

## Ottawa-Iqaluit Exchange<sup>1</sup>

In March and April, 2013, The YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada program sponsored an exchange between students from The Leading Note Foundation's OrKidstra Program (Ottawa, ON) and the Iqaluit Fiddle Club (Iqaluit, NU). Fifteen students with adult leaders flew north for five days on the first phase of the exchange. Fifteen IFC students will come to Ottawa in late April. The following is not a formal report. The notes were written during the Iqaluit visit and sent to parents to keep them updated on a daily basis and are presented here as is.

## Iqaluit Exchange Updates

### IQX Update # 1, March 10, 2013

The good news is we are here! We made great time from Ottawa to Iqaluit, arriving 1/2 hour early despite leaving 15 min late. This might be because the plane was much lighter than expected--we were not allowed to take our suitcases! The bags are checked in and will be flown up tomorrow. We did a hasty repack on the airport floor to put much needed things into carry-ons, and then waved fond goodbye to everything else.

While waiting at the airport, Carlos said he was not looking forward to -40C. How prophetic. We are now officially in a blizzard, so all our afternoon activities have been cancelled, kids have been picked up by hosts and Grace, Rinila, Amy and I are at a B&B. If the weather continues like this, and it well may, we will be housebound tomorrow till it lifts.

Imagine: white wind flying horizontal; the house moving on its base in the pressure of the wind; we can't see more than 100m, all schools and offices are closed down, and the taxis, which form public transport here, are not answering calls. Grace & the girls and I may well dine on the lunches we packed before leaving for the airport (they actually gave us a good, free meal on First Air) and whatever we can scrounge. (As it turned out, the two girls raided the cupboards, got busy over the stove and made us a delightfully spicy chicken noodle soup!)

We had a wonderful welcome--several Fiddle Club kids and hosts came to meet us and off we went to a hall to play 'get to know each other games' and break the ice. So, we are all warm, and dry and still excited for the rest of the week to play out. Which is pretty close to what Ngoc Kim said while waiting at the airport: "I'm really, really excited but I don't quite know what for!"



*Friends... going places... in the snow*

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<sup>1</sup> Y Exchange Group # 4922

## Update # 2 March 12, 2013

Hello, again! Things were sidelined this morning as the roads, schools and offices were closed till noon. Now the sky is brilliant, the snow glares (glad most kids have sunglasses) but the wind is cold: -20 becomes -38 with the wind.

Amy & Rinila went for a walk to the corner store this morning. On the way back, Amy's vanilla latte spilled onto her glove and the drops froze instantly! We hear from Yoshuna's host that her facebook friends were surprised there were no igloos up here but that wireless internet is freely available. Many things are not as might be expected.

The program began in earnest this afternoon with a special screening of the movie from Greenland called Inuk, about a teenager struggling with his life and identity in the city who finds meaning in the traditional life of the Inuit. Stunningly shot out on the snow and ice and all based on a true story. We had the director and a woman who was involved in the real story behind it all come and talk to us. Afterwards, the kids learned how to crack a dog whip under the instruction of an Inuk hunter, dressed in polar bear fur pants and caribou skin jacket.



*OrKidstra & Iqaluit Fiddle Club with Inuk hunter*

Then off to a really fascinating lecture from Matty McNair--an accomplished polar explorer who has led groups to both the south and north poles, by dog sled. She stressed that in order to achieve in any sphere--polar expeditions or music--you have to dream, grow the skills, assemble a good team with different strengths and talents, and have fun. She will take us out on the ice tomorrow for our own dog sled experiences. Can't wait. It will be cold, but we now all have our suitcases and the extra warm clothing packed away there. Yes, the bags arrived from Ottawa late this afternoon.

Some quotes from the kids: Patrick said that he and Declan were looking forward to dinner at their host family last night. Perhaps they would have caribou? they thought, or even caribou *eyeballs*??!! Supper turned out to be...yummy lasagna--but far from a disappointment, they agreed.

All the kids had stories about the violent winds last night which shook the houses, and even the beds inside. Some thought it rather like earth tremors. But we were very glad to see the brilliant sun break through around noon.

Matty McNair told us to watch out for Northern Lights and mentioned that although sometimes they are pink and green, they are often just light gray streaks across the dark sky. I saw them tonight. She also said that sometimes the photos you take of these pale streaks turn out to be pink or green when you look

at the result. I hope others in the group saw them. We all went home to our separate places at 5 for a free evening.

