



Colour Photo: Don Healy, Leader-Post / Joanna Sanders Bobiash (standing second from left, holding sign) and her Grade 7 class at Wilfrid Walker School have a wall honouring Regina-born Olympic speed-skater Lucas Makowsky, who graduated from the elementary school in 2001. The students will be following Makowsky's races closely.

## School adopts skater

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By Rob Vanstone

Lucas Makowsky's presence is still felt at Wilfrid Walker School, from which he graduated in 2001.

The Regina-born speedskater, who is to compete for Canada at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, is honoured in Joanna Sanders Bobiash's Grade 7 classroom. The school is supporting Makowsky as part of the Canadian Olympic Foundation's Adopt An Athlete program.

"It was a lot easier to get the kids to buy in when you can say, 'Let's look at his picture on the wall,'" Sanders Bobiash says. "Even though we've never met him, we feel like we know him."

Makowsky's photo from the Class of '01 is displayed in the hallway. However, he is most conspicuous inside Studio 1, where the commemorative Lucas Wall can be found.

It actually started out as an Olympic Wall, but the focus shifted to Makowsky as the students became acquainted with him.

The Lucas Wall includes photographs, articles, a poster signed by Makowsky, a postcard he sent from Berlin during the World Cup season, a countdown to the Olympics and posters and flags with Olympic themes.

"A lot of the kids have really connected with him because he went to school here," Sanders Bobiash says. "We have a lot of competitive swimmers here and the fact that he went to the school less than 10 years ago makes (the Olympics) seem a little more attainable."

In return, the students have helped to make life as an elite athlete more affordable for Makowsky. Nearly \$2,000 was raised by the school to help Makowsky defray expenses incurred while competing or training. The school held a coin drive in October and a candy-cane sale in December to benefit its adopted Olympian and proud alumnus.

"It has been a pretty cool experience so far," says Makowsky, 22, who trains with the national team at the Olympic Oval in Calgary. "It's cool to be able to say you went to that school when you were younger. I know the kids are really excited with the Olympics coming up."

Makowsky has fostered the excitement by being accessible to the students. "Lucas has been great," Sanders Bobiash says. "He e-mails us letters twice a month and he made a Skype call to our class. That was a really big hit. He has been very generous with his time."

The relationship was initiated by Adopt An Athlete, which contacted the school. Makowsky requested Wilfrid Walker because of his direct connection.

Mind you, there have been some notable changes since Makowsky last frequented the classrooms of Wilfrid Walker. For starters, there has been a complete turnover in faculty since 2001. As well, it has become a French immersion school, and is also known as Ecole Wilfrid Walker.

In that respect, Wilfrid Walker is also attuned to Makowsky, who was trilingual -- speaking English, French and Ukrainian -- by the time he entered Grade 1. During the Skype call, he spoke to the students in French.

The contact will be more direct later this year. Makowsky plans to pay two visits to Wilfrid Walker when he returns to Regina following the speedskating season. Even before then, Sanders Bobiash will be able to see him in person.

Her Olympic excursion, which was in the works before Makowsky became an adopted athlete, includes a stop at the Richmond Olympic Oval for the men's 5,000-metre race on Feb. 13.

At the speedskating venue, she will hold up a poster the 18 Grade 7 students have made for Makowsky, who has also qualified in the 1,500m and team pursuit.

"It just so happened that I was able to get tickets for the 5,000 metres," says Sanders Bobiash, who also has tickets for curling, women's hockey and figure skating. "It was total luck."

"The first race that he qualified in at the Olympic trials was the 5,000 metres. That was very exciting for all of us."