

Jewish and Aboriginal communities solving problems

Students, teachers and parents in Winnipeg are using the classroom to explore diversity and overcome racial stereotyping

By Rebeca Kuropatwa
For the Jewish Free Press

It is likely much to former Grand Chief David Ahenakew's chagrin, but Aboriginal and Jewish educators have used his anti-Semitic remarks as the impetus for strengthening Jewish-Aboriginal relations.

Ahenakew will soon be going to trial in Saskatchewan to appeal his conviction of hate speech for saying things like "The Jews damn near owned all of Germany prior to the war," "That's how Hitler came in. He was going to make damn sure that the Jews didn't take over Germany or Europe," and "That's why he fried six million of those guys, you know. Jews would have owned the goddamned world. And look what they're doing. They're killing people in Arab countries."

A Manitoba Chief from Roseau River, Chief Terry Nelson, also recently made malicious comments concerning Jews. "Sadly, how the press and Canada responds to this [Ahenakew's trial] issue will surely cause natives to hate Jews even more than some of them do now and what Jews fear the most, active promotion of hatred against Jews in Canada will only rise dramatically amongst natives as they make a martyr out of an old man."

Meanwhile in Winnipeg both Aboriginals and Jews are taking it upon themselves to show that such intolerance and hate is not the norm in either community.

Eileen Curtis teaches Grades 3 and 4, Hebrew Emersion, at Brock Corydon School. Her students learned with local artist, Debbie Henteleff, about Aboriginal art and culture, as part of the school's Literacy Through the Arts workshops. Another innovative program Brock Corydon School is considering is planting an Aboriginal medicine garden on school grounds.

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(l. to r.) Students Michelle Perrin, Adam Tabachnick, Elijah White, Thomas Peters, and Jessica Katz display some of their discovery projects.

Katz did hers on the beaver.

Red paint was used to honour Aboriginal people, black for Black people, white for Caucasian people, and yellow for Asian people. Red, black, white, and yellow are also painted on each of the four corners of the local Aboriginal centre, the Circle of Life Thunderbird House.

"I learned a lot about how Aboriginals view the creation of the world and what is in it," said Katz. "Now that I know about this, I'd like to teach other people about it."

Another program that promotes understanding and mutual care is "Giinawind-Hineini," (Friends, Here We Are). Angela Busch of Southeast Education Centre initiated this program. Southeast Education Centre is an independent boarding school for aboriginal



Aboriginal student Roberta Young learns to make potato latkes

Aboriginal students learn about each other's cultures and beliefs through in-person interaction and dialogue, and beginning with Gray Academy and Southeast Education Centre, expand to include other schools and groups.

Gray Academy students visited Southeast Education Center in December 2006, to a warm welcome. They learned about Aboriginal traditions, foods, storytelling, dance, and art.

On Friday, April 13, Gray Academy students had the opportunity to welcome Southeast Education Centre students to their school. Available workshops included learning about Jewish cooking, art (on the theme of tzedakah), Chasidic storytelling, basketball, and Israeli dance. The cooking workshop involved everything from traditional Passover foods, such as charoset and matzah, to potato pancakes. The storytelling workshop include reading of Elie Wiesel's "The Holy Seer of Lublin," and the Bobov Rebbi's "First and Second Miracle."

Dr. Ruth Asharfi, Director of Judaic Studies at Gray Academy, said that this was a great way for the Aboriginal and Jewish communities to learn about each other's cultures and traditions in a very relaxed atmosphere.

by this program is so important," said Asharfi. "That if we see something wrong, we should get up, go out, and do something about it - get the ball rolling. Then, you will see where it will eventually lead. Angela took something negative and turned it into something positive, and we are better for it."

Busch approached Shelly Faintuch, Community Relations Director of the Winnipeg Jewish Federation, and together they came up with the "Giinawind-Hineini" program.

To begin the workshop program at Gray Academy, Maryanne Boulton, of South Beach Casino, presented the Jewish Federation with a check for 2500 dollars, as part of their "Community Spirit Fund." Boulton said the program is all about "getting involved and learning about each other, to build more understanding." The casino is part owned by seven First Nation communities. According to Boulton, it is doing so well, that they started the Spirit Fund as a way to give back to the community.

Roberta Young, a student from Southeast Education Center, said that she enjoyed the program. "Everything is new to me. It is interesting. I just played in a basketball game for the first workshop, and our team won - so far

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Henteleff began each class by telling the students about a legend, such as light, creation, the stars, islands, and animals. The children learned how to make animal puppets, of Aboriginal legends, and about Aboriginal ways in general.

Thomas Peters did his project on the legend of the eagle, Michelle Perrin did hers on the wolf, Elijah White did his on the porcupine, Adam Tabachnick did his on the dappled deer and the grey wolf, and Jessica



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students from reserves in the southeastern region of the province. This school, Gray Academy of Jewish Education, and the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg joined together to make this project come to fruition.

The program involves Grade 11 students from Gray Academy and Southeast Education Centre. The aim is to have Jewish and

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Asharfi added that one woman made all of this possible - Angela Busch. "She heard about the anti-Semitic comments made by prominent Aboriginal Chiefs and she said 'I don't like this, and I am going to do something about it.' She is a great example of inspirational leadership. Angela showed the power that a single individual can have in creating change."

"The message being relayed

by this program is so important," said Asharfi. "That if we see something wrong, we should get up, go out, and do something about it - get the ball rolling. Then, you will see where it will eventually lead. Angela took something negative and turned it into something positive, and we are better for it."

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Roberta Young, a student from Southeast Education Center, said that she enjoyed the program. "Everything is new to me. It is interesting. I just played in a basketball game for the first workshop, and our team won - so far so good."

"I think what Angela Busch has started is great," added Young. "It is a smart way to get our communities together in a positive way."

Anna Vishnevsky is a student at Gray Academy, and was helping to teach Jewish artwork for the day's workshops. She moved to Winnipeg a couple of years ago, from Israel. Vishnevsky said, "I really like the com-

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munity here. There is a strong connection to Judaism at the school. I've discovered a lot of things I didn't know before, even though I was living in Israel."

What she really appreciated about these workshop exchanges is that "you have the chance to meet new people, and to learn about different cultures. We learned

about their holidays and observances - all their sad and happy days."

This will make such a big difference in Aboriginal and Jewish relations, "because you can learn so much more about other people when you get to meet them in person," said Vishnevsky. "It is an opportunity to get to know other people, and to see that

they are no different than you are - nothing bad about them or their culture. You make real friends this way."

Southeast Education Center student, Trish Castel, was working hard to make artwork that was just right - a clay Mogen David, with the Hebrew letter "tet" in the centre, for the first letter of her name. She found

the artwork "fun and cool to do. The potato pancake was good too, but the one I made kept on cracking."

"I think what Angela Busch is doing will really make a difference. If people see that we are getting together, they will see that it is all right - that we are treating each other equally and not discriminating."