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Editors' Page

How do we build welcoming and humanizing school communities? What educational experiences allow young people to help construct these communities and act as moral and thoughtful agents within them and ultimately in the larger society? The articles collected in this issue of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* speak to these questions.

“We Promise All Our Children Hope” is an edited transcript of Strini Reddy’s keynote address given at our *Divisional Day* on February 6, 2006 at the Centennial Concert Hall. Strini is a retired educator who continues to be an activist for education, social justice, peace, and anti-racism. Before speaking with us at the concert hall, Strini spent several weeks visiting and conversing with the people of Seven Oaks School Division. His speech at the *Divisional Day* is a continuation of this conversation.

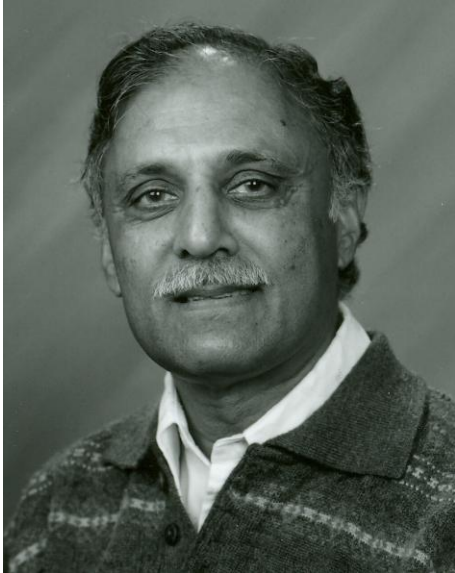
The authors of the second article, Verene Freund and Nan Fewchuk, initiated *Neechisan*, a course for Aboriginal students at Garden City Collegiate. *Neechisan* welcomes its students into a school experience that allows them to explore their culture, develop a positive sense of self as participants in community, and acquire skills for success at school.

This issue concludes with Diane Cameron’s description of the educational practices that build community at Nisbet School. “Seeds of Peace Grow Here” is a powerful and moving account of peace education that comes to define the lives of children and adults at school. We can help children find the vocabulary and practice ways of relating to each other that preclude acts of violence and enable everyone to be fully human. Diane joined the division in April of 1972 and currently teaches early years at École James Nisbet Community School. For Diane, teaching Kindergarten within the James Nisbet family is the highlight of her career. Her pet peeve is the common misspelling and mispronunciation of NISBET as Nesbitt. Remember, NISBET IS BETter!

Matthias Meiers (on behalf of the Editorial Committee)

DIVISIONAL INSERVICE
Monday, February 6th, 2006
9:15 a.m.
Manitoba Centennial Concert Hall
555 Main Street

“Reflections From a Friend of Seven Oaks”



Keynote Speaker:

Strini Reddy

Strini Reddy's career in education extended over a period of forty-two years. His experience in five different countries included all levels of education from primary to post-secondary. He served in a variety of capacities – teacher, principal, consultant, teacher trainer, university lecturer, superintendent of schools, and executive director.

Over the years, he has been the recipient of various honors and awards for his leadership and achievements in education, social justice, peace and anti-racism. Among these awards were a national Award from the Canadian Council for Multicultural and Intercultural Education,

which he received in 1990, and, in 1998, a Distinguished Service Award from the Canadian Association of School Administrators for excellence in leadership and outstanding contribution to education in Canada. In 2000, he was among the first group of Manitobans to be invested in the Order of Manitoba and, two years later, he was a recipient of the Queen's Jubilee Medal.

Strini retired, in 1998, from the position of executive director of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents but continues to be involved in various activities dedicated to the well-being of children and young people in Canada and elsewhere. He is a much sought-after speaker who has delivered numerous keynote addresses on a variety of topics at local, provincial, and national conferences.

In his busy retirement, among other pursuits, Strini volunteers with The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg on issues related to child poverty. He is also a volunteer with The National Children's Alliance of Canada. He chairs Manitoba's Early Childhood Advisory Committee and serves on the Board of The Boys and Girls Club of Winnipeg as well as on the Board of Governors of the University of Manitoba. He and his wife, Emelia, live in Winnipeg and enjoy spending time with their children and grandchildren.

We Promise All Our Children Hope

Edited Transcript of “Reflections from a Friend of Seven Oaks School Division”

I’m very, very pleased to be with you even though I had to get up a little earlier this morning than usual. You see I’m retired now and at a recent meeting of colleagues, retired colleagues, we went around the table and asked, “What are you doing? And what are you doing?” One person said, “I do nothing and I don’t start that until 10:30 in the morning.” Another one said, “I get up with nothing to do and by the time the evening comes, I’m only half done.” Fortunately for me, I don’t have that problem. I’m blessed with all kinds of wonderful opportunities to do whatever I consider to be important. One of the most important things for me is to spend time with people like you, supporting and encouraging your hearts, because you do one of the most important jobs in the world: caring for and educating our children and our grandchildren. I’ve been an educator all my life and I know first hand the importance of what you do and the very profound impact that you have on the lives of children and young people. So, as long as my energy holds up, I’ll keep doing this. And apparently my energy is holding up because, when I came in this morning, I heard people saying to me, “You’re looking good.” That reminded me of the three stages in life. The first stage is childhood, the second stage is adulthood, and the third stage is “Gee, you’re looking good.” It’s very clear to me which stage I belong to.

