

Our Stories

**Stories about Aboriginal Participation in
the Northwest Territories Voluntary Sector**

**Sandy Auchterlonie for the
Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories
Northwest Territories Literacy Council
YWCA of Yellowknife**

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small maple leaf above the letter 'a'.

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Introduction

The Northwest Territories Literacy Council, the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories and the YWCA of Yellowknife conducted research in 2004 to:

1. Gain an understanding of volunteers and volunteerism among persons of Aboriginal ancestry.
2. Identify ways to increase the participation of Aboriginal volunteers in the voluntary sector in the Northwest Territories (NWT).

A main focus of the research was to increase the participation of Aboriginal people in leadership and governance positions within the sector. The research involved:

1. Developing a profile of the voluntary sector in the NWT, including Aboriginal participation in it, from a survey of volunteers and voluntary groups.
2. Personal interviews to discuss Aboriginal volunteerism and good practices that support Aboriginal volunteer participation and encourage greater accountability to Aboriginal communities.¹
3. Interviews with eight Aboriginal role models for a storybook celebrating their volunteerism.
4. Two case studies to examine volunteer experiences and activities that can help improve the participation of Aboriginal volunteers.²

The research was funded by the Canada Volunteerism Initiative's Knowledge Development Centre at Imagine Canada.

¹ See *Aboriginal Participation in the Voluntary Sector of the NWT*. (Little, 2005).

² See *Fort McPherson: A Volunteer Model and Engaging Aboriginal Volunteer in Voluntary Organizations with Territorial Mandates in the Northwest Territories*. (Little, 2005).

Our Stories



Our Stories celebrates the achievements of eight Aboriginal volunteers in the NWT. These volunteers are recognized by their peers and their communities for their contributions. They represent the diversity of regions and the voluntary sector in the NWT.

Each volunteer profiled in *Our Stories* describes his or her volunteer activities and the significant influences that led them to volunteering. They also describe the benefits of their volunteer participation and offer advice for others who want to experience these benefits.

The volunteers featured in *Our Stories* are committed to making their communities better places. They are motivated by the needs they see and/or by a cause that has affected their lives. Most express the values of sharing, helping, and caring for others, values that they learned from their parents and/or grandparents. The volunteers in *Our Stories* are passionate about the work they do and encourage others to volunteer and make a difference in their communities.

This storybook will be of interest to volunteers and voluntary and government groups that want to support volunteers. *Our Stories* will also be of interest to individuals and groups that want to promote and celebrate volunteerism and make linkages between informal and formal ways of helping and volunteering.

Neil Colin: The Happy Man



Neil Colin is a Tetlit Gwich'in elder who lives in Fort McPherson. Neil is a northern celebrity. People write songs and books about him. They ask him to appear on television and radio shows. They quote him in the newspaper. But success hasn't changed Neil. He is still the down-to-earth, happy man he has always been. He is also the same man who loves to make others happy and says, *"Whenever I meet someone, I say something funny and make them laugh. Laughter is the best medicine."*

Neil was born up the Rat River in 1933 on a bitterly cold spring day. When Neil was a baby Christopher and Enna Colin adopted him. Neil grew up in a small village near the mouth of the Peel River. In the 1940s approximately 47 families lived in the village. Neil fished, hunted, and trapped muskrat and other animals. *"We didn't need alcohol or drugs,"* he says. Today, Neil is happiest when he is at the mouth of the Peel River.

Neil is married to Elizabeth. They have nine children and eight grandchildren. Elizabeth is also very active in the community. She is a respected elder and a role model for women in the North.

Neil works hard to keep his language alive. He speaks Gwich'in in his home, on the radio, in the school, and in the community. He speaks Gwich'in to youth, adults, and other elders. Speaking Gwich'in makes Neil happy. Others have recognized Neil's dedication to his language. In 2003 he was awarded the Community Language Leader Award by the Government of the NWT.

Neil loves to volunteer with Fort McPherson's community radio station, CBQM. He has been on the radio since 1981 when CBQM first started. CBQM is a lifeline for people in the community and on the land. Everyone

*"Caring
for others
is good
for your
health
and good
for your
mind."*

listens to it. Neil relays messages, tells stories, plays music, sings songs, and sometimes does a moose call or two. He spreads his happiness over the airways,

“A lady once said to me, ‘Neil, last night I was at home, I was tired. My baby was cranky and the house was messy. I started listening to your radio show. I put the baby on my back. He was happy and went to sleep. I got happy and before I knew it, I had finished cleaning the house.’”

