

The 2011 National Debate Seminar, hosted in Hay River, Northwest Territories, was a true celebration Canada's North, which was the overall theme for the event. Known as the "Hub of the North," Hay River is a town located on the south shore of Great Slave Lake, at the mouth of the Hay River.

From March 9 to 14, Geoff Buerger, principal of the Princess Alexandra School in Hay River, and Jayne Murray, the Public Affairs Coordinator of the South Slave divisional Education Council, took the lead in hosting the 2011 National Seminar.

The rest of the committee included Sophie Call, principal of the francophone school École Boréale and lead on French activities and language inclusion, Colleen Eckert with the Northwest Territories Teachers' Association, Paul Thériault, principal of the Diamond Jenness Secondary School, Patrick Teskey, editor of "*The Hub*" newspaper, community members Justin Carey and Jill Taylor, and former Seminar delegates D.J. Perron and Reiss Kruger (a town councillor). Truly, this was a community effort.

With the exception of the Yukon and Nunavut, there were delegates from all provinces and the Northwest Territories. In total, there were 68 student delegates, and 22 adult delegates, which surpassed the initial targets set in the original submission.

Wednesday March 9th was the arrival day. Each group of delegates was met at the Edmonton airport by Registrar, Lorelie DeRoose. As the day worn on, the pile of luggage grew in the corner of the arrivals lounge taken over by the gathering delegates. Some early arrivals, like the Manitoba delegation, took the day to visit the West Edmonton Mall. Others worked on homework or just explored the airport and made new friends with the other delegates. The adult delegates caught up with old friends and started bonding with the rest of the adults. Stephen McCarthy led a debate workshop for the PEI delegation. The PEI group had some experience with in-class debating, but had never been to any debate events outside of school before.

With their delayed flight arriving just minutes before the 6:00 pm check-in time for the charter, the New Brunswick delegation was the very last to arrive. The staff of First Air, the charter company, was very helpful and accommodating. The boarding lounge took on a party atmosphere as everyone anxiously waited to board. The staff helped us ensured that no nut products were brought on the plane and were very patient as the CSDF also checked each person in before they boarded.

The Charter plane itself was very spacious and comfortable since there were many more spaces then people. First Air provided one of the best meals anyone had had on a plane in years – fresh fruit, a salad, ham and cheese croissants, finished off with freshly-baked, still warm soft chocolate chip cookies. The flight to Hay River was much shorter then expected and within just a couple of hours we had made the trip to the Northwest Territories. As we landed in the dark, it was difficult to see much more than a handful of lights of the small town.

Upon arrival, delegates were greeted (in both French and English) by Sophie Call, another Seminar Host and the principal of École Boréale, the town's francophone school. Sophie and Geoff, in their big parkas escorted the group down the plane's staircase and across the frozen tarmac, past the professionally printed welcome banner, into the tiny airport, where a group of boys in toques, shorts and runners (they really wanted to wear flip-flops, but couldn't find any!) welcomed them. The boys were youth members of the organizing committee.

Once the mounds of luggage were sorted out and loaded on to the busses, students were taken to two schools: École Boréale for the girls and Princess Alexandra for the boys. Most of the adults stayed at the town's Highrise – a once derelict building originally built in anticipation of the boom to come with MacKenzie pipeline, it is now slowly being reclaimed and renovated. The original plan was to have all

the adult delegates alternate chaperoning duties at the school, but a core group volunteered to stay at the schools the whole time. The adult accommodations were just one long block away – cutting across a snow-covered field with just a narrow pathway packed down. One misstep off the path would find the walker crashing knee-deep through the fragile snow on either side. The parent observers stayed at the North Country Inn, a few blocks further away.

Students were separated into small groups, which were then assigned classrooms set-up as their dorm rooms for the duration of the Seminar. The delegates' first challenge was setting up their cots, on loan from the local Joint Task Force North, Canadian Forces. They were not given much time, as everyone was called together in the Princess Alexandra gymnasium shortly after the adult delegates arrived at the school. This was the first opportunity of many for adults to tour the school, a highlight which was the Cultural Activities classroom. It was obvious from the very first that we had all stepped into another culture – with bows & arrows, snowshoes, mounted fish and antlers and posters about Dene culture and language decorating the walls of the school.

After the briefing and orientation was concluded, everyone bundled up for the trek to the lake behind the two schools. The cold was a bit of a shock to the system, especially after the balmy day in Edmonton, and it remained cold and frosty all week. Fortunately, everyone had packed tonnes of winter gear, and for the few who had jacket malfunctions – zippers and too light, the hosts had a handful of extra parkas around. The hosts could not have arranged it better as delegates were treated to the spectacular display of Northern Lights. After a long day of travelling it was not difficult to shepherd everyone out of the cold and back into the school for lights-out.

