

[By Vicki O'Brien]

It sounds like quite a responsibility

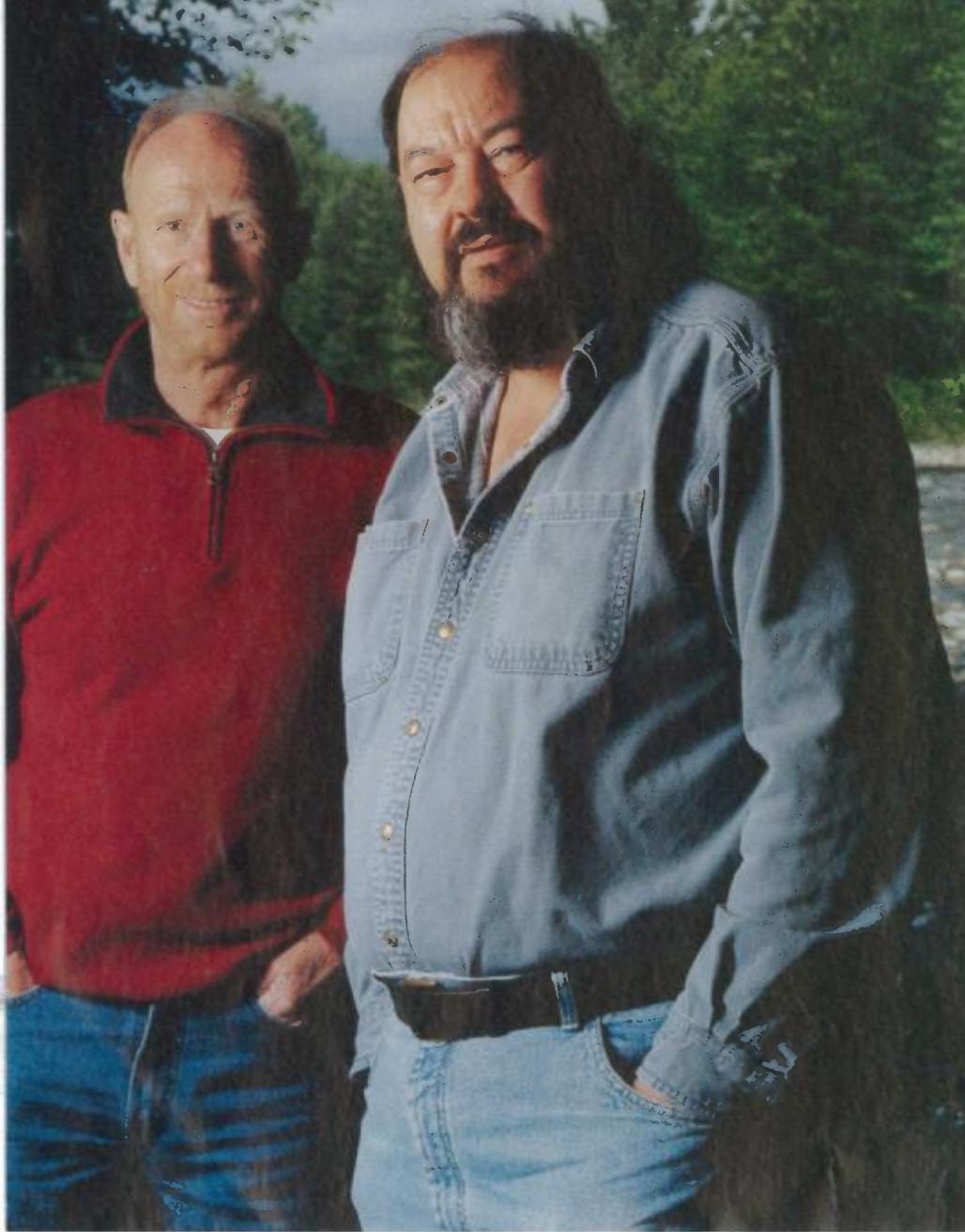
being a role model for an entire generation, but Derek Loots doesn't mind. A disarmingly open 27-year-old sporting a backward baseball cap, a firm handshake and an impossibly wide smile, Loots is about to enter the final year of a civil engineering degree at UBC. Every time he hits the books, Loots is reminded that he and those who come behind him represent the future hopes of the Kaska Dena people, a First Nation whose traditional land covers more than 24 million hectares in British Columbia, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. ¶ Today, he and other young Kaska may have a future, thanks to the foresight of his elders – and the work and dedication of two men who come from literally the opposite sides of the world. ¶ Dave Porter is a legend among his own people and other First Nations, and a force to be reckoned with by governments and corporations anxious to cash in on the northern resource bonanza. A former radio journalist, aboriginal activist, high-level bureaucrat and elected politician, at age 50 he has shed those skins and returned to his roots. ¶ Martyn Williams, 57, is one of the world's top wilderness adventure guides, leadership trainers and motivational speakers. Although British-born and -educated, Williams is a man who knows the northern land and its people and is an expert at reaching troubled aboriginal youth. ¶ Together, the two men have created a model, one which could help the Kaska First Nation forge its own destiny, reshape the future of these northern lands and have a positive impact on Canada's geopolitical landscape. The goal: to turn unmotivated, unskilled young people into talented wilderness guides ready to participate in the coming boom in wilderness guiding and cultural tourism in Kaska country.

