

Giving BACK

A Legacy of Teaching and Learning in Hartley Bay

A passion for education can often run in families. Parents influence their children, and siblings navigate parallel courses as educators. For the Hill family in Hartley Bay, a First Nations community that is part of the Tsimshian nation, about 90 miles south of Prince Rupert, educational leadership and a commitment to students and families in the community has deep roots.

Cameron Hill is the Principal of Hartley Bay Elementary Junior Secondary School in School District 52 (Prince Rupert). His wife Eva Ann teaches at the school, and they were both born and raised in Hartley Bay. As Cam describes, the community is remote. "Within the Tsimshian nation, there are seven distinct groups and we are one of those groups, the *Gitga'at* people. We have a population on our band list of just a shade under 1,000 people, but in our community here, we have a population of about 150 to 180, depending on the time of the year.

We're very isolated; we are only accessible by boat or by seaplane, and we have no roads coming into or out of the community. It can be difficult to get in by boat, even in what you would think of as the spring or summer, as there can be fog, wind and rain. My school and my students always measure the snowfall that happens in our community, because we're totally on boardwalks to get off of the muskeg. In a good year, we've had about seven to ten feet of snowfall, and in a very bad year, we've had in excess of 23 feet that we had to remove from our boardwalks so that we can get around safely, and for our emergency vehicles."

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80% of the fun in doing something like that – the happiness that you gain from it – is just knowing that your ancestors did the exact same thing for so long, and you really feel at one with them.”

Cam originally became involved in the commercial fishing industry, the norm for young kids growing up in the community in the 70s and 80s, and was able to make a good living through the summer months. “I participated in the salmon fishery, both gill netting and seining, and in the herring fishery in the spring. I always say to people that after I graduated, I had no idea that when you went to university, you didn’t have to keep going through April, May, and June! I

was never without a job in the commercial sector. Somebody always wanted me to come and fish with them on their boats. I had some good teachings from my grandparents and my dad, so I was well versed on the water, and I used that money to put myself through school.” Cam was involved in welding, aquaculture, and commercial diving before his teacher training. But the continued downward spiral of the fishery necessitated a change in direction.

“To me, the writing was on the wall – I knew that I had to go back to school. I loved working with youth, and I thought I would take a stab at that. There’s something that I will never forget, when I



"In regard to myself and my home, I consider myself an avid harvester. I always live by the rules that my grandparents instilled in me, and I funnel that into our school. When I do a lot of on-the-water and on-the-land activities with my students, I'm reminded of something simple my grandmother would say: take what you need, but use what you take. That resonates with me, with whatever harvesting I do, whether it's salmon, shellfish, deer, or seals; if we live like that, and if the rest of the world would live like that, I think we'd be in a way better situation, globally. I think that there would be a lot of food to go around, I think there would be a lot of people

that would be looked after. And I really cringe when money is equated with food – if your reason for doing it is financial, I think we need to step back and reconfigure that, and rethink that process, because First Nations people have been living along this coastline for thousands of years and have always been able to look after themselves. So we, globally, need to really take a look at that and understand that, because I think First Nations People have a lot to offer. I don't know one First Nations community on this coast that isn't willing to share their expertise on how they got to be where they are."



was home following the herring season and my dad and I went to fish for prawns. We set our gear, and caught the prawns that we wanted, but within that prawn trap was this tiny little octopus. I took that octopus and kept it alive in its own little container, and I thought that I would bring it home to my mom who had a classroom of primary students. I took it to the classroom the next day, and the little thing was vibrant and swimming all over the place, and the kids were just enthralled. I guess it really was my first lesson in teaching, and that was when my mom said, why don't you become a teacher? And I answered, why – are you crazy? Look these primary kids, they're bouncing off the walls. I have to say, I think every primary teacher should be paid ten times whatever I get, because I don't know how they do it.

"This year we have about 36 kids in the school,

from K to 12. About 20 years ago, our hereditary leadership saw and understood that kids were leaving our school system in grade 9 or 10 to go to high school in the Prince Rupert area; at that time, the numbers in our school were dismal and it wasn't a good situation. You can also look back on the atrocities of the residential school system, and the lingering effects that has on families. We felt that the only way to try and make it more successful for our students was to continue up to grade 12 within our tiny community. It was a daunting task to begin with: education everywhere is always looking for more funding, and it's no different for us. I'll always say that I can teach anything, but am I the *best* at teaching it? No. There are certain areas where I excel. Then, there are other areas where I wish I could do a far better job, and I'll always keep on trying to make myself better in those subject areas.