The first full day of the Seminar quickly set the pattern for each meal – a short trip to the Legion Hall right across the street brought delegates to a hot buffet breakfast. With a very limited number of showers between the two schools, getting ready each morning was an exercise in co-ordination and scheduling. On their return to Princess Alexandra, delegates were officially “registered” and picked up their goodie bags, which included the beautiful keepsake handbooks loaded with photos of the north, maps and brochures on the area, pins, a water bottle, and a blue toque embroidered with the Seminar logo.

Delegates settled into the gymnasium where special guest Courtney Thériault kicked things off. With family in Hay River and on the hosting committee, Mr. Thériault, also a former Seminar delegate, and a French-speaking journalist with CityTV in Edmonton, was an excellent choice as MC for the week.

An elder opened the ceremonies with brief words of reflection and prayer. Guests Kelly Schofield, Mayor of Hay River, Dr. Curtis Brown, Superintendent of the South Slave Divisional Education Council, and Philippe Brûlot, Directeur général of the Commission scolaire francophone were among the guests to bring greetings during the opening ceremonies.

The delegates moved outside to the space between the two schools for the “Feeding the Fire Ceremony”. Two local girls went around the circle and helped each delegates grab a pinch of tobacco from a pouch and add it to a plate. One of the male delegates was selected to join the Elders, including Doug Buckley and keynote speaker Francois Paulette, during the ceremony to feed the tobacco to the fire, while another elder played the drum and sang. This ceremony was very moving and spiritual.

Everyone returned to the gym, where various displays by sponsors were set up. Delegates had a chance to talk to the staff of First Air, and representatives from Parks Canada, Wood Buffalo National Park and the Canadian Rangers. Delegates took the opportunity to pose for pictures with RCMP Constable Marie Martell a Ranger. Elder Doug was extremely touched to have received a fur cap from PEI delegate Emily MacDonald. She and others of the PEI delegation were taken on a personal tour of Hay River and area by Doug Thursday afternoon.

About twenty students and a couple chaperones were selected to fly on the vintage Buffalo Airline DC-3 plane to Yellowknife. They ate a bagged lunch on the plane and visited the Legislature and toured town and the Buffalo Airline's hangar and visited with the stars of the hit show Ice Pilots NWT. Supper was served at the hangar with the pilots.

After a hearty lunch of hamburger soup, the delegates that remained at the school spent the afternoon learning and practicing various Inuit and Dene Games, presented by top instructors Donald Kuptana and Peter Daniels. Delegates learned the Dene "stick pull", finger pull, outdoor harpoon activity, and hand games (see <http://www.awg2008.org/sports/dene-games.asp> and <http://www.awg2008.org/sports/arctic-sports.asp> for good descriptions). They learned that the Inuit games test the strength endurance (wrestling), agility (kicking), resistance (cold weather) and pain resistance. The various Inuit games were demonstrated by one of the top-record setting athletes of the games, Matthew Anikina. Everyone was eager to try the various kicking games, where they had to kick a small ball dangling from a string. A real twister was a game where they had to wrap a pole around their bodies, front to back and around again. Another game where small teams had to carry each other around without dropping the person was very popular. The delegates spent hours circling the school testing themselves.

Thursday afternoon was also the first day small groups had a chance to go dog sledding. Doug Beck keeps anywhere between 20 to 40 sled dogs at anyone time. Everyone who went was at first surprised the dogs were not big huskies, instead they were smaller sleek dogs. About 8-10 dogs were attached to a sled that held about four people comfortably, tucked in with several layers of blankets. Doug would stand on the back of the sled and give quietly spoken commands to his team. The ride was like being on a roller coaster, with the trees and snowy path zipping by. The best way to enjoy the ride was to just lean back and let the whispers of the wind and dogs and air rush over you. It was a very meditative experience. Dog sledding was unanimously loved by everyone who had the opportunity to try it.

After a traditional turkey supper, everyone reconvened in the gym by 7:00 pm for keynote speaker, noted activist Francois Paulette. His words about the endangerment of the earth and the need to live in harmony with our world were inspirational. New Brunswick Métis delegates Tobbi and Marie Debly were extremely excited to meet Mr. Paulette who they greatly admired.

After the keynote, delegates attended two different workshops of their choice on the upcoming resolution topics. Another full day had the delegates collapsing in their cots, and lights were out at midnight.

Friday March 11th was the first day of debate. After another "trucker breakfast" this time featuring ham and potato pancakes, debaters had a chance to work with their partners and prepare for the two Parliamentary rounds on the resolution: *Canada should take more active measures to assert sovereignty over the Arctic*. Western Arctic MP Dennis Bevington was scheduled to be the morning's guest speaker, but was delayed due to mechanical issues with the plane. Instead, delegates had more time to prepare while host Geoff Burger briefed a pack library of judges from the community.

