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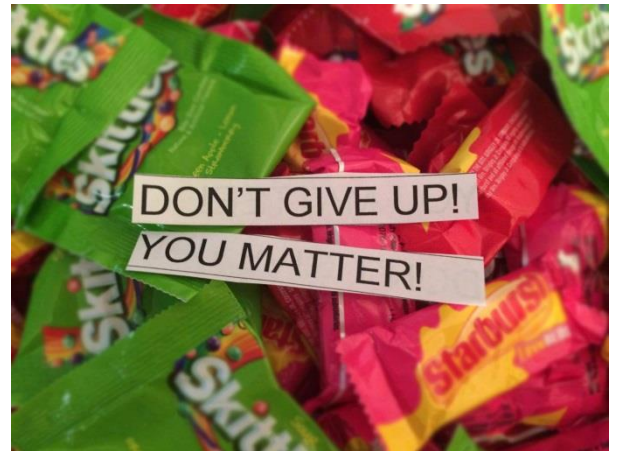
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NORTEP-NORPAC Instructor hands out positive messages to trick-or-treaters

With the recent suicides of six girls in northern Saskatchewan in less than a month, NORTEP-NORPAC Instructor and SGEU member April Chiefcalf wanted to send a positive message to kids. On Halloween, she did just that. Chiefcalf printed about 300 notes and handed them out, along with candy, to trick-or-treaters in her home community of La Ronge. The notes read, "Don't give up" and "You matter."



"I was feeling so badly for the young people in our community," says Chiefcalf. "I wanted to let them know that people love them and care about them . . . and not to feel lost."

Some of the kids saw the notes right away and responded by smiling and saying thank you. Many found their notes mixed in with their candy when they got home.

"When I woke up the morning after Halloween, there were a lot of people on Facebook talking about it, because they didn't know who had given these notes out," says Chiefcalf.

One parent posted a photo of the notes and said they were "by far the best treat" that her daughter had received. "Whoever did this . . . I want to say, thank you! Thank you for such a little gesture. It sure impacted my heart and my family."

Chiefcalf says she's happy the messages resonated with people, at a time when northerners badly need hope and encouragement.

Northern Saskatchewan has been devastated in the past few weeks by a series of youth suicides. A 13-year-old girl from La Ronge took her own life on Sunday, bringing the number of deaths to six. On Tuesday, about 250 northerners gathered at a vigil.

There's a feeling of despair and powerlessness and fear, says Chiefcalf. But I'm also seeing what I often do see in La Ronge, which is a lot of community strength and people coming together, trying to take action as quickly as they can.

Chiefcalf says the north needs more support from the provincial government. Instead, the government is terminating funding for the very program at which Chiefcalf teaches. NORTEP-NORPAC is a unique and successful post-secondary education program that provides northern students, mostly First Nations and Métis, with local access to teacher education and pre-professional studies. A 2014 survey found that 90 per cent of NORTEP graduates were in teaching positions, most of them in northern Saskatchewan.

Despite signing a five-year funding agreement just over a year ago, the provincial government now intends to terminate the program's funding within months.

I don't think getting rid of NORTEP is going to help the problem at all, says Chiefcalf. The program is part of the solution. I think it's important, because kids see that there's a place they can go when they're done high school and get post-secondary education in the north and have a job opportunity that comes out of that.

They're also connecting with teachers who grew up in the north and have similar experiences and perspectives as them.

Chiefcalf says the government should consult with northerners before it implements a plan of action.

The parents who have lost kids, the parents who are struggling because they're worried about their kids, the community leaders, the people who work in mental health, and other capacities in the north. I think those are the people who need to be consulted, she says.

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In the meantime, Chiefcalf says she and others in northern Saskatchewan are feeling heartsick.

The whole community has to come together and tell the kids that we love them, and we care about them, she says, hoping that her Halloween notes made a difference.

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