Championing children’s rights

By Monique Jacobs

Childhood is universal. Regardless of culture, social status, geography or any of the other differences separating human beings, we were all once children. Nevertheless, the rights of children are often perceived as secondary to other human rights or overlooked completely.

Dr. Philip Cook and Natasha Blanchet-Cohen of the University of Victoria are working hard to change that. Building on their extensive experience in promoting the rights of children, they recently established the UVic Institute for Child Rights and Development (ICRD), dedicated to making child rights a priority on the global agenda. The institute works to elevate the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) from rhetoric to implementation, essentially “breathing life into the Convention,” says Cook.

The CRC is an international treaty recognizing the human rights of people under 18 years of age. It is intended to ensure that nations provide child protection measures, access to such social services as education and health care, and opportunities for children to develop to their fullest potential. The Convention was ratified by every country except the United States and Somalia, making it the most widely recognized treaty in history.

The institute works in communities around the world to assist them in efforts to implement the Convention.

“The rights-based approach offered by the CRC changes peoples’ views of children. It doesn’t just focus on one aspect of children’s lives, but rather on the whole child in the context of family, community and culture,” explains institute coordinator Blanchet-Cohen.

Circles of Care, one current ICRD project undertaken in partnership with UNICEF, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the government of South Africa, works to build up community support for children affected by HIV/AIDS. It involves children and youth in identifying the most challenging problems, and developing solutions that involve the entire community in taking action.

“Our work promotes the Convention by presenting examples of good practice programs that encourage non-discrimination based on such things as gender and culture, and that view children as capable contributors to their own development, rather than defenseless victims,” says Cook.

The Institute, in partnership with Senator Landon Pearson, recently published a research handbook on best practices in working with sexually exploited youth in the Americas. Our From the Shadows (2001) summarizes successful global initiatives and presents an overview of the many factors involved in the exploitation of children and its impacts on both children and society. Through several case studies, the handbook offers examples of effective action in working with sexually exploited children and good practices worth imitating.

Other Institute projects include developing curriculum on child rights in education and fostering Aboriginal child rights through youth leadership programs. The Institute offers internship programs that send Canadian youth to South America to help local communities integrate youth initiatives. And Cook and Blanchet-Cohen are designing an accredited post-secondary program combining child care, environmental sustainability and experiential education soon to be offered by UVic with Malaspina College.

Cook sees child rights as the most pressing global challenge: “Children are like the canary in the mine,” he explains. “They truly are the first indicators of social toxicity and breakdown. There is a great need to involve children in partnerships to create healthier communities, and practical strategies are essential to bring real change to the lives of real children. This is what the Institute for Child Rights and Development is all about.”