



Neil Falkner died in a back-country skiing accident in 2002. His mother created a fund in his honour at Britannia Secondary School, which sends at-risk youth to an outdoor camp.

Cutbacks threaten school's life-changing inner-city program

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A scholarship at Britannia Secondary School is in danger of being lost because of funding cuts at the Vancouver School Board.

Britannia, an inner-city school located in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, has been the beneficiary of a legacy fund that has sent at-risk youth to outdoor camp since 2003.

But looming budget cuts at the Vancouver School Board mean Britannia is on a list of 12 schools being considered for closure.

Judy Lynne, founder of the Neil Falkner legacy fund — named after her late son who was a one-time student at Britannia — said the program has been enormously successful but “if Britannia closes, it just won’t be the same.”

Grade 10 students have been selected to receive the charitable funds at neilfalknerlegacy.ca, which, since 2003, has sent 26 pupils on an Outward Bound program at an average cost of more than \$7,000 a year.

The annual scholarship is believed to be the biggest in the school’s 108-year history. The award has always gone to a student who isn’t performing well or is suffering privations at home.

Lynne recalls one youth, Brian, who was under stress at home and would only give one-word answers at school. After several weeks in the wilderness with Outward Bound, he came back “really changed.”

“Brian looked me in the eye and told me it was the best thing that

ever happened to him. He was the most perfect kid we ever sent,” Lynne said.

The fund’s origins can be traced to the 1980s when Falkner’s parents were in the throes of a “messy divorce.” The turmoil affected Neil, who gave a poor account of himself at class. A chance encounter led to Outward Bound and he eventually turned his life around, becoming a ski instructor in Whistler.

Neil died in a back-country alpine accident in 2002.

“The Outward Bound journey made a huge difference in his life. Neil came back with pride in himself and he brought that energy into the school. That was the whole idea behind the program,” added Lynne, who hosts charitable events at Whistler and near her home on the Sunshine Coast.

The Vancouver School Board said in a notice on its website efforts will be made to “minimize negative impacts to school and vulnerable communities” caused by the closures. It said cuts to facilities are intended to reduce operating costs and allow funds to be transferred toward educational programming.

Britannia teachers were notified of the school’s possible closure on June 20. Community input is being collected by the board until the end of September. (To find out how, go to engage.vsb.bc.ca).

The board said it will make its final decision in December as to which schools will be closed.

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