

The Heart of the Community

by

Andrea McComb, BCPVPA

sharing the voices of

Dan Duncan and Becky Puterbough

SD 58 (Nicola-Similkameen)

**Dan Duncan and Becky
Puterbough are Principals
in Merritt, BC, and on
November 15, 2021,
they awoke to a
city-wide evacuation order.**

**They tell two stories of
leading through a natural
disaster in the midst
of a pandemic.
They are stories of believing
in the good in people, and
how schools are the heart
of the community.**

For Dan, with Merritt Central Elementary's proximity to the river, flooding seemed imminent. As information was issued over the radio, people were waking up and trying to figure out what to do. For many, the first phone call was to the school. All through the day, people were reaching out for help in navigating the decisions before them. Dan realized how significant a role he would be taking; he would not be a bystander.

The news did not hit Diamond Vale Elementary in the same way. The school was not so close to the river, so when the news came that schools were being closed, Becky thought they would be back in class in a day. So, even returning several months later, there is still a message on the board from that morning saying that Diamond Vale has closed for the day. Becky arrived just to make sure that no students turned up for school, and one did. It was lucky that she was there. Even then, it never crossed her mind that the school would flood that day.

The whole town was put on evacuation order; it was real. The sewage plant was overflowing, and the river was rising. It was a couple of days later when Becky heard that the water had reached her school.

School district meetings began immediately. People were scattered across multiple communities. Staff reached out to all of the families. Once they knew everyone was safe, they began to offer other supports. Care and support took many forms: meeting people where they were, providing gas cards, groceries, and basic items, and offering transportation. The people who were lucky enough to have a vehicle helped get people to shopping areas, to pick up medicines, and to get loved ones to medical appointments.

The surrounding school districts were amazing, and they were a big part of keeping the school connection. Some districts quickly accepted students. They offered space, and they had clothing, toy, and book drives; a donation centre was formed very quickly. Schools organized gym nights and craft times so

students and families had an opportunity to see each other and connect with some of their teachers. This created a sense of normalcy, even though they were not at home. These schools became the source of connection for our displaced communities.

After nine days, the first people were allowed to come back. The transition back to their homes and town happened in five phases. The district supported the setup of a food bank and a huge donation center. There was a lot of planning, and there were many meetings. The leadership team was meeting on a daily basis to think about what things would look like as the different phases returned, and how they could continue with a very soft form of education until they were back in their school buildings.

If you were given a day to salvage what you could from your school, and you did not know exactly where you were setting up a school or for how long, what would you take? The three older classes in Dan's school were relocated to old middle school that held the district's discarded furniture. Between Christmas and Spring Break, the other seven classes were set up in two churches in town, Crossroads and Evangelical Free. After Spring Break, Dan's school was finally reunited. Becky's school was split

between three sites. The logistics were worked out for busing. Becky knew they were all – one day – returning to Diamond Vale Elementary, and so they needed to keep the feel of being part of the community of Diamond Vale while joining the communities of Merritt Bench Elementary, Nicola Canford Elementary, and École Elementaire Colletville. Once Dan's school was together, teachers worked to create a welcoming learning environment with makeshift desks from odds and ends of discarded furniture in the old middle school.

Then the time came to welcome the kids. Dan shares that, "After six weeks of missed school, there were a lot of happy people, a lot of gratitude and hugs, and a lot of amazement. One parent said, 'I can't believe you've made this work. Just, thank you, this is amazing.' So many people reached out, and the gratitude made it worth it. It felt like Merritt was coming together. There was a recognition that, despite some of the obstacles, kids were at school, and they were where they needed to be."



A kindergarten teacher set up a mini school in her house for 7-8 primary students that live out her way.

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The Type of People in the Education System

Dan and Becky shared their respect and gratitude for so many in the education system, starting with the District Office. “They took care of people first, and they would work out the details later. They responded so quickly to families and staff; the question was always, ‘What do you need?’ They sorted out so many logistics, all while being displaced themselves and working out of an old bakery.”

They spoke of the generous hearts and work ethic of school staffs. If people were able, they were contributing, supervising a gym drop-in, helping people shovel out their homes, driving people to medical appointments.

They spoke of how the families are so appreciative of all of the work schools were doing to stay connected. And, they are grateful to the communities that wrapped Merrittonians with care and supports while they were displaced.

Dan said that, “If these amazing people weren’t in the gym playing indoor soccer with kids, they were at other people’s homes throughout town shoveling out mud, freezing, getting cold, and getting dirty. People were extremely quick to help, which is no surprise in the education system. That’s what we do. The glue and giving that comes from the education system, that is why the story is so important.”

