

PROJECT NORTH



Since its happenstance origin in 2005, Project North has ventured to the farthest-flung Inuit communities, handing out more than \$1 million in much-needed hockey equipment – and keeping a safe distance from polar bears – along the way **BY RONNIE SHUKER**

I

T TOOK MARK BRAZEAU a while to cue up the polar bear video. The cursor kept bouncing to an old video of Grade 1 kids in sunflower masks singing *Ring Around The Rosy* in Inuktitut at the school where he works as principal in this isolated Inuit village, which was still buzzing from all the new hockey equipment Project North had donated a few hours earlier.

Brazeau eventually got the video going and began narrating a field trip taken in 2007 for an up-close encounter with the world's largest land carnivore. Two distant polar bears came onto the screen, lured

to a seal carcass slung atop a remote cabin outside the village. The video cut to the next shot with the bears about 70 feet away, sniffing the air and assessing the risk. Brazeau aimed his 30-aught-6 rifle, as did a fellow teacher, while the students stood ready to dash into the cabin upon their orders. The teachers fired warning shots over the bears' heads, but they continued to linger. Second shots were fired at the rocks near their paws, but the bears barely blinked. The next round, if the bears had charged, would've killed them. Finally, after stalking around some more, the bears moved on.

MICHELLE VALBERG

This wasn't the first polar bear story Jeff Turner heard during his travels across Northern Canada. In a decade donating equipment on behalf of Project North to Canada's Inuit communities, he has heard many stories like this that are unique to the region – about just how different life in the North can be, about the challenges the Inuit face here and about how hockey is helping to retie the cultural fabric that was ripped apart by colonization. "Mom or Dad will come up to us and say, 'Thank you. We couldn't afford to do this. I can now take my son/daughter to play hockey thanks to you guys,'" Turner said. "The kids are so excited. It entralls a community."

As the volunteer vice-president of Project North, Turner has shepherded more than a million dollars of new equipment to Canada's Inuit communities, often with former NHLers in tow. This time around his entourage consisted of just a freelance editor along with

a colleague from Algonquin College in Ottawa, where Turner also volunteers as vice-chair of the college's foundation (by day he's vice-president, chief development officer at Kind Canada). The destination: Kangisualujuaq (pronounced *can-gick-soo-a-loo-joo-ack*), a village in the semi-autonomous Inuit region of Nunavik in northern Quebec, roughly the size of France. The donation featured 25 bags of new gear worth more than \$30,000, but the real prize was the 54 composite tribute sticks to the Humboldt Broncos, valued at more than \$330 apiece. After the bus crash in April, a chain reaction of charity eventually linked these two communities in September: Bauer donated the sticks to Rogers, which then placed them in stores across Canada, which were later donated to Project North, which then brought them to Kangisualujuaq – connecting these two small-town Canadian communities that, until recently, shared little beyond hockey.

NORTHERN SIGHTS

The Inuit region of Nunavik in northern Quebec is home to about 12,000 citizens and has a deep connection with the sport of hockey.



Before the Broncos' bus crash, not much could have held Humboldt and Kangiqsualujjuaq in common. They might have shared the small-town trait of relative obscurity, yet even then, at roughly 6,000 people, Humboldt would be considered a big city by Kangiqsualujjuaq standards, which only just cracked the 1,000 mark in 2018 and got its first full-time doctor. Despite being in the same country, the two Canadian towns are worlds apart, far beyond the 1,573.46 miles, as the crow flies, between them. But they both live and breathe hockey, and they both know the small-town heartache of tragedy.

In the early hours of New Year's Day 1999, about 400 people were celebrating in the gymnasium of the Satuumavik School in Kangiqsualujjuaq when, just after 1:30 a.m., an avalanche roared down the 300-foot cliff directly behind the school. It broke through the gym wall, killing nine people, including five children under the age of eight. Two decades later, much like the bus crash will remain in the collective consciousness of Humboldt 20 years from now, the memory of the tragedy hasn't gone away for Kangiqsualujjuaq, which mourned the 20th anniversary of the avalanche on Jan. 1. "It was a horrible event," said Hilda Snowball, who recently stepped down as mayor after serving two terms. "The first few years after it occurred it was very difficult, but as we go along we get to accept it. There are people who talk about it each year, so it does come up when the new year is here. It's always mentioned."

