

CITY/REGION

Algonquin adventure

Group hikes across the 131-km park for 18 winter days

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DOURO — For 18 days and 131 kilometres, exposed to the wilderness and winter weather, a team of six men and a teenager trekked across Algonquin Provincial Park to raise awareness for a charity before returning to Peterborough yesterday.

The adventure was designed to attract attention to SOS Children's Villages — an international charity for orphaned and abandoned children.

A group of four Belgian men started planning the wilderness trip a year ago and commissioned the help of Douro resident, and Algonquin park warden, Roy Perritt.

Yesterday, the team was scurrying around Perritt's home as they packed their gear in preparation for a flight back to Belgium today.

The team looked like they had been away from civilization for three weeks. The stench of camping hung in the air.

A sense of accomplishment was palpable.

"If two children have a better future because of what we did, I'm already happy," Bert Poffé said.

SOS Children's Villages gives children who have lost their parents or are no longer able to live with them a permanent home and stable environment. The charity builds villages and family networks for children who don't have parents.

It operates in more than 130 countries.

Poffé, who is from Leuven, Belgium, said he became involved with the charity last year following the Boxing Day tsunami in southeast Asia. When the fundraising effort was finished after a couple months, he said he wanted to do something else to help.

The idea for the Algonquin park trip was formed.

With fellow Belgians Ludo Francois, Dirk Michiels and Wilfried Van Gompel, Poffé raised public awareness of their trip and cause.

In November, the team spent a night in a walk-in freezer at -28 C. It was a media frenzy that focused on the charity, Poffé said.

It was also good training for the trek.



Clockwise from left, Bobby Perritt, 14, Ludo Francois, Wilfried Van Gompel, Roy Perritt, Dirk Michiels and Bert Poffé display a map showing where they trekked across Algonquin Provincial Park to raise awareness for SOS Children's Villages, an international charity for orphaned and abandoned children.

The coldest night on the adventure was -32 C, said Perritt, who has been a wilderness guide for 14 years.

Most of the trip was plagued by mild winter weather, Perritt said.

"The warm weather made it more difficult," he said. "There was a constant danger of thin ice."

Perritt, pointing to a map in his home on Division Road off of Parkhill Road east of the city, showed the route the team travelled.

They made their way, from east to west, until about the centre of the park. Then they turned south.

The original plan was to exit at the east edge of the park, Perritt said, but the warm weather made it difficult to pull the sleds with the equipment, and the team didn't think they could accomplish the feat within their set timeframe.

SOS charity

What: SOS Children's Villages International.

Founded: In 1949 by Austrian Hermann Gmeiner to house war orphans and homeless children.

Where: There are SOS Children's Villages in 132 countries.

More info: Visit www.sos-childrensvillages.org

People could follow the trip through its conception on a website (www.wintercrossing.com) that promoted SOS Children's Villages. The website also allows people to donate to the charity online.

"We are quite happy with people following the story," Poffé said.

The Canadian and Belgian SOS Children's Villages organizations

have said they're receiving a lot of attention because of the trip, Poffé said.

"It's becoming bigger and bigger than ever in Canada," he said.

There is one SOS Children's Village in Canada. Three homes, for 16 children, were built in Surrey, B.C. in 2000 on a 8,000-square-metre property.

Perritt brought his 14-year-old son, Bobby, and another park warden along for the adventure to support the charity.

Bobby promoted the charity at Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School and his principal made it possible for him to take exams early, Perritt said.

"It's a good example for other young people," Poffé said.

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