

Apprenticeship program pays dividends

When Patricia Souliere moved to Alberta from Ontario four years ago looking for the good life, all she could find was low-paying jobs.

She'd dropped out of high school, taken a bartending course and gone to hairdressing school. .

But pouring drinks didn't appeal to her as a long-term job and after working for four years as a hairstylist, she was looking for something different.

With few skills, though, she ended up cleaning carpets for a living. It certainly wasn't the life she had imagined.

Souliere, who is aboriginal, was determined to break out of the poverty trap. She took a carpentry course at Norquest College, did some woodworking for a year and is now an apprentice carpenter.

She's making \$14 an hour, twice her previous salary, and figures her earnings will jump substantially when she gets her carpenter's ticket in three years.

"I love it," says Souliere, 33, who has been making furniture for the Alberta Infrastructure Department since November.

"You're allowed to be creative. You can actually see your accomplishment as you're going along," says the mother of five.

Souliere is off welfare and no longer has to worry about making ends meet on minimum wage.

It's a success story that organizers of the Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project (AAAP)

hope will spark broader interest in the native community.

The project was formally launched in September to help natives enter and complete apprenticeship programs.

Participants can receive coaching to help them choose a trade, referrals to potential employers and mentorship while they train.

"It offers a great opportunity to move towards self-sufficiency," says AAAP project co-ordinator Bruce Arcand.

"It's a stepping stone to the rest of their lives."

And, increasingly, young aboriginals are heeding the message that education is the key to economic independence, he adds.

There are signs across the

country, as well, that growing numbers of natives recognize the importance of staying in school.

Census figures released yesterday show that fewer natives are dropping out. In 2001, 39% of the native population had less than a high school diploma, down from 45% in 1996.

And in 2001, 16% of working-age natives had trade certificates, compared to 12% of the non-aboriginal population.

We still have a long way to go because natives quit school far more often than non-natives. The aboriginal community is going through a baby boom and more role models are desperately needed.

But there are signs that things are improving. At Amiskwaciy Academy, 45 students are expected to be at this year's graduation ceremony.

That's up from 19 grads in 2002 and nine grads in 2001, when the academy opened.

"We put real emphasis on our students being able to articulate career goals," says assistant principal Shirly

McNeill.

Students participate in job-shadowing and work-experience programs to give them a feel for what careers might interest them.

Over at NAIT, the retention rate of native students has skyrocketed. Four years ago, 50% of aboriginal kids dropped out, says aboriginal liaison Eva Stang. Now, 70% of the 300 native students at NAIT stick with it.

Setting up the Student Friendship Centre four years ago so natives could gather for peer support probably boosted the retention rate, says Stang.

As well, second-year students tutor newcomers.

Ten years ago, native students at NAIT primarily studied nursing and social work. Now they're studying everything from petroleum engineering and architectural technology to culinary arts.

One talented young grad just spent a year working as a chef at a Disney World hotel in Florida.

Says Stang: "Every time we have a graduation and I see our students cross the floor at the Jubilee Auditorium, I know that's one more person that's going to go out and assist their community."



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