



THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

Geoff Green
wants to save
the world.

So he founded
Students on Ice,
which takes
kids to the ends
of the Earth.»

BY MARGO PFEIFF
PHOTOS BY LEE NARRAWAY



PREVIOUS PAGE: Students on Ice expeditioners gather at the bow of their vessel, the Clipper Adventurer, as it cruises through the fiords of Torngat Mountains National Park in northern Labrador. LEFT: Limbering up for a day of hands-on learning, students perform sun salutations during a stern-deck yoga session.

The idea of SOI came to Green as a result of more than a decade of good karma. After attending a European student-exchange program in the 1980s, he began bumming around Switzerland and France. When he ran out of money, he charmed his way into skippering a yacht – a gig that stretched into several years. One connection led to another: He taught elementary school, then became a freelance expedition guide. On an Antarctic beach one day in the mid-90s, he had a revelation. Even his jaded older clients were awestruck by the polar regions – “so, if I could get kids into the greatest classroom on earth, it could inspire the next generation to do something to help the planet.”

With his typical unbridled enthusiasm, Green threw himself into fundraising, maxing out seven credit cards along the way. It paid off. Since 1999 he’s toured the Arctic and Antarctic with more than 1,700 high school and university students from 45 countries. Many hail from poor families – the sort of youths who, without SOI, would have been lucky to travel at all, much less to the poles. “The objective is to fire them up and turn them into polar ambassadors who will spread



ABOVE: Kids examine “bergy bits” stranded by the tide during a glaciology workshop in Prins Christian Sound, Greenland. LEFT: Simmi Sigmundsson of Iceland shows off the biggest char of the day in Saglek Fiord, Labrador.

the word when they get home,” Green says. And they have, initiating change as scientists, activists and community builders.

Every year SOI hosts one Arctic and one Antarctic expedition carrying dozens of impressionable 14- to 18-year-olds. Every second year there’s an additional Antarctic voyage for university students. While most SOI Arctic trips stay in Nunavut and Nunavik, this year’s trip began in Iceland. We would start with three days of bus travel, then sail for southern Greenland, northern Labrador and Arctic Quebec.

The red-eyed kids from 13 countries who flew overnight from Toronto to Reykjavik on July 23 were no ordinary teens. High achievers, many had already filled their resumes with environmental stewardship, activism and leadership roles. They were selected

“There’s been a change of plans,” expedition leader Geoff Green announces as he leaps onto our bus. “The president of Iceland has invited us to his house.” Our tour of the geothermal plant can wait. The bus reverses course and half an hour later we’re disgorging 72 teenagers at a complex of modest white buildings on a spit of land overlooking Reykjavik, Iceland’s capital. We stream past a small church and into the house of Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, the outspoken head of this tiny Arctic nation since 1996.

“Your timing is good,” the president says, welcoming us into his reception room. “The world has finally woken up to the importance of the North.” For 20 minutes, Grímsson speaks eloquently about Arctic oil-and-gas drilling, the importance of listening to aboriginal viewpoints, even how climate change is affecting “the third pole,” the Himalayas. “It’s not your fault, but you have to deal with it,” he concludes to the enraptured crowd. “I urge you to engage in activism.”

Hands shoot up and kids who just an hour earlier were horsing around in Viking hats now pose astonishingly intelligent questions.

“There are students in this room who aren’t from polar regions,” says Joey Loi from Markham, Ontario. “What can we do to help?” Another wonders: “Iceland has no military, police are unarmed and we came into your house – which doesn’t even have a fence – without passing through security. How is this possible?” Grímsson is an out-of-the-box thinker and his view on issues like public safety, renewable energy and global warming resonate with the kids. They’re all abuzz as we make our way back to the buses. Green is buzzing too. “Wow,” he exclaims. “The good karma is really flowing today.”

Green is the founder and director of Students on Ice, a unique ship-based eco-educational program that gives teens from around the world a first-hand look at climate change in the Arctic and Antarctic. They participate in scientific studies, attend workshops and have unfettered access to polar experts, from permafrost researchers to Inuit elders. This is only day two of a two-week expedition and already the kids’ minds are blown. In SOI, as it’s called, dropping in for a chat with a president is par for the course.



from hundreds of applicants worldwide, competing for dozens of scholarships to cover SOI's whopping \$10,000 price tag. "Eighty per cent are fully sponsored by governments, NGOs, philanthropists," says Chris Ralph, SOI's communications advisor. "The other 20 per cent raised the money themselves, doing everything from polar bear dips to bake sales."

