

Webequie Summer 2008 Teamwork

In August 2008, nine volunteers from Kitchener, Guelph, and Puslinch Township spent August 12-19, in the remote fly-in community of Webequie First Nation. They went to repairs homes and start developing a relationship with the community. They had been invited by Scott Jacob, who was the Chief, through Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win: North-South Partnership for Children. The Partnership organized the short-term project.

While in Webequie, the volunteer team built nine landings and steps and a 60-foot wheel chair ramp for Elders having difficulty getting in and out of their homes. A carpenter in Webequie designed the landings and steps. The team also hosted a BBQ and a feast for the community.

The volunteer team paid for their own travel and meals, while Webequie provided accommodations. Before heading north, the team had raised funds for the building materials, the BBQ and feast, through Duff's Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the Heaman Family Foundation.

Webequie is a traditional Ojibway First Nation located in remote northwestern Ontario in Nishnawbe Aski territory and is 540 km north of Thunder Bay. Accessible only by air, the current population is approximately 700, of whom 66 percent are under the age of 35.

Highlights of the trip included:

- Working with some of the children, most notably ten-year old Devin, who was keen to learn and work alongside the team.
- The beginnings of a relationship with some of the Leaders. Community members were all accommodating and instrumental to the trip's success.
- The beginnings of a relationship with some of the Elders in the community. They were appreciative of the work being done.
- A fishing trip organized by a local guide on the Winisk River. The team caught nine pickerel and about as many northern pike.
- Cultural learning. "We are just beginning to get to know each other. It will take time for a strong relationship to be established, but we have started."
- Generosity and giving - Two local men took a volunteer fishing with them. Together, they caught 11 pickerel. When they returned they said to him – "there are nine of you – you should take the fish."

Returning north

The most common question asked, especially towards the end of the week was "Are you coming back?"

The team has since talked with Webequie through the Partnership about further opportunities. Possibilities include

- Return trips to Webequie with people from Puslinch Township and Guelph
- Hosting a group from Webequie here in Puslinch Township and/or Guelph
- Communication via e-mail

"We are committed to learning more about Canada's Aboriginal people through our relationship with the people of Webequie and to share this new knowledge with non-Aboriginal Canadians."

Community challenges and successes

In Webequie, unemployment is about 85 percent. Depression and suicide rates are high. One young man told us that his friends, the ones he grew up with, were "up in the sky somewhere."

But there is good news. Webequie is rebuilding and growing — the community has many strengths. Webequie received "official reserve status" in 2001, after trying for many years at great cost, emotionally and financially. The Councillors are working on a joint venture with a drilling

company, which could mean increased revenue and job creation.

Children are a community concern. Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles are all involved in the raising of children. Children are loved and cared for. There is a great concern for the children — which brings us full circle. "Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win" means altogether giving to one another, altogether caring for one another, altogether without any expectation of return, all for the sake of the children.