



Cultures collide but kids connect

By Arielle Godbout

Reprinted courtesy of the Winnipeg Free Press

Barriers tumble at Peace Camp gathering

CAMP STEPHENS, Ont. -- After another long day at camp, seven girls were preparing for bed when one of their cabin leaders invited them to rise early for a traditional First Nations smudging ceremony. Thirteen-year-old Yvette Nabalizi's eyes widened, her anxiety palpable.

"Isn't it drugs?" she asked nervously.

Another girl chimed in: "Tobacco is going to go into my lungs." But the cabin leader explained the smudge would be sage, and Yvette nodded, though she still seemed apprehensive.

Next morning Yvette was up early and at the main lodge, where a small group of campers had assembled in a circle.

A woman stood in the middle, sweet-smelling smoke rising from the smouldering bundle of sage nestled in a large shell. The woman encouraged the smoke with a black feather before beginning to move around the circle.

When it was her turn, Yvette dipped her fingers into the curling smoke and brought it towards her face — in this way she cleansed her eyes, then her mouth and finally her entire head.

"I thought it would be hard for me to breathe," she later confessed, adding she hadn't learned much about First Nations traditions since coming to Canada from Zimbabwe three years ago.

Hearing about Yvette's experience, Phoebe Burns smiled knowingly. Burns is the co-ordinator of the Winnipeg Youth Peacebuilding Project. Cultural exchanges that help dissolve misunderstandings — like Yvette's experience with smudging — were a major goal of the project's Peace Gathering.

The week-long program brought together 64 hand-picked youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds in an attempt to foster discussion about issues affecting Winnipeg's inner city.

Led by the Institute for Community Peacebuilding, the project is modelled on Seeds of Peace, an American conflict-resolution program that aims to promote understanding among youth in the Middle East. Noëlle DePape, a Canadian Mennonite University graduate who'd been involved with Seeds, approached the institute with the notion that a similar program might work in the inner city. David Pankratz, the institute's director, said he knew from personal experience that ethnicity often played a role in tension between youth in the inner city.

With the spark from DePape's suggestion fuelling him, Pankratz approached a number of youth-focused agencies and organizations.

"They immediately said 'yes, we know this is happening but we don't know what to do with it, so we treat the fights, the disagreements, the tension as two boys having a fight over a girl, or a cellphone. We know there's more, but we don't know what to do.' "



HOW COULD THIS NOT BE FUN? It didn't take long for Peace Camp attendees to bond.

Yvette said she doesn't know what to do either when she encounters discrimination.

"Some kids are not as nice as you want them to be, they'll make racist jokes," she said, admitting quietly that she's had some trouble with one of her acquaintances.

At the peace gathering, people paid attention to her ethnicity for a different reason — they wanted to know about her culture. Already, Yvette has noticed that Canadians seem to consider ethnicity a taboo subject.

The peace gathering offered deliberate opportunities for participants to address stereotypes, and also reflect on larger issues like violence and bullying, and peaceful living, through the facilitation groups held each morning. Like the cabin groups, the facilitation groups are a deliberate mix of First Nations, newcomers and established Canadians, as are the three discussion facilitators, who in their daily lives work with youth in some capacity, often with one of the project's partner organizations.

Burns said she doesn't expect miracles from the gathering: "It doesn't mean they're going to become best friends and eat in the cafeteria together."

But when the participants return to school in the fall and pass each other in the hallway, she hopes they'll acknowledge each other, realize their community includes people outside their own identity groups and have a basic respect for other people's cultures.

No spare time for Eritrean newcomer

Newcomer throws himself into new life in Canada by helping those around him

VolunteersinAction



In a place filled with busy beavers who habitually log long hours, Yohannes Ghebrewoldi Yemane stands out.

If IRCOM had an award for hardest-working employee, Yemane would be a contender – save for the small fact he's not staff but a volunteer.

"I typically arrive at about 8:30 (half an hour before the office opens) and usually Yohannus is there waiting by the door," says volunteer coordinator Erin Anderson.

The 50-year-old pastor and community worker from Asmara, Eritrea quickly threw himself into Canadian life after arriving in October 2007 with his wife and their two young children, Ftsee and Messel. He became involved in numerous community activities and enrolled in the Community Economic Development diploma program at Red River College. He was keen to combine practical experience with the classroom stuff and signed on for an administrative practicum in April 2009 at IRCOM House—where he moved one month after arriving in Winnipeg.

