Memorial fund offers adventure

Fund established in memory of son exposes teens to empowering activities

by Michele LeTourneau
Northern News Services
Ikaluktutiak/Cambridge Bay

Empowerment through adventure is the focus of a fund to support Nunavut youth in memory of a special person.

The Ayalik Fund grows each month, a memorial to the love of two parents for their child.

Created by David and Laurie Pelly in the aftermath of the sudden death of their beloved son Eric Ayalik Okalitana Pelly, who they adopted as a toddler in Cambridge Bay, the fund is intended to provide what the Pellys hope will be empowering adventures for Nunavut youth.

Eric, 19, died of sudden cardiac arrhythmia in his sleep on Dec. 30, 2014.

In the 16 month's since Eric's death, the fund has sponsored five youths from Cambridge Bay – and plans are in the works for four more – to experience the types of challenging and rewarding opportunities the Pellys know helped their son grow into an accomplished young man.

At the outset, the young people the Ayalik Fund sponsors learn why they get to travel outside Nunavut, experience some of the world, and meet challenges head on.

"We have a teleconference and Donna (Olsen-Hakongak) brings them together in Cambridge Bay and I spend 15 minutes talking about Eric, about the Ayalik Fund. So they know. And the kids are moved by that. They understand they are celebrating Eric's contribution," said David Pelly.

"It celebrates his short life. He was going to do great things in life. He'd made it. He'd gotten through. It's tough. He's adopted. He came out of difficult circumstances. He faced a lot of challenges. He made it through them – through his own hard work, with our support, and with the opportunities these sorts of programs gave him."

> ***"It celebrates his short life."***
> *David Pelly*

In the summer of 2015, Shania Angohiatok and Ian Kavanna, the first two youths the fund sponsored, participated in a Rocky Mountain expedition with Outward Bound.

Kavanna, says Pelly, wasn't doing very well in school last year, and he was starting to skip school – not uncommon for a 16-year-old boy.

"He came back – and I'm not going to say the Ayalik Fund deserves all the credit or anything like that but who knows – he came back and he's a good student. He's coming in all the time. And at some point in the fall he volunteered to be in the mentoring program. Which means after school he goes over to the junior school and helps the younger kids with their homework," said Pelly.

'One kid at a time'

The Pelly approach is one youth at a time.

"Right from the start, and it was Laurie who put it into words, is we've got to target one kid at a time. We're not going to give money to the GN for youth programs. This is not what it's about."

Pelly says the criteria of the fund are important, adding it's about seeing their own potential, potential they may not be aware of.

"That's what it's all about. The high school is already sending its all-stars down. The high school already offers that opportunity. The kids who are shining students, the top-of-the-class students, are already going. That's great. Now we want to take the kids who would like to do it but don't really have the opportunity. It's not that they're not smart or anything like that. But they don't have the confidence to put themselves forward."

As an example of how one youth who finds their self-confidence, their self-esteem, who is empowered, and who then goes on to make a difference in others' lives, Eric himself is present. Just a while ago, the Pellys lunched with Eric's girlfriend.

"She said, 'There's something I need to tell you.'"

Pelly recounts the conversation, paraphrasing her words -- "Just a couple of weeks before Eric died, we were having a real heart-to-heart about where we were going to go with our lives. We really wanted to stay together. And he said to me: You know what's going to be really important to me? Someday I'm going to have enough money and I want to go back up to Cambridge Bay and help young people."

The girlfriend's revelation was astounding.

"How about that," asks Pelly. "She said this to us after we'd already established the Ayalik Fund. So we're doing … I mean he had no idea it was going to happen quite so soon. It just gets you. We're doing what he dreamed of doing. We're doing it for him. We did it out of our own personal initiative and motivation without knowing it was actually something he'd articulated."

This past February three youths – Sebastian Malone, Lee Ann Ekpakohalok and Ethan Gillis-Kaiyogana – travelled to Ottawa for a week-long national program designed to introduce senior high school students to their peers from across Canada and to their nation's capital.

This summer four more will join expeditions in British Columbia and Ontario.

Two will join a 12-day sea-kayak adventure at Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, while the other two will join a 12-day canoe trip in Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario.

"A couple of weeks ago (Donna) brought nine or 10 kids together in a room. She invited them. She said she wanted them to hear about a program that we think – we as in her role as a community worker – we think you might benefit from this," said Pelly.

Pelly spoke with the youth about his son and the fund started in his name, while Olsen-Hakongak presented the Outward Bound material, speaking with them about the personal growth aspect of the program.

"I think where it stands now is the kids are processing this. Out of this group of nine or 10, four will come forward one way or another. If we have more than four we won't be able to send them this summer – it's not a one-off thing. We've already got the money for next year," said Pelly.

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photo courtesy of Laurie Pelly

***This past February three youths** from Cambridge Bay – Sebastian Malone, left, Lee Ann Ekpakohalok and Ethan Gillis-Kaiyogana – travelled to Ottawa for a week-long national program, titled Encounters With Canada, thanks to the Ayalik Fund.*

Expansion planned

Currently, incoming donations exceed expenditures and is managed by Tides Canada, an organization which offers governance services to small foundations such as this one.

"We'd like to see this self-sustaining."

For now the youth come from Cambridge Bay, but the Pellys would like to expand.

There are more than 300 people on the donor list – each receive a personalized thank-you card from Laurie – and other donations come from groups that get together and fundraise.

On April 12, while Pelly was in Iqaluit, staff from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada presented the Pelly with a donation, as did Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. staff. A childhood friend gives his time as webmaster for ayalikfund.ca

As for the Pellys, their grief remains and always will, making their work on behalf of their son bittersweet, yet a part of their grieving process.

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photo courtesy of Jovan Simic

***Alain Grenier, left,** who works with Indigeneous and Northern Affairs Canada in Iqaluit, presents Laurie and David Pelly with a donation fundraised by staff for the Ayalik Fund.*

"The profound grief is very private, by necessity. People we interact with, quite understandably, they're living their lives. It's completely natural that everybody else has moved on, while Laurie and I are in the depth of sorrow. We have to bear that. Basically, it's a life sentence … Every day, all day. And we always will," said Pelly

"That's the private side of it. The other side of it is gives us a raison d'etre (the most important reason or purpose for someone's existence), to have this capacity to help other young people. That's why it's so important to do things in a way that sort of parallels the sort of things we did for Eric."