Neil grew up helping others. Today, Neil helps wherever and whenever he is needed. He has served on the Tetlit Gwich'in Council most of his adult life. He digs graves. He is a master of ceremonies. He calls square dances. He helps families in need. He attends meetings. He helps raise money for community groups. He talks to people who are trying to live without drugs and alcohol. He shares his traditional knowledge of the land and the animals. He talks to youth about making good choices. Neil sometimes gets money for the things he does, but mostly he does not. He says, *“Helping others makes God happy and it also makes people down here happy too.”* It also makes Neil happy!

Neil has had hardship in his life. In 1974, Neil and Elizabeth went to Edmonton for treatment for alcohol addiction. When they returned, they helped start the Peel River Alcohol Society. For one whole year, they held Alcohol Anonymous (AA) meetings. No one came at first. Finally someone did come, and soon there were 30 to 40 people at each meeting. Neil has visited other communities to help them start AA groups. He has had some slips over the past 30 years, but overall he has maintained his sobriety. He says, *“If you have sobriety, people respect you.”*

Neil is concerned for the future of his people, especially the youth. He is worried about the impact that mega-developments like the proposed Mackenzie gas pipeline will have. He sees people who do not care for others like they used to. But, because Neil is Neil, he looks on the bright side. He sees women in his community who are healthy, strong, and confident. These women are committed to making the community a better place. He knows that they can and do make a difference.

Neil urges people to get involved and care for others. *“Caring for others is good for your health and good for your mind.”* In the meantime, Neil will continue to do what he loves to do – enjoy life and spread joy to others. The world is a better place with Neil Colin in it.

Mary Rose Sundberg: Following Her Passions



Mary Rose Sundberg lives in Dettah. She is a wife, a mother, a leader, and a volunteer who follows her passions. Mary Rose comes from a family tradition of volunteering. *“I guess it’s in my blood to do my part in making our communities better.”*

Mary Rose’s greatest inspiration comes from her grandfathers. She feels that it is her duty to carry on the work of these men. One of her grandfathers, Chief It’o Sangris, helped establish the school in Dettah. *“He didn’t want any children sent away to residential school for months at a time,”* Mary Rose says. Her other grandfather worked tirelessly for the communities of Dettah and Ndilo. In those days leaders weren’t paid, they volunteered.

It is not surprising then, that when Mary Rose moved back to Dettah in 1986 to raise a family, she volunteered at the school. *“There is a long history of why I care so much about our school and wanting it to succeed,”* she says. For many years Mary Rose was a member of the district education authority and served as its chairperson for a period of time. She also raises funds for school trips and community events. Her paid and volunteer work in education is challenging but also very rewarding.

“We just about lost our school due to low enrolment, but with community support we are making some improvement. It will take a few years, but I believe we will succeed.”

Another one of Mary Rose’s passions is Dogrib literacy and culture.³ When Mary Rose was young, her family moved to Ndilo so her father could work at the mine and the children could attend school.

³ The Dene who continue to live in the region between Great Bear Lake and Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories are known as the Dogrib people. Today, this region is known as the Tli Cho Region.

“You won’t know until you try something whether you enjoy it or not.”

“We went on the land on weekends and holidays, but it was not enough. I know how to cut up a caribou and other traditional skills, but there is so much more to learn about being on the land.”

Her desire to learn traditional Dene skills and values has developed into a passion for Dene culture and literacy to which she devotes many volunteer hours. Mary Rose teaches classes in Dogrib literacy, helps develop teaching materials, and interprets for elders in Dettah and Ndilo. She also writes proposals, advocates, and raises money for language programs in her communities.

As a past board member of the Literacy Council of the Northwest Territories, Mary Rose shared her passion for Dogrib literacy with others across the NWT. In 2001, Mary Rose was recognized for her language work and was awarded the Community Language Leader Award by the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, Government of the NWT. In 2004, Mary Rose was appointed chairperson of the Aboriginal Languages Revitalization Board, an appointment she accepted with honour. The Board advises the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment on language issues and concerns and works to maintain, promote, and revitalize Aboriginal languages.

