

Northern Lakes College Faculty Authors Children's Book

A former combat soldier and kindergarten teacher, Matthew Oostvogels blends his unique experiences with his passion for education and international development. He recently co-authored a children's book, *Akiki's Journey and the Rights of the Child*. The book chronicles the journey of Akiki who, recruited as a child soldier, eventually finds his way out. Matthew hopes to include the custom-made resource into professional development opportunities offered to Ugandan teachers. The book was written with the intention of providing African teachers and their students with a teaching and learning resource to bring awareness to the reality of child soldiers.



Photo credit: Parenteau Photography

Matthew's experience in the Canadian military, along with his participation in a Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative called the Veteran Trainers to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers (VTECS) program, opened his eyes to the reality of child soldiers. These experiences led him and a group of like-minded individuals to establish Teach Peace Development, a not-for-profit organization with a mandate focused on the prevention of child soldier recruitment through teacher professional development.

Matthew and his wife, Ashley, have two boys and live in Peace River. Matthew is the Coordinator of Human Services Programs at NLC. Of his early experiences, he explains, "I joined the military after high school, serving five years between regular and reserve forces. I was deployed in 2006 to Kandahar, Afghanistan as a tank gunner. One memory that stands out is children playing while war waged around them, attesting to the fact that childhood innocence can prevail." This early observation of childhood innocence in the midst of war would lead Matthew to the Roméo Dallaire initiative, the founding of Teach Peace Development, a TEDx Talk, and, ultimately, Akiki's story.

After returning from Afghanistan, Matthew attended university, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Education, and a Masters in Adult Education. After teaching kindergarten in Peace River for five years, Matthew joined NLC in August 2018. Matthew's international development experience provides his students with a glimpse into how one can combine passions into a meaningful, large-scale contribution.

Matthew spent part of the summer of 2018 in Uganda participating in the Masulita Project, an Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) initiative. The Masulita Project aims to provide professional development opportunities to Ugandan teachers through co-teaching opportunities with Alberta teachers. The Ugandan and Alberta teachers swap



teaching stories, techniques, and ideas. “In 2018 there were 200 teachers who participated in the project in the Ugandan district of Wakiso,” says Matthew.

Matthew will be returning to Uganda in the summer of 2021 with his organization to pilot a teacher’s kit developed through Teach Peace Development. The primary focus of the teacher’s kit he will be sharing with the Ugandan teachers is to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers. “It’s a preventative approach. The idea is to teach the teachers preventative measures against child recruitment,” explains Matthew.

To learn more, see Teach Peace Development. Listen to Matthew’s TEDx Talk: Let Kids be Kids: My Journey of Advocacy for Child Soldiers. Akiki’s Journey and the Rights of the Child may be purchased on Amazon.