TESTIMONIAL

ABSTRACT

A Katimavik participant in 1999, Leesa Dean shares her extraordinary experience in this insightful and touching testimonial. Katimavik means "meeting place" in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit people.

LEESA DEAN

Leesa Dean works in the Participants Office at Katimavik, Montreal.

The Katimavik program is much easier to explain to others *before* actually living the experience. In the months preceding Katimavik I was able to express what I would be doing and where I would be going in as little as one sentence: "I'm going off to travel and learn French and to meet other young people" being a popular description. I could tell others about my anticipated experiences while passing on the street or between bus stops, but once I actually became a participant, conversations about Katimavik become much longer and required more commitment. Even now, five years after my participation in the program, those who are interested in hearing about my time with Katimavik must be willing to endure several cups of coffee, hours of listening to my stories, and the viewing of approximately seven hundred photographs. Katimavik is no longer a static summary of information pamphlets, but rather a series of life-changing experiences, epiphanies, and realizations that I enjoy sharing with anyone who has the time and desire to listen.

In an effort to revert to the short summary for a moment, I have to say that Katimavik was everything I'd hoped it would be. I learned French, found a career path, discovered the joys of cooking, learned practical skills like how to build bicycles and beds and play guitar, travelled from east to west across Canada… and the list goes on. Katimavik left me thoroughly satisfied, standing on two feet and ready to take on whatever the future had in store for me. Although I fully appreciate the tangible skills I learned in the program, I also underwent an important social transformation during my participation that became crucial to my personal development and helped me adopt a more positive attitude towards Canada as a whole. I also gained a better understanding of different lifestyles and values existing within the Canadian population. This type of development may not have been possible for me had I not left the comfortable cocoon of my familiar hometown and the somewhat homogenous lifestyle I had adopted there.

In order to better demonstrate this personal transformation, allow me to paint a picture of my pre-Katimavik existence. Although I had done some travelling prior to the program, certain aspects of Canadian culture remained elusive to me. I grew up in a small town in the interior of BC with a French population easily counted on two hands, and I still remember my first encounter with Francophone culture. When I was in grade 7 a boy named Benoît from Quebec was placed in our class, which was equivalent to throwing the poor boy into a pool of sharks. As a collective population, we couldn't pronounce his name and didn't understand his culture, so instead of learning about it, our defence mechanism against change was to make fun of him mercilessly. We were taught by some how to swear in French (at Benoît), and the word "frog" was used several times a day. I do not mention this because I think it funny, but rather to raise awareness of attitudes of intolerance and closed-mindedness that sometimes lurk in the shadows of our multi-cultural country.

To add to my misunderstanding of the French culture, students were forced to take French in school and I quickly discovered that the French language and I were thoroughly incompatible. I failed tests, wore the dunce cap, and eventually lost interest in learning the language altogether… until I found a pamphlet about Katimavik in my high school counselling office during my grade 12 year. At that point I re-examined my discontent with the French language and decided perhaps I would be able to learn effectively if I could learn it in a more immersive way than in the classroom of a unilingual town, some 4,000 km from the nearest major French population. Once I learned of my acceptance to Katimavik, I made it my personal goal to improve enough in French to be able to have a fluent and witty conversation with my grade 10 French teacher upon my return from the program (which I managed to do when I ran into him on the street the following summer).

Opportunities to learn French were plentiful in the program. First of all, it was necessary to learn French in order to communicate with my group members. Each Katimavik group has three

participants from Quebec, and although many Francophone participants have some knowledge of English before the program, others do not speak English at all. One of my group members spoke about as much English as I spoke French (very, very little) and to my surprise, we were very comfortable around each other and found alternative ways of communicating if we couldn't find the necessary words in our second language. And once I found the words, I allowed myself to feel quite learned and cosmopolitan, being able to speak a new language. I definitely felt cool, and as my French vocabulary grew, so did my self-confidence.

The real French experience began for me on December 10, 1999 when our group arrived in Val d'Irene, Quebec. I was equipped with only a French dictionary and a few funny phrases the French participants in my group had helped me to learn during our first 9 weeks of the program in Hamilton. I was proud to be able to ask where the bathroom was, tell the boys they were handsome, tell people I was feeling either well or sick, and if I concentrated hard I could order a poutine perfectly. I imagined this would be enough to get me started, and I suppose you have to start somewhere. What I didn't realize was that I was about to become a resident of a village of less than 100 people, 100% Francophone, the village commerce consisting of a ski lodge, a hotel and three main streets.

During our first week, I found out I would be working with a woman named Michele who did not speak any English. No one else would be working at with us; it would just be me and Michele, together all day. I was terrified. I smiled at her weakly, shook her hand, and tried to mentally prepare myself for the ordeal… or adventure? Although I was sure she would be frustrated at my lack of French and maybe even dislike me the same way I disliked Benoît so long ago in my grade 7 class, all my panicking was unfounded. What started with Michele and I and a dictionary gradually developed into a wonderful friendship. We spent the first few weeks pointing to objects and pronouncing their names slowly while I carried around a notebook full of scribbled words and elementary sketches. Without even recognizing the learning process that took place, I one day found myself sitting across from Michele without my crucial notebook, chatting away. Everything she said made sense, and more importantly, she understood me, too.

