

This edition of *real leaders* profiles **Dr. Robert Conn**, **Alice Carlick** and **Debbie Groat**, and **Bev Kirby**. **Robert Conn** is founder and executive of SMARTRISK in Toronto whose innovative work involves encouraging Canadians to think about risk and safety issues in order to avert preventable injuries. As leaders in the Lower Post First Nations community, **Alice Carlick** and **Debbie Groat** have something in common with **Bev Kirby**, a founding member of the Community Education Network in Newfoundland. All are investing in their futures by helping implement strategic plans that enhance the capacities of their respective communities.

As a heart surgeon, **Dr. Robert Conn** saved one life at a time. Today, he is working to save many lives – the lives of those who might otherwise die in preventable incidents.

In fact, as founder of SMARTRISK, Robert doesn't believe in 'accidents.' He maintains: "Far too many injuries are so predictable they may as well have been planned." His mission is to teach kids and their parents to take an active role in the prevention of injury.

SMARTRISK is based in Toronto. Its mandate is to change the way Canadians think about safety, risk and preventable injuries



Robert Conn poses in full Snowbird gear. The Snowbirds are active ambassadors for SMARTRISK.

including falls, motor vehicle crashes, railway and pedestrian injuries, poisoning, fires, drowning and suffocation. SMARTRISK attempts to equip Canadians with the knowledge to make informed choices about how to manage risk in their lives.

"At SMARTRISK, we believe that risk-taking is fun – something we want to be able to keep doing day after day," Robert says. "But we all have a line that we should not cross. At

SMARTRISK, we call it the ‘Stupid Line’ and we help people to understand where to draw the line.”

And the consequences are national in scope – in 1995, more than two million injuries accounted for \$4.2 billion in direct health care costs. Treatment for falls – injuries that were largely preventable – comprised almost 60 percent of this total. Yet many Canadians do not see the risk in their everyday lives. SMARTRISK addresses the need for an injury prevention strategy that promotes the recognition of risk factors. For children, eliminating hazards in the home, redesigning the structure of playgrounds and simply teaching children *how* to fall could lower the incidence of unintentional injury.

In order to achieve this goal, Robert relies on creative messages that go beyond scare tactics to develop a more positive approach – an approach to which kids will listen. SMARTRISK’s HEROES program is an example of the creative thinking that makes the organization so effective. So far, the program has brought a high-tech audiovisual show to more than 700,000 teenagers across the country. Pulsating music and images of young people laughing, dancing and playing sports turn to pictures of ambulances, stretchers, hospital beds and wheelchairs. But the core of the show is what follows – the opportunity to talk to an injury survivor.

Greg Pelsey is one such survivor. Greg was injured in an automobile crash and says the impact of SMARTRISK’s presentation is staggering. “The kids are very moved by the presentation, and they really welcome the opportunity to talk with injury survivors. They often have very specific questions about my life now, whether I was drinking, wearing a seatbelt, whether I was charged. You can tell that this is hitting home with them.”

Participating in the HEROES program has also been personally satisfying for Greg. “It gives me the opportunity to talk about my injuries and how my life has changed,” he says. “And it gives me the opportunity to tell people first-hand what I have learned – to be a leader, to think about risk first, and not to do anything I don’t want to do.”

Bob Gunn, President of Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance Company, is one of the players involved with SMARTRISK. “I received a very intriguing fax from Robert when he was first pulling together partners to support his work – and when I met him in person, I was even more impressed.”

Robert managed to convince Bob that the plethora of organizations promoting safe driving, skiing, boating and other activities was not enough. “Robert made a very compelling case with his motto, ‘There is no such thing as an accident,’” Bob says. “I was impressed by both his passion and the uniqueness of his vision. Robert made a personal sacrifice by putting on hold a very promising and prestigious career to pursue a noble crusade, to dedicate himself to saving lives and preventing life-altering injuries.”

During his training as a children’s heart surgeon, Robert was required to harvest organs for transplantation. “Once my naive fascination with the miracle of heart transplantation wore off, I became increasingly haunted. One day, it just hit me that the donors were healthy active kids until a few hours before, riding bikes, swimming or driving around with their friends.”

Robert responded to a supervisor’s challenge to do something about the deaths, but he was not optimistic. “I made the decision to give it my best. Deep down, I thought that I would



Robert (second from left) speaks to teen participants of SMARTRISK's HEROES program.

take a leave of absence for about six months, realize I couldn't do anything about it and return to surgery.”