The Role of Connection to Support Mental Health

Connection created a sense of normalcy. Craft time, gym time, Bingo nights, Strongstart, pop-up neighborhood schools, and multiple phone calls and texts were the ways people found to come together.

Diamond Vale Strongstart at the Thompson Hotel in Kamloops



Ewa Olguin is the Strongstart Coordinator at Diamond Vale Elementary, and she evacuated to Kamloops. In the Thompson Hotel she noticed many families from Merritt, so she started a meeting time with students each day in the lobby to colour and connect. The hotel could see the importance of the kids connecting, and offered them space in the Conference Centre. Ewa sourced donations from the Salvation Army, United Way, and Merritt’s White Bear Daycare for snacks, juice, and craft supplies.

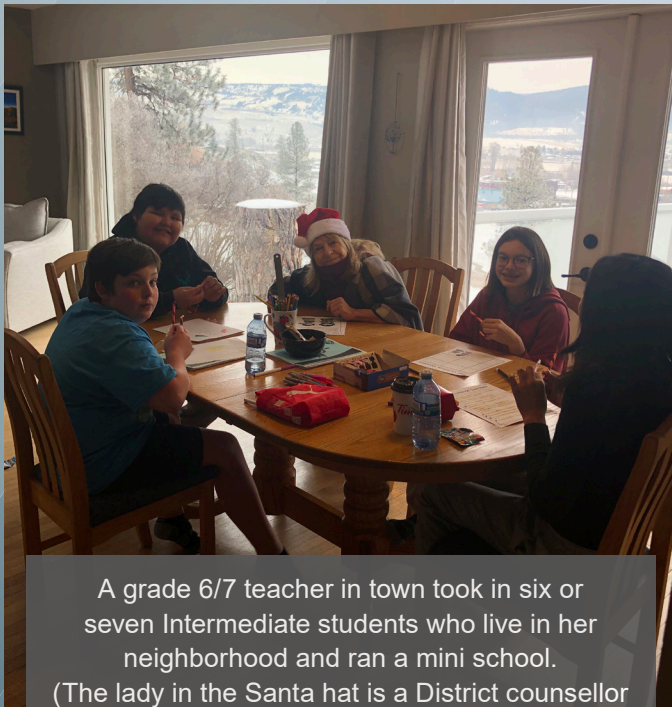
From the Merritt Herald (December 7, 2021), the article “Web of Kindness” brings Merritt kids together in Kamloops.



7 staff, including Becky and Dan, help community member on left to muck out her basement on November 28, 2021. The community member was then made a Vice-Principal of Central Elementary on December 1, and instantly begin looking after others!



Pictured left to right:
Taylor Morrison, Dan Duncan, Alison Kuzio, Merrill Livesey, Natasha Omori, Natasha's Dad JC,
Becky Puterbough, Lindsay de Visser, Jamie Van Haaster, Natasha's Mom Bonnie



A grade 6/7 teacher in town took in six or seven Intermediate students who live in her neighborhood and ran a mini school. (The lady in the Santa hat is a District counsellor who stopped by the house for a visit)

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There was an understanding that not all staff were in the same place, some staff had lost their homes, and were not going to be home for months, and many of them are still not home. Right now, schools are here for mental health support.

District level mental health counsellors were brought in to work with people who were impacted the most. At the school level, district counsellors organized a sharing circle for staff to have the opportunity for everybody to talk about their experience. It was really powerful to hear how it impacted people differently.

Becky added, "It's knowing that kids are going through a hard time, that staff are going through a hard time, and being gentle and trying to understand that we all did experience a similar event, but that the levels at which we experienced it are very, very different. And the length of time that we experienced it for was also very different."

The BCPVPA is deeply grateful to Dan Duncan and Becky Puterbough for sharing their remembrances of this experience that was extremely difficult, but which left in its wake the inspirational sense of community that keeps us together.

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BECKY PUTERBOUGH

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DAN DUNCAN



Junior Boys Volleyball: The Panthers

"When Merritt citizens were evacuated, members of the community went to areas they felt were best for their families. This included the members of the volleyball team, and some of these boys were in Kamloops, Kelowna, Salmon Arm, and Prince George, to name a few areas. We began to receive numerous calls from multiple districts in the Okanagan offering us their gyms, fields and whatever else we needed to ensure that teams could still practice. With help from the parents and a coach who was committed to their success, the team was able to compete in the Junior Boys Provincials in Revelstoke. The boys placed third — a feat no boys' volleyball team at MSS has ever accomplished!

For the boys who played, it was to have fun, and for the fans, it was celebrating the strength and resiliency of their community."

Gian Cavaliere
Vice-Principal/Athletic Director
Merritt Secondary School