It wasn't long before he needed that early start to keep up with all the duties he had taken on, which includes office work, assisting tenants who come to the community resource office, interpreting for residents learning a new language in a new country, organizing events, mentoring other residents, and generally putting up his hand as soon as anyone utters a sentence beginning, 'Would anybody be willing to ...'

But the soft-spoken Yemane brushes off any suggestion that he's doing anything special.

"People should try anything and be willing to involve

themselves and participate; volunteering is the key to learning about a new place and making connections with your community," he says.

Yemane, who spent over 20 years as a refugee in Sudan, before arriving in Winnipeg, would rather praise Canada for giving himself and his family a new chance in life.

"Winnipeg is a great city in many ways; it is an extremely peaceful place to raise a family," says Yemane.

"My kids are thriving and both my wife and I have had many opportunities that we would not have had back in Sudan."

Still, Yemane's work ethic is inspiring to all who know him – especially when you know he still finds time for a hobby: a lush balcony garden jam-packed with more than 15 different types of vegetables.

He also has several IRCOM staff wondering how they'll cope when he returns to school in November to take an Applied Counselling course at Red River College. But there's hope – given his track record, it's a safe bet that full-time studies won't be nearly enough to keep this new Canadian busy.

This is the first in an ongoing series to highlight the significant contributions of volunteers at IRCOM – a group of 65 amazingly dedicated volunteers.



Yohannes Yemane in his balcony garden at IRCOM House



Who are you?

My name is Nomaqhawe (Noma) Sibanda. I was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city and the heart of Matabeleland province. I was just a child when our family arrived in Colorado in 1986. I moved to Winnipeg in 2005 and am the executive administrator for the St. Boniface Hospital Foundation.

So moving to Winnipeg is the realization of a life-long dream?

Okay, I'll admit I'd never heard of Winnipeg until my parents moved here in 2001. But coming here has given me a chance to get involved in the immigrant and refugee community. I mean, I'm a member of that community but I've had the opportunity and time to go to university, to connect with all sorts of different groups and cultures, and to acculturate into the mainstream. So that's why I'm excited about being one of the IRCOM Ambassadors.

You're an ambassador? Like Gary Doer?

Noooo! We're a volunteer group of new Canadians who go out to speak at schools and to business and community groups about the refugee and immigrant experience. Our mission is to encourage positive engagement between newcomers and mainstream Canadians. We're living manifestations of what we're trying to achieve – newcomers who successfully live with their hybrid identities in the mainstream culture.

Do you see a gap between the newcomer and mainstream Canadian communities?

Because I don't have an accent or other telltale signs that I'm from a non-western country, people assume I'm Canadian born. So I get to hear their true feelings about refugee and immigrant issues, and the views of some people aren't always very nice. But it's more a lack of understanding and contact, and that's sometimes true in the newcomer community as well. As someone who has a foot in both worlds, it's so clear to me – we need to talk, we need to share our stories, and we need to get to know each other better.

Rap video a 'shout-out' from IRCOM youth

By Marlo Campbell

Reprinted courtesy of Uptown Magazine

The scene inside the large, main-floor multi-purpose classroom is one of high-energy chaos.

Against a backdrop of colourful child-friendly murals, a group of teenage boys are goofing around, competing for the attention of 28-year-old Jim Agapito by improvising Michael Jackson-inspired dance moves. There's a lot of crotch-grabbing and yelling, punctuated by hoots of laughter. In the corner library area, a pre-teen girl wearing a traditional head scarf and pink flip-flops perches on the arm of a comfy chair, flipping through the pages of *Little House on the Prairie*. Other girls sit huddled nearby. Their periodic giggles combine with several other animated conversations already taking place simultaneously.

It's a Wednesday at IRCOM House, a 67-unit apartment block on Ellen Street. The young people gathered here are between 12 and 18 and come from around the world. Many left their home countries because of war; some spent time in refugee camps before immigrating to Canada.

All live in or around IRCOM House, not far from Central Park, a location that's become notorious for the gang members that hang out in it when the sun goes down.

The IRCOM youth are taking part in With Art, a community art program funded by the Winnipeg Arts Council.