Mary Rose is also a councillor for the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. Of course, one of her portfolios is education. She attends meetings of the Dettah Divisional Education Authority, and keeps the Chief and Council informed. She is also a member of the Finance Committee, Pathways Board, and Human Resources Committee of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation.

Mary Rose pursues her passions with the support of her family, especially her husband Brian. Elders also give Mary Rose strength.

“Our elders tell us we can succeed in many areas if only we all work together and support each other, and I try to remember this as I’m working or volunteering in the communities.”

Volunteering helps Mary Rose develop her skills and self-confidence: *“Before I started volunteering for events and activities, I was too shy to look people in the eye. Today it’s not too bad. I’m able to smile and say hi to people.”*

Mary Rose understands that it can be difficult for people to get involved and make positive changes. Many people have a lot of history together, especially in small communities. She feels that people first need to forgive one another. *“We need to forgive each other and make our community a better place for our children,”* she says.

Mary Rose encourages others to get involved in their communities and consider volunteering: *“You won’t know until you try something whether you enjoy it or not.”*

Tony Rabesca: Giving the Gift of Life



Tony Rabesca is a caregiver who works to make his community a healthier place. Tony was born in Rae-Edzo (Behchoko) and raised by his grandparents. Tony's grandparents taught him the traditional Dogrib values of helping and caring for others. They also taught him respect, dignity, and patience. They told him that the Dene way is to give to those in need. They said that when you help others you give the gift of life. This is what Tony continues to do today.

Tony began working and helping others at a young age. *"When I was 20, I developed and delivered programs for youth in Rae-Edzo. I volunteered in the evenings and delivered activities for youth,"* he says. Tony has had several different helping jobs. He is currently the Community Wellness Coordinator in Gameti (Rae Lakes). Tony gets paid for his work as wellness coordinator, but like many other people in helping professions, he also puts in many hours without getting paid.

Tony gets involved in activities that promote healthy living, such as picnics, recreation, traditional games, indoor dances, and other events in his community. Recently, Tony helped plan and build a golf course in Gameti. He wrote funding proposals and helped design the course, clear fairways, install greens, and hire and supervise summer students. People now golf at the nine-hole North Slave Aboriginal Golf Course.

Tony likes to volunteer with youth. *"Volunteers can make a difference for our next generation."* He delivers workshops that help youth develop coping skills, deal with bullying, understand the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol, find solutions to their problems, and make their community a better place.

"When you give to others, you receive more in return."

Tony is a Dene drummer. When he lived in Rae-Edzo he helped start the Rae-Edzo Dene Youth Drummers. This group performs in Rae-Edzo and across the NWT and Canada. Tony also helped form the Dogrib Youth Council in Rae-Edzo. The Youth Council works with leaders to create a brighter future for youth in the community.

Recently, Tony helped form a youth/elder group in Gameti. This group is working together to design and build a house that uses traditional knowledge and modern technology. This project is benefiting youth, elders, and the community of Gameti. *“It is an opportunity for people to get involved and take responsibility for preserving our way of life.”*

Tony also helped start the Gameti Community Justice Committee. The committee and a coordinator support offenders, victims, and families in Gameti. They help people heal and reintegrate back into the community. In February 2003, Tony brought together community justice committees from Rae-Edzo, Wha Ti, Wekweti (Snare Lake), and Yellowknife for the North Slave Regional Justice Workshop. People in the workshop learned from each other and talked about how to reduce crime and create healthier communities. They identified root causes of crimes, risk factors, and ways to improve support services and resource networks. Tony put in many paid and volunteer hours to make this a successful event.

Tony has served on many boards and committees, including the Rae-Edzo Friendship Centre and the Somba k'e Healing Lodge in Yellowknife. As a board member, he helped make sure that these organizations operated in good standing and met the needs of their clients. Tony is currently on the board of the National Crime Prevention Centre. This board funds groups and First Nations to take on crime prevention initiatives in their communities. He receives a stipend for some of the boards he is a member of and he volunteers for others. *“By sitting on boards and committees I know that I can make changes for others in need of help.”*

Tony says that helping others brings many rewards: *“When you give to others, you receive more in return.”* He says that volunteering has taught him many lessons. Tony believes that people who take responsibility for themselves, are taking the first step to wellness. *“It is overwhelming to see others change their direction to a brighter future,”* he says. Volunteers help people lead healthy lives. They help make Dene people and communities strong. As Tony says: *“They give the gift of life.”*

