

# From Nunavut to Swaziland: The Nunavut Youth Abroad Program



2000-12-01

*Keane Shore*

[Photo: In 1999, a group of Nunavut youth worked at St. Joseph's Mission, a medical facility in Swaziland.]

It's seldom that Nunavut youth and rhinos share the same sentence — and probably more seldom that they share the same country. But it happened this summer.

Six 18- and 19-year-olds from across Nunavut worked in Swaziland for 42 days, in a leadership development program called [Nunavut Youth Abroad](#).

## **Six participants**

The six — Gloria Kowtak and Jeff Tulugak of Rankin Inlet, Tracy Aqatsiaq and Frank Tapardjuk of Igloolik, Teresa Barnabas of Arctic Bay, and Janet Krimmerdjuar of Pond Inlet — were accompanied by two adults, Grace Okada and Steve Metzger, both of Hudson Hope in northern British Columbia. In August, they described their experiences at the Ottawa headquarters of [World University Services Canada](#), one of the program's partners.

In many ways, these Nunavut residents are normal teenagers — in the way they descend in a horde on snack trays, or in the casual bravado with which one of them faces a 24-hour day flying from Ottawa back to Baker Lake the next day.

## **Two-year odyssey**

In other ways, they're unique — kids from across Canada's newest territory, performing their final act together in the exchange program, meeting some of the groups that sponsored their two-year odyssey from villages in Nunavut to Swaziland and back.

During the program's first summer, they spread across central and eastern Canada working at a YMCA day camp, a library, youth programs, a federal Member of Parliament's constituency office, and a marine conservation centre. These placements served as preparation for their international experience — living and working at the remote Khululeka Lodge on Swaziland's Mlilwane Game Sanctuary. (The previous group worked at St. Joseph's Mission, a large Swazi medical facility, helping staff and patients in its hospital, vision, and physiotherapy programs.)

### **Animal footprints**

For a short time, the Nunavut teenagers developed and taught learning games to elementary school students. But their main job was to help cast wild animal footprints and collect their droppings for the sanctuary's displays.

Along the way, they hiked Swaziland's semi-tropical geography, dealt with a slightly predatory ostrich, and met with a queen. But mainly, they grew a capacity to live far from the close-knit support of the communities they call home, north of 60 degrees latitude.

### **Fond memories**

While they learned to bargain in an open market for drums, masks, and other small items, their main souvenirs are memory. One is of Olive, a half-tame ostrich that lurked at their lodge, scattering them in alarm the night she charged through their midst while they barbecued.

Another memory is of rhino droppings — an impromptu birthday present. When Kowtak tried to push Tulugak into a mud puddle as a birthday joke, he tried to splash the mud back at her. She dodged it, but the mud soaked Aqatsiaq instead. Aqatsiaq chased the offending mudslinger down with a handful of rhino droppings. This event is one they laugh over — now.

### **Leadership training**

Playing aside, the exchange program grooms potential leaders for Nunavut with strong local, national, and international awareness "to help manage and lead this fast, culturally rich, and geographically diverse part of Canada [with] concrete work experience, cross-cultural training, and international awareness vital to the new territory's prosperity and growth."

Formerly administered by the Nunavut Division Educational Councils, Canadian Crossroads International, and the Nunavut Regional Inuit Association, the program is now run by a Board of Directors, staff, and many Nunavut-based volunteers. Financial support comes from a variety of international, national, territorial, regional, community, and business sources, including the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

### **Orientation session**

The program is rigorous for students who haven't travelled outside the sub-Arctic before. During their first orientation, the participants set personal goals and then learned a range of strategies for coping, resolving conflicts, budgeting, and handling cross-cultural issues. This preparation helped them to handle their own fears about leaving small communities and gave them a picture of the world they were entering.

While the teenagers don't talk about their future leadership roles, everyone mentions how the exchange program instilled deeper self-confidence and helped them appreciate their own ability to deal with different situations.

## **Territorial flag**

"The things I learned will help me in the future," says Frank Tapardjuk, who, on the advice of his uncle, brought a territorial flag, asking just about everybody he met in Swaziland to sign it. He now has a priceless memento of his travels — and the signature of the fifth of Swaziland's eight current queens, Inkhosikati LaMagwaza, who met the group just before they flew back to Canada.

Gloria Kowtak says living in another country away from her family has made her more confident about her ability to handle new experiences. She was also intrigued to find linguistic similarities between her own language and that of her hosts.

"I experienced a totally new world of there," says Janet Krimmerdjuar. "I made lots of friends in different cultures. It was amazing!"

*Keane J. Shore is an Ottawa-based writer and editor. (Photo: Jim Kreuger, Member, Board of Directors, Nunavut Youth Abroad Program)*

*If you have any comments about this article, please contact [info@idrc.ca](mailto:info@idrc.ca) .*

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