

Nature becomes the classroom

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Nature was an important element to the Monday and Wednesday evening classes held for six weeks from May through June. Each class began outside on a patio behind the St. James Building with a smudging ceremony and a talking circle with the 25 students, before heading inside for teaching and discussion.

On the final night on June 10, students were introduced to guest elder Isaac Day, an Ojibwa medicine man from the Serpent River First Nations, located between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie on the north shore of Lake Huron. In his professional life, he works as a traditional healer for all the First Nations communities in southern Ontario. He is a ceremonial leader, a sweat lodge keeper, a fast/vision quest conductor, a medicine man and interpreter, and has been doing this work for 26 years.

"The medicine wheel gave me a deeper respect for the whole picture that I will try to recapitulate in my cycle of seasonal poems which will be performed at Aeolian Hall on August 15," wrote Canadian poet, playwright and novelist Penn Kemp, BA'66, to Anne Barnfield, Interim Dean of Academic Affairs at Brescia, in appreciation of the lecture and last class. Kemp, who has been invited to be writer-in-residence for 2009-10 at Western, was invited to attend by a student of the Smokes'.

"We had to get a fire permit from Physical Plant services at Brescia, but this was our third sacred fire, and we have one of our men, who waits with the fire until it is out, and he picks up the ashes and leaves the area spotless," says Dan. "The ashes are used to light the next sacred fire, because they contain our medicine. They contain the sacred thoughts and prayers of everyone in the ceremony."

"The fire-keeper did an excellent and unobtrusive job of keeping the fire glowing, and everyone was very happy. The students were emotional about the ending of their course and expressed their deep thanks to their teachers many times. There was a real sense of unity and blessing, too," says Ceri Harris, who was in attendance.

"I learned so much from Dan and Isaac's use of examples from nature, the trees around us, the honking geese, as life lessons. Being outside by the ceremonial fire connected us all and grounded the teachings," says Kemp.