



The Story of Boys and Girls Club of Cape Breton (BGC-CB): Bridging Gaps, Building the Future Generation

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The Roots of Whitney Pier: A Legacy of Diversity and Resilience

Whitney Pier, a vibrant neighborhood of Cape Breton Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia carries a rich, multicultural history, woven together by the stories of families from the Caribbean, Ukraine, Poland, Italy, African Nova Scotian and other parts of the world. The community was shaped by waves of immigrants who came to work in the steel plant in the early 1900s, leaving their mark and forming a unique cultural tapestry. This legacy has evolved over the years and remains visible today in the faces, traditions, and spirit of the Pier's people.

Amidst this historic melting pot stands the Boys and Girls Club of Cape Breton (BGC-CB), a place where children, youth, and families come together to learn, grow, and support each other. The club serves as both a gathering point and a lifeline for a community that has seen significant change over the years, including new challenges brought on by a shifting economy and an influx of new Canadian families.

Nadine Maclean, a lifelong resident of Whitney Pier, speaks with deep affection for her neighborhood. "The Pier is like no other place; it's safe, close-knit, and people always look out for each other," she says. Growing up there, Nadine saw firsthand how welcoming the Pier has been to newcomers of all kinds. And as the community continues to diversify, it's the Boys and Girls Club that plays a crucial role in upholding these values of inclusion and belonging.

Today, BGC-CB's mission is to empower youth, support families, and build strong communities through a wide array of programs

designed to help children thrive. The club is a reflection of the neighborhood's diversity, serving a mix of families—long-standing residents, newcomers, and everyone in between.

A Safe Haven: The Mission and Values of BGC-CB

BGC-CB is a place where the club's executive director, Chester Borden, pours his passion and energy into service delivery that meets the needs of children and families. Chester has been with the club for over 19 years, witnessing its evolution from a modest "hole in the wall" into a thriving organization, and he is clear about the club's mission: "Our goal is to build the next generation of leaders and contributors within the community." Under his leadership, the club focuses on fostering inclusivity, empowerment, and respect for diversity, ensuring that every child who walks through the door feels seen, valued, and supported.



BGC-CB tripled in size in 2016 and now has extensive indoor and outdoor spaces for its members.

In Whitney Pier, where low incomes have historically shaped much of the community's experiences, BGC-CB steps in to provide resources, mentorship, and structured activities that promote leadership, education, and mental well-being. "The club has always been a safe space," Chester reflects. "Whether it's through after-school programs, life skills training, or simply offering a place to make friends and be heard, we make sure no child is left behind."

Nadine sees this firsthand. Her sister, her children, and her nephew have all been "club kids," participating in programs that have given them a sense of purpose, community, and safety. "The Boys and Girls Club has been a constant support," Nadine says. "It's more than just a place to drop off your kids; it's a place that helps you and your family through good times and tough times."

Opening the Doors to Newcomers: Embracing Change and Diversity

With Cape Breton experiencing an influx of newcomers in recent years, particularly families from Nigeria and India, as well as international students attending Cape Breton University (CBU), the club has had to adapt quickly to meet the needs of a growing and changing demographic. Chester and his team recognize the unique role BGC-CB can play in supporting these families as they settle into their new lives in Canada.

John Burton, regional director for BGC Canada, underscores the importance of the club's role as a non-traditional settlement service. "Settlement can't just be about providing housing or employment; it's about fostering a sense of belonging and building relationships within the community," he says. This means helping children from diverse backgrounds integrate socially, connect with their peers, and find their footing in a new culture.

Chester believes that representation matters when it comes to supporting newcomers. "We've made efforts



Youth from many diverse backgrounds learn about and celebrate truth and reconciliation.

to recruit staff from racially diverse backgrounds,” he explains. “It’s important for children to see themselves reflected in the coaches and staff they interact with.” However, finding qualified staff from newcomer communities has proven challenging due to financial constraints, low wages, and limited resources for training. Nevertheless, the club continues to actively reach out to newcomer communities, seeking volunteers and staff who can bridge cultural gaps and help create an inclusive environment.

