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Santa brings the Christmas magic to Saskatchewan's far north

By Ben Borne
of Eagle Feather News

Santa Claus parked his reindeer at the Saskatoon John G. Diefenbaker International Airport and chartered a plane for Rise Air's 22nd annual Santa in the North trip.

No more Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

Instead, Santa and his elves board a dimly-lit Beechcraft 1900D at 6:30 a.m. one cold winter morning.

The plane carried a cargo full of gifts bound for the Saskatchewan's Athabasca Basin region.

At the helm was Capt. Brady "Goose" Tetzlaff and his first officer Christian "Maverick" Scibetta.

"On Goose! On Maverick!" Santa shouted as the pilots took the plane to a cruising altitude of 28,000 feet.

(It's a one-and-a-half-hour flight to the students and teachers waiting in anticipation for Santa's arrival.)

Christina Clarke is one of those teachers in Stony Rapids.

She looked up to the sky patiently waiting with her students in tow for the orange plane to circle overhead signaling Santa's arrival.

It's become somewhat of a tradition.

She's been there when Santa has arrived for the last 22 years.

"Just because we're isolated, it doesn't mean that Santa is only down south – the spirit of Christmas is everywhere," Clarke said. "The kids are excited, families are excited, and it's great to see Santa again!"

For Georgia St. Pierre, acting principal at Father Megret High School in Wollaston, Santa's visit to the north is meaningful for the children.



Santa gives a wave as he boards the plane that will take him to the province's far north. Santa visits communities in the Athabasca Basin as part of Rise Air's 22nd annual Santa in the North trip. (Photo supplied by Ben Borne)

"Christmas is a time of giving and hope, and these kids, it doesn't matter what they get ... as long as they get to see Santa." St. Pierre says.

The children were not disappointed.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" bellowed Santa as he entered the school.

The students and teachers' eyes lit up with excitement – Christmas magic arrived early in Saskatchewan's far north.

Packed inside

Santa's gift sack was more than 1,300 gifts for the students in Wollaston, Stony Rapids, Black Lake, and Fond du Lac.

There was a palpable energy in the room as the kids tore into their



Santa gives a little girl one the gift bags he brought with him as part of Rise Air's 22nd annual Santa in the North trip. He handed out 1,300 gift bags filled with goodies including a book by an Indigenous author. (Photo supplied by Ben Borne)

gifts with shrieks of excitement.

The gift bags included a small toy, mandarin orange, candy cane and a book written by Indigenous authors.

Eagle Feather News was on hand to ask Santa a little more about his gift choices.

"It's important to include books by Indigenous authors," Santa said. "These kids need to see themselves reflected in the stories they read to know their own stories, their culture, and to know they belong in the stories told around the world."

With changes in technology and supply chain constraints – Santa is often busy negotiating deals with toy manufacturers to ensure a steady stream for his workshop. This keeps the old man in red busy, so he needs support for this special trip from Saskatchewan-based businesses.

"Helping bring the magic of Christmas to the kids in the most northern parts of our province for 22 years is the reason for the season for the Rise Air team," says Dan Gold, Director of Communications and Stakeholder Relations at Rise Air. "We wouldn't be able to do this without our financial partners at Athabasca Basin Development, Cameco, Orano, NLCDC, SSR Mining, the team at Santa's Workshop and other in-kind sponsors."

After two full days in the north, including an overnight stay at Al's Place in Stony Rapids, Santa jumped back on the plane to head back to his sleigh in Saskatoon. While looking out of the plane window as it circled around the community before finally taking off, he said with a twinkle in his eye, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night."



The University of Saskatchewan receives a Christi Belcourt original

By Liam O'Connor
of Eagle Feather News

Not everyone can own a Christi Belcourt original painting, but seeing one in person has become a lot easier for students at the University of Saskatchewan.

The world renowned Métis artist's latest piece called *Every Dot a Prayer for the Saskatchewan Rivers* is now housed in the College of Law Library.

Belcourt is not only a visual artist, but is an activist, who often uses her art to draw attention to issues she's passionate about such as the water, the environment and the impacts of colonization.



Christi Belcourt at the unveiling of her recent art piece called *Every Dot a Prayer for the Saskatchewan Rivers*. It is now housed at the College of Law Library at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. (Photo by Liam O'Connor)

The painting was unveiled in November during a panel discussion at the university. It was moderated by Marilyn Poitras and included both Belcourt, and acclaimed Métis author Maria Campbell.

"*Every Dot a Prayer for the Saskatchewan Rivers*," depicts both the water and the wildlife. There are thousands of dots of paint within the intricate piece, that make up different animals and nature.

