
ONE STARFISH AT A TIME: A GROWING MOVEMENT OF CHANGE-MAKERS

Wesley Prankard and Pytor Hodgson¹

ACCORDING TO THE 2006 CANADIAN CENSUS, THERE WAS A TOTAL OF 1,172,785 Aboriginal people in Canada, comprising 3.8% of the Canadian population. In 2006, the median age of the total Aboriginal population was 27 years, 13 years lower than the median age of non-Aboriginals (Statistics Canada, 2008). The increase in Aboriginal children and youth comes at a time when a growing spotlight is illuminating the generational inequities facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Child protection, health services, community safety, housing, resource development and management, access to safe drinking water, and recognition of Treaty and inherent rights of First Nation Peoples are challenges that are destined to persist until a cultural shift occurs throughout Canada. This shift must be one that is driven by legislation, policy, and increased and accurate education of all Canadians on the history, cultural significance, contribution, and understanding of the effects of the longstanding actions that created the current crisis facing many of Canada's more than 600 First Nations and more than a million Aboriginal Canadians. The time has come for this shift to occur and it is Aboriginal leaders, grassroots activists, and allies who are driving it across Canada.

One of these allies is Wesley Prankard from Niagara Falls, Ontario. Wes, has been a recognized and respected leader since the age of 11, and his efforts have become an excellent example of a youth-led and designed social movement, dedicated to transforming the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada – he has altered the conditions of the lives of Aboriginal children in Canada, and his own in the process. Though originally Wes didn't know what civic engagement was (or that he was doing it), he himself has become a leader. Perhaps even more critical, Wes is helping to build the next generation of leaders who together will continue to work for equity for all children and young people in Canada.

At the core of Wes' message is the belief that for Aboriginal children, things are not always fair. Young people demonstrate that they inherently know the difference between wrong and right, with a grasp and understanding of fairness that many adults can easily forget. The statement, "sometimes life isn't fair" doesn't resonate with children. As Wes demonstrated at 11 years of age, even if adults are resigned to that concept, to him it just didn't matter. Fair's fair, and after learning about the inequities facing Aboriginal children, he decided he was going to do something.

Wes shares, "The conditions and challenges of northern First Nations include isolation. For hundreds of years the northern First Nations have been living far away, off the land.

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Since colonization, it has been creating problems such as transportation and access to commercially sold products or resources. There has been consistent under-funding [of] health, education, and child protection and the stereotypes revolving around First Nations and other Aboriginal Canadians is one thing that keeps these problems happening.”

Wesley’s message when public speaking is that First Nation Peoples, many of whom live in third-world conditions in what is now Canada, should receive the same rights as all Canadians. Says Wes, “They have been treated unfairly for too long, and things need to change, quick.”

Wes is a boy with a big heart and a loud voice. Service-focused and just 14-years-old, Wes is a philanthropist with a strong commitment to serving the needs of First Nations youth and children, bridging the gap in the inequalities that exist between First Nations and non-First Nations youth.

In 2010, Wes’ father, Bob Prankard travelled with a humanitarian group to Attawapiskat First Nation. Upon returning home, it took some time to process what he had just experienced. Eventually, over the dinner table, Bob shared with his family the emotional stories and pictures from his visit. He talked about the contrast of the wealth rooted in the people’s spirit of Attawapiskat while being surrounded by overwhelming poverty and despair. He shared images of over-crowded, mould-covered homes as well as a series of trailers, originally intended for emergency housing, that have become the permanent residence for many families.

His young son, looking at the pictures, could not understand how this could occur in Canada. Living in southern Ontario with privilege and opportunities, Wes felt that there must be something he could do. He quickly rallied friends and family, collecting 24,000 pounds of clothing and food supplies for the community. Wes accomplished this by starting what has become an annual Camp Out, sleeping outside in March to help raise funds and awareness for the Attawapiskat housing crisis. With the support of regional airline Air Creebec, Wes accompanied the collected materials as they were flown to the community. The trip would change the course of his young life – and the lives of many other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people in Canada.

The community of Attawapiskat welcomed Wes with open arms, embracing his openness to learning and passion for creating awareness. Wes made friends with other children his age, as well as adults and community leaders. They showed off the strengths and assets of their community and culture, introducing Wes to traditional practices and traditions. Through this experience Wes learned that what he had done – collecting the food and clothing – wasn’t him performing charity; instead it was social justice.

During that visit, while playing with some of the community’s children, Wes learned that there was no safe place for children to play in Attawapiskat – no structures or facilities. Simply put, there was no playground. This was shocking and appalling to Wes because there were three easily accessible playgrounds surrounding his home. In fact, in Niagara Falls there are 55 of them. Wes left Attawapiskat with a mission: to help raise the money needed to build a playground for the children, his peers, in the community. Little did Wes know, he had become a philanthropist.

