

Students learn to Think Indigenous



By Nate Smelle

York River Public School (YRPS) students from Junior kindergarten to grade 8 assembled in the gymnasium first thing Thursday morning to begin an exciting and enlightening day of learning how to Think Indigenous. The dynamic Aboriginal arts and education collective, Tribal Vision had everyone's heartbeat pounding early on in the day, as they led the crowd through an array of traditional songs, dances and teachings. Explaining the significance of each tradition after every performance, the children listened intently to the wisdom being shared with them. With the engaged audience enthusiastically responding to each teaching, some of the students even joined in on the dancing.

"We have really been creating a climate at the school," said YRPS Aboriginal education coordinator Troy Maracle.

"It's more than just a couple of classes or an activity or an event. It's been a work in progress, so that our First Nations, Métis and Inuit students within the Bancroft area feel that they are being included and represented in the school. When they enter they should feel like they are a part of it and that their culture is being recognized."

As part of the opening ceremony Tribal Vision performed three dances: a War dance, Smoke dance and the Hoop dance. While the Smoke dancer was dancing those in attendance were asked to send their thoughts and prayers to someone they care about who may be suffering. Before the Hoop dance began the students were encouraged to pay close attention to the dancer and to call out the names of the animals they saw being portrayed in the dance. Starting with one hoop, she added another hoop to the dance each time she mimicked the behaviour of another animal. As the dance evolved, the dancer transformed her movements from those of a bumblebee to a mouse, to an alligator, a butterfly and an eagle. Building her spinning collection to a total of five hoops, the dance ended with her weaving the rings into a sphere to emphasize the great importance of recognizing the unity shared among all living things. Pulling one ring out of the globe, she proved to those in attendance why unity must be all inclusive. In light of the recent reports released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) this lesson could not be more timely.

"There has to be balance," said Maracle.

"There needs to be understanding and acknowledgement of what has happened. When we acknowledge and understand what has taken place then we can truly move forward."

For the rest of the day students participated in a series of workshops taught by leaders, artists and educators from the Indigenous community. Tanya King-Maracle hosted one of the workshops for the children on the history of the residential school system in Canada. Having learned of the injustices and abuse that her parents endured as survivors of the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) she explained to the children how these institutions aimed to wipe out the indigenous way of life.

"They wanted to assimilate all indigenous people and strip them of their identity in terms of who they are as a person and as a community," King-Maracle said.

Also pointing to the report released by the TRC on June 2 of this year, King-Maracle said there is no better time than now to start the

process of reconciliation.

Marsha Depotier of the Métis of Ontario and Maggie's Resource Centre in Bancroft was the teacher for the workshop on Anishinaabe culture, medicine and ceremony. Through her work, Depotier is able to have a positive influence on helping Indigenous people reconnect with their culture, their community, their environment and themselves. She believes that getting back in synch with one's culture is a huge step towards healing.

“Healing ceremonies usually begin with a smudging of sage to cleanse our senses,” Depotier said.

“I start with my eyes so that I can see what I need to see; then my ears so I can hear what I need to hear; then my mouth so that I can say what I need to say. Through these ceremonies we learn to speak up for ourselves and for all of our relations.”

Aboriginal artist and educator, Jaime Koebel led a workshop on Métis culture and teachings, inviting students to work together through a traditional Métis mapping project. Encouraging them to map out their afterschool activities using symbols or images of the plants residing in the places they plan to be that night, the students caught a glimpse of some of the highly symbolic and creative forms of communication in Métis culture. Tracing pathways from one destination to the next through symbols, the Métis people were able to disseminate important information to their community. In turn this creative way of communicating with one another also helped to preserve many of their traditions.

Koebel also discussed another unique way the Métis people would share important information and items with their community through what she calls “a giving tree.” Basically a hollowed out tree would act as a postal outlet for Métis people to leave messages for each other. Often people from the Métis community would leave useful things like spare moccasins, medicine, food and tools, for others who may need them. The only requirement to take part in this system was that if you took something from the giving tree you had to give something back to it.

Looking after each other has always been a top priority of the Métis people. She believes the core values and strength of the Métis people are best described by the first word used to describe community as a whole.

“The Cree word for our people is Otimpemsuak, which roughly translates in English to the people who are their own boss... or the people who own themselves,” said Koebel.

“That's a lot different from the French word Métis which means to mix or mixed.”