

Non-Indians help youth find Ojibwa roots



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Darrell Mixemong, 21, learns to stretch a rabbit skin in a survival program for young Ojibwa on Christian Island in Georgian Bay.

Mars and deerskin

Darrell Mixemong asks if he can go to Mars. Matt Bamsey of the Canadian Space Agency replies, "absolutely."

Bamsey has come to Christian Island to talk to Mixemong and the other Beausoleil First Nation youth enrolled in the Cultural Wilderness Program about the similarities between space travel and the survival training they're receiving.

"Survival in space, when you're far from help, is about preparation, knowing your environment and using your surroundings and the resources around you."

He's come to the area to work with the same instructors teaching the youth and will be taught the same wilderness survival strategies they've already begun learning.

It will help the Ph.D. student at the University of Guelph, who's working with the Mars Institute Board of Advisors on a planned manned mission to the planet in 2030, prepare for the three-year-long trip.

"The conditions on Mars are very cold," he explains, using a computer demonstration projected on a large screen inside the gymnasium where the young men take a break from working on traditional Ojibwa deerskin shirts.

He tells them about how their instructors will also help him prepare mentally and physically to survive if he one day has to go into space for three years.

"I'm impressed that you guys are learning how to survive isolation for long periods."

Mixemong raises his hand and asks, "What do I have to do to go to Mars?"

Bamsey tells him, "You've already started."

-San Grewal

Identity found in intense bush survival program

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CHRISTIAN ISLAND, ONT.—For the first time in his life, on a small island in Georgian Bay, Darrell Mixemong, a 21-year-old recovering alcoholic, holds onto a piece of his heritage. This one he's made himself.

He runs a sure hand down the tanned hide of an Ojibwa deerskin shirt, feeling the line where the next cut has to be made, then deftly trims the excess leather. Its intricate design involved days of punching holes to create patterns he designed himself, then meticulously weaving long strips of leather through them.

"I'll probably give it to my father. He'd like that," he says.

As he quietly works in a nearly empty gymnasium, there's a glow that surrounds him, something the elders on his reserve say they have never seen before.

It's what Gino Ferri, an expert on aboriginal Canadian culture and founder of the program Mixemong is enrolled in, calls "ethos."

"A sense of being, a connection," explains the man known in Ojibway as "Firewalker." "They become fully alive."

Ferri, an Italian-born Canadian, and his team of outdoor survivalists at Survival in the Bush Inc. – a Muslim woman named Jennifer Khan he affectionately calls "Pocahontas" and a young white outdoorsman named Tyler VanderMolen – are helping Christian Island and Beausoleil First Nation youth recover their lost culture.

There are nine young men in what's called the Cultural Wilderness Program, all between their late teens and mid-20s, and all chronically unemployed. Heading in and out of the bush over a 14-week period with either Khan or VanderMolen, they are learning survival skills and traditional Ojibwa practices such as how to kill an animal, spirit it, skin it and prepare its meat.

When not learning how to survive in the bush they are taught traditional leatherwork, Ojibwa history and the forgotten prayer rituals of their ancestors. This is the inaugural class of the Cultural Wilderness Program on Christian Island.

"It's an intense course," Khan says. "This isn't stuff from a textbook. They will use the entire part of the animal – rabbits, porcupine, grouse, snakes – baby blankets will be made from the skin, the meat will be blessed and shared as a communal meal and the innards will left in the bush so other animals can participate. It's about being in the continuity of the life cycle."

Such a traditional understanding of Ojibwa life is seldom taught here any more.

"The Ojibwa way of life was snuffed out on the island between 1920 and 1958," explains Rodney Monague Sr., who was chief of the Beausoleil First Nation between 1968 and 1990. "Anything that was considered pagan, basically un-Christian, was forbidden," he says, by what First Nations people commonly call "Indian Agents." They were the representatives of the Canadian government's Ministry of Indian Affairs, the last of which left the island in 1968.

Since then the island's people have been cut off from their natural past.

An outdoorsman at his core, Ferri became fascinated with Ojibwa culture as a teenager. He saw first-hand how the people of Christian Island struggled without a true identity while living there in the late '60s. He spent about a year there to gain a better appreciation of Ojibwa culture and spiritual practices from elders who at the time still possessed much of the knowledge that's since been lost. After members of Loyalist College's Bancroft campus, reserve leaders on the island and his own organization discussed what could be done on the island, he jumped at the chance to help repair the damage.

While there was some initial apprehension from reserve elders, skeptical about non-aboriginals teaching their youth, Ferri says there's no longer an issue.

