

Teachers learn about exploration through reclamation from 'Queen of Diamonds'

Brenda Dalglish

Life in the developed world as we know it would cease to exist without minerals, Eira Thomas, executive chair of Stornoway Diamonds, told more than 100 teachers who spent a professional development day at PDAC 2010. The teachers' event was sponsored by PDAC's *Mining Matters*, the association's educational program.

Challenging the characterization of exploitation in the blockbuster movie *Avatar*, Thomas presented a different image based on the contributions made by Canada's diamond industry in the Northwest Territories, where three diamond mines have opened since 2009.

"We've come a long way and I think that here in Canada we've become the global leader in the area of social responsibility," Thomas told the teachers, in a presentation that described the economic growth that has occurred since the diamond mines opened.

Mining Matters will be running day-long programs for grade school students on Monday and for high schools students on Tuesday during the convention.

Teacher Ann Jackson thanked Thomas, who's been called the Queen of Diamonds for her role in two major Canadian discoveries, for giving them another perspective on the industry. "I'm glad you discussed the reclamation, that's very important. . . . But wow! What a story."

Thomas explained that when the Diavik diamond mine, where she was a geologist who led the team that discovered the deposit, was developed, it was designed with the intention that it would eventually become fish habitat after the mine was closed and water allowed to flood back into the kimberlite crater.

Another teacher was excited by Thomas's presentation which included a photo of her as a skinny seven-year-old standing on a plane float with her father, geologist Grenville Thomas of Vancouver. The teacher joked "and the by the way, I'm looking for a job change, any suggestions."

Thomas described how she grew up in a family where dinner conversation "often centered around rocks and stocks."

Her first discovery occurred in 1994, in the final hours of a drilling season that had produced little, as the last hole was drilled and a two-carat diamond suddenly appeared.

“I slept with it under my pillow that night. . . just so I could be sure, I guess, that I’d found it!” she told the teachers. “And I couldn’t even tell anyone because I had to get back and tell our board of directors.”

The economic benefits Canada’s three diamond mines have brought to the NWT include an unemployment rate that is one of the lowest in Canada and where a high percentage of the mines’ employees are Aboriginal, she said.

She pointed out that diamond mines leave a relatively light environmental footprint because diamonds are hard and can be separated from waste rock without using harsh chemicals.

“Canada is a great place to explore,” she said in answer to a question. “And I believe it’s compatible with core Canadian values of conservation and social responsibility.

“But only 0.1% of all discovered kimberlites become producing mines. Science has helped. We’re getting better and we’re spending less. But it’s still a very high risk thing.”

Stornoway is on track to open a mine at its Renaud project.

“We believe Renaud will be Quebec’s first diamond mine by 2013,” she said.