we can change the
world

Wilderness adventurer Martyn Williams and aboriginal leader Dave Porter figure they're part of the solution to the cycle of alcohol and despair of the Kaska Dena youth of northern B.C., Yukon and the Northwest Territories

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Porter and Williams believe the Kaska's future does not depend on its immense traditional lands or its wealth of natural resources, but on the progress of its young people. While they know it could take years to achieve significant social shifts in high-risk aboriginal communities, they plan to stay the course. "We have to," says Porter. "If jobs aren't found for our rapidly growing young population, the social and civil disruption in our communities here in the north, right across Canada, and in our urban centres is too frightening to contemplate."

The Kaska First Nation is a young one. Demographically, most Kaska are aged 15 to 30 with a lifestyle revolving around TV, video games, drugs and alcohol. Home is a remote group of communities still struggling with troubling social issues such as poverty, high unemployment, broken families, violence and addiction. Few Kaska complete high school, let alone university.

Five years ago, concerned for future generations, Kaska leaders embarked on an ambitious project to salvage their children. The plan: to re-energize traditional culture, reconnect young people with the natural world, and while turning them on to life, educate them on land management and resource issues. Guided by a new style of aboriginal leader, such as Porter, the Kaska believe a wider world view is vital if the butterfly of self-governance is to emerge strong and successful from the stultifying cocoon of state dependence.

For Porter, the first step was to start an annual summer environmental youth camp for teens, where the classroom is the great outdoors and their teachers are tribal elders, and business and community leaders. The second step: to engage the nation's unemployed twenty-somethings and give them the 'hunting' skills necessary to survive in the modern world. Not to become clones of the southern white world, but something uniquely Kaska. That's when Porter sought Williams's expertise.

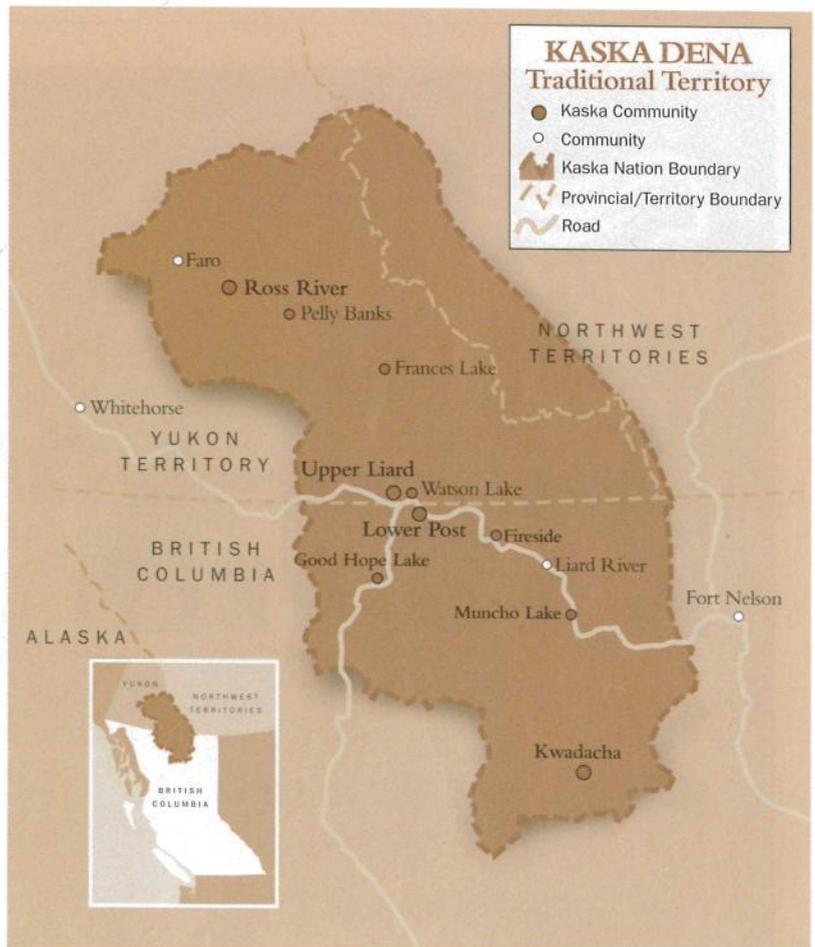
Together they designed a six-month program to get their unmotivated, unskilled young people off the couch, out of trouble and into the world of conservation and tourism. It's a tough, hopeful experiment, now in its second year, already making a huge difference for a generation that had more or less given up.