Georgina Fabian: Following the Best Slavey Traditions



Georgina Fabian grew up in Fort Providence and on the land near the Horne River, the Horne Mountains, and Mills Lake. As a child, Georgina and her mother spent many months alone while her father trapped, and her brothers and sisters attended the mission school. Georgina's mother was, and is, a strong woman both physically and spiritually. She influenced Georgina profoundly. *"I remember when I was four or five years old going into the bush with my mother to haul wood. She always wore a dress even though she worked as hard as a man,"* Georgina says. Georgina's mother taught her the Slavey values of helping, respecting, and caring for others. Georgina follows these and other Slavey traditions daily. She encourages others to do the same.

Georgina now lives on the Hay River Reserve. She settled there after she married Frank, whom she met while attending college in Fort Smith. Georgina and Frank have five children ranging in age from 22 to 34, and seven grandchildren. For many years Georgina worked in the helping field as an addictions counsellor at the Nats'ejee K'eh Treatment Centre and a wellness worker for the Band.

Georgina is renowned for her traditional sewing and beading skills. Her work was recently featured at the Open Sky Festival in Fort Simpson. One year, Georgina helped an adult education class make mitts for Christmas presents. She loved it! While the class sewed, Georgina talked about Dene culture and traditional values, healthy living, and how to live alcohol and drug-free lives. Today, Georgina volunteers her time teaching traditional sewing to adults and children on the Reserve and in Hay River. She also talks to groups about Dene culture and the importance of following Dene traditions. She encour-

"We need to teach our children our Slavey traditions. We need to show them how to be kind to others."

ages people to take control and be responsible for their destiny and urges people to do what makes them happy and to not worry about what others think.

“We are good at feeling sorry for ourselves. We have to look at all the things we have – land, water, family – we need to take control and do things for ourselves...When you find your calling, you realize that you do not need alcohol and drugs.”

Georgina is compassionate and helps others wherever she sees a need. She donates crafts as prizes and moccasins to families of the deceased. She helps out at the school and the daycare. She volunteers during National Addictions Awareness Week. She helps with the annual clean up at the cemetery. She and her husband started a Dene drumming group for youth, adults, and elders that continues to be active. She sits on the Justice Committee. She feeds kids who are hungry. She breaks up fights between youth. *“I say, ‘Why are you hurting your friend? You need to help each other and be kind to one another.’”*

Georgina is worried about the future of Dene youth. In the past, all Dene took responsibility for teaching children and helping them develop into healthy, contributing members of society. *“This was one of our traditional values.”* This is not happening today. People do not want others meddling in their affairs. Yet many youth are troubled, and need guidance. They know little about traditional ways and are highly influenced by the white culture. *“We need to teach our children our Slavey traditions. We need to show them how to be kind to others.”*

Georgina is saddened to see traditional Slavey values weakening. She urges others to care for one another and to listen and respect the words of elders. She urges others to volunteer with good intentions and not for personal gain, prestige, power, or money. She urges others to follow the best of Slavey traditions. Georgina says that people who help others make communities better places. They are happy, they make life better for people who need help, and they are good examples for others. They create caring communities and are rewarded in many ways: *“Slavey people believe that if you help people, when your life is over you will be one step closer to the Creator.”*

Melissa Fraser: A Voice for Youth



Dawn ‘Melissa’ Fraser is a young, Métis woman who lives in Fort Smith. She is energetic, strong-willed, and has a zest for life that is infectious. Melissa gets involved and makes things happen in her community, especially for youth. She is a strong voice for youth. Watch out! We will hear more from Melissa in the future.

Melissa works as a community landclaims fieldworker for the Northwest Territories Métis Nation Negotiations Secretariat. She interviews elders about traditional land use and the history of Fort Smith and surrounding area and does enumeration. Melissa loves her job and especially enjoys spending time with elders.

Melissa has many interests. She loves working with children. *“They let you act as crazy as you want and they have a great sense of judgement,”* she says. She enjoys writing short stories and past accounts of her life. She also likes the outdoors and knitting scarves *“simply because I don’t know how to stop.”*

Melissa is the youngest of eight children (although her adopted nephew is now officially the ‘baby’ of the family). She has an “awesome” relationship with her parents who stuck by her during her rebellious teen years. She is also very close to her only living grandparent, her grandmother. According to her family, Melissa inherited her strong will from her other grandmother who passed away when Melissa was a baby. *“My grandparents were and always will be inspirational people, and their legacy will live on as long as I live and speak of them with great pride.”*

“I am one of those people who enjoys being part of something and when there is a community event going on, I want to be a part of it.”