In September, the 54 Humboldt tribute sticks from Project North, along with the 25 bags of new gear, went to the kids at the school in Kangiqsualujjuaq, since relocated to the middle of the town. It might sound like small potatoes, but for this village, one-third of whom are under 15 years old, a donation like this is a lifeline in a region where the suicide rate among young people is 10 times the national average, and where poverty, overcrowding, domestic violence



and addiction plague the Inuit communities that live here. It seems absurd that hockey, of all things, fits into fixing all of this – after all, it is itself a remnant of colonization – but it does. "There's not much Inuit culture left here," Brazeau said. "There's hockey and there's school, that's it. Hockey is keeping the kids off the couch, off the pot, off the bottle."

In Nunavik, hockey is much more than just a way to keep kids active. Officially it's a form of crime prevention. The Nunavik Youth Hockey Development Program is funded through the region's \$12-million Crime Prevention Fund, which is administered by Makivik Corporation, the legal representative of Quebec's Inuit communities in Nunavik. Founded in 2006, the program was set up to run youth leagues throughout the region and employ hockey coaches in each of its 14 villages, mixing on-ice sessions with off-ice classes ranging from stress management and character building to teamwork and health. In 2016, the NYHDP was awarded the YMCA Peace Medal for its work on the ice and in the classroom.

BRIGHT COLORS, BRIGHTER FACES

The landscape in the North is often stark, so residents add flair by making sure their building structures are painted vividly. A friendly smile does the trick as well.

MICHELLE VALBERG

Until recently the program also featured the Nunavik Nordiks, a collection of select boys and girls teams made up of the region's best players to compete in tournaments in southern Quebec. Out of the program's \$2.2-million budget, nearly half went to the select teams, including their travel and accommodations. But in 2017 the Makivik Corporation, somewhat controversially, cut that part of the program after an independent review from the consultant firm Goss Gilroy found no correlation between the select teams and lower crime rates. (A subsequent report from the University of Toronto found no connection either, but the authors suggested even looking for such a link is a red herring because children in Nunavik deserve the same opportunity to play competitive hockey as kids across southern Canada.)

The decision ended the 11-year run of former NHLer Joe Juneau, who was at a tournament in Quebec City with the midget girls' select team when he got the news early in 2017. "When I announced that to the kids, you know what their response was, right at that instant?" Juneau said. "It was like, 'What are we going to do now?' That was their response. I felt like crying. 'What are we going to do now?' That answer is very powerful, because in other words, it's telling you that they have nothing else. If there's one thing they wanted more than anything else, it's for this program to keep going. It was like putting a knife into their hearts. I saw their reactions when I announced it. It was sad, very sad."

In theory, the recreational part of the program has continued, but without the regional structure connecting all the villages, each one has been left on its own. Compounding the problem is that Inuit communities across Nunavik suffer from a chronic shortage of equipment. And Kangiqsualujjuaq is no exception, which is why the "give" (as Turner calls the donations) from Project North was an event the village had marked on its calendar for months.

Project North was founded in 2005 by Canadian photographer Michelle Valberg after seeing a group of Indigenous children playing shinny on a pond in Churchill, Man., without much equipment. Valberg had no experience running a charity, however, so she contacted her longtime friend Turner, who was working for the United Way at the time and has a long fundraising background. "It was really quite funny that I was the first person she called," Turner said. "I hate the frickin' cold, and I don't do much hockey. But anyway, it's for kids."

Project North began as a drive for used gear at an Ottawa fire hall, where Valberg's husband works as a captain. They got a lot of equipment, but Turner estimates about 75 percent was junk – cracked helmets, skates with no laces, shoulder pads without straps – so they sent the best of what they had to four villages and vowed never to donate used gear again.

Valberg enlisted former Ottawa Senators defenseman Chris Phillips as the charity's honorary captain, and he suggested applying to the NHLPA Goals & Dreams fund. Over the next six years Project North was awarded \$50,000 three times and given access to wholesale prices for new equipment. From there Valberg and Turner built up their corporate network. Diamond Storage in Ottawa donated a unit

PROJECT NORTH



GETTING GEARED UP

Project North has been making trips to Inuit Canada since 2008 to donate equipment to locals. Recently, 54 Humboldt Broncos sticks were passed along.

to store the equipment. A politician in the Canadian senate hooked them up with someone from First Air, which offered to ship the equipment for free and provide complimentary airfare for Project North and its guests. Scotiabank jumped onboard to fund three trips throughout the North with the Stanley Cup and continues to support the charity annually.

