

Proud to celebrate being Aboriginal

Aboriginal peoples of Canada – comprised of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people – will be celebrating National Aboriginal Day June 21 to commemorate their cultural uniqueness and the contributions made within Canadian society.

Thank goodness the days of the European colonial mindset of Duncan Campbell Scott, superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1913-1932, has become less socially acceptable. Scott said: "I want to get rid of the Indian problem ... our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question and no Indian department."

In spite of the centuries of hardships endured with the passing of policies to eradicate "Indians", Aboriginal people still thrive throughout Turtle Island (North America).

As a woman of maturity, I have seen a noticeable improvement within the last 40 years of Aboriginal cultural pride brought on by young leaders.

I have learned many cultural teachings from the leaders that came into my life during the rising popularity of the American Indian Movement in the early 70s.

The American Indian Movement, a social activist organization, was formed in the late 60s with the objective of promoting self-worth and self-dignity of Indian people.

The organization fought for the improvement of resources, education, housing and healthcare to alleviate poverty.

The National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) also formed around the time of Pierre Elliot Trudeau's infamous 1969 White Paper. The chiefs of the time came together in unity to ensure that the "Indians of Canada" were not absorbed into the body politic.

It was an exciting time to be a child growing up in Toronto when the American Indian Movement made its way there.

Young leaders from many communities converged upon the city, bringing their own unique knowledge of culture and traditions.



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*Wawatay Reporter, Debbie Mishibinjima, as a child. She is proud to be a Nishnawbe Kwe and celebrates Aboriginal Day every day. She first began to dance at powwows while attending the Abinoojiiyag Native Children's Program in Toronto.
-Submitted photo*

I am thankful I was able to gain exposure to our culture and traditions at a young age.

The ambitious young leaders formed an after school program called the Abinoojiiyag Native Children's Program. Danny Commanda, a former counsellor, estimated that about 500 children attended the program through the years it existed.

I recall making my first buckskin traditional outfit at Abinoojiiyag when I was 10 years old to wear at the Ottawa powwow.

Thirty years later, I continue to follow the path of the drum by dancing and singing at powwows.

I still carry the teachings of how to make women's powwow regalia and how to do beadwork. I honestly think I would not be the proud Nishnawbe Kwe I am today if I had not attended the Native children's program with many positive young people enforcing how great it is to be Nishnawbe.

It was in 1982 that the National Indian Brotherhood first suggested implementing a National Aboriginal Solidarity Day on June 21.

The date June 21 was selected because of the historical importance of tribal gatherings during the summer solstice.

Disappointingly, the recommendation to create a special day to honour Canada's first peoples remained dormant until 1995 when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended that there be a designation of a National First Peoples Day.

At long last, on June 13, 1996, Former governor general Roméo LeBlanc made the declaration that June 21 would be known as National Aboriginal Day.

In 1996, when the proclamation was declared, Aboriginal Day events were celebrated from coast to coast.

But really, is one day of the year to celebrate the achievements of Aboriginal people enough?

Our young children and youth ought to be taught their history, their culture, their language, and their traditions at home and within the education system.

I have hope that the youth of today will stand united, will embrace their language and culture, and will help their fellow young men and women.

Powwows continue to be a place where I can enjoy the beauty of watching young people engage in dancing, singing and drumming. I see the young ones being called to the path of the drum. After all, the beating of the drum represents the heart beat of Mother Earth.

As a proud Nishnawbe Kwe, I find that everyday is Aboriginal Day.

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