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COMMENTARY **OPINION**

How dance brought hope, joy to Pikangikum youth: Hepburn

Innovative project inspired by a Toronto dancer instills pride and confidence in youth living in the troubled, remote First Nations community.

By **Bob Hepburn** Politics
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Sarah Robichaud waited anxiously in the school gymnasium late one afternoon last spring to see if anyone would show up for the first workshop of an innovative dance project she was launching for students in Pikangikum, a troubled community in remote Northwestern Ontario.

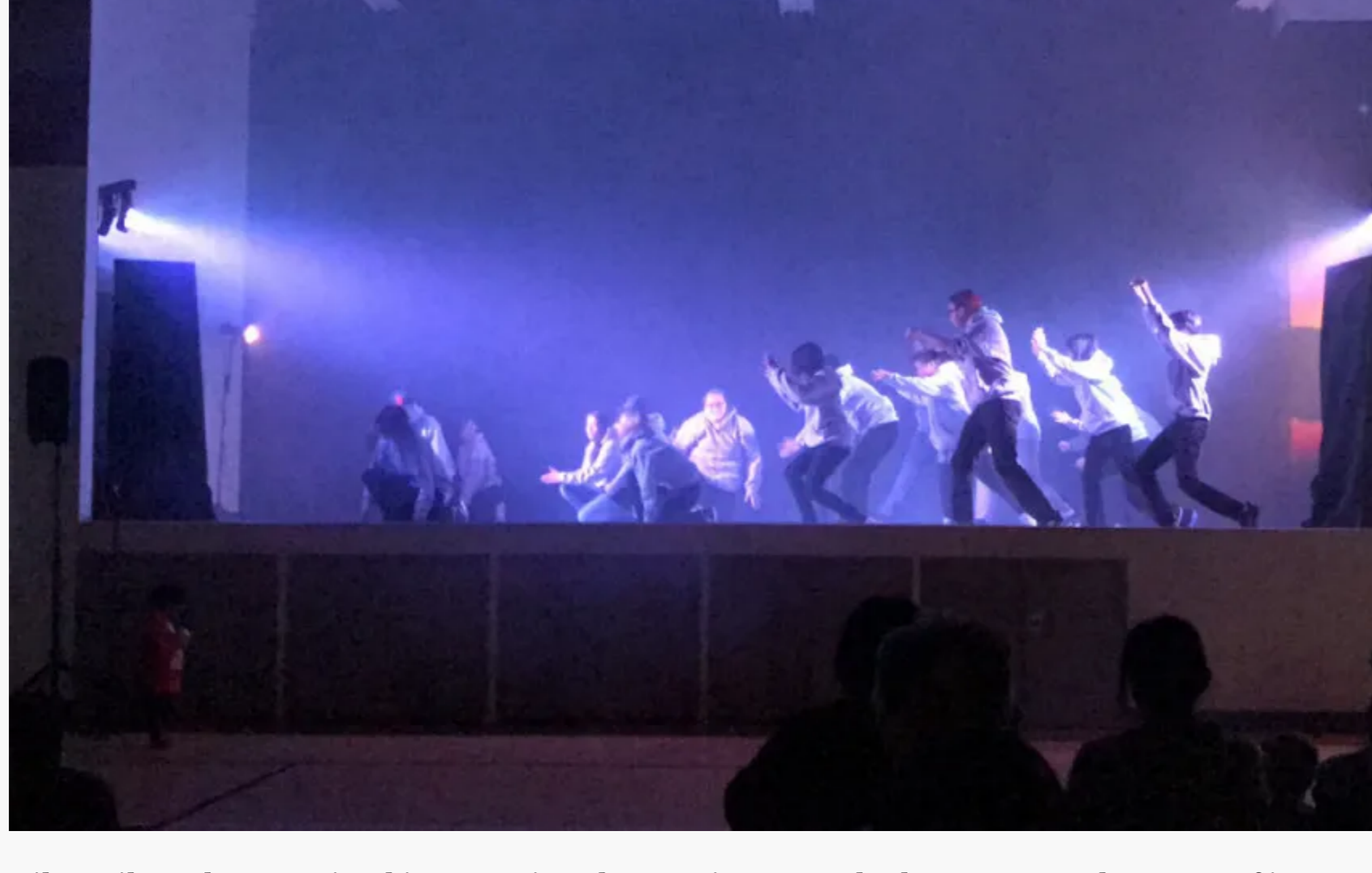
Robichaud was prepared for as few as two students — and she'd heard that maybe no one would come.

