

Raise-A-Reader: Sedin and Biekسا make a great team off the ice, too

Canucks wives work together to teach literacy to those who are struggling

By Yvonne Zacharias, Vancouver Sun September 23, 2013



Katie Biekسا (right) helps out students with their English while volunteering at the Canuck Family Education Centre at Britannia Secondary School in Vancouver.

Photograph by: RICHARD LAM, PNG

Deep within the maze that is Britannia secondary school, there is a basement room where people from around the world gather to learn English.

At the front, an upbeat blond woman writes purposefully on the blackboard. Apart from the fact that she is leading the class, she immediately stands out in a sea of dark hair and swarthy complexions.

She invites the participants to state where they come from.

China, Vietnam, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iran. The list goes on.

Finally, the facilitator says where she is from, carefully spelling out S-w-e-d-e-n. Then she gets the participants to recite the names of the countries out loud.

The woman at the front of the class is Marinette Sedin, who volunteers her time here at the Canucks Family Education Centre in between caring for the three children she shares with her husband, Daniel Sedin, one of the famous Sedin twins who have brought so much moxie and class to the Vancouver Canucks hockey team.

As the mostly female class states where they are from, Sedin relies on a volunteer at the back to point out the countries on a map. When that volunteer is stumped, a student leaps up to help.

This volunteer is Katie Biekse, wife of Canuck defenceman Kevin Biekse, although to most of the participants, she is just a helping hand on the rough road to English literacy.

“A lot of them don’t even know who our husbands are, they don’t ask, they don’t care,” Biekse said in an interview after class. And that’s fine with her.

Here, the ephemeral hockey world vanishes, replaced by the hard-rock reality that there is a sub-section of the city in need of down-to-earth basics.

The snapshot of what goes on in this classroom might seem rather ordinary given Vancouver’s diverse population and increasing global mobility, but look a little deeper and you will find more.

The goings-on deep in the guts of an inner-city school show the far reach of The Vancouver Sun's Raise-a-Reader program, which helps fund the work of the Canucks Family Education Centre.

They also reflect the hockey team's extensive community outreach. The players get the glory — at least when they win — while much quiet work goes unheralded.

Great good can come of these hockey connections, not only on the home front but in the community where a duo like Sedin and Bieksa have teamed up to help some of the city's most vulnerable women, including refugees who have fled extreme hardship. Many feel isolated here.

Their partnership began roughly eight years ago when they started working together to prepare a big holiday dinner at Rogers arena for families from the education centre — most of whom are immigrants — complete with presents for the kids and the presence of the Canuck mascot, Fin.

"It's nice for a lot of them because for many, it's their only (holiday) dinner," said Bieksa, whose smile is constant as she speaks with refreshing candour about her life.

Then when Sedin needed a classroom volunteer, she turned to her friend, Bieksa.

"It's a good way for me to get out and use my education and also volunteer and do something charitable. It's good for me," she explained.

She marvels at the magic that unfolds here. "It's sort of like a little community in the classroom," she said. "We all get together and help each other out."

Her friendship with Sedin has grown as a result. "My part is to support Marinette and the other CFEC volunteers and staff. We work as a team and together we create the themes and lesson plans that support the different participant levels and we work from there," Bieksa said.

She noted how gratifying it is to see students, who are all at different levels, helping each other. She and Sedin divide the students in groups, mixing and matching countries, trying to come up with combinations that will work. That way, "they are forced to speak English and they try their best," said

Biekša, adding, “Their learning process in the classroom is very natural and organic. You just see it happening.”

Under the guidance of executive director and founder Jean Rasmussen, the Canucks Family Education Centre has served more than 1,200 families on Vancouver’s east side and Burnaby’s Edmonds area since its inception 11 years ago. With significant funds from the Raise-a-Reader program, the centre provides an integrated service approach and relies on a number of key partners such as the Vancouver and Burnaby school districts, Britannia Community Services Centre, the Canucks for Kids Fund, and many others to help the centre provide quality learning and experiences for the families that attend.

Biekša and Sedin encourage participants to read menus, streets signs, bus stops, children’s books to their kids and to help their kids with their homework. They want the participants to not only learn English but to engage in Vancouver the way they once did. Of course, it’s much more difficult when you come here not speaking a word of English. “It’s nerve-racking, even ordering a cup of coffee,” said Biekša.

The classes are free of charge, with lunches provided, and with nearby care — and early literacy programming — for young children. Even bus tickets are provided when needed. Many of the adult participants are not only learning English but working toward the equivalent of a high school diploma.

“They don’t have to feel guilty about spending the money or getting child care or paying for buses or even food,” said Biekša. “It’s all supplied. They can come here and just relax and enjoy learning with each other.”

Jean Rasmussen, founder and executive director of CFEC, says Biekša’s skills and background — she has a master’s degree in social justice and equity and an undergraduate degree in English with a minor in women’s studies — makes her an excellent fit with the centre.

“Katie brings with her a unique set of skills to the work of the centre. Her education and interest in the issues that impact women’s lives made her the right choice to facilitate a citizenship study group this fall for CFEC parents, who after many years as residents of Canada, now qualify to begin the

process of becoming Canadian citizens — a very important achievement for many.

“CFEC is about investing in human potential and it takes many individuals and organization working together to make lasting change.”

At lunch time at the centre, Sedin is juggling one of the participant’s children on her lap as she reaches for a lunch of fresh vegetables.

There is no “us” and “them” in this classroom. There are mostly women helping women, finding common ground as mothers of young children and mostly as transplants to a city far from home.

“Katie and Marinette are essential to the work of the centre and bring with them an understanding of the many challenges young families face. They too must balance the numerous demands on their time and energy and when they leave the classroom at the end of the day they, like the parent participants, are on their way to pick up their kids,” Rasmussen said.

Bieksa agrees: “I can relate to them in terms of being a woman and trying to make something for yourself and really looking out for your children and trying to improve their lives as well as your life,” said Bieksa.

“We are all human. It’s a human experience. And it’s very real.”

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