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NEWS LOCAL

Changing it up for Maskwacis' future

Lindsay Morey/Staff writer

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Some of the 30 students who will be attending Portage College in March as part of Change It Up.

Jobs and a stronger community are what a partnership between Classroom Connections, Samson Cree Nation and Portage College will bring to Maskwacis through a new pilot project, 'Change it Up! Trades'.

The program gives an educational bridge for young, unemployed Aboriginals and prepares them to fill skilled-trades shortages as well as matches them with job opportunities.

On Jan. 21, the three partners celebrated sending all 30 students to college in the next phase of the program. Close to \$1 million was allocated to the program.

Since August, 30 Maskwacis students upgraded their reading, writing, document use, math and science skills. Some students even went up three grade levels in math.

This March, all 30 students will enter a pre-trade program at Portage College in Lac La Biche. At the college, they will prepare to write a trades' entrance exam, which would put them into a two- to four-year apprenticeship starting in August.

While addressing the students, Samson Cree councillor, Derek Bruno said, "It warms my heart that everybody made it into [Portage College]. This is not something that was handed to you, you worked for it and you achieved it."

Bruno is responsible for bringing the project to Maskwacis after he worked on the first Change It Up! program in Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, south of Fort McMurray.

He and Heather MacTaggart, executive director of Classrooms Connections, received government funding for the project after they guaranteed jobs through partnership with such companies as MDM Foundations, Julmac Construction, Galloway Oil Field Construction, Spirit Pipelines, Western Manufacturing, and Samson Oil and Gas Inc.

MacTaggart said for a long time people have said, 'go work, get a job,' without realizing there are missing steps between education and work, especially for people who were not successful in high school or have a Grade 10 or Grade 12. She said this program ensures students are prepared academically for college as well as being prepared mentally to be away from their community.

Bruno said he hopes the 30 students will find a new sense of resiliency, motivation in life and success following this program.

"I like the underdog story, I like the comeback story; and that's our story. We didn't ask for the things that we have [like crime and poverty] but we can ask for a different tomorrow."

Bruno said this program will bring a new culture resurgence to the Maskwacis people and a work ethic, "Seventy per cent of Samson is under the age of 30. When you have such young moms and dads, we want to make sure their home fire is nice and bright. We want kids growing up watching their parents work."

One such parent to set an example for the next generation is 27-year-old, Kera Wolfe. As a young mother of a four-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter, she wants to be able to better support her family and become self-sufficient.

Wolfe is excited about her opportunity to go to Portage.

"I can't wait to actually go to college. I've always been interested in the trades. I like working with my hands, building and creating things."

Wolfe plans to take either carpentry or welding at Portage College.

Samson Cree Coun. Larron Northwest said the program is an investment in the next generation.

"Hard work is what we're trying to instill in our young people. Collecting a welfare cheque is not the way to go.

"When you're out working and bringing home the bacon to your family, it builds a sense of pride and gives our people some self-worth."

Northwest said Maskwacis' young population can fill the gap left by retiring baby boomers in the oil and gas, and construction industries. He said this program is a great fit for aboriginal people who don't like the typical educational system and who just want to get out there and start working.

Northwest urged students to take their acceptance to Portage College seriously and attend all of their classes as they will set an example for the next group of students who may want to take the Change it Up! Trades program.

"Be serious about getting ahead in your life. And when you guys become successful, other people will look up to you and you'll be able to share that experience; the trial and tribulations which lead to your success," said Northwest.

To learn more about Change It Up! program, you can visit its website at changeitup.ca.

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