

Great Moon Gathering 2010



By **Bianca Auciello** and **Gianna Helling**, Vice-principals
Jean Vanier Catholic Secondary School, Toronto CDSB

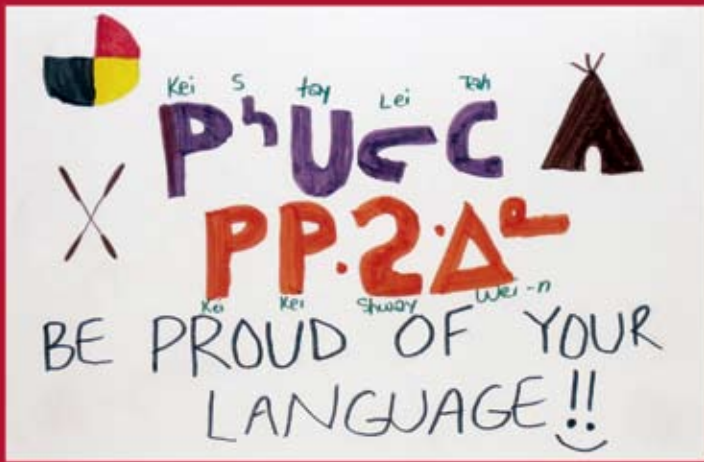
❄️ *A Journey to Moose Factory, Ontario* ❄️

Our long journey to Moose Factory, Ontario began in the wee hours of the morning on Tuesday, February 16, 2010. In our group were 12 educators from the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB), an instructional leader and the coordinating principal of aboriginal education from the TCDSB, one Ojibwe language teacher from Walpole Island First Nation, three youth leaders from Me to We, four musician/artists from the ArtsCan Circle and two representatives from Spelling Bee of Canada. We boarded the bus at the TCDSB Catholic Education Centre and began our nine-hour trip to Cochrane, Ontario. The bus was buzzing with excitement as we made our final preparation to attend and present at the *Great Moon Gathering 2010*, on February 18 and 19. This gathering of educators is the major professional development opportunity for communities in the Mushkegowuk Council. These communities include Peawanuk First Nation, Fort Albany First Nation, Kashechewan First Nation, Attawapiskat First Nation Council, Taykwa First Nation, Chapleau Cree First Nation, Missinabi Cree First Nation and Moose Cree First Nation.

We arrived in Cochrane early the next morning and met Donna Seary, director of education for Omushkegowuk Education, an umbrella council for the Mushkegowuk region. Donna facilitated our group's travel and participation in the conference and was

the chief organizer of the event. We had breakfast with Donna in the Cochrane train station as we waited for the Polar Bear Express that would take us five hours north to Moosonee. Our final leg of the journey was a slushy five-kilometre ride on the ice road from Moosonee to Moose Factory Island. The ice road is the only direct access by car to Moose Factory, which is located 20 kilometres south of the southern tip of James Bay. During the spring thaw and autumn freeze, the 2,700 residents of Moose Factory use helicopters, as necessary, for transportation. In the summer, there are frequent boat rides across the Moose River between the two points.

Our delegation from the TCDSB was led by literacy resource teacher Brenda Stewart who works closely with Principal Stella Wesley from Attawapiskat's J. R. Nakogee School. This school on James Bay was contaminated by diesel fuel spills in 1979, which poisoned the elementary school and surrounding homes. Community members have suffered illness and death and have been engaged in a fight for a new school since July of 2000 (See the *CPCO Principal Connections*, Spring 2009 article by David Hogan, *Education is a Right*). Our team was supported by the superintendents responsible for the TCDSB's First Nations, Métis and Inuit initiatives, Anthony Petitti and Patrick Keyes, as well as Ann Perron, our director of education.



Classroom sign at Dolores D. Echum Composite School

Literacy and numeracy resource teachers from the curriculum and accountability department as well as two vice-principals from Jean Vanier Catholic Secondary School presented workshops on a variety of strategies for student success, including: *What Is In Your Primary Literacy Block*; *Engaging Junior/Intermediate Students Through Oral Language*; *Developing Understanding with Mental Math and Math Games*; *Student Success an Integrated Approach*; and *Building Dynamic Teaching and Learning Communities: Strategies For At-Risk Students*. The workshops were excellent opportunities to share ideas and learn about the diverse needs and common challenges faced by students both in the North and in our home schools.

When not presenting, we attended other workshops such as *How to Integrate Native Culture into the Curriculum*, *Suicide Awareness* and *Story Telling and Legends*. Thursday morning was dedicated to purely cultural workshops, allowing participants to learn songs, stories and crafts, cultural activities like *Tipi Construction* and *Under Ice Netting*. We also had the opportunity to dialogue with community leaders, elders and youth. We learned how to sew a tobacco pouch and mittens out of moose hide, as well as how to build tamarack geese, a traditional Moose Factory craft, originally used as hunting decoys.

The *Great Moon Gathering* is not only a professional development opportunity; it is also a cultural celebration. The theme for this year's conference was *Reclaiming Our Cultural Traditions for Future Youth Success*. The conference began with a traditional opening ceremony including a smudge ceremony, prayer and honour song. The honour song was performed by the High Ridge Singers, a traditional drumming group made up of young men from the Moose Cree First Nation. All conference participants shared a community banquet dinner, where we were treated to caribou, white fish and Indian pudding; a dense fruitcake covered in warm custard. During the feast, we listened to a high school student from Attawapiskat, who was given the name Earth Walker by the Elders, because she walked from Cochrane, Ontario to Hinton, Alberta to raise awareness for her community's need for housing. Close to 100 people were left homeless after a sewage backup this past summer contaminated their homes. Youth talent from all of the communities participating in the *Great Moon Gathering* entertained the



Sewing traditional items with elders and youth



Warning on the ice road!

group after the feast. Throughout the conference, we were touched by the compelling stories of perseverance by youth, educators and families who are working to reclaim language and culture after the travesty of residential schools.

It is challenging to sum up in words the impact that this conference had on its participants. We were humbled by the hospitality and warm welcome we received from the Mushkegowuk Council and the staff at Delores D. Echum Composite School in Moose Factory, host school of the conference. We have had the unique opportunity to bear witness and share our experiences with our colleagues in southern Ontario. We hope to continue to raise awareness and interest around Native studies and to share strategies for student success with educators from across Ontario.

More information on the Mushkegowuk Council can be found at www.mushkegowuk.ca. Pictures and video of this trip can be viewed at www.jeanvanier.com/student_success/ under the tab Moose Factory.