

My Arctic Journey: Bonnie Hewitt – Communications Consultant

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Did you know that the Arctic makes up more than 40% of Canada's landmass? Despite that, most Canadians will never have the opportunity to travel there. I am now one of the lucky ones.

My name is Bonnie Hewitt and I am a Consultant in the Communications department for Baffinland Iron Mines. An amazing company that produces the world's highest-quality direct shipping high-grade iron ore. Not only that, it also makes significant investments in local and regional, social and economic benefits to five Inuit communities on North Baffin Island and to the territory of Nunavut as a whole.



The opportunity that allowed me to travel where very few ever venture, was the Annual Performance Review Forum. Locally known as the APRF, it's a three-day meeting hosted by us and the Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA), with Elder and Youth delegates from the five communities, plus other Inuit organizations.

The goal of the gathering is to present updates on all aspects of Baffinland's operations and look ahead to the future, as well as answering questions and sharing recommendations. My role at the 2023 APRF was to take notes and capture photos of the delegates and the gathering as a whole. I also supported the Baffinland team with media interviews, and posted a play-by-play of the proceedings to our social media. It was a background role with a massive online audience.



This year, the APRF was hosted by the remote hamlet of Pond Inlet, on the eastern edge of the Northwest Passage. In the land of the Northern Lights and the Midnight Sun, it's easy to see why Pond Inlet, also known as Mittimatalik, is called the "Jewel of the North." A community 173 square kilometres in size, surrounded by spectacular mountains, and home to 1,882 people.

My first impressions of Pond Inlet were striking – while I arrived at night, the sun was still out and it was as bright as day. The hamlet is so far north of the Arctic Circle, that from May to August, the sun is shining 24 hour a day. Fortunately, the hotel had blackout curtains to help me sleep. Two other things also stood out right away - the crisp, clean air, and the silence. For someone who lives in a big noisy city, it was magical.



The squeaking of the snow underfoot broke the spell, as I began to explore my new surroundings on foot, bundled up in my new winter parka and insulated boots, both just purchased for my trip north. As I walked through the community, it was easy to see the direct benefits and positive impacts of the Mary River Mine, the ripple effects of which have spread right across North Baffin.



During the first day of public meetings, two of the Elders thanked the company for its investment in the region, and for the long-lasting, high-paying jobs which enable our Inuit employees to support their families and to purchase tools, including snowmobiles and four-wheelers, so they can hunt and fish, and help feed their communities.



The Elders also applauded our educational funding and initiatives, from annual scholarships for post-secondary students, to free laptop computers for every high school graduate. Most importantly, it seemed to me, was when they thanked us for giving them a voice, and for incorporating Inuit traditional Inuit knowledge in our operations. This made me even prouder to be part of the Baffinland team.

I was overwhelmed by the generosity and support of everyone I met in the high Arctic. They welcomed me, this southern stranger, with warm smiles and open arms. Unlike the anonymity of life in Toronto, in the North, everyone looks out for everyone else. I was also quite touched to see how children are cherished and Elders are revered.



After nearly a week in Pond Inlet, my journey home brought me through Nunavut's capital city, Iqaluit, where the public art and architecture are truly stunning. There are beautiful Inuit sculptures around every corner, and the art galleries are full of treasures.



And while it was also nice to see a paved road again, I didn't see any stoplights. Still, drivers all politely waited their turn at the many four-way intersections, where the stop signs are printed in Nunavut's three official languages.



There's no question Nunavut's Inuit face daunting challenges, including inadequate housing and health care, a woeful lack of resources, and exorbitant food prices. All overshadowed by intergenerational trauma from a tragic legacy of forced relocation, residential schools and more. But while there are no simple solutions, I am thankful to work for a company that is making a positive difference. I also saw plenty of reasons for hope. I met many young Inuit who have big dreams, and bright futures ahead, including a young fashion student in Iqaluit who says she plans to "take the world by storm."



I will never forget the breathtaking sight of those majestic mountains, or the sheer exhilaration of standing alone on the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean. But truly it's the remarkable strength and resilience of the people I met, and their rich cultural traditions that made this work trip a life-changing experience.



I want to personally thank Baffinland for giving me such an amazing opportunity. This was my first visit to the Canadian Arctic, and I hope it won't be the last.

