

Community

CONNECTING



Photo Courtesy Spirit North

TO THE OUTDOORS

Spirit North has its roots in BC's neighbouring province, and was originally part of the provincial sports organization Cross-Country Ski Alberta. Olympic gold medallist Beckie Scott, founder and current CEO of Spirit North, was the ambassador for the program which began in just five Métis and First Nation communities in Alberta. When Beckie first visited those communities, she was struck by the disparities between the opportunities provided to youth living in these communities in comparison to what was available to youth in other communities, and she was inspired to develop a program that speaks directly to bridging that gap.

In order to maintain that purposeful focus, Beckie launched Spirit North from that program. Spirit North now works in more than 63 communities, and impacts more than 6,000 youth every year through their programming that includes land-based programs and other opportunities for schoolchildren across Canada to access the land.

Laura Filipow, Program Director for Spirit North, emphasizes that the relationship with schools has been key to the organization's success. "We do a process called co-creation," says Laura. "We consider communities that have been identified for programming because they are close to an existing program, or communities that have reached out to us directly. We take a lot of time to consider each community in a meaningful way, as we want to make sure our program is long term and sustainable.

"We visit the school for a co-creation session where we develop the program in collaboration with the school and – ideally – with people from the community, because our programs are meant to speak to the whole community and be available for the whole community. In many places, the program has expanded beyond the school.

"In this session, we talk to them about what they want. What are their goals? What are they looking for in a program? What kind of sports already exist, so that we are not duplicating work? We have a guided questionnaire, and we dream big; and then, we look to those things that we can do. Our goal for

Spirit North is a national charitable organization that uses land-based activities to improve the health and well-being of Indigenous youth, empowering them to become unstoppable in sport, school, and life.

Working in partnership with schools and communities, Spirit North's active, participation-based programs are designed to make Indigenous youth feel unstoppable, helping them develop skills that improve their performance in the classroom and deepen their connection to their communities.

Spirit North programs take place across all seasons, and include cross-country skiing, mountain biking, cross-country running, canoeing, and land-based games and activities.



Photo Courtesy Spirit North

"Spirit North was founded on the belief that sport holds the power to change lives, transform communities, inspire individuals, heal and teach."

Olympic gold medallist **Beckie Scott**
Founder and CEO, Spirit North



"It is so much more than just getting kids out skiing, it's really working in a holistic way with the people in schools, the kids, and other community members to make it as easy as possible."

the meeting is to conclude with a list of things that we can start more immediately."

Spirit North hires a leader who will be part of the program-building and relationship-building processes, and who will work on the actionable items, which include developing the program with the community, and getting the kids out accessing the land. "We see a big gap with the knowledge and the confidence that people need to get kids out and participating in the sports that we focus on. We work hard to develop that, so that in the event that the leader implementing the program cannot stay for the long term, we can still see development in the communities.

'It is so much more than just getting kids out skiing; it's working in a holistic way with the people in schools, the kids, and other community members to make it as easy as possible. There are many details to work on, from equipment storage, to locations, to developing the programming – even trail building where needed – and, of course, in the consultation process with the community. All those tiny little pieces go into making the programs successful."

While young people are learning skills through the program, that is definitely not the whole story. "I believe it's about the connection to the outdoors: it's an outdoor education program, without explicitly

"We can really see the ripple effects in BC communities. We ran a sign translation project in Penticton, with the Syilx Nation. The Nickel Plate Nordic Centre that services Penticton is on the traditional hunting grounds of the Syilx Nation, and the band members never felt very comfortable or welcome there.

"Since it is a Nordic Centre, you have to pay trail usage fees, and if you don't have equipment, you can't use the trail. All the signs were in English, and a conversation opened about language reclamation and translation. The Nordic Centre was very open to it: we accessed a grant to pay for remaking the signs, and had an Elder and a language keeper translate the signs together.