Sir William Osler, a wonderful Canadian, who was so very erudite and thoughtful, often said to people, “Make the best possible use you can of this day.” The words that I know which best capture this idea are found in a prayer from the Sanskrit called *Salutation of the Dawn*. It says,

Look to this day!
For it is life, the very life of life,
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence:
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendor of beauty,
For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow only a vision,
But today well lived makes every yesterday
A dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day!
Such is the salutation of the dawn

I am wishing for each of us that this will be one of the best days you've had and that it will help you continue to do the wonderful things that you do in this division for each other, for the families, for our children.

One of the things that I appreciate very greatly about this Division is the very honest effort that you have made over the years to include and honor all members of your community. I've always believed that when everyone is included, the possibilities are limitless. Now, I know that you've always done this, but to symbolically, physically bring people together like this here in the same room, is a very important gesture. This Division has always recognized the contributions of every member of the division. What you have done today says loudly and clearly that we value every single person in this Division and that we truly are a team. John McKnight writes, "A powerful community is one that is asset-based and calls for gifts from everybody." Over the past couple of weeks I've had a wonderful opportunity to learn first hand how generously people in this Division are willing to give of their gifts. There can be no more powerful force than people coming together to share those gifts and talents for the benefit, not only of themselves, but also for the benefit of others.

One of the problems in education, as I've seen it over the years, is that people continually make greater demands of our schools and that they continually try to find simplistic solutions to very complex human issues and problems. In doing so, they focus on what I consider to be inappropriate things. They focus more on structure; they focus more on trying to fix the way that something looks. They forget that the most important thing to focus on when you're trying to bring about change is what you focus on in Seven Oaks and that is the humans, the people.

I am amazed at the consistency and the commonality of language that exists here. It doesn't happen by accident. It happens very deliberately, day by day, hour by hour, as people communicate about what is important to us as a family. You know that it is people, not things and structures that make the difference.

There is an ancient Greek tale that tells of a Thracian King who ruled his land with an iron fist. He was hated by his people. The king ordered his ministers to build him a magnificent palace. For five years the Thracian people, along with Greek slaves, laboured to build this palace. When it was finished it was as magnificent as any king could desire. It was made of the sturdiest marble. It was made of the strongest Greek stonework. The king established himself in the palace but on the third day a violent storm struck the land. The winds blew, the rains pelted the palace, and amid the thunder and lightning the edifice groaned and swayed until finally it collapsed. The king lay dead under a fallen heap of stone. All the ministers came to inspect the site and sift through the ruins. Finally one turned to the Oracle of Apollo and asked, "How could this palace have fallen; it was built with the sturdiest of stones!" And the blind oracle appealed to the heavens and then replied, "It is people, not pieces of marble, that are the building blocks of great palaces. This edifice was built in hate and thus it was doomed to fall. Build your palaces on people and families, on city states and they will last."

The moral of the story is very clear. Structures and organizations and communities and schools are made great by their people infrastructure. Capable, creative, positive, thoughtful, caring people like you are the fundamental building blocks of strong, surviving organizations. It is this people infrastructure that enables us to survive tough and turbulent times, not a constant tweaking of structures. What I see in Seven Oaks is a clear recognition of that truth.

I want to thank all of you who so graciously took time to talk with me. My only regret is that I wasn't able to enjoy more of that kind of conversation with more people in the school division. But I'll try to fix that as the years unfold. It has been an absolute delight to sit and talk with people, all the way from the maintenance and transportation shop to the school division board office and to the different schools. What struck me so clearly is that when I asked to speak with staff, people in this division knew immediately that this meant everybody. It was very clear to people what I meant; I didn't have to explain. I appreciated your willingness to share with me so enthusiastically, so openly. It was a wonderful experience. And of course this has created a huge problem for me as I stand before you today. How do I faithfully represent all those beautiful, wonderful stories that I heard from every corner of the division? I struggled with that, struggled to capture the essence of what I have heard but I found out it is an impossible task so I'll do the best I can to try and weave through my talk today some of the things that struck me as very important.

As I was thinking about you on Saturday, I read an article in the Winnipeg Free Press which underlined the tremendous importance of what it is that each of you does in your daily life in this division. This article reported that, in 2005, twenty-five children and youth under the age of eighteen committed suicide. Four of them were under eleven years old. Amidst all the speculation in the article about why these children at such a tender age would do this, were the

words of the Provincial Children’s Advocate, Billie Schibler, who said, “The only common factor is that somehow all these kids have lost hope and they decided to end their life.” It brought to mind a couple of things. One is a poem that I picked up recently from a newsletter of an organization called *Voices*, an organization for youth in care, and the poem in their newsletter said the following:

There are no windows in this place
for me to show my face;
Reach out and hold my soul,
that at times I cannot control.
What’s the point of being here,
when being me is what I fear?
Every day it’s all the same,
trapped again in my own pain.
I cry myself to sleep,
so many secrets I must keep.
No one to reach to, nobody cares,
trapped in the middle of a distant stare.
I prayed that I was free
of this grief that’s killing me.
Everywhere I turn,
every bridge I burn.
There are no windows in this place
for me to show my weary face.

It is sad that a child of fourteen has to say that there are no windows, that she is trapped in darkness, that there is nothing hopeful that she sees.

