



CHRIS SCHWARZ, THE JOURNAL

Students from English as a Second Language and Cree language classes at NorQuest College learn more about each other when they pair up as cultural learning partners at the end of their term. Student partners from different cultures in the First Nations and New Canadians program are, left to right, Matilda Kamara, Aiden Onespot, Doreen Chalifoux and Maria Tshibwabwa.

Cultures cross paths in class

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Aynalem Kibite formed her impression of aboriginal Canadians by watching old episodes of *Bonanza* in her native Ethiopia and by studying the head-dresses in post-cards sent by her brother in Canada.

Then she met Elaine Willier, a northern Alberta Cree.

It turns out the African newcomer and the First Nations citizen have a lot in common—smudging ceremonies, bead-work, even the way bead colours refer to directions, such as north and south.

“She (Kibite) thought we still lived in teepees,” Willier said. “I told her no, it’s the 2000s now.”

Kibite and Willier met in a NorQuest College class set up to overcome the misconceptions new Canadians and First Nations people have of each other.

For one week near the end of their term, new Canadians taking English and aboriginal Canadians studying Cree share a classroom, pair off as partners, and begin to leap the barriers imposed by culture and history.

For aboriginal students, there’s a bonus.

They and their new partners go to the Provincial Museum aboriginal gallery, where the history of aboriginal North Americans is documented.

“That’s where the pride comes from,” said Margaret Goodeagle, a former nurse and prison liaison worker who came out of retirement four years ago to teach in the Cree language program.

Goodeagle and Michelle Tracy, who teaches English as a second language, are the leaders of the program intended to bridge the cultural gap among the students.

For them, the project is thrilling. Tracy said the daily contact between students from vastly different cultures, but with much in common, is almost overwhelming. “They forget that they didn’t know each other always.”

The two classes, about 46 students in all, came together Friday to finish some posters capturing their shared experience and paying tribute to cultures that are worlds apart, yet very similar.

A student from Zaire displayed a poster of a North American eagle and a poem reflecting aboriginal themes. Others showed collages reflecting the interaction of their own culture with that of their

partner.

“It’s a great program,” said Val Kormish, a teaching assistant in Goodeagle’s Cree language class.

“It is not just a passing thing. The students work together every day for a week. At first they’re almost scared to talk to each other. Now they are so much closer.”

Willier brought pictures of some of her distinguished ancestors, including Treaty 8 signer Chief Moostoos, to show Kibite.

“You can live next door to someone and not know their culture,” Willier said. “They could be your neighbour for years and years and you don’t know who they are.”

Along with her pictures, she brought newspaper stories reflecting her family’s history and personal leather work. Her Ethiopian partner, meanwhile, had many stories to tell about the coffee harvest in her native country and ceremonial smudges—like the weekly smudges held by aboriginal students in a special room at NorQuest.

“It’s the cleansing of the soul,” said Kormish, referring to the smudges lit to give thanks for life’s gifts in Ethiopia and in Edmonton.

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