

Teachers' aid

Connecting corporations to classrooms
for enhanced public education

Heather MacTaggart has had a fast ride since she graduated from Laurier with a degree in psychology in 1984.

She was at Procter and Gamble for six years, selling soap at the beginning and rising to a management position. Then she had three children in four years and stayed home for another six years to raise them plus a stepdaughter who was eight at the time the first baby came along. The children are now ages 8, 10, 12 and 20.

MacTaggart has had a consulting firm, teaching sales managers how to communicate. She's worked in promotions: she placed Batman on Kellogg's Corn Flakes boxes to promote a movie.

But those years of staying at home with the kids had an impact. MacTaggart recognized first-hand that schools were short of resources. She also knew from her work in promotions that many companies were eager to support education with their names and their money.

Bringing the needs of educators together with the needs of sponsors was a "Eureka" kind of thing. "I bring them together in a way that makes sense for both, and really benefits kids," she says.

In 1997, MacTaggart founded a non-profit organization, Classroom Connections, to create unique curriculum-based educational resources and distribute them free to schools across Canada.

Just five years later, more than three quarters of Canada's schools—about 10,000 in total—are registered to receive Classroom Connections' offerings.

Projects to date have included

- *Literacy Connections*, a school workshop



Heather MacTaggart '84

for parents and volunteer readers to help young children learn to read (major sponsor: United Parcel Service Canada Ltd.),

- *Gift of Life*, a program designed to increase awareness of organ donation and transplantation programs for children in grades 5 to 8 (major sponsors: Bell, Hewlett-Packard and Fujisawa Canada, Inc.), and

- *Strangers Becoming Us*, which tells the role of immigration in Canadian history and society for children in grades 4 to 8 and grades 10 to 11 (major sponsor: Citizenship and Immigration Canada).

The Classroom Connections resources are completely professional, and depending on the project can include video, audio CDs, booklets, transcripts of the recordings, suggestions for activities and a listing of on-line resources.

So just what are these resources? Here's an example. In Program 5 of the *Strangers Becoming Us* package, writer and narrator Dr. Morton Beiser, professor of cultural pluralism and health at the University of Toronto, discusses Canadian immigration history. The audio portion of the CD opens with the sounds of water, native music and crowds. Beiser begins:

"Once upon a time there was a country called Canada. It stretched from sea to sea and it had farms and fish, forests and lots of back bacon and maple syrup for everybody. Some of the children in this country were white, others were black or brown, and others were mixtures of the two. Some people wore

hats and others wore turbans. Some ate with forks and knives and others with wooden sticks. But despite all these differences, they all respected each other. They delighted in their differences and they made sure that everybody was treated equally."

The End.

"Pretty good story isn't it? But it's a fairy tale. When this country began it wasn't anything like that. Even our first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald—he was afraid that letting immigrants in would ruin the country. A hundred years ago our country tried to keep visible minorities out ..."

The program goes on to discuss the Head Tax levied against the Chinese, anti-Jewish immigration policies and modern immigration policies that bring in about 200,000 people a year from just about everywhere.

"The program is good and the kids really enjoyed it," says Tim Hom, a senior history and math teacher at Loreburn Central School in Loreburn, Saskatchewan, who presented the "Immigrants" section of *Strangers Becoming Us* to a Grade 6 class this past April.

"It was well done, well written," says Hom. "And the activities were dead on."

Following the program and a discussion, the Loreburn students surveyed the ancestry of their class (the largest proportion, 27 percent, is of Norwegian descent) and compared the results with classes from schools at Lucky Lake and Kenaston, all within an hour of each other, and all located roughly midway between Swift Current and Saskatoon. They then posted the results on their Web site <www.saskschools.ca/~lcs/imgrant/bckgrd/>.

Hom, who is of Chinese ancestry, particularly liked the "nice information package on Chinese immigration," which came as a tool with the CD. "That kind of information is hard to find anywhere else," he says.

The professional dissemination of valuable, socially aware information to school children is what motivates

MacTaggart, who admits to being a granola eating/peace-loving/recycling/save-the-whales kind of person behind the visage of well-groomed corporate executive. She draws a paycheque, but as a non-profit organization Classroom Connections will never be rewarding her with stock options and huge bonuses.

"I wanted to educate, to teach children values," says MacTaggart, a Toronto native who still calls the city her home.

"I'm concerned about kids in education. More and more people are sending their kids to private school. That worried me. I'm a supporter of public education.

"My idea was to create a company that supported public education—to help it continue to be strong by providing extra resource materials that would enhance and add value to what was being taught already. And to work in the educational system, it really had to be a non-profit company."

The Ontario Public School Boards Association saw merit in MacTaggart's vision and gave her some administrative assistance and a place to hold meetings.

Literacy Connections was her first effort, and like everything that has followed, the corporate presence is suitably low key other than logos on printed material. As advertising goes, this is the lowest of low-key.

The reason corporations (and government agencies) get involved, MacTaggart says, is to "demonstrate their corporate social responsibility" and to promote worthwhile educational programs.

Ideas for the programs come from "teachers and educational experts," says MacTaggart, and once a program has been conceived, the next step is finding the money to sponsor it. Programs can cost anywhere from \$175,000 to \$750,000 to develop, and obtaining those corporate sponsors (at a minimum investment of \$175,000) is the first step toward making the program a reality.

"We hire educators to create a program,"

she says, and Classroom Connections itself has just five full-time employees and a pool of about 20 designers and publications people who are hired on a contract basis as required.

Classroom Connections' latest offering, *Cultivating Peace in the 21st Century*, is being sent to schools in registered school districts this August. (Teachers can get an advance electronic copy at <cultivatingpeace.ca>.) Its stated aim is to begin educating for a culture of peace, a topic with particular resonance following September 11.

"How do educators help youth reflect, react and find meaning in the wake of these events? *Cultivating Peace in the 21st Century* is a ready-to-use set of activities that examines the basic concepts of peace, security, human rights and global justice," according to the promotional material. "It is designed to have applications in grades 10 to 12 Social Science and History curricula across the country."

While *Cultivating Peace* is starting as a secondary-school resource, it will eventually be for grades K to 12, says MacTaggart. "It's a 10-year project," she says. Funding to begin the process has come from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Canadian Heritage and CHUM Television. The second component, *Cultivating Peace: Taking Action*, will come out in August 2003.

MacTaggart says she is always looking for "the right type" of corporate partners to "join us in getting the message out."

A registered charitable fund is also in place to give sympathetic individuals and corporations a way to contribute to the ongoing development and success of *Cultivating Peace*. Look at the <cultivatingpeace.ca> Web site for details.

Creating a culture of peace is a very ambitious project. So is she aiming for a Nobel Peace Prize? MacTaggart laughs delightedly at the idea.

"I would absolutely love it if this had such an impact that we would be considered!" ♦