Sponsors of SOI include the Prince of Monaco, the World Wildlife Fund (which put two Greenlandic and two Nunavummiut students on board), plus the governments of the Yukon and Newfoundland. To keep the dollars flowing, Green gives countless lectures. After one presentation, an older gentleman remained in his seat and called Green over. Introducing himself as Harold Snyder, a Manhattan businessman, he pulled out his chequebook. "How much would it cost to send one kid from every borough in New York on your Antarctic trip?" The Snyder Foundation continues to sponsor a Palestinian and an Israeli to join the annual Antarctic excursions, and every year they send two students from both Rhode Island and Tennessee to the Arctic.

Sponsors don't just come from down south. This year, the Arctic airline First Air covered travel for 20 students. Northern regional and territorial governments also stepped up, placing a particular emphasis on recruiting First Nations and Inuit students. As a result, the 2011 trip included 32 aboriginal youngsters from across Canada, the largest-ever contingent. "Many Nunavik students wouldn't get the opportunity to visit other Northern regions," says Barrie Ford of Makivik, Nunavik's Inuit land-claims corporation, which sponsored nine students this year. "SOI allows them to connect with youth from around the world. They share their own knowledge, have pride in their culture and make positive lifestyle choices."

The schedule is a whirlwind of hands-on experiences, all designed to hyper-stimulate young minds. The day after meeting President Grímsson, we visit Thingvellir, site of the world's oldest parliament, to learn about early democracy, and then get a visceral lesson in mid-ocean tec-

"SOI allows them to connect with youth from around the world. They share their own knowledge, have pride in their culture and make positive lifestyle choices."

Barrie Ford, Makivik



MAIN: Students on Ice participants pose for a group shot before the perfect backdrop: Saglek Fiord in Torngat Mountains National Park, Labrador. RIGHT: Celebrated songwriter Ian Tambyln helps student Michael Gardiner of Newfoundland work on a tune for presentation.



LEFT: Arctic animals provide "teachable moments" on Students on Ice expeditions. Here, a polar bear and her cub exit the waters of Nachvac Fiord in northern Labrador.

tonics while standing in the gap that's tearing Iceland in two as the Eurasian and North American plates pull apart. We listen to a lecture about geothermal energy – which supplies 90 per cent of the hot water and 25 per cent of the power to Iceland's 320,000 residents – as we watch Europe's most famous geyser (the word is Icelandic for "gusher") shoot fountains of sulphuric water into the air. At the Viking Ship Museum near Reykjavik, a colourfully costumed interpreter named Botvar demonstrates a low, growling form of Central Asian throat singing. With

some prodding, two shy Nunavut girls, Becky Okatsiak from Arviat and Robin Ikkutluluk from Gjoa Haven, join him in a moving round of Inuit throat singing. The social and cultural ice is beginning to melt.

"GOOOOOOD MORNING, students on ice," comes Green's trademark 6:30 a.m. wake-up call. We're now aboard the 100-metre-long, ice-class Clipper Adventurer, at anchor off the northwest tip of Iceland. After breakfast, we ride Zodiac boats to shore. Landscape painter Linda Mackey, founder of the Polar Artists Group, sets up an informal open-air studio in the grass for a workshop. The rest of us begin to hike slowly up the increasingly steep tundra hillside. Teenager Derek Gill from Memphis stares up at the mist-shrouded ridge. He'd never boarded a plane or left Tennessee before this trip, and this will be his first time hiking. He's not optimistic he can make it. It's a long slog, but when he peers over the ridge top at the ocean and bird cliffs on the other side, he shouts triumphantly, "I done it!" in his southern accent. "I'm not goin' down until I'm the last one." Like his fellow hikers, he has wet feet, blisters and is drenched in mist. He looks like he could burst into tears. »

As we enter calmer water alongside the pack-ice off Greenland the next morning, everyone hangs out on the stern deck for fresh air. Annie Petaulassie, a long-time Iqaluit teacher who leads sewing and handicraft workshops, is reciting an Inuktitut-alphabet song as she pens Toronto student Yaneev Forman's name in syllabics. He then writes her name in Hebrew characters and a lively discussion of alphabets ensues. Kayleigh Spencer, a Cree girl from Quebec, and Isabella Maliki Bruce,

an Inuk from Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, compare traditional teachings from their respective grandparents. Becky Okatsiak, the Arviat throatsinger, launches into a traditional Arctic dance and soon has a group around her. Then someone spots a pod of finback whales and everyone is leaning against the railings.