The judges, as is often the case, were probably more nervous than the debaters, but quickly became involved in the debates and loved the engagement they had with the students in their role as wisdom-sharers. With all the media coverage the Seminar received, the town was abuzz about the debates, and judges reported the next day that they had been stopped by people in the street to talk about what was going on.

Lunch was a tasty beef stew with the best-ever grilled cheese sandwiches. For dessert, everyone headed back to the yard between schools and savored the maple toffee, poured over snow and twirled on a stick, provided by the association franco-culturelle de Hay River.

After lunch, MP Dennis Bevington address the group and the delegates had the honour of the NWT Speaker of the House Paul Delorey and Clerk of the House Tim Mercer present to them the Mace of the Northwest Territories, a truly unique piece of art and history of the Territories (view MOV07082). They also engaged the delegates in a detailed discussion on Consensus style governing as used in the NWT.

The rest of the afternoon was spent participating in a number of northern sports and activities: ice fishing in an old bombardier snowmobile with Doug Buckley and Damian Stary, curling, more dog sledding, snowshoeing on the Hay River with former Seminar delegate and current Hay River councilor Reiss Kruger, and a trip to a trapline with English guide Boyd Warner. It was a busy and exhausting afternoon.

After a supper of fresh whitefish from Slave Lake, delegates relaxed with a concert by celebrated francophone artist Justin Lacroix, followed by a dance until lights out at midnight. During this time, the adult delegates began part one of the Annual General Meeting to receive the audit and various reports, as well as to introduce any potential motions.

Friday's breakfast started out featuring chocolate cinnamon pancakes in addition to other meats and eggs. Another small lucky group had a bagged breakfast and headed to Fort Smith on the Buffalo Airways plane. There, they were hosted by the PW Kaeser High School and debated the two cross-examination rounds on the topic: *Resource development is more important than environmental protection*. After the debates, the community included them in their annual "Wood Buffalo Frolics" winter festival. There was a chili cook-off for lunch, followed by a tour of the Northern Life Museum, shopping, and participating in the Frolics Activities. Supper was provided by the Town of Fort Smith and the visit concluded with a swim at the town's pool and Sauna. The mayor of Fort Smith, Janie Hobart was eager for part of the Seminar to happen in Fort Smith and she really took the initiative to plan for and support the group's visit.

For the group who debated the morning rounds in Hay River, the afternoon was another cultural immersion, starting with the bannock and Eskimo donuts served with the fish chowder at lunch. Events to choose from included a trip to the trapline with francophone guide Stephane Millette, more ice fishing, snowmobile and tobaggan tour with Jack Kruger, carving workshop with renowned artist Sonny McDonald, Caribou hair tufting with Brendalyn Trennert, drum making with Phil Fabian, and storytelling with Raymond Sonfrere. The group at the carving workshop each sanded and polished a small piece of bone to create a keepsake keychain. The Tufting group each produced a small wearable piece of art of their own design. The drum makers worked painstakingly hard all afternoon to create their drums almost from scratch with the raw materials provided, but in the end each took home a handmade drum. At the end of their session, they had a drumming lesson and learned to play a short song.

After a supper of roast beef and pork, delegates were introduced the format and rules that for the Consensus rounds the next day. This style was completely new to everyone, including the hosts who created the style based on the process of government used in the NWT. There were hours worth of questions as delegates worried about trying something new and outside their comfort zone. After the briefing, delegates had time to prepare with their groups for the Consensus Rounds and to relax. When the group from Fort Smith returned, the briefing was repeated for them. All the adult delegates took time this evening to sign the custom printed thank you cards on behalf of their delegations, which were then given to the judges, special guests, the Seminar sponsors and all the various community members who helped make the Seminar such a success.

Two busses were packed with the delegates who opted to head to the Alexandra Falls early Sunday morning. Interpretive guide Doug Lamalice gave a talk on the history of the Dene people and their traditional way of life before leading the group to the lookout for the frozen but still moving falls. It was a

brehtaking view and an inspirational scene for every photographer. The group had a chance to stop at a roadside store for a bit of gift shopping before returning to Hay River for Brunch. All meals were provided by “Chef” Lena and her staff at the Legion. The delegates gave her a standing ovation after brunch to thank them all for a week of delicious food. In the 46 years she had been feeding youth and sports groups at the Legion, she declared this was the best and most respectful group they have ever served.

