

An Oji-Cree Student in Two Worlds in Northwest Ontario

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In the past our people were nomadic, moving from place to place and living off the land as they endeavoured to provide for themselves and their families. These activities summarized part of the culture and traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation. The environment they lived in trained them to be both self sufficient and hardy. From what I have gathered, after having listened to countless stories by my uncles and grandparents, as soon as a child became of age to be able to walk and follow, the training would begin. The child would follow his father as he went about his routine of setting and checking the traps. This kind of mentoring would ensure that a child knew at an early age how to provide for himself, as well as getting disciplined in some form of responsibility. This type of conditioning was begun at an early age to ensure continuity and from that I believe there was not too much free time to promote idleness either. The other form of instruction received at a very young age was the traditional life value system as taught by the elders. These values taught respect to your fellow man as well as well as teaching or counselling in the things that every living person will encounter in life. I also believe my people were the first sustainable developers because from an early age they were taught to respect the land and the very creatures they hunted, trapped and fished. The respect I am talking about here is that they were taught by their parents to use up any remaining fragments of the animals they killed and not to let anything go to waste. They would always say that there is a God who sees everything we do and that what we do would always come back to us.

Since the time of contact with the European cultures we have seen the demise of this way

of life as well as the destruction of the indigenous family unit as it collided with values alien to it. This disconnection came as a result of government funded programs like welfare and other programs that were most certain to fail as a result of under-funding and the dependency that they fostered. These programs robbed individuals of their self-worth and self-determination. This social injustice was further compounded by young children being taken from their parents and raised in institutional residential schools, where some grave wrongs were done to them. Is it any wonder that the native community as a whole is in such turmoil today? We have people, whole generations, who are devoid of proper parenting skills, money management skills and general life skills.

In having put a background to my text, I will now refer you to my formative younger years. I am Oji-Cree originally from North Spirit Lake [First Nation], Ontario [180 kilometers northeast of Red Lake], having been born to a family of eight with three brothers and two sisters. I attended the day school that the government operated in the Roman Catholic church until I was in grade three. After that we moved to the newly constructed school on a peninsula overlooking the lake; I was there till I had finished grade eight. The other school that operated on the reserve at that time was run by the Northern Light Gospel Mission. This mission was operated by Mennonite people that had come up from the United States and who were based out of Red Lake, Ontario. I used to go across the lake to the mission and admire the house that the Mennonite people had built. I used to dream that one day I was going to have a house as well built as that one and not like the government funded shacks that were predominant on the reserve. The school that my parents chose to send me to start my secondary schooling was [the Mennonite-run] Poplar Hill Development School [a residential school closed in 1989] in Poplar Hill, Ontario [140 kilometers north of Red Lake]. This school was right across the lake from the reserve.

The memories that I will now recount to you are not of the same vein from where I started, these memories are good, full of joy and productivity. There was hardly any free time available to us where we would find time to be raucous and disorderly. One of the very first things that I remember when I got to Poplar Hill was being fed, getting a haircut and being assigned my clothes and a locker. After that, my memory is both vague and selective as I try to reflect on the one year that has had such an impact on me. The one memory that is really clear to me is that much of the day was used up. There was barely anytime to mull over the fact that I was away from my parents, except for the occasional pang of loneliness. The only other time I got kind of lonely is when the girl I got attached to went home. I guess you could say my first girlfriend, but as you can see I survived that trauma. Every morning was started with washing up, chores, breakfast and then school. The academic part was a mixture of Math, English, History and some Theology followed by shop classes and Physical Education. There were other things that we did that were really instructive to me such as the outings that consisted of fishing, planting potatoes in the school garden and general activities we did as a group. Some of these activities are missing from the mainstream of family life these days and they would only serve to strengthen the family if practiced. What is really endearing to me as I reflect on my year at Poplar Hill is the collection of personalities that we had both on staff and in the student body. There were a lot of different people who contributed to the big family life we had; single staff, married, both old and young. When I went home for Christmas I felt that I was in another world and this world didn't have too much happening in it. My

father must have realized that I was bored because when he saw me lying on the bed, he said to me "Are you okay? Come on, get up and do something."

Looking back, I now realize that the spiritual teaching that I received in Poplar Hill was, next to my mother's spiritual teaching, the most fundamental part of my upbringing. As I stand here today I want to relay to you that stereotyping happens on all sides, from all sides. Having had some form of discipline at home and knowing that "no" meant no and "yes" meant yes, I did not have a hard time with the structure that was in place. That does not quite mean that I was an angel, but for those people that had the run of their place at home, these are the ones that suffered a little, trying to get used to the routine. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay at Poplar Hill and even now enjoy a good relationship with the Mennonite people as I attend a Mennonite church. There are many former students that will probably say that they enjoyed their stay there and many of these former students have gone on to occupy leadership positions as well.

I served as Chief of my reserve for five and a half years before taking a job with the Northern Chiefs Council in Sioux Lookout. The Council is a tribal council that receives core funding from the government to provide advisory services to six reserves whose chiefs comprise the board of directors. These directors provide the direction for the council as it strives to meet the needs of the people it serves in the wake of the government's devolution policy.

After having been established in the Sioux Lookout region for about nine years, the chiefs of the council decided that the reserves would be best served if the council's sub-office was relocated to Red Lake, Ontario. The rationale behind this move was that most of the reserves that we serve are directly to the north of Red Lake and the winter road networks that makes its way to the communities starts here. The house we had built in Sioux Lookout was sold as we moved to our new area of work and in the spring of 1999 work commenced in Red Lake on the new house that we had designed. This time I was the general contractor for the work and the people I had subcontracted to do the labour were Mennonite people. Today I am living in my Mennonite house, which I thoroughly enjoy, thanks be to God!