In order to achieve this goal, Wes worked for a year and successfully raised \$100,000. The first order of business was branding his work under the name Northern Starfish. Drawn to the Starfish story by Loren Eiseley, it tells of a young man who was making a difference, just a little at a time.

As he [the wise man] got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean.

He came closer still and called out “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?”

The young man paused, looked up, and replied “Throwing starfish into the ocean.”

“I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” asked the somewhat startled wise man.

To this, the young man replied, “The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them in, they’ll die.”

Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, “But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can’t possibly make a difference!”

At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, “I made a difference to that one!”

(Eiseley, 1978, p. 185)

Wes has been able to hold many fundraising events since he started Northern Starfish at 12-years-old. Throughout 2010 and 2011, he successfully completed many fundraising activities and events, including his annual Camp Out, a walk-a-thon, (which had Wes and his family walking 1,321 kilometres, the equivalent distance between his home and Attawapiskat) and winning \$25,000 via an online voting contest with his Pepsi Refresh entry. His efforts allowed for the building of a playground in Attawapiskat, completed on his 13th birthday. Wes, who was in the community for the building of the playground, was honoured with an Eagle Feather that represents honour and courage. An entire generation of children in Attawapiskat First Nation will have experiences that their older brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and parents never had. They have a playground to safely keep them active and occupied in their community. The playground is a symbol much bigger than a plaything – it is a reminder that young people in the south have the children’s backs by working towards equality and justice for them and their families.

Throughout that year, Wes met First Nation leaders and grassroots activists who were drawn to the simplicity and genuine nature of his message: the third-world conditions

First Nations children have to live in are not fair. These allies began providing Wes with opportunities to share his message and goal with other children and young people, First Nation leaders, and in First Nation communities.

Wes began to realize that the issue was widespread across First Nation communities. Many children and young people were struggling with inequity like his friends in Attawapiskat. He discovered that there were many occurrences of children's rights being violated.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) Article 2 (Non-discrimination): The Convention applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from. It doesn't matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis. (See UNICEF, 2005)

Wes shares, "Article 2 is very important because there [are] a lot of violations of that right for First Nation children. Overall they are missing lots of the rights of the UNCRC because that article is not being protected. Without Article 2 being enforced the rest of the Articles in the Convention are at risk." Wes continues to say, "One of the rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures that children have the right to play, (Article 31 [see UNICEF, 2005]) and every child deserves this basic right. They don't have as many of their rights protected by the UNCRC as I do right now" (W. Prankard, 2011, Keynote Speech at *Unite and Ignite 2011 National Youth Conference*: Ottawa, ON).

With the first playground built, Wes resolved to build a playground in every remote northern community that doesn't have one. Currently he is promoting a national penny drive to help build a playground in Kashechewan First Nation. Along with this, he continues to support his friends in Attawapiskat by helping raise money for emergency housing and the building of two new foster homes. It is easy to look at the contributions to one community that young Wesley has made and simply limit it to that - but what Wes is doing is much bigger than one playground, one community, or one issue. He is, simply by doing what is important to him, inspiring many other children, youth, and adults to get active.

Since beginning this journey, Wes has become an experienced keynote speaker, motivating children, youth, and adults in classrooms, conferences and speaking to audiences of over 1,500 people. He has spoken at many key events such as the Assembly of First Nations General Assembly, Global Dignity Day, Unite and Ignite 2011, Count Me In 2012, and at a TedX event in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Wesley's goal is not only to bring equality to First Nations or to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, but also to inspire youth to realize their extraordinary power to change the world. His passion lies in motivating and challenging others to make a difference: to do something.

This is where Wes' story is special. Of course he wants the support of other young people in his campaign for social justice in northern First Nations, but more importantly, he simply wants young people to do what they can to make their world a little bit better. As he describes, "Most people think about philanthropy as a genius entrepreneur with a lot of money that funds certain charities. I seem to think more like Keith Taylor whose story is in *Me to We: Finding Meaning in a Material World* by Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger (2006). He explains it as someone who reaches out and helps in any way they can, without expecting anything in return."

And that is what Wes has been doing now for three years – reaching out in any way he can with no expectation of anything in return. And the results have been extraordinary. When young people lead, not only do amazing things like playgrounds get constructed, but also leaders are built. When Wes speaks, he catches people's hearts and more deeply connects with their souls, especially those of young people. He shows young people what's possible – and reminds them that they too can do exactly the same thing.

When young people listen to Wes, see the pictures from his journeys, or follow him on social media, they learn about different cultures, experiences, and backgrounds, while gaining understanding about children's rights. While doing so, they are able to see themselves in that space – doing something.