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"Our school is a band-run school, but we also belong to the school district. We are very proud to be a part of FNSA (First Nations Schools Association) that provides help and support for us – especially at those higher academic learning platforms in grades 10, 11, and 12 – through something called Connected Classrooms. This is where they've recruited some of the best teachers that BC can offer in the areas of the academics, Math, English, and Science, and we get online with those teachers and other First Nations schools. For the first time in our history, I've had students take Physics 11 and Physics 12, and be successful. We are now offering the higher end math courses within the BC curriculum, like Pre-Calculus 12 which is as high as you can go. We have Chemistry 11 and Life Science 11, and Biology in grades 11 and 12, combined with the social studies, the sciences, English, English First Peoples 10, 11, and 12. We are so lucky to partake in those courses. And, at the end of the day, we have some very successful students coming out of those courses;

it opens up so many doors for them, whether they want to go into the trades, or whether they want to go to college, or right on to university. We've been very proud of our students and the effort that they've put in to achieve and take part in those courses.

"In talking about my family, I have to start off with my dad who was born and raised in Hartley Bay. His name was Ernie Hill, and he's known up and down the coast as "Goody", because his second name was Goodlett. At that time, when my grandparents were raising my dad and his siblings, the school system within Hartley Bay only went up until grade 8. And my grandparents and my great-grandparents understood the importance of education, and knew that that my dad and his siblings needed to further themselves, and to get to a place where they could continue their education. So, my grandparents moved them to the Prince Rupert area where they could achieve grade 12 status. It was a very difficult thing for them to do, because for anybody that is



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born and raised in First Nations communities, the First Nations way of life is centered for you. It's hard to leave that. My dad always made sure that he was able to connect or reconnect, and come back to Hartley Bay all the time. He achieved his grade 12 graduation in Rupert, and through graduating there he met my mom. Her father was a doctor who was trained in the army, and his specialty was tuberculosis. We all know the effects of TB on so many people, but in particular for First Nations people; it was something that took a lot of lives and made a lot of people extremely sick and can still have those ill effects today. My mom's father worked to help First Nations people in the local communities as they grappled with the monster of TB. My dad

was working as a commercial fisherman, and put himself through university, along with his own dad. To me, that's just an extreme feat. I laugh about this, but my dad was one of the very first hippies on the hill at Simon Fraser University; he was there right from its inception, and he chose to go there for its openness, and its welcome. My dad felt part of the campus, and got his teaching degree there. I can't emphasize how much of a struggle it was for him to do that, to come from my tiny little community, to go to Rupert, and then go to the daunting Vancouver area. The fact that he did that prepared me, and helped me; he was never one to say, Cam, go be a teacher. He just always supported me in whatever I wanted to do.

"Hartley Bay is so tight knit. We joke that everybody knows everybody else's business, but I always look at it with a positive twist. My mother-in-law has been ill, and we brought her home. This illustrates what is at the core of Hartley Bay and the *Gitga'at* people, the caring that we all have for one another. There are so many visitors, so much love, so much baking, so much cooking. People are bending over backwards to help my wife and her family, to bring her mom home and to pass with family and loved ones around her. This is what we mean to one another. And educating our children, when we

have something like this happen in our community, that's what makes it so real and gratifying to me. My dad always said that in times like this, families are going through so much. I need to make sure that the school is open for the kids that are a part of that, so that they have some sense of normalcy during trying times. I always think about that because my staff tease me and say, you know our school has never been shut down for anything? And I say, that's right. I know. That's the way it's going to stay, because you need to make sure that our school is always open."

The Hills of Hartley Bay

(L to R) Cameron's sister Jodi Lynne Hill, who has her masters in teaching the hearing impaired; Cam's daughter Morgan Hill who has her teaching degree; Cam's son Max Hill who is doing his two-year course in Early Child Care Education; Cam's wife Eva Anne Hill who teaches at the school in Hartley Bay; Cam Hill, Principal; Cam's son-in-law Karl Fisher, and his first grandchild Evie; Cam's daughter Rachel who is an EA in the school. In the front is Cam's mom Lynne Hill who turns 80 this year, officially retired from teaching last year, and is someone Cam always goes to for guidance.

"My mom and dad moved back to Hartley Bay the year I was born – 1968 – and started to teach in our school. I can remember, as a little boy, waking up in the classroom that my mom and dad were going to be teaching in, and we would put all of our bedding away and get the day ready for the kids that were coming in to the school. We did that for about the first year and a half, and then we had a little teachers' cabin until my dad was able to start to build his own home in Hartley Bay. I guess you could really say that teaching is in my blood, sleeping with my sister in a little makeshift bed on the floor in the corner of the classroom. That really brings back fond memories and makes me think about how dedicated my mom and dad were to the teaching profession, and trying to give back to the community. That was his sole purpose: he was so rich for being a *Gitga'at* person, and for the teachings of this community. I've been extremely lucky to be raised by a community so loving as Hartley Bay, and to get guidance from our hereditary leaders. I'm just so lucky to be able to be a part of that.