### **Update #3, March 13, 2013**

How do you write a short note when the day starts with dog-sledding on the frozen bay and ends in the gracious space of a new cathedral? The kids had just such a range of experiences today.

But first, a thought from Gareth from yesterday evening. His hosts took him and Peter on a drive around the town after dark and ended up high on a hill overlooking the whole of Iqaluit. Gareth was surprised to see the small cluster of buildings that is the town and the miles and miles of nothingness that surrounds it. They also saw the Northern Lights, not just gray streaks but pink!

Patrick's moment of truth came after a visit to NorthMart (combination of Walmart and Loblaws) where you can buy everything from guns to oranges. He dragged me with great excitement to the cleaning aisle today to point out the amazing price of a 3 kg box of Tide: \$44! A jug of Tropicana orange juice is 19.59 and a litre of Chapman's frozen yogurt costs 14.99. He was shocked at the price of a One Direction doll which retails for \$20 in Ottawa: in Iqaluit, \$80. Six rolls of toilet paper = \$9.99. We all have a greater appreciation of the value of food and household goods!

This morning, having dropped our instruments at the Cathedral, we walked along the shoreline and out across the frozen bay: indistinguishable from the land itself--undulating banks of snow and ice crunching under our feet making hollow sounds as though we were walking on drums. Don't worry. We were very safe. The ice won't break up for many weeks yet. The kids raised a large, square canvas tent so we could tuck inside every so often. A local woman came to make and deep fry bannock: just like a hot doughnut and wonderful with hot chocolate.

We took turns climbing onto a dog sled and rushing out along the shoreline, on the ice and snow, behind panting, scrambling dogs--a dozen or more per sled. The wind was terrific as we raced along, the snow squeaked below the runners, and the snow was rippled like sand by the seashore, carved into waves and dunes by the wind. Each time a sled returned, the riders tumbled off full of stories and grins--then headed into the tent for chocolate or joined a game of ice soccer to keep warm.



By noon we were starving and ready for a lasagna lunch back at the elementary school. Emily, Kafele and I went off to find a phone to call Yellowknife and connect with a journalist with News North to be interviewed about OrKidstra, the exchange and the week's program. It didn't take long but they will run a story next Monday and will give me access to their online issue so we can send it out to you all.

The kids put in a hard afternoon of rehearsing by themselves and with the Iqaluit Fiddle Club as tonight was a fundraiser concert for the building fund of the new Cathedral of St. Jude's. The Cathedral is a huge white igloo-shaped building with a tall spire that sits in the centre of the town. Inside, the walls and ceiling are a half-globe with curved maple pews and red carpets. The pulpit resembles a sled on end and the exit signs are in English and syllabics. It was quite a setting for the concert which started at 7:30 with an Inuk in traditional costume, beating a large, hand-held circular skin drum. It was a most moving performance that had the audience of some 200 spell-bound. Then the music unfolded with soloists (Miss Grace & Miss Margaret, and others), a duet by Patrick & Peter, performance by the Quintet, and many tunes by all the OrKidstra exchange kids, and their counterparts. At the end, all the musicians and the audience joined in Amazing Grace in English and a rather halting Inuktitut. We had only sung it once or twice. Still, the spirit was there and the applause long and heart-felt. Well done, Everyone!

We cleared up after the audience left, and all staggered off to our respective homes. [Marcanthony reports that his host family is "just fantastic" and that he had no idea how much he would enjoy everything up here.] What a day!



*Fundraising Concert at St. Jude's Cathedral*

#### **Update #4, March 14, 2013**

The community of Iqaluit was delighted to learn that our concert in aid of the Cathedral building fund raised \$835 last night. What a great contribution our kids and the Iqaluit Fiddle Club and all the other performers have made. Many thanks to them all.

The drummer I mentioned last night, Matt Nuqingaq, came to see us this morning at one of our workshops. He brought several drums (kilauja) and we all had a go, dancing in a circle and making the deep hollow drum sound out joy and stillness. He then told us the story of Sedna, the sea goddess who provides all food and who needs special care by shamans so she doesn't send storms over the sea and scatter all the seals, fish and whales so hunters cannot find their prey.