The second thing that article reminded me of was our friend Jan Speelman. And you will all remember Jan Speelman, a wonderful educator, who, when she passed away in 2003, was the president of the Manitoba Teacher’s Society. Jan said many profound things in her lifetime. All of them were things worth remembering because she spoke from the heart and she spoke about the importance of us as people. One of the quotes from Jan was: “We have promises to keep. As members of a community, we made promises to our children. We promised them our protection, we promised them a safe community, and we promised them opportunity. But, perhaps most of all, we promised our children **hope**.”

I take comfort from the fact that each one of you is in the business of providing children with hope. And when I say children I mean all children. We should be reading these statistics and ask what has happened to the lives of so many kids. We should understand what this child says when she says there are no windows in this place. We should continually strive to do what you are doing and that is to create those windows so that we can look into them and they can look out to us so that there is always hope.

There are very few places where I have heard such a variety of complimentary terms used to describe a place where people work. The word I heard most frequently was the word “family.” I know that people meant that word when they said “family.” You see I have always strived very hard to have people think that, when they work together in an organization like this, it is a family. We care about each other, we take care of each other and we take care of our children and our grandchildren. In addition to the word “family” I heard things like “a caring place,” “a strong team,” “a learning community.” I heard things like “a close knit community,” “a supportive work environment,” “a proud division,” “one of a kind,” “a good place to be,” “a fun place to work,” “considerate people,” “positive culture.” I also learned that these are not just empty words. How did I find that out? By listening to see whether the celebrations and stories that people told me about matched the kinds of words that they used to describe what this division is all about. People gave all kinds of examples to illustrate why they use these terms and I didn’t have to ask for that. They talked about the consistent opportunities for all to learn, that is for both adults as well as our students. They talked about quality professional development for every sector of the school division.

Seven Oaks School Division, I can tell you without a doubt from my experience, has about the best educational dialogue going that I know of. It is continual. It is reflective. It is

thoughtful. It is connected. You can't beat that. That is how we learn, that is how we put things together in meaningful ways.

People also talked about things like their educational leave proposals. They talked about the Master's course; they talked about exposure to the best thinkers and educators from different parts of the world. They talked about initiatives to support the Division's Mission Statement:

The Seven Oaks School Division is a Community of Learners, everyone of whom shares responsibility to assist children in acquiring an education which will enable them to lead fulfilling lives within the world as moral people and contributing members of society.

These ideas might sound so simple to you. However, they sound simple to you because you are right in the middle of them. When I stop and think that you have two days at the beginning of the school year when you have twenty-minute blocks of time with parents, children, and teachers talking together about what's coming, it tells me that you think ahead rather than backwards. You think about how you can share together to make things better for kids, before difficulties start to happen. Very often people use their time to try and fix things. You are using the time to try to project how things can be made better.

When the bus drivers spoke to me with such great pride about the fact that they bring their kindergarten children and parents together for a bus orientation, I thought to myself, what a thoughtful, wonderful thing to do – to bring people together and say, "Welcome to our School Division, welcome to your School Division. We are the first ones the kids will see in the morning and last ones they see in their school day. So we are very important to them." And so they are. And so is everybody else in this school division.

You have services and personnel in your school division which people appreciate like Community Coordinators and Early Learning Specialists. All these people come together to support the notion that "*Community Begins Here.*" All these people come together to support the

notion that we have values and a mission by which we live. There are few places that I know where people, all the way from the school board to everybody else in the division, understand what their mission is and know what their values are. The job didn't end when they hung up the Mission Statement on the wall. It continues and people keep reflecting on what this mission means and whether you are being faithful to it.

Wherever I met and spoke with you, whether in the Transportation Department or the Division Office or the schools, I was impressed by your intentional and sustained efforts to live the values of the Division. There were all kinds of evidence of the deliberate efforts that people are making to build a culture of caring in this School Division, to create a climate that is conducive to learning and to living well together. I was struck by the many, many activities, the many initiatives that afford everyone the opportunity to understand and to practice fundamental concepts like empathy, justice, inclusiveness, and kindness. Another thing that stood out for me was the remarkable consistency between what the children had to say and what the adults had to say. There was no prompting; there was no setting this up; there were no adults present when I spoke to the children so they didn't feel the necessity to say good things about their teachers and their school. And indeed, what the children said and what the adults said were absolutely on the same page. What that tells me – and it doesn't happen by accident – is that everyone in that building is working together on the same ideas, creating the kind of *community that begins here*.

Some of the children spoke very freely, very knowledgably about what it was about their school that they thought was important and I wish I had the time to share everything with you but let me just say a couple of things. First of all, a child was sitting right next to me. He looked like he was having some difficulties; he looks up at me, tugs on my sleeve, and says, "I only just came to this school but I feel very welcome here." I thought to myself, "What a profound thing

coming from a young child. At this age he can articulate clearly the fact that he only just came to this school and he feels very welcome.” I asked myself, what is it that makes him feel welcome? Other children helped me understand. They said, “At our school we respect each other and we take care of each other.” I said, when you say ‘we’, who do you mean? They replied, “Everybody, the teachers, the other adults in the building, and the children. We take care of each other and we respect each other.” Children talk very knowledgably when they articulate the fact that they are all included, that they feel included and that they feel the need to include everyone. It is obvious to me that people are doing this in a very systematic and very calculated and very careful kind of way.