Later, Laureen Harper became Project North's honorary chairperson and suggested the idea of allowing donors to virtually build a hockey bag online. Her husband, then Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper,

PROJECT NORTH

bought the first bag. “It boils down to the immediate impact you see when the kids get the gear and how excited they are and the smiles, many of them toothless,” Turner said. “It’s brilliant. The kids are so excited. We go into a community in the farthest reaches of the North, and typically it’s in March when it’s minus-30, minus-35 degrees, and we often do gives outside. The kids will take off their clothes, put the gear on and go play hockey for hours. It’s unbelievable.”

In August, Project North celebrated the 10th anniversary of its first give and cracked the \$1-million mark in donated gear. It’s a modest charity, but it ventures where few in the hockey world are willing to go. In 2003, Hockey Day in Canada went to Iqaluit in Nunavut, but that’s about it when it comes to hockey media exposure for Canada’s Inuit communities. In six seasons, Sportsnet’s Hometown Hockey has never visited an Inuit village, and since Kraft Hockeyville’s inception in 2006, none has ever been a finalist, much less a winner, for the annual competition. Meanwhile, over the same period, Project North has donated equipment to 26 Inuit communities throughout Northern Canada – every one as rabid a hockey town as any in the south of the country.

“Hockey is god here,” said Tunu Napartuk, greeting us at the airport in Kuujuaq after our flight from Montreal. “It means everything to us.”

And Nunavik being Montreal Canadiens country, the Habs are demigods. As mayor from 2012 to 2018, Napartuk had been trying to find funding to bring the Canadiens alumni to Kuujuaq. He estimated it’d cost \$30,000 minimum, but the payoff for the kids would be priceless in a community where 40 percent are younger than 15.

“When former players speak, the kids listen,” Napartuk said. “Hockey teaches them tools, it teaches them rules, it teaches them consequences. Bringing the alumni here would be special.”

With a three-hour layover in Kuujuaq, the largest village in Nunavik at nearly 3,000 people, Napartuk offered to take us on a quick tour of his hometown. As we drove past the local arena – named The Forum, of course – the conversation continued with the Habs. “I’d like to get just two minutes with (Canadiens GM Marc) Bergevin,” Napartuk said. “But I’d like to get 15 minutes with (Canadiens owner Geoff) Molson (to) tell him to get out of the way.”

As Napartuk outlined how to fix the Canadiens, we drove past cookie-cutter housing units in blue, brown, beige, red, orange or yellow mixed with gray, all elevated above the permafrost, with one tank for heating fuel and another for sewage. We passed the local community center, where the Scottish rockers Nazareth had played a month earlier, and then the spartan municipal office, where Napartuk worked as mayor for the past six years. It all looked humble, austere, quaint, peaceful, and then we drove by the charred remains of an office that had recently been burned down. “Arson,” Napartuk said. “One pissed-off young lady. Seventeen years old. She confessed.”

Back at the airport we piled into an Air Inuit twin-otter plane and buckled up for our flight to Kangiq-



sualujuaq, never flying higher than 500 feet the entire way. As we passed the tree line, the black spruce and tamarack trees were replaced by granite terrain, peppered with Inukshuks, ponds of various sizes and shapes, and stubborn vegetation, mostly carpets of moss and lichens. To the west, Ungava Bay, where the world’s second-highest vertical tide (32 feet) was recorded, stretched out to the entrance of the Atlantic Ocean as the late-afternoon sun drifted lazily down toward the horizon.

A half-hour later, we came over the cliff where the avalanche happened, and out popped the isolated community of Kangiqsualujuaq. There is no infrastructure – roads, train tracks, electricity lines – connecting the villages in Nunavik to each other or the rest of the province. Every summer, cargo ships have to come up from Montreal to deliver supplies for the year. Flights here are prohibitively expensive (as much as \$2,000 between villages and nearly \$3,000 for the short trip to Montreal), so to get from one community to another residents must snowmobile in the winter or canoe in the summer.