Some of the kids shared their impressions of our trip with me today. Daniela has been surprised by the size of Iqaluit--many more houses than she had expected--and by the modern buildings (not high, but new and brightly coloured.) Claudia chose the dog-sled ride as her favourite event--and she probably shares that with many of the kids. Jennifer giggles over the twice daily struggle to get juice out of a juice box. Our snacks often sit in a car for a few hours before coming into where we are. This means granola bars are brittle and juice boxes are frozen solid! Dealing with this problem is a trick that the Iqaluit kids

have been sharing with ours. Rebecca and Jennifer seem to like these block-shaped popsicles hugely! Marcanthony surprised us all (possibly himself, too) by sampling fish eyeballs at supper last night when Arctic Char was on the menu at his host family. The eyes are a great delicacy. Congrats, for bravery and curiosity!!

Everyone practised their pieces for the Friday evening concert and then fell on the hot-dog lunch. A school bus picked us up early in the afternoon and drove us out to Apex Bay--the original settlement but several miles away from Iqaluit (formerly Frobisher Bay, which was established by the US army as part of the DEW line back in the 50s). Apex is still a thriving community, but the principal tourist attraction is down on the beach: the original Hudson Bay trading post--well, a reconstruction using materials and colours similar to the original: white clapboard and red roofs, easily visible across the water. Right on the shore is a stranded, bright red trader's dory which made a great jumping off point to the snow banks around it. The kids ran over the hard-packed, blinding white snow on the shore and out onto the frozen bay. The ice there stands in jagged peaks as the daily tides force the ice into weird shapes. It is all several metres thick so there is no danger.



Darlene Nuqingag, our counterpart Exchange Leader, said that although the ice won't go out of the bay till early June, we are now in the northern Spring--her favourite season. (I hope many of you have the chance to meet Darlene when she comes down with the Iqaluit Fiddle Club in late April. She is a wonderful source of calm and delight as we go through our hectic days.)

Then off to the Visitor Centre (with displays and a library), a visit to the Museum (and its shop!), and a few nearby shops. Then home for a free evening with host families. Tomorrow, weather permitting (we are supposed to get 15 cm and then strong winds), we are off to the Legislative Assembly, then to do some community service, visit the Research Centre and finally rehearse a bit before the evening concert which starts at 7:30 p.m. Full days indeed.

There has been quite a bit of local media interest in the Exchange: News North out of Yellowknife is doing a story next week, as you know, but also sent a photographer to the concert last night, so may include a photo or two. Nunatsiaq News (the Iqaluit paper) sent a photographer to the rehearsal this morning and will do a feature story next Friday (March 22). We'll keep an eye on all these and try to get links to you all in due course. Many of the kids have taken their own photos, but we will also post a variety of photos on line when I get back and download them.

This morning in a break, I reminded the kids that we would like them to jot down impressions, two



highlights and something that would make an exchange better. I said I would collect their paper on the plane on Saturday. One of the Iqaluit kids perked up and said with concern, "You mean you are *leaving*?!" Well, I think that speaks volumes about the bonds that have been created in just a few short days.

### **Update #5, March 15, 2013**

Another packed day! We trudged through 10 cm of blowing snow from the Elementary School to the Legislative Assembly where we were introduced by the Chairman (Speaker) and again, and at length, by the Premier. The room is small and round with a round table in the centre and an igloo shape overhead. The chairs are upholstered in sealskin and the wood is beautiful blonde maple. As the speakers use mikes and headphones it was hard to hear what the representatives and ministers were saying, but it was a very special honour. The name of each child and adult will be recorded in the visitor book. The Minister of Finance & Health talked to several kids individually and the Premier talked with a few of us outside the room when the Assembly closed off their business.

Today we split into four or five groups to do some community service. I was with Patrick, Peter, Rinila & Yoshuna and Rebecca & Alassua from the Fiddle Club. We visited Nanook Elementary School in Apex, a community just a few miles from Iqaluit. A dozen eager children of about 4 & 5 years, sat on a rug and listened attentively while our older children explained about their instruments, played simple and more complex tunes, explored how the kids felt when they heard major and minor keys, and even showed them how to dismantle, clean and put away their instruments. They invited the little ones to sing a song and were rewarded with three--all in Inuktitut.