The Saskatchewan River is a "life giver" according to Belcourt, and therefore is sacred. The river flows for about 550km through the



Every bird, fish and animal Christi Belcourt included in her latest painting are on the endangered species list. As the title suggests the painting is a compilation of dots, which is Belcourt's signature style. (Photo by Liam O'Connor)

pose a threat to the feathered creature.

Campbell also voiced concern about the state of the environment.

The 82-year-old has seen many changes in her lifetime. Campbell recalled fishing for sturgeon with her family when she was a little girl and said the fish were so much larger back then compared to now.

It is something even her father noticed. He told her stories of when he was a child and the fish were huge and it was not unheard of for a single sturgeon being able to feed 10 families.

Although the panel focused primarily on Indigenous law, Campbell reminded people that water is an Indigenous law that also requires protection.

"The very first protector (Indigenous people) had was (the) water, that was wrapped around the womb, and protected them," said Campbell. "(This) is why women are our water keepers and why we should all be looking after water because water was our first protector, and it needs our protection now."

Belcourt feels as though she's become more fascinated "in understanding and knowing species at risk." She said that conservation work is key to helping nature regenerate.

The root of environmental problems stems from capitalism, according to Belcourt. In her eyes, tackling corporate capitalism and coming up with a different system is the solution.

"Capitalism is an insatiable beast, that seems to just want to consume, consume, consume," she said. "And the problem that we're faced with is that the earth's way, that it's run economically, is pushing capitalism as the model under the guise of democracy."



A close up of the large lake sturgeon in Christi Belcourt's latest painting called, *Every Dot a Prayer for the Saskatchewan Rivers*. She chose to prominently display the sturgeon in her painting because it has been recently placed on the endangered species list. (Photo by Liam O'Connor)

prairie provinces.

"Water holds life the same way a child or a newborn is held in his mother's womb," said Belcourt. "Water holds life for this planet and for all of us. The most sacred of elements is water because that's what we're born in and so that's why half of the painting is covered in water."

The centerpiece of the painting is a massive fish, which Belcourt said represented lake sturgeon. She wanted to highlight the importance of the fish because it has been placed on the endangered species list.

"When there's not enough moose in one area, (Indigenous people) leave that area alone," said Belcourt. "When there's not enough sturgeon in the river, we shouldn't be catching them either, even if it is part of our sacred foods. We do this because we know how to be good environmental stewards of the earth."

Burrowing owls are also featured in the painting because of their endangered status. Belcourt explained tailing, farming and lack of natural grasses



A full view of Christi Belcourt's painting on the University of Saskatchewan's College of Law Library wall. The large art installation was unveiled in November in Saskatoon. (Photo by Liam O'Connor)

Police help spread some holiday cheer

By Kerry Benjoe
of Eagle Feather News

Twenty Regina students were picked up by police and taken downtown - to shop.

The Regina Police Service in partnership with the Cornwall Shopping Centre hosted its annual CopShop event and once again it was a huge success.

Chief Evan Bray said the annual shopping trip has become very popular among RPS members.

"I remember having to go around and ask people to volunteer, now we have a list," he said. "I used to volunteer, but didn't this year because I wanted to give others a chance."

According to Bray,

CopShop started about 10 years ago and is an offshoot of The Regina Intersectional Partnership (TRiP). According to the RPS website, the program is a targeted and collaborative approach to crime reduction and community well-being.

This year 20 students were selected by their schools and were paired with a member of the RPS to do some holiday shopping.

Bray said it's a great way to start building positive relationships with youth and is a way for the police to connect with members of the community in a fun way.

The goal is to make the day extra special for each participant.

Kasia Badger from Coronation Park Community School was one of the students chosen and it was a day the whole family will always remember..

The day started with a limousine ride to the Cornwall Shopping Centre, which Badger said was the best part of the day.

Once the students and RPS members arrived at the mall they made a trip to the Bay to select a new winter jacket.

Badger chose a black parka with faux fur trim.

Her mother Dezaræ Cote and her grandmother Helene Cote said they were so happy Badger was given such a wonderful opportunity right before Christmas.

In addition to getting new winter clothing, the students ate, shopped and made happy memories with their shopping partners.

Badger purchased clothing, jewelry, a barbie doll, phone case and some candy for herself.

If there was anything still remaining on her wishlist, she did stop to let Santa know.

Dezaræ said it was great to see her daughter so happy.

"Kasia has a rare skin condition," she said. "She blisters, (it's) a genetic

flaw - epidermolysis bullosa simplex."

