

CNC's Lakes District Campus Impressive

Written by Ray Gerow

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Hadi and welcome to the first edition of "Aboriginal Voices." The Aboriginal Business and Community Development Centre is proud to be able to partner with The Citizen and the College of New Caledonia to bring this forum to reality. This forum will provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to discuss relevant issues that are affecting their lives. For now, Aboriginal Voices will be published every Thursday, but hopefully we will solicit enough interest to run it more often. It is our vision that this becomes a communications tool that not only highlights the issues we are facing, but also enlightens, educates and fosters positive relationships. If you have a topic that is near and dear to your heart and you are looking for a chance to talk about it, this forum is for you.

I have been mulling over my opening topic for a long time now, and believe me, the list of potential topics is long. Here are but a few I was considering: Getting leadership to listen to urban Aboriginal people; Organizations gone wild; Individuals with hidden agendas; Separating business and community issues from politics; and Elected leaders and resource companies using Aboriginal youth as negotiating pawns.

Instead of picking from this list, I have chosen to follow the lead of The Citizen and attempt to focus on the good things happening in our community - and after having recently toured the Lakes District campus of CNC, my choice was simple. To say I was impressed would be an understatement - to say I was moved to tears would be closer to reality. If you ever want an example of what a real community partnership can do, this one should be top of your list to look at. The strong Aboriginal participation rate (58 per cent Aboriginal student enrolment, 89 per cent overall student completion rate) speaks for itself - the campus has created a warm and friendly environment where all students feel comfortable. Without a doubt, they put the "community" in community college.

As a former resident of Burns Lake, I was amazed with how far along this campus has come in building strong relationships with Aboriginal people. CNC has taken to heart the need to work with the entire family in order to ensure the student has the best chance of succeeding academically. The campus has managed to integrate itself into the fabric of the Burns Lake community, and in doing so has garnered the trust of the local Aboriginal people. It is hard to see where the community ends and the college begins - by bringing the college into the community and the community into the college they have created a wonderful learning environment.

Programs and services are offered that you would not normally associate with a post-secondary institution, but once you see them in action you would question why this is the exception rather than the norm. They have coined what they provide as "Student wraparound supports," and believe me, they wrap the student in supports like a blanket, but they do it in a manner that supports but does not smother.

The Lakes District campus has worked hard over the years to ensure they have meaningful Aboriginal partnerships - they work with all of the local First Nations as well as they have a

strong Aboriginal advisory committee. As they like to say “The community suggests many of our courses. We pick content, format and location to meet our community’s need, not to suit the convenience of the institution.” One shining example of the leading edge community involvement shown by CNC is their Family Centred Program (FCP). The FCP has been working with families in the Lakes District since 1989. Programs are client centred and designed to recognize barriers that families face. Transportation and child care are provided, and sessions are offered on and off site. FCP offerings include those you would normally find being offered in larger centres such as Prince George, but instead of being scattered throughout the community they are all housed under one roof. Suffice it to say that if a family needs it, they will likely find it at the Lakes District Campus. How better to ensure strong student success than by supporting them before they are even born?

So, I am sure you are asking what this has to do with Prince George? I use this as an example of how a mainstream organization can collaborate with Aboriginal people, but even more importantly - how Aboriginal people can collaborate with a mainstream organization. As Aboriginal people we don’t need to always do it on our own - by working and collaborating with the existing capacity and infrastructure in our communities the entire community benefits. For centuries our people survived by collaborating with our neighbours, with nature and in some cases even with our enemies - we need to get back to this principle if we wish to move forward, we don’t always need to do it ourselves.

Organizations can join together in creative ways to tackle issues that lie beyond the scope of any single organization. The Burns Lake CNC campus has shown leadership by creating an honest and open invitation to the Aboriginal community to be a true partner - and this involves a huge amount of mutual trust, shared vision and open communication.

Helping people who have complex problems requires a great deal of co-ordination in order to provide the most efficient and effective assistance. By coming together, building relationships with one another and coordinating resources, we in Prince George can assume mutual responsibility for our future generations. We can no longer work in isolation; we need to realize that the problems facing us are enormous, and by working together as an entire community we can start to overcome them - often one child at a time.

I will leave you with a quote that I like, not sure who said it: “We’re still not where we’re going, but we’re still not where we were.”

Ray Gerow is president and CEO of the Aboriginal Business Development Centre.

If you have a topic of interest you would like to see in Aboriginal Voices, contact ADBC at 562-6325 or e-mail an article to abdc@bcgroup.net.