

125 years of change in Calgary schools

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

A recent social studies lesson in Allen Wideman's classroom included the paintings of Ted Harrison, whose vibrant depictions of the Yukon landscape are beloved by people who wouldn't dream of setting foot in Canada's Arctic.

As the Grade 5 students viewed the colourful images on a whiteboard connected to the Internet, talk shifted to another aspect of life in the North. Wideman quickly brought up a picture to further develop their understanding of the Yukon.

Technology, says Wideman, has enabled teachers to bring worlds alive for their students.

"If the discussion goes in another direction and we need, say, another map, we just hop on the computer and there it is," says the 31-year-old, who teaches at Wildwood Elementary in southwest Calgary.

"The amount of information available within seconds is phenomenal. Using technology, students have the ability to really run with their interests."

It's a long way from the iconic prairie image of one young woman teaching children of

various ages, sizes and abilities in a one-room schoolhouse.

Calgary's first school opened in 1884 with a dozen students sharing books on the tables and benches made by local carpenters.

Today's students have grown up with their own computers, cellphones and iPods, accustomed to instant access to whatever bit of pop culture or historical data they are seeking.

Wildwood's student population includes a diversity never dreamed of more than a century ago. One in five students speaks English as a second language, with close to 50 languages spoken at their homes. Families range from extremely affluent to those struggling with social issues that were not known or just not discussed in past generations.

Heather Harrigan recently retired after 33 years in the Calgary public system, all but two years teaching high school. She watched a profound change in students, who still have all the teenaged angst as they try to find themselves, but now live under pressures their predecessors could never have imagined.

"They're afraid of the world, they're afraid of failure, they're afraid of exploring," says Harri-

gan, who finished her teaching at Bowness High School in the city's northwest. "They're afraid to relax and get something

wrong. They're like the adults who live in the future and talk about 'When I retire.'"

Many believe that comes from a childhood overmanaged and scheduled by well-meaning parents who hover over every move as their children grow, trying to protect them from disappointment and difficulty.

Harrigan worries about the growing number of students whose initial plans after finishing school aren't backpacking through Europe or testing the waters of living on their own, but returning to upgrade the marks they had in Grade 12. And she believes those changes are largely a mirror of what's happened to the city of Calgary.

"When I started teaching, there wasn't as much pressure for people to own things, to have three SUVs and a big house," she says. "Life seemed more genteel."

That push for success has created some troubling new dynamics.

"There's a notion that all of them will go to university and if they don't have the marks, it's the teacher's fault. That's ludi-



crous," says Harrigan. "I don't think I taught a student in the last decade who didn't believe they were going to university."

Despite being bright, articulate and techno-savvy, too many students don't view themselves as part of a global culture, he says. "I don't think they see themselves being part of solutions — they're disempowered. Now they just say, 'You can't make a difference.' Either they don't feel it's worthwhile or it's not a priority."

Tia Agnew understands the apathy and disconnect Harrigan is describing. She spent much of her Grade 12 year at Lord Beaverbrook organizing a day-long social justice project designed to shake up that notion.

CHANGE 2008 (Change Hurtful Attitudes Now! Generate Equality for Everyone) brought together more than 35 speakers for workshops and information sessions. All 2,100 students and more than 120 teaching staff at the **school** had

to choose and attend four sessions on March 13. The goal was to take issues such as violence, racism and homophobia and show students the human costs of bullying and prejudice.

"We need knowledge and understanding before we can make a difference," says Tia, a 17-year-old honour student. "People always tell themselves, 'I'm just one person,' but I think CHANGE told them we could make a difference."

The seeds of CHANGE began when Tia attended a week-long retreat in Grade 11 called Connections 25, designed to combat prejudice and discrimination by getting teens to understand the diversity of cultures and experi-

ences in **school** and society.

She was riveted by Cory Johnson's speech on turning disabilities into possibilities. Johnson, born with cerebral palsy, was bullied as a child and battled against stereotypes of what it means to be disabled.

Tia worried the passion the program had ignited to improve her surroundings would quickly dissipate once she was back in the "real world."

"I was almost nervous to come back to **school** and become immune again," she said. "I wanted everyone to see the situations, see what's becoming a growing problem."

Teacher Nan Nassef tried to rein in Tia, worried that the scope of the project was too large. But during the summer, the teen tracked down dozens of speakers on issues ranging from domestic violence to global poverty and set up "action sessions" on promoting change.

"It was her brainchild and it was a huge undertaking," said Nassef, who has been teaching for five years. "She worked on the administrative side, on the organizational side, getting the fundraising together. It was amazing."

Tia was stunned by the reaction from her schoolmates. "I had people coming up to me crying. I had kids who said, 'Thank you so much,' she recalled. "Sometimes we need that eye-opener, we just need to be told people are doing things."

More than 50 people have volunteered to keep Tia's dream alive and put on a similar day of workshops and speakers during the 2008-09 **school** year.

Like Tia, Jay Bjornson's most valuable lesson came outside

the classroom.

Bjornson quit **school** midway through Grade 12 with only half of his courses completed at Bishop Carroll High, a **school** renowned for its unique self-directed learning program. He

left home to avoid the fights with his parents over where his education was going.

"It was a serious learning experience," says Bjornson, who quickly found living with two buddies and working full time was not the bed of roses he'd envisioned.

"It was a big waste of money. And it's hard to pay all those bills. It was a lot more than I expected."

At 20, Bjornson is finishing high **school** at St. Anne Academic Centre, where his classmates are also returning students. He's been accepted to the University of Calgary's natural sciences program and is looking at becoming an engineer.

The dirty downside of Alberta's red-hot economy has always been one of the highest dropout rates in Canada. Unlike other regions of the country, a job is easily available to unskilled workers. But living in Calgary has become a much more expensive proposition.

"There's not much you could do without a high **school** diploma," Bjornson said ruefully. "I kinda knew that, but I thought I could do it online. (In fact), it's harder."

Bjornson is back at home and plans to stay there when he starts classes in the fall at U of C.

"My advice is to stay at **school** and appreciate everything at home," he said. "It costs your parents a lot more than you think."

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Heather Harrigan, who taught in Calgary schools for 33 years, on today's students



Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Lord Beaverbrook High School teacher Nan Nassef, left, helped Grade 12 student Tia Agnew organize workshops and speakers for the school's 2,100 students and 120 teachers.



Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Jay Bjornson, 20, attends St. Anne's Academic Centre, an adult environment in which students complete Grade 12.



Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald
 Heather Harrigan, who retired after teaching in Calgary for 33 years, says students today live under pressures their predecessors could never have imagined.

Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald
 Al Wideman makes the most of technology when he teaches Grade 5 at Wildwood Elementary School. "If the discussion goes in another direction and we need, say, another map, we just hop on the computer and there it is," he says.