The condition is often referred to as butterfly skin.

"She's my butterfly," said the proud mother.

Helene said her daughter is a single mother who does her best for her children. She said her granddaughter is a good girl and knows sometimes things are a struggle.

"I commend (the Regina) police dept for reaching out and making these



A group picture of the RPS members involved in the last CopShop taken at the Cornwall Shopping centre. . (Photo supplied)

students feel important and special," said Helene. "I know Kasia did."

Although Bray didn't have an opportunity to participate this year, he shared his own CopShop story.

He recalled one little girl who went from store to store to buy gifts for her family, but every so often she would return to one store and hold a certain doll.

"We sometimes have to remind the kids to save some money for themselves," said Bray.

However, the little girl would remember someone else in her family who she wanted to buy something for before spending money on herself.

"Once she was all done shopping for other people, she was short a few dollars for the doll she wanted," said Bray. "I gave her what she was short ... but I'm not the only one who throws in a little extra at the end of the day."

He said spending the day walking from store-to-store with an excited child could get anyone into the Christmas spirit.

Bray said the volunteer RPS members range from senior officers to school resource officers and everyone who has participated raves about the experience.



Kasia Badger wearing the new black parka she selected during the 2022 CopShop event. Badger's family members say they appreciate the RPS initiative because it left Badger feeling extra special this holiday season. (Photo supplied by Badger's mother Dezaræ Cote)



Chief Evan Bray at the last CopShop event he participated in. CopShop has grown in popularity. He sat out this year to give other volunteers an opportunity to participate. (Photo supplied)

Elder Profile Lillian Piapot

*Urban migration through the
eyes of a Regina Kokum*

**By Kerry Benjoe
of Eagle Feather News**

In the late 1960s Ross Thatcher's Liberal government created the Housing for People of Native Ancestry program and families were plucked from the reserve and placed in cities like Regina and Moose Jaw.

In 1969, Lillian Piapot and her children were one such family.

Although she was 28, at the time, she and her children had never lived in a home with running water, indoor plumbing much less owned a television, but that all changed when they moved into Regina.

"My kids would play with the lights and turn the faucets on and off," said Piapot. "They were scared of the TV because they never seen one before."

The 81-year-old has spent 53 years in Regina, but her story began on the Piapot First Nation located about 30 minutes northeast of Regina.

Like others of her generation, she attended both Indian Residential School and Indian Day school.

Despite the experience, Piapot had a desire to learn, but was denied the opportunity.

She lived in a time when the Indian Agent wielded total power on reserves. Under the Indian Act, the Indian Agent had the authority to send people to jail, kick people off reserve or take anyone's children without repercussions.

"When we saw the car, with the writing on the side we would run and hide," said Piapot.

She remembered children being taken, but didn't know where they went. Some of the kids ended up in Indian Residential Schools while others were victims of the 60s Scoop and adopted to non-Indigenous families.

In the late 1960s the province got involved in the apprehension of Indigenous children.

From 1967 to 1969 the Province of Saskatchewan piloted the Adopt an Indian or Metis Program. During this time it was common for Indigenous children to appear in adoption advertisements in the local paper or on TV.

Piapot, was the eldest of 15 children, but said some of her siblings didn't survive childhood. It was common for children to die from illnesses like chicken pox, mumps, measles and whooping cough because vaccines did not exist yet.

As the eldest grandchild, she was raised by her grandmother which was customary at the time. This traditional practice continues today among many First Nation families.

Piapot's mother married a man from another reserve and according to the Indian Act she automatically transferred to her new husband's reserve. This clause was amended in 1985 under Bill C-31.

"Women didn't have many rights back then," said Piapot.

Unfortunately, her younger siblings became part of the 60s Scoop and she didn't see them for many years.

When Piapot was around 16 she was married to an older man.

"It was an arranged marriage," she said.

Piapot had seven children, but lost her eldest child in infancy. She and her husband eventually separated.

Piapot said when she was still living on the reserve most homes didn't even have electricity. Everyone hauled water daily, cut wood for heat and used oil lamps for light.

"We were poor, but we cared for one another," she said.

One day her brother-in-law showed up at her place and said come with me we have a house for you with furniture and you don't need anything.

She got in the car with her children and was taken to her first home in Regina.

"It was on 13th Avenue, there were a lot of (First Nation) families along that street," said Piapot.

The experience was overwhelming at times.

"It was like landing on Mars," said Piapot.

There were no programs to help Indigenous people integrate to city life, but as a single mom she found her way by connecting with the Manpower program.