Sunday afternoon was the final two Consensus rounds on the questions: *Should cultural preservation be a top government priority?*” The students were very anxious about trying the new style and it was a rocky beginning. For each round, they were assigned a position of Premier, government minister, or Urban, regional and rural MLAs. They had to present what they considered their constituents’ point of view. Each room was like a mini model parliament, but the students found that mind-set difficult to adopt. They struggled to find the right balance between being polite, respectful and “accommodating” while at the same time advocating for their side as they are used to doing with debate. Please note that the consensus rounds based on the NWT government acted as the Model Parliament activity as indicated in Annex A clause 2 that would be held.

During the first rounds, the adults finished their AGM. The most important motion was to recognize in the CSDF constitution the North as one of the regions members directly elect a director for. Host Geoff Buerger was elected as the first official Northern board member of the CSDF.

After the rounds, delegates met in their provincial/territorial delegations to complete both the CSDF and Exchanges Canada surveys and all their travel documentation, and to vote on their picks for male and female Tom Lawson Spirit of the Seminar awards (given to the delegates who “made” the seminar for the rest – by their outgoing, welcoming, inclusive, fun-loving, sportsmanship spirit). Each delegation in turn was called outside for their group photo posed around a quinzee or small snow hut, taken by host Jayne Murray, who is also a professional photographer (her photos were available at the gift stores).

After their photos, everyone changed into their party clothes for the closing banquet at the Chief Lamalice Complex in K’atl’odehche First Nation. The banquet opened with traditional drumming by a group of elders and greetings from Chief Roy Fabian. The feast, featuring moose, beaver and local fish was prepared by the students of the First Nation’s cooking school and catering business. The Honourable Floyd K. Roland, Premier was scheduled to attend, but was kept away by legislative business.

Courtney Thériault MC’d the awards, which saw the MP Bevington present winners of the Founders Cup (top speaker from each province/territory) a small keepsake – a tiny beaded drum made by Georgina Fabian. Ms. Fabian also had a display of her art work on sale during the banquet – a last chance for everyone to take home a memento of their trip. Commissioner of the Northwest Territories George L. Tuccaro presented Awards to the top English (Weedon) and French (Governor General’s Award) speakers, while Chief Fabian presented the top Bilingual (Chief Justice of Canada Award) Award. A complete list of winners can be found on the CSDF web site:
www.csdf-fcde.ca/english/national_seminar/seminar_history.php.

The newly created Hon. Paul Delorey Consensus Award was presented by the Honourable Mr. Delorey to BC’s Anna Karina Kvasnikova, her third award of the night. The Award is a custom designed silver metal inuksuk, which will remain in the NWT until the next time consensus rounds are held at a Seminar.

The CSDF also presented McLeese Awards to six Canadian coaches for their dedication to debate over the course of the careers, including one to host Geoff Buerger. On behalf of all the delegates, CSDF president John Baty conveyed the greatest appreciate to the hosts and their committee for an amazing Seminar and presented Geoff Buerger and Jayne Murray each with a gift of a painted buffalo skin.

Tom Lawson, founder of the CSDF and Seminar, presented the Tom Lawson Spirit of Seminar awards to two Manitoba delegates. Each received a small silver metal sculpture.

Delegates returned to Princess Alexandra for one last official event – the Rules Committee Meeting, run by CSDF Board members Stephen McCarthy, Elisa Frank and Richard Pictoin. This meeting is a chance for debaters to discuss what they would like to change about the Seminar. The Consensus rounds were the hot topic, with the majority appreciating the opportunity and value of the activity and a few vocal dissenters who were upset that Consensus was included as a style instead of more debate rounds. In general, everyone wished they could have seen a demonstration first, in addition to the briefing, and they made some suggestions to improve the flow of the style.

With everyone wound up and sad this was their last night together, it took a while to settle everyone down for the night. They used the time before lights out to play in the gym, take one last visit around the town (the Red Rooster convenience store was a popular place), and to tidy up their rooms and pack for the next morning's departure.

Members of the organizing committee worked into the early hours of the morning to have the delegates' departure packages ready. Each student received a copy of their delegation photo and copies of results and the ballots from their rounds.

The delegates had one last frantic morning and a short bus ride to the airport. Heartfelt thanks were given to the hosts who came to see the delegates off. Again, First Air provided a delicious warm breakfast, and with the early morning light, the flight back to Edmonton was a visual wonderland and we all had our last look at the frozen landscape of the north. During the flight, delegates received their packages and draws were made for a great variety of items donated by the sponsors, including Buffalo Airways caps, mineral samples, CDS, and winter gear.

No one wanted to leave the baggage area once we had all received our luggage. This was their last chance for group photos and tearful goodbyes. Soon, groups were leaving to catch their connecting flights home, bringing the Seminar to an official end.