Food Security and the Club’s Role in Well-Being

Brittany Macdougall, who manages all day-to-day operations, has witnessed the transformative impact of BGC-CB’s programs on the health and well-being of the community’s children. One of the club’s most important services is the lunch program, which provides much-needed meals to children who may not have consistent access to nutritious food at home. Brittany estimates that about 80% of the children who attend the club rely on the lunch program. “For many of these kids, this program is a lifesaver,” she shares. “It’s not just about providing food; it’s about making sure the kids have what they need to thrive.”

This program supports children from single-parent households and low-income families, making a tangible difference in their daily lives. Brittany highlights how important it is to offer these services consistently, ensuring that the children feel secure, cared for, and supported not just nutritionally but emotionally as well.

Partnerships and Collaborations: Strengthening Support Systems

One of the key strategies for expanding BGC-CB’s reach and impact has been through partnerships and collaborations with other local organizations. Chester speaks passionately about the club’s ongoing discussions with Eastern Family Services, a well-funded organization with a shared commitment to family and mental health

support. “We’re in talks with Eastern Family Services about a potential joint project,” Chester shares. “Pooling resources could lead to greater community impact.”

However, while the potential for collaboration is exciting, financial and human resource constraints can make progress slow. The ability to effectively partner and expand programming requires not just vision, but sustainable funding and the right personnel—two things that BGC-CB is constantly working to secure.

The club’s partnership with the neighboring school in Whitney Pier is another example of a successful collaboration. With the school located just next door, BGC-CB works closely with teachers and staff to provide after-school support and align programming with the academic and social needs of students. This relationship allows for a seamless connection between the school day and club activities, ensuring that children have continuous support in both their learning and personal development.

Yet not all partnership efforts have been successful. Chester highlights challenges in building a more structured relationship with Cape Breton University (CBU), despite the university’s growing international student population. While CBU has contributed to diversifying the community, there’s a disconnect between the university’s priorities and the grassroots, community-driven work of BGC-CB. Chester sees the potential for collaboration but acknowledges that limited capacity and funding gaps have made it difficult to establish meaningful ties.

On the other hand, the club’s collaboration with “Rise,” a marketing and PR firm, has been transformative. “Rise is helping us elevate our communications and visibility,” Chester says. “They understand our goals and are working on enhancing our social media presence and supporting grant applications.” This partnership has enabled BGC-CB to connect with a wider audience, attract crucial funding, and effectively tell its story of community impact.

Programs and Services: Supporting Children and Families Holistically

BGC-CB provides a range of programs and services aimed at supporting the well-being of children and their families. These include structured after-school programs, mental health support, life skills training, sports, creative arts, and cultural activities. Nadine, whose family has been involved with the club for years, speaks to the impact these programs have had on her children. “The club is more than a place for my kids to play; it’s where they learn, make friends, and feel a part of something bigger,” she shares.

Mike Vickers, Treasurer of BGC-CB and a local advocate for youth development, highlights how the club’s programming aims to empower children with practical life skills. “We want to go beyond babysitting and provide kids with tools they can use for the rest of their lives,” he says. From computer skills to music lessons, cooking classes to woodworking, the club’s activities are designed

to be both fun and educational, helping children gain confidence and independence.

The sense of connectedness and belonging that develops among the children is one of the most rewarding outcomes of BGC-CB’s work. “Once a child becomes a ‘club kid,’ they often stay connected to the club for life,” Mike shares. This enduring bond creates a strong sense of community stewardship, with older teens and young adults continuing to contribute to the club and look out for one another.

Nadine sees the club’s programs as essential for helping children stay grounded and gain a sense of belonging. “It’s a place where my kids can come after school, have a meal, and participate in activities that help them grow. It’s where they’re encouraged to be themselves, and to learn about respect, diversity, and leadership,” she explains.

