

Local school gets lessons in native culture



By Tony Pearson

Although the aboriginal peoples are Canada's original settlers, their culture has not always been celebrated – think of the attempts to eradicate it at residential schools. However, the Algonquin Lakeshore Catholic School Board has a stated goal of improving understanding of aboriginal histories, cultures and perspectives by all members of the school community. This goal was definitely achieved this week at Our Lady of Mercy School in Bancroft.

All week long, the various classes from kindergarten to grades 7 and 8 worked with Derek and Naomi Martin, a Mohawk couple from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford. The Martins are veterans of more than two decades on the powwow circuit; Naomi is a two-time world champion smoke dancer.

For the past six years, as Tribal Vision Dance, the Martins have been working with schools to educate students about First Nations culture. Derek estimates that they visit more than 200 schools a year. But this visit was special, as OLM is one of only six schools in the province to receive a week-long experience with Tribal Vision, thanks to a grant from the Ontario Arts Council.

During the course of the week, OLM students learned about a variety of aspects of the aboriginal cultural experience and beliefs, culminating in Friday's performance of a number of native dances. All classes staged a dance. Most of the dances were Haudenosaunee (what we know as Iroquois), but there were borrowings from the Cree (Round Dance) and Seminole (Alligator Dance) as well.

Classic First Nations values were brought out through the dances. For example, the traditional women's shuffle tells the Haudenosaunee Creation story. And the Duck Dance, in which all classes participated together, celebrates environmental stewardship, as well as giving thanks to The Creator for providing food for the tribes.

At the end of the performances, to which parents were also invited, the Martins expressed their delight at their visit. "The kids really seemed to love it – even the senior grades," said Derek. "We appreciate the opportunity – students should learn about and respect the First Nations' cultures, which are part of the national heritage. The program also celebrates both diversity of beliefs and the unity of humanity, who are all children of the Creator."

Principal Patricia Flagler-Edwards noted that a number of OLM students are of native ancestry, and that education about aboriginal peoples has been part of the school for years. She said that the mural in the gym where the dances took place represented the Algonquin nation's "seven grandfather teachings." She said the Algonquin-Lakeshore Catholic School Board has identified Aboriginal education as one of its key priorities. To quote their website: "Our goal is to improve achievement among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, and to provide an opportunity for all students to gain knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal cultures and traditions." Last week, OLM students definitely gained such new knowledge, and as the loud cheering at the end of the performances demonstrated, truly appreciated it.