

Feds' shame, North's victory - So this is Christmas.

And what have you done?

Another year over and a new one just begun.

And so this is Christmas for weak and for strong, for rich and the poor ones.

The road is so long.

John Lennon scribbled these lyrics on a scrap of paper almost 40 years ago. They hold as much meaning this Christmas as they did for my generation. On Dec. 8, 1980, Lennon was killed, leaving us a legacy of social activism, protest and peaceful dissent. The goal: to make this world a better place. Imagine. And while my generation's youthful idealism has been tested over the years, it has been our task to pass the torch to a new generation of social justice activists.

On Dec. 8, 2009, Theresa Hall, chief of the First Nations community of Attawapiskat on James Bay, learned her community's 10-year fight for a new school was over. The children had been without a school since it was condemned in 2000, due to toxic contamination from a diesel fuel spill 20 years before. The children studied in portables that were drafty (in northern Ontario winters) and mouldy and were without a library, gym and other facilities.

The federal government announced the children of Attawapiskat were finally "on the list" for a new elementary school. It seemed fitting the good news came on the anniversary of Lennon's death. Despair turned to hope.

"They were overwhelmed, especially with Christmas around the corner," Hall said of her community.

Here in Thames Valley, students, teachers and educational workers were also celebrating. Our involvement in this human rights issue began over a year ago, when members of District 11 Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation first heard of their plight and our government's indifference to it. Here is a chronology of those events and the impact it had on all of us:

Nov. 26, 2008: District 11 human rights, status of women and political action committees sponsored a bus for 40 Thames Valley students from six secondary schools and seven teachers to attend an Attawapiskat Human Rights Forum in Toronto. Our students became part of the largest student-led children's rights conference in Canadian history, as they joined the fight for a new school for the children of Attawapiskat. It was a Youtube clip describing the plight of this remote First Nations community that had been the catalyst for this youth movement. .

"We are the children who aren't willing to sit at the back of the bus any longer," said Shannon Koostachin of Attawapiskat. "We want what every Canadian child deserves. We met in Ottawa with Chuck Strahl (minister of northern development and Indian affairs), who cut the meeting short and left the elders with tears in their eyes. We have been patient long enough. We are tired of broken promises. We are not going away. We are standing up for our rights."

Thames Valley students stood in solidarity with these young people from Canada's North. Among our delegation were students from Chippewa of the Thames and their teacher, who had once taught in aboriginal communities in the north. She spoke of the appalling conditions of their schools. Our students shared their outrage at the microphone.

March 2009: News arrives the condemned school building has been demolished, exposing the 400 children in nearby portables to dangerous chemicals. The noxious fumes meant the students had to be removed from the portables. A state of emergency was declared. Despite repeated urgent appeals, the government announced it had no plans to build a new school in Attawapiskat.

May 22, 2009: The fight for a school for the "forgotten children" of Attawapiskat came to London. At the invitation of OSSTF, Timmins-James Bay MP Charlie Angus was the guest at a student forum at H.B. Beal secondary school. Students heard first-hand of the appalling conditions that continued to exist for these First Nations students. "Education is a fundamental human right and this situation is a violation of the UN convention on the rights of a child," Angus said. Students returned to their home schools galvanized to take action.

Angus, once billed by Peter Gzowski as the "poet laureate of northern Ontario," was also a performer at an Attawapiskat fundraiser for OSSTF members at the London Music Club. Our Voices for Attawapiskat evening was a sold-out event billed as "an evening of song, awareness, activism, fun . . . and a little shame." Performers included Maya Two Feathers and vocal music teacher Sharon Beeler, who spoke proudly of her own Mi'kmaq heritage.

One of Angus's songs speaks of the children of Attawapiskat as the more precious commodity than the diamonds mined along nearby James Bay.

June 2009: District 11 human rights, status of women and political action committees launched the Student Voices for Attawapiskat Creative Arts Contest. The challenge to students was to deliver a powerful message, in visual or written form, to our federal government, that the children of Attawapiskat deserve a new school. The contest drew hundreds of entries from across Thames Valley.

Nov. 23, 2009: Two Thames Valley secondary students and teacher R. J. Wieczor travelled to Parliament Hill to act as "human rights ambassadors." They visited the House of Commons and delivered all the contest submissions to Strahl's office. The letters and posters sent a powerful collective message: "Education is a fundamental human right. The children of Attawapiskat deserve a new school."

Nov. 26, 2009: The crisis in Attawapiskat became the focus at the Ontario Federation of Labour conference in Toronto. OSSTF delegates spoke about the need for action from the broader labour community. It was even suggested we head up north and build a school, as volunteers did in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. Canadian passivity must be replaced by action. Indifference to injustice is not benign.

Dec. 8, 2009: The long-awaited good news arrives. The children of Attawapiskat will have what every child deserves -- a school. The Students Helping Students Campaign made a difference in the lives of Canadian children forgotten by our government. While we know there are 40 other native communities in a similar crisis, this small victory keeps hope alive for the next generation.

First Nations children in Canada deserve the same educational opportunities as non-native students. By joining in this fight, our students have seen that their actions can fuel change and correct injustice.

It was Margaret Mead who said, "A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Imagine.

So this is Christmas.

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