"We're in this for the long run. This is not a European-style-program where an authority figure talks at students and then the course is over.

"We use traditional native methods – it's about doing everything with them."

Christian Island is a two-hour drive north of Toronto to the southern tip of Georgian Bay and then a 20-minute ferry ride across the choppy frigid waters from Cedar Point, the only access to or from the island.

When the winds are too high in the summer or the icebreaker can't break through the frozen passage in the winter, the island's 700 residents are cut off from the ferry and any connection to the outside world.

People remain indoors most of the winter months, in small, isolated houses. About 150 of them, almost all covered with wood siding, are dotted around the southern half of the island, surrounded by dense poplars, spruce and white pine that cover the rolling landscape. Three churches, one general store, the K-8 elementary school and the council's administrative building are connected by dirt roads that all lead one way: Off the island, down to the ferry dock on the south-eastern shore.

Other than the people who move to and from each arriving or departing ferry, dogs that roam along the barren roads are often the only sign of life.

The ferry schedule dictates the lives of students, who after Grade 8 attend high school in Midland, where they board throughout the winter, away from their homes for the first time. For most it's their first interaction with non-natives. Dropout rates are high.

The isolation felt by many of Christian Island's youth, fearful of what lies on one side of the water and trapped on the other, has also resulted in rampant alcoholism and substance abuse.

"Dropout rates from school are about 80 to 85 per cent for aboriginal students," Ferri says, who has earned two PhDs, in psychology and education. "We're trying to turn that around."

Some find the odd construction job on the mainland, around the Midland area; others leave for Casino Rama in the summer to find seasonal work. But most days are spent unemployed.

"It's about overcoming their fears," explains Khan. "When people react in any situation with confusion and anger by lashing out, it's usually because they're unprepared or unfamiliar with the dynamics of their surroundings. We teach them Ojibwa rituals that help them understand their connection to their surroundings so they don't have to fight them."

Mixemong, who has lived on Christian Island since he was born, says he resented his heritage growing up. He doesn't speak or understand Ojibwa. Before meeting Ferri, Mixemong never contemplated much at all about the Ojibwa way of life.

"I don't know what kind of tools they used exactly, but it must have taken people in the olden days way longer to make this," he says, looking down at his nearly completed deerskin shirt.

He deflects any praise for his craftsmanship. "It would have been way harder then, using sharpened rocks."

Concentration and patience are all part of the program, says the young man who dropped out of school after Grade 10 and began drinking and doing drugs to cope with what he describes simply as "a bad life."

Ferri believes the way to counter the isolation the island's youth feel is to empower them.

"The Ojibwa loved the land," Ferri says. "You take the land away from the Ojibwa and you eliminate their cultural and spiritual connection, their lifestyle. This is what we're trying to do: Give them that connection back."

Ferri has trained everyone from military personnel to everyday campers on how to survive in the harshest conditions on earth. Eventually, their overnight stays in the bush will be without any supplies and almost nothing but the clothes on their back. They will have to kill their own food and build their own shelters.

"We're teaching these young people how to cope, how to mentally prepare for challenges, how to devise a plan and work as a team: survival skills that helped their ancestors 500 years ago."

Today, generations of Beausoleil are growing up without a true sense of identity.

"I'm the chief and I can't even speak or really understand Ojibwa," says Rodney Monague Jr., sitting in his pick-up truck. "For me I was able to pursue a life and career without that identity and do okay. But for these young guys who are kind of troubled, maybe learning who they are will help them. I can already see a change in a lot of them."

Twenty-three-year-old Ernest Rice has almost finished his deerskin shirt, which he began about four weeks ago and has worked on in-between the wilderness outings, smudge prayer rituals, the moccasins, mittens and drum he's already finished.

He began working construction off and on after dropping out of high school in Grade 10. It kept him busy and focused on something other than his anger, says Rice's grandmother Velma Smith, who raised him after his father drowned when he was 1.

"His mother left the family when Ernie was 16, and his grandfather died 10 years ago. He had a lot of anger in him. They never did much to try to find his father."

Smith says she's seen a big change in her grandson since he started the program. "Just this weekend he was up cleaning around his yard, raking up. He never used to do that."

But Mixemong has undergone the biggest change.

"He wouldn't even look you in the eyes, or talk to you before," says Chief Monague. Now, he says, Mixemong is beating down the door of the local employment office, looking for work.

"Roots and wings" is what Ferri says the program is trying to give these young men.

"We don't know if it's going to help them," he admits. "But we want to give them the tools to make the right decisions, to think about things and ultimately feel proud of who they are, who they have come from."