

# Model citizen

Toronto's Josh Silvertown is on his own Yukon quest.



Photo: Courtesy Dreamcatcher

**Josh Silvertown, Executive Director of DreamCatcher Mentoring, with Program Coordinator Denise McDiarmic**

**T**hough Josh Silvertown makes his home in Toronto, there's a strong case to be made that his heart belongs to the North. While he holds a Ph.D. in biomedical sciences and spends his days working as a clinical research consultant, he devotes much of his spare time to his role as executive director for DreamCatcher Mentoring, a non-profit educational society dedicated to improving the lives of young people in the Yukon.

The idea for DreamCatcher Mentoring began in 2004, when Silvertown met Beverly Sembsmoen—an implementation officer with the Tagish/Carcross First Nation—through Action Canada, a national program that brings together community leaders to discuss public policy.

“Beverly identified the issue of a high dropout rate for kids in remote northern communities, particularly in the Yukon,” says Silvertown, recalling his first conversation with Sembsmoen. “In Grade 9, a lot of kids have to move away to go to school, and they get homesick, so they end up dropping out of school that year. Even from Grade 9 to Grade 12, if you stay in school you still may get picked up by a local mining company and get lured out before you graduate. Or you may end up mixing with the wrong crowd and get involved with drugs and alcohol. Or, due to high absenteeism—which is a huge issue—you may just not fulfill the requirements for graduation.”

The problem, Sembsmoen explained, was that students in remote Yukon communities simply did not have the same access to education as other children in the nation.

Though they came from vastly different backgrounds, Sembsmoen and Silvertown both understood the role a quality education can play in determining a child's future, and so they set out to level the playing field.

“Yukon is one of the first places in Canada where the government really invested a lot of money into getting everyone wired,” says Silvertown, “so every school had high-speed internet access.”

With that in mind, the two came up with the idea of an “e-mentoring” program, which would match Yukon youth up with role models via the Internet. Students with a particular career goal in mind could learn the path to professional success, even if role models didn't exist within their community.

Less than a year later, an e-mentoring pilot program was launched at Carcross Community School. Twelve students were matched with mentors from across North America, each pair communicating via a monitored website, which provided a loose curriculum of potential questions and exercises. While the initial idea required some tweaking, the overall results were enough to warrant pushing ahead with the DreamCatcher Mentoring program.

As of fall 2009, over 300 students from 13 schools have been paired with a career mentor, including eight students from Iqaluit, Nunavut. While it's too soon to draw hard conclusions about the program's effectiveness, anecdotal evidence has been encouraging.

“We've received a lot of positive feedback,” says Silvertown, who stresses that the program is not mandated, but instead

driven by community involvement. “This is something where we've had First Nations buy-in; we have Department of Education buy-in; we have parents and teachers and principals buying-in. The program we have today is a product of listening to feedback from the communities.”

In just six years, DreamCatcher has built a database of over 600 mentors worldwide, hailing from locations as far-flung as Dubai, London, and Melbourne. The society works to maintain a diverse pool, with mentors both from conventional trades and professions, and from unconventional corners of the workforce. Famously, some mentors have gone beyond the online realm, including a master auto mechanic based in Toronto, who promised his charge an apprenticeship on the condition that the student first finish high school.

As with any act of generosity, both the donor and recipient stand to benefit. This holds true for Silvertown, too, who's received an education of his own from DreamCatcher.

“The irony is that we have an e-mentoring, virtual organization that basically involves relationships online, but I've actually learned to appreciate the importance of face-to-face relationships. It's so important for me to [visit] three or four times a year, to go to schools and talk to teachers, and let them know that there's a real person and a team behind this program. I've learned there's a lot of beautiful people and places in the Yukon. And really, one of the reasons I continue with this is I keep wanting to come back.” **Y**