Her first job was at the University of Regina as a cleaner, but she also cleaned homes for non-Indigenous families.

She earned a reputation for being a good worker, so she was never without a job, which is something she is proud to say.

"I didn't say much," said Piapot. "I liked to be quiet and just observe people."

Things have changed a lot since then.

Piapot has found her voice and is an advocate for herself and for others. She supports many worthwhile causes like MMIW, 60s Scoop survivor groups grandmothers groups, YWCA, women's groups, support groups for those in the justice system, cultural groups and others.

Piapot has watched the city grow and change and says some things have gotten better while others have not.

Despite a dependence on a walker to get around, Piapot is an active and well respected member of the Regina community.

Tracy Desjarlais spends a lot of time with Piapot as her helper, which is a role she cherishes.

"My Kokum Lillian means a lot to me," she said. "She has been

like a mother to me since my mom passed in 2019."

Desjarlais said there are very few Elders in Regina, who can speak the Cree language, which has created a demand.

Piapot is humble about her knowledge and says there are many Elders who still speak the language, but there are not enough places for them to sit, visit and talk Cree.

As she gets older, she believes it's become even more critical for her to speak her language.

"When I get asked to say a prayer for something, I always share a story or a teaching," said Piapot. "People need to know who we are and what we have been through."

She retains many of the cultural values and teachings she was taught by her elders on the reserve.

Like many grandmothers Piapot says she hurts when her grandchildren hurt and rejoices when they achieve their goals.

"I have an architect and a journalist in my family," she said. "Others have gone on to university."

Watching her grandchildren pursue post-secondary education makes Piapot very proud because she knows they are breaking cycles.

Although she's had more than her share of hardships she chooses to be kind to others and her gentle nature draws people to her.

Most recently, Piapot's magnetic personality caught the attention of the President and CEO of the Mosaic Company Joc O'Rourke.

The pair met during a funding announcement at the YWCA in Regina. He heard Piapot had never attended a football game in her life, so he decided to rectify it.

O'Rourke made certain her first game was memorable by inviting her to the Grey Cup game and giving her the star treatment that included new Roughrider gear, transportation to and from the game, VIP seating and a room at the Hotel Saskatchewan.

Although football "wasn't her cup of tea", she enjoyed the opportunity to share a little about the Cree culture with those she met.

Piapot said the best part of the day was listening to Teagan Littlechief sing part of the national anthem in Cree.

Recent health issues have slowed her down, but she says as soon as she's able she will reconnect with the youth at the Miller Comprehensive High School where she served as the resident elder.



Beloved Regina Elder Lillian Piapot shares her story of life moving from the reserve and into the city more than 50 years ago. She shed some light on some forgotten history of the province. (Photo supplied)

Regina Symphony Orchestra plays homage to different cultures as part of Reconciliation

By Liam O'Connor
of Eagle Feather News

The Regina Symphony Orchestra (RSO) highlights the early interaction between Indigenous people and New Canadians in its musical rendition of *Li'l Shadd: A Story of Ujima*.

It is about Dr. Shadd the first known person of African Ancestry to live and work in the province of Saskatchewan.



Jeff Cappo performs alongside the Regina Symphony Orchestra. Indigenous drumming and singing was included in the story to highlight the relationship Dr. Shadd had with Indigenous people. The RSO has established an Indigenous Advisory Council to provide advice and direction to the RSO on matters related to collaborations with the Indigenous community (Photo supplied by the RSO)

She narrated the book while the symphony played in the background, it was then recorded in its entirety and made available to schools across the province.

Although *Li'l Shadd* is originally a children's book, Brown believes the RSO rendition is one that would appeal to people of all ages.

"The story about Ujima was chosen because we wanted to document the contribution of the first known person of African ancestry in the province of Saskatchewan," she said.

The RSO's Indigenous advisory council also contributed to the success of *Li'l Shadd*.

Megan McCormick, director of marketing and development, says this is

one way the RSO is working towards Reconciliation.

"The Indigenous Advisory Council provides advice and recommendations to the RSO on matters related to collaborations with the Indigenous community," according to RSO's website. "This involves representing the needs of Indigenous people in Saskatchewan and supporting RSO strategies to increase engagement."

For *Li'l Shadd* the RSO reached out to Jeff Cappo. He provided Indigenous drumming which was incorporated as part of the story.

Brown said Cappo's skill helped to enhance the musical ambiance of the piece and for a voice actor it was an exhilarating experience.