Tricia Wasney, manager of public art at WAC, says the goal is to connect artists with communities and have them collaborate on a public art project of their choice.

The IRCOM kids were one of three groups chosen by WAC to participate in the 2008 season of With Art. Last spring, they asked to be matched with Agapito and Ervin Chartrand, two local filmmakers. Together, the group decided to write and record a rap song about the refugee experience. Enlisting the help of local hip hop artist Wab Kinew, they came up with *Live from 95* - a shout-out to IRCOM's address - and recorded it in the fall of 2008.

Its lyrics reflect both past and present struggles: "Holla if you hear me/ The haters try to kill me/ I done nothing wrong, not trying to be a G/ I try to live my life so badly."

Wasney says the collaborative creative process is the most important aspect of the program.

"That process of working together is super-important," she says. "We called it With Art for a reason. It's not for someone: It's not about the kids at IRCOM, it's not for the kids at IRCOM. It's with them."

"Where we are located is in the midst of the gang area," says Abdi Ahmed, IRCOM's youth program coordinator. "The African Mafia is very much present. We're also on the (turf) of the Aboriginal gangs, so it's a huge conflict."

During the Wednesday night With Art practice, Abdi attempts to maintain a loose semblance of order; no easy feat considering kids outnumber adults by about five to one. Doing slow laps around the room, he keeps a watchful eye on the proceedings, dispensing the occasional time-out to youths who aren't paying attention. He loses his cool only once, when some of the kids can't resist flashing gang signs for the camera. They're told in no uncertain terms that gang signs are not tolerated at IRCOM.

"A lot of kids have known to address their problems using violence," Abdi says. "You know, they run away from their countries (because of) too much



Photo by Nick Friesen/Uptown Magazine

THE CAST AND CREW of *Live from 95*.

violence, stay in refugee camps, still violence, they come here, African Mafia, still violence.

"Our interest was to help the kids and use their energy in a different way."

With Art keeps the IRCOM kids occupied, engaged and motivated. It also lets them interact with someone who can speak about the gang lifestyle from first-hand experience.

Ervin Chartrand is an award-winning Metis filmmaker now - but back in 1998, when he was charged with conspiracy to traffic cocaine and sentenced to nine years in prison, he was the vice president of the Manitoba Warriors.

Abdi continues: "When Ervin came, we thought, 'This is a former gang member, an Aboriginal gang who we are in conflict with all the time - this can be a huge bridge for us, which is a very good thing.'"

Chartrand says he didn't choose his life so much as it chose him. His father died when he was six months old, leaving his mother struggling to raise six kids on her own. She coped by drinking.

"She quit when I was around 10 but it was too late," Chartrand says.

By then, he was already using and selling drugs, and hanging out with his older, gang-involved brothers.

"It's this kind of world, it's separate from reality, separate from society, you know, and it's kind of a world where no one else can step into unless they're an associate or family," he says.

In and out of jail from the time he turned 18, Chartrand was one of the co-founding members of the Manitoba Warriors street gang.

"There's nothing really happy about being in a gang," he says. "You've got to do a lot of violence for the gang to up your ranks and stuff like that, sell drugs - and as a girl, you could be pimped out, you could be raped, gang raped, stuff like that."

Thirty-five Warriors were arrested in 1998, part of a year-long police investigation called Operation Northern Snow.

Chartrand spent 14 months in the Remand Centre before being transferred to Stony Mountain. Once he sobered up, he took a good look at his life and decided he didn't want to be a gang member anymore.

Gangs are everywhere, Chartrand says, including prison, and they don't approve of people trying to quit.

"They tried to kill me in jail and stuff like that, and for a while, actually, when I got out. I think for the next two years I got jumped, I got threatened, I got confronted," he says.

He finished his sentence in Alberta for his own safety. Released in 2002, he considers himself lucky to have made it out alive.

Emotionally, too, leaving gang life behind was hard.

Video project offers alternatives to youth

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"A lot of kids, they think the gangs are their family," Chartrand says. "As soon as you're out of the gang, there's no loyalty, there's no friendship.