*Introducing music to Kindergarten children at Nanook School, Apex*

Margaret's group visited another school and performed in similar style. They were visited by CBC North TV and we presume a short piece aired on local TV twice tonight. Of course, we couldn't see it as we were involved in the concert. Maybe it's available on line?

A brief visit to the Nunavut Research Institute, which supports arctic research of all kinds, (we saw everything from GPS locators to polar bear skulls) was followed by pretty intense rehearsals for the evening choral concert.

We celebrated Declan's 16th birthday in grand style with a huge cake and a musical card and much joking around. During the concert, one of the performers explained that his song was a Birthday song "Is anyone celebrating today?" Lots of ribbing and joshing in OrKidstra as Declan grudgingly admitted he indeed was. Happy Birthday, Declan!

There were about 7 choirs from the area participating in the concert, ranging in age from 7 to 70 and singing in all three languages (English, Inuktitut & French.) OrKidstra performed Sword Dance, Peter & Patrick did a duet, and then OrKidstra joined with the Fiddle Club to do Ode to Joy--standing ovation! Then all the choirs performed songs in Inuktitut and French, and then, accompanied by OrKidstra & the Fiddle Club, sang To Young Canadians. The audience rose to its feet at the end. Such a great ending to the day and the week.

Over the last five days, I've mentioned all sorts of things that happened to the kids, but we adults have stories to tell, too. Grace has been delighted by the joy the kids have expressed about their host families. She hasn't heard one negative comment by anyone!

Margaret was particularly thrilled by the way the two groups have blended, musically and socially.

Olivia, our visiting luthier, spent over 15 hours training local artisans in the techniques of rehabilitating stringed instruments. Today she experienced a first: a violin nut had to be made.. These are usually made out of ebony, but there was none to be had. Instead, the local artisan (a jeweller by trade) suggested narwhal tusk. So Olivia and Matt fashioned one out of local ivory. A particularly northern violin was reborn!

For my part, I have been struck by the professionalism and courtesy of all our kids. There couldn't be better travel companions. Many thanks to each one of them for making this experience a joy.

This is the final IQX update and in closing, I am reminded of Matty McNair's recipe for successful expeditions. She, of course, had in mind treks over polar wastes, crevasses and snowfields. But our week has been an expedition, too. "Success", she told us, "lies in no whining, respecting the people and your surroundings, and in having lots of fun." How very true!

The children will have their own tales to tell and I know kids from both groups are eagerly looking forward to the end of April. Only five weeks till then...and only 17 hours (if we are on schedule) till the kids come home. See you tomorrow afternoon!



*OrKidstra and Iqaluit Fiddle Club students rehearsing for the Community Choral Concert fundraiser*

At the end of the visit to Iqaluit, OrKidstra students answered a few questions about their experiences. Here is a selection of answers—in their own words:

What were the highlights?

- Dog-sledding with the Fiddle Club; ski-dooing and [host] family time; Movies and bonding with new people;
- Trip to movies with host family with several other OrKidstra kids; learning how to throat sing was awesome & I beat my partner!; playing duets with my partner; helping out at Apex School.

What could have made it better?

- NOTHING could've made this exchange better! 😊
- If it can be a bit longer like two or three days more to spend more time with your hosts;
- It doesn't get better than this. At first, I thought it wasn't going to be fun because of the cold but I was wrong.

What did you learn about yourself?

- That I'm able to like other cultures;
- I learned that as long as you have fun, not even a blizzard can pull you down;
- I learned that it is easier than expected to experience, accept and interact with other cultures and languages. It is easy to live with other people;
- I learned that the best thing to do is to be around people that care or respect you. And the way to be around caring people starts with your hobbies. Music, martial arts and scouts for example are hobbies that bring people together;
- That I was able to adjust very quickly to all the new things and that the way they live up there is something I'd love to be like when I have a family of my own.

Other comments:

- This was truly an experience of a lifetime that I am certain I would have never had if not for the exchange. I am very grateful towards everyone who made this possible and will forever cherish the memory;
- I loved our host family's hospitality. In fact it was so good that I didn't want to leave Iqaluit. I also loved how everyone in Iqaluit knew each other. Thank you to everyone for making this exchange possible;
- I want to do again this exchange!



*And Board Member, The Leading Note Foundation*  
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