"I feel as though I was meant to do this work," says Williams. "I've had a great life. I've worked with people who are very rich and also communities that are extremely poor. Now I believe my future is helping young people understand how they can shape the world. Most of them simply aren't in touch with that idealistic part of themselves."

Derek Loots is living proof that encouragement and a strong sense of direction can create leaders out of disaffected youth and break the cycle of self-destruction. He faced his own demons before finally opting out of a high-risk social life. He went to live with his father in Vancouver while finishing high school and continues to live there while at university. Meanwhile, Loots returns home in summer breaks to work as a leader in the annual youth camp targeting at-risk high school students. "It's great to be part of something so positive," says Loots.

Kaska country is a vast wilderness cradled between the coastal and Rocky Mountains, the glacier-draped peaks a jaw-dropping backcloth for lofty plateaus, pristine lakes, rivers and open plains. It's home to more than 2,000 Kaska Dena people, a nation of five B.C. and Yukon communities sharing kinship with the great Navajo and Apache nations of the American southwest. Stunning country this; revered by preservationists for its place in Canada's huge boreal forest mantle; admired by the hardest of travelers and hunters for its haunting natural beauty and richly varied wildlife . . . and lusted after by governments and developers for its incredible wealth of natural resources.

Diamonds, copper, palladium, gold, zinc, oil and gas, and quality timber are all here in profusion in a land that is lush and welcoming when cloaked in its summer glory, but stark, frigid and inhospitable



[leadership]

in the long, dark winter months, when temperatures routinely hit -40°C and only the bravest souls venture out on skidoos for the hunt.

In the midst of Kaska country is a wilderness gem, twice the size of Vancouver Island. Like most British Columbians, you've probably never heard of the Muskwa-Kechika (MK). At 6.3 million hectares, MK is North America's largest publicly administered special management area. Also known as 'the Serengeti of North America', it is home to thousands of animals of every stripe.

A treasure chest of nature, Muskwa-Kechika is a vast network of protected areas surrounded by legislated buffer areas where environmentally sensitive industrial activity is permitted, and wild land zones in which mining and wilderness tourism is allowed. Set up under B.C.'s former NDP regime, locals worry that the MK's future is less certain under a Liberal government committed to re-evaluating provincial resource management.

Essentially nomadic people, the Kaska used to live along their trap lines, moving throughout their traditional territory hunting, fishing and gathering edible vegetation according to the seasons. With construction of the Alaska Highway, permanent communities emerged as Kaska found work in forestry and mining. It was in this early settlement period that children were wrenched from their parents and sent to residential school, which in turn spawned a dislocated, dysfunctional generation whose relief invariably came from a bottle.

Over time, a slump in the fur market, plus increasing unemployment, poverty and inadequate housing added to an already fractured society. What was once a proud family-centred culture was shaken by an epidemic of violence and addiction.