"They'll turn so fast on you that you just can't believe it," he adds later. "I was just devastated. I was shocked. I never thought that they would turn on me but they did. It was wild. It was crazy - it's like you, growing up with your parents all your life and them just kind of putting you out in the middle of nowhere and saying, 'We don't want you anymore.' That's how it felt."

Now 38, Chartrand does a lot of public speaking about his former life. Programs such as With Art didn't exist when he was young, and he thinks it can make a big difference in the lives of vulnerable kids.

"As long as you can target the youth and show them that there's more to life out there, you know, catch them before they actually get sucked into these gangs," he says.

On this particular Wednesday night, the group is blocking a fight scene for the upcoming video shoot. It's based on the real-life experience of 15-year-old Jamshaid Wahabi, who immigrated to Winnipeg from Pakistan last year with his mom, two sisters and brother.

Back home, Wahabi used to be able to hear Taliban gunfire at night from his house. Shortly after he arrived in Winnipeg, he was jumped and pepper-sprayed by gang members while walking in Central Park. He ran home and his brother called the police, who came and talked to them. He says he wants to be a cop when he grows up.

The other IRCOM boys are assigned the role of the gangsters and told to pretend to beat up their friend.

Dagmawit Fekede, 12, is going to direct the video. The youngest participant (and the only girl who raps on the song), she stands back with Jim and Ervin and discusses camera angles.

Fekede is Ethiopian but lived in Kenya for most of her life. She immigrated to Winnipeg in 2007.

"When I moved here, I don't remember every coming out of my house for about, like, four months or something. I was really shy," she says.

The faux beating proves too fun to take seriously and rapidly devolves into general roughhousing. The practice ends with pizza and pop. Live from 95 is played while everyone eats.

Azim Bekkodjaev, a 16-year-old from Kyrgyzstan, says he's been writing songs since he was nine.

"My mother couldn't afford musical instruments and I couldn't read the music so I just wrote lyrics," he says.

Bekkodjaev says he wasn't recruited by gangs when he arrived two years ago because he couldn't speak English.

He likes Winnipeg. "It's a good city," he says. "There's always somebody to help you."

He also likes Ervin.

"He was a gangster before, so it's like he kind of understands us."

"Often time, in the media and these kinds of things, newcomers and refugees are depicted as people who are helpless and people who do not have the potential," Abdi says. He thinks the documentary will help counteract that perception.

The IRCOM youth aren't the only ones benefiting from their participation in With Art. Agapito says he's also getting a lot out of the experience.

"These kids are teaching me a lot. I'm learning about culture, I'm learning about creativity, I'm learning about how to work with kids.

"The way that they look at things is completely different than the way I look at things... I mean, some of the kids have gone through hell, and they can look at things and be so energetic about everything.

"I laugh the entire time. I just have such a good time with them."

Go to www.ircom.ca to view Live From 95

Ellen Street Insider

Learning a new language is tough work but it's been made easier for Newcomer Literacy Initiative students by **Pat Dodd**, who is not only a long-time volunteer with the program but also faithfully brings cookies and other fresh-baked snacks every week. That's why, reports teacher **Troy Heaps**, it was a real crisis when Dodds headed to India for a month of travelling in October. Heaps was overheard saying, "If India wasn't such a great place to visit, none of this would have happened." ... Ellie's a little miffed at **Noëlle DePape**. As the picture below shows, IRCOM's executive director got up close and personal with **Archbishop Desmond Tutu** at the Rotary World Peace Symposium in Birmingham, England this summer. But, Ellie notes, DePape missed a golden opportunity to invite the Nobel Peace Prize winner to next February's Meet & Greet at IRCOM House. D'oh! Oh well, DePape - who has a long association with two of Rotary's Winnipeg chapters, was able to share the South African bishop's inspiring words with her Winnipeg connections. Tutu spoke of the scourge of the arms trade and why he refuses to use the word terrorist because it is a word infected with hate. He closed his speech with the following parable: *A man goes to a farmer to buy a chicken, insisting that it is an eagle. 'No,' the farmer says, 'this is just a chicken.' 'It is an eagle', the man says, and he buys it. The man brings the chicken to the top of a hill and lets it go - the chicken flies. Wings spread apart, elegant above the mountain top, flying. Tutu then paused and surveyed his audience, before concluding: 'We are all eagles in the eyes of God. We need to believe we are eagles. It is time to spread our wings and fly.'*



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