

Protecting the future through sharing values

By Nate Smelle

Over the past six years as a reporter, I've had the pleasure and privilege to engage with several members of the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin Nation at a variety of events and gatherings throughout North Hastings. Through these encounters I have learned a great deal about the history and culture of the Algonquin people. While there never seems to be a shortage of wisdom shared by those who address the crowds at these gatherings, it is usually the one-on-one conversations with people participating in the ceremonies afterwards that I find most enlightening. Noticing Algonquin elder Katherine Cannon on stage singing and drumming along with the Shawashgun Ikwe singers at the Indigenous Day celebration in Bancroft's Millennium Park last Thursday morning, I recalled how she had taught me this simple fact back in 2013 during a conversation we had regarding what it means to be Algonquin.

I had reached out to Cannon, who was Chief at the time, after connecting with some of the Algonquin elders and activists who converged on Millennium Park to show their support for Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike and the Idle No More movement that was building nationwide. Though the demonstrators in Bancroft were incredibly well-informed regarding what was at stake ? things like water, human rights, and the future of the planet ? I returned home from the protest feeling like I needed a better understanding of what was compelling so many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across Canada to occupy public spaces and engage in civil disobedience. To enhance my awareness, rather than speaking with me about the Canadian government's lack of concern for the water, future generations or their role in centuries of oppression and cultural genocide, endured by Indigenous people, Cannon explained to me over several hours and several cups of coffee, how her mother taught her about Algonquin values.

By taking Cannon and her siblings out to the field near their home to gather medicines and berries, Cannon said she learned to value the gifts of the land, and the vital role of water in all living things. By taking the family out into the same field at night to lay down in the grass so they could stare up at the stars and soak in the sounds coming from the forest that surrounded and provided for them, Cannon described how her mother taught her to appreciate the natural world and respect their place within it as stewards. By working in the garden and traveling with her father to share the harvest with their neighbours, friends, and family in need of food, Cannon said she started to understand how kindness and sharing are what make a community strong.

Together these life-affirming lessons gifted to Cannon by her parents revealed to her the value of being a compassionate and responsible caretaker of the land, water and all living things.

Catching up with Urpi Pine and her two children Wenu and Chaska after their performance with Cannon and the Shawashgun Ikwe singers on Indigenous Day, I found myself immersed in another one of these fascinating discussions about the inherent values of Indigenous cultures throughout Canada and around the world. Listening to how she had been passing down the songs, teachings, and values that have shaped Mi'kmaq culture to her children since she carried them in her womb, gave me a rare sense of comfort, and yes even a bit of hope for future generations. By encouraging the next generation to embrace their Indigenous roots, Pine is not only helping people remember some of the forgotten beauty and truth of Mi'kmaq culture. She is also taking direct action to ensure that the next generation genuinely cares about each other and everything that truly matters. It seems to me that there are no better seeds worth planting than kindness, generosity, respect for each other, and appreciation of the sacredness of water and the natural world. That is of course if your idea of progress includes a better quality of life than you are living now.