

Conference teaches students about global issues

By Teresa Carey

MLA Peter Bjornson made a guest appearance at the Manitoba Council for International Development (MCIC) conference, held at the Waterfront Centre in Gimli on Feb. 9, 2011.

The conference, entitled "Making the Grade: Girls and Boys in the Global Classroom," saw Grade 5-9 children from numerous communities (Arborg, Gimli, Riverton, Teulon, Selkirk, Lockport, Lac du Bonnet, and Koostatak), taking part in the one-day conference.

Students were there to become informed about global issues affecting girls and boys in underdeveloped countries, such as politics, economics, gender inequities, child labour, water and sanitation, and how these impact education. Students were guided through a series of exercises and games, moving through four stations, each with a specific set of hands-on activities and lessons, with boys and girls given gender-specific tasks.

At the "Child Labour" station, girls were asked to assemble widgets, under strict quality control conditions. They were required to complete the entire task, and could only "go to school" when they completed their work. They learned what it may be like for their counterparts in other countries who must work, and who may only go to school after they contributed income to their households.

Near the end of the day, Bjornson played a part of "celebrity guest" in a game show,

called "Are You More Concerned About Your World Than a Seventh Grader?" (A take-off from the television show, "Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?").

There were three categories to the game: Barriers to Education, Education and Gender, and Working Together to Make the Grade. Students drew on the information they learned throughout the day. Bjornson was given the standard game show options, such as to "ask the audience."

Bjornson also gave an address to the crowd. He talked about democracy, what it means and why it is important.

"It is something we take for granted here. It's something that is very precious and important," he said.

Bjornson used the analogy of deciding on pizza toppings to illustrate his point. He asked for two volunteers to come up to the front of the room. Only one of them could have a say as to what toppings would go on the pizza they would share.

"Well, it is pepperoni and anchovies for both of you," he said, tying the metaphor to the value of voting in elections.

"The biggest challenge...is apathy. During the last election there was just over 50 per cent voter turnout. I'd rather have 100 per cent voter turn out, and have 50 per cent spoil their ballots—because you send the message. How many of you would be comfortable in having someone else decide who will [be elected]?" Bjornson asked.

The conference was one in a series of five



Photo by Teresa Carey

Girls working at the "Child Labour Station" at the MCIC Conference in Gimli. Their task was to assemble pieces under strict quality control. Once completed they could then "go to school."

"Generating Momentum for Our World" conferences. Other host communities include Winnipeg, Morden, Beausejour, and Strathclair.

The MCIC's mandate is to promote public awareness about international development issues. It is a coalition of organizations who are committed to issues of respect, empow-

erment, and self-determination for all people; development that protects the world's environment; and global understanding, cooperation, and social justice. The MCIC has almost 40 members which include UNICEF Canada, World Vision Canada, Save the Children, and various high-profile church organizations.

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