

An exciting year ahead for Algonquin Nation

By Nate Smelle

Since taking on the position of Algonquin Negotiations Representative last June, Stephen Hunter has been working diligently to improve the lives of Algonquin people and enhance the relationship between the Algonquin nation and the broader community. To accomplish these goals, he has dedicated a great deal of time to strengthen existing relationships and establish new partnerships with local municipalities, not-for-profit organizations and community members throughout the Madaouskairini Algonquin territory/Bancroft area. Doing so, he said, has resulted in the creation of several opportunities for the Algonquin community to share its rich heritage and foster reconciliation with local residents and visitors to the Bancroft area.

“It was a great year for our community and there were a lot of exciting things happening in Bancroft,” said Hunter.

“There was some real momentum this year for our community in terms of engagement with the community at large.”

In the past six months, Hunter said he became inspired by how receptive people have been to engage with Algonquin culture and educate themselves about the history of the Indigenous communities that have resided in this area since time immemorial. He described the partnership between the Algonquins of Ontario, the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council, Central East Sporting Coalition of Ontario, Bancroft Field Naturalists Club and the Town of Bancroft that fostered the creation of the new Eagles Nest trails network as a prime example of how mutually beneficial working together towards a common goal can be. While helping to lead a nature discovery tour group through the new trail system along with his fellow Algonquin guides Chuck Commanda and Christine Luckasavitch, Hunter said he started to notice an unprecedented level of interest in Algonquin history and culture among the public. This became even more clear as the summer went on, and he met more and more people through the public birch bark canoe build outside the Bancroft North Hastings Heritage Museum.

“The impact we had this past year with tourists in the town of Bancroft was fantastic,” said Hunter.

“There was a sense of community around the canoe build that was unprecedented. People from the community loved it and so did the tourists. People came here and identified with the Algonquin community. We had people from Italy and from Spain. Our guest book is amazing; it has people in it from countries all over the world who signed it.”

Several community members and organizations also reached out to the Algonquin Nation to build closer connections in 2017.

Hunter said it gave him hope that things were changing for the better when Peter Nitschke, general manager of Bancroft Minden Forest Company Inc. approached the Algonquin community to let them know they had found birch trees appropriate for building a birch bark canoe. This gesture meant a lot to him personally, he said, because it showed that they understood how difficult it is to find a birch tree that is big enough, tall enough and straight enough to make a canoe.

“Having that kind of support and relationship with the local community makes a huge difference, and provides some light for us,” said Hunter. What he considers most exciting about these new types of opportunities, is that they allow Algonquin people to share their stories and their values with the community as a whole. One of the reasons this is so important, he said, is that they haven't had the chance to have these types of exchanges in the past. Acknowledging that the world right now is a scary place, Hunter believes that communities everywhere can benefit from embracing Indigenous values.

“If society reevaluates how they look at all of the life in this great place that we live, people can learn how to re-evaluate and look at the importance of the role and responsibility that all of these things have; and the responsibility that we have to all those things,” Hunter said.

“Then the world will be a much better place, and we won't be worried about water bills. Hopefully things will continue to change, and people will continue to have a renewed love for the environment, and how delicate and perfect it is when it's left alone. We embrace this, and it is our inherent responsibility to be good stewards.”