

Indigenous communities seek cultural recognition



Algonquin culture is celebrated and enjoyed annually at the Pikwakanagan Pow-Wow.
SARAH VANCE Special to This Week

By Sarah Vance

Located two and a half hours from both Toronto and Ottawa, North Hastings borders on soil shared with indigenous communities such as Tyendinaga Mohawks to the south; Pikwakanagan Algonquins to the north, and Curve Lake Ojibwe to the east. The 2006 Aboriginal population census found that the area is home to 1,450 indigenous residents. Numbers are the highest in Bancroft where there are 430 identified and 65 registered status residents. For the region served by Hastings and Prince Edward Counties Health Unit, 5,455 indigenous clients have been identified.

Algonquin cultural services are delivered locally by the Kijicho Manito office in Maynooth, which processes land claims and works under the direction of Chief Cannon to archive local genealogies.

Kijicho Manito belongs to the Bear Clan and is one of 10 communities involved in the present day land claim, which seeks a unified approach to reaching settlement and reconciliation.

On March 17, Algonquin communities voted 90 per cent in favour of accepting the Agreement in Principle (AIP), which has been at the negotiation table since 2004.

‘Many of our members expressed concern and were led to believe that signing the proposed AIP would inevitably mean a self-government agreement that would end reserve status and the Indian Act tax exemption,’ said Chief Kirby Whiteduck of Pikwakanagan, who states that this is not the case. Native culture in the region is also served by the Metis Nation of Ontario, which facilitates learning from a facility at 91 Chemaushgon St. in Bancroft. The building also boasts a lending library.

This office is home to provincial healing and wellness programs, including the southern regional Victim's Support co-ordinator, Marsha Depotier, who offers culturally relevant victim services that address and deter violence against women and children.

Indigenous communities continue to experience barriers that come at a detriment to mental, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. This is indicative of systemic patterns of victimization that continue to negatively impact women.

‘There are barriers that prevent women from speaking ? such as stigma and economic consequences,’ said Depotier, who facilitates gatherings honouring missing and murdered Aboriginal women. ‘Many women in domestic situations would never call the police for fear that nothing will happen, that they could be dual-charged or that their children will be apprehended.’

Aboriginal women feel that they become disenfranchised when there are gaps in cultural knowledge.

‘For a period of time, a children's aid worker was involved with my family ? and she did not even know what a smudge was,’ said one local family who felt culturally under-served by this agency. ‘How can we be served in an inclusive way when a worker lacks

cultural knowledge??

There is room for growth in the area of honouring North Hastings' rich cultural groups. Some progress is being made: the North Hastings Heritage Museum does have a section on native contributions to the region, and hopes to do more native programming in the coming year.

But while Bancroft continues to identify goals along the community safety and wellbeing spectrum, no intentional steps have been taken to ensure that indigenous priorities are seamlessly blended into these outcomes.

The Chamber of Commerce, now some years into its new facility, has created a mineral museum, but it lacks mention of indigenous communities, once the backbone of that local labour industry.

For indigenous service people like Earl Donald Pearson, who served on two international United Nations tours of duty, a photograph at a local veteran's hall would be appreciated, but there isn't one.

The Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs continues to release funding for reconciliation projects. Bancroft's unexplored cultural diversity might make it a candidate for such funding, but first, action would be needed to give more recognition to this fact.