An adult who listens may be moved, touched, and genuinely impressed with Wes' commitment, character, and how articulate he is. They might even be motivated to make a donation to Northern Starfish and learn more about issues facing First Nations in Canada. Adults often see Wes as an inspiration.

It is important to note the difference between the two: seeing something as inspirational and being inspired. Google "inspirational quote," and you can read slogans, see pictures, memes, and videos that will warm your soul and reminding you of the good in the world, all of which is very important. Inspiration however, does not always lead to action. This is what young leaders do – they become agents of a much greater change in our world. They inspire the action required to create change. For young people (and of course, some adults), when they hear and meet Wes, they are inspired.

This is why Wes was named one of *Free The Children's All Star World Changers* in 2012 and the same year, a *National Role Model* by Global Dignity, founded by HRH Crown Prince Haakon of Norway. Though much direct work has been done to support northern First Nations, particularly Attawapiskat, a larger movement has been occurring: the mobilization of many other young people who are creating change, with and for First Nations or other civic issues that are important to them. Wesley has become a catalyst for other young people and adults, to learn more, act more, and do more. Or as he says, to "do something."

As Wes shares, "I feel it is important for all youth to make a change not just for my organization, but in their own communities because there simply [aren't] enough people making change and if we all did, this world would be a close-to-perfect place. The reason it is not is because adults who are making change when looking for volunteers or workers never look to kids, so the population of possible candidates are decreased, a lot!" This

is why Wes continues to call on young people to join him and become change-makers themselves.

Young people are heeding the call across the country. For example, in Ontario, the Youth Volunteer Challenge has a three-week campaign with one goal: get high school students to volunteer in their community. In 2012, almost 28,000 youth volunteered close to 124,000 hours over 3 weeks (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2012).

The Community Foundations of Canada website provides a great example of young philanthropists who, with adult support, are creating change in communities across Canada with Youth in Philanthropy Canada, a national program. More than fifty community foundations in Canada have developed a youth advisory committee or council (YAC) made up of young people from a diverse range of backgrounds who want to be actively involved in supporting their community. With the support of an adult advisor, each YAC works to raise money, build endowment funds, and make grants to youth projects in their local community. Though not youth-led, these YACs and similar programs are continued examples of how young people are giving back in their communities in this country (Community Foundations of Canada, 2013).

Youth and young adults are active philanthropists, as the 2010 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating shows (Volunteer Canada, 2010). Data showed that young Canadians consistently volunteer more than any other age group. Canadians aged 15 to 24 have a volunteer rate of 58 percent. What's surprising however, is that in Canada we cannot determine the amount or effect that even younger youth and children are having. The data collected for the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, like other data collected by Statistics Canada, begins at 15-year-olds. There are countless children and youth, like Wes, who are creating change but who are not included in current data.

For example, Ta'Kaiya Blaney, a 12-year-old from Sliammon First Nation is an actor, recording artist, and sought-after speaker, inspiring other children to get active in helping protect coastal waters in British Columbia and across Canada. As well, after almost a year of preparation and training, 14-year-old Annaleise Carr swam across Lake Ontario in 2012 in support of Camp Trillium, raising more than \$240,000, and was named World Open Water Swimming Association Woman of the Year. Like Wes, what these young people are doing is powerful in itself – but the residual effects are what are most exciting.

Wes' real legacy – beyond the direct support he provides to his First Nation peers – will be the inspiring call to other young people to step up, stand up, and do something.

Zoey 'Pricelys' Roy is a demonstration of how powerful young voices can be. Along with being the National Youth Outreach Coordinator for the Arts Network for Children and Youth, Zoey is involved in many other youth and culture-based projects across Canada. A student at the University of Saskatchewan, Zoey is a poet, filmmaker, and mentor. She teaches children and youth spoken word poetry in schools, clubs, and community organizations and helps connect youth via the arts. She first met and heard Wes speak when he was the keynote speaker at *Unite and Ignite 2011*, a national youth conference

held in Ottawa. After the conference she learned more about him from his website and watched as Wes continued working to get the playground built in Attawapiskat.

After talking to Wes, Zoey, a highly respected voice of young adult and youth engagement, was inspired to do something, specifically around voter education and helping young people become informed decision-makers. Wes' simple message, do something, made her think about the gap that existed in the education youth had about the upcoming election and the feeling that politicians didn't represent the people they serve. She knew there was something she could do.

There was a real purpose in what she wanted to achieve. She says, "I wanted people to feel like they had a voice and want politicians to be more accountable. If only 30 percent of Canada is voting – where are the young people? By educating them and informing them [about] what they could do in the voting booth they would be confident enough to make a decision and vote" (Interview with Z. Roy, February 23, 2013). Inspired by Wes' message, Zoey became active in *Rock the Vote Canada* to help bring education to young voters and encourage them to be engaged. One of the events she organized was at Brock University where Zoey had Wes share his message to other young people, to do something.

