



## Native reserves trip to open student eyes

Meeting aboriginal people during Reading Week offers fresh look at Canada's first cultures, organizers say

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EDUCATION REPORTER

You just know they're not heading off to party in Cancun, not these socially conscious young students of peace and conflict and international relations.

At 21, Ronan MacParland leads summer volunteering trips to Kenya. His friend, David Berkal, founded a non-profit operation that takes student volunteers to West Africa. He's been doing it for three years, and he's 20.

Yet this week, for spring break, these globe-trotting University of Toronto students are staying home to learn about life on Ontario's native reserves.

In an unusual twist on Reading Week, they have organized a busload of 18 students, two of them aboriginal, to visit a series of native reserves across Ontario. They say they're tired of leaving aboriginal issues to government and academics; they want to meet native young people face to face and get their own fresh sense of Canada's first cultures.

"People were saying we should get to know our own country and cultures and we realized that's so important," said MacParland. "We need to redefine how we understand aboriginal cultures, and this is a grassroots way of doing that."

The group left Saturday, with the first stop a meeting with young people from the Serpent River First Nation, north of Manitoulin Island.

"This is by no means a tour. It's an opportunity to have a dialogue and build relationships with First Nations communities," said Berkal, who persuaded his professor in aboriginal studies and her husband to come along as a sort of bridge to the communities and free group leaders.

"I agreed to do this because my goal is to change the face of aboriginal people in Canada, to get rid of the stereotype that generates pity," said Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, an assistant professor of aboriginal studies and social work at the U of T and a member of the Georgina Island First Nation on Lake Simcoe, where the group will stay one night.

"The point of the trip is to see what's right about these communities – not what's wrong – and how money has gone into a tremendous renaissance of education and progress and hope."

Other stops along the seven-day tour, for which students paid \$750 each:

- A performance by the native theatre troupe De-ba-jeh-mu-jig ("storyteller" in Cree and Ojibwa) in Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island.
- A lesson on the ancient petroglyphs of Manitoulin Island from an elder, starting with breakfast outdoors over a fire.
- A visit to an innovative housing development in Whitefish River north of Manitoulin.
- A visit to an Ojibwa classroom in Wasauksing First Nation near Parry Sound.
- A visit to Niigon Technologies, a native-run manufacturing plant at Moose Deer Point First Nation that makes small automotive and electronic parts.
- A visit to First Nations Technical Institute near Belleville and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in Ottawa.

"We want to help redefine the Canadian identity, and if we put our heads together and our hearts together, we can change the way we think about aboriginals and Canada," said MacParland.

"This is the beginning of making connections that, who knows, could lead to a whole different way of dealing with these issues 10 years down the road," said Ian Wylie, a first-year student who is going on the trip. Zannah Maston, a second-year peace and conflict student going on the trip, said there will be time to chat and hike and sit by a bonfire with native peers – and eat.

"So many of the communities are throwing us potluck dinners and breakfasts – it's a traditional way of welcoming visitors," said Maston, who is interested in learning about how some of the communities are being affected by changes to the environment.

The group obtained government funding and donations from several native communities to hire a filmmaker to come along and make a documentary about the trip that will be released June 21, National Aboriginal Day.

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