I thank you for teaching our children those important messages. As I watch television and see the terrible things that are taking place in our world based on religious differences, mistrust, disrespect, and misunderstanding, I think how critically, doubly important what you do in the schools is. Because if we are to have any hope for a more peaceful world, it’s going to come from the people that are in your hands at the moment. That is where the peace will come from.

This reminds me of the time several years ago, when I spent some time in different schools in Seven Oaks because, once again, Seven Oaks was being very thoughtful. People were thinking about the issue of violence and what was taking place, particularly why it is that children at such a young age would be violent. So, rather than rushing out and writing a policy condemning these kids and saying we shall isolate them and we’ll discipline them, I was given the privilege of walking around and talking to some little kids who were causing lots of problems in their schools and having great difficulties behaving themselves in civil ways. It was a most fascinating experience. I have talked with many of you about this but this was a long time ago now. I remember one little guy that I spoke to. I asked the school if I could interview this kid and

they said, “Oh yes.” So I said to the principal, “Do you think you need another adult sitting there since I’m a stranger?” He said, “No, this guy’s going to be fine. The seminar room has windows all around and with all the adults wandering around there is no problem.” Well I sat in the seminar room waiting for the child to come; when he arrived he opened the door into the room, walked in, looked at me and said, “Hey I thought you were going to be white!” I knew I would get the straight goods from this kid. He was having difficulties, he was being taken care of by his grandmother and he was having all kinds of problems. That very day, that morning, when I went to the school, he had kicked his teacher in the shin. So I thought I would like to talk about this and I asked him, “Why did you do that? Why did you kick the teacher?” “I didn’t do that, my leg just went out.” This caused me to think very deeply about this kid. Anyway, the long and the short of it is that when the people talked about and discussed this stuff later on, they came to several conclusions about this child. One of the things they said was, “No child should be anonymous. It requires a concerted effort from all of us to let these kids know that we know who they are on a personal basis.” They also said it was too heavy a responsibility to ask one person, one teacher, who had that child in her class to deal with everything that this child brought to the school. All of us need to take responsibility. And people did that. They did it in wonderful kinds of ways. I also spoke with an amazing teacher assistant who was looking after this kid. The assistant had written a huge journal page by page by page, day by day by day documenting what progress was being made, what was happening with the child’s life, etc. And I thought to myself, isn’t this an amazing commitment – paying that kind of detailed attention to what’s taking place in this child’s life in order to make things better for him and his family. I eventually phoned and talked with grandma several months later and the statement she made will stick with me forever. She said, “Sir, those people at the school were the angels of mercy that my grandson needed.”

And I thought to myself, what a compliment to people and at the same what an amazingly important thing to be able to do in the life of a child.

Another teacher assistant in another the school said to me, “I have this little boy that I am very committed to. When they gave me this piece of paper on which it said all the things about this kid over the past year, the first thing I said to myself is, that’s not my child, that’s not the one that I know, that’s got to be somebody else.” And she added, “I have a goal this year. My goal is to teach this boy to read and that is what I am going to do. But I also know, before I can teach him to read, I have to build trust, a trusting relationship between him and me.” What a profound thought, if you don’t build trust in a relationship you can’t teach him to read.

You also have this wonderful journal, called *Teaching Today for Tomorrow*. What’s different from other journals that I know is that the majority of the contributions come from people in the Division. You have this wonderful courage to be able to reflect on your life as educators, as people within the school division and share it with other people, bare your soul, tell people about the struggles that you’re having and how you can learn from each other. That is truly commendable. A conversation with one of your high school teachers led me to go back to one of these professional journals, a back issue, because I knew that this person had written an article some time ago. In that article he was able to publicly share his experience and question his own familiar teaching practices and adjusting them where they did not stand the test of relevance. He views himself, his colleagues, and his students as learning and developing human beings. I also came upon another one and by the way your journal is the only thing I read from cover to cover. I read it faithfully. My desk probably looks like yours: there are piles here and piles there, things I intend to read sometime in the future but I do read your journal when it comes to my desk because I consider what you write to be very, very important.

I read an article by a teacher from another collegiate who retired a couple of years ago and he said that Seven Oaks had a strong tradition of telling stories. So he took the opportunity just before retiring to reflect on his teaching career by telling some of his stories. One of his stories bears a very great resemblance to what I heard from people over the last couple of weeks. He wrote that at his collegiate they had a remarkable collection of adults, each of them possessing different strengths. One of his colleagues organized canoe trips every year for the kids and so our retiring teacher accompanied him and learned from this person. Taking part in one of these canoe trips was a student from his English class whom he considered to be one of the weakest students he had ever taught. He said the kid's speech was atrocious, his understanding was very limited and his reading was very poor. Then the teacher writes,

In the evening we gathered around the camp fire and told stories. The student who was so incompetent in my class became a star. He mesmerized the whole group with his stories; he kept their attention for hours with stories that were skilfully constructed and told in the best oral tradition. He is without a doubt, the best story teller I have ever heard and he couldn't even write a simple sentence.

Now, without spelling out all the details this teacher leaves us with an important message which is beautifully captured in a sentence that I read in one of the educational leave proposals that I read at one of the schools that I visited. This is the sentence that appears in there: "We know that children have gifts, that every child has talents, that it is our job to highlight those gifts."