So far, it has been six years, not six months. And Robert now knows that he can make a difference. He still misses the drama of the operating room and the ability to show results – he notes that prevention is very hard to sell because it is difficult to show the injuries that *have not* happened. But he has no regrets. Despite the personal and financial sacrifices, Robert believes he made the right decision to work to prevent injuries, rather than deal with the aftermath.

Robert's will to succeed has served him well throughout his life. As a medical resident at the University of British Columbia, he was a key member of the executive of the Canadian

Association of Interns and Residents when they brought the first Charter challenge to the Supreme Court in 1982.

Dr. Chris Newman, a longtime friend who was a resident with Robert, calls him a visionary with an incredible capacity for work. Then, as now, he was driven by the need to eradicate injustice. She says that SMARTRISK works with kids because it teaches them to make choices.

“SMARTRISK doesn't deny the need to take risks, or the fun associated with risk-taking,” Chris explains. “Instead, it helps kids learn how to assess risk and make informed decisions about how far they want to go. Kids can really grasp the concept of a Stupid Line. SMARTRISK shows them how not to cross the line just to go along with the crowd.”

Despite widespread public acceptance, Robert has had a difficult time getting this issue onto the public agenda. Government and the corporate sector did not appear to understand the magnitude of the problem. So Robert made it clear to them by putting a ‘price tag’ on injuries. He commissioned a study on the Economic Burden of Unintentional Injury in Canada which found that preventable injuries cost Canadians \$8.8 billion in 1995 – \$300 for every citizen. In Ontario alone, hospitals see an average of 44 people with head injuries every day – four of whom will suffer permanent brain damage.

The presentation of concrete data like these is beginning to have the desired effect. Governments and the business sector acknowledge that these staggering costs may point to an injury epidemic. Robert has developed strategic partnerships with Parks Canada, the Red Cross, Ford Motor Company of Canada Ltd. and the Department of National Defence (DND), to name but a few. At DND, Robert was asked to develop a program for young military personnel about the importance of assessing risk. Today, he has a flourishing relationship with the Snowbirds, the Canadian Forces Air Demonstration Team.

“The Snowbird pilots are known for taking risks and they are active ambassadors for SMARTRISK. Whenever they perform across the country, they visit schools and talk about how they make decisions about what risks to take,” Robert declares.

Like the Snowbirds, Robert thrives on a challenge. When he set up SMARTRISK, he began with the most difficult audience first. “I instinctively knew I had to test the sustainability of the organization,” he says. “So I decided to pick one of the most difficult sectors to test my

idea. I thought that if I could convince accountants about the cost-benefit of prevention, the organization would stand a chance.”

PriceWaterhouseCoopers proved to be a good choice. The firm provided office space in downtown Toronto and furnished it with the required equipment. But space and supplies were only a part of what Robert wanted from the corporate world. He also wanted to harness the intelligence and experience of the most successful executives in Canada. Today, Ford Motor Company of Canada Ltd., Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance, Bell Canada and Bell Mobility, Canadian Pacific Limited and Harvey’s Youth Foundation are all actively partnering with SMARTRISK to develop programs.

Ford not only has supported SMART-RISK financially through sponsorship but has provided the truck which transports the HEROES show across the country. The company also has engaged its corporate employees and the grassroots support from its nationwide dealer network in actively participating in several SMARTRISK injury-prevention initiatives to benefit the communities they serve.

Canadian Pacific has worked with SMARTRISK to address the issue of youth playing ‘chicken’ on railway lines, both from the perspective of youth and that of engineers driving the trains. Bell Canada is developing a risk website to provide a broadcast centre for SMARTRISK, encouraging international virtual communities to share research.

Says Chris Newman: “Robert was a wonderful surgeon and doctor. Now he is an educator, dedicating himself to the bigger picture, to teaching Canadians how to prevent predictable injuries.” As a result, SMARTRISK is helping to save both lives and money.

Lower Post is a community with a plan – a plan that is creating a future for the community’s children.

Debbie Groat, Deputy Chief of Lower Post First Nation since 1995, is proud of what members of her community have achieved. “Lower Post has not only developed a plan for enhancing community capacity and stewardship of the land, but we have also articulated a clear vision that includes rebuilding our culture, economic development and improving the management of our community resources.”

