

Diversity

SELENA MELL, CULTURAL AMBASSADOR EXTRAORDINAIRE, QUESNEL, B.C.

For the cultural forum at École Baker Elementary School, principal Selena Mell has dressed in everything from a voyageur's sash and blouse (a nod to her French-Canadian heritage) to a vibrant Indian sari. Selena, 37, began the biannual forum in 2001 to encourage kids to celebrate their own and other cultures. Although Quesnel, like most small towns in the B.C. interior, is not as ethnically diverse as cities such as Vancouver, it draws students from a variety of backgrounds, and 25 per cent are First Nations.

The forum has flourished over the years. Now the gym buzzes with colourful costumes, dancers and music, and smells beckon from the concession, which features a multicultural platter of foods from around the world. Exhibitors from every school in the district take part, competing for prizes with displays. The kids' faces light up with pride when they talk about their own heritage and show off their traditional dress. For some, it's the first time they've shared their culture with anyone outside their families.

Selena loves planning it all. "Putting on a large event that celebrates culture is like putting on a birthday party for the kids," she says. "It's a positive experience that creates huge memories."

➤ Honourable Mentions...

Sabra Desai, Mississauga, Ont.

For upholding human rights and social justice by improving the delivery of education and municipal services to the highly diverse population of Toronto.

Andrew Donaldson, Toronto.

For breaking down cultural barriers by encouraging the congregation of his church to delight in new traditions through music.

Paul McKenna, Tottenham, Ont.

For building a bridge between world religions through his Golden Rule poster.

Judy Tethong, Victoria.

For teaching by example and showing youth that compassion and commitment can make a difference in the battle against intolerance.

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