

Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Centre blossoms through intergenerational education



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By Nate Smelle

As the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin EarlyON Child and Family Centre approaches its first anniversary, those instrumental in making the centre a success have been reflecting on their experiences through the programs they have offered over the past year.

Christine McRae is the program coordinator and Indigenous pedagogical leader at the centre. Extensively involved with the programs offered at the centre since its inception, McRae has experienced the value it brings to the community on multiple levels. Through educating people about the Indigenous history and culture of the first people to inhabit the area, she says the centre is playing an important role in changing the narrative regarding the community's history.

Pointing out how for several generations it was illegal for Indigenous people to publish any form of literature in Canada, McRae sees the fact that Algonquin people are now able to share their own story through programs like those offered at the centre as being a sign of progress. One of the best things about the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Centre, she says is that the educational experiences it provides families with children between the ages of 0 to six have been raising awareness of Algonquin values throughout the broader community.

“Right from the earliest years we are teaching them about this Indigenous culture,” says McRae.

“We are teaching language, we are teaching traditions, we are sharing beautiful children's books by Indigenous writers, we are spending time out on the land and developing that deeper connection and that deeper respect. It has been amazing to see how much that North Hastings community has embraced that learning and our culture.”

The programs have been evolving over the first year to accommodate the needs and interests of the participating children and families, explains McRae. Since she started working with the centre, she says the Open Circle program held each Monday has become one of her favourites. Based in traditional knowledge and teachings, McRae says the program gives families an opportunity to begin their week together with a smudging ceremony. What she enjoys most about the program is that it builds relationships and nurtures a sense of being part of an extended family.

“A lot of it has to do with our relationship with each other and our relationship with the Earth, within that traditional cultural context,” McRae says.

“It can really be anything, but we try to do it based on what would be of interest and what would be relevant to the families. I am constantly learning as well.”

McRae continues “one of the most valuable things that I have taken away from it are those relationships that are constantly building within the community and with those families. I would say that is the most valuable thing that we do. Seeing the children change over the course of the year everyone becomes like a big family.”

As an Algonquin Elder and program planner teaching at the centre, Ada Tinney can attest to McRae's observations. Tinney says she thoroughly enjoys every moment she spends with the children and families she teaches. Through her experience teaching, she says the centre creates “win-win” opportunities for the children, parents, grandparents and Elders involved with the programs.

“It is a great opportunity when the kids are able to interact with other people as well as their own family,” says Tinney.

“It is a nice safe environment, and it is always great to see the children developing from a month old until they are up and walking. They soak in so much at this age, so it is great to have some Algonquin culture being taught to them at this stage in their life.”

One of the greatest lessons Tinney says she has learned while teaching at the centre, is that it is best to let the children learn on their own, and to allow them to take risks. She says teaching the children things about Algonquin culture and history that her generation never had the opportunity to learn has been equally rewarding for the Elders as it has for the children.

“I find it very enlightening to watch them as they are developing their own sense of being in the world – both inside and outside because a lot of the play is outside,” Tinney says.

“They are so interested in plants, bugs, animals and birds so spending time with them outdoors is a great opportunity. I have learned a lot from them too.”

Jenny Katz and her daughter Miryam are two of the local residents benefiting from the programs at the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin EarlyON centre. She describes the experience of learning with her daughter and the Elders at the centre as “deeply moving.” Katz says having the opportunity to become immersed in Algonquin culture is both an honour and a privilege, because “This is the culture of where we are. To come here and be assimilated into the culture that is of this place, so we can learn about where we are in the right way has a whole other level of learning. We are not being assimilated into a culture of domination and colonialism, we are being assimilated into the rightful culture of the land – the culture that knows about the knowledge of what this place is saying.” Since the centre opened last year, North Hastings Children's Services executive director Jessica Anderson has observed how it has helped Indigenous and non-Indigenous families develop a mutual understanding of the community they call home. Recognizing how this understanding is benefiting the families at the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin EarlyON centre, she says the team in Maynooth have started working with families at their sister site at the Bancroft EarlyON Centre. The opportunities for intergenerational education that the centre has created are incredibly valuable for everyone taking part in the programs, she says.

“Having Elders and having the children and their parents learning at the same time really has a lot of value,” explains Anderson.

“In early childhood education it is all about learning through play. They learn through sensory activities – playing, getting dirty and being out in nature – so having the Algonquin centre and that knowledge sharing really is inline with our program philosophy.”

For example, Anderson says last week the group spent a day learning about the water systems and water pollution by conducting fun experiments, while learning about the Algonquin language and the environment at the same time. Anderson says she feels inspired when she thinks of how the lessons the children are learning about Indigenous values, culture and history, and the environment will stay with them as they grow up. Seeing how the children take pride in what they have learned provides hope for future generations and speaks loudly to the value of the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin EarlyON centre, she says.

“The pride is more relevant and important than anything else, because they will grow up with that,” Anderson says.

Although North Hastings Children's Services has yet to find out if the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin EarlyON Centre will receive funding from the province beyond December 2019, Anderson says they are committed to keeping the centre going. For more information on

the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre visit them online at: www.nhcs.ca; or contact coordinator Christine Luckasavitch at c.lucasavitch@nhcs.ca; elder and planner Ada Tinney at atinney@nhcs.ca; Jessica Anderson at janderson@nhcs.ca; or call 613-332-0179.