Later on, before our group moved to our third Katimavik project in Courtenay, BC, Michele gave me a small gift and said to me in near perfect English, "Leesa, I am going to miss working with you. I'm very thankful for your help and I am so proud of you for learning so much French!" I almost choked on my juice when she said it, realizing that my so-called unilingual friend was not so unilingual after all, but in the end it was for my own good, so I forgave her quickly and marvelled at the patience she'd had with me. So there you have it: if a small town Anglophone girl from BC can learn French, I am convinced anyone can do it. I conquered French (at least in my mind I did) and managed to unravel certain stereotypes I'd had of French culture before participating in the program.

Another stereotype I was confronted with in Katimavik was the "Newfie myth." For many people where I come from, Newfoundland is none other than a looming mass of land, almost as distant as Japan, full of people with funny accents that fish and eat seafood all day. The Newfie jokes don't help this image either, and with BC as far as it is from Newfoundland, we had no proof to tell us otherwise. Luckily for me, one of the participants in my group was from Newfoundland and was able to undo this and a few other stereotypes in one fell swoop. First of all, Dale taught me that it is ridiculous to assume that the entire population of a province eats the same and has the same lifestyle. It seems simple now, but sometimes you need to meet someone like Dale to understand. Dale was also part native and fully gay, which were two things I had been completely unexposed to growing up. There was an underlying homophobic sentiment in my hometown, and there was also a distinct segregation between the white kids in town and the native kids who mostly stayed on the reserve 20 km away. In a Katimavik household, you quickly learn that different lifestyles and cultures are beautiful, and you learn to share and appreciate them.

During the program, I learned how to take care of myself and others. I learned that no task is too big when you have a support network like your fellow Katimavikers who will applaud you when you excel and stand by you when you do not.

I sometimes marvel at the efficiency we managed to establish as ten people under one roof! Although it may seem strange, I often miss sharing a bedroom, clothes, responsibility, and a life with so many others. The livingroom at my apartment feels oddly empty if it is not full of people, music, projects, and random occurrences. During the program, I learned how to take care of myself and others. I learned that no task is too big when you have a support network like your fellow Katimavikers who will applaud you when you excel and stand by you when you do not. I learned how it feels to laugh uncontrollably until your sides hurt and you can barely breathe, which although it sounds painful, is an extremely fulfilling experience. Most importantly, the concept of trust and faith replaced my tendency to assume the worst and watch the world around me with suspicion.

My first encounter with trust and faith occurred during the third week of the program when Dale took me out for a walk behind the school, sat me down on the steps and told me he was gay. It was the first time in his entire life that he had uttered the words out loud, and when I saw the years of silence and confusion come tumbling out of his mouth in those two words, and I couldn't believe he trusted me enough to tell me. I remember thinking about all the times in high school that I, along with practically everyone else, had harassed certain people we suspected to be gay, and it was a swift and disturbing reality check for

me. Dale peeked over at me and asked if we were still going to be friends and I laughed, kept holding his hand, and wondered how he could even ask the question? I then promptly dragged him off the steps and took him out for a celebration milkshake. At that moment, I finally understood the importance of being open-minded, for if I hadn't been, I might have lost one of the best friends I'd ever had.

That was one of the most valuable parts of Katimavik for me: watching each individual in our group have the freedom to express him or herself in any way possible without feeling ashamed, self-conscious or alienated. Before Katimavik I was terrified of making mistakes and felt the best way to avoid it was to avoid taking responsibility. During the program, I was able to realize that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life at the end of someone else's line, following listlessly along. With the support of understanding project leaders, patient work sponsors, and encouraging participants, I began taking control of my life and learned that leadership is an important skill to develop in the pursuit of the future you want, as opposed to the future you only wish you could have. I can only speculate about what I might be doing right now if I had never participated in the program, but one thing is for sure: I am proud of who I am and the things I have accomplished so far. Interestingly enough, most of my biggest accomplishments can somehow be traced to what I learned in Katimavik.

Katimavik is different for everyone. Each participant's experience is very much dependent on their group members, work placements, project locations, and other factors. Perhaps I was lucky to fall into a perfectly compatible group, travel to three wonderful locations I had never been to, and perhaps it was just luck that all three of my project leaders were incredibly insightful, wise, and strong individuals. I have met many Katimavik employees and past and current participants of the program in the last five years, and it never ceases to amaze me how some things never change. I can exchange stories about group life and disastrous cooking with someone who participated in the program some 20 years before me, and they will understand exactly what I am talking about and probably have a similar story. And no matter how much time has passed since my experience of being a participant, a conversation with others about Katimavik is always full of excitement and laughter, and it will always end with a knowing look between the conversing parties, an unspoken manifest of reminiscence. There is something very special about Katimavik that has become permanent for me. Yes, it is a wonderful memory, but it is also a reminder that we have choices to make in life, and these choices shape our lives and determine who we are. Katimavik was one of the best choices I ever made.

BROADVIEW PRESS



Selling Diversity
Immigration, Multiculturalism, Employment Equity, and Globalization
By Yasmeen Abu-Laban & Christina Gabriel
1551113988 $29.95 CDN



Contesting Canadian Citizenship
Historical Readings
Edited by Robert Adamoski, Dorothy E. Chunn & Robert Menzies
1551113864 $32.95 CDN



Cruelty and Deception
The Controversy Over Dirty Hands In Politics
Edited by Paul Rynard & David Shugarman
1551111969 $29.95 CDN



Still Counting
Women in Politics Across Canada
By Linda Trimble & Jane Arscott
1551113740 $24.95 CDN

FOR THE NAMES AND NUMBERS OF LOCAL SUPPLIERS, PLEASE VISIT:
WWW.BROADVIEWPRESS.COM