"It was an amazing opportunity for me to do the narration to orchestra music," she said. "Recognizing each piece of the orchestra's instruments that was being played at each segment of the reading, really provided me with a variety of sounds and pitches, where I aligned the narrative of the story accordingly."

The nearly 30-minute performance can be found online on the RSO's website and comes with a lesson pack with numerous lessons for teachers to use in their classrooms.

McCormick said the classroom ecosystem is changing. The new educational tools available to teachers are designed to engage a new generation of learners living in the digital age.

"Kids are used to seeing stuff on screens, and that's kind of how they experience the world now," said McCormick. "So, it almost makes it seem more special that they're seeing these musicians on a screen, more than even seeing them in real life, so it's interesting."

McCormick said plans for live performances of *Li'l Shadd* are still up in the air, but they know with certainty RSO is working with SACHM on a festival for the new year.



Members of the Regina Symphony Orchestra during a taping of the musical score for *Li'l Shadd: A Story of Ujima*. The audio is available for schools. (Photo supplied by RSO)





Volunteers worked in bitter cold temperatures to set up the 13 teepees on the Saskatchewan Legislative grounds in preparation of the 2022 Winter Solstice ceremony in Regina. (Photo by Kerry Benjoe)

Urban Winter Solstice Celebration is a safe place for everyone

*By Memory McLeod
for Eagle Feather News*

In 2011, Joely BigEagle-Kequahtoway had a vision to create an opportunity for women to “rematriate” cultural spaces.

“For me it started with the question, ‘Where are our ceremonies, as women?’ ” she said. “This isn’t to slight the men in any way because we don’t want to disrespect them or to break away. But that rhetoric about women and their moon time. For myself, going to ceremony, I was told that on my moon time I can’t take part in the sweat, in each instance it was always ‘I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.’”



Sandra Ahenekew made a brief stop at the 2022 winter solstice ceremony in Wascana Park. She took a selfie, said a short prayer and dropped off supplies for the men and firekeepers. (Photo supplied by Sandra Ahenekew)

Not one to sit back and take someone else’s word, BigEagle-Kequahtoway began her own research and gained the knowledge, which she shares with others who are interested.

In 2018 the Buffalo Peoples Art Institute, the organization she co-founded

with her husband Lorne Kequahtoway, hosted its first Winter Solstice celebration. Initially it was held indoors, but a decision was made to take the ceremony outside where it’s been held for the past couple of years.

The Winter Solstice celebration marks the beginning of a New Year for Indigenous peoples. The ceremony itself is held to honour the celestial beings in the sky.

“We have asked 13 matriarchs who are pipe-carriers to lift pipe for the community,” said BigEagle-Kequahtoway before the start of the ceremony. “That reflects the 13 moons of the year and the number of spots of the turtle’s back. I know in the western ideology there is a stigma attached to that number but for us it is a time to gather in a sacred space.”

The ceremony held on the grounds of the Saskatchewan Legislative Building and out in the open as a way to share Indigenous culture with the larger community.

“It all has to be done in a respectful, nurturing way,” said BigEagle-Kequahtoway. “It has to be done slow, slowly. It takes time to listen. My uncle taught me that the way ahead would be revealed by my pipe. It takes time to learn the songs, the prayers in our language.”

Although women play a pivotal role in the ceremony, men are not excluded in fact the men play an equally important role.

Sandra Ahenekew stopped by the ceremony to drop off some handwarmers for those who needed them and to say a little prayer.

She said it was a wonderful feeling to be so close to ceremony.

“I could hear laughter coming from the teepees,” said Ahenekew. “The men were outside chopping wood and tending to the fires. It was beautiful and peaceful.”

As a mother, grandmother and great grandmother, auntie and sister it was wonderful to be around a ceremony that was dedicated to our matriarchs.

“I wanted to go to the space to feel the power of prayer, of love and respect,” said Ahenekew. “Having an opportunity to have space in an urban setting allows many of us to participate who may not have otherwise had the opportunity.”

She left the ceremony feeling hopeful.

A lot of thought and planning has gone into the initiative in order to make it a safe and inviting place for women to learn. What began as a personal inquiry about women and ceremony has become a haven for women who want to explore Indigenous culture.

“We want them to feel welcome,” said BigEagle-Kequahtoway. “Listen to our old people and our young people, and I see that we need to nurture our gifts. For the women who’ve put their pipes away, we have a responsibility to activate them, feed them and energize them.”

The ceremony began at 10 a.m. with special instructions and teachings given to the small groups gathered in each teepee. It wrapped up with a community feast.



