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REGIONAL NEWS

LU profs score major research project

By SARAH ELIZABETH BROWN

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A pair of Lakehead University history professors will spend the next three years researching a federal agency little known at home.

The extensive world travel may force professors Ron Harpelle and Bruce Muirhead to get more pages for their passports.

Nice work if you can get it.

In three years time, they'll have written a history of the International Development and Research Centre, a Crown corporation inspired by prime minister Lester B. Pearson. A website and documentary film or series are also in the offing.

The IDRC is essentially the research and development arm of Canada's international development efforts. The Canadian money — IDRC has a \$122-million budget — funds research done in developing countries. That research is usually done by locals.

"The idea is they know best — they live with these problems every day," said Harpelle.

At any one time, 700 projects are on the go in a little more than 100 countries. The projects range from HIV to forestry to food.

For historians used to small research budgets, the project fund — "It's lots" — is pleasant. And they'll traipse the globe to meet people who've worked on IDRC-funded projects.

But as historians, what they're really looking forward to is getting their hands on IDRC's archives.

"They have really extensive archives," said Muirhead. "We have unrestricted access to absolutely everything."

Already he's perused letters from Nelson Mandela and a Mozambique president.

"It gets our hearts beating a little faster," said Harpelle.

His specialty is Latin American and Caribbean history, making his the international perspective. Muirhead, who studies Canadian foreign economic policy, brings the Canadian outlook.



Lakehead University history professors Bruce Muirhead, left, and Ron Harpelle will be racking up the miles as they travel the globe to conduct a research project.

Muirhead was travelling in Mexico last summer when Harpelle contacted him about submitting a project proposal. When it came time for the top six applicants to make presentations in Ottawa, Muirhead was in India. He perched on his bed at 3 a.m. for the teleconference back to Canada.

The pair beat out ex-diplomats, researchers at major Canadian universities and corporations that do nothing but write these sort of histories.

It's the kind of project that will establish them as academics, and will garner attention for Lakehead University, they said. Appropriate then, that the historians tucked away in a small Northwestern Ontario university should write the book on an institution largely unknown in Canada.

But elsewhere in the world, the centre is a highly respected, well-known agency.

At arm's length from the federal government, the centre has a history of open bookkeeping, its aid doesn't come with restrictions and it doesn't have a reputation for meddling, they said. Most of its budget is spent in developing countries rather than Canada, cutting down on politics at home.

In the 1970s, it fueled major projects researching the environment, pollution and the effects of urbanization.

"They're way ahead of the times in some of the things they chose to study," said Muirhead.

With marching orders not to produce a "vanity piece," the two will be looking for the IDRC's flaws.

"They're interested in the history of ideas — what worked and what didn't work," said Muirhead.

Over the years, the IDRC supported alternatives to military regimes, such as in South Africa, where it supported Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress.

Mandela, the first president of South Africa after the fall of apartheid, singled out Canada's IDRC for its help to move his country from dictatorship to democracy, said Muirhead.

A Mexican health minister visiting Ottawa asked to be taken to IDRC's headquarters, said Muirhead. Decades ago, the minister had started a health clinic in southern Mexico with IDRC money.

"He just wanted to go to them and say, 'Thanks a lot.' And that was 30 years later."

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