CONNECTING YOUTH AND BREAKING THE DIVIDE

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Following a life-changing experience with the Students on Ice Program, Abhay, with the help of his brother Sukmeet, founded Break the Divide Foundation to create opportunities for students to connect with other youth and communities first in the North, but now globally, to foster deeper understanding and greater opportunities to make meaningful change.

In 2016, I travelled to the Canadian Arctic where I saw the impacts of climate change firsthand. I delved deep into the social and ecological determinants of health for the Inuit. I also learned that suicide rates in the Arctic are eleven times the Canadian national average. After returning home, I discovered shocking news: my Inuit friend's boyfriend had shot himself while she was away on the Arctic expedition with me.

I was shaken to the core.

It was then that these issues became personal for me. No longer was climate change an issue of a 1.5 or 2 degree change in temperature. No longer was suicide a mere statistic. It was real.

Coming back from the expedition, I was inspired, and I realized this inspiration stemmed from my personal connections to real people in the Arctic. I wanted other people to experience similar personalized learning.

Then, Sukhmeet had the chance to live in Inuvik, Northwest Territories for six months. He, too, saw the impacts of climate change firsthand. The effects on the community were profound.

This led us to start a non-profit called Break The Divide (BTD). It was a simple idea at first – that conversations between youth living in British Columbia and students in Inuvik could serve to change mindsets.

That's exactly what happened. Through video calls, students talked to one another and learned about each other's lifestyles.

We then realized the potential of BTD and expanded our program to schools around the world.

We talked to students in Cape Town, South Africa about access to clean drinking water. We talked to youth in rural India about poverty in their communities. Currently, students from Siberia, Bolivia, China, Taiwan, India, and Canada connect with one another to discuss the most pertinent issues of our times such as climate change, mental health, Indigenous reconciliation, and so much more.



Trip to the Canadian Arctic

BTD follows a three-step approach to change: connect, communicate, and create change. Essentially, we connect youth with one another, they communicate about issues in their communities, and then work together to leverage shared knowledge to create change.

In this age and in this society, empathy is everything. It allows communities to be at the forefront of dialogue and decision-making. At BTD, we turn empathy into action. And we enable thousands of youth to do exactly that.

BTD is an innovative idea that is perfect for this time of record polarization and apathy.

> **“BTD follows a three-step approach to change: connect, communicate, and create change.”**

When Sukhmeet and I see a problem, we take action. This is at the root of our passion for social entrepreneurship. To flourish as a global community, we need to care about one another and take action locally.



Trip to the Canadian Arctic

For Sukhmeet and me, this tendency for hope and altruism comes from our parents. Sukhmeet was seven years old when we immigrated to Canada from India. I was only 11 months old. I saw my parents struggle to provide a good life for us. We recognized the importance of seizing opportunities whilst learning about the atrocities committed

against Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Therefore, we knew we had to work with communities to create positive change, leading to our passion for reconciliation and community connections.



Abhay and Sukhmeet spreading their message of hope.

Since founding BTD, Sukhmeet and I have spoken about our work in promoting inclusivity, sustainability, and dialogue to deconstruct barriers at international conferences in Washington DC, Spokane, Florida, and Toronto, engaging with tens of thousands in the process. We have also spoken about holistic learning practices at teacher development conferences across North America. In 2018, Sukhmeet and I were guest lecturers at the University of Kassel in Germany, speaking about BTD's role in tackling the UN SDG of Good Health and Wellbeing. Currently, we are co-administering a course about Intercultural Competencies in Delhi, India.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we have scaled our efforts to help our community. In Sukhmeet's role as the Health and Wellness Ambassador for the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), representing 70,000 physicians and medical students, he hosted an event with the CMA's past president to dispel COVID-19 myths. To reach a broad population and humanize the effects of the pandemic, I started an international podcast named "Different Boat, Same Storm". Locally, Sukhmeet and I have partnered with tech companies to produce 3D printed face shields for healthcare workers. We have also received grants from the Clinton Foundation and the Government of Canada to implement public health safety measures in Sikh temples to protect the elderly.

As the world continues to change in the wake of COVID-19 and other growing challenges, Sukhmeet and I are optimistic about the power of young people.

Youth are not only the future. We are leaders today, with unique and innovative ideas that can spark dialogue and long-standing change.

At this moment in time, when we recognize the intersections of this pandemic, the climate crisis, systemic injustices, mental health issues, and the urgent need for reconciliation, it is critical that we remain optimistic.

As youth, we must have hope and work hard to create the future we want to see.

This is how, together, we will break the divide.