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Further North and Further Away than you've Ever Been

This is the fifth year that Ernescliff College in Toronto organizes a social service project in the remote community of Berens River in northern Manitoba. A group of 15 students participated in the project this year. Following are some of their reflections on this rewarding experience.

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Imagine traveling farther north than you've ever been in your life.

Imagine going there on a small fishing boat, being buffeted back and forth by the waves and the rain. Now imagine intense hard work in an isolated aboriginal community on the northern tip of Lake Winnipeg, surrounded by vast stretches of muskeg and water, stunted spruce and great expanses of blue sky. And all around you ferocious mosquitoes hounding you and the locals on the look out for possible bears

That is part of what a group of 15 Canadian High School students experienced this summer on a social work project in the remote northern community of Berens River in northern Manitoba. This is the fifth year that Ernescliff College in Toronto has organized this volunteer project. There are break waters to be built, drainage trenches needed to protect the local parish church,

mountains of firewood to be cut, and many young kids who need tutoring in math, English, and catechism.

Geoff, who is originally from Winnipeg, joined the team from Vancouver where he is currently studying. He said: “I tutored a young grade 8 boy named Maverick; he knew how to add and subtract but not multiply. He asked me to teach him how to tell time on an analog clock. He could not read 3:30 written digitally, nor did he know there were 24 hours in the day.” The boys slept on the floor in the local gym and ate meals provided by Fr. Rhéal Forrest, the parish priest who is in charge of several communities in the area.

Camillo, a 17 year-old from Toronto, said it was a real eye-opener to see the realities that the native people in Canada have to face: “I always heard that life in the native reserves was very difficult due to drug abuse

among the people. But, seeing it in person definitely changed my perspective on this issue.” Fr. Rhéal is grateful for all the help he can get from these young men, more used to life in the city. But they all agreed that their experience in Berens River was more rewarding than they would have imagined.

Chan from Vancouver was quite struck by the relationship they were able to build up with some of the natives: “It was sad to listen to them talk about their difficult home situation as if this were natural. One kid that I was teaching told me that he was happy that his dad is in prison because otherwise he would physically abuse his wife and kids all the time. An even more striking factor was that they were virtually unaware of Canada. The only major city they knew was Winnipeg, and they had no idea whatsoever what a province is.”

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