

Northern delights and culture shock

Time in Nunavut educational for kids and their student teacher

By JEFFREY SIMPSON
Staff Reporter

On Cheryl Maclean's first day of her new teaching job, the students couldn't resist touching her hair.

"They were very surprised at my appearance," the 28-year-old university student said in an interview Wednesday.

"I don't think a lot of them had seen a person with red hair before."

That's because Kimmirut, on the southern end of Baffin Island in Nunavut, is well removed from the rest of Canada.

Ms. Maclean, originally from Long Point, Inverness County, has recently returned to Nova Scotia after spending a month teaching first and second grades in the remote community of about 400 as part of her education degree at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax.

Upon arriving in the North, she surveyed the treeless landscape as her plane landed and saw nothing but white ice and snow in all directions, she said.

"It felt like I was in a completely different world — and sometimes the Third World," she said.

She adjusted quickly to the new culture thanks to her northern studies course, she said. She even went on a four-day camping trip with high school students who hunted and cooked caribou stew for dinner.

"It was delicious," she said.

"It's one of the best meats I've ever eaten."

But nothing quite prepared her fully for the shock of some of the societal problems, such as alcohol abuse.

Her students would show up late for classes on Monday morning and suffer sleepiness after enduring parents who were drunk and high all weekend, she said.



Cheryl Maclean, a Mount Saint Vincent student teacher, said her time in a remote Nunavut community was in some ways like a "completely different world."

"I don't think there is enough activity organized to keep youth busy in the evening or after school," Ms. Maclean said.

"And part of it is their culture. Their children are free to go where they want. There aren't enough restrictions."

Their diet is also poor, with junk food such as chocolate, potato chips and soda being staples.

"The amount of sugar they eat — amazing," Ms. Maclean said. Nick Newbery, the Mount Saint Vincent instructor who organizes the teaching placements, spent three decades in the North after he got bored teaching in Toronto during the 1970s.

"I just wanted to have some adventure," said Mr. Newbery, who taught Ms. Maclean's northern studies course.

"It's the sort of thing you read in books and I wanted to go see it."

Mr. Newbery said the students benefit from the experience of teaching in a culture that's foreign to them. But the people of the North need the education. With a 75 per cent dropout rate, there's a dearth of indigenous people qualified to fill government jobs so they can run their own society, he said.

"So if we can get the kids to stay in school, they'll have more productive lives and the govern-

ment will be better able to function," he said.

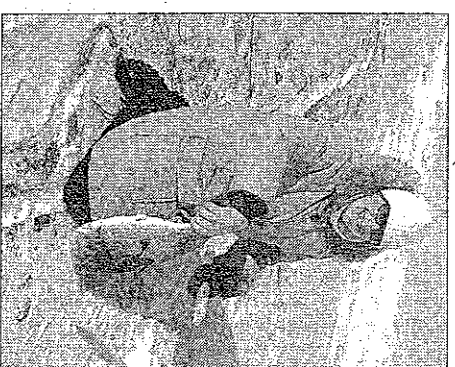
"My main motive is to try to provide orientation, for people who are interested in teaching in the North."

It's more beneficial for the local community if teachers stick around for a while and become familiar with the culture there, he said. That's a commitment that has crossed Ms. Maclean's mind for the future.

"I would love to go back. I wouldn't think twice about it," she said.

"I would go up for a year or two. A month up there was just a little taste of it."

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For really good ice fishing, Nunavut's the place to be.