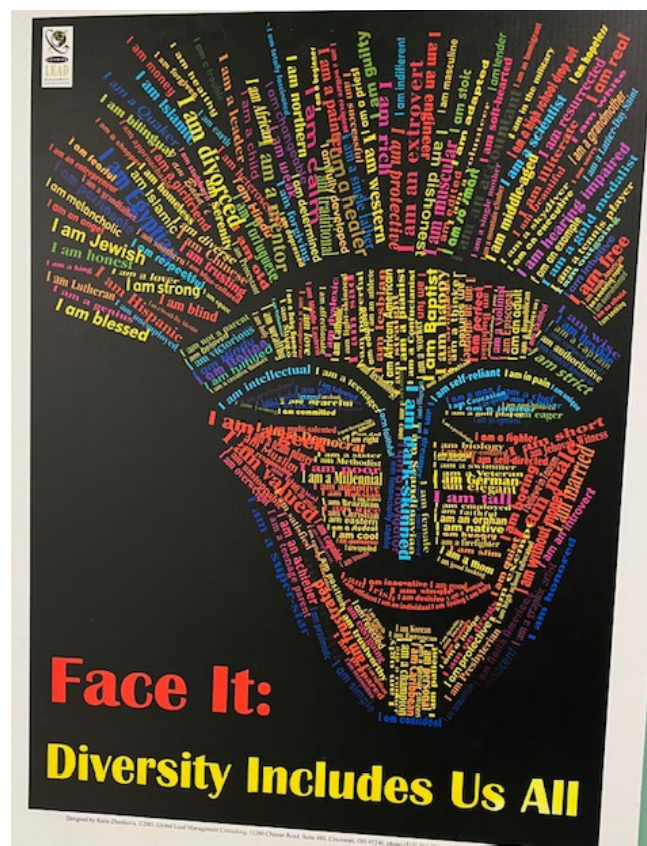
First Nations History, Traditions and Newcomers

Jeff Ward, President of BGC-CB and a Mi’kmaq Knowledge Keeper, brings a unique First Nations perspective to the club’s efforts to support newcomers. Deeply connected to his heritage, Jeff views the club as an opportunity to facilitate cultural exchange between Indigenous communities, newcomers, and long-term residents. He believes that the Mi’kmaq way of life offers valuable lessons in respect for the land, traditions, and community connection—lessons that can be shared and celebrated with new Canadians.

“Culture isn’t something you teach; it’s something you live,” Jeff says. He envisions BGC-CB as a space where people can come together to share their stories, dance, food, and traditions in an environment of mutual respect and curiosity. He dreams of events that bring together people from all backgrounds, allowing newcomers to learn about the Indigenous history of the land while sharing their own cultural traditions. For Jeff, this kind



BGC programs support members ongoing learning with several recreational, educational and cultural programming activities and field trips.



Activities and posters around the club spaces help youth learn about respect, diversity and to value their cultural heritage.

of experiential learning is key to building understanding, breaking down barriers, and fostering a stronger, more unified community.

Challenges in Mental Health and Youth Support: Finding Resources to Meet Complex Needs

Mental health support is one of the club's most pressing challenges, especially as it strives to support both newcomers and long-standing community members. However, limited funding and access to trained professionals make it difficult for BGC-CB to provide comprehensive mental health services. Chester speaks openly about the issue: "Mental health is a critical need in our community, but without the right resources and funding, there's only so much we can do."

BCG's experience is that mental health is not just an issue for newcomers; it's a broader community need. The

club's diverse membership means that children come with varied experiences and needs, and BGC-CB aims to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels supported. Despite the constraints, the club is committed to developing partnerships with healthcare professionals and leveraging local resources to ensure children and families receive the mental health support they need. The focus on mental health is complemented by BGC-CB's emphasis on socio-economic support. Many of the children attending the club come from single-parent households or low-income families, and providing meals, safe spaces, and developmental programming is central to addressing their needs. However, the financial challenges of maintaining such services remain an ongoing struggle.

