

Community



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FOUNDATIONS FOR LITERACY



An Interview with Write to Read BC representatives Robert Blacker, Project Leader and Shirley-Pat Chamberlain, Project Co-Leader, as well as Louise Ormerod, Education Manager and Principal at the Gitsegukla Elementary School.

In 2007, two men drove together on the Sea-to-Sky Highway to Whistler: Robert Blacker, a former police officer, and the Honourable Steven Point, a former Provincial Court judge and the 28th Lieutenant Governor of BC – the first Indigenous person to hold this position. As they chatted on the drive, Point asked a simple question that would launch the Write to Read BC initiative. Point knew that Blacker was part of the Rotary Club, and asked, “What is Rotary doing in your backyard?”

Blacker realized that although Rotary excelled in supporting global efforts, they had no projects in British Columbia. They were sending books overseas, but there were many communities much closer to home that also needed books and literacy resources.

After visiting many remote Indigenous communities as Lieutenant Governor, and seeing that they lacked literacy resources, Point had a vision to bring books and supplies to these communities. With the help of Blacker, Rotary, Indigenous leaders, and committed

community members, something very special began. Blacker says the process of starting Write to Read BC was like, “the creator guided us on this path: it was a river, and we went with the flow. We had a lot of twists and turns, but the bottom line was that we both agreed to see how we can make it happen.”

Blacker oversaw organizing Rotarians, and Point consulted with Indigenous leaders and chiefs – both groups were excited by the possibilities. The excitement culminated in an evening hosted by Government House, which provided an event space for Rotarians to meet the Honourable Steven Point, and hear about the proposed idea to bring books and supplies to the most remote Indigenous communities in BC.

On this evening, many things came together to seed the success of the organization. Blacker met a ‘newbie’ Rotarian, Shirley-Pat Chamberlain, who has gone on to be the Co-Lead of Write to Read BC and an integral part of the team. Other Rotarians that were inspired by Point’s vision wanted to lend a hand, and this group

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of committed individuals began supporting BC communities that needed it the most.

Now, after many years, Write to Read BC is a well-established organization that includes volunteers with career experience as librarians, architects, builders, educators, and engineers. They have executed 23 literacy centres across the province, each of which looks different because every community is unique and requires a centre catered to their specific needs. Blacker explains, “To be very honest, we don’t have a strategic plan because our communities are our strategic plans – they’re the ones that will tell us where we are going.” Write to Read BC works in equal partnership with Indigenous communities. The

community guides them and tells them what they need, and the volunteers ensure that it happens.

Throughout the years, Write to Read BC has connected with communities in many different ways. However, it is common for Blacker to receive an email that asks, “Are you still doing libraries, Write to Read?” This is exactly how he connected with Louise Ormerod. Blacker recounts, “We clicked: I knew what we needed to do. I had been to the Gitsegukla community two years previously, and I knew the challenges that the community was facing, but we never had a strong champion there. And that’s the real magic elixir, that champion – Louise was our champion.”



Louise Ormerod's Story About Write to Read in Gitsegukla

Photo courtesy of Google Maps

In Northern BC, nestled in the sweeping landscapes of the Skeena Valley where the Kitseguecla River joins the Skeena River, is the community of Gitsegukla. The Nation is made up of about 500 community members, with a Health Centre, Administration Office, and Elementary School. The Gitsegukla Elementary School is the centre of the story told by Louise Ormerod, the Education Manager for the Gitsegukla Nation.

Just a few years ago, Ormerod retired from the Coast Mountain School District No. 82 and moved to a place close to her heart – Princess Lake. Her retirement lasted seven days before she received a call from the Gitsegukla Nation asking her to join the Elementary School as the Principal and Education Manager.

Ormerod visited the school, and could feel that the school had a strong cultural connection to the community but was struggling due to a lack of stability: in the last three years, there had been five different Principals, and the position had been vacant for a year and a half. To add to the tension, there was an impending Independent School assessment. It was here that Ormerod jumped in. The assessment identified 21 violations, but she was determined to mitigate these, and to improve literacy scores.

