

Scholarships for children in foster care

Recipients of two \$500 grants a year to be selected by financial need

by Sarah Ferguson
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New scholarships aimed at helping NWT residents who have grown up in foster care to afford post-secondary education were officially launched July 14.

The Helping Children Soar scholarship fund, established by the Foster Family Coalition of the NWT, will award two \$500 scholarships per year to NWT residents who have grown up in foster care and are committed to furthering their education, said Tammy Krivda, executive director of the coalition.

"The message we are trying to convey by offering this scholarship fund is 'Yes, you can do it; you can move beyond your challenges and have a chance at an education,'" said Krivda. "The most important gift you can give a child is empowerment."

Pat Strus, the coalition's president, said the unique challenges a child in the North faces while growing up in foster care can make the challenge of completing post-secondary education more difficult here than for foster children in the rest of the country. She said a large number of the children in foster homes in the NWT have been exposed to alcohol, drugs and the atmosphere of addiction from an early age, and many more have a host of issues related to mental health as a result of emotional instability in their families.

"Most of these kids are in survival mode and are living from moment to moment. When I ask them about their education plans for the future, the majority haven't thought about it at all – they can hardly think about tomorrow, let alone an education; they just want to get out of school as fast as possible," Strus

said. "It's amazing that they finish school at all."

Strus described the founding of the scholarship fund as "a starting point" that she hopes will lead to more opportunities for foster children in the North.

The official launch ceremony for the scholarship fund was held at the coalition's Camp Connections located approximately 65 km northeast of Yellowknife. The annual summer camp is attended by 80 to 100 children and youth from foster homes in communities across the territory, said Krivda.

The Foster Family Coalition of the NWT was formed in 2001 and is dedicated to improving the lives of Northern children and youth in foster care, Krivda said.

BHP Billiton donated \$20,000 to the effort and established a partnership with the coalition to create the scholarship fund, along with the Yellowknife Community Foundation, whose initial donation of \$11,000 inspired the scholarship fund's creation, said Strus.

"I was at a conference in Alberta when the idea came up," she said. "A single mom who had been raised in foster care stood up and spoke about how it was taking forever for her to complete her degree, and how she was struggling. I thought that nobody who has lived in foster care in the North should have to struggle to that extent," said Strus.

"We base the awarding of the scholarships on who needs it the most, not necessarily on how high a person's grades are. We want to award them to people who are dedicated to their education," she said.

"Education should be a right for all, not a privilege for some."



photo courtesy of Pat Strus

Pat Strus, president of the Foster Family Coalition of the NWT, right, and Daryl Dolynny, from the Yellowknife Community Foundation, helped launch the Helping Children Soar scholarship fund at Camp Connections earlier this month.