

Creating links with Haiti; Students at Bliss Carman Middle School will have a chance to meet the children they sponsor in Haiti

By Lori Gallagher

The Daily Gleaner, October 17, 2012

Erold Santil, Sylvie Etienne and Francot Etienne may live in another country and they may never have the opportunity to visit Fredericton, but at Bliss Carman Middle School, they're considered members of the family.

Students at the school sponsor the three young people through FreddyLink, a project through World Vision that has linked sponsors from Fredericton with children and families in need in villages in the Cobocol Area Development Program in the central plateau region of Haiti.

The school wants to help its students get an idea of what it means to be global citizens, says Heather Ingalls, a Grade 8 teacher at BCMS.

"We had done the Twitti School in Zambia," she says. "That was coming to an end because they had completed the project there, so we were looking for another avenue to keep the kids involved on a global scale."

FreddyLink seemed a good fit. The three children the school sponsors are middle school-aged, making it easy for the students to relate to them, with each grade focusing on one child.

Last year was the school's first year participating, and already students are getting a lot out of the experience.

Gretchen Murray, a Grade 6 teacher at BCMS, explains how they are encouraged to be creative. "We say to them, 'We're doing this, and it's something you can be directly involved with. How do you guys want to support these children? How do we want to

raise money? We can just bring in money and that's great too, but how can we find neat and fun ways to raise funds and support them in any way that we can?"

The students are proud of some of the fundraising ideas they've come up with.

"They go nuts," Murray says. "On my whiteboard last year I had a list of at least 20 things. Some were outlandish and some were really cool."

One of the cool suggestions from her Grade 6 students was Hair for Haiti. A loonie bought a ticket in a draw, and 12 winners each got to do the teacher's hair. The teacher had to keep each hairstyle for an afternoon.

"They had a blast," she says. "The fundraising wasn't that fantastic, but it got them talking about that program."

Ingalls notes that the personality of the class really determines some of the things they come up with.

"The Grade 8s last year did a bake sale. One of the Grade 8 teachers has a baking club here, and we had a lot of bakers."

The students chose a professional development day when other teachers were going to be in the school to hold it.

"The students came in on their day off and ran this bake sale," Ingalls says. "Some baked, some ran it. They all participated in different ways."

The fact that the kids got up on their day off and came into the school to do this is impressive. As teachers hoped, they feel real ownership of the project.

"We try to bring it up in discussions whenever we can," Murray says. "You don't want to lose that focus, and there's so much going on in the school all of the time."

Grade 6 sponsors Francot, who celebrated his 13th birthday in early October. Grade 7 sponsors 14-year-old Eroid and Grade 8 sponsors 10-year-old Sylvie.

"I find when we talk about current events, and now they have a connection with Sylvie, they'll talk about what's going on in Haiti and what has gone on in Haiti," Ingalls says.

A parent with a child in Grade 7 at the school is going to Haiti next year and has offered to take three suitcases down, one for each of the sponsored children.

"So they're talking about things that Sylvie might want and might need, and things they could send down that they can enjoy," she says. "It's made them have this personal connection to someone that they've never met."

Students see the school helping on a local level, with things like the breakfast program and sponsoring someone so they can participate in band or athletics, notes Murray, and this project shows them how they can do that and still help on a global scale.

"Yes, we have issues at Bliss Carman and we have issues in Fredericton, but we can also help out as much as we can and reach out and help whoever and whenever we can," she says.

Thanks to technology, the world is much more accessible to students.

"It's nice to see them give where they don't expect to get back," Ingalls says. "It's nice to see them be good global citizens."

Bernie Zearth, the FreddyLink project co-ordinator, is thrilled to hear how well the project is working at Bliss Carman.

"I think this is fantastic," he says. "This is exactly what we want. The whole

concept is our community here in Fredericton linking to this other community, and to hear all these ideas and excitement is awesome."

The students will have an opportunity to get to know their Haitian family members a bit better on Tuesday, Oct. 23, as part of Hope for Haiti 2012.

The evening will feature guest speaker Morose Evenel from World Vision Haiti.

"He's responsible for the three or four projects in Haiti that are run through World Vision Canada," Zearth says. "He's going to be doing a little bit of a presentation, and some of the students are going to be talking about their experiences."

As well, the group hopes to Skype with Francot, Sylvie and Eroid in Haiti.

"We've asked for the three children that are sponsored," he says. "It's a bit of a deal at their end because they actually have to travel from the project to Hinch - it's almost an hour drive - for them to do the Skype thing."

As excited as the students are to be part of this event, so are the kids in Haiti.

"When I was down there, they are so thankful to us," Zearth says. "You can just see it. Everyone you talk to, they have a sense of thanks and respect for Canadians. And they're kind of mystified. There are those Canadians on the other side of the world who don't know us and yet they do that for us. They're just amazed and so thankful. It's just life-changing for them."

Anyone is welcome to come to Bliss Carman Middle School to take part in the event on Oct. 23. It's being held in the cafeteria from 6:30 to 8 p.m. and participants will have a chance to experience Haitian-style coffee and snacks.

Information will also be available on FreddyLink and about other children that need sponsors.

For more information about FreddyLink, visit FreddyLink.com, and to

learn more about the project at BCMS,
contact Murray or Ingalls through
blisscarman.nbed.nb.ca