

Grade 5 Class Inspired Into Acting for Social Justice

By Jan Malek



Camille Prince Shaw, a Grade 5 teacher at Whitby Public School in Durham County, Ontario, wanted to teach her class a lesson about the importance of acting for social justice.

When looking for a suitable project, Ms. Prince Shaw spoke with a school board representative, who suggested that she have a look at the Council of Canadians' website. After reading about the Council of Canadians' campaign work for water, including the push for safe, clean water for First Nations, Ms. Prince Shaw saw the potential for a teachable moment.

She helped her students research and learn about the water crisis in many First Nation communities, where many people do not have access to safe, drinkable water. In late 2016, there were 156 drinking water advisories in 110 First Nations communities. Many of the drinking water advisories are recurring, and some have been in place for more than 20 years.

The students collaboratively decided to raise money to improve drinking water infrastructure in First Nations communities as their act of social justice.

Ms. Prince Shaw said she wanted the students to recognize that not everyone receives the same access to basic and essential resources like water. She also

wanted to teach students that social justice problem solving is everyone's responsibility, including children's.

The students came up with a plan, spread the word, made posters for the community and hosted a creative information session about the project. They made Wampum bracelets as gestures of thanks to those who donated to their fundraising efforts.

Gurleen, one of Ms. Prince Shaw's students, said she did not realize how many people don't have reliable clean, safe water.

"I found out that First Nations weren't treated right, they were taken from their own lands and put onto reserves. These reserves didn't provide all their needs such as clean water," she said. "I learned that there are many people who don't have clean water, and it is hard to believe some people in Canada don't have clean water."

Jessica, another student in the class, said she liked learning about the significance of the bracelets.

"The Wampum bracelets taught me that the First Nations would make peace between tribes by creating bracelets that would show they were a friendly and harmonious tribe. Our class made

Wampum bracelets for those willing to help by donating. We did that so the First Nations could afford to have clean water at their reserves. We raised almost \$400 in a few hours. It made me feel good to help other people."

Ms. Prince Shaw said she was really proud of her students' efforts. "As a teacher it is my role to teach math and language along with the other subjects. However, it's also imperative that teachers develop character and critical thinking skills in students as well. Young people should learn how to affect positive change. I believe that knowledge is power and that empowering students to make change creates caring and responsible individuals, which in turn makes good citizens."

Ms. Prince Shaw said the Wampum Project mirrored the efforts of the Council of Canadians on a smaller scale. "This project was a culminating hands-on experience that enabled students to become agents for social and environmental justice. Like the Council of Canadians, we believe that our government needs to be held accountable and deliver on its promises. Peace will come when all rights are received and fairness is finally achieved."

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