

ArtsCan Circle

Mike Stevens' Story - January 24, 2002

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The following is a transcription of a story told by Mike Stevens at the initial ArtsCan Circle meeting on January 24, 2002.

How this started for me is that I was booked for a tour, an armed forces tour, and we were playing in Goose Bay, Labrador and then on to Alert and then on to Bosnia. It was a really comfortable tour - you could pretty much check your mind at the door. We stopped off in Goose bay to refuel and to do a couple of shows - this would be about a year and a half ago. I'd heard about what was going on in Sheshatshui (Labrador) with the kids who were addicted to some of the solvent sniffing. While we were in Goose Bay, I felt that the community wasn't really talking about it. At the concert we did, I dedicated a song to the kids just to get people kind of thinking about it. I did that twice and after the end of the concert, Ted Ostrowski - who was living there (in Sheshatshui) - he was at the concert and he came up to me afterwards and said Look, if you can sneak away from your tour, I'll drive you out there to see the kids and to see first hand what is happening. So I did.

I snuck away from the tour and I met Ted in the morning out by a old movie theatre by the barracks and we hopped in his four wheel drive and off we went. As we were driving out to Sheshatshui - it might have been a 40 mile road - what I noticed was there were crosses on the side of the road and there were little statues and things that people had put there and there were a lot of them. After seeing a bunch of them I asked Ted what they were and he said that in a lot of cases they were spots where people had died and then he went on to explain that in a lot of cases it was suicide and in a lot of cases it was kids.

So we were driving down this road and we get into Sheshatshui and the first thing I noticed was there were houses bulldozed and mounds and crosses, and then there'll be a few more houses and then there might be another one like that. (Ted) went on to explain that that's were some of the kids who were sniffing were in the house and the house caught fire and burned down and killed a bunch of kids. At this point I had no idea that anything like this was going on and it really shook me up. I felt like I'd just gone out of Canada and into some third world parallel universe. You could have knocked me over. We went on and Ted said that maybe we could find some of the kids. We drove around and we didn't see any so we went into the school and I ended up playing for the kids at the school. They were incredible kids; super smart and artistic and they really loved the music. So I did that and played for a bunch of classrooms.

We left and when we did we saw a bunch of kids by a campfire who were sniffing. Ted stopped the truck and said "Okay, there they are" and I was actually scared, even though they were just

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kids. I had no idea of what to expect or what to do or if I'd be some goofy white guy. All I know is that I did really care about it and so I got my harps out and played. Some of the kids got really into it and put their bags down and we talked about music and went on for about 45 or 50 minutes. The media was there and had filmed some of it and when I left I gave them some pictures. I left from there really shook up.

(I then) continued on the tour and got to Alert, which is the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, and I was out walking around in the minus 40 degree weather and I got a phone call. The first thing I thought was that there's been a death in the family cause who would call you there. Ted had called CBC, I think it was the As It Happens people, and ended up I ended up doing an interview right then and it was really raw because it's just...it still affects me that way. Anyway, I did the interview and took off to Bosnia. When I got to Bosnia called home and my wife said "Look you got like 300 emails and it's all over the news and what's going on?". Apparently those images of playing for the kids, people saw them and it touched a chord with them and they wanted to help. And so now all of a sudden (I thought) this is way bigger than me and I have to do something about it.

So I did the interviews and I decided that when I did an interview I wasn't just going to be a talking head, that I was going to try and figure out a way to help. And so what I did was I would say if anyone has any old instruments that they're not using, what you need to do is give me your phone number and I'll drive to get them, I don't care how many you have, or what they are, I'll go and get them. And so every interview I did that and I ended up filling my whole basement up with instruments; half a transport load. I drove all over too to get them; you wouldn't believe the stories that came from this. This whole thing keeps evolving. The people who were giving me instruments were people who had maybe lost a son in an accident and hadn't used the instrument in thirty years and they'd pull it out and I'd get the story. I had my son with me, who's seven and he heard all this. It was just incredible. So I filled up my basement with these instruments and...(Mike's voice gets shaky here)...Sorry, shaky voice. It's hard to talk about.

I decided I'd set up a music library and thought that's the one thing that I'd maybe know how to do. First of all I sent 40 harmonicas to Sheshatshiu to the school, as soon as I got home. I got all the instruments gathered up and got a trucking company to take them up there and got them situated in a social worker's house and then figured out a way to get them into the school.

I then decided that I'd take a couple of weeks in the summer and go up there and try and implement a program - actually go back and make something happen. So I picked up a friend

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from Nashville, Raymond McLain, and we loaded up the car and we drove up there - the one stretch of road is like 500 kilometers of gravel and dirt and potholes. We drove up there and we spent 10 days with the kids at the treatment center. These kids are unbelievable - they're wide open and, I'll be honest a lot of them are suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome and a lot of stuff. These kids are brave and they're tough; they're dealing with things that no kids...that I've never had to deal with...I learned from them. If you want to learn about Canada, go do this. Those kids will teach you about Canada. And the music affected them; they were into it. You could see the spark.

At the end of the ten days I was there we played this Northwest River Beach festival and a guy came up to me and he said, "Who are you with?" I said "What do you mean who am I with? I'm with Raymond." "No, what agency are you with?" "We're not with any agency." "Well, how did you get the instruments? How did you start the program?" This guy was with an agency called CareForce - a Christian based...and this guy's heart is in the right spot...(his name is) Bob Simpson. He said, "Look, if you want to do this kinda thing, let's have a couple of meetings and what I'll do is I'll let you come along with me - no strings attached, you can do whatever you want - and we'll go out to these areas like Pikangikum and Sheshatshui and Davis Inlet and I'll let you do music programs for the kids. You can do them your own way."

So, subsequently, I've been out to Labrador three or four times and went to Pikangikum, another community, in October. I'm going back to Davis (Inlet) in the last week in April. What I'm trying to say is (even though) right now it sounds like me it's not. It's about the music. What I can see is if these kids could see some native...now I'm not native and I really have no legs to stand on to talk about this, but I know that these kids, they were inspired. They were just pumped and they're ready to learn and if there were some native musicians and artists and folk musicians involved in this, it could really help them. I'm not saying it's going to cure anything. It might take 20 years, it might take a generation, but it'll make a difference and it'll be a tangible thing. You could save a kid's life. The music does it.

I would just like to start some kind of program - native driven - I want it to be completely sympathetic to the native community, to understand their culture, to be about their culture and their arts and find a way to get those people into those communities, maybe some doing...what do you call those extended stays where an artist goes in and for a while...a residency as well as musicians rotating through the communities. A lot of people have been going into these communities and then never coming back again and the kids can see right through that stuff immediately. The way to get respect is to go back and to keep going back. Kids are smart. I guess

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what I'm trying to say is the music, the arts, and us, can make a big change that a lot of the programs up to now can't do. I've seen it happen. And Ted's seen it affect kids. For me, it's real. That's why I can't sleep; I haven't had a good night's sleep in a year and a half because I know it can work and I just want other people to get that and thanks for coming out to listen to it.