

Program nurtures mental health and cultural connection



By Kaitlin Sylvester

The Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre, a branch of the North Hastings Children Service offers a monthly Indigenous led culture circle. The theme this month was mental wellbeing, with a talk about historic practises alongside a gratitude journal workshop. The event ran from 10 to noon on Saturday, March 9. Run by Diane Martin and Gidge Tinney, the event was a morning of creativity and cultural learning. The Cultural Circle is an integral part of the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre, a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous families can come together to delve into the rich tapestry of Algonquin culture. In a community still recovering from the impacts of colonization, the programs offered here play a crucial role in reconnecting with lost teachings and rebuilding the spiritual fabric of the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation. Martin and Tinney, both proud members of the Algonquin First Nation, are personally invested in these programs, having designed them to address the needs of the community. Martin says they were driven by their own experiences growing up without the guidance of cultural teachings which create a need to ensure that future generations have the opportunities and cultural grounding they lacked in their youth. This week's focus on positive mindset aligns with the changing seasons, marking the departure from the darker months of winter. Martin said "We chose [to focus] on a positive mindset for the last two cultural circles, as we are leaving our darker months of winter where there has not been much sunlight, [which] can have a negative effect on many people." Recognizing the impact of winter scarcity on mental health, the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre aims to equip attendees with tools like gratitude journals or worry stones to cultivate a positive frame of mind in their daily lives. "Our hope for our attendees is that they learn new tools to add to their everyday life, so they start their days off in a positive frame of mind," offered Tinney. During the workshop, local women engaged in a lively discussion with Martin and Tinney about the nature of Indigenous medicine and mental health. Tinney acknowledges "gratitude journals" are a Western concept, but said, "spiritually and holistically Indigenous people [practice gratitude] every day without calling it gratitude" it is gratitude for Mother Earth, or for the Creator for providing all of everything we have. For providing the animals that could put clothing on our back, that put food on our tables. The plants could help us if we were sick. Discussions moved to Indigenous Medicine Wheel teachings, which focus on the connection between physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental health. Spirituality can be a tricky topic with a group of relative strangers, but Tinney skillfully navigated the conversation saying "where we have conflict between different cultures is that we forget spirituality is an individual experience. It's a guideline of how to live a good life" We all live in different parts of the world. Does it make one [spirituality] right or wrong? Gratitude is a concept with roots in cultures around the world, a fact recognized by both Tinney and Martin, who also spoke eloquently about how music and movement also show up across cultures as a powerful means of shifting focus from negative occurrences to positive reflections. In a world filled with war, inflation, and other mundane challenges, Martin says taking a moment to identify three things for which one is grateful can be transformative. Tinney said she is

grateful for the nourishing rain, the melodies of singing birds, and the presence of those who share in the journey of healing the community. The Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre emphasizes inclusivity, offering its programs free of charge to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. This commitment reflects a broader mission to enhance cultural awareness and foster a sense of community within and beyond the Algonquin First Nation. "As we know, it takes a village to raise children," said Martin, "so let us raise them to the best of our abilities and encourage bias free and open-mindedness about all cultures and people with different abilities." The reach of the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre extends beyond a single event, and is instead reflected in their ongoing effort to build a foundation of strength and resilience within the community. The Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre aims to uplift each individual and, by extension, the entire community. "In a world where no one is perfect," said Tinney, "the emphasis is on mutual support and appreciation for the unique contributions each person brings." As participants engaged in creating gratitude journals, they were not merely creating art; they were weaving threads of connection, resilience, and cultural pride. The Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Cultural Circle serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation, striving to reclaim its heritage and forge a path of healing for current and future generations. As Martin said, "the medicine wheel teaches us that when someone is lacking spiritual health it's going to affect all of these other parts of their being - their mental health, their physical health, and their emotional health." Miigwetch.