“Bike Club is full of learning, bike club is full of love;” Building community one ride at a time with the Wil-Doo Community Bike Club

By JOSEPHINE L. SAVARESE

It is 7 pm on a warm Friday night in August 2016. A group of children and youth are gathered before a row house on the north-side Fredericton streets of Doone Street and Wilson Row. Most are sitting on bicycles, helmets on, poised to depart, laughing and talking. A few others wait for one of the bikes collected into racks in front of a row house. A man with reddish hair is checking the bicycles for safety and suitability for the rider. The approximately 15 cyclists are speaking a range of languages including French, English, Kisongo and Swahili. When everyone is ready, the group proceeds to the nearby bike trail, heading toward Barker’s Point Wading Pool.

The youth are members of the Wil-Doo Community Bike Club, a volunteer operated program for lower income youth aged 7 to 15 years who reside on the two streets forming the club name. The Wil-Doo Community Bike Club is well known to its membership of newcomers, refugees, long time New Brunswick residents and residents of St. Mary’s First Nation. In the summer months, club members cycle to places like film screenings and wading spots.

A recent adventure included cycling to a concert by Gypsophilia, a 7-piece instrumental band that combines hot jazz with klezmer, funk, and world rhythms. The group performed at the Fredericton Playhouse on Sept. 22 for a Conservation Council of New Brunswick fundraiser. Members of the audience were captivated by the Wil-Doo Community Bike Club members’ enthusiastic response including dance moves, cheers and heart signs to the band. “The gang really enjoyed the show!” wrote founder and chief organizer, Jenn Wambolt, on the group’s Facebook page.

According to Wambolt, the group performs important functions in the Doone Street neighborhood. The club provides respite for parents during the summer months. In addition to learning basic literacy, the bike club builds a sense of belonging and esteem. Importantly, the youth learn to rely on and respect each other. During the rides, they must operate as team members. When conflicts arise, the group uses a restorative justice approach to find solutions that keep the group together.

The Wil-Doo Community Bike Club has been operating since the summer of 2014. In that year, the community centre lost its funding from the Fredericton Community Foundation to run a day camp for the children and youth in the neighborhood. A long time community volunteer, Wambolt realized the youth were left without needed programming. Wambolt started the bike club with donated bikes similar to the ones she and her husband, Rusty Wambolt, currently refurbish.

When asked about her inspiration, Wambolt does not hesitate. Because a parent was a teacher, Wambolt knows the importance of skill building and training. In addition, she also cites the musical, The Sound of Music. She recalls the scenes of Maria, played by Julie Andrews, with the seven von Trapp youth joyfully pedaling and singing through the Austrian mountains. Wambolt watched the show with friends whose parents were diplomats. These screenings took place outside of Canada during the nearly five years she spent in Malawi and Nigeria. Wambolt’s international experience provides a context for how she bonds with the children and youth. Many of the cyclists have roots in other countries including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nepal, the Philippines and Malaysia.

After around twenty minutes of cycling, the group arrives at our destination. Some of the youth head to the wading pool, Wambolt and I sit at a picnic table to discuss the club. Some members describe what the bicycle club means to them on note cards. They state “bike club Rules; “bike club is fun.” For one youth, the bike club represents “power.” One youth describes it as “amazing.” For another, it is a chance to “meet the new places.” Many of the cyclists say they are glad to learn more about their city. Wambolt is finishing the interview when one youth says he is getting “freezy,” he wants to head home. The older children laugh gently, knowing he is cold. The bicycle troupe heads out of the park. A young girl slips on loose rocks and falls. Wambolt consoles her, sees to her scrapes as the other riders wait for everyone to rejoin the group. “Flip flops” Wambolt ruefully explains to me. She insists on helmets and footwear, reluctantly allowing open-toed sandals.

