

Kilimanjaro

Trevor Stokes

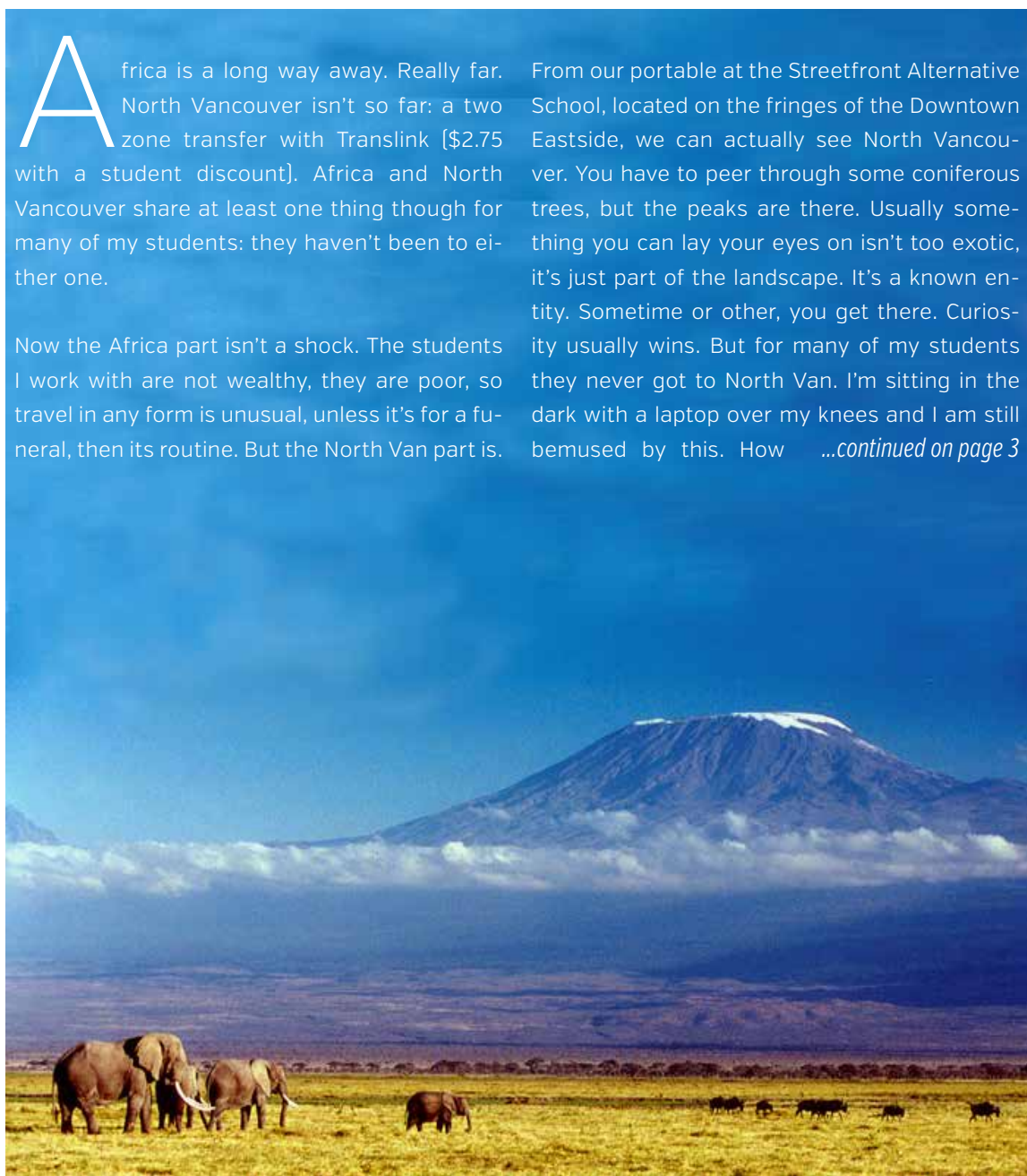
Africa is a long way away. Really far. North Vancouver isn't so far: a two zone transfer with Translink [\$2.75 with a student discount]. Africa and North Vancouver share at least one thing though for many of my students: they haven't been to either one.

Now the Africa part isn't a shock. The students I work with are not wealthy, they are poor, so travel in any form is unusual, unless it's for a funeral, then its routine. But the North Van part is,

From our portable at the Streetfront Alternative School, located on the fringes of the Downtown Eastside, we can actually see North Vancouver. You have to peer through some coniferous trees, but the peaks are there. Usually something you can lay your eyes on isn't too exotic, it's just part of the landscape. It's a known entity. Sometime or other, you get there. Curiosity usually wins. But for many of my students they never got to North Van. I'm sitting in the dark with a laptop over my knees and I am still bemused by this. How ...*continued on page 3*

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don't you get to North Van? Scared of bridges? I guess you don't get there if you don't need to go.

The world that my students occupy is tiny. For most, 90% of their travels will keep them within 40 square blocks. A trip to Metrotown is a big deal. Stanley Park? Most wouldn't be able to get there unassisted. The airport? That's laughable. Why would you need to go to the airport? Buses and your Aunt's car, that's how you get to a funeral in Fort St. John (getting back is an entirely different story). Almost nobody has walked around Kitsilano, been to the heart of Richmond, heard of Steveston, or chased the tide at Crescent Beach. That's OK. They are great kids and the lack of travel doesn't matter—to them—but it matters to me.

