



Creating Futures

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News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Winners of 2013 SSDEC Excellence in Education Awards Recognized

Recipients Announced at Annual SSDEC Staff In-Service

Hay River, NT – The South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) is pleased to announce the recipients of the *SSDEC Excellence in Education Awards* for 2013.

This year's *Program Staff Award* winner is **Ms. Marnie Villeneuve**, a northern-born and trained teacher at Paul W. Kaeser High School in Fort Smith. Described as *outgoing, compassionate* and *a true friend* by her colleagues and former students, Marnie excels at building motherly relations with her students, and students maintain the connection with her long after they have left her official responsibility. She is a northern born and trained teacher, a staunch supporter of Northern and Aboriginal education, and she has and continues to serve on regional and territorial committees and executives at the pleasure of various organizations.

The *Partner in Education Award* is presented to the **Wood Buffalo National Park - Sweetgrass Station Education and Outreach Program**, specifically recognizing the cooperation, commitment and hard work of Parks Canada staff who work hand in hand with local DEA and school staff on this initiative. This project offers students from communities around Wood Buffalo National Park a unique opportunity to have an authentic remote wilderness experience. Students “unplug” from the modern world for four days and learn two ways of knowing the world: a traditional knowledge way through the stories of local Elders, and the ways of western science from their teachers and park staff. In the process, students learn about the natural richness of the Peace-Athabasca Delta and the need for good stewardship for land and water.

The purpose of the Excellence in Education Awards is to publicly recognize the sustained commitments and outstanding contributions made by staff, parents, and community members in helping to create the best possible futures for South Slave students. The *SSDEC Excellence in Education Award* is awarded annually to a recipient(s) nominated by their peers and selected from the following two categories:

- *Program Staff* – includes teachers, administrators, consultants and education assistants serving South Slave schools
- *Partners in Education* – includes support staff (eg. secretaries and custodians) parents, students, volunteers and other community members, groups, or organizations that work in support of student learning

2013 SSDEC Excellence in Education Awards Recipient Backgrounders attached

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SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL
2013 Excellence in Education - Educator Award

Marnie Villeneuve, Teacher, Fort Smith

It has been said that the best of teachers are those who teach from the heart. We can all look back with appreciation to those teachers who taught us well, but with gratitude to those few who touched our hearts. Those who always recognized and acknowledged our unique talents, and whose direct and encouraging words lifted our spirits, will long be remembered with a special fondness.

The South Slave Divisional Education Council is pleased to acknowledge one such educator with this year's Excellence in Education Award – Ms. Marnie Villeneuve. Marnie has touched the hearts of many students throughout her career with the SSDEC. Her kind ways, caring words and passion for helping others is a hallmark of her teaching and this has been recognized by others – friends and colleagues alike. In fact this award comes as a result of three separate nominations, two submitted by colleagues, and one by an Aboriginal community leader who is adamant that she should win. One nominator said this of Marnie: “She is a dedicated, committed teacher who excels in building relationships with her students. She maintains these connections once students leave her class and she actively draws kids to school.” The nominator went on to describe Marnie as “caring, dynamic and a HUGE asset to the school, the staff and community.”

Marnie was born and raised in Fort Smith, received her teaching certification through Aurora College, Thebacha Campus in Fort Smith, and after a stint in Inuvik she was fortunate enough to secure a teaching assignment in her home community, first as teacher at JBT Elementary School and then at the school from which she graduated – PWK High School in Fort Smith. She is truly committed to helping make the community of Fort Smith a better place to live and raise a family.

Her passion for teaching and building long and lasting relationships is offset only by her desire to get involved and make a difference in the lives of her students and the NWT as a whole. She was selected repeatedly by her NWT colleagues and continues to sit on the *Central Executive for the NWT Teacher's Association (NWTTA)*. She has also served on several committees promoting education and the teaching profession in the north. As an influential member of the SSDEC's *Homework and Student Skills Initiative* she co-authored the initiatives' seminal publication “*Help, It's Homework Time Parents Handbook*.” More recently she was one of 70 teachers selected by the Speaker of the House of Commons to attend the *Teacher's Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy* in 2011, at which time she was instrumental in establishing the first-contact between His Excellency, the Governor General of Canada and the GNWT-SSDEC that helped to contribute to His Excellency's visit to our region in the winter of 2012.

