



Bobby Orr supports program that gives aboriginal youth hockey equipment

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The people of the First Nations, both young and old, skirted the stairs in the corner stands at the Air Canada Centre early Tuesday morning to excitedly greet a hockey icon.

And Bobby Orr patiently posed for pictures, signed autographs, or just simply shook hands with his admirers.

It is readily apparent that the former NHL great is still held in the highest esteem some 31 years since he played his last game.

Orr got his start in hockey while growing up in Parry Sound, Ont., where he said he relied on the charity of friends to buy him skates that allowed him to participate.

And it is inconceivable to Orr that in a country where hockey is an integral component to winter as tuques and mitts all kids aren't given that same opportunity just to play the game.

"In Canada you're thinking, are you kidding me?" Orr said later in an interview. "That can't be true – but it is."

Which is what brought the 62-year-old to the ACC in the first place, to lend his support to a growing cause that he isn't even officially involved with – at least not yet.

The Ontario government used the home of the Toronto Maple Leafs to launch the hockey phase of a sport and life-skills program that targets aboriginal youth in troubled First Nations communities in Northern Ontario.

Promoting Life-skills for Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) is the Canadian program of Right To Play, an international aboriginal humanitarian and development organization that runs programs in 20 countries worldwide.

The winter hockey camps are the latest addition to the PLAY program in Ontario. The goal is to provide both equipment and skilled training to several hundred residents in Moose Cree and Sandy Lake First Nations.

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That along with providing a little hope.

"This is at its heart letting kids be kids," said Chris Bentley, Ontario Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. "And when kids are allowed to be kids they're full of hope, they see a bright future, they don't have worries or troubles. They're fit and they're full of that certain magic."

Sandy Lake is a fly-in First Nations community that is located about 600 kilometres northwest of Thunder Bay. Moose Cree is situated at the southern tip of James Bay.

Life is not easy and studies have concluded that more than half of First Nations children are overweight or obese. Rates of diabetes among aboriginal people are three to five times higher than those of the general Canadian population.

Alcohol and drug abuse is widespread and many among the younger population fall victim to the coarse ways.

"We have so many social problems," said Grand Chief Stan Beardy of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, a First Nations political organization. "On the average we lose about 30 young people to suicide, there's high rates of violence.

"And what this program does, by introducing workshops, training to the young people, it gives them hope that there could be a future."

The plan is to support the Northern communities by certifying local hockey coaches through Hockey Canada and to co-ordinate skills camps for children and coaches.

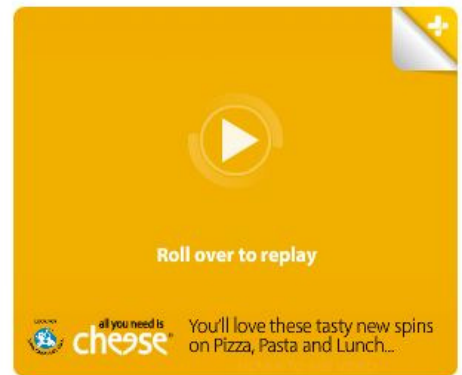
A coaching skills camp has already been led by former NHL player Jean Chabot in Moose Cree with another planned to begin shortly in Sandy Lake.

Chief Adam Fiddler of Sandy Lake said there has been a lot of talk about resource development in Aboriginal communities, but not much action.

"Sometimes it feels like there's no opportunity for our people, yet we live in the richest land in the world," he said.

The PLAY initiative, he said, gives his people at least some hope that things are being done to affect some change.

"This partnership is all about investing in one of the biggest resources we have, and that's our young people," he said. "This is about investing in hope, investing in a better future for our young people, our children."



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