

Building a Future and a Hope

by Lynn McDowell





Ed Dejarlais

Almost 30 years ago First Nations convert Ed Dejarlais wrote in the Canadian Adventist Messenger of his vision for a community of First Nations Adventists. He called for partners and donations to help build a centre where the truth could heal and transform the lives of others as it had transformed his.

Ed's dream was the beginning of something big—something that is transforming the lives of First Nations families with hope: Mamawi Atosketan Native School.

Despite 20 centimetres of new and unexpected snow, the mood in the packed gym of Mamawi Atosketan Native School (MANS) on April 25 was upbeat. Supporters joined SDACC president, Mark Johnson, and vice-president/director of Education, Dennis Marshall, for a historic Milestone Celebration. There was much to celebrate, but the tone was spiritual. People came to reflect, to thank, and to mark God's leading at Canada's only mission school and the North American Division's (NAD) newest senior academy.

This year, MANS celebrates 12 years at its location on conference-owned land five kilometres from Maskwacis (formerly Hobbema), its new senior academy status, and MANS's first Grade 12 graduating class. While all this success could have taken the open house theme in several directions, staff decided to model the biblical principle of expressing thanks to God and to those who shared His blessings. "Hats Off to You" celebrated and thanked regular Adventist church members for laying the school's strong foundation.

The different ways that individuals contributed—donations of time, talent, and treasure—became the focus of heartfelt acknowledgements from students, teachers, and Alberta Conference leaders. Ken Wiebe, Alberta Conference president, specifically thanked the approximately 98 individuals who put their backs as well as their hearts into the project by helping with the construction.

SDACC's President Comes Home to the Leading Edge

For Johnson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada (SDACC), it was a homecoming as well as an opportunity to show support for Canada's leading-edge approach to transforming First Nations communities. The North American Division's (NAD) other First Nations school, Holbrook in Arizona, uses a residential school model—something that carries a

dark history in Canada and which modern First Nations parents in Canada would never subscribe to.

"I think that this is a tremendously important part of what we're doing," said Johnson, who, along with his wife, Becky, choose Maskwacis as their home church in 2008 when Johnson became president of the Alberta Conference, and have been members ever since.

"I grew up in a church that was located in a community surrounded by reserves," says Johnson. "I deeply appreciated their set of values, the way that they came at life, and the way they attempted to make the best out of circumstances that were, in some cases, not so good.

"We as individuals need to be supporting the work among the First Nations. We need to be actively, seriously contemplating how we will speak to that great reservoir of spirituality that exists within the culture of the First Nations, and talk with them about Jesus and how to live between the weekends in a way that is workable and will bring glory to God."

Glory in the Everyday

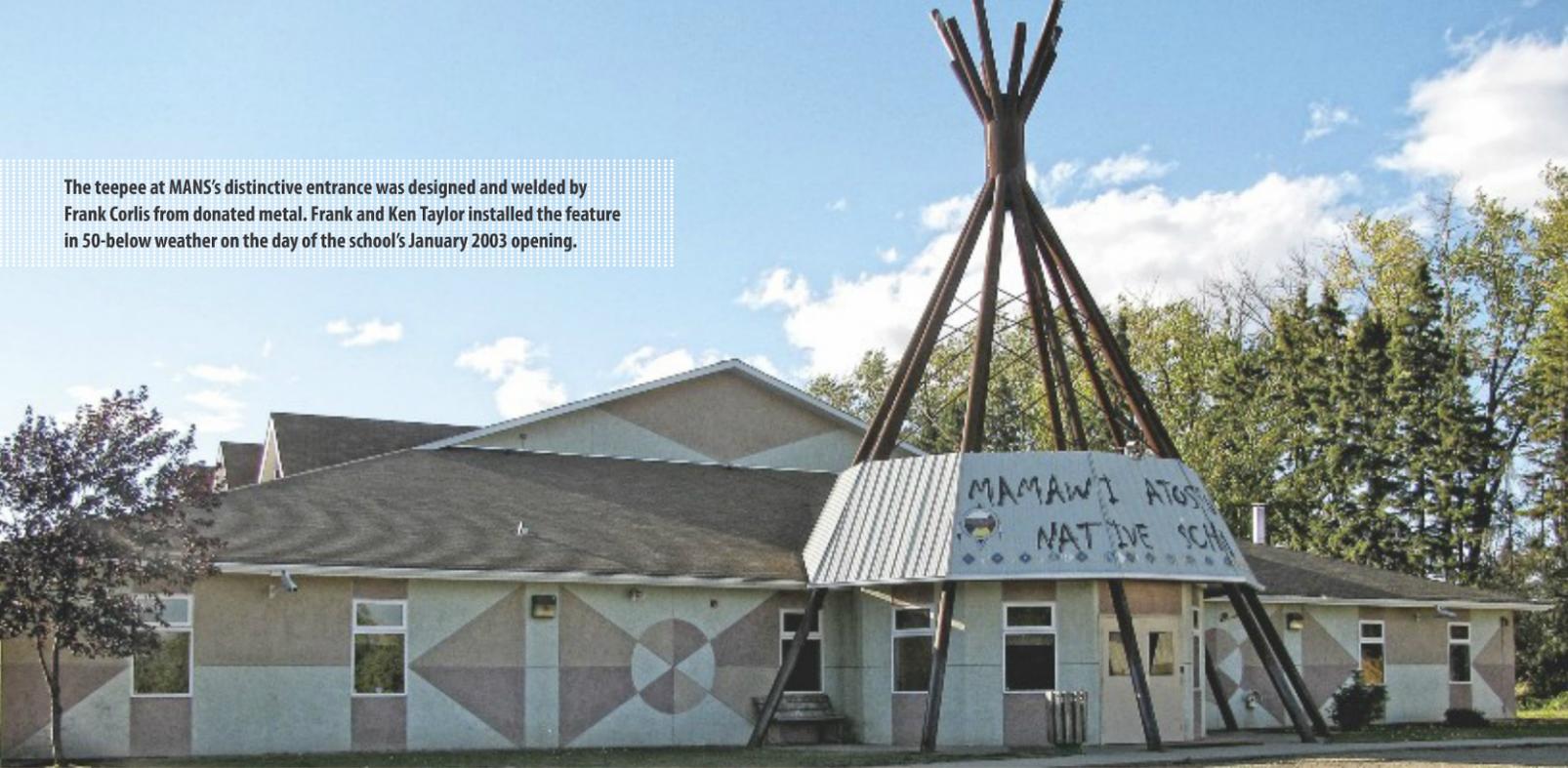
MANS is a "between-the-weekends" answer Johnson sees as critical to connecting with First Nations and their spiritual inclinations—a "sermon in shoes." Students were not shy about expressing their appreciation.