Few would dispute the fact that Marnie leaves an impression wherever she goes. Her enthusiasm and passion for life is boundless. Her dedication to teaching and to building strong bonds with her students has helped enrich the lives of those she has taught. The SSDEC is fortunate to have Marnie Villeneuve as a teacher at PWK and it is a great honor to award her with the South Slave Divisional Education Council's Excellence in Education – Educator Award for 2013.

SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL
2013 Excellence in Education - Partner Award

Wood Buffalo National Park - Sweetgrass Station Education and Outreach Program

Rob Kent, Superintendent, WBNP; Richard Zaidan, Visitor Experience Manager, WBNP

The Sweetgrass Station Education and Outreach program debuted in 2010 as a unique partnering arrangement between Wood Buffalo National Park and the Fort Smith District Education Authority. During two consecutive four-day camps, a total of 50-60 students travel to Wood Buffalo National Park's Sweetgrass Station in the Peace-Athabasca Delta each year. Sweetgrass Station is in a remote and authentic wilderness setting that necessitates travelling 1.5 hours by bus, then 1.5 hours by boat, followed by a 12-km hike.

This authentic on-the-land wilderness program uses engaging, hands-on activities to teach students the importance of protecting and preserving the land, water, history and flora and fauna of the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Wood Buffalo National Park. Students gain an understanding of the area's significance, the Delta's importance, and the interconnectedness of the areas rich cultural and natural heritage.

The WBNP delta is home to the world's last untouched ecosystem of wolves and bison, whose predator-prey relationship remains untouched for hundreds – if not thousands – of years. From 1955 to 1977, Wood Buffalo National Park operated a bison management and conservation program at Sweetgrass Station. Against the backdrop of eight-foot tall wooden corrals from that era, this education program uses stories, some told by local Elders, to share the area's rich and diverse historical and cultural significance. Sweetgrass Station is now a focal point for unique outreach, education and visitor experience in WBNP.

The experience is also infused with numerous opportunities for personal growth. Self-confidence comes from the accomplishment of backpacking 12 km along a wilderness trail more frequently travelled by bison and wolves. Participating in the trek and the camp's operations (e.g. filtering drinking water and helping others with chores) teaches students to become both self-sufficient and team players in a wilderness setting. The bond that grows between participants from a shared and challenging experience is one that continues long after they return home.

The program's remote location significantly increases the complexity of planning and delivery of the program. The Park contributes more than 800 hours of staff time a year to prepare and operate the wilderness site, and coordinate logistics for the camp's operations. While this is a partner award, it should be noted as well that a small crew of dedicated teachers at PWK High School in Fort Smith contribute considerable time to acquire food and supplies for the camp, hire boats, develop and deliver on-site programming, and chaperone and cook in camp as well. This small group of Parks staff, cooperating with a handful of PWK School staff (one of whom nominated this partner), remain committed to making the Sweetgrass trek and camp an experience that continues to enrich and provide lasting memories for more and more students.

Sweetgrass has recently incorporated internationally acclaimed astronaut, photographer, scientist and educator Dr. Roberta Bondar and her Foundation to implement for the first time in the north (with P.W. Kaeser High School), the Wilderness Bondar Challenge. The Bondar Challenge provides cameras to students in a unique learning experience – as a gateway to learning and advancing our overall understanding and appreciation of our interconnectedness with the environment. Capturing an image in

the environment that relates to some aspect of biodiversity, participants interpret the artistic components of the photograph that they have taken, challenging their imagination and creativity. At the same time, participants must communicate an understanding of the scientific elements of their photograph, related to the biodiversity theme. Images and accompanying artist's statements by winning PWK students are now a permanent part of the Foundation's Travelling Exhibition and Learning Experience.

Program participation is growing due to its success and popularity. The 2013 program will see participation from Alberta schools in Fort Chipewyan and Fort McMurray.

The SSDEC is fortunate to have partners like Parks Canada staff who are keen to work with dedicated teachers who go above and beyond to provide the best possible learning experiences for our students. It is an honor to award Parks Canada, and in particular the Wood Buffalo National Park staff responsible for the *Sweetgrass Station Education and Outreach Program*, with the South Slave Divisional Education Council's Excellence in Education – Partner Award for 2013.