Once on the trails, we greet a teenager learning on her bicycle. She is, Wambolt explains, a former club member. While living with autism, she functioned with the group before adopting other activities. With Wil-Doo, she gained confidence and physical strength. “She is still riding her bike,” Wambolt states with satisfaction, a smile crossing her face. The bicycle club members pedal towards home, as Wambolt and I follow. The cyclists seem to be enjoying the summer evening. Importantly, they are also building strength and fostering community through cycling.

Josephine L. Savarese is a member of the board of directors of the NB Media Co-op.

Make Muskrat right

By BLAKE SHEPPARD-PARDY

Editorial note: Students from Labrador going to universities in Fredericton organized a rally in solidarity with the Innu, Inuit, Melits and Labradorians defending Lake Melville from the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project on Oct. 19 at St. Thomas University. Days before, a number of people were arrested for trespassing on the Muskrat, the power company behind the project. The property is located on the traditional territory of the Innu and Inuit, Rally organizers honoured the resistance of Inuk artist Billy Gauthier as well as Delilah Saunders and Jeremia David Zack who had started a hunger strike days before. The project is of concern to local indigenous people because it threatens to raise the level of Lake Melville by flooding the river with organic matter. Some people don’t want the dam at all while others want the vegetation and soil cleared before flooding the river occurs to prevent methylmercury poisoning. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador and indigenous leaders reached a deal to make changes to the project to protect the health of residents on Oct. 26.

My family grew up in Labrador, and many of us occupy the land that is being threatened. My family originates from Rigolet, a small inlet town off of Lake Melville. Many of us rely on the natural resources that Lake Melville provides. I was raised by my great Aunt Shirl who was forced to attend a residential school. She taught me the importance of the land, and culture. She taught me to hold onto what I believe in. She is home fighting and I am standing with her. During the fight for Muskrat Falls she watched many protesters, who are family members and close friends of ours, get arrested. Those arrested were peacefully protesting and the arrests have not been justified. My Aunt wrote something that has allowed me to share with you:

“Watching the arrests this morning was like something out of a nightmare. Force was used, if not physical force (that, as sure as hell, was used) then the force of having power and the backing of government. I felt helpless as I heard screaming and crying as someone was being dragged away, she was screaming “you’re hurting me.” The feeling was so helpless that I almost became the child watching my mother cry as her children were being taken away. Or, I immediately went back to a place where I was taken to a dorm. This is a sad day and we can’t continue to let these sad days go on.

Systemic control should not be allowed to go on when it devastates lives like this.

My mother is pain from the desperate useless screams. My mother will never be broken through. Or my eyes and ears will ever turn away from the miserable truths around me and I will never be silent. This is just to show you how those who have already been through a large pain in their lives once having their culture ripped away are now going through this again.”

The northern communities of Labrador rely heavily on the resources that Lake Melville provides. Especially when the one store is lacking basic necessities during the harsh winters. Our northern communities typically only have one grocery store, with limited access to food. The food is costly, and this is why we rely heavily on the foods that Lake Melville offers.

Pam Duffett, Jessica Lyall, Ondrea Beals, Blake Sheppard-Pardy, Sara Fowler and Samatha Messer (left-to-right) are students from Labrador studying in Fredericton. They want Lake Melville protected from the Muskrat hydroelectric project. Photo submitted by Blake Sheppard-Pardy.

(continued on page 2)
By TRACY GLYNN

A crowd gathered for the Fredericton premiere of Migrant Dreams on Oct. 21. Pictured left-to-right: Tracy Glynn, organizer with No One Is Illegal-Fredericton, David Coon, MLA for Fredericton South, Tzazná Miranda, organizer with Justice for Migrant Workers-Ontario, Amanda Wildeman, executive director of the National Farmers Union in NB, Emrie Caisie, President of the Fredericton District Labour Council and Josie Baker with the Cooper Institute in PEI. Photo by Sophe M. Lavoie.