Despite creative new healing initiatives underway today in the Kaska community, the fallout of residential school still threatens the health and safety of a new generation. Separations and divorces are

on the increase. Instead of hunting, trapping and playing sports throughout the long, tedious winter months, most Kaska youth prefer to stay home, watch TV and play video games. Cocaine is currently the drug of choice.

According to Derek Loots, young people can earn good money for short-term seasonal work in logging, construction or the oil industry – and just as quickly blow it all partying.

The Kaska are now fighting to break that cycle in a long and complex journey towards cultural renewal and self-government. Elected officials head the nation's two negotiating arms: the Kaska Dena Council in B.C. and the Yukon Nations Council in Yukon. Dave Porter is leading the B.C. talks.

I catch up with Porter in a modest suite at the Holiday Inn in Vancouver, where he seems to be a permanent fixture. This afternoon he was at Starbucks on his way back from a meeting and plunks two lattes on the table in his slightly chaotic home away from home. A charismatic bear of a man who wears his long hair in a knot and sports a somewhat shaggy bush of a beard, Porter is patient and extremely media savvy.

One of 14 children in a family living in the bush near Lower Post, Porter was sent to residential school at age six. Four years later, after his parents separated, he ran from a violent new stepfather. He eventually ended up in a Whitehorse group home where the Danish/First Nations couple who managed the home unofficially adopted him. "Having people who cared about me completely changed my life," he says.

Over the years, five of his siblings and many of his friends succumbed to alcohol. It is in their memory that Porter works tirelessly to improve the lot of Kaska youth.



CONGRATULATIONS
TO THE MEGAHAIR FAMILY ON
20 YEARS OF
BUSINESS FROM THE HEART



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CONGRATULATES
THE MEGAHAIR FAMILY ON
20 SUCCESSFUL YEARS
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J O I C O

Porter's call to leadership came quite young. Despite his own problems, he was always the one representing his peers at school. He excelled academically and while still in high school joined CBC Radio to cover northern aboriginal issues. While enrolled in pre-law at university, he was tempted off track to chair the brand-new Northern Native Broadcasting (NNB) initiative.

In the early 1980s Porter was elected to the Yukon Legislature, later serving in the first NDP government in several Cabinet posts. After leaving the legislature, he soaked up the bureaucracy in a variety of positions within and outside government. In the 1990s he completed his mainstream 'education', leading the Fur Industry European Lobby on behalf of Canada and the U.S., and serving as the first oil and gas commissioner in B.C.

Now, armed with an impressive resumé, Porter returned home as national negotiator for the Kaska Nation. About self-government he is adamant: "We are willing to share our resources with others throughout Canada and the world, but unlike the past it cannot cost us anymore," says Porter. "From now on we will be full partners in development and it must be sustainable."

In 2002 he was elected chair of the Kaska Dena Council, with a special commitment to preserve traditional culture and create opportunities for young people. It's probably Porter's biggest challenge to date. Unemployment stands at between 70 and 80 per cent in Kaska communities and in several communities homes still house up to 10 people.

Even as seven-year-old Dave Porter was dreaming of escape from residential school, a world away in the northern Liverpool suburb of Anfield, 14-year-old Martyn Williams was

having a very different dream: one day he would climb the world's highest mountains. Failure never occurred to him.

While at university in Wales, Williams honed his climbing skills in local mountains and elsewhere in Europe, but continued to dream of bigger peaks. When he read that teachers were needed in B.C. and Yukon, he opened up a map and listed all the great mountains in the region, beginning with Robson, Assiniboine and Cline. Within a matter of weeks he was hired by the Yukon government to work in the Kaska community of Ross River, six hours by dirt road from Whitehorse and one of the coldest places in North America.

Back in 1969 the Kaska lived in log cabins, with no running water, hauled their own wood and primarily survived on moose meat. Williams says he was lucky, his cabin had electricity. Over time he gained his students' trust and while teaching standard academic skills, also taught them to canoe and rock climb. In turn, the children showed him how to hunt, trap and handle a dog team. On weekends he traveled the region, becoming an expert on the wilderness of B.C., Yukon and the NWT.

Two years later Williams left for the comparative metropolis of Whitehorse. Based on his experience with the Kaska, he was handed the school district's 'troubled' kids, primarily aboriginal, with learning deficits, behavioral difficulties or anger management problems.