Melissa discovered the joys of volunteering at an early age. *“It was fun, not work,”* she says. Melissa volunteered at the Fort Smith Health Centre as a candy striper. She visited long-term care patients and helped them participate in community activities. Through this work, Melissa got to know, love, and admire the elders in her community. *“They made me strive to be a good person towards my elders.”* One of Melissa’s goals is to create bonds between youth and elders: *“This could be accomplished if people believe it is possible, and I am taking [it] upon myself to make it possible.”*

Melissa has a volunteer ‘rap sheet’ that is very long. *“I am one of those people who enjoys being part of something and when there is a community event going on, I want to be a part of it.”* Currently Melissa is volunteering as:

- a youth Representative for the Métis Local 50;
- a board member of the Uncle Gabe’s Friendship Centre, as well a member of the Youth Committee;
- a member of the Northern Youth Initiative Steering Committee, which is developing a community youth council;
- a member of the Radio Society and host of “Youth Yap” heard every Friday night;
- a volunteer for the South Slave Friendship Festival, Wood Buffalo Frolics, and National Kids’ Day; and,
- a volleyball coach for junior girls 14 years of age and younger.

Melissa’s parents are her role models. They taught her the importance of volunteering and to do things with a good heart and good intentions. She strives to be like them and carry on the good work they do. Melissa’s greatest reward is that her parents are proud of the way she lives her life and the person she has become.

Melissa says that it is everyone’s responsibility to teach younger generations to contribute to their communities and not to expect monetary rewards. *“The number one job in this world is to bring up our children to be good citizens because whether we like or not, they will be making decisions for our future.”*

Melissa’s advice to others is to volunteer to help those in need and not for recognition. Volunteering is special work with special rewards. *“It is the little people who appreciate the work of others and give thanks to those people who matter the most.”*

“One time I remember helping one of my elderly ladies and she said to me ‘I will pray for you, for you will be rewarded but not with money and gold’ and my response was ‘Well, can you pray that I find a husband with money and gold?’ and we laughed together. Nonetheless, she prayed for me, and I have yet to meet that husband of mine.”

Jessica Sanderson: Setting a Good Example



Jessica Sanderson is a young Chipweyan woman who lives in Fort Resolution. Although she is only 16 years of age, she has many years of volunteer experience. Jessica sets a good example for youth and adults in her community. She is someone who gets involved and makes things happen. She is a quiet leader who inspires others.

Jessica is the middle of three children. Jessica's parents are both volunteer leaders in the community. Her dad, Arthur, is the local volunteer fire chief. He also cleans the ice during skating season, drives youth on trips, and helps out at community events. Her mom, Marilyn, helps raise funds for everything from special events to families in need. She is also a strong advocate for women and women's issues. In 2004, the Status of Women Council of the Northwest Territories recognized Marilyn's contributions to her community and region, and awarded her a Wise Woman Award.

As a child, Jessica helped her mom get set up for meetings, helped her dad decorate the fire truck for the Canada Day parade, and helped decorate the school for special occasions and dances. Today, Jessica is involved in many different volunteer activities. Jessica's other volunteer role models are her teachers and the community recreation coordinator, Tausia Lal.

Like most teens, Jessica loves spending time with her friends. She likes sports, especially soccer and hockey, listening to music, and travelling and meeting new people. Jessica is also a junior ranger who enjoys spending time on the land and skeet shooting.

Recently, Jessica inspired youth and adults to get involved in a major project. In Fort Resolution, girls and boys play hockey together, but the arena didn't

“Sometimes there aren't many people to help out [with volunteer activities].”

have a change room for the girls. Jessica, who is a hockey player, took charge. She convinced other youth to help fix up two change rooms in the basement of the arena. The youth asked parents and local businesses to donate construction materials. Then, they started working. Soon, parents and other adults came to see what was happening. Before long there were 50 youth and adults working on the project. Today, the change rooms are usable but 'not quite done.'