Lower Post has a population of 193 and is located between the borders of Yukon, Northwest Territories and British Columbia. It has been a long time since this small Kaska community has been able to make its own decisions and plan for the future. Residents are preparing themselves for changes coming their way – including land claim settlements and self-government – and have begun the process of strategic planning and restructuring.

The community plan also has given the children of Lower Post a focus on the future. **Alice Carlick**, Principal of the Little School, says that the most satisfying aspect of developing the plan is to hear Grade 4 children talk about university and their future careers.

“This may not seem like a big deal,” Alice says. “But like many First Nations children, until recently, children in Lower Post could not imagine what it would be like to be an adult or have a job. Because there were few jobs and children did not see their parents working, they could not see employment in their future. This type of positive vision can guide these children throughout their lives. It’s something that they can hold within their hearts.”

The children were inspired by a process that began by asking all members of the



Alice Carlick plays the guitar and sings with her students at the Lower Post Christmas party.

community what was important to them. “This included children in kindergarten, adolescents, elders and community members – we talked to almost everyone!” says Debbie.

By talking to all residents, Debbie discovered that “people want a community that is safe and welcoming – one with jobs, comfortable houses and services for those in need. They want a community that addresses cultural and social interests.”

“Most importantly,” Debbie stresses, “they want a place that our children and our grandchildren will be proud to call home.”

Flo Frank, of Common Ground Consulting, and Caroline Sparks have been working with the Lower Post Council to develop its community plan. Flo says that Debbie’s desire to empower her community is crucial to her success as a visionary leader. “Her dream is one of inclusion – one shared by community mem-

bers,” says Flo. “It is based on how they can invest in themselves and in their children.”

“Developing a plan to empower the community was a bold step in itself, but the timing was exceptional,” Flo adds. “They were not even close to settling their land claims, but Debbie had the foresight to know how important it was to articulate a realistic vision. Debbie took charge of the process, even though she knew how difficult it would be. And she was committed to having a plan designed by the community – one that would give a clear mandate to negotiate the community’s future.”

Alice adds that the focus on children is crucial. “Investing in children is investing in the future. Communities are only as strong as the foundation they build for their children, who are the lifeline of the community.”

And while Lower Post is at the forefront of communities planning a new life in the new

millennium, it is also one of an increasing number of bands recognizing the benefits of having women in leadership positions to guide the process. In the past, many band offices focussed only on economic development. The new generation of women leaders is taking a more holistic approach which offers real benefits as well as the prospect of developing real economies.

“Female leaders have a different attitude and a different set of skills,” says Flo. “They are often the ones who bring the long-term human concerns to the forefront. With their experience, they can look at immediate needs and resources while maintaining a long-range vision. They pace things differently, they understand that change doesn’t happen in a day.”

Council staff member Maryann Shilling agrees that Debbie is a strong female leader. “No matter how busy Debbie is, she makes time for everyone. Everybody is welcome in her office – kids, elders, family and friends. She is very



Alice and children in the Head Start Program make necklaces out of Cheerios.

open and encouraging of all people, and she doesn't judge people."

Pearl Lutz, Debbie's administrative assistant, describes Debbie as smart and easy to work with. "She has a great personality and is very understanding. You can take your problems to her and, as busy as she is, she always takes the time to discuss them calmly."

Sherry Geddes, an administrator at the Council office, appreciates Debbie's balanced approach. "Her focus is always geared toward a sense of community well-being and what is important to the community. Debbie can see the whole picture."

Maryann adds: "Debbie is so dedicated. I often see the light on in her office long after everyone has gone home and I never hear her complain, even with extensive travel commitments and the short notice that she gets to go here, there and everywhere to represent us."

Debbie also knows the value of listening. When a study showed that the existing allocation of resources meant several priority areas in the plan were not being dealt with, Debbie assessed staff assignments.

She outlined what the community wanted to do, then asked the staff what they needed to help meet those expectations. Debbie wanted to know what could be done to improve things. She made the staff part of the solution.

Debbie credits her childhood experience of growing up on the land with her grandfather for equipping her to deal with her demanding position. "We were guided by a natural plan," she says, "where the seasons dictated the work that was done. At first glance, my connection to my family and the land may not seem like it

was the most relevant preparation to be Deputy Chief, but in some ways, the fundamentals are the same."

