

THE MANITOBA

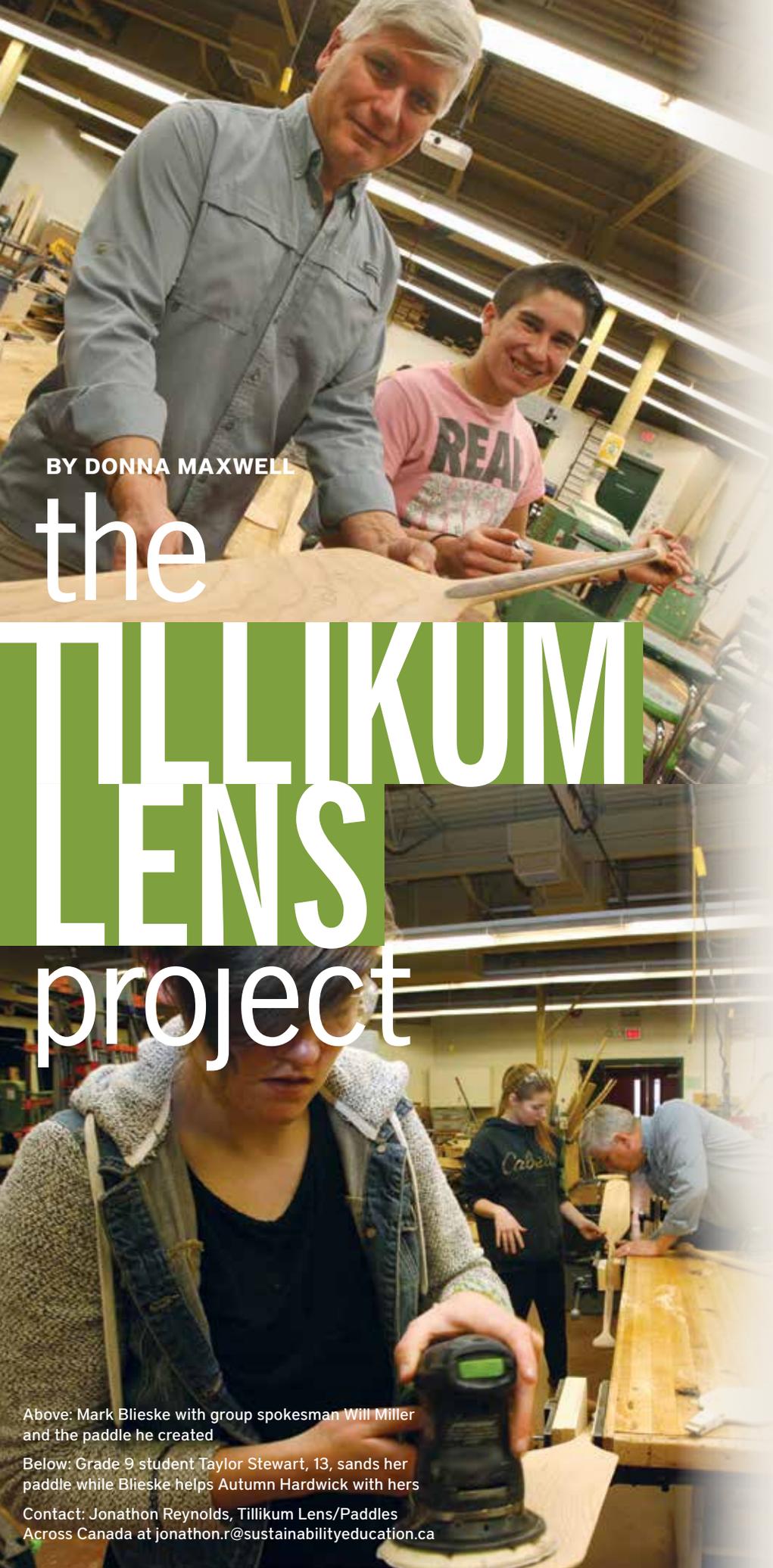
Teacher

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RANA BOKHARI

'Take the burden off teachers'



BY DONNA MAXWELL

the TILLIKUM LENS project

The Tillikum Lens really clicked with students at a school in Ontario earlier this year when photos they took during the weeklong project swayed some members of the local school board to invite the students, and their photos, to their next board meeting.

The school board was considering closing Lakefield District Secondary School and the students' photos, which documented their sadness over the school's impending demise, impacted the board members enough that they wanted their colleagues to see them before they made a final decision.

Jonathon Reynolds, executive director of the International Sustainability Education Foundation, which started Tillikum Lens a year-and-a-half ago, said it aims to uplift Indigenous youth by showing them the power of photos and how they can be used to tell a story, sometimes, an important story, like how much your school means to you.

Reynolds said the students took all kinds of photos during the week, ones showing them smiling and happy, others showing their school and their sad faces, reflecting how they felt about the closure. When it came time to select pictures to display at an exhibit at the school, they chose only the sad, sombre ones.

He said he asked why they only chose the sad ones to display, and their answer was "that's the story we're trying to tell".

"Their ability to just pick that up and go with it was amazing, in a one-week course," Reynolds said.

"They knew their mission."

And though it's unknown whether they were able to sway the board, Reynolds said they made their point.

"They resonated with the people who are the actual decision makers and even if they don't change it, at least they know now that saying something and doing something, people will take seriously, and that in itself gives them a sense of power that they wouldn't have had before."

Reynolds said Tillikum Lens – Tillikum means 'people' in the Chinook language – was inspired by paintings done in the 1930s by school children in Osoyoos, B.C., trying to save their school. Reynolds saw them at the Osoyoos Desert Cultural Centre, where they're on display today.