Fredericton - A film documenting systemic oppression and exploitation of migrant workers by recruiters and the government in small-town Ontario premiered to Maritime audiences in late October. Migrant Dreams, Min Sook Lee’s latest documentary on migrant workers in Canada, follows women and trans migrant workers from Indonesia and other countries who are struggling to make enough money to send back home to their families.

“Every single tomato has a story... it’s a story of transnational families and shattered dreams,” said Evelyn Encalada, an organizer with Justice for Migrant Workers in Ontario, who is featured in the film.

“It is important to honour the workers’ resistance,” said Josie Baker from the Cooper Institute, a PEI social justice organization. Baker accompanied Tzazná Miranda with Justice for Migrant Workers - Ontario on a tour to five communities in the Maritimes, including Shediac, NB, and O’Leary, PEI, where migrants from Jamaica, the Philippines and other countries work at fish plants.

Miranda spoke of the successful Harvesting Freedom Campaign, which recently completed a pilgrimage to Ottawa with migrant farm workers and their allies. The campaign, marking the 50th anniversary of Canada’s transnational family farm system, includes shediac, NB, and O’Leary, PEI, where migrants from Jamaica, the Philippines and other countries work at fish plants.

“It’s really important to remember the hard work that the workers are doing and the impact that they make in our local community,” said Miranda. “It’s really important to remember the hard work that the workers are doing and the impact that they make in our local community.”

The number of migrant workers entering Canada has passed the number of immigrants entering the country temporarily, according to Statistics Canada. About half a million migrant workers with temporary work permits enter Canada every year.

Today, about half a million migrant workers with temporary work permits enter Canada every year. The number of migrant workers entering Canada has surpassed the number of immigrants entering the country every year since 2006. A federal review of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program was recently tabled in Parliament. The review contains 21 recommendations for policy changes, though the timeline and nature of the changing changes are still unclear, according to migrant justice groups. Meanwhile, a number of workers from the Philippines employed at fish plants in PEI are waiting to hear if their six-month work contracts will be extended or if they will be forced to pack up and go home.

Justice for Migrant Workers has also been trying to get the government to make changes to the program’s rules to give workers more rights. They say workers are treated as disposable and injured workers are often cut off from health care coverage.

A banner that read, “Sheldon McKenzie Didn’t Have to Die,” was put on the wall at the film venue in Fredericton.

“Nobody should have to die for a tomato,” Miranda told the audience. “It is important to honour the workers’ resistance.”

Tracy Glynn is a member of No One Is Illegal Fredericton.

Labour leader resigns from board of Miramichi women’s shelter

By ASAF RASHID

Patrick Colford, president of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, resigned from his position on the board of the Miramichi Emergency Center for Women (MECW) on October 16. Colford made his resignation public in order to point out his concerns over labour relations between the union and the shelter.

“We, as a board of directors, have made decisions that have put the Miramichi Emergency Center for Women in a crisis situation that has put our staff in a strike position,” said Colford.

Colford was on the negotiating team for the MECW as they were trying to reach a collective agreement with the staff.

“I was appointed to the negotiations team, then dismissed along with two others, I am confident that a deal could have been reached in a timely manner had the board not chosen to dismiss us and hire the law firm,” argued Colford.

MECW staff are represented by CUPE Local 5243. CUPE had previously withdrawn from the bargaining table on the advice of the mediator, but both parties have agreed to (the mediator). We were unable to get the employer to agree to come back to the table,” said Colford.

According to Ward, the tone of bargaining changed once the board decided to negotiate through their lawyers rather than continue to use the board’s negotiating team, which included Colford.

“Colford did not sit with us at the bargaining table, but was there to help on the employer side. This was all cold and white. Instead of a mediator, he had to help, to assist them, but then, on the advice of their lawyer, the former bargaining committee was removed. If we had been working with the mediator, we would have a deal,” said Ward.

Ward expressed concern about MECW spending money on legal costs when there were other options, like the board negotiating with the employees, rather than continue to use the board’s negotiating team, which included Colford.

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