

Here is a story from the Tillsonburg News, a local daily paper. We visited the Port Burwell Public School on Thursday, April 8th for the day. We held a school assembly, and we had individual classes with each class. A largely Mexican Mennonite school, who gave us rapt attention throughout our day. We wanted to thank Carla Matos for inviting us and taking care of us....

By Jeff Tribe - Staff Writer

Quinn Donelan may not have been fully aware of the allegorical potential of his question.

But the Pt. Burwell Public School student's inquiry if First Nations education and communicator Dan Smoke had ever sent smoke signals was right on the mark. Smoke, along with wife Mary Lou and Kim Crawford's visit to the school Thursday was facilitated by Carla Matos. The Native educators and communicators opened with a school-wide assembly before visiting individual classes, including Lisa Koivu's Grade 5/6 group, a session which produced Donelan's query.

Dan Smoke has in fact physically created traditional smoke signals, which in his response to Donelan, he compared to an early form of binary (computer) communication. Computers use combinations of "on or off" (binary switches) in extremely complex functions. Smoke signals were similarly arranged into regulated spaced "puffs" to create understandable messages.

"In the same way, we use smoke signals to speak in that same on/off language," explained Smoke. "That was a form of communication."

Smoke built on his theme, noting waterways and rivers held strategic importance, in part because of a significant role in early communication. Dan and wife Mary Lou currently live near the Forks of the Thames (River) in London, which historically would have been a nexus point for both travel and information. Based on the comparative rapidity of a canoe's passage compared to overland routes, news of impending attack, for example, would travel quickly up and down the river, said Dan.

"In this regard, our waterways were like fax machines," he said.

While familiar with traditional methods, Dan and Mary Lou Smoke take full advantage of modern technology to broaden their target audience.

Dan is a member of the Seneca Nation of the Iroquois Confederacy, hailing from Six Nations near Brantford. Among his many credits, Dan is the president of the Board of Directors for the Native News Network of Canada, treasurer of the Native Journalist's Association of Canada. He has been an invited speaker at the AGM of the Canadian Association of Journalists.

Mary Lou, a member of the Ojibway Nation (from Batchawana Bay), is a writer, singer, guitarist and traditional drummer who willingly volunteers and shares her talents with the community at large. Mary Lou has performed internationally (Germany, Holland), nationally (1976 Olympics) and locally (Grand Theatre, London and Ontario Place, Toronto). She also performs at traditional powwows and Aboriginal Music Festivals. Mary Lou is the founding member of a local women's drumming group (the Ogitchidaw Kwe Wag Singers) and has contributed to the healing and well being of Native and non-Native women and

to a greater understanding between women of many faiths.

The Smokes also lead an annual First Nations opening ceremony at Tillsonburg's Canada Day celebration.

Mary Lou's inspiration as a communicator came early, if painfully in life.

"When I was eight-years-old, I was chased home from school after a history lesson," she recalled.

The lesson had been on Custer's Last Stand at the Little Big Horn, interpreted as a "massacre" and as the closest available Aboriginal, Mary Lou had born the brunt of the backlash.

"My mother said, "Mary Lou, you get out there and tell them this is still our land."

"When white people killed Native people, it was called a victory," interjected Dan, for whom elder Art Solomon was a formative influence. For too long, Solomon would say, it has been "him telling our story and getting it wrong.

"So now it's our turn to be heard, and for him to listen," continued Dan.

The couple does extensive counseling within the Aboriginal community, encouraging, for example, young people to stay in school.

"And we do a lot of cross-cultural bridging," said Dan.

Thursday's trip to Pt. Burwell was one example, an inclusive approach including Native ceremony and traditions, selections from Aboriginal creation narration, mention of The Red Path (essentially explained Mary Lou, choosing to "walk through life in a positive manner based on the Seven Grandfathers" principles of courage, love, truth, respect, honesty, humility and wisdom), what could be termed a wildlife parable (the story of geese sharing the lead through mutually-supportive flight) as well as a drum-accompanied The Water Song.

Solomon exhorted Dan whenever he had an opportunity to "educate our own people as well as our non-Native brothers and sisters" to take it and share what he has.

"And I do," said Dan, of a multi-tiered — and multi-media approach.

"The more understanding that is out there, the less discrimination and racism is out there," he had explained earlier to Koivu's class.

The Smokes do run into their detractors, said Dan. "But that's OK, we're not all supposed to be on the same page."

All they ask for is the opportunity to communicate their point of view in a respectful manner that allows for equally-respectful discussion and feedback.

And when that occurs, no matter how the discussion begins, it typically progresses in a positive manner, often to a positive conclusion, says Dan.

"And that's what we look for," he concluded. "That opportunity."

Dan and Mary Lou Smoke

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