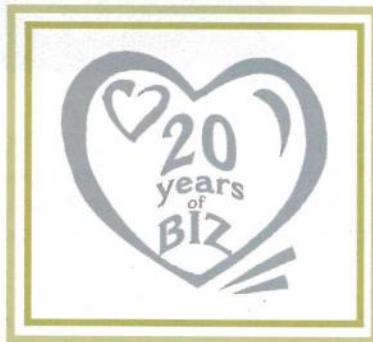
"They were barely communicative and quite disconnected from their heritage," Williams recalls. To get through to them he focused on interests such as trapping, while teaching them about making money with bottle drives and similar activities. He also worked with them on self-esteem issues. Gradually they figured out they would need academic skills, like math and reading, to do what they wanted in life.

Despite the resulting happy kids and parents, not everyone in the system appreciated Williams's unconventional approach. Eight years



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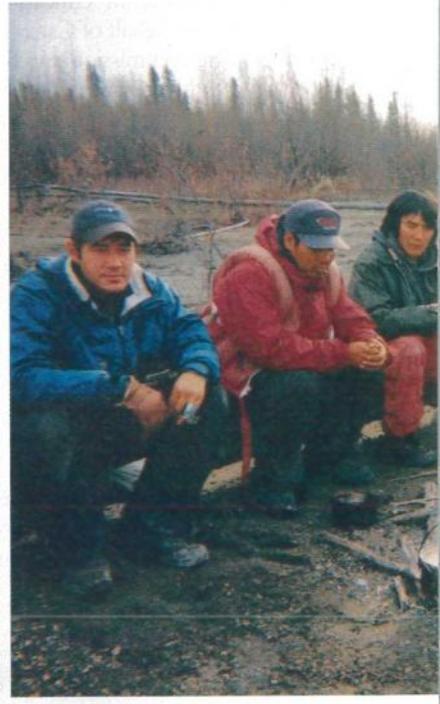
[leadership]

later, after a change in administration, he quit in frustration to become a full-time guide in the Yukon where he built up a lucrative river-rafting business. While working with a regional environmental group he met Dave Porter, who impressed him even then as “a young firebrand” already articulate and outspoken in his early 20s.

The two occasionally crossed paths over the years. Porter watched as Williams conquered Everest and both Poles (see *Extremely Motivated*, page 153) and Williams followed Porter as he climbed the different, but no less challenging, mountains of

support came from Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC) and local businesses.

That summer Williams attended the Kaska’s youth camp, met with elders and leaders, and began planning his wilderness program in earnest. He aimed to remove his group from the pressures of popular culture and immerse them in the natural world. “The wilderness has the ability to give people life skills in a very rapid way,” says Williams. “In this setting, where there are no physical boundaries, young people can quickly get a strong sense of themselves and who they are.”



reshaping the future

“The wilderness [can] give people life skills in a very rapid way. Where there are no physical boundaries, young people can quickly get a strong sense of themselves and who they are.” – Martyn Williams

Clockwise from left; Derek Loots is intertwined with the Kaska youth; living off the land; a first aid volunteer; next winter’s dinner; finding themselves on the Frog River; getting the skinny on a moose



politics and government. In 2001, while brainstorming a way to ramp up his youth initiatives, Porter concluded that Williams was the answer: “Martyn is one of the top wilderness guides in the world and an incredible human being. I thought he was the best person to reach our kids and motivate them.”

Porter caught up with Williams at 100 Mile House, enlisted his support (“Well, I didn’t really have to think about it too hard,” says Williams) and began planning for the first Kaska wilderness guide training program. Along the way, Williams introduced Porter to his friend, fellow climber and long time supporter Yvon Chouinard, founder of outdoor clothing company Patagonia, who agreed to help the Kaska with seed funding and a donation of clothing. Other

