

# Canoe trip gives youth life skills



Nathalie Heiberg-Harrison/INNSL photo

**Inuvik's Bryanna Storr, 16, left, and Karlie Robert, 17, paddled 460 km along the Peel and Ogilvie rivers. Six Gwich'in youth and two adults with the Leaders of the Day organization made the trip, which is designed to give youth leadership skills and confidence.**

## Twenty days, 460 kilometres and a two-day portage through traditional lands

by **Samantha Stokell**  
Northern News Services

For six Gwich'in youth travelling the Peel and Ogilvie rivers through the Yukon and Northwest Territories, the 20-day journey proved to be as transformative as promised.

Along with two instructors from the Leaders of the Day organization, the youth paddled their canoes on the Peel River, just past Eagle Plains on the Dempster Highway, to the Ogilvie River and up to Fort McPherson's Happy Landing on July 31, just in time for the Midway Lake Festival.

The 20 days in the bush, through the Aberdeen Canyon, past the cliffs of Peel Canyon and along the Yukon border, gave youth a truly exceptional journey.

"It was one of the biggest challenges of my life and it was an amazing challenge," Bryanna Storr of Inuvik said.

"I paddled 460 km and I feel fabulous. You never

know what you can do until you do it and you're never as strong as when you doubt yourself and then have to use your strength."

Their strength was needed for a two-day portage, with 80-pound barrels or a canoe on their backs. The portage was through Aberdeen Canyon to avoid rapids that were too dangerous for the rookie canoeists.

"It's the toughest portage in Canada," said Kelly Henderson, an instructor for the trip. "They went through swamps with water up to their thighs, through the bush with gear and tents on their backs. And then they paddled for eight days."

For the other Inuvik youth on the trip, Karlie Robert, that portage was also the most challenging part, but the experience was worth it.

"It was amazing. I learned to love the land and support it more and treat it with respect," Robert said. "Anyone who thinks about signing up should definitely do it, even if they have a job. They should take the month off. You'll learn more in a month on the trip than a month on the job."

Before the trip started, 10 youth had originally been scheduled to travel, but because of summer jobs, they didn't join the youth made up of Gwich'in from the Beaufort Delta. The trip was supported by the Gwich'in Tribal Council, who wanted the youth to see their traditional lands.

"It was an opportunity for them to challenge themselves and see what they're capable of," said Mary Ann Ross, vice-president of the GTC. "They were put under extreme pressure, physical and men-

tal, and they had to figure out as a team how they're going to accomplish things. I think they discovered a lot about themselves."

That's the entire goal of the program. Co-founder of Leaders of the Day, Jonathan Carroll, recognized the skills that can be gained from extended trips into the wilderness.

Youth learn to be leaders by deciding when to eat, daily paddling schedules, where to set up camp, and in doing so, gain confidence.

Every night after paddling, the group discusses the challenges, how they overcame them, who they appreciated in the group and who they had trouble with.

"It's not just travel for travel's sake.

They're aware of who they can become in this experience," Carroll said. "They're free from distractions of drugs, alcohol, TV, iPods, telephones. Away from the distractions of life, they can find out who they are when they're not searching for the next rush."

Now that the trip is over, Storr and the other paddlers have changed for the better. She feels better able to deal with challenges waiting for her in the rest of her life. "The one really tough portage, with 80 pounds on my back, four to six kilometres and with my partner carrying a canoe, I just thought, I don't want to do this," Storr said. "But I did it and what I'm taking home is that I'm not going to get anywhere if I don't push through."

Organizers are planning another trip for the summer of 2012. For more information visit the Leaders of the Day website.

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