video game on his television screen, one of his few possessions in a house devoid of furniture. At 28, he has battled the bottle for years, even resorting to mouthwash and hairspray when he can't meet the bootleggers' prices. He has perfected the technique of drinking hairspray -- by adding milk and sugar -- to stop it from burning as it goes down his throat.

He works part-time as a security guard at the band office for \$12 an hour. He pays the household bills. His brothers, Cauley and Reggie, pay for the groceries from their welfare cheques. Eight people live here, three of them children, but not a morsel of food remains in the fridge, save for bottles of barbecue sauce, maple syrup and two cans of baby formula.

Mr. Roundhead watches his three-year-old son, Ishmael, a child so small for his age that he playfully hides inside a kitchen cupboard. He remembers the drinking binges with his girlfriend that led to Ishmael's diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome. Once

while she was pregnant, he came home to find her passed out, the baby kicking so vigorously in her belly that it was visible through her clothes.

"I wanted her to drink," he says. "I didn't think anything of it -- until he came out and had FAS."

Fetal alcohol syndrome is rife on the reserve. In a place where destructive habits betrays a wholesale loss of self-respect, the growing numbers of teenage girls becoming pregnant think nothing of treating their unborn children as recklessly as they do themselves.

"We can't do anything about it until the baby comes," says Rachelle Wavey, 23, a Tikinagan worker who was raised here. "We can talk to them, but they don't listen. They just say, 'It's my life. I can do what I want.'"

The homes here are even more overcrowded and dilapidated than in Webequie. With few exceptions, every house on the reserve -- 10 clusters with names like Bottle Hill and Ten Houses scattered along a 30-kilometre stretch of highway -- bears broken windows patched with plywood or cardboard.

In a few houses that appear boarded-up entirely, only smoke trickling from the chimney indicates that someone lives inside. There are empty lots where arsonists have done their work.

No one fixes their broken windows, since idle teens -- Mish has no community centre, no organized sports, no clubs -- will soon smash them again.

The waiting list for a house stands at 102. With the band receiving enough money from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for about four houses every year, it has borrowed from the bank to build more even though the debt disqualifies it from other project funding.

Without enough houses, some band members have moved to Pickle Lake, where every summer they construct a shantytown of wooden pallets, scrap plywood and rusted oil drums in the woods by the town dump, where the Northern Store truck unloads food scraps on Tuesday.

The front window is also broken in Michele Kwandibens's house. Touring the reserve in a Tikinagan van, Ms. Ammirati and a few members of the assessment team happen upon 14-year-old Michele, Lizabell's cousin, as she trudges through the three hours of blowing snow and minus-40-degree cold between her uncle's house near the school and the district where she lives. With no bus service, people hitch rides or walk for hours.

Inside her house is a chaos of children. Pre-adolescent boys hang out the kitchen window, gusts of frigid air rushing into the house. Girls run in and out of the few small rooms. Michele's older

brother plays a video game on a large television screen.

In the midst of the fray is her mother, Maryann, seated on a tattered couch cradling her newborn grandchild, who also lives here.

Eleven people are crammed into this dark, dingy three-bedroom house, holes punched in every one of its inside doors, mattresses tossed on bedroom floors to sleep everyone.

Michele's father works on a road-building crew, bringing home \$725 every two weeks -- about twice what the family would collect on welfare. But without a car, they must hire a taxi to the Northern Store in Pickle Lake to buy groceries at a whopping \$170 for a return trip, a common extravagance for dirt-poor families on this reserve. With this bite out of the budget several times a month, the money quickly vanishes.

"Sometimes we can't pay all the bills," Mrs. Kwandibens allows. "Sometimes we're out of food. Sometimes our friends give it to us."

Many of the children abuse alcohol. Michele's drinking problem was serious enough that Tikinagan social workers shipped her to Toronto last year for treatment. Her older brother, Franklin, 22, admits that he drinks too, although he wants to stop, land a job and move into a house of his own. He wishes the community would call meetings to talk openly about its problems. But even if one were called, there is no community hall in which to meet.

"Who do you talk to when you have problems?" Ms. Ammirati asks Franklin.

"Me? I go to her," he jabs a thumb at his mother. "She's the only one I trust."

Tears spring in Ms. Ammirati's eyes at this unexpected gleam of light. "That's so beautiful," she tells the young man.

"A family love that transcends physical surroundings," she says after leaving the house.

And so it goes on the two reserves.

The team is assaulted by images of filthy crowded houses, stories of rampant alcoholism, violence, unfit parents, government dependence, hopelessness, and death. Yet, unmistakable are the deeply loving families and the inspired community leaders who, despite it all, have bottomless faith that their first nations can return to the vibrant societies they once werr.

"I feel like we started with a whole circle of despair and defeat," Ms. Ammirati says. "I still see it, and I don't know how to get people off thinking, 'We can't do it because we can't do it.' But today we saw some

bright lights. Individuals who are out there doing things for their people."

Bright lights like the handful of activists in the Webequie Women's Circle who banded together after being frustrated by the epidemic of youth suicides, the alcoholism, the widespread lack of parenting, the silence around sexual abuse so common in their homes and the male-dominated council's tendency to fixate on the reserve's economic problems rather than its deep-rooted social ones. One of their first efforts is a proposal to impose a curfew.

"Most of the women have been in pain, in grief, in losing their children to suicides," says Elsie MacDonald, a band councillor and former chief. "They wanted to take action."

In Mishkeegogamang, there is Chief Connie Gray McKay, 44, a mother of six who was raised by grandparents in the bush before finishing high school, heading to university and returning to run the education authority before becoming a band councillor a dozen years ago.