"Those pictures were pretty powerful and they managed to maintain the sort of culture and the school within that area all through that period, so I thought, well, a picture's worth a thousand words, right?" Reynolds said.

"We kind of took it from there. And I wanted to set up a program that wasn't just go in, share something and then leave and

Above: Mark Blieske with group spokesman Will Miller and the paddle he created

Below: Grade 9 student Taylor Stewart, 13, sands her paddle while Blieske helps Autumn Hardwick with hers

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disappear. It had to be some sort of a longer term engagement.”

Tillikum Lens workshops began in B.C. and are now making their way across the country. They already partner with Sony, who provides cameras, and they’ve taken on a new partner in the Canadian Canoe Museum and now students not only learn how to take photos and have them tell a story, they learn how to build a paddle and when the ice thaws, they’ll go on a day-long canoe trip with their instructor.

Lockport School in St. Andrews recently hosted a Tillikum Lens/Paddles Across Canada workshop and retired teacher Mark Blieske returned to teach eight Indigenous students both photography and woodworking. Blieske, who used to teach woodworking and graphics at the school, was the ideal man for the job – he taught for 36 years in the Lord Selkirk School Division, and he and his students made canoes and paddles in class and he took them on a yearly camping trip. He may be retired, but the trips continue.

“I’m still doing it. I still go on the canoe trips, I still work with the kids with paddles, I volunteer my time now and this year will be my 79th and 80th trip with Lord Selkirk School Division students,” Blieske said.

It’s a project that certainly seems made for Blieske, and during the week in January that he spent at his old school, his enthusiasm for the work, and the kids, was evident. He was back in his element, and loving what the dual-stream workshop was doing for his charges.

Certainly they’re learning camera skills and the impact a photo can have, as well as woodworking, but the lessons run much deeper than that.

“They’re learning how to relate with other people and they’re talking amongst each other, you can hear them now. The first day, they didn’t talk, now they are,” Blieske said.

“Self confidence is another thing that we get through this. As a teacher, I learn a lot, just how to approach this whole milieu of students that are such a disparity of socioeconomic backgrounds. As well as just how they act and react with each other, I love that.”

And while the Lockport group didn’t have a pressing issue, like the closing of their school, to document, they still have stories to tell, whether it’s what their lives are like from day to day, or simply the experience of taking a piece of wood and turning it into a beautiful paddle.

Blieske’s group, like all groups from schools that participate, was chosen by the school’s guidance counsellor, and had to meet the criteria that included being an

Indigenous student and having varied social backgrounds.

The students were in grades 7-9, and when they walked into the workshop they didn’t know each other, but as Blieske said, they worked side by side and became friends in short order.

He said it was fascinating to see them develop, literally right before his eyes. During one session where the students had to take turns being the photographer in charge of a group shot, he watched as they learned how to lead and organize the others so the shot could be achieved.

The original goal of Tillikum Lens was to have the students make a statement to the larger community through their photos. The fact the workshops created a change within their smaller group was a

“wonderful, synergistic thing”

- Jonathon Reynolds

Lockport principal Daryl Loeppky said the benefits of the workshop can be seen in the junior high school’s hallways.

“A junior high school is a really despaired group of kids all over the place trying to find themselves, that sort of thing, and where do you fit in and this was a really neat opportunity to meld eight students together around a certain theme of their heritage,” he said.

“To me, that’s the neatest thing to see from a social perspective.”

Reynolds said the original goal of Tillikum Lens was to have the students make a statement to the larger community through their photos. The fact the workshops created a change within their smaller group was a “wonderful, synergistic thing”.

“We expected to be able to use these programs to build community outside of their own community, but we didn’t realize how powerful it would be within their own

communities as well,” Reynolds said.

“That’s a real bonus.”

The Tillikum Lens has partnered with other activities before, like archery, and now it’s paddle making. Reynolds said that’s proven to be a unifying force as well, with some students signing on because they’re interested in the photography element and others drawn in by the woodworking.

At Lockport, the making of the paddle taught students woodworking, a skill some had no experience in, but it also provided an opportunity for students to delve into their heritage. Blieske said some had plenty of knowledge about their background, while others had very little.

“We’re trying to show them the culture. And a lot of them don’t even know what their past culture is. I’ve asked them, ‘do you know anything about your past native culture? And a lot of them don’t know.”

The project wraps up in a couple of really big ways. The students’ photos were on display at the Silver Canoe Dinner at Festival du Voyageur, where all eight students were treated to dinner and group spokesman, 15-year-old Will Miller, spoke to the guests about the project.

Miller, who was voted spokesman by the others in the group, said he was honoured by their confidence in him.

“It made me feel really great, like a high honour. I didn’t know if I was ready for it, but I feel like I can handle it,” he said.

The school stepped up again, and before the dinner, human ecology teacher Kristin Fillion and vice-principal Diane Steiner taught the student etiquette so they’d know which fork to use and when.

Miller said he learned so much during the week, from confidence and respect for others to how difficult life was for his ancestors. He liked making the paddle and knowing how hard it was for those who made them years ago.

“We’re learning about different hand held tools that were used by the natives before us, like the curve knife, and how hard it was to make paddles back then compared to now,” Miller said.

“We have all these electric sanders and different tools so it’s so easy to make paddles now, compared to back then.”

He’s also made new friends and he’s glad he had that opportunity.

In the spring, the students will reunite with Blieske for a day-trip down either the Seine or Assiniboine River where they’ll get to use the paddles they made. They’ll end up at Fort Gibraltar and have lunch.

“It’ll be kind of neat, ending up the canoe trip at a fort,” Blieske said.