

Totem pole shares stories about Algonquin culture



By Nate Smelle

After a devastating storm tore through his community in late August 2013, Algonquin elder and artist Dan Bowers came across a massive eastern white pine toppled by the high winds. When he first discovered the fallen tree, Bowers said it spoke to him in a way that he had not experienced before.

"I passed by and saw him laying there and could not go by without feeling something in my heart," Bowers said.

"I could see the life of the Grandfather being drained as the sap began to drip on the earthly tears. He stood there over 100 years and gave us life as we all walked by I knew then it was what creator wanted, to show respect for his life."

The following winter Bowers decided to honour the Grandfather by carving a totem pole from the ancient tree. Each night he would carve late into the cold evenings with the Grandmothers shining down on him, keeping watch as the seasons changed. As he carved the totem the ancestors began to tell their stories.

"I had never carved a totem pole in my life but I just started carving," Bowers said.

"I have been fire keeping now for more than 20 years and I've listened to all of the elders when they would come in and talk. Elders from all different nations have come into tell her stories to me. I've listened to the elders who were put in residential schools when they tell me their stories. In a way I picked up all that wisdom through them and tried to portray it in this pole. I tried to tell their stories for them."

Then he said it was like time stopped; and in a blink of an eye the journey was complete.

On the morning of Sunday, Oct. 25 more than 300 people gathered in Algonquin Park to celebrate the totem pole's new home at the East Gate of the park. In the spirit of peace and reconciliation with all nations Bowers presented the totem pole to Algonquin Park on behalf of the Algonquins of Ontario.

"I wanted to portray our culture to all the nations and I thought this would be a perfect place to do that," said Bowers.

"We have all nations coming through here, and it is for all nations not just for Algonquins. It is important that we respect each other's cultures."

"Certainly it will draw a lot of attention," added park superintendent Dave Coulas.

"We have about 800,000 people who flow through Algonquin Park every year. We have a visitor centre that speaks to the overall history of Algonquin Park, but it is also a mutual hope that there will be a cultural center dedicated to the Algonquin first nation, storing artefacts and speaking about the culture. This is all about creating an opportunity to share the Algonquin culture, which is

very important in this area and to the park.?

Working together with Bowers from the beginning to create a space for the totem pole at the East Gate, Coulas said he learned many valuable lessons throughout the process. Through learning about Algonquin culture he has also discovered a great deal about himself.

?We are all standing here holding Mother Earth in what is really just a moment in time,? Coulas said.

?And there is a tremendous amount of responsibility that each and every one of us carry to recognize the past and the honour the future that we are leaving to future generations.?

Because Algonquin people expressed themselves through petroglyphs and in nature instead of in books, Bowers said that carving the totem pole was his way of sharing Algonquin culture with future generations while hounouring the ancestors.

?Looking back on our elders and our ancestors before us I think of the hardships they had to face,? Bowers said.

?This is my way of giving back to them. It is not just for the people it's also in recognition of what our ancestors went through. It is in honour of them.?

With a cool Autumn rain beginning at the end of the ceremony the gathering packed up and headed east to Whitney for a delicious community feast provided by the Algonquin Park staff.