My classroom is littered with posters. Bob Dylan, Mark Rothko, A Clockwork Orange, Malcolm X, Stevie Wonder, Billy Mills, Sonny Rollins, Joseph Heller, and Rene Magritte to name a few. Each one has a purpose. They all mean a lot to me, but I have one poster that's more important than all the rest: 101 Places to See Before You Die. It's covered with snapshots of the magnificence of this world: Petra, Ephesus, Angkor Wat, Tikal, the Grand Canyon, Everest. This poster is the first thing I see when I come into work. You can't avoid it. It's staring right at you. I want the kids to be confronted with it every day, every time they walk to their lockers, change their shoes to go on a run, every time they try to break up the monotony of my lessons with the oh-so obvious bathroom break. I hope they look at these places and dream. I hope they have a tiny itemized list of their favourite spots—an ad hoc bucket list. Some have. Some haven't.

I got six postcards over the past 9 months from former Streetfront students. I cherish those

postcards. Frankie Joseph sent me one from India. Jericho Cowell sent his from England. Dylan Gauthier dropped it in a mailbox outside of Tokyo. Corey Mellor's arrived courtesy of Beijing. Tony Xie sent me two: one from Seoul and one from Shanghai. I was thrilled to receive these for a number of reasons: [1] the kids figured out how to save enough cash to get out of Van (no small feat); [2] the kids spent their hard earned money on the idea that it would be cool to see another country, and [3] they didn't succumb to that lassitude and quicksand that East Van can foster. Unlike so many of their contemporaries, they caught a glimpse of a world outside of their own. That's why the poster is on the wall.

This desire to have kids expand their thoughts and dreams led us to a monumental day about 18 months ago. I was in the office at Britannia Secondary talking with my Vice Principal, Dr. Andrew Schofield, about important, transformative things one could do with students: field trips, international travel, experiences to be shared, that sort of thing, when he blurted out, "How about climbing Kilimanjaro?" He's from South Africa and known for some hyperbole so I just went with the comment and waited for the next part of the conversation to surface. I soon realized he was serious. He felt that one could pull this trip off. You had to have the right kids, and it had to be the right story, but it could be done. He thought the Streetfront kids would be perfect for such an adventure. I wasn't sold just yet, but I was curious.

Taking kids on any field trip is getting to be arduous. Permission for approval, consent forms, arranging transportation, food; at times it's enough to just stay in the classroom. A snowboard trip to Cypress Mountain is one thing. Climbing a 20,000 foot peak in equatorial Africa with a bunch of inner-city ...*continued on page 19*



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alternative students? That's something different. As we Googled and searched for other high school groups that had climbed Kilimanjaro, we found that this was almost uncharted territory. I found a private school in England that had taken a group of students a number of years ago. I thought I had found a private school in Ontario that did it, but upon more research found that some instructors did it to fund raise for the school. So as far as I know, the Streetfront Alternative School could be the first high school group in Canadian history to climb Kilimanjaro! Remember, we are not talking about Upper Canada College or Crofton House, we are talking about some of the most disadvantaged and challenged kids in BC, bucking up and climbing a monster in Africa. Now I was really excited!

We chose Kilimanjaro as our first expedition because of its size and scope. Far too often at-risk students are denied the opportunities that other students are granted. Lack of resources and support leave them longing for the type of

students. They have already faced incredible challenges and obstacles and found the strength to climb those personal mountains. Our internationally recognized marathon running program (see Spring 2013 BCAEA Newsletter) has proven time and again, how when supported, the most at-risk students can achieve the greatest of accomplishments. I knew the Streetfront students would have the physical capacity and the mental toughness to tackle Kilimanjaro. We were going to do this!

We recognized early on that this could not just be a one-off trip, it had to have some staying power. We had to create a sustainable and lasting project that would produce outcomes that could be seen years, even decades from now. From this came the Street2Peak Project. In March of 2015, 18 students from Streetfront and Britannia Secondary School will travel to the upper highlands of Tanzania in order to climb Africa's highest peak. This trip is just the first in an ever-evolv-

life-changing experiences that are the privilege of the more fortunate. When deciding what the first trip would be—we could only decide on one thing—it had to be of such significance that the world would take notice of their accomplishments. This was nothing new for many current and former Streetfront



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ing series of expeditions that the Street2Peak students will participate in over the next decade. The purpose of these trips is to give disadvantaged students an opportunity to share their stories of struggle and success with the rest of the world and expose our students to those wondrous and beautiful lands outside of our inner-city borders. They will get to meet, firsthand, other indigenous youth from different countries and start to participate in a global conversation about what it's like to be a kid in an ever-changing and overly complex world. In so doing, we will be creating a leadership cohort that will take their experiences to students around the province, inspiring youth to believe in themselves and know that it doesn't matter where they come from—what matters is where they go.

The Streetfront students who embark on this trip are carrying a lot of baggage with them. They are carrying their personal stories of triumph and pain but they are also carrying with them the hopes and aspirations of all alterna-

tive students. They want to present to the world that they are capable of amazing things and are not defined by labels but rather by their accomplishments. Street2Peak will also be a catalyst for our community. Streetfront is located in the Downtown Eastside where tragedy and sadness often become the only narrative that gets heard.

Our goal is to change this. Some will say the story is about climbing a massif in Tanzania, but it's so much more than that. The real story is about kids believing they can climb the mountains they are to face in life and to not cower in their presence, but rather stand atop and breathe in the air that's reserved only for the brave. The mountains aren't going anywhere but my students are, and I can show you the postcards if you like. ♦

Trevor Stokes has worked at Streetfront since 1999 and is always looking for the next great challenge.

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