

## Lost Prizes at Home and Abroad

By Ken McCluskey

In the early 1990s, the Lord Selkirk, Sunrise, and Interlake school divisions established Lost Prizes, an initiative to reclaim at-risk, talented high-school dropouts who had essentially been lost to the system. Most of these students had withdrawn and were unproductive, and some were in trouble with the law. Lost Prizes was a way to reconnect with these individuals, awaken their dormant creative potential, and motivate them to do something more productive with their lives.

During the first part of the Lost Prizes program, a facilitator worked directly with the participants in an off-site classroom setting. The classes featured various strength-based interventions, career awareness, and creative problem solving (CPS) training. Using CPS tools, the re-engaged students learned to make reasoned educational, career, and life decisions, and considered how to move from their “current reality” to a “desired future state.” They mapped out individual growth plans to help identify and work toward goals. In the second phase, students gained experience through on-the-job placements, and had an opportunity to encounter and address some real-life problems with caring, philanthropic mentors in the business community.

Lost Prizes was very successful. Once their talents were identified, appreciated, and nurtured, 57 of the 88 participants (65 percent) responded by returning to high school, entering post-secondary programs at university or community college, or obtaining employment. A similar format has been successfully used to increase graduation rates among at-risk Aboriginal students and to reduce recidivism among inmates.

By 1999, the original Lost Prizes and related made-in-Manitoba initiatives ended, but interest in the projects remained and similar programs were established in the three original divisions. This year, faculty at the University of Winnipeg (UW) collaborated with educators in the field to launch new incarnations of the program at the Manitoba Youth Centre and at Sisler High School.

Lost Prizes weds theory and practice from both the enrichment and at-risk domains. Currently, with support from UW faculty and staff, a vision is emerging that features three levels of Lost Prizes intervention:

- ▶ Lost Prizes training centres that provide the facilities, materials, and human resources necessary to train new practitioners.

- ▶ Programs that involve trained practitioners using the Lost Prizes philosophy and approach directly in their work with young people.
- ▶ Schools that embody and practise Lost Prizes principles at all levels throughout the institution.

The effects of these efforts can be seen in a number of interesting new ventures. In Thailand, a new Lost Prizes free school called Por Peang (i.e., “self-sufficiency”) will soon be built for village children in Buriram, and a prototype demonstration centre is also being planned for Bangkok. Projects in other sites in Asia may follow. Kenya will soon be opening a Lost Prizes school and program in Nairobi and a training centre in Kisumu. Planning sessions were held in July to follow up on earlier discussions and interest in Jordan, India, Turkey, Israel, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru.

Everyone involved in Lost Prizes outreach understands the importance of concrete training and preparation. To meet this need, 25 UW foundation and support courses/workshops—each three full days in length (i.e., 1.5 credit hours)—have been developed to help educators acquire basic competencies and certification. Subject to university approval, the Lost Prizes courses may be counted as electives toward the Bachelor of Education degree or, alternatively (if extra assignments are completed), toward the Post-Baccalaureate Diploma in Education.

The goal of the programs has always been to improve the talent identification and development process. Once educators are equipped with appropriate training, skills, commitment, and experience (in both the enrichment and at-risk areas), they strive to identify and nurture the gifts of these highly capable, but disconnected children and youth. While there are always new challenges to address, they approach them with hope, flexibility, and perseverance. As a result, a lot of young people who have been otherwise marginalized now have the potential to make incredible contributions to societies around the world.

### Profile Dr. Ken McCluskey

Dr. Ken McCluskey, Dean and Professor of Education at the University of Winnipeg, is known internationally for his work in mentoring, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, at-risk children and youth, and gifted education. Before becoming a professor (in 1998) and Dean of Education (in 2003) at U of W, Ken had 25 years experience as a psychologist, special educator, and administrator in the public school system. He has received major program development, creativity, and publication awards from the Canadian Council for Exceptional Children, the International Centre for Innovation in Education, the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, and Reclaiming Youth International. Ken has written over 100 professional articles and chapters, and is the author, co-author, or editor of 20 books, including *Understanding ADHD: Our Personal Journey*, *Lost Prizes: Talent Development and Problem Solving with At-Risk Populations*, *Mentoring for Talent Development*, and *Enriching Teaching and Learning for Talent Development*.

