

Think Indigenous Day at local high school



Heather Sararas helps NHHS principal Ken Dostaler smudge, as HPE director of education Mandy Savery-Whiteway looks on.
TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

Local school boards estimate that one in five students in their schools is aboriginal. Yet it has taken a while to recognize this identity in our schools. However, in 2007 the Ontario Ministry of Education renewed its commitment to native students. Since then, more attention has been paid to improving educational programs and services to First Nation and Metis students, and to increase the awareness of all students of native traditions, teachings, and perspectives.

One such effort was last week's Think Indigenous day at North Hastings High School. The day began with a smudge, to purify mind, body, and spirit for the day ahead. The smudging was carried out by Heather Sararas, survivor of the Sixties Scoop that took aboriginal children from their homes and placed them up for adoption (read Heather's story in last week's Bancroft This Week). The students were then treated to a performance of traditional dances by the Smoke Family Dancers.



Teacher Heather Taylor and Marsha Depotier of the Metis Nation of Ontario show the banner of support from NHHS, which will be sent to the Attawapiskat community. TONY PEARSON Special to This Week



Thunder Jack Smoke does the Grass Dance, traditionally used to prepare the pow-wow ground. TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

Students then attended a variety of workshops where they received hands-on learning about aspects of native culture, from dot painting and soapstone carving to lacrosse. One entertaining seminar was staged by writer Drew Hayden Taylor, author of 28 books in genres from the novel to plays to essays; he has also written for television ? his first screen credit was for an episode of *The Beachcombers*.

Taylor gives his ancestry as Ojibwa and Caucasian, and thus calls himself an "Occasion" ? "hopefully a special Occasion, or even a memorable Occasion." Because of his mixed heritage, he is drawn to mixing literary and cultural genres ? what he terms "reverse cultural appropriation." Accordingly, he has written a native vampire novel, and this fall is bringing out a collection of native science fiction short stories. His advice to students: "Never trust your Grade 11 English teacher" (his told him that you couldn't make a living writing).

Speaking of Grade 11 English: next year, all North Hastings Grade 11 English courses will be native-themed. The skills developed will be exactly the same, but will be developed through the study of native literature ? novels, stories, poetry and plays. English teacher Heather Taylor, who used to teach a course in native studies, will spearhead this initiative, as she did the "Think Indigenous" program.

Taylor pronounced the day a success: "Students are taking away many traditional teachings, and learning how to build new cultural relationship." Greg Shortly, HPE First Nations/Metis/Inuit instructional coach, proclaimed the day "Fantastic ? a great opportunity to see educators and the native communities come together."

The day ended with the students writing messages of support to Attawapiskat, the First Nations community on James Bay recently plagued by an outbreak of teen suicide events. Heather Taylor outlined the situation at the closing assembly, and arranged with Attawapiskat to send the support messages from Hastings County teenagers.