The teepee village set up on grounds of the Legislative Building. Before the day is over 13 matriarchs in each of the 13 teepees that represent the 13 moons of the year will lift their pipes and say prayers for the coming new year. The winter solstice represents the end of the year for Indigenous people. (photo supplied by Joely BigEagle-Kequahtoway)

Memories of Christmas

As a child my memories of Christmas time were wonderful,

I was raised in a home free of drugs and alcohol, which looking back, is pretty amazing considering both my parents were residential school survivors.

They attended during those very dark years when violence and torture was the norm in many of those institutions.

However, my memories of Christmas are like a page out of a story book - both idyllic and serene.

Picture it.

Christmas Eve I would accompany my mom to midnight mass at the local on-reserve church.

After the services ended, we went home. I would watch a classic black-and-white Christmas movie on TV, while my mom prepared what my dad referred to as a "midnight snack."

It was usually ham, potato salad, pickles, cheese, vegetables, crackers, chip and dip, pop, tea, coffee, and homemade pie. It was basically a full supper for some people, but for us it was "a snack."

After eating, we would hang our stockings then go to bed to wait for Santa.

In the morning, I would wake to the smell of a turkey cooking and freshly baked cinnamon buns.

The best part would be walking out into the living room and seeing our sparkly silver tinsel tree almost completely hidden behind mounds of gift-wrapped packages.

I wasn't allowed to tear into my gifts until the rest of the house woke up, but I could check my stocking. In it would be an assortment of mixed nuts, ribbon candy, jujubes, a candy cane and a mandarine orange.

If I was lucky there would be a small trinket or toy in there as well.

I would always eat my candy cane first then count my candies because my dad was very strict about sweets, so I rationed out my loot to last throughout the holidays.

My mom usually cooked my dad bacon and eggs to accompany his cinnamon bun. Although he was diabetic, he indulged during the holidays.

Having a cinnamon bun for breakfast made the day seem extra special. It's a tradition I tried but failed to recreate in my own adult life.

After an adequate number of people woke up we would be allowed to start opening our presents.

As the youngest of eight, I always got more than my fair share of gifts.

Yes we were spoiled.

Looking back now it makes me appreciate my parents so much more.

My mom was born in January of 1940 and my dad in July of 1933.

My dad died when I was 13 as a result I know

age of six until she was 12.

The entrance to the school grounds was once directly off Highway 56.

The massive wrought iron gate is still there, but the old road was closed long before I attended the school.

My mom didn't talk about presents at Christmas time when she was a child.

To her, the big thing at Christmas time was receiving an orange. Back then, oranges were scarce, but somehow her dad always had one for her on Christmas Day.

Looking back over my mother's childhood memories and my own they are a stark contrast when it comes to materialism.

However, the effort my mother's dad and grandparents made to show they cared was exactly what my parents did for us.

She may not have seen it, but knowing what I know about the oppression and segregation that existed in my mom's era I can appreciate all their efforts because they shaped the person my mom would become.

Although generations of my family was impacted by residential school, they all did their best to show their children love.

This has been their gift to me that I've passed on to my own children.

My kids are all adults now and I am now a grandmother.

I still think creating positive memories is important, but I am slowly moving away from the commercialization of Christmas.

This year, I chose to observe the Winter Solstice.

I still plan on wrapping a few presents for my grandson to open on Christmas, but nothing extravagant.

I think next year I will skip Christmas and the minus 50 temperatures completely and head somewhere hot.

I decided to create this special holiday edition for our Eagle Feather subscribers because with a monthly paper, we often miss the fun holiday stories.

I hope you enjoy our present to all of you because without your support we wouldn't be able to do what we do at Eagle Feather News.



Editor In-Chief

Kerry Benjoe

very little about his childhood.

My mom is 82 and has shared small tidbits of her life growing up.

I don't push her because I know her memories are probably difficult to put into words.

As a child, she looked forward to Christmas because it meant she could go home for a little while to visit her family.

My mom was the eldest child in a family of eight and spent a lot of time with her maternal grandparents. She recalled how they would only pick her up in the middle of the night to take her to their place on the neighbouring reserve.

My mom didn't know because of the Pass System, her grandparents were breaking the law by picking her up.

They must have loved her.

She told me, right before Christmas and at the end of the school year she would watch her dad from the dining room window. He would pull up to the school with his team of horses and the way she said it I know it's a memory she cherishes.

She was in Lebret residential school from the



A Regina couple chooses to give despite their own devastating losses this year

By Memory McLeod
for Eagle Feather News

Regina Varage Sale shoppers received a message brimming with generosity and kindness in an ad offering up a free Christmas food and gift hamper to families in need.

