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Grannies' wisdom, humour key to Cree community

MONIQUE POLAK, Special to The Gazette

Published: Sunday, February 03

Atsynia shows us a pair of moose hide mittens she made for a customer in Montreal. They are trimmed with beaver and decorated with beaded flowers. Matches surveys her daughter's handiwork. "I could make them - even nicer," she teased.

Because the local school is just behind the mini-mall, Matches's grandchildren often pop in at lunch. Devren Atsynia, 5, comes for a hug and to talk his gookum into handing over money for candy.

"We do the teaching to pass this on," said Saganash, 68, holding up the moccasin she is sewing. Saganash, another product of the residential school system, has spent most of her life raising children - her own and other people's, too. She has 34 grandchildren, one of whom she adopted. She has also fostered 50 children in the last 45 years. "They come from broken homes and there's drinking," Saganash said.

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Saganash was 4 and suffering from a kidney infection when she was sent to hospital in Moose Factory. Her parents saw her off at the boat that crossed James Bay. But instead of being returned to them after she recovered, Saganash was sent to residential school.

"The boys picked on us. We fought back and then we got strapped," she said.

This enforced early separation from their families seems to have strengthened the gookums' commitment to family - and community. "I just like kids," Saganash said. "You have to be patient with them. You have to tell them how to act with their teachers. You have to talk to the teenagers - tell them to look after themselves."

Nancy Danyluk, 63, combines a busy life as a gookum and band councillor. She was elected to the band council - the organization that runs Wemindji - in 2003. Even in her work, Danyluk focuses on family. "We try to help families. If somebody in Wemindji has a relative out of town who dies, the band pays for the family's airfare. We've even chartered planes for them," she said.

Danyluk, a retired nurse - she was the first Cree registered nurse in the James Bay region - is still looking after people. She lives with her husband and two grandchildren, and on the night we met, she was expecting two more grandchildren for supper. She also sent out chicken soup to another two granddaughters who were home with colds. "If you don't have family, you don't have nothing," she said.

Danyluk and the other band councillors are making every effort to support local police in their attempts to enforce the alcohol bylaws. "I worry about all the teenagers in Wemindji - not just my grandchildren. The world is changing. There's a lot of exposure to the outside world," she said.

Danyluk, too, spent four years at Bishop Horden Hall. "The troublemakers were humiliated in front of the rest of us. Once they made us carry our desks up from the basement. One boy laughed. The teacher strapped his hand I don't know how many times. Afterward, I felt like I didn't know how to parent," she said.

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