

# A PLACE OF HONOUR

## A Rotarian-run charity helps indigenous communities meet local needs

by ANNE FORD

**W**hen approaching a challenge, Chris Snyder, a member of the Rotary Club of Toronto, has learned to break it down into smaller, simpler, less daunting tasks in service of a sensible goal.

Take Snyder's time in Malawi. The small country in southern Africa is one of the poorest and least developed nations in the world, with an average literacy rate of 61 per cent. In 2009, Snyder visited Malawi with a team of Rotarians and learned that local schools had no seating or electricity.

"We worked with the local community to get chairs and mats so the teachers and children could at least sit down" during the school day, Snyder says. "We also cut a hole in the roof and put in a skylight. These are things that help the educational process. It's not rocket science; it's just removing an obstacle."

Now, through an organization called HIP: Honouring Indigenous People, Snyder has put his problem-solving skills to work in his own country – specifically, in Canada's indigenous communities, which represent about 4 per cent of the population.

HIP got its start in 2014, when Snyder, who owned a financial planning firm in Toronto, led a club committee focused on serving aboriginal groups. The idea was to identify and support programs and projects that address the needs of Canada's earliest and often most disadvantaged populations. "We can help people in the developing world, as well we should," he says. "So why not here?"

Canada's Aboriginal Peoples – the First Nations, the Métis, and the Inuit – experience poverty at much higher rates than Canadians with European heritage. The employment rate is less than 60 per cent, and median income is 30 per cent lower than that of the rest of the country. In some indigenous communities, more than 80 per cent of the residents receive income assistance through social programs.

"The situations in some of our aboriginal communities are absolutely a national disgrace," says Snyder, HIP's founder. "People call it Third World Canada, and it really is." He points

to numerous signs of blight: housing shortages, unsafe drinking water, soaring dropout rates, and a troubling rise in suicides, particularly among young people. "We've got 660 different indigenous bands across the country, and though the needs are different in every community, they're thematically similar. Often what they need most is a way to keep kids in school and off drugs."

As outsiders in these communities, Snyder and other committee members knew they couldn't presume to know the specific wants and needs that underlie the broader social issues. "We can't swoop in and solve indigenous problems here, the same way we can't swoop in and solve problems in Africa," he says. "The local people have to be part of the solution. So we went to aboriginal community leaders and asked, 'What are your needs?' Everybody kept saying education. That's a very doable thing for Rotary clubs."

Born from that assessment, HIP has grown into an independent charity devoted to encouraging Rotary clubs across Canada to promote education initiatives with and for indigenous people. The organization's board comprises Rotary members from five districts and representatives from indigenous groups. The board's diversity was intentional, according to board member Karihwakeron Tim Thompson of the Mohawk Nation. "It's this idea of sharing, of information exchange, of learning together," he says. "We're hopeful that through the work of local Rotary clubs and indigenous communities, we can establish relationships and work on shared priorities with mutual understanding."

"We want local indigenous communities to identify educational projects, and then have nearby Rotary clubs come to the table with their specific knowledge, expertise, funding, and networking," says Kevin Webb, a member of the Rotary Club of London-Hyde Park, Ont., who also serves on the board. "It's not about what we want; it's about what the indigenous communities

LEFT: EVELISA GENOVA/  
RIGHT: ONE LAPTOP PER CHILD



HONOURING INDIGENOUS PEOPLE (HIP)



**Chris Snyder (seated center, bottom left) is the prime mover behind Honouring Indigenous People (HIP), an organization created by Rotarians in southern Ontario to support educational efforts in indigenous communities and increase awareness of indigenous issues, history, and culture.**

themselves identify as needs. If you want to support a community, you have to help it retain its dignity and take responsibility for its own growth. That’s how projects become sustainable, and that’s what I see HIP trying to do.”

HIP collaborates with Rotary clubs by screening service projects focused on indigenous education, promoting them to other clubs, helping with publicity, and sometimes raising funds. The clubs contribute modest dues payments, currently \$100 per year, to help with administrative costs. At only two years old, with about 50 member clubs, HIP has already fostered several successful collaborations.

The Rotary Club of Toronto, for example, has organized career days for schoolchildren, donated more than 100 student backpacks, and partnered with Native Child and Family Services of Toronto to develop a General Educational Development program. The Rotary Club of Collingwood and South Georgian Bay, Ont., has helped deliver science-based programs to schools in remote indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario.

In District 7070 (Ontario), the Rotary Clubs of Belleville, Bowmanville, Etobicoke, Toronto Eglinton, and Toronto West have partnered to pack and ship food and winter clothing to the John C. Yesno Education Centre in Fort Hope. The Rotary Club of Scarborough has helped prepare and pack 14,000 meals bound



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for Sandy Lake First Nation Reserve. Both communities are in remote areas of northern Ontario.

Snyder says the Rotary Club of Guelph is involved in an especially ambitious project: working with audiologists to bring special amplification technology to classrooms in northern Canada. “Indigenous people suffer disproportionately from hearing problems, and some children just can’t hear” well enough to learn effectively, he says. “This technology will help them hear their teachers better.”

The other side of HIP’s mission is to increase awareness among nonindigenous Canadians about aboriginal culture and history. “There’s a lot of misunderstanding,” Thompson says. “There’s the idea that indigenous peoples no longer exist; there are romantic stereotypes and negative stereotypes. These have all played a role in harming the relationship between indigenous peoples and others.”

To counter those misconceptions, HIP provides a list of educational books, films, and resources for learning about indigenous culture on its website ([www.rotaryhip.com](http://www.rotaryhip.com)) and in its newsletter. The organization also encourages Rotary clubs to invite speakers to address topics related to indigenous populations. “We’ve got 750 clubs in Canada,” Snyder says. “Suppose each of them had a speaker like that. You can imagine the enormous potential there to create awareness.”