There are other beautiful stories, among them a story about a school where a teacher went to Global Village and learned about this concept of buying a goat or buying chickens for a village in Africa; they also bought a well and that well is going to be able to provide water for so many people for such a long time. Imagine the education that these kids got. This was a class project that every single person in the school became aware of and contributed to so much so that the class who took this on thought it was very important to go out and thank everybody in the

school for their participation. The school, like many of your schools, rather than merely sending contributions to the Christmas Cheer Board identifies people within their own communities and says family “A” and family “B” in our community are in need. But the sensitivity with which they do this preserves the dignity of the people who are recipients of this generosity. It is heart-warming to see you educating children to think about the feelings of people and then getting the responses from the recipients like bringing baking to express their appreciation and return the kindness. Such experiences are fundamentally important for children as they become what we hope they will be and that is good human beings.

Ken McCluskey from The University of Winnipeg who is now Dean of Education has a wonderful line which I will always remember and it says, “Always being the helpee and never the helper can eventually be subtly dehumanizing.” Our children need the opportunity to be helpers. Even the ones who are in great need, need this ability to be of some use to the world, the ability to be of some use not only to people around them but people in their entire world. The adults in the school have the same need. I was told incredible stories of how people take care of one another and it reminded me of a wonderful piece from Rohinton Mistry’s book *Family Matters*. I want to share a piece of it with you. In the story an employer and an employee are sitting at the table having a drink and talking to one another after the store is closed and this is what goes on.

“You see how we two are sitting here sharing? That’s how people have lived in Bombay. That’s why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here.”

Right, thought Yezad, fourteen million people, half of them living in slums, eating and shitting in places not fit for animals. Nice way of sharing the gift of Bombay. But none of this would have any effect on Vikram Kapur launched in poetic flight.

“You see, Yezad, Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Within this warp and weft is woven the special texture of its social fabric, the spirit of tolerance, acceptance, generosity. Anywhere else in the world, in those so-called civilized places like England and America, such terrible condition would lead to revolution.

Which might not be a bad thing, thought Yezad.

“From now on,” said Mr. Kapur, “in this shop we will celebrate all festivals: Divali, Christmas, Id, your Parsi Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha Jayanti, Ganesh Gharturthi, everything. We’ll decorate the windows, put up appropriate greetings with lights and all. We are going to be a mini-Bombay, an example to our neighbourhood. I made this decision after an amazing thing I saw last week.”

He drank what he had accepted from Yezad’s glass. “Last week, I parked my car near Grant Road Station and bought a platform ticket. To watch the trains and passengers. Just felt like it.”

He paused for another swallow and continued. “I never travel by train, I see how crowded they are when I drive past the tracks. But from the platform that day I saw something new. A train was leaving, completely packed, and the men running alongside gave up. All except one. I kept my eyes on him because the platform was coming to an end.

“Suddenly, he raised his arms. And people on the train reached out and grabbed him. What were they doing, he would be dragged and killed, I thought! A moment later, they had lifted him off the platform. Now his feet were dangling outside the compartment, and I almost screamed to stop the train. His feet pedalled the air, they found a tiny spot on the edge, slipped off, found it again.

“There he was, hanging, his life literally in the hands of strangers. And he had put it there. He had trusted them. More arms reached out and held him tight in their embrace. It was a miracle – suddenly he was completely safe. So safe, I wondered if I had overreacted to the earlier danger. But no, his position had been truly perilous for a few seconds.

“I waited on the platform to see more trains. It was then that I realized that what I had witnessed was not a miracle. It happened over and over: hands reaching out to help, as though it were perfectly normal, a routine commuter procedure.

“Whose hands were they, and whose hands were they grasping? Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Parsi, Christian? No one knew and no one cared. Fellow passengers, that’s all they were. And I stood there on the platform for a long time, Yezad, my eyes filled with tears of joy, because what I saw told me there was still hope for this great city” (p. 145-6).

Fellow passengers you are too. Who lends the helping hand to whom? Who knows? Who cares? As long as the helping hand is extended from one to the other. Those helping hands have to come also from people outside the immediate school community. It’s very important that people understand what it is you do. It is very important that people share the challenges as well as the joys of what happens in our public schools. Our public schools are a microcosm, a reflection of the larger society. You open your doors, you open your arms, you open your hearts to all our children. You give real meaning to the word “inclusive.” You take on the formidable and the critically important task of preparing our children, not just to become workers as some people seem to think, but to grow up to be moral people and citizens that contribute to the public good in a democratic, civil society.

It was a pleasure and an honor for me to be able to spend time visiting with some of you at your respective workplaces and to have this opportunity to share my reflections with you. I am deeply grateful to each of you for your total commitment to the well-being of our children. I wish you continued success.

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Neechisan: Taking the First Step

Verene Freund and Nan Fewchuk

June, 2006

Neechisan is an educational program designed for and developed with Aboriginal students at Garden City Collegiate. Named by the students, *Neechisan* is a Plains Cree word meaning blood brother, blood sister.

