

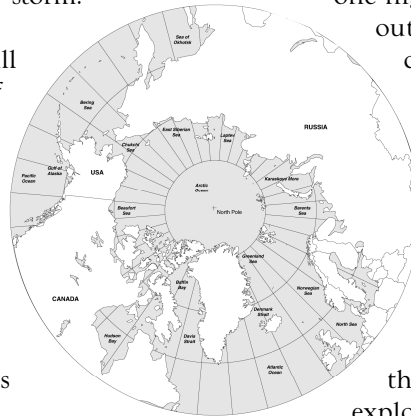
A Note from the North

by **Beth Mulloy**

Two years ago I was given the opportunity to research literacy in the circumpolar world. The project was to research literacy needs and services in the countries north of sixty. The researched material would be used for northern literacy programming and be the start of a relationship between learners and literacy practitioners across the circumpolar world. What was meant to be a short exploration has turned into a plod across the tundra in a snow storm. Languages, cultures and distances have been daunting obstacles. But through all of these challenges the original spark of inspiration lives. Does each research project begin with such a spark? I have always had a yearning to know how other northerners do things – what they eat, how they learn, their art, how they keep warm, everything! I think we embark on research to discover what information we need to push our stated agendas forward (in this case, how can we improve our literacy programming in the north) and to also satiate our curiosity. Perhaps research projects are like our childhood explorations that just grow bolder and bolder as we get older and more confident, feeding our natural curiosity about how the world works.

My northern childhood set me up to be curious about other northern lives. As I got older I would read about places like Siberia, Iceland, Greenland. They were all cold and dark, and yet the people looked happy, wore colourful clothes, chased reindeer and lived in family tents. They had hot springs that were so hot they could build a greenhouse over them and grow grapes all year long! The cultures looked rich and dense, filling the white icy wastelands with peals of laughter and bright colors. In contrast, my life in the north seemed cold and dark and all the time we just survived.

I was raised in various mining towns across northern Canada, places that were so remote that my recently immigrated English mother hung onto her sanity by building rock gardens out of tailings from the uranium mines. The north then stood alone. We went outside (south) to visit friends, shop and see delightful things. As a little girl I knew that in the south were the most generous trees in the world, they grew fruit, and you could just walk by and pick a piece of fruit, right off the branch. That was only one



of the many miracles – outside. Meanwhile on the inside we dealt with darkness, never-ending black days and nights, a harsh coldness that danced with the ice fog rising up from the open river. It was always said that the river, until it froze, was warmer than the air. At sixty below I wondered how warm the river could be. Sap froze solid, shattering the trees, gun shots in the cold, still air. Testimony to our isolation were the one highway out of town, the three flights out a week and the harsh climate that closed both down regularly.

My early life experiences created a curiosity about northern peoples and their lives. I seek a kinship, believing we are more the same than I can imagine. How we cope, live and experience the northern life is fascinating to me, climate shaping us, creating a commonality among people who have many differences. In the north we are just beginning to explore our circumpolar neighbors. Every time I receive an e-mail from any person living north of sixty I am thrilled – they exist! A little of the darkness from my childhood recedes.

The north has evolved and changed since I was a little girl. I have lived many different places and I now know that it is what we do in our environment that shapes us.

I expect I will be always looking at the north, wanting to know more. I was in the hot springs one day when a group of unusual looking people came in. They were from Russia. I was thrilled. A chink of light came through – these were our northern neighbors. They suffer through long, dark, cold winters and wear lots of furs and drink vodka. Given our histories it seemed impossible that I would be, this day, sitting in the hot springs with a group of Russians, neighbours coming to visit.

So I plod along, researching literacy in the circumpolar world, knowing all the while that what we are finding and sharing in literacy is only one part of my quest. Recognizing that in order for any research to be extraordinary it must be inspired by that personal spark of interest and the desire to know something, to look beyond the regular. Perfect, because I want to know who else is trying to keep warm around the fire in this frozen land. ■