Show Me The Money

Funding is a persistent challenge for BGC-CB. While the club receives some support from the national BGC

office, only about 5-6% of the budget comes from this source. The bulk of funding is raised locally through partnerships, community initiatives, and grants. The Department of Community Services (DCS) provides about a third of the club's funding, a significant contribution that enables the club to cover core expenses. However, relying on a single primary funder also comes with risks, and BGC-CB often struggles to find comprehensive support that covers staffing and operational costs.

Chester expresses frustration over how government programs often fund small pilot initiatives through BGC-CB, only to later direct larger amounts of funding to bigger organizations that can scale those programs. "We're often left to do a lot with very little," he says. The complexities of federal grant applications add to these challenges, as they require extensive reporting and administrative capacity—resources that a smaller organization like BGC-CB may not have.

Chester and John share a vision of expanding the club's reach beyond Whitney Pier to other areas of Cape Breton. The potential for growth is there, but it is contingent on securing sustainable funding to support any expansion efforts. "Show me the money," Chester says, underscoring the need for financial backing to turn these aspirations into reality.

Mike Vickers, who plays a crucial role in the club's financial planning, underscores the difficulty of securing long-term funding. "While grants help, they often don't cover operational costs, which makes it hard to sustain our programming and staff," he says. The lack of core funding limits the club's capacity to explore new partnerships, expand services, and invest in the training needed to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse community.

Hiring and retaining qualified staff is also a challenge. Working with youth has never been a particularly lucrative profession, but it is even more challenging today when the demands on staff for everything from comput-



BGC-CB really has the feel of a youth-centred club with multiple different activities going on all the time.

er technology to coaching sports, to dealing with behavioral problems and mental health are prevalent - and the financial rewards for working for a small non-profit organization are minimal. Chester shared the experience of a staff recruitment drive recently, where the top candidate declined the job because of low pay. This is a common occurrence, but the organization can't compete for wages. He also shared BGC-CB's desire for hiring staff from new immigrant communities (specifically India and Nigeria) so youth members of the club can have someone from their own cultural and ethnic background to look up to. Unfortunately he has not yet been able to recruit qualified staff.

Opportunities for Growth and Community Impact: Vision for the Future

Despite these challenges, BGC-CB is optimistic about its future and is actively pursuing opportunities for growth. The club aims to leverage national programs that support equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), as well as develop unique, place-based programs that reflect the cultural richness of Whitney Pier. By offering workshops on Canadian laws, financial literacy, and educational systems, BGC-CB seeks to help newcomer families navigate life in their new country more effectively.

The club is also working to enhance its marketing and

outreach through its partnership with Rise, which is helping to elevate the club's visibility, secure funding, and attract new members and supporters. By improving its communication strategies and grant application processes, BGC-CB aims to strengthen its impact and ensure its long-term sustainability.

Building a Future of Inclusivity and Opportunity

The Boys and Girls Club of Cape Breton is more than a youth organization—it is a transformative force in the Whitney Pier community. Through its programs, partnerships, and commitment to inclusivity, BGC-CB provides a safe haven where children and youth from all backgrounds can learn, grow, and find their place in the world. It stands as a catalyst for change, empowering young peo-

ple, supporting families, and fostering a sense of belonging for newcomers and long-standing residents alike.

While financial and operational challenges persist, the dedication of Chester, Jeff, John, Mike, Nadine, and Brittany, among many others, ensures that the club's mission of service, empowerment, and community-building will continue. With a focus on sustainable funding, partnership growth, and programming that meets the evolving needs of the community, BGC-CB is poised to create a more inclusive and supportive Cape Breton, where every child has the opportunity to succeed.

This journey is ongoing, but one thing remains clear: the Boys and Girls Club of Cape Breton is a place where bridges are built, futures are shaped, and a community comes together, stronger with each day.

