

Stubborn fight to protect her culture

Annie Adam wants to help natives regain their self-esteem

LARRY JOHNSRUDE
Journal Staff Writer
EDMONTON

At 55 years of age, Annie Adam is going back to school, aiming to use her life experiences to impress on aboriginal youth and families the importance of their culture in their lives.

A Cree native from Fort Chipewyan, great-grandmother and recovered alcoholic, she draws a link between the loss of cultural identity and the problems plaguing aboriginal youth—acute drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and suicide.

"If you lose your culture, you lose your respect for those around you, for your elders and for yourself," she says. "That's where I see a lot of problems these days in the native community. There's a lack of respect for their history or themselves."

She knows first-hand how difficult it is for aboriginal people to keep their culture alive. As a girl growing up in Fort Chipewyan in northern Alberta in the 1950s and 1960s, she was beaten regularly by the nuns at the Catholic residential school for speaking her native Cree language.

Student wants to help families with their troubles

It didn't stop her, though.

"I'm just a very stubborn person," she says with a shrug. "That's why I can still speak it to this day." Her stubbornness is the reason she's starting a new career at a time when most people are thinking of retiring.

She's training to become a family counsellor through the aboriginal family and youth support program offered by Edmonton-based NorQuest College in conjunction with the Riel Institute.

Earlier this year, she received high-school upgrading through



JOHN LUCAS, THE JOURNAL
Annie Adam, 55, is training at NorQuest College to become a family counsellor. She wants to help native people reclaim their cultural identities.

the Ben Calf Robe education program for natives, also offered by NorQuest.

"It was always my dream to go back to school," says Adam, who dropped out when she was 16 to raise a family. She now has eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Taking care of her family by herself, she divorced her husband and spent most of her working life as a cook in northern mining and forestry camps.

But the constant strain of heavy lifting took its toll. In 1998, she went on workers' compensation because of neck

and shoulder injuries. That was when she decided to resume her education.

"I could have just sat around home doing nothing, but that's not me," she says.

"I'm the kind of person that has to be doing something."

Energetic and outgoing, with dark expressive eyes and an engaging smile, she wants to use her life experiences to help families that are going through troubled times. She has battled alcohol, gone through divorce, raised a young family on meagre means and had to deal with the suicide of her only son,

who was in the middle of a marriage breakup and custody battle.

"I've always pulled myself through it," she says. "I want to help others pull themselves through their troubles as well."

When she's done her course in nine months, she hopes to get a family counselling job with one of the First Nations near Edmonton. She has seen improvements to her native Fort Chipewyan in recent years and the community is becoming more self-reliant and in touch with its cultural roots.

liohnsrude@thejournal.canwest.com