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Friendship earned the hard way

Curtis Lavoie learned a lot teaching railway workers, but his bond with Alex Kormendi made a friend for life, writes Joanne Laucius

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In 1989, an idealistic young graduate landed in rural Saskatchewan with a tough assignment.

Curtis Lavoie was to work with a gang of Canadian Pacific railway workers. In his spare time, he would help the workers advance their education.

"I saw an ad that said 'Hard work, low pay.' It looked appealing," says Dr. Lavoie, now an Ottawa emergency room physician.

Dr. Lavoie signed on as a "labourer-teacher" with Frontier College, founded in 1899 by Alfred Fitzpatrick, who believed that education had to be brought to people where they worked -- remote mines, lumber camps and railway lines.

Dr. Lavoie thought a lot about the summer of 1989 as the years moved on. This June, he got a surprise -- a phone call from a 16-year-old girl in British Columbia who had tracked him down after her father, one of the railroad students, found a letter Dr. Lavoie wrote to her father, prompting a flood of memories.

"He helped me so much," says Alex Kormendi, who now lives in Kelowna. "We just talked about life. What happened to me, what happened to him."

Dr. Lavoie had just finished his undergraduate degree in physiology at McGill University when he volunteered to work as a labourer-teacher.

For a young man who grew up in relative middle-class comfort, the rough railway culture was an eye-opener. Many of the workers hadn't finished high school. They swore, drank, slept in boxcars and were awakened at 2 a.m. to avoid working in the heat of the day.

"The whole philosophy is that there are learners everywhere and everywhere is a place to learn. I really took that to heart," he says now.

He went to a second-hand store, bought 75 books for \$8 and set up a library in one of the boxcars. The books were organized by war, mystery, western, Penguin, and weird.



CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

As a volunteer with Frontier College in 1989, Dr. Curtis Lavoie was assigned to work in Saskatchewan with a railway work gang by day and help other workers with literacy at night. He recently reconnected with one of his students, Alex Kormendi, an immigrant from Hungary now living in Kelowna B.C., seen in the photo Dr. Curtis is holding, after Mr. Kormendi's 16-year-old daughter tracked him down.

The workers started contributing their own books and magazines. It was hard to gauge the library's success, but one day, while sweeping out the sleeping quarters, Dr. Lavoie noted that half the bunks had a book or two on them, all from the library.

But Dr. Lavoie really connected with Mr. Kormendi, who arrived from Hungary only months before. His English was minimal, but he had an uncanny knowledge of numbers.

Over the summer, Dr. Lavoie tutored him and translated for him. The two went on errands, played soccer and chess. Mr. Kormendi talked about Hungary and his family.

By the end of the summer, the two decided to meet the next year in Hungary. Mr. Kormendi was a no-show in Hungary, but his parents welcomed Dr. Lavoie. He returned to Canada and the two lost touch.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kormendi had settled in Kelowna after meeting his wife, Martha, through a Hungarian-language newspaper. They had three children and Mr. Kormendi worked as a newspaper delivery man and custodian.

Seeing an old letter from Dr. Lavoie got him thinking about his friend, said his daughter, Csilla, who decided to see if she could reunite the two with a little help from Google.

"I didn't think it would be that easy," she says. "It took all of 15 minutes."

In his report to Frontier College in 1989, Dr. Lavoie wrote of the friendship.

"By the end of the summer, Alex and I were very good friends. In fact, I would say he was the best friend I had out there, and among the best I ever had," he wrote.

Dr. Lavoie's railway summer changed his approach to people, and helped steer him in the direction of emergency medicine. Nights in the emergency room at Montfort Hospital or CHEO can be gritty, just like his days working on the railroad.

"You don't have to be tough, but you do have to be accepting," he says.