When we finally break through the pack-ice, we sail up a fjord in Prins Christian Sound and drop anchor. "According to the ship's 1966 charts, that glacier" – Green

points at an icy tongue a kilometre away – "ended right where we are now." By late afternoon, a dozen workshops are taking place at spots across a spectacular tundra hillside with views across cliffs reddened by the late-afternoon sun. "I think the good karma was in overdrive today," Green says as he starts the evening's recap. "Ten drum dancers performing in a Zodiac, learning from a glaciologist about glaciers while we stood on top of one, then filling our bottles with its pure water. That's the way education should be."

Our last day in Greenland starts with a soak in a natural hot spring that the Vikings once used, watching icebergs drift past. We then visit the community of Nanortalik, a cluster of colourful houses perched near the shore, where the local Inuit men show off their remarkable kayak-rolling skills while the women, clad in sealskin, paddle a walrus-hide *umiaq* boat. Iqaluit elder David Serkoak drum-dances and Sylvia Cloutier throat sings for the entire village gathered on the waterfront.

"The Inuit educators on board are not only role models for Inuit kids, they also demonstrate for southern kids a different way of doing things," says Raffan. "It's a valuable cultural mash-up." That group includes buff Johnny Issaluk, a champion of Arctic sports like the Inuit high-kick, which he performed at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Issaluk has also coached sports in Iqaluit and been a counsellor in that community's Embrace Life suicide-prevention group. On board, he and other Inuit adults meet regularly with their assigned "pods" of Northern kids. They help the shy ones – like Gelena Koonark from Pond Inlet, who had never left her small Nunavut village – integrate and deal with culture shock. "A lot of Inuit kids get very homesick," says Annie Petaulassie.

ONE OF THE RESEARCH programs that SOI has been taking part in for years is the Drift Bottle Drop, started by federal scientist Eddy Carmack to track ocean currents. Everyone is supposed to fill out a form, tuck it into a glass bottle, and toss it overboard. The hope is that the bottle will be found and the form returned to the researchers. Only a small percentage of bottles are ever recovered, but ninth grader Simmi Sigmundsson found one dropped from a 2009 SOI expedition on an Iceland beach near his home.

As she listens to the project details, though, 16-year-old Otera Ortega is aghast: "We're throwing hundreds of bottles into the ocean? That's crazy!" She turns to Richard Sears. "Is it possible that whales could ingest the bottles?" Yes, he admits. There is silence. »



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64

The next day the elders sail with us to a neighbouring fjord, telling stories and answering a barrage of questions as they sit on the deck in sunshine. Willi Etok speaks of growing up in a sod house, how glaciers have shrunk and caribou and seal populations have dwindled. Sarah Ananach sends shockwaves through students as she explains in a gentle voice how her family was forced off the land and relocated time and again, losing the threads of their culture.

Since reaching Labrador, there's been a marked shift in dynamics on board. Kids are revved up and taking charge, racing around doing interviews for "SOI CBC," a nightly video-news broadcast coached by CBC Ottawa newscaster Lucy van Oldenbarneveld. Evening recaps have become noisier and more enthusiastic. "Journalist" students are interviewing field staff for the daily *Ice Cap* newsletter, and many are working on assignments to be delivered to their sponsors. There's a sense of urgency to squeeze everything they can out of their final days: group hugs and teary outbursts are on the rise. "The first part of the trip is run by the staff," says Glithero. "And the second half is run by the students."

Quiet time is encouraged to process the avalanche of stimulation and information of the past two weeks. Jean-Francois Carey, the youngest Canadian to summit Mt. Everest (at 24), gives an inspiring talk about his expedition and the importance of focusing on your passion. Iqaluit youth activist Jesse Mike starts her discourse with, "I hope you get out there and start knocking some sense into people." Our group has begun to feel like a family, and for some kids that's more than they're going home to. As we round the northern tip of Quebec, there's talk about dealing with post-expedition blues. "We know we're making changes in these kids," Green says as the ship anchors off Kuujuaq. "But we don't know what kind of change. Transformations can be two days or five years down the line."

Before they disperse back across the globe, Green addresses the students one last time. "You've stood on a glacier. You've seen the Greenland ice cap. You've spoken with the people most affected on this planet by climate change. No one can tell you otherwise now." He gazes across the group like a proud father. "You've got something special inside of you. You are now polar ambassadors, and your job is to spread the word." 

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