"Despite the recent passing of my mother, my husband being diagnosed with cancer and losing our first grandchild due to COVID, my husband and I and our boys have decided to continue with our fourth year of giving food hampers and gifts to four families who are in need," said Twyla Saulteaux in her post. "This is our story and the challenges we face this Christmas season, but we know that there are many other people who will share their story with us and are also experiencing challenges and hardships."

Saulteaux, a school teacher and her husband Albert Agecutay, a public works manager, both work for the Pasqua First Nation, say it was not a good year for their family.

They lost their first grandchild who was born four months premature due to complications with COVID-19. Four days after birth, the baby suffered brain hemorrhages and died.

Compounding their grief, the couple faced the progression of liver disease in Saulteaux's mother, the late Rev. Bernice Saulteaux.

Saulteaux's mother single handedly raised her children in both Regina and on the Carry the Kettle Nakoda Nation.

"She was the one people would go to for help," said Saulteaux about her mother. "She supported them however she could. Open her fridge and make them a meal. She was always busy, on the go, traveling, when asked to go. Whatever she could do for others. She always put others before herself."

Her mother's rapid decline required around-the-clock care, so the couple moved her into their home until she needed palliative care.

"It was a big adjustment for her, being the one taken care of," said Saulteaux. "She started having dreams of her loved ones who've passed and she was making her peace with it. She passed in September."

While they were carrying for the family matriarch, Albert was also dealing with his own cancer diagnosis.

"He actually had pre-existing health conditions, but because of COVID his appointments were canceled three times," said Saulteaux. "So when he was finally able to get a biopsy we were told he had Stage 3 cancer. He had surgery to have it removed and was off work. He just completed chemo three weeks ago, and is slowly returning to work."

The family's tradition of giving began when the couple asked the Z99's Adopt-a-Family Christmas program to pair them with an Indigenous family.

"They couldn't specify that, so that first year we just went ahead and bought the hampers and asked people walking on the street in North Central if they needed hampers," said Saulteaux. "We just pulled the gifts out of our trunk for kids by age and gender. This year, we were so tired and wondered if we would do it again. But we thought of the children and parents in such hard times."

They advertised on VarageSale an online buy and sale page. The response to their ad was overwhelming and reading the messages often brings tears to Saulteaux's eyes because it's difficult to hear of so many suffering the loss of



Twyla Saulteaux and her husband sit with some of the supplies they gathered for some needy Regina families. Despite a difficult year they chose to still help others who may be struggling (Photo supplied by Twyla Saulteaux)

loved ones.

However, she said giving back is part of the healing process for her family.

"This would have been our first Christmas with our grandbaby, so we understand the sadness we see and feel in the messages," said Saulteaux. "One young single mother reached out and her story was so heartbreaking. Alone, no support and a mother in palliative care. She told us she never mentions her need to anyone and it was hard to ask for the help but did it for her baby. This is why we do it, for those who just need a hand at this time of year."

Two other individuals have also come forward to offer donations and financial support.

The outpouring of kindness the couple has we have received from those wanting to help us truly heartwarming, she said.



Miyosiwin Salon says elders and seniors need self-care too

By Kerry Benjoe
for Eagle Feather News

Typically, the holiday season is a busy time of year as people rush to fill Christmas wish lists with the latest gadgets, but sometimes those who give the most forget about themselves.

This year, the Miyosiwin Salon in Regina hopes to make a difference in the lives of elders and seniors. It is once again offering the elder haircut gift card program. The cards are \$26 each, which covers the cost of a wash cut and style.

"We thought we would put the focus on our elders because they do a lot for everyone in the community," said Jennifer Dubois, Miyosiwin owner and stylist. "They're always giving with the little money that they have, so we wanted to do something special for them to highlight them."

Miyosiwin piloted the program in 2017,

certificate for someone they know as a gift or they can purchase a card and donate the service to someone random.

Dubois said the best part of the program is seeing the elder's response to the service.

"They absolutely love it," she said. "(When they receive a gift card) it's like opening a gift for Christmas. They don't expect it. And I think that's probably the nicest thing that they can receive."

With the anonymous gift cards, she can randomly give them to senior and elder customers when they come into the shop for a haircut.

"They're always super happy," said Dubois. "It's nice to see the smile on their faces. Just knowing that they can save their money for something else and their haircut was covered, they just leave super grateful."

She said as an Indigenous business it's important to focus on what they feel brings value to the community. Creating the program for the elders was something natural.