Jessica is on the executive of a newly formed youth group in Fort Resolution. The group will be a voice for youth in the community. They will give advice and direction on issues affecting youth, such as health, wellness, and recreation.

Because Jessica loves to travel, she gets involved in fundraising for youth trips through activities such as bake sales, working at the concession in the hall and arena, selling raffle tickets, and participating in auctions. Jessica's efforts have paid off. She has travelled to Hay River for hockey; Yellowknife, Fort Simpson and Edmonton for soccer; Winnipeg for the Indigenous Games; Whitehorse with the Junior Rangers; Fort Providence for the Mackenzie Summer Youth Games; and Edmonton for the Dream Catcher Youth Conference.

Jessica also volunteers in recreation. She supervises kids during movie nights, cleans up tables during bingo nights, helps clean up after community functions (sometimes until 2:00 a.m.), and helps out with spring carnival activities.

Jessica volunteers because she sees a need in her community and she enjoys helping others. "*Sometimes there aren't many people to help out.*" She volunteers to make her community a better place. She volunteers to fill gaps in funding for community and youth events and activities. Jessica does not wait for others to do things. She rolls up her sleeves and gets things done. She sets a good example.

Michael Cazon: Building a Better Future



Michael Cazon, a Dene, was born at Trout River. He now lives in Fort Simpson with his wife Tonya and beautiful daughters Golia and Meegwun. Both Michael and Tonya love the land and spending time at their bush camp. Tonya is also very involved in her community.

Michael is passionate when he talks about his Dene culture and the benefits of health and wellness. He not only talks about it, he lives it. He helps youth who are willing to learn to build strong foundations and a better future for themselves.

Michael understands that youth need to feel good about themselves if they are to make healthy choices. He also knows that youth have different interests and needs. Sports help many youth build self-esteem, but not all youth are interested in sports. Michael provides them with other options. He helps them make connections to the land and to the Dene culture.

For many years Michael has made his home a safe place for youth. He also takes youth out to his bush camp where they learn traditional life skills, and how to work together and take responsibility for themselves and others. They also learn about the importance of the land, the air, the water, the sacred fire, and sharing and caring for others. Both Dene and non-Dene youth spend time at the camp. They develop skills and take pride in their accomplishments. Their positive experiences on the land stay with them and help make them stronger.

Michael is also a Dene drummer. Being a part of a drumming group is a very empowering experience. He and other drummers share their knowledge of drumming, hand games, and traditional dancing with youth in his community. Both Dene and non-Dene youth attend. *"It is not only for the Dene"* he says;

*"We all
need clean
air to breathe,
clean water
to drink,
and good
food to eat."*

these experiences help all youth to understand and respect Dene culture and help Dene youth to feel grounded and proud of their identity. Michael understands this and is working with others to establish a group that will travel and demonstrate Dene drumming, dancing, and hand games to others.

Michael talks openly about his struggles with alcohol and feelings of isolation, anger, and hopelessness. He has visited the high school in Fort Simpson to share these stories, and to encourage youth to make healthy choices and use available resources to get help when they need it. Michael has also visited schools to share his knowledge of traditional life skills and drumming and helps out at their cultural camps in the spring and fall.

Michael works with others (in both paid and unpaid ways) to improve the health and well-being of individuals and families in his community and region. As a former Deputy Grand Chief of the Deh Cho First Nations, Michael worked to build a better future for his people. He provided valuable input on programs for youth and families for the Liidlii Kue First Nation. Michael was also a member of the community interagency committee, a group of organizations and agencies that work collaboratively to improve community health and well-being.

For a number of years Michael was also a member of the Fort Simpson Justice Committee. The committee brings victims, offenders, and other community members together to heal, take responsibility for their actions, and restore harmony in the family and community. The committee is guided by Dene cultural values of respecting and caring for others.

Michael is also committed to making sure the environment remains healthy. *“We all need clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and good food to eat.”* Michael believes that it is everyone’s responsibility to teach youth and others to respect the environment and use natural resources wisely: *“We need to pass down to future generations an environment as close to its natural form as it was left for us by our ancestors.”*

Michael understands that as his community gets bigger and more diverse, it becomes more difficult for people to come together and work together. He knows that it takes many committed people, each with an important role, to build a better future for our youth, our families, and our communities. Michael is helping to build this future.