"Now when you go to Nickel Plate, Nordic Centre, you will see every single sign in both English and the Syilx Nation language. We have heard from the elders there that it just feels so much more welcoming. We now have ski equipment that we're able to store there, that any community member can use. And a lot more community members are using this equipment because it is available to them without any barriers.

"These kinds of successes come about from relationship building. We built that relationship with the language keepers in the community, and with the Nordic Centre, and tied those pieces together. It's very patient work, but the payoff is amazing."



Photo Courtesy Spirit North

being that. We support the curriculum where teachers see parallels — especially in Language, PE, or Culture classes — in bringing the opportunity to get comfortable being outside, so that kids can better understand how they can move and develop their basic physical literacy.”

The Spirit North programs offer a gradual introduction for kids to learn that they can be outside. It can help them to learn about themselves, their friends, and to discover what they can do. Local educators, knowledge keepers, and Elders come out and join the programs, and can make their own connections with youth as they are interacting comfortably and learning in the space.

“We get so many kids saying, ‘I like to be outside with my friends, I like to learn new things,’ or, ‘I couldn’t go up the big hill at first, but by the end of the day, I

got it!’ For us, it is about these little victories for the kids. It is a great way to develop overall resiliency, to develop a capacity that can stick with them as they move through their lives. They try things that might seem a bit intimidating at first, but they realize that it’s okay, that they are going to fall but they are going to get back up. In the long run, it’s these little steps that develop you to be a better, bigger person. That is really our long-term goal.

“Teachers tell us that after an outdoor session, the kids are more settled in the class. They have fun out there, explore on their own. When they come back into the classroom, they are better able to focus.”

“We have had kids that have participated in our programs, and who want to take part in a local ski race, bike race, or running race, but they’ve never felt welcomed in those settings. Before COVID, we

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put together little race simulations for kids who were interested. We ran them exactly like a race would be run, and kids have that full experience – medal ceremony included! And, we’ve had kids who have gone out to the wider community, competing in the BC Winter Games and other big events. They’ve developed this confidence to participate in so many different things.”

Local schools can play an integral part in the programs, and are welcomed to be part of the co-creation process. “If school leaders reach out to us, and we can support the program, then it’s great to have them as part of the process from the beginning. When they are involved, they can better understand what we do. There are other programs for schools that come with a set agenda, or ones that plug into existing programs. Our program is more fluid, and we are focused on establishing the relationship, and developing mutual understanding of what that community needs.”

Some of Spirit North’s programs are developed so that they can be accessed right out of the school doors, but sometimes that is not possible depending on the sport and the location. Transportation to Nordic centres can be an issue all across Canada. “In Penticton, for example, there is no snow, so kids have to drive 45 minutes up Apex Mountain for snow sports. However, if we are mountain biking, that’s right from their doors. We collaborated with the Principal in that community to figure out the access to transportation, and ways to bring people in to do some trail-cutting. It was a great collaboration and a huge opportunity! The programs where Principals and Vice-Principals have participated are the most successful. School leaders understand the unique nature of their communities.”

Laura acknowledges that teachers and school leaders can be stretched thin with the demands of their roles. “It is very important for us to develop these programs without being a burden to the existing school

structures, which is why we hire people externally. We need the involvement from the community, but we do all of the planning. We also work closely with schools and communities to try to access different funding for the programs, to purchase equipment, and to cover transportation. We also have private donors and corporate sponsors, and we always consult with the communities in advance to ensure that our funding efforts are respectful to them, but supportive of the program. If Principals are aware of any funding opportunities for equipment or for transportation, we are always interested in learning more!"

The ultimate objective in Spirit North's programming is to get kids outside, learning and exploring. "We hope that they come away with a sense of joy, and a sense of freedom. Sports in general brings resiliency, along with a connection to the land. We find that a lot of kids haven't really experienced that, for so many different reasons. It's not about learning how to ski correctly; it's not about learning the best technique for any of the sports we do. It's really about the joy of movement, being able to easily access what is right outside your door, and getting as much as you can out of it."

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