She also says that her experience as a trustee at the School District 87 Board and as the Community Liaison Coordinator for the school helped to hone her skills. Debbie explains: "I learned a great deal from community members who got involved in community matters and from past leaders who were good role models. They were just starting to see our future as a people and they began to organize based on our culture and tradition. They recognized the importance of who we are and where we are from, as well as the realities of what we've been through."

Debbie continues: "I am part of the picture, at this time, and others will follow. Our job is to take the right steps to move forward, which is difficult because things are moving very quickly and we lack resources. I feel that people are beginning to understand our situation but we have a long way to go. We are increasing awareness, elevating hope and working towards self-sufficiency."

Alice Carlick first met Debbie in 1981, just after she had moved to Lower Post. Both mothers, they quickly established a mutually supportive relationship. "We have upheld each other," says Alice. "We both believe that women should be commended as a major strength in the community and for keeping families together."

Alice is candid about the amount of work that remains to be done. "Even within our small community, we face many challenges. Schools have predominantly male students, so I really try to encourage the girls to be strong – not to be submissive."

Debbie is a tireless promoter of education for children and adults. Debbie and her staff have developed several innovative programs and approaches to encourage adolescents to stay in school, support young mothers who want to continue their education or training, and support community members who are trying help themselves.

Flo says that Debbie is a real inspiration for youth in her community. “She is a very accomplished native woman whom the children respect. She’s making a big contribution to the community and to the field of leadership.”

Debbie believes that the most important factor for young girls is to see other women working to make a difference – and this, she

says, encourages them to speak up, to contribute their own ideas.

“I noticed a little girl looking very concerned during one of the community planning sessions when we were talking about our lack of resources,” says Debbie. When asked what was wrong, the girl replied: “When we want to raise money for school, we make jelly. I think we should make cranberry jelly!”

Debbie laughs at the story, but is proud that Lower Post is working on all of its goals within the community plan. “And we are on our way to ensuring future leadership. We can now take lessons from our children on how to find innovative solutions!”



Alice Carlick (centre) with Ovide Mercredi, Former Grand Chief of Canada (left) and Justice Robert Yazzi of the Supreme Court of the United States - Navajo Nation.

When **Bev Kirby** began working in southwestern Newfoundland 10 years ago, there already had been more than two decades of talk about the role education could play in ameliorating problems facing the area's residents – but not a lot of concrete action.

Local leadership and the creation of a community education advisory committee changed that, thanks to their ability to forego traditional approaches to economic development and education and to focus on a long-term, comprehensive, community-based program to deal with the area's complex problems.

The small communities that make up southwestern Newfoundland had been seriously affected by the closure of the cod fisheries and other resource-based industries. Coupled with long-standing problems due to high levels of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and social problems associated with isolation, the economic viability of the area was seriously threatened.

Based on the belief that people are the greatest resource in a community, Bev helped bring together community members and leaders who supported the vision of community-wide mobilization to eradicate illiteracy and long-held negative attitudes toward education. The group also identified a fundamental need to support families and create a lifelong learning culture which would promote personal enrichment and help to create a sustainable community.

The result was the Community Education Network (CEN), an holistic approach with multiple strategies for community-based programs and partnerships in the areas of education, literacy for youth and adults, family support, early intervention, prevention and community economic development. CEN brings together parents, schools and community residents to work



Bev Kirby and Tracy Snow attended the 'Communities In Schools' conference in Washington, DC in February 1998.

together for their own well-being as well as that of the community. It encourages the use of local resources to involve people of all ages in bringing about change.

Bev is reluctant to take credit for the creation of CEN. Rather, she points to a confluence of events and timing that caused the community to come together to rethink its future. “The crisis point was reached in the early 1990s with the further erosion of the fisheries and other resource-based industries that were the primary employers in the area,” she says. “It became clear that unless something major changed, the community would not have the resource base to be sustainable.”

Another contributing event was a youth survey conducted in 1983 by the Port au Port Economic Development Association. “Everyone was shocked by the bleak picture painted by the increasing number of youth who were dropping out of school. Of those who did graduate, many left the region,” says Peter Doyle,

Assistant Director of Programs at the Cormack Trail School Board and Chair of the CEN. “We, as a school board, were motivated to change our way of doing things because of our frustration about high dropout rates, low achievement and the lack of belief in education.”

