

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, October 2012

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Appreciating Education and our Role Models

The theme for this issue is education and role models so I am going to start with my visit to SIAST in Prince Albert last week where I was hosted by the Basic Education Department.

I cannot think of anything more inspiring than a classroom full of adults who have made the decision to go back to school. It is a decision that is brave and requires not only strength of character and discipline but also a love and commitment to family and community and, most importantly, the need to change what is.

My day started with the drive on the River Road from Gabriel's Crossing to Prince Albert, which I am sure is one of the most beautiful on Earth especially in September. Both the river and the season always remind me of our Nokoms and the generations of our people who dreamed and worked for miyo pimatchihiwin, a good life for future generations.

"Kitiyseeneeminahwak," they would have said with pride. "Our people," which means so much more than the literal translation. The students were from all over Saskatchewan and the world for that matter. They were Michif, Cree, Dene, African, Asian, and all shades of "white" reminding me that today, family and community are all of these and creating miyo pimachihwin must include and be respectful of all who are here. Not always easy for me because I tend to harbor anger and bitterness but I was fortunate as a young woman to know the late Mederic McDougall, one of the Elders who spent his life working for a better world.

We were discussing the anger one feels at the racism and injustice we encountered almost everyday. When I asked him what to do with all the anger he said: "Use it as fuel to do your work, Maria, and you will be surprised at the amount you will get done."

Good advice because sometimes all that ugly can paralyze us and we get nothing done. I was also reminded of my grandmother as I spoke to the class. She told us children that the world was like the landscape around us. It was full of difference and to always remember how important that difference is to our well-being.

"Poplar trees and birch, pine and willow, tiger lilies and yarrow, bluebells and sweetgrass. Every single one of them make our land rich and beautiful; imagine what it would be like if there were only birch trees."

Well this classroom was a rich and beautiful one and I was honored to be there.

Looking at the students I also remembered my sister and her decision to get her GED and go to university in the early 1980s. It was a long, hard journey, but she finished and she led the way for the rest of our family, my brother and his wife, my son and daughters, nieces and nephews.

It was not easy for any of them. There were, and still are, so many challenges that are unique to adults who decide to go to school.

Never having enough money, raising children, juggling family and school life. Then there is the never-ending job of dealing with family drama and trauma. It is often difficult, I am sure, for teachers to understand Aboriginal students and all the responsibilities and obligations that are attached to their large extended families and how that affects life in a classroom.

I am not sure what it is like for non-Aboriginal students, but for us it is often both a blessing and a curse, a colliding of cultures for sure. So, to the students at Prince Albert SIAST Basic Education Department you are my heroes and role models and I send you my best wishes to you and your teachers.

My other role models? Our Nokoms of course who taught us the principles of miyo pimachiniwiwin, by their actions, deeds, stories, songs and love. My Mom who could turn a flour sack into a pretty dress and a piece of moose meat and a cup of porridge into a feast. My Dad who could not read and write, but made sure we had art and books in our lives.

Mrs. Parks, the teacher whose knowledge and kindness are still a part of my life. My Aunt Leada who has given our big extended family unconditional love and support and who at 91 still rushes off to cook us a huge meal when we arrive. She is the essence of wahkotowin, teaching us by her actions the importance of family.

And last but not least, our editor John L., who has kept this small newspaper going and made room for all of us opinionated writers and who does not scream and tear his hair out when we are late, and most importantly, he pays us.

So have a great takqwakan autumn and hiyhiy, merci to all of you.