A few minutes before the start of the workshop, though, a few students cautiously entered the gym. By the time the session began, some 30 students from grades 6 to 12 had joined in.

Robichaud, who had spent months preparing for that first day, was overjoyed that so many students, some of whom were so shy they would barely say their name, came to listen to a woman from Toronto talk about dance, movement, personal expression — and having fun.

The Pikangikum Intergenerational Dance Project that Robichaud designed was aimed at promoting connection, creation and expression between the youth and adults in the community. "We didn't go there to teach them dance," she says. "Rather, we wanted to empower the youth to tell their stories through movement."

The task was difficult, though, given the hardships faced by many of the students. It was also hard given that some observers might question the worthwhileness of outsiders coming to Northern Ontario with their "little projects" that fail to address the massive underlying problems such isolated communities face.



Pikangikum has received international attention over the last 20 years because of its high rate of suicide, especially among youths, and of mental health issues. The problems are so bad that the fly-in community of 2,500 residents was once called "the suicide capital of the world."

An estimated 75 per cent of the residents are under the age of 25, unemployment runs at 75 per cent and 80 per cent of homes have no running water or toilets. Alcoholism and drug abuse are widespread, as is gasoline sniffing.

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Just last month Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins announced \$1.6 million in new funding for 20 full-time mental health workers for Pikangikum after four more young people committed suicide this summer.

Robichaud had heard about the community's problems from her partner, Michael Ouellette, a physician who has worked in Pikangikum for the last four years. "I was deeply moved by the problems and wanted to help in some way."

Several years ago Robichaud, a classically trained dancer, had designed Dancing with Parkinson's, a program for those living with the disease to increase awareness of the body through motion and artistic connection. "What if I did a similar program with students in Pikangikum?" she asked herself. With that, the project was born.

Robichaud received approval from the local band council and school authorities for the program and raised money to purchase costumes and supplies.

In the workshops, students were asked about their personal stories, experiences and understanding on those themes and they created gestures and dance phrases to express their stories, which Robichaud then pieced together into a full program.

After only 12 two-hour workshops and rehearsals, the 20 students who remained with the program created out of their own experiences an evening of dance that they performed before nearly 300 parents, friends and community leaders.

Each section of the program was based on the Ojibwe seven grandfather teachings of truth, courage, humility, wisdom, respect, love and honesty.

When the program ended, the applause was loud and sustained. Tears flowed and hugs and high-fives were exchanged throughout the room.

Tess McLean, one of the volunteers recruited by Robichaud and who has been involved in dance initiatives for years, says she believes the project has had a positive impact for the students. "It was one of the best experiences of my life," she says, adding she hopes the program will be expanded in the coming school year.

Robichaud is currently working with school and band leaders to expand the project this fall to all grades. She also hopes local residents will assume leadership for the program.

Clearly, it's easy for critics to dismiss such small projects as insignificant and for failing to tackle the larger issues facing such troubled communities. But such criticism overlooks the importance these initiatives can play a role in helping participants make new friends and gain confidence and pride from having developed a major event from scratch.

It worked in Pikangikum, where every student who took part in the final performance plans to join again next season.

Such an endorsement is reason enough to make it a continuing, year-round program and extend it to other remote communities where hope and joy is in short supply.

Bob Hepburn's column appears Thursday. bhepburn@thestar.ca

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