It is the first day of class for a course that is called *Multi-age* on the timetable and only four students arrive and sit down. Mary waits one second before exclaiming, “So what’s this class all about anyways!” As the teachers, we explain the goals of the course. We talk about our hopes of promoting awareness and celebrating Aboriginal culture in the school. We are blunt when insisting that as two white women, we are not here to solve the problems of the Aboriginal community, but rather, are attempting to create educational opportunities for the Aboriginal students of Garden City Collegiate. Our plan is to invite as many Aboriginal educators, elders and guests as possible. Curriculum will include such areas as foods and nutrition, family studies, drama, and fitness, areas where we have some expertise. We invite the students to contribute suggestions as to whom they would like to invite to the class and tell them it is our hope they will all participate in taking ownership and responsibility in making this program work. Jay storms into the room late and sits shooting suspicious looks at the teachers. She listens for a moment then says, “You’re not even Indians so why are you doing this?” Rose responds by explaining that if Jay hadn’t arrived late she would have heard the explanation. The room is silent. Jay acknowledges Rose’s answer with a smile. The first year of “reclaiming our youth” begins.

The circle is a sacred symbol of life...individual parts within the circle connect with every other; and what happens to one, or what one part does, affects all within the circle.

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve

Seven generations of lost identity, poverty and chronic unemployment, have left many of our Aboriginal youth void in spirit. Many of these young people are lacking in work ethic. They are not receiving a meaningful and relevant education. They are not being taught the skills necessary to help them participate in and contribute positively to society. As teachers, we have become familiar with the devastating circumstances in which these teens live. Drug and alcohol addiction and abuse are a part of their everyday lives. Suicide is a common occurrence within the immediate family unit and community. Foster parents are the main care givers for a majority of the students. Murder is not just something they read about in the paper or see on the news. Black eyes on both males and females are common. The issue of teen pregnancy is ever present. Theirs is a lost culture and this is particularly evident in the public school system.

The school system at present is not working for the majority of Aboriginal youth at Garden City Collegiate. Teachers often do not understand why they don't attend classes, do their homework, or participate as positive citizens in the school. Teachers and non-Aboriginal students, for the most part, have no idea how much "baggage" Aboriginal students are carrying. They feel insignificant and worthless because they never experience success. They cannot experience success because they do not attend regularly. They don't attend because they feel alienated and don't fit in. The cycle is vicious.

Neechisan, as an educational initiative, is the first stepping stone to what Dr. Martin Brokenleg (2001) refers to as "reclaiming youth at risk." He introduced us to the concept of "the circle of courage." This pedagogical idea encompasses guiding principles which have been

validated by youth development research:

1. The Spirit of Belonging: the universal longing for human bonds is cultivated by relationships of trust so that the child can say, "I am loved."
2. The Spirit of Mastery: the inborn thirst for learning is cultivated; by learning to cope with the world, the child can say, "I can succeed."
3. The Spirit of Independence: free will is cultivated by responsibility so that the child can say, "I have power to make decisions".
4. The Spirit of Generosity: character is cultivated by concern for others so that the child can say, "I have a purpose for my life."

When these principles are lived and experienced at school, students develop a sense of self-worth and are able to confront and overcome life's barriers. Without these, discouragement prevails.

Brokenleg insists that "Fostering self-esteem is a primary goal in socializing all children.

Lacking a sense of self-worth, a young person from any cultural or family background is vulnerable to a host of social, psychological, and learning problems." For many of the Aboriginal students of *Neechisan*, the circle of courage has been broken.

For us, one of the main goals this year has been to help mend this broken circle. As educators, we work against what Peggy McIntosh refers to as "The White Privilege." She writes,

Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow "them" to be more like "us".

We are working to foster the 'spirit of belonging' by supporting the needs of each individual student and providing opportunities for them to experience success outside of the normative views of the system. We believe that each student is worthy of feeling welcome in a school where racism still exists and create a space within the school that is racism free. We refrain from judging the students' behaviors and choices no matter how negative, and focus on teaching the students to take responsibility for their actions. Students are welcomed into the classroom no matter the time of arrival or number of days absent.

We cultivate the spirit of mastery through their experiences as chefs in the cooking lab, as mentors to the young and as published authors in the school and community newspapers. The students have proved their spirit of independence through the choices they made and by taking responsibility for their actions. For example, a cooking lab was planned on the understanding that all students would have to attend to all classes for the week prior to the cooking lab. Due to poor attendance, the cooking lab was cancelled. The next time the same conditions were presented, attendance was excellent and the cooking lab was a great success. The students lived the spirit of generosity by offering buffalo meat for cooking labs, facilitating drama workshops for the group, attending conferences, volunteering to read to elementary students, and teaching peers how to shoot a basketball.

At this time, 75% of our class attends on a regular basis. Even though most do not attend any other classes, they come to *Neechisan*. A connection has been made, a sense of trust has been built, and these students feel they “belong.” Even the few who disappear for months at a time return to the group and still feel like they have been connected even though they have not physically been with us for two or three weeks.

Maslow’s concept of a hierarchy of needs has fundamentally informed our practice as well. We adapted this concept to a school experience perspective. Just as Maslow insists that physical needs such as food, water, sleep and exercise, are essential for survival, we too focus on the importance of good health and wellness for success in education. Once these needs are addressed, the students can move to the next stage: attaining skills that are necessary for survival and success in the school system. For these students, survival skills in education are reading, writing and math. Without a foundation in these areas, students feel frustrated and are not able to tackle everyday assignments in their regular classes.