Chief for the past two years, she believes that, if there is hope for a place like Mishkeegogamang, it lies in restoring the health of families -- teaching people themselves raised in poverty and neglect to parent and providing them a decent place to live as a start.

"The last message we want anybody to say about us is, 'Oh, those poor little Indians.' That's not what we want," she says. "We want the message to be very clear that as first nations people, when you talk about what is the answer, we just want our resources to be the same as everybody else so we can provide adequate housing and adequate education."

The assessment team has come away with no shortage of things to recommend in their report, starting with an immediate shipment of floor-hockey equipment and 150 pairs of cheap shoes for children to wear in the new school whose polished floors are distractingly cold.

But few of the other possible recommendations are that simple:

- \* With welfare cheques in Mishkeegogamang issued by the band as food vouchers at the Northern Store, a chunk of the economy drains from the reserve the moment it pours in. Some people wonder why, with some business training, couldn't reserves start their own co-ops to sell groceries and sundries?

- \* In Webequie, investment should be invited in the budding eco-tourism industry, bringing money and jobs into the community.

- \* A small bus could be purchased for Mish to ferry people around the reserve and to Pickle Lake several times a day

- \* What about youth-recreation programs for adolescents on both reserves where they are none, including excursions to the bush to learn traditional land-based activities like hunting and fishing?

- \* Agencies from down South should provide counselling and training should be provided for burnt-out, barely qualified crisis workers lurching from one emergency to another.

- \* Perhaps gas could be subsidized for hunters who go into the bush for food.

"There are basic needs not being received, and for me, that's a situation that requires humanitarian action," says Nicholas Finney of Britain's Save the Children. "We shouldn't make excuses for the government. They're the duty-bearers here and it shouldn't be taken away from them. But there are things that can be done that can make people's lives better on a day to day basis."

In Canada for the first time, Mr. Finney struggles to reconcile his Third World humanitarian experience with the Canadian aboriginal context of profound poverty and suffering. He is more accustomed to places in the grip of sudden disasters like earthquakes or war.

"There's been no sudden disaster here. It's a gradual disaster that has emerged, unfolded, and been propagated, whether it's intentionally or by negligence, by people that should know better, by people in power, over a long period of time. That much has become clear," he says.

"I work for Save the Children and we're a child-rights organization in whatever context. And we always focus on vulnerability. And I've seen some very vulnerable kids and some very vulnerable families, living on the edge of survival. . . .

"I don't think people are able to live a life with dignity in a lot of places we've seen, and that troubles me."

Mr. Finney says he returns to London "very angry" and eager to share the little-known story of aboriginal misery in Canada that dates from the time British traders first came to these shores. But standing in the wings waiting for the assessment report are a few other humanitarian agencies considering the uncharted territory of northern first nations.

One of them, Feed the Children Canada, has already shipped nearly 100,000 pounds of food, new clothing and supplies to Sioux Lookout. It got involved here months before the partnership formed after the school principal in Mishkeegogamang called the agency's head office in Oklahoma to appeal for food for his students. Its most recent tractor-trailer load included the shoes and floor-hockey equipment that had been promised just the week before.

Now one of the partners, Feed the Children is planning to tackle a more ambitious role, raising funds and recruiting expertise to build community centres and schools on reserves and provide education for struggling single mothers.

"There's a lot more we want to do up there," says Antero Manninen, the director of procurement and special programs. "We're quite committed."

Charitable foundations are also showing interest. The Laidlaw Foundation is already on board. And at the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, executive director Charles Pascal is intrigued by the project and its "genuine reciprocity" between North and South, rather than the paternalistic approach typical of government.

"In the wake of big-brother government programming and funding that just doesn't work as often as it might over many, many decades and many different governments, here we have a situation where non-governmental organizations are saying, 'You know what? We're just going to get on with this,' " says the former deputy minister with the Ontario government.

"Governments need to sit on the sidelines right now and watch a project like this with a pad of paper, a notebook, and take notes on how genuine reciprocal relationships might be the answer."

In Webequie, Ms. Ammirati breaks the stout silence of Krystal Shewaybick and three of her classmates by asking them to write about or draw something that makes them feel safe.

Krystal scribbles furiously on a blank sheet of paper. "Where I feel safe is STAYING HOME. Being with my family. Follow wherever my parents go."

At home are rules and boundaries not observed by most of the neighbours. There is hardly any furniture but for bare mattresses, a couch, and big-screen television, but the floor is freshly mopped.

"We're always telling Krystal what to do," says her mother, Marilyn. "She has to be here, to get home early. Doing her chores too."

Odds are stacked against this family. They are poor, racked by suicide and despair, with little to do but watch television and nowhere to go without a snowmobile. But the family bond endures. In a place of near hopelessness, this is the starting line.

Margaret Philp is a Globe and Mail feature writer based in Toronto.

Band aid

Anyone keen to help the

project can visit its Web site, [www.northsouthpartner.com](http://www.northsouthpartner.com), for information, or call 1-800-263-2841.

The members of the new alliance dedicated to improving life on native reserves

include:

- \* The 30 first nations located in Northwestern Ontario
- \* Humanitarian agencies Save the Children Canada, Feed the Children Canada
- \* Tikinagan Child and Family Services, a native child-welfare agency based in Sioux Lookout
- \* Office of the Child and Family Service Advocacy, Ontario's official child advocate
- \* Laidlaw Foundation
- \* Kinark Child and Family Services, Ontario's largest children's mental-health agency
- \* Ryerson University
- \* Voices for Children, a child-advocacy organization

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