

FEATURE

Making development a challenge

BY ANDREW MACDONALD

AS A CANADIAN, the chance to travel to a developing nation is an exciting and challenging prospect. It is especially so if you are afforded the opportunity to really learn about and experience a completely new culture.

To take full advantage of our time abroad it is important to know how to communicate and cope with situations, according to the local customs. It takes some time to become comfortable with cultural sensitivity, but once attained it provides for some remarkably interesting experiences.

Last year, from March 8 to May 26, I travelled to Guyana, South America with Youth Challenge International. The team was an international mix, involving challengers 17 to 25 years of age from Canada, Costa Rica, and Guyana. The three months were an intense period during which YCI completed 23 medical, scientific, and community service projects. Much of YCI's success depends on the philosophies and ideas before, during and after the projects. After a very intense selection weekend participants are faced with the challenge of fundraising \$3 000, as well as equipment procurement and the many dreaded needles involved in immunization for medical safety.

With major financial aid from Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and sponsorship from within Guyana, YCI was able to fund an extensive set of projects. Challengers procured paint, tents, chainsaws, computers and carpentry tools, as well large donations from Nissan, Steve Bauer Bikes, and Tilley Endurables.

Fundraising is a very important part of the program. It allows challengers to become comfortable in talking to sponsors about YCI and the objectives of the project. In tough economic times it is a chance for participants to show some imagination in anything from winter bike-a-thons, raffles and movie nights to approaching corporations and local business for financial support.

Last spring, having completed my prepara-

tions for the journey we flew to Georgetown, Guyana where field staff had been organizing headquarters for nearly a month. The entire group spent two days on renovations to the Georgetown hospital before travelling down the Essequibo River for a four day orientation session at Shanklands Island. Challengers broke up into project groups to learn proper use of the ATV, chainsaw and zodiacs, as well as seminars on safety, hygiene and footwear.

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The team, now in four mixed international groups, began traveling to projects across the county. Included in this movement were teams working in the far south studying the remote Wai Wai Indian tribe, a scientific bat project in the north, and our project to the northwest of Georgetown in the Amerindian community of Akawini. Thirteen of us, including British nurse Jayne Heffernan and Guyanese anthropologist George Simons, used van, boat, truck, canoe and foot to reach the village.

Once there, we attempted construction, medical work and anthropology. We had diverse and ambitious goals, such as the building of a 100-foot dock to facilitate access from the Akawini River to the health centre and primary school. We also built a dug-out canoe to transport schoolchildren from the upper village to the lower, each day. Our team lodged on the upper floor of the health centre, cooking our meals on open fires: a great deal of rice and noodles, sardines, local fish and pineapple.

After a month at Akawini our projects were complete and we moved on to the East Indian community of Canal #1. YCI had already been on site for three weeks, repairing fire damage to the Two Brothers Primary School. The team

completed the project with the guidance of four skilled carpenters, paid for with money raised by a community fair. Challengers and local volunteers managed to rebuild the burnt-out section, paint inside and out, build new outhouses, a fence around the cricket pitch, and a footpath over the canal.

My final project involved a month-long medical and anthropological hike through the Pakariama mountain range, where our team preformed inoculations in remote Amerindian villages. On April 25th we flew from Georgetown on a small charter aeroplane to the interior village of Kato. Making a base camp there, we travelled to the villages of Itabac and Kanapang on the Brazilian border. After four days on this route we returned to Kato to re-outfit and depart for Kurukabaru, the highest village in Guyana. On this journey I was lucky to spend a great deal of time with Mr. Simons studying Amerindian burial sites, native instruments and customs. Our travels brought us to Kaitour Falls: at 741 feet the highest single drop in the world, and a presence I will never forget. Soon after it was time to return to Georgetown, and just three days later our flight to Toronto.

Once back in Canada my time was spent developing pictures and a slide show, in order to show my sponsors what the experience was like and what we accomplished. This is part of the fourth challenge, the commitment to YCI after a project is completed. Thus far, I have taken on the role of YCI representative in Halifax. As a King's student I have attempted to spread awareness of YCI, with a great deal of support from the school media at both King's and Dalhousie. I feel very strongly about cross-Canada representation on YCI projects, and my goal is to continue to promote and organize East Coast selection weekends.

A very important point which I stress to all potential challengers is the excellent philosophy with which YCI selects each field project. The team works with local on a community-identified project: in this way YCI attempts to research projects months in advance, ensuring community support. Generally, YCI looks for equal representation of local volunteers and challengers on the site. If possible the community is also responsible for providing shelter and some meals for the challengers. I found this philosophy crucial, and one which makes YCI a very special organization for which to work.

In August, this year, nine challengers from Eastern Canada will travel to Guyana for the third project of a five year commitment. Stephen Creaser, Jason Dodwell, Bruce Homer, Maria Patriquin, Maria Wesolkowska, Denise Shupe, Hope Moore, Rebecca Staunton and Hilary Sears were selected last November and are currently in the midst of fundraising.

Two weeks ago, Project Costa Rica I returned safely after a successful three months. The application deadline for Costa Rica II is Friday, March 27. If you are able to contact me by then, applications will be given time to reach Toronto for review the following week. I welcome any questions and applicants for both challenger and field staff positions. For more information contact Andrew Macdonald at 496-9431 or write to Youth Challenge International, 11 Soho St., Toronto, Ontario, M5T 1Z6. (416)971-9486. A final note is to advertise several upcoming fundraisers: Saturday March 28 is a dance-a-thon at the Grawood, April 1 YCI presents *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in the McInnes Room, as well as a raffle in early April.

