

Northern mother went to cupboard and it was bare

NWT emergency food depot run by a sister; Vincentians' projects stave off hunger

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THE CATHOLIC REGISTER

You may not remember your first cherry, but Kedra and Destiny Kimiksana will always remember theirs. The young sisters got to try a cherry thanks to Sister Faye Trombley, the missionary who runs Our Lady of Grace Parish in Tuktoyaktuk, NWT.

At 69 degrees north and 133 degrees west, on a little reach of land that extends into the Beaufort Sea, cherries are hard to come by and expensive.

But it's not just cherries. All kinds of healthy foods are either rare, expensive or both in Arctic communities.

Trombley's April grocery bill included such bargains as \$4.09 for a bunch of broccoli, \$19.99 for 700 grams of cheddar cheese, \$25.14 for 295 ml of orange juice, \$18.79 for three tins of sockeye salmon and \$14.98 for five pounds of potatoes.

Of course, that's cheap compared to prices in Paulatuk, 350 km due east.

With the support of Catholic Missions in Canada and her Mackenzie Diocese, Trombley can go to the grocery store without fear. But many in her community cannot, including Kedra and Destiny's parents.

The western regional council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul helps Trombley run an emergency food depot that Trombley refuses to call a food bank. It's just emergency supplies for when people run out, she told The Catholic Register.

This year SSV's regional council shipped five sea cans (large standard shipping containers) with food, clothing and other necessities up to its five partner communities in the Arctic — Gjoa Haven, Taloyoak, Paulatuk, Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk.

The Vincentians in the West call the northbound shipments their North of

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60 Project. It takes a different form in each village.

In Taloyoak, Oblate Father Lukasz Zajac feeds 15 to 25 children in the church every Sunday. Then the priest sends youngsters home with bags of fruit to share with their families. On Sunday evenings families gather back at the church for a communal dinner for 30 to 50 people.

St. Vincent de Paul societies in Al-



Sr. Faye Trombley

berta, Manitoba and Ontario raise the money to support Zajac's program and other North of 60 efforts.

With 70-per-cent unemployment considered normal in Tuktoyaktuk, family food emergencies are pretty common, according to Inuvialuit mother and community activist Dorothy Loreen. (The term Inuit applies to aboriginal people in the eastern Arctic. In the western Arctic the language spoken is Inuvialuit.)

Loreen has neighbours who have gone days without food in the house.

"Can you imagine having nothing to eat for two days?" Loreen asks.

The Tuktoyaktuk government had plans to open a food bank, but so far has been unable to overcome a couple of obstacles, said Loreen.

"They had nowhere to store the food and no one to work it," she said.

NO STORAGE

The storage issue is a problem even for the Tuktoyaktuk St. Vincent de Paul emergency food depot. The storehouse has no heating, which means canned foods will freeze and explode if left there.

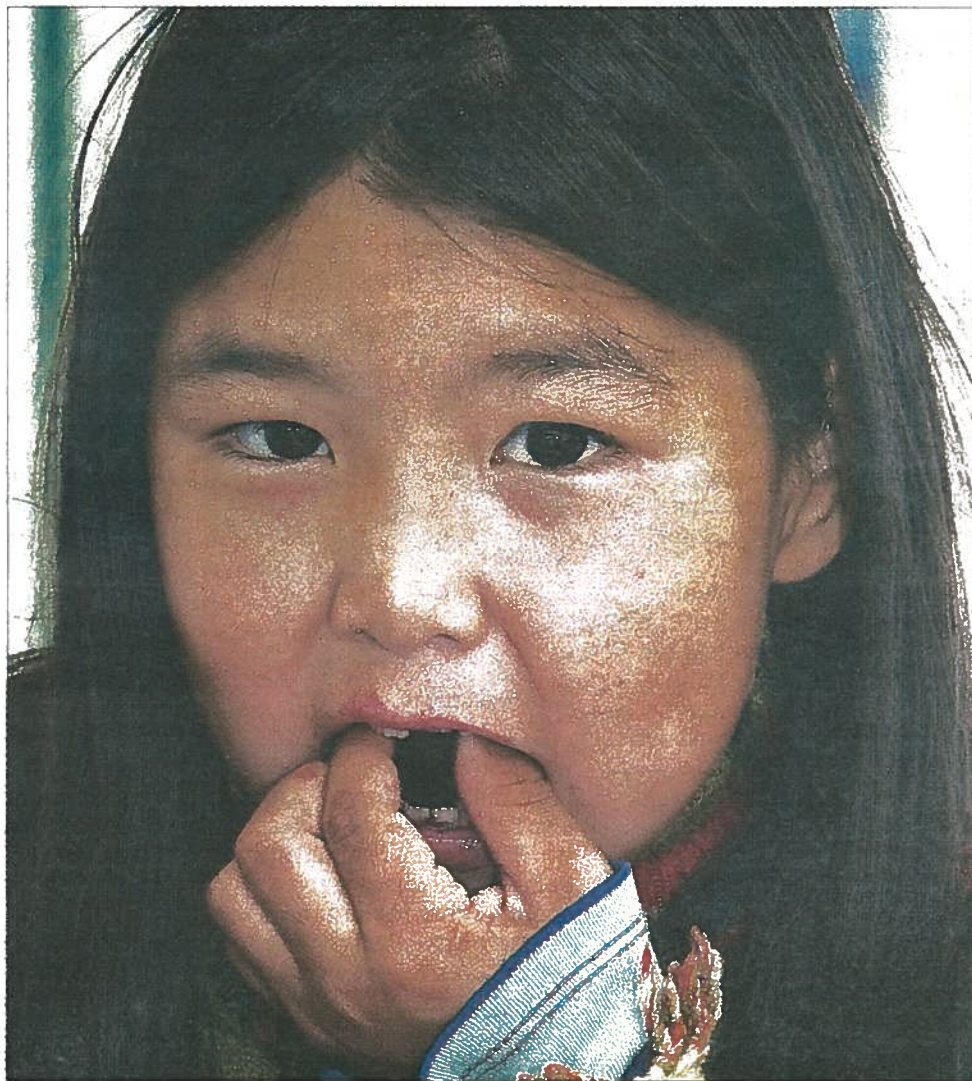
The only other place is the hallway of Trombley's little house, which quickly fills up. The society asks its partners in the South not to send cans.