At our hotel, we ran into Nancy Dea, an environmental consultant for the Kativik Regional Government, the governing authority for Nunavik. She had just returned from cleaning up yet another abandoned mineral exploration site left behind by a company hoping to make a quick buck off the region’s resources. Over the past 10 years, Dea has cleaned up more than 100 sites, which can take anywhere from

EQUIPMENT/SUPPLIERS

Michelle Valberg and Jeff Turner are central figures in the Project North initiative to help Inuit youth pursue their passion to play hockey. Proceeds have topped \$1 million.

MICHELLE VALBERG

two days to seven years to finish, but there are still hundreds more to clean up, all littered with tons of abandoned material – everything from generators and power tools to dishes and cutlery. “This is forgotten land,” she said. “No one cares about this part of the country. Companies come and do their prospecting and then just leave everything behind. There’s no government inspector going around to those sites, no fines. No warning letters are sent. It’s just out of sight, out of mind.”

The next morning we were greeted at our hotel by Brazeau’s wife, Nancy Etok, who cheerfully offered to take us on a tour of her hometown in her black pickup truck, adorned with Detroit Lions dice and floor mats. (“I guess I just started cheering for them because they lose so much.”) We saw the same upraised houses, each with a blue light to refill its heating tank and a red light for emptying its sewage container. Kangiqsualujuaq’s co-op store, founded in 1959, was Canada’s first Inuit co-operative. Its lone restaurant is run by a couple from Luxembourg, of all places, who stumbled upon the village a few years ago while travelling and decided to stay.

Etok has lived here all her life. Since few outside of Nunavik can pronounce Kangiqsualujuaq – Etok suggested saying “Can you swallow a truck?” quickly – visitors generally refer to it by its colonial name, George River. “We’re just so lucky to live here,” she said. “The land, the air, the isolation. It’s so beautiful.”

Our first stop was the local school, renamed Ulluriaq (“Star”) School, where Brazeau and Etok have worked together as principal and vice-principal since 2009. Along the hallway were handcrafted “We are rising stars!” signs. On one locker, sacrilege: a Boston Bruins logo. On the wall outside the gymnasium hung an autographed Carey Price home jersey. Nearby was the Reading Royals jersey of Oliver Labelle, who co-owns a hockey school in southern Quebec called the Ecole de Hockey with the village’s gym teacher.

Outside the gym doors were the records for the teams in the school’s floor hockey league: Vegas, Philadelphia, Toronto, Washington, Pittsburgh, Edmonton and both the New York Rangers and New York Islanders. In the gym itself, where the kids in the hockey program are required to do dryland training, hung an Ulluriaq jersey. “Hockey is so important to our kids, especially the boys,” Etok said. “And when it’s not going well at home, it’s an opportunity to ask, ‘What’s happening?’ It’s a way to help them. And this is where hockey comes in. The kids, they love hockey, but we need them to get their education. It’s school first, hockey second.”

In Kangiqsualujuaq, hockey is tied to education. The kids sign contracts requiring attendance and good behavior at school in return for the privilege of playing hockey after school and on weekends. Last year, according to the school’s own records, 95 percent of the kids earned their playing time. “We don’t tell the kids, ‘You’re cut.’ We ask them, ‘Did you earn your hockey today?’” Brazeau said. “We don’t use it as an axe. We use it as a lever. The kids that drop out, we can get them back because of Max and Kris. They’re that good.”

That would be Maxime Lalande and Kris Durocher. Lalande has been Kangiqsualujuaq’s phys ed teacher



THE GIFT OF GIVING

Former Ottawa Senator Chris Phillips was the charity’s honorary captain and helped Project North receive grants from the NHLPA’s Goals & Dreams fund.

since 2013, and for the past two years he’s also operated the village’s hockey program. In 2017 Lalande hired Durocher, a late-round pick in the 2012 QMJHL draft by the Quebec Remparts, who left a job as a financial advisor to handle the day-to-day operations of the program in Kangiqsualujuaq. Durocher spends most of his time at Wolves Den Arena, where Etok took us next.

Built in 1990, it’s one of the oldest rinks in Nunavik, but Lalande and Durocher have been hard at work upgrading it – getting a Zamboni, adding a \$10,000 scoreboard, changing the colors and logo to something approximating the Minnesota Timberwolves’ midnight blue and moonlight gray, replacing the glass and board trim and renovating the storage and dressing rooms. “There’s a lot of money that gets pissed away in this region, I can tell you that,” Brazeau said. “This is money well spent.”



