Empowering youth for a better future

Submitted by Denise Duncan

The good life. What does this mean? Some of us are living this life. Some of us are seeking this good life. Opaskwayak Cree Nation have created a program for youth that literally means “The Good Life”. How can we not want this life for our youth and children? This was the thought behind the innovative 5-year youth program initiated by Beatrice Wilson Health Center and lead program coordinator, Donna Young. Under the guidance of Donna Young, a group of caring individuals and support organizations described as the Hub is leading the way and supporting the Mino-Pimatisiwin program. The goal is to guide youth towards a life that is meaningful, rich in tradition, culture and language by developing a land-based program that is focused on youth at risk. The word Mino-Pimatisiwin in the Cree language literally translates to” the good life”. It is one of a kind! The creation of a preventative action youth program with guidance from Cree elders, family support and involving land-based programming to help youth deal with life issues and make good life choices.

In early March, four Opaskwayak Cree Nation youth were invited to become youth leaders to train, develop and deliver a culturally based sports training program for all youth who want to participate. The intent was to train youth to learn skills leading other youth in structured sports and traditional recreational land-based activities. These skills included agility, strength, balance, reflexes, hand eye coordination, accuracy, strategy, intuition and patience. In the early days of indigenous sports these skills were learned at an early age through games. This was maintained throughout adult hood to ensure optimum physical fitness while subjected to the harsh elements of the north. The coaches trained to lead traditional sports, traditional Cree sports and land-based activities. These coaches are leading the summer youth cultural sports program to encourage and guide other youth to live the Good Life. This program started in mid July with 30 youth actively involved daily. Due to the COVID regulations an action plan was carefully put in place to ensure that all involved would not encounter a health risk.

Basically, two different age groups were formed to support the sports leaders in delivering programming to youth. The younger students participated in the morning, ages 8 to 13-year-old children learning sports such as soccer and dodgeball but as well traditional sports such as foxtail and the stick game. The waters are a huge part of living in the North; therefore, it is important to provide programming that reflect this. The youth coaches are teaching youth swimming skills, canoeing and fishing skills. These are activities that increase happiness and joyfulness in children and youth. Becoming involved with earth elements such as earth, air, sun, water and movement. The older youth (age 14 to 17 years) participate in the same activities in the afternoon. There has been incredible support from youth this summer possibly because of the severe restrictions of the pandemic starting in March until things started re-opening in July.

The importance of being a child/youth is acknowledged in the Mino-Pimatisiwin as well as learning Northern life skills and cultural practises within this summer program. Mental wellness is being viewed as equally important for our youth. Sometimes we ignore the mental wellness of our children, but this must change. Beatrice Wilson and OCN recognize that youth are feeling stressed during the pandemic and are offering programming and counselling to ensure that the youth are heard and listened to. That they have a voice and that they have a place to go to for counselling.

Mino-Pimatisiwin is to ensure that all youth have opportunity for personal growth through healthy cultural experiences. Beatrice Wilson does not want to duplicate anything that is currently being offered with the resources within the community. Together we will create supportive services for our youth and our community.

Land based activities have already started such as berry and medicine picking as it is the time of the year to gather. Hunting season programming is in the planning stages. The hub that we spoke of earlier is a group of organizations that are working together to create the best outcome for youth. The hub will include Child and family services, youth centres, both schools on OCN lands, restorative justice, social services, RCMP, Junior Chief and Council (who are an integral and key piece to this project.) Collectively they work together to create opportunity, design and delivery of the Mino-Pimatisiwin, the Good life. When people work together great things can be achieved.

Public Safety Canada, the funders of this project are excited about Mino-Pimatisiwin design and outcome. Mino-Pimatisiwin is unique in that it involves the knowledge of the elders, families and is land based.

I love this quote about youth…. What do you think?

Because you are young

You are torn between a world of hate

And a world of dreams

So much to lose, so much to gain

So much to fight for

So much to change.

You can get involved in this uplifting program Mino-Pimatisiwin, “the Good Life” by reaching out to Beatrice Wilson Health Center. Contact: Donna Young or Sarah Linklater at (204) 627-7410.

Educating and supporting our youth is the best way to invest in a prosperous future. - John Adriance.