Further up the hierarchy, our students need an environment where they feel safe and secure. In our classroom, we provide the opportunity for each individual to express their ideas freely without being criticized, or condemned. They need to know that if their skills aren't at grade level, we will still support them in any way we can, and help them to feel comfortable in their learning. We insist that if and when they make poor choices or mistakes, they will not be punished. Instead, we try to teach them how to make amends and learn from their mistakes. Maslow refers to physical safety, economic security, freedom from threats, and comfort and peace at this level. Many of our students struggle with these issues in their homes and communities making it that much more important for them to find a place of safety, serenity, and security at school.

The need to belong and be accepted is the next critical level for all youth. To become a member of a group and associate with a positive team is the next step to achieving healthy self-esteem. Students need to feel they belong in Garden City Collegiate and that their input matters. They need to know that they can make a difference, and it begins by attending. We want them to understand that their contributions are important, and that each individual brings their own strengths and weaknesses to our community of learning. This understanding is a condition for the possibility of self-esteem.

Volunteering to take a leadership role in our class by facilitating discussions, teaching others a skill, sharing talents, reading to elementary students, and writing for the school newsletter helped our students gain self-confidence. Some were able to achieve this goal while others reverted back to making poor choices when obstacles got in the way of learning.

The need for self-actualization peaks Maslow's hierarchy. For some of our students, this means making the honor roll, graduating from high school, and attending post secondary

institutions. For others, it means becoming a self-supporting member of society. While some students may not achieve these hopes for several years, our message to them remains constant: stay in school, don't give up, rise to life's challenges, you are not alone.

Administrators, teachers, parents, families, Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal students, and the community at large must be educated. Education begins in the home and in school. Awareness and sensitivity towards these students is vital for healing to occur. Most importantly, we need to understand that we will not and should not attempt to change the Aboriginal students to "fit in" and conform to the status quo, but rather work on creating change in the system which will allow them to grow and experience the successes they deserve.

The trials and tribulations have been numerous. In the big picture, our students are the *crème de la crème*. They are the leaders and hope for the future because they are still in school and we actively tell them so. One student transferred from an inner city school where all of his friends had completely dropped out of school. He battles the lure of friends' negative choices, parties, and the streets, to come to school every day in order to graduate. He is the youngest and the first of sixteen grandchildren to do so.

Twenty-seven Aboriginal students have connected with *Neechisan* this year in their own, unique ways. Four students have completed the course, four others have taken on leadership roles in the elementary schools, one participated in the school production, and two will travel to Denver this summer to play basketball in the Indigenous Games. In addition, several students participated in various conferences throughout the year, ten students received their Emergency First Aid and CPR Certificates, and one has been accepted into the School of Broadcasting this December. A highlight was the commercial created by one of *Neechisan's* finest, who is also one of the top students in Garden City Collegiate.

We've come a long way from that first class and our students have been growing and building self esteem through positive contributions. Perhaps Miroslav Holub's poem entitled, "The Door," summarizes best the hope that lies in the *Neechisan* program:

Go and open the door.
Maybe a dog's rummaging.
Maybe you'll see a face,
or an eye
or the picture. (...)
Go and open the door.
Even if there's only
the darkness ticking
even if there's only
the hollow wind
even if
nothing
is there
go and open the door.
At least
there'll be
a draught.

References:

Brokenleg, M, et al (2001). *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*. National Educational Service. ISBN:1879639866

Seeds of Peace Grow Here

Diane Cameron

January 25, 2007

What do the government publication, *Hansard*, and the magazine “*Today’s Parent*” have in common?

Both publications have drawn attention to École James Nisbet Community School in the last year. *Hansard* recorded Judy Wasylcia-Leis’s speech to Parliament in which she highlighted the way Nisbet staff and students taught, practiced, lived and celebrated Peace Education through our home-grown “*Seeds of Peace Grow Here*” initiative. “*Today’s Parent*” recognized Nisbet as one of the Top 30 schools in Canada, due in large part to the Peace project. For this honour, nominations were invited and then personnel from nominated schools were interviewed about their programs and successes in order to compare nominees to determine those cited as Canada’s Top 30.

Our population includes all socio-economic ranges, with a great many of our students at risk. We provide a breakfast program for those children who need food or nurturing or both. Lunch is available to those in need as well. Our school population is diverse with large numbers of children having recently come from the Philippines and India or being first generation Canadians. Additionally, we have growing numbers of Aboriginal students, many of whom are learning English as an additional language. Our paraprofessional staff numbers ten and takes leadership in many areas of school life. Our CAREtaking staff has an ever growing understanding of what is happening in classrooms and why, and they support our efforts in both

usual and unusual ways. Such facts give the outline of James Nisbet School and perhaps present a very ordinary picture but we assure you some extraordinary things are happening here.

