



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.

Wayuu girls,
Venezuela.



EMILIE MANNET PHOTO

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



Phillip Cook, Anu community worker Maghaly Sylvia, and Natasha Blanchet-Cohen working together in Venezuela on an indigenous youth leadership project.

a research handbook on best practices in working with sexually exploited youth in the Americas. *Out 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."

facts from the EDGE

- In August 2001, the Institute for Child Rights and Development will host the *Second International Conference on Children's Rights in Education: Creating a Culture of Human Rights, Democracy and Peace in the New Millennium*. The conference at UVic will build on international efforts to foster greater respect and endorsement for child rights and development through education. Other participating organizations include UNICEF, Education International, the International School Psychology Association, and the Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. www.childrightsenducation.org/
- The Institute for Child Rights and Development is one of the newest additions to the family of organizations found at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies. Dr. Philip Cook was formerly the Director of UVic's Unit for Research and Education on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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- More information about the UVic Institute for Child Rights and Development is available on the Institute's Web site: web.uvic.ca/icrd/

- Several ICRD publications are available on the Web, including:

Starting From Strengths: Community Care for Orphaned Children (Report for IDRC, 2000): web.uvic.ca/icrd/pub_resources.html

Out From the Shadows. Good Practices in Working with Sexually-Exploited Youth in the Americas: web.uvic.ca/icrd/pub_resources.html

- UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, works for children's rights, survival, development and protection: www.unicef.org
- Convention on the Rights of the Child: www.unicef.org/crc/faq.htm
- The Hong Kong Committee on Children's Rights has an information-packed Web site: www.childrenrights.org.hk/4convent.htm

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**Roderick Haig-Brown, A Legacy
Through June 6**

Maltwood Art Museum & Gallery. Info: 721-6562

The exhibit features the life and times of this influential writer, conservationist, fisherman, farmer and magistrate. On display are first edition copies of his books, items from his prized fly-fishing tackle collection, and information and artifacts from the Haig-Brown house in Campbell River.



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