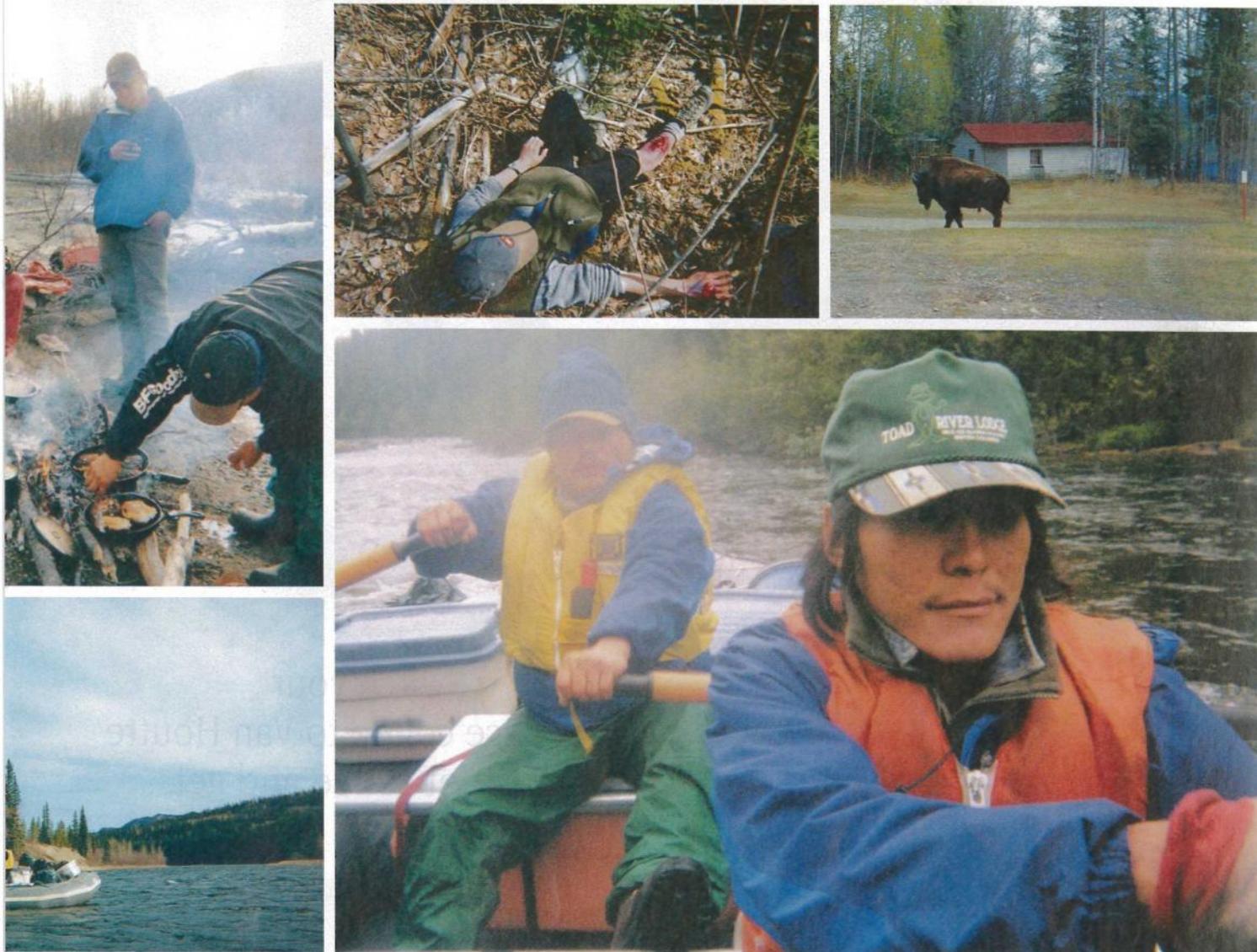
Last year, 16 trainees with educations ranging from Grade five to 11, headed for Liard Hot Springs, a scenic spot three hours north of Fort Nelson, where they would live outdoors in tents for the next six months – no drugs or alcohol allowed. In fair and foul weather, and it can be really foul up north in winter, they underwent an intensive cultural re-awakening with tribal elders involving hiking and wilderness camping, learning a broad range of traditional skills such as identification and use of medicinal plants, hunting, fishing, snowshoe construction and cold weather survival skills – important skills their grandparents weren’t able to teach their parents.