Aaron Ruben: Working Hard for Youth



Aaron Ruben is a young and busy Inuvialuit man who lives in Paulatuk. Aaron is one busy guy. He works full-time at the Northern Store and volunteers many hours each week. He especially likes to volunteer with children and youth.

Apart from five years when he was attending school in Inuvik, Aaron has lived in Paulatuk all of his life. He lives with his parents and five siblings. His two younger sisters and brother attend school while his older sisters attend upgrading classes and help their mom with her sewing.

In small NWT communities like Paulatuk, there usually aren't a lot of activities for youth. Most communities have a gym and an arena. Sometimes there are not enough volunteers to open these facilities, supervise activities, and most importantly, to coach youth. When Aaron was 14 years old he began to volunteer in recreation. Supervising youth the same age and older can be very difficult, but Aaron did it. When he was 16, he began to establish sports clubs and teams in the community and to coach them.

Today, Aaron is still very involved in sports and recreation activities. He coaches hockey and soccer in the winter and baseball in the summer. He volunteers many hours opening facilities and supervising activities. Aaron also helps out with community activities such as the spring carnival, events at Christmas, the New Year, Easter and Halloween, and at other activities throughout the year.

Two of the teams that Aaron helped to establish are travelling to tournaments this year. His youth and adult hockey team is going to Inuvik and his youth soccer team will be participating in Super Soccer in Yellowknife. Travel costs from Paulatuk to anywhere in the NWT are very high. This means that Aaron

“I think that volunteering is a great thing to do. It is fun. I am happy to volunteer and spend time with youth and adults.”

is extra busy helping to raise funds for these trips. In addition to seeking funding from government sources, Aaron is organizing different fundraising events in the community such as dances, bake sales, tournaments, and marathons.

Aaron decided to volunteer after he returned to Paulatuk. When he came home from school, he saw that there were few fun activities for children and youth. *“The adults were able to get out and enjoy themselves but there were few opportunities for children and youth.”* Aaron says that seeing others having fun is one of the best rewards he gets from volunteering. He continues to volunteer because he likes working with and helping youth: *“I think that volunteering is a great thing to do. It is fun. I am happy to volunteer and spend time with youth and adults.”*

Aaron hopes that his actions will help others in his community realize the importance of volunteering. He wishes more people would volunteer: *“If more people volunteered their time they would make a difference in the community.”* He knows that they would have positive experiences. *“They would realize how much fun and how rewarding volunteering can be.”*

In the future, Aaron would like go on to college or university and maybe become a manager. Regardless of his career choices, his commitment to volunteering will remain strong. Aaron hopes that others will discover the benefits of volunteering. In the meantime he will continue to work hard so children and youth in his community will have things to do.

Conclusion

We have much to learn from the eight stories in this storybook. One of the main lessons is about the many rewards associated with helping out or volunteering. Some of these rewards are feeling good, helping others feel good and making the community a better place to live. These rewards are the same for young and older volunteers and for men and women.

These stories tell us that volunteering is important to self-identity and sense of place in the family and community. Whether people help in informal and traditional ways or in more modern or formal ways, the very act of giving freely for the benefit of others gives individuals a sense of pride, well-being and connection. People who help and serve, are valued and respected by others for their kind heart and the honour that they bring to Aboriginal traditions. Helping or volunteering is part of who Aboriginal people are.

We learn from some of these stories that keeping the Dene languages alive and strong is a main reason that Aboriginal people volunteer. Many of these Aboriginal volunteer role models speak with great pride about their volunteer efforts to promote and use Aboriginal languages. They link these volunteer efforts to their ancestors and traditions. Their work today honours and respects these traditions and the people who have gone before.

Each role model in this storybook tells us that we can make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of people around us if we help out or volunteer. Helping out isn't hard. We all can do it.

To Learn More

Our Stories has focused on the volunteering achievements of eight people in the NWT. To learn more about people, their volunteering activities, and their cultures in the NWT you may want to visit these Web sites.

- **Dene Nation:**

www.denenation.com/

- **Liidlii Kue First Nation:**

www.cancom.net/~lkfndir/

- **Northwest Territories Literacy Council:**

www.nwt.literacy.ca/

- **The Inuvialuit:**

www.pwnhc.ca/inuvialuit/placenames/inuvialuit.html

- **Volunteer NWT:**

www.volunteernwt.ca

- **Métis Nation:**

www.metisnation.ca

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