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Vive le cirque!

A group of students from Montreal's National Circus School have inspired Igloolik's young people this year.

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IGLOOLIK — Remember those films we saw in our youth? The circus comes to town and one or two kids dream about running away with the circus?

In Igloolik, at the last workshop given by five students and one teacher from the National Circus School of Montreal, a young girl came to them and said. "I want you to stay here forever."

Six visitors from the National Circus School of Montreal came to Igloolik for three weeks in June, just in time to give a year-end show to the students of Ataguttaluk School.

With little more than an accordion, juggling material, a unicycle, fire, and colorful hair and costumes, they fascinated their young audience, who enjoyed their first encounter with the bold and comic spirit of the circus.

It was through Inusiq, a group of young Iglulingmiut who got together last summer to do suicide prevention work through forms of artistic expression like theatre and videomaking, that this exchange took place.

Inusiq brought the Montrealers together with elders from Igloolik, for a week of camping with more than 15 young Inuit on Baffin Island. Everyone was exposed to traditional Inuit activities like caribou and seal hunting, skin preparation, as well as to circus skills like juggling, creative dancing and acrobatics.

Suicide prevention

This unusual exchange has its origin in the sadness of last summer in Igloolik, when two young men took their lives and left the youth of the town wondering what they could do to stop the misery.

Guillaume Ittuksarjuat Saladin, a Québécois who had spent the first 15 summers of his life in Igloolik, had travelled back up North to complete a work study and prepare for entry into the National Circus School in Montreal.

A member of Inusiq himself, he proposed that the group combine cultural activism with the teaching of circus skills. The goal was to alleviate the depression felt by youngsters and allow them to express their creativity, while at the same time confronting them with new challenges

The idea has been experimented with elsewhere. Saladin says they are inspired by Clowns Without Borders, an organization that sends clowns to Third World countries and war zones to work with children who need to remember the sanity brought about by dreaming and laughing.

The famous Cirque du Soleil finances the Cirque du Monde, which works with children at risk in Third World countries.

Igloolik may not be a war zone, but certainly faces a serious lack of resources for occupying the time of roaming youngsters who can't go camping and face long summer days and nights without anything exciting to do in the community.

A lot of them end up facing serious depression without the tools to get out of it. The results are too often tragic.

Collaboration with Isuma

Eric Nutarariaq, the president of Inusiq, worked in collaboration with Saladin and Igloolik Isuma Productions to raise money for this exchange with the circus students.

The Canada Council, as well as Brighter Futures, provided funding to Inusiq. Le Cirque du Soleil also provided money for the group to buy circus accessories that will stay permanently in Igloolik

The money will pay for the production of a video drama on the issues of suicide and empowerment. While visiting here, the circus group joined in the video production and participated in the story development.

For their last two days in town, the circus group offered workshops in the community hall for Igloolik's children.

Many came and tried the juggling, the diabolo and the devil sticks. A lot of them surprised the crowd, who bursted into spontaneous applaudes. The Montrealers then learned how to drum dance.

The circus has now left Igloolik gone and no-one left with it, although many Igloolik residents came to the airport to bid the visitors farewell.

Now kids can borrow the accessories from Inusiq to practice their newly acquired skills. A few teenagers are already pretty good with the unicycle, even on the unpaved roads of the town. Another one dyed his hair red like one of the young acrobats.

Does the government support culture?

This exchange and the interest that it raises among the young people of Igloolik raised a few questions:

How much money the budget for the Department of Language, Culture, Elders and Youth in Nunavut's new government is oriented towards programs for youth?

And what about culture? Neither singing, dancing, visual arts, theatre, traditional or modern dance, are offered in school or in community programs on a regular basis.

Remember the long elaborate production of the Nunavut inauguration show on April 1? Many wonder if they were wrong in seeing a commitment from the Nunavut government towards arts and culture.

Saladin and his group want to come back to Igloolik as soon as they can to spend more time with the youth of the community, and Inusiq wants to pursue its program.

Inusiq's activism has been gaining more and more support in the community, and their group includes more participants than ever before. Their video will be edited and available in the fall.

To get in touch with Inusiq, phone 1-867-934-8111.