As Zoey said, "Wes spoke in a language that everyone could understand. He uses a kid's perspective which made things more simple to understand." Zoey goes on to share, "I like how original Wes is and he inspires people to take action and I think his journey is like a ripple effect. It gives people hope that they too can be doing something. Wes is positive and approachable, which is important for a leader, young or old" (personal interview with Z. Roy, February 23, 2013). This is just another example of the residual outcomes when youth and young people are leading social movements: their passion and commitment continues to grow in others.

Alyssa, who is ten-years-old and in Grade Five in St. Catharines, Ontario learned about Wes and Northern Starfish from her parents. They had met Wes and shared with their daughter the stories of his travels and what he was trying to achieve. Alyssa filled an entire piggy bank, going door to door in her neighbourhood and is committed to continue helping Northern Starfish as she now feels impassioned to do something.

Alyssa shared that it was through Wes that she first heard about the issues of First Nation children and youth and she believes that Wes inspires people, certainly herself, by the things he's done. Says Alyssa, "He leads by example and I believe that all kids can do the same."



@colby22sis, a twitter follower of Wes; tweets about the effect of Wes on him (source: <https://twitter.com/colby22sis>).

Hi,

I just wanted to thank Wesley. For a long time I wanted to give back and make a change but I didn't. I guess the reason I didn't was because I was scared to break away from the crowd and do something that nobody else in my grade was doing. That changed though when I read about Northern Starfish. I'm not sure how I came across it but I'm so thankful I did. It's amazing what [you're] doing. The fact that you've been able to make such a difference is incredible. I think reading about what you've done and seeing how successful you've been has really given me that final push to do something. I have no clue what I'm going to do but I know I'm going to do something. You are such an inspiration and I just wanted to say thank you for doing what you're doing and inspiring me.

Sincerely,

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Emails and tweets like this, along with many other stories of young people such as Zoey and Alyssa come into Northern Starfish every week. Cousins, 13-year-old Kai in Niagara Falls and 11-year-old Soren in Saskatchewan worked together to raise funds for the Attawapiskat playground including a penny drive, taking part in the Camp Out, and helping raise awareness. Inspired by his Ontario cousin, Soren did a presentation to his class about Northern Starfish and the challenges facing First Nation children.

Not all young people who were inspired by Wes do something directly with Northern Starfish. For example, 12-year-old Jessica, inspired by Wes' message, completed the *Run For A Cure* to raise awareness and money for cancer research. After talking to Wes who shared with her that she needed to find her own passion – what was it that mattered to her – she knew that it was cancer. Jessica shared that in losing several family members to the disease, she discovered her passion and took action. In 2012, Wes' annual Camp Out had several dozen youth participate in various sites across Canada, including a school that hosted an indoor campout for their students. These young people all heard Wes' call to do something. This is the power of young people taking the lead – they inspire others to do the same.

Adults play a significant role in supporting young people and creating space for them to be the leaders of their own movement and social agenda. Here are Wes' five tips to adults who want to meaningfully create the safe spaces that germinate youth leaders.

1. The expectations put on kids have been lowered by society: for example, parents and teachers don't expect kids to make a significant contribution to society. So we sleep. Adults need to raise their expectation of us, while we as young people raise our own expectations of ourselves and take action. It's time to wake up.
2. Parents and other adults need to be the example. You need to lead a life that you would want your kids to live.
3. Young people can find it intimidating to change the world. Of course parents, teachers, and any older people need to empower young people as

much as they can and help them to understand the power they have within themselves.

4. Don't be a dream-squasher. Some young people think we need a college education or a lot of money to create change, but we just need a dream. Support your children's dreams.

5. Give your kids the book *Do Hard Things* by 18-year-old twins Alex and Brett Harris. It's a great book and I love it and I think every kid should have it. It talks about how easy it is to be the change.

In closing, when young people lead, youth, young adults, and adults follow. They do this because young people not only inspire and provide inspiration – they provide hope. Wes and his network of young people across Canada are an example of this hope, an idea that our country will come to the place where we respect, honour, and value each other, ensuring that nobody, young or old, is left behind; where all children and young people get to play – and the adults who care for them, as Wes says, get happy too. This transformation of individuals and communities is what is going to continue to strengthen the fabric of our nation-to-nation relationships. This will help ensure the next generation of leaders are coming from every community in Canada.

NOTES

1. Quotes from Wes Prankard within this article are from discussions between the two authors, unless otherwise noted.

2. Email received by Northern Starfish; February 10, 2013.

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