“We were also alarmed by the results of school readiness testing which showed that children in the area were a full year behind the average,” remarks Barb Case, Manager of Community Development at the Newfoundland Department of Human Resources and Employment, and a consultant with the Economic Recovery Commission at that time. “The community saw clearly that if they did not address the needs of children, from the prenatal stage through adolescence into employment, nothing would change.”

“We couldn’t just work with the adolescents and wait for the same patterns to occur in the next generation,” Barb continues. “Nor could we condemn today’s adolescents to a life of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. We needed to address everything at once and we were realistic enough to expect it would take a generation before we saw a difference.”

CEN evolved into an umbrella organization to support cooperative programming and interagency collaboration in the development and operation of a wide range of programs and projects. It brings together diverse community and government agencies representing health, education, social services and economic development. These partners have included Abitibi Consolidated Inc., the Cormack Trail School Board, College of the North Atlantic, the Health and Community Services Western, the Bay St. George Mental Health Unit, the Bay St. George Community Employment Corporation, Human Resources Development Canada, the Status of Women Council and Regional Economic Development Boards, among others. As

coordinator, Bev acts both as the information clearinghouse and the chief networker.

Under CEN, schools have become involved in ensuring stimulation and appropriate early learning for preschoolers. Working with parents of young children led to the development of supportive prenatal programs. The ‘Endless Possibilities’ youth corps project, funded by Human Resources Development Canada through Youth Services Canada, is addressing the needs of unemployed, out-of-school 18- to 24-year-olds by involving them in literacy work, assisting with Family Resource Centres, mentoring young students, supervising homework clubs and organizing reading clubs. Former fishery workers have become involved with schools and are now running the breakfast program.

“Bev has an incredible long-range global vision that involves the whole community,” says Barb. “It is a model of social cohesion and economic development.”

Achieving such an ambitious program required substantial changes to traditional structures to succeed. Barriers between public institutions had to come down, and the private sector had to expand its role in supporting community initiatives in job training and alternative learning for young adults and high school dropouts, Bev explains.

Other CEN programs include the Communities In Schools Program which ensures that students have ready access to a range of health, education and social services; Communication for Survival which brings communities together through leadership development and community-directed radio, television and roundtables; and the Pathfinder Learning Centre whose computer-based program provides an alternative way of learning for students who have been out of

school for some time or who have difficulty with traditional education.

Barb laughs when she recalls how quickly and easily everyone agreed to deal with the disruption that was bound to follow the implementation of CEN. “However, because of the magnitude of the problems facing the region, everyone was willing to put up with the messy conditions that such major change entails. Traditional boundaries just slipped away and we could really look at how to enable people to learn through, with and for each other to create a better community.”

The essential ingredient in the mix, says Peter Doyle, is Bev herself. “This initiative could never have happened without her. Partnerships with both the public and private sectors have grown exponentially and there is a real sense of ownership of this very fluid process,” Peter declares. “What Bev has is not specific to

her organizational skills. It’s the intangibles that are important – her work ethic, her wonderful style that enables her to work with everyone, and her vision about how community education and social and economic development fit together on a continuum.”

“This is a mission, a lifelong commitment for Bev,” says Tracy Snow, District Coordinator for the Communities In Schools Program. “She is the embodiment of community education. She is always learning from her experiences, and she has an innate sense about how to apply this learning in the community. While Bev is open and direct, she also loves to work quietly behind the scenes, sort of planting seeds and standing back to watch them grow.”

CEN, for all its successes, lacks secure funding. So Bev spends a lot of time writing proposals. And while members of the Board of CEN are dismayed that she has to find funding



Bev Kirby (far right) makes a presentation at the National Conference of the Canadian Association for Community Education in May 1999.

to pay her own salary, Bev says she doesn't mind the insecurity – the rewards are worth it.

In fact, the evolution of CEN, particularly the Communities In Schools Initiative, has been a great validation and source of energy for Bev. “The range of partners committed to this initiative is very gratifying to see,” she explains. “Having realized that the most effective intervention is prevention, schools are very active partners in preschool and child care programs. The school board has made a very real investment of space and services for the Family Resource Centres, which supplements funding from two

Health Canada programs – the Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) and the Prenatal Nutrition Program.”

Peter Doyle confirms: “Our involvement with the Community Education Network has taken the school board beyond the walls of the school. While this may be a hurdle in some ways, working with other community organizations has generated some very positive results. I think a lot of us feel very fortunate to be living and working in a place where there is a real spirit of cooperation.”

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