

Gerry Garske St Luke's Catholic Primary School highlights her experience as an exchange teacher in Alberta Canada 2003

My teacher exchange year in Canada began with a tour of the Rocky Mountains on board the world famous Rocky Mountaineer Rail Tour from Vancouver to Calgary – and what a journey it was! Fine food, spectacular scenery, enjoyable company, snow and ice, hoar frost and freezing temperatures. All this was good preparation for my arrival in Edmonton - my home for 2003.

Host School

My host school, St. Matthew's Catholic Elementary, is publicly funded as a bilingual English Ukrainian Program. The prairies of north eastern Alberta were settled by Ukrainian migrants in the 1920's and 30's and retain a unique Ukrainian cultural flavour today.

The school curriculum in Alberta has many similarities to our own, so I found the transition to teaching Kindergarten, Grade One and Grade Three to be a relatively easy one. However, the physical arrangement of schools is vastly different as is the winter way of life. The proximity of the world renowned alpine villages of Jasper, Banff and Lake Louise are a wonderful advantage to living and working in Alberta and are exciting and fun filled weekend destinations.

School Life

My school life was a journey of discovery as I learnt the intricacies of the bi-lingual program, adjusted to the school corridors and a classroom without windows, performed recess playground duty in the snow (the children went outside until the temperature reached minus 20 degrees with wind chill), took my Grade One students ice skating on the outdoor rink behind the school, enjoyed my daily two half hour recess and one hour lunch breaks, plugged the car engine block heater into the power supply in the staff car park when the temperature dropped to below minus 25. I learnt how to dress in winter coat, snow boots, scarf, gloves and toque (beanie) in under one minute at the school door as the children raced to recess.

Assistance

Edmonton schools have a position called 'school custodian' and mine was a guardian angel in disguise. Al helped to free my snow bogged car on 3 occasions, did my laminating, unjammed the photocopier, came with a mop and bucket immediately when needed, provided hot coffee to all staff on arrival in the morning and at lunch, prepared the gym for parent nights, and gave me travel advice, map reading interpretations and tips for driving safely on the right hand side of the icy roads.

Differences

There is no such position as APRE in Edmonton Catholic schools and so teachers prepare school and class liturgies and implement the religious education guidelines without assistance. Classes finish one day each week at 2.00pm so that teachers can participate in their staff meeting which for three

out of every four weeks is devoted to professional development. I found this to be immensely beneficial.

Professional Development

I had the opportunity to visit other schools as part of my professional development program sponsored by Alberta Learning Network. Wherever I went, I was greeted enthusiastically and warmly as there is a lot of interest in Australia, our education system and our way of life. A highlight for me was my visit to Ben Calf Robe School which specializes in the education of First Nations children.

My year in Alberta was challenging, exhilarating, life giving and life changing. My perspective on my home country, my work as an educator and my capabilities as an individual have been broadened and enriched. I loved every minute of it! Western Canada is a vast and beautiful land of cultural diversity and awe inspiring scenery with unique wildlife. The prairies and the mountains of Alberta beckon me still!