"My dad was the Principal of the school, and my mom was a teacher. I lost my dad about seven years ago, he had a valiant battle with cancer. He refused to retire, he just wanted to keep on working. When he did retire at the age of 74 or 75, it was six months later he was diagnosed with cancer and it was an uphill battle. My mom continued to come to the school, she was very lonesome for my dad and wanted to do something that she loved, to still connect with

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the kids. She stopped coming to school just last year, and she is just on the verge of turning 80. She had continued to teach, especially our English classes; she'd only come in the mornings and take the afternoons off, but she was really prominent in helping our students achieve their grade 10, 11, and 12 English marks and I really thank her for that.

"Once I was in the school, my dad would say, "You might want to think about being a Principal: I'm not going to be here all the time." So, I went away to SFU while I was working to achieve my masters. My mom and dad taught here, and myself and my wife teach here. It's really special, because I don't think there's anything more gratifying than teaching the grandchildren of people that I went to school with.

"I get up every morning just happy to go to work, and to be a part of the Hartley Bay school. It's such a boiling-over of emotions, to be able to help people that I care so much about, the families, and the interconnectedness." Cam acknowledges that he hasn't thought so much about the legacy of education that his family has created, but realizes that it is special, and unusual. That was reinforced when he saw the decisions that his own children were making about their careers and futures. "My daughter came to me and said she was thinking about becoming a teacher. And I said, what? Don't you see what I go through? Don't you want to go somewhere? Don't you want to make some money? And she said, you know it's not about money. It's about doing something that you love. I now have a daughter who has graduated from SFU – three generations of us who have gone to SFU – and she is a qualified teacher. My other daughter took her Education Assistant (EA) training, and she's already involved in our school and the education field. And my son is entering his second year of early childhood education. So the whole family is going down the road that I did.

"My grandmother was also a teacher, and my great-grandmother Violet Robinson was an incredible woman and one of the very high-ranking matriarchs

"It's about giving back to the community, but I think it's also the love of doing something – if you get up and you're going to work, and it's something that you *have* to do as compared to something that you *want* to do, that's a huge difference. And your life is just so much fuller when you feel like you're contributing in some way to a good cause. "

within our community here. She was involved in the medical profession, although she wasn't trained by any university; she was basically a midwife that would be called up and down the entire coast to deliver babies. She gave so much of herself to not only our community but to communities that are around us.

"It's about giving back to the community, but I think it's also the love of doing something – if you get up and you're going to work, and it's something that you *have* to do as compared to something that you *want* to do, that's a huge difference. And your life is just so much fuller when you feel like you're contributing in some way to a good cause. That's the way I look at it, and really, with what has happened to First Nations people across BC and across Canada, and the fight that we've had to go through just to preserve our identity; I need to make sure that that's in the school system for the *Gitga'at* people. I'm doing everything that I can to make sure that *Gitga'at* kids are proud of who they are, and where they come from; they're grounded. You have to know where you've come from to be able to figure out where you're going, and our kids need to understand that, that their identity as *Gitga'at* people is something to be proud of. Once that is established, it's an ongoing process, because although First Nations people have made strides, we still have a long way to go to preserve that. I need to make sure that that happens, but at the same time, I have to make sure that I'm preparing my kids for that big world that is outside of the confines of the *Gitga'at* territory that they've been born and raised

in. It's a huge world, and if I'm able to give them the tools to achieve higher education, and the work ethic to go out into the world and be a productive member of wherever it is that they're going to be, when they remember who they are and where they come from, they're going to go far. You always have to be ready to fight. Fight for me just rolls off my tongue, because we have to fight, we need to keep persevering and establishing that identity as something to be proud of. I see strides not only in what I'm able to achieve within my community and in my school, but I see strides with First Nations educators and learners all over the north and all over the province and all over Canada. We have some neighbors, whether it's within BC or Canada, that need help. Whenever we have a catastrophe in our community, or we have a death within our community, we have this saying that our canoe has capsized, it has turned over, and sometimes it's not just up to us to be the ones to right that canoe. Sometimes we have to depend on our neighbours. And I want all First Nations people, wherever they are, to realize just how important their identity is, and to be proud of it. I want to help not only the *Gitga'at* people, but I want to be an example for other First Nations communities, to say that we're all in this together and whatever I can do to help you, you just have to pick up the phone, go to a conference, go to a meeting, text me, talk to me, come visit us. We'll share what we're doing, and what we think is helping us, and by all means I'm sure that you have something to offer us that can help us too. It's reciprocated; we just have to keep striving and moving forward.