



Guyana project a life-changer for Johns

[JACKIE CARMICHAEL](#) / Westerly News

September 17, 2013 10:02 AM

A trip to Guyana brought a new calling for Gord Johns.

The Tofino Chamber of Commerce director's vacation to the second poorest nation in the Americas brought revelations – and a new project he hopes to share with friends on the West Coast.

“We can stay interconnected internationally,” he said over lunch at SOBO, recounting how he shook off the resort temptations of golf and tennis, seeking out a connection through Canadian organizations that match volunteering executives with Guyanese charities needing a hand.

“You can make a difference for a very small amount in developing countries,” he said. Johns was intrigued by Guyana's unique demographics – with a population of just three-quarters of a million, most of those descended from African and east Indian slaves, South America's second poorest nation (Haiti is the poorest) is home to an English speaking population.

Help came from Ann Geer, a Guyanese woman with a Canadian background, who suggested Buxton Youth Developers.

Over the last decade, Buxton, the most desperate and crime-infested area of Guyana, was in the grips of “Fine Man”, a strongman connected to the country's major drug trade.

“This is a Hollywood movie – every single Guyanese will tell you, ‘Don't go to Buxton,’” Johns said.

The terrorized community saw hopes fade and prospects crumble; children stayed away from school, and single mothers fought to take their streets back.

Amidst the chaos, a community champion named Robin Phillips set out to save the children of Buxton. Armed with a bell and a megaphone, he strode the streets of Buxton at great personal risk from – and under the very nose of - ruling thugs.

“Come learn, kids. Come to the school!” he yelled.

Phillips pieced together BYD's educational program on a shoestring, combining sport and culture, a winning combination, with school in the day for 50 high-risk students, and after-school programs helping dropouts get back on track..

“The program's really about bringing them back in the fold. It lifted their children and it changed their lives, on a \$6,000 a year program,” Johns said.

“Robin is the most motivational person I’ve ever met ... He says God has given him a gift, and he feels grateful to be able to do such a humanitarian job,” Johns said.

The organization uses well a neighbouring sandy sports field filled in with a gift from New Zealand and \$30,000 from the “Canada Fund.” BYD’s meagre operating costs have come from corporate donations that will run out in 4 months. With the help of dedicated volunteers and people like respected national sports leader Lenny Shuffler, BYD has changed the fate of the high-risk children of Buxton, Johns said - but more partners are needed to continue the good work.

“They need people that want to be a part of the solution,” Johns said.

“It inspired me to see the selflessness of these individuals and their commitment and dedication,” he said. “It’s important to share that spirit and energy and try to support them here.”

Johns’ partner, Jennifer McSporran, is the Canadian consul for Guyana.

“She’s my inspiration,” he said, citing a lifetime of volunteer service over and above an illustrious diplomatic career.

McSporran has led her own two children in volunteer work, which has inspired Johns to involve his children in helping others as well, he said, adding that you don’t have to look far to see that needs exist for children here in Canada as well as across the globe, he said.

“Children have lost hope, children live in poverty,” he said.

BYD runs out of funding in December, and Johns is asking West Coasters to help raise \$12,000 to fund the basic program for two years. He’s holding a potluck at his home Sept. 22 from 4-6 p.m. at 1318 Lynn Road in Tofino to raise funds and awareness of BYD and how much impact just a little money can have.

Johns said he’d like to see West Coast youth get involved as well.

“It’s a really good project for youth in our community help people somewhere else on the planet,” he said.

“You can’t not help kids everywhere in the world that you know need it,” he said.

Just \$500 would fund the entire BYD program for a month.

“We can (help BYD) without it draining our resources and taking away from local initiatives here in our community,” he said.

editor@westerlynews.ca

© Copyright 2013