Our *Seeds of Peace* initiative is now in its fourth year at our school. This grew out of a distressing playground incident with a few students. Each year it has become more solidified as a cornerstone of each Nisbet student's education. Peace Education involves all from the youngest students to the eldest who take part in a wide variety of activities including art, story, raps and assemblies. These activities stress such life affirming tenets as *Politeness, Empathy, Acts of Kindness, Co-operation and Everyone Counting*. We have also spent time working with the Seven Sacred Teachings. The grade four students participated in a full-day, off campus conference in May, where their progress as peaceful student leaders was celebrated and reinforced as these students were poised to soon become our eldest. (We have a video of the conference if any colleagues are interested in how the day unfolded.) This conference and the Peace initiative have become very meaningful in our students' lives. Our students have spoken to University classes and board committees to explain their experiences. We note differences among our children and those students who transfer in and who have not yet learned our culture. One grade three student brought a newcomer who was having some issues to his teacher and said that his new classmate was in need of Peace lessons. Substitute teachers and paraprofessionals notice and comment on our children's demeanour. At Nisbet the talk and walk of Peace has transformed our school.

Respect underlines all that we do with children and with each other. Our staff members are not clones marching lock step through the years. We are very different, with our staff now counting brand new teachers as well as those of retirement age; we have teachers who teach in a traditional fashion and those who are pursuing methods that appear anything but traditional; we

have young parents on staff, with all the stresses that brings, and those with grown families. We all understand that we work best when we believe in what we do. We respect the varied beliefs in the school and yet try to learn from one another.

One group that is entering its fourth year at our school is the near dozen professionals studying Inquiry as a way of teaching. This has led some teachers to investigate Reggio Emilia-inspired approaches to education. Change is visible in the school as both environment and teaching styles are being examined with the aim to make both reflect our respect and hope for the children. This group sets its own agenda, often meeting outside of school hours and the school year. Ideas are discussed and individual efforts are supported and encouraged. We understand that such groups usually have a lifespan shorter than we are experiencing. We believe that our Inquiry group is long-lived because we are self-directed and feel constant renewal as more colleagues join and play an active role as we evolve.

Our school catchment area includes *Dial-A-Life*, a medical housing complex that provides housing for those who need to be close to hospital for dialysis. Often whole families accompany the patient who has come from a remote area. Such families are often in crisis. Our school supports these folks with a preschool time in the complex, summer programs, and a Christmas party. Our staff members make it their business to know our families very well and often serve as advocates for these families as they negotiate systems.

Roots of Empathy has been held at our school for the past four years. This program has been very successful as students learn to be empathetic to another's needs. We have been very lucky to be able to have babies from our extended Nisbet family as our youngest teachers. At the other end of the age spectrum we have had Reading Grandmas from Amber Meadows Seniors

Residence as part of our school family as well. All our spaces seem to be filled with happy, positive interaction.

We welcomed sixty more individuals (and a new age group) to our building this January. We have two sections of year five Education students each meeting once weekly with their professor, Wayne Serebrin. These students take part in their lecture or activity in our Multi Purpose room each morning and then follow up by working with students from both the English and French grade 1 and 2 as well as our multi-age class. After lunch the students get back together as a university class to debrief how their plans unfolded. We welcome these folks and the new ideas that they bring with them and they in turn appreciate the real experience our school provides. It is special on Tuesdays to see how full our building is, and just how full of life our halls and spaces are, as the babies and toddlers take part in the Preschool Story time; the university students bustle around with their students; and our students and staff carry on their normal busy life. James Nisbet School is a place of energy.

Energy is also very evident with the *REC and READ* program that combines after school recreation with literacy activities. This program involves University of Manitoba students, grad students and professors, Maples Collegiate students and some Nisbet students in grade three to five. This program was so successful last year that it is serving as a model for other sites in Winnipeg. The university professor mentors the university students who mentor the high school students who in turn mentor the youngest, while all build skills as communicators and leaders, in both recreation and literacy activities.

Our gyms are busy places as well, with a full slate of Intramurals plus Hip Hop Dance and Yoga as we try to build a healthy community. We are blessed to have teachers with a variety of expertise and it is only a rumour that they do all these things for the coaching jackets – (bags

this year!). We have a Marathon Club each year that trains and participates in the Manitoba Marathon. Noon hours are busy times as well, with music programs, book clubs and two Math clubs as children are given opportunities to practice other “languages.”

Our Early Years Support Team is active, sponsoring such activities as Books for Breakfast, Winter Fireside Readings in the Park, and Cuddle-Up (home reading) Book Evenings. We currently have a Triple P program at our school being led by our school psychologist and social worker. We have had FAST and other programs that allow our staff family to offer support to our extended Nisbet families.

Our parent council is very active and addresses the practical things as well as funding special purchases such as our wonderful piano and ever-changing ecosystem which were purchased in memory of two dear colleagues. They are now working at making a wheelchair climbing structure a reality. In addition to raising funds, our parent council nurtures, making sure that things such as inoculations are practically painless, and providing hot lunches on a regular basis. These volunteers are an essential part of our family.

Family is a very important word and is often used to describe both those within our walls and our relationship with those within our community. Our community thinks like a family and offers support as families do. We have worked with Dr. Carolyn Crippen to develop an attitude of “servant leadership.” Our Nisbet family has experienced much together and our bonds run deep. We have experienced significant change in the last year, but our family seems able to grow and meet the challenges when faced with either planned or unexpected changes. No one stands alone and we are all stronger for having each other and administrators who believe in us. The culture of nurturing and caring, peaceful interaction and high standards for children runs so deep that it survives and thrives as new experiences and people are introduced. Nisbet halls, rooms

and offices are places of energy and laughter; sometimes tears, (but always with hugs for support) as well as places for plans and dreams. We start each day fresh and build for the future of our family.