

Camp helps kids connect with local lands, stories



NHHS Wolf Pack students painting during one of many workshops exploring Indigenous culture and heritage at Camp Can Aqua. Lessons included crafting moccasins and healing blankets and studying water, medicine and land-based teachings. / SUBMITTED

By Sarah Sobanski

North Hastings High School's Indigenous studies club has completed its second culture camp.

More than 20 students headed to Camp Can Aqua to participate in workshops celebrating Indigenous culture and heritage May 30 to June 1. Students crafted moccasins and healing blankets, studied water, medicine and land-based teachings and heard stories of their heritage such as how the world came to be.

"Our whole reason for being here is diving into Indigenous culture," said club leader and NHHS teacher Heather Taylor. Taylor identifies as Ojibwe and started the club, Wolf Pack, nearly a decade ago. This year the camp was supported by the Ministry of Education's Community Connections Grant.

"Getting [students] back outside with the land is really important to help them physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually," she said.

Taylor said the club has been growing since its first weekly meeting was held in 2010. Every week students participate in an Indigenous lecture, travel together on field trips to study Indigenous heritage and host a cumulative event or trip at the end of the

year. Some students start in Grade 9 and continue until they graduate four years later.

Grade 12 student Breanna Sleeper said she liked learning about Indigenous heritage.

"It's not recognized enough how much they were hurt and how it's affected their lives," she said.

This year students participated in a drumming circle with the community's first floor drum. It was crafted by Tribal Spirit Music in Quebec.

"That drum will stay in the school for many, many years," said Marsha Depotier of Metis Nation of Ontario. Depotier's path has led her to become a "knowledge keeper" in the area's Indigenous community. She works closely with the club every year.

Depotier said the way students reacted to playing the drum and learning the responsibilities of playing it was incredible to watch. Moved to tears, she said the room "was on fire" as students connected with the music.

Students were also up and out of bed at 5 a.m. to partake in a sunrise ceremony.

"We want to make sure we're giving thanks to all of creation," said Depotier explaining that the ceremony takes place when the sun rises as that's when it is at its strongest.

"The biggest thing that kids are taking from here is embracing their identity," she said. "They're free to be who they are."

Graduating student Eric Culp called the experience "amazing." He said he was in the club because he identified as Indigenous but also "because it's a beautiful culture."

The Wolf Pack is hosting an Anti-racism and Cultural Inclusion dinner and discussion event June 13 from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. There are 100 free tickets available. They can be picked up at the NHHS front office.