Williams then introduced first-aid, water safety, trail-building, orienteering, map and compass reading, rock climbing, canoeing and

river rafting. It all included overt and subtle exercises in confidence, self-esteem, teamwork and leadership development. A third component took place inside a walled tent classroom where the group learned business and communications skills: how to design and present a business plan, how to market themselves and their wilderness programs and how to communicate with international tourists. At the end of the program, Williams helped students build a canoe out of spruce trees and canvas and paddle it 150 kilometres down the icy Turnagain, Kechika and Liard Rivers. It was an amazing

This year Porter and Williams are working with Capilano College on a second wilderness training project involving the Tlingit, Tahltan and Squamish First Nations. They are also seeking funding to take a group to Costa Rica where the indigenous people have learned to profit from a boom in eco-tourism.

Porter's passion for communications could also play a role in the big picture. Under his guidance, the Kaska are developing an ambitious multi-media internet portal, the Kaska Traditional Knowledge Network (KTKN), which is capturing history and traditional values from tribal



achievement, which thrilled the entire Kaska community.

Yes, there were a couple of dropouts, admits Williams, but for those who remained it was a life-changing experience. They learned important life, social and business skills that in some cases have already translated into guiding jobs.

In the near future the Kaska hope to open a lodge in Liard Hot Springs and employ their graduates, running guided tours and river raft trips through the region's pristine wilderness. A first deal fell through last year after two years of negotiations, when the federal government delayed funding and the vendors lost interest. But Porter and Williams, with typical tenacity, are investigating other options. Funding, as always, is the biggest challenge.

elders. While historically theirs is an oral-based culture, this is changing in the name of progress. The KTKN's database will one day contain detailed resource mapping, geological and environmental information that will be an invaluable tool for land use purposes. While most Kaska are not yet computer-literate, Porter hopes to see a computer in every home, linked together by a high-speed broadband network.

"First Nations can't afford to be a casualty on the information highway," says Porter. "To be equal partners, we must participate in the communications industry. Getting connected will help us educate our people, retain our culture and better manage our land and resources. We think it's about time we controlled our own destiny using all the tools available to us." □ ►

[leadership]

Extremely Motivated

Martyn Williams is the first person to lead successful expeditions to the three extremes: the North and South poles, and the summit of Mount Everest. One of the world's foremost adventure guides, he was co-founder of Adventure Network International, the first company to guide private expeditions to the Antarctic interior.

On a hiatus from extreme guiding, while living in New Mexico and operating an organic food business, Williams experienced an epiphany of his own. He had a dream that he could make a difference in the world and inspire millions of people to take environmental and



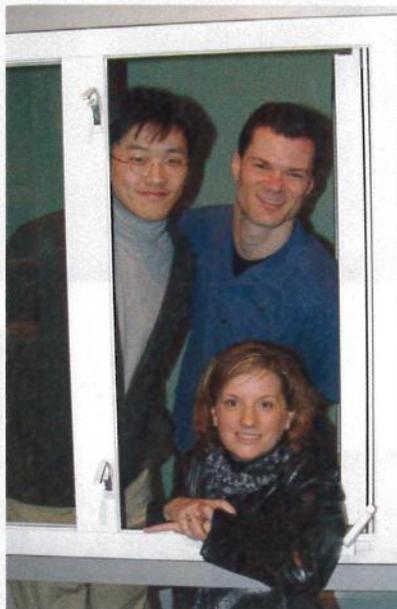
humanitarian action. After wrestling with a number of options, Williams decided on the 'Pole to Pole' project, a journey never attempted before: to trek from the North Pole to the South Pole in one go.

Not only did Williams complete the journey, he did it with a group of inexperienced young people from seven continents. The entire project took two years and involved nearly 71,000 km of skiing, trekking, cycling and kayaking through North and South America. Along the way, the team helped with environmental clean-ups, wildlife habitat protection and projects to support the homeless. It sent a strong message to youth and school groups following the journey via the internet that they have the ability to change their world, literally and figuratively, one step at a time.

Building on the success of Pole to Pole, which is the subject of a Korean TV documentary and soon a book, Williams plans a second expedition in 2005. This time he shouldn't have to subsidize his dream with more than \$200,000 of his own money. A group of investors and corporate sponsors are supporting his vision for world change and footing the bill. ■

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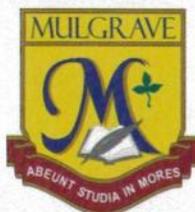
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