The food problem in the North goes far beyond individual and family food emergencies, said Dr. André Corriveau, chief public health officer for the Northwest Territories.

Almost a third of households are what public health experts call "food insecure" — not always sure how they're going to feed themselves tomorrow, or today. Commonly, mothers don't eat so their children will have whatever there is.

In Nunavut to the east, food insecurity approaches two-thirds of households.

Among aboriginal people in the North, life expectancies are up to 12



CATHOLIC REGISTER PHOTOS | MICHAEL SWAN

Kedra Kimiksana tastes her first sweet juicy cherry.

years shorter than for Canada as a whole. The life expectancy gap, which puts northern aboriginal people on a par with Bangladesh, is the result of nutritional deficits, said University of Alberta scientist Gita Sharma, one of the world's leading experts on aboriginal health.

"People are not meeting the dietary recommendations for fibre, vitamin C, vitamin D, vitamin A, folic acid. Dietary foundations are essential to health,"

'The (health) cost per person in Nunavut is twice that in the south of the country.'

Gita Sharma

Sharma told The Catholic Register.

The contributions of volunteer groups such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, especially those that connect people in the South with northern aboriginal populations, are extremely important, said Trombley, a former professor at Newman Theological College in Edmonton. When people in the South understand and reach out to the North, aboriginal people suddenly feel included, less invisible.

But there can be no illusion that charity alone will solve a problem tied to Canada's history of colonization, residential schools, the gap between rich and poor in a resource-dependent economy, basic infrastructure problems and much more.

Solving hunger in the North will require the best efforts of governments, academics and volunteers, said Sharma.

"We all have a responsibility to make sure that people have enough food to

prevent cancer, heart disease and diabetes," she said. "If we don't, it's going to cost us all as taxpayers. People with these diseases access the medical health care facilities and that costs us all a great deal of money. The cost per person in Nunavut is twice that in the south of the country."

HEALTHY FOODS NORTH

Sharma has run small pilot projects under the banner of "Healthy Foods North" to train local people in healthy eating, promote the nutritional value of traditional foods from narwal to polar bear and help people with cooking, budgeting and other skills.

"Community based, community driven, community owned, bottom-up," is how she describes the program. But pilot programs by a university-based epidemiologist can't do what governments should do.

"It needs a large amount of money and a large number of people to work together to improve that situation — to improve dietary inadequacies and improve the rates of cancer, heart disease and diabetes, all of which are nutrition-related," she said.

Corriveau worries about the effects of nutritionally deprived diets on children. "In early childhood it has an impact on brain development," he said.

From school performance to under-developed immune systems and the re-emergence of tuberculosis, a deprived northern diet is costing the next generation, said Corriveau.

Sharma claims she is "extremely hopeful." She constantly runs into people who want to help and she's confident the science has shown how to solve the problem.

"I wish there was more funding available so we can tackle this problem sooner rather than later," she said. "It's a shame that in this rich country . . ."