Afterward Etok took us to the other end of the village, where some 200 tourists, most of them Americans and Europeans older than 50, were being shuttled ashore in Zodiacs. Valberg and Turner had timed the Kangiqsualujuaq donation to coincide with the arrival of the Ocean Endeavor, a cruise ship run by Adventure Canada, another sponsor of Project North. Most of the tourists were adorned in Adventure Canada outfits, except for a lone Texan dressed head-to-toe in camo gear. As they filed ashore bent over against the wind, they walked uphill into the miserable wet weather, which was just meteorological foreplay for the blizzard that followed the donation. "It can't be all easy-breezy," Etok said, watching the tourists disembark. "It's never easy-breezy in the North. They might have to walk a bit, but that's part of the adventure."

The tourists were headed for the community center, where the townspeople had gathered for the give, many rocking Habs shirts. Etok introduced Valberg, each of whom in turn introduced Turner as his doppelganger Lanny McDonald (albeit with a compara-

tively minor-league mustache). The tourists then brought out the 25 sets of new equipment in CCM bags. They'd packed the bags aboard the Ocean Endeavor the night before, making sure each one had every piece of equipment in it. Next came the 54 Broncos tribute sticks. "In memory of the kids from Humboldt," said Turner to the packed gymnasium. The cruise's entertainer led everyone in an acapella rendition of Stompin' Tom Connors' *The Hockey Song*, after which the national anthem was sung in a mix of French and English and then in Inuktituk. Then the poor tourists were pitted against a group of local kids in a spirited game of floor hockey. The kids wiped the visitors 10-1 and would've shut them out entirely if not for a pesky American tourist from Colorado, who scored a late goal to salvage some foreign elder pride. "That was the highlight of my hockey career," he quipped, still trying to catch his breath.

Over many such visits like this throughout the North, Turner has brought along several names of note from the hockey world, including Canadian women's star Natalie Spooner and former NHLers Kyle Quincey, John LeClair, Marty McSorley, Mark Napier and McDonald. In 2016, McDonald joined Project North on a tour with the Stanley Cup and loved it so much he went back again in 2017. "The Stanley Cup,

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ARENA IS FOCAL POINT

Wolves Den Arena in Kangiqsualujuaq got a much-needed facelift which included a Zamboni, a \$10,000 scoreboard, and renovations to the dressing rooms.

MICHELLE VALBERG

PROJECT NORTH



whether you're five, 55 or 95, has this magic about it, and to be able to take it up North and spend time there means so much to every age group," McDonald said. "The elders absolutely loved the fact that we would come to their villages, because a lot of them would never ever see the Stanley Cup, and the fact that people outside of their communities would care enough to come up."

On McDonald's first visit, Valberg and Turner were with Spooner and some executives from Canadian Tire and Scotiabank. They were hopscotching all across the North with the Cup, visiting as many as seven villages in a day, and at one point they stopped in Resolute Bay, the third-highest community in North America, where Turner heard yet another polar bear tale. "This little girl comes up to us and says, 'Do you

want to see the bear I caught?' " Turner recalled. "She was 16 and she just shot her first polar bear."

They all followed the girl back to her grandparents' place. There, skinned and hanging up on a drying line at the back of the house, was the massive polar bear hide. The girl had taken the bear down with a 30-aught-6.

After the grandfather proudly retold the story of how his granddaughter shot the bear, everyone got up to leave. It was then that the girl's diminutive



grandmother came up to Turner and, with a phalanx of corporate execs surrounding him, reached for his arm. Over 10 years of travelling to Canada's Inuit communities, Turner said he's been touched by many such moments, but this one stands out. She told him something he said he'll always remember from his trips throughout the North, bringing a bit of hockey cheer to the gracious and hospitable people who live in this unforgiving land, ignored by the government and forgotten by the rest of the country.

"Thank you for not forgetting us." **H**

STANLEY'S TRIP TO THE NORTH

Hall of Famer Lanny McDonald was so taken by the North during a trip with the Stanley Cup in 2016 that he returned the next summer as well.

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

Project North volunteers have heard many polar bear stories and seen their fair share of hides over their 10 years travelling to Canada's Inuit communities.