"It's just part of our culture," said Dubois. "Our youth and our elders are extremely important, so I think, providing a service that honours them or highlights them is very important. It's in line with our cultural beliefs."

The gift cards are available for purchase up until Christmas Eve and do not expire.

People can purchase gift cards by calling Miyosiwin at 306-949-4990 or online at <https://miyosiwin.ca/>. Dubois said when purchasing online put \$26 in the dollar amount so the salon knows it's an elder's gift card.

Next year, they are considering launching the program sooner, because people are requesting it.

To keep up to date with what is happening at the salon, Dubois, says people can follow Miyosiwin's Facebook and Instagram pages.



For \$26 dollars people can purchase a wash, cut and style for an elder. (photo by Kerry Benjoe)

but due to unforeseen circumstances such as a global pandemic and a change of locations they had to hit pause on the program, but it's back in full swing.

Dubois said the response from the community has been great.

"Even chief and councils, purchase gift cards for, their members and for elder retreats and things like that," said Dubois. "So it's a really good opportunity for anybody to give back to a senior or elder that they know."

People can purchase a gift



The unique gift cards were designed by Miyosiwin and each card is covered in the traditional languages of Treaty 4. (Photo supplied)



Jennifer Dubois, owner and stylist at Miyosiwin Salon, holding a gift card. Miyosiwin offered an Elder's haircut and style special this holiday season. (Photo by Kerry Benjoe)



Indigenous people choose to redefine the holiday season

By Kerry Benjoe
of Eagle Feather News

Some members of the Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation are choosing to celebrate Oh-Mah-Kah-Teh-Cha or the beginning of a new season with a winter solstice ceremony.

Keith Ryder, a Dakota Elder, said Indigenous people have existed on this land for thousands of years and were very much aware of the world around them.

"As First Nation's people we have star knowledge," he said. "In our creation stories we look at the stars and a lot of our creation stories say we come from the stars."

Ryder said long before the coming of the wasicu (European settlers), Indigenous people looked to the stars to mark important times in the year.

"Within those celestial ceremonies there was the beginning of the year," he said. "They watched the stars and understood the shortest day of the year, you marked that very special time."

December 21st is not just the shortest day of the year, it represents the conclusion of the lunar year. Despite there being 12 months in a calendar year, there are 13 moon cycles and the last moon cycle is in December.

"In my development, I've come to understand the ceremonies that are part of star knowledge," he said. "Up there in star knowledge there are Grandfather Laws. Our natural laws exist up there within the stars and our people understood that."

One of those natural laws is the relationship between men and women, which is part of the winter solstice ceremony.

"Making peace again between man and women and getting back to that equality and understanding those laws," said Ryder. "Those laws are supposed to dictate how we live. We have seven sacred rites or seven sacred laws that are there."

Ryder said many people from his community are choosing to mark the Indigenous New Year on December 21 with a traditional winter solstice ceremony. The community is also going to celebrate the current calendar New Year 10 days later with a kah-omni dance at the community centre. The kah-omni dance is similar to a round dance with the type of songs that are sung, but instead of dancing in a large circle people dance in pairs.

He said culture is always evolving, so the movement towards incorporating traditional ways of celebrating during the holiday season is a natural progression.

Many traditional ways of doing things were impacted by things like the Indian Residential School system.

Ryder said many people left those institutions confused about traditions and religion.

"We are regaining an understanding of who we are," he said. "We have always had our ceremonies, but residential school almost took that away from us...It doesn't matter if we are Dakota, Cree, Dene or Saulteaux our Grandfather Laws are there."

There is a movement now to embrace the old ways of doing things, but at the same time there's no pressure to give up contemporary ways of celebrating the holidays whether it's gift giving at Christmas or participating in the New Year's Eve countdown.

Ryder said the information he shares is readily available to anyone and scholars have compiled research on the topic of the celestial knowledge of Indigenous people.

"In fact, there is a book called, Lakota Star Knowledge," he said. Ryder also shares his knowledge with others and has helped to develop curriculum that is taught at the Bert Fox High School located in Fort Qu'Appelle.



Minnie Ryder a member of the Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation set up a teepee in her yard for the ceremony. The photo of the teepee was taken on December 22. (Photo supplied by Minnie Ryder)



Keith Ryder's teepee on Standing Buffalo in his yard during a full-moon ceremony earlier this year. He set it up again for Oh-Mah-Kah-Teh-Cha. The Elder has helped to revive the winter solstice ceremony six years ago and since then it has grown in the community. (Photo by Rhonda McNabb)

