

# Stars are the limit for new group at ECI

Interactive conference on global issues inspires students to take action

By **CANDY IRWIN**  
for South Mountain Press

Be aware everybody - inspiration has struck and it's definitely contagious.

When Erickson Collegiate Grade 8 students Skye Rees, Diana Dawson, Vanessa Lariviere, Kyra Rattlesnake and Dorothy Courchene were specially chosen to attend a conference in Strathclair on March 9, they weren't quite sure what to expect. The goal of the conference, called "Making the Grade: Girls and Boys in the Global Classroom," was to raise awareness about global issues and to encourage students to go back to their schools and communities and share what they've learned. And that's exactly what happened.

Rather than just taking in information, those in attendance at the conference engaged in activities that made real for them the plight of children in other countries who are denied an education because of the situation or culture in which they live. For example, the students had to physically move heavy jugs of water to fulfill a daily quota before they could begin their day.

Hauling water, said the group from Erickson, was tedious and difficult. The girls felt firsthand what it might feel like to be in that dire situation, being unable to focus on anything else until basic needs are met. They learned that there are a staggering 218 million child labourers in the world today.

## Frustrating experience

The group participated in another exercise, where girls, who knew the answers to questions asked, were denied the opportunity to answer, simply because they were female. The students from Erickson felt, in a very real way, the discrimination that is an issue for millions of young women in other parts



Erickson Collegiate Grade 8 students, from left, Skye Rees, Diana Dawson, Dorothy Courchene, Vanessa Lariviere, and Kyra Rattlesnake display a unique wooden tea set that will be raffled off in conjunction with a fundraising tea on June 3 sponsored by the newly formed STAR (Students Taking Action for Rights). Proceeds will go toward the construction of a new orphanage in Haiti.

of the world and the experience left them feeling "frustrated at being treated so unfairly".

Together they learned that poverty is the biggest barrier to achieving an education. When you have to worry about the most basic of needs like clean water, nutritious food, safe shelter, clothing and health care first, education is quite far down on the list.

So, when Rees, Dawson, Lariviere, Rattlesnake and Courchene returned to school, they formed a group called STAR (Students Taking Action for Rights). They were firm on their goal, which is to take action on global education issues. "We wanted to create and support change by working together to raise money to help those in need," explained the girls.

But where to begin with

such a massive issue? Through their Grade 8 teacher, Mary Dalton, the STAR group learned more about the value of education in ending the cycle of poverty experienced in countries such as Haiti. Dalton's family adopted a little girl named Beatrice from Haiti in 2000 when she was six years old.

Beatrice's brother, Wesley Francois, and his wife Jusna, operate a registered Haitian charity called, "Organization d'Aide pour la Connaissance des Enfants Haitiens" and they are in the process of building an orphanage called The Little Bouquet Children's Home.

## Powerful philosophy

That was just the sort of concrete project that STAR needed to focus their efforts on. They engaged in a telephone interview with Fran-

cois, who at the age of 16 asked a Canadian missionary to sponsor him to go to school. "We were touched by Mr. Francois' philosophy regarding the importance of education," said the girls.

My heart was touched,

too, when the members of STAR explained to me that "the stars were the limit" in their hope to help promote equality in education worldwide! So, all sorts of plans are afoot and South Mountain Press readers are personally invited to participate and support STAR's cause.

The five girls who comprise STAR are hoping to involve the grade 7 and high school students in their school and perhaps the grade 7/8 class in Onanole School. They are hoping to make a presentation at Erickson Elementary School, too, "to keep the inspiration going."

## Public support

To support the group's efforts, members of the public are invited to attend a "Tea For Haiti" on the afternoon of Friday, June 3 at the Erickson Collegiate gymnasium. In addition to tea and dainties, those in attendance will be treated to a performance by the Junior High Band and an art display and have the opportunity to purchase a variety of craft items.

STAR will also be raffling off a unique, carved wooden Haitian tea set sent to the school by Francois. Proceeds from the raffle and craft sale, as well as money from a silver collection and donations at the door will all go to help

with the construction and furnishing of the much-needed orphanage.

I asked the students how they would feel when they meet with success, which I am sure they will. Their answers were heartfelt: "I will feel motivated to keep going." "I will feel awesome." "It will be really fulfilling." "I will feel a sense of achievement if I can improve someone's life." "I will remember that our lives are privileged compared to others."

Do you feel proud? I do. And, I'm not going to miss that tea.

Candy Irwin writes from her home in the Lake Audy area. She can be reached at 848-7354 or email [candy@ridingmountain.ca](mailto:candy@ridingmountain.ca).

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