Ormerod recalls, “We had 21 violations before us, and we needed to get through these as a team. There were so many violations, and our reading level had plummeted before I arrived. There were students exiting the school to go to a different school – they were losing their student population.”

Ormerod had to address this issue, and through her connections at the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) she got in touch with Robert Blacker from Write to Read BC. “I contacted Bob,

Building New Opportunities

The new library also became a community resource. Louise hired someone to open the library to the entire community from five to seven o'clock. Youth can go in with their family or adults and elders can find resources specifically for them or to use the computers. There were a lot of people that were coming into the Elementary School's little library. The demand for resources was significant enough that this past January an old learning centre, that had been vacant the past six to eight years, was secured to be revitalized to house the adult learning resources. They were able to increase the number of adult resources they had, procure more tables and computers for the new adult learning centre.



Photos courtesy of Write to Read BC



and it just took off from there. We had a couple of hiccups along the way because of COVID-19. We were supposed to work on the library resource center in the spring of 2020, and of course COVID-19 restrictions hit in March, so we had to postpone. There was a small window in August that year where everyone was feeling comfortable, so Bob and his team quickly got up to Gitsegukla and unloaded the books.

“We got shelves, we got a TV, we got computers, we got a big, beautiful board table – the whole library was redone. I had some people from the community and teachers help. It went really smoothly.”

That first semester in fall 2020, Ormerod and her team worked hard on reading with the students. There was a push to get grades and reading levels up again for the Independent School assessment. The new library came at the perfect time to promote both reading and the school. In January 2021, three BC government employees came to do the assessment and, upon completion, told Ormerod that the school had zero violations, and that reading levels were up 400%.

Ormerod said, “That was the biggest indicator of success to us, that what we had been doing with the library and the resources – with the support of Write to Read BC – supported those improved reading levels for our students.”



Shirley-Pat Chamberlain, agrees that the ‘magic-elixer’ to installing a new literacy centre is a community champion. “Like Louise, they help steer the project, but also help to continue and sustain it. Write to Read BC can help with maintenance, but it is truly a community effort to keep the centre running.” Chamberlain adds that the literacy centres, “are community-based, and are meant to be intergenerational spaces and places of healing. They include not just books; some of them include cultural artifacts and cultural resources as well.”

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Write to Read BC literacy centres are where community and school come together; they may be built in schools and open at certain times to the public, or they may be in community-accessed spaces that can be used by local schools. In one case, a Write to Read BC centre was turned into a high school so that students could have reliable access to the internet while studying remotely during the COVID-19 lockdown. People living in cities may not realize that BC is one of the least connected places on the planet, and the opportunity to have a space with consistent internet access was crucial for students during the pandemic. Chamberlain explains that the literacy centres can also connect people to post-secondary education opportunities. “The library, or literacy centre, has become the key community space in many places. I’ve seen the young ladies who helped us set up the library doing their own upgrading with university courses via the technology and the interactive television that is provided.”

Many of the libraries established by Write to Read BC have become an important, vibrant part of the community, providing a place to learn and connect. Centres hosting book clubs are becoming very popular, and with partnerships like Good Minds Books and Supporting Indigenous Libraries Trust, communities can obtain multiple copies of books and eliminate the need for participants to purchase copies, making activities accessible to everyone. These programs help to embed the centre in the community, weaving it into

the cultural fabric of the place. Chamberlain notes that Write to Read BC is, “not adding to or stressing the capacity of the communities.” Write to Read BC might first go into an existing space like a school or band office, and from there they ask the community to decide where the literacy centre would be most helpful, creating a successful cultural and community connection with the literacy centres.

The team at Write to Read BC have three literacy centres in the planning stages, and recently received a request from a community in the Yukon. They make it easy for the communities involved by taking on the brunt of the logistics, construction, and implementation, and they are ready to set up more centres. As Blacker puts it, “Our team has always said we will never say no – we will always say yes.”

To connect with Write to Read BC, visit their website: writetoreadbc.com