

SINCE 1930
Daily News

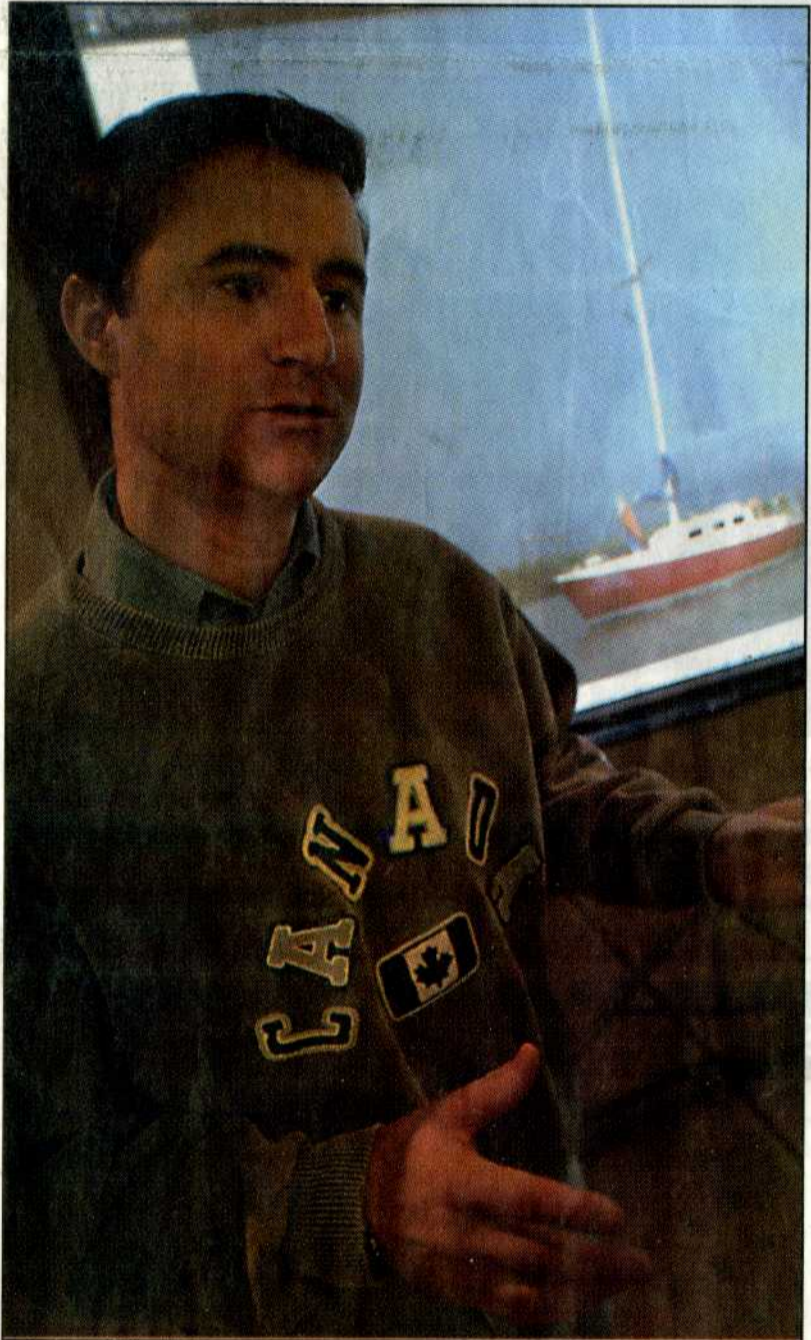


6 20252 00102 2

A floating philanthropist

Eric Blackburn travels world by sailboat, helping his fellow mankind

ANDREW BERGLAND
Dawson Creek Daily News



B.C.'s own floating philanthropist, Eric Blackburn made a visit to Dawson Creek Friday in order to speak to the Rotary Club Sunrise about his current efforts to make the world a better place.

Blackburn's story began almost 12 years ago in his hometown of Cranbrook, when on a whim, he decided to build his own sailboat in order to go travelling around the world in search of adventure and to help his fellow man.

"I took her (his sailboat named the Chickadee: Spirit of the Kootenays) with the goal of going around the world... and kind of giving back a little bit along the way," Blackburn told the group of about 40 Rotarians, adding it's the fortune of being Canadian that allows for giving back to others. "We're Canadian. Lottery tickets are fun, but the fact we're born in this incredible country, we've got a lottery ticket for life."

Along the way he ran into a number of Rotarians in California who suggested he take along toys and school supplies for needy children as long as he would be traveling down to some of South America's impoverished countries anyway.

This new project grew and eventually received non-profit status, named the World Kids Foundation. "Rotarians get the job done. They're dynamic, they're the polished gems of our society," Blackburn said.

Blackburn started his charity work in Mexico and further down the South American coast where he set up sister schools with Canada and helped deliver donated boxes of school supplies.

"What I've discovered along the way, there's a dire need for us, collectively Canadians and Americans, to reach out," he said. "There's so many needs down there."

Blackburn's travels hit a resting point in the impoverished country of Nicaragua where he landed in 1998 with his gunwales full of Friendship Boxes. Each box contained school supplies and friendship letters from students, which were provided by schools across Canada and the U.S.

While in Nicaragua, Blackburn took part in various projects including reforestation of landmined areas left from the Nicaraguan Revolution, starting a computer college with donated equipment and bringing in containers of medical supplies, food and clothing.

The reputation of the generous Canadian began to spread throughout Nicaragua and eventually Blackburn was invited to a remote village where he began a project that remains his top priority today.

"I saddled into the village and there were a bunch of kids running around with no shoes and runny noses and no schooling so I made a commitment that I would help them build a school," he said. "That was initially what I thought would be a six-month project and ended up taking about a year... very difficult to get to, very remote community. We had to haul in everything by oxcart and horseback."

The funding for these projects came largely through his appeal to Rotary Clubs in both Canada and the U.S. and continue to be Blackburn's largest support network.

"When I was in the village for the first time, the locals were unloading an oxcart of bricks... I asked one of the members of the village to give me five of those bricks and I will bring them back the United States and auction them off at Rotary Clubs... I collected about \$3,500. Enough funds to start building a school," he said.

Since those initial dollars, the school has been built, classes have started, and two other schools have been opened, but work and funding continues to be a priority. Blackburn scrolled through a number of slides depicting a school that is little more than a few crumbling walls built on a dirt foundation with no ceiling. It's short several bags of cement, the blackboard is falling down and desk repairs just scratch the surface of what needs to be done to give it just a semblance of a North American school.

"This is more or less a typical school," he said. "It needs a lot of help right now."

More information about Blackburn and the work he's doing in South America can be found at worldkidsfoundation.org.

ANDREW BERGLAND/DCDN

During a Dawson Creek Rotary Club Sunrise meeting, Friday, B.C.'s floating philanthropist Eric Blackburn shows a picture of the boat he built in order to sail around the world helping the less fortunate.