Medallions beaded by Grade 10 student Krista Abt, a student at MANS since Grade 1, were presented to the following individuals: developer/contractor Alfred Breitreuz and building developer/contractor Ken Taylor for "Time Invested"; Sandra Kiehlbach Toms, who was the founding teacher/principal of the school at its first location on the reserve in 1985, for "Talent Invested"; and Elizabeth Tym as representative of deceased founding donor Mary Krysowaty, for "Treasure Invested."

Students presented customized MANS mugs packaged with cookies made by Grade 2 and 3 students to those who contributed labour or cash to construct the present building. Handmade thank-you cards were

(Photo, left) Parent Livinia Potts applauds the school's values, which align well with her own. As program coordinator for the Samson Band with a special interest in helping to heal sidelined women, Livinia values the MANS environment and staff that identified her daughter's leadership ability early on. "My mom says she's really proud of what I'm doing," says 17-year old Eldenia, who worked alongside Burman University students for three summers putting on VBS at reserves in Western Canada.

The teepee at MANS's distinctive entrance was designed and welded by Frank Corlis from donated metal. Frank and Ken Taylor installed the feature in 50-below weather on the day of the school's January 2003 opening.



Members of MANS's musical sign language group, Total Praise, happily and confidently perform at the Milestone Celebration.

Photo: Kelly Dreger



Labour volunteers Pat and Victor Latoski returned to MANS for the Milestone Celebration. "We had a great experience," says Victor. "You filled the auditorium to overflowing—very impressive."



Brayden Omeasoo-Steinhauer, assistant director of MANS's musical sign language group, Total Praise.

displayed on tables. One Grade 5 student wrote, "Thank you for helping me have a safe place to go to school. Thank you for building our school. We love our school. We all love you for making our school."

Big Changes for Brayden

The change in the life of Brayden Omeasoo-Steinhauer shows the effect of MANS's "sermon in shoes." His Grade 6 teacher, Cheri Notice, an accomplished American Sign Language artist, uses this medium to teach music and powerful spiritual lessons to her students. Brayden's young sister had recently been killed, and as Brayden struggled with his emotions while signing "I Know That I Can Make It," Notice realized something deep was happening for him.

Brayden has emerged as a superior talent. He is a youth who, at 14, has a capacity for determination and a will

to help others that no one would have suspected. Now assistant director of MANS's musical sign language group, Total Praise, he grows daily in his confidence as a leader who wants to encourage and help others. When Notice shared Young Peacemakers, the First Nations Bible curriculum, with her class, Brayden was among those who responded to the invitation to become a "Peacemaker"—no small commitment on a reserve divided by gang violence. Brayden's family supports his new direction and his ambition to attend Burman University and to become a teacher or lawyer.

The Home-School Connection: Sharing and Reinforcing the Good

Through the simple but powerful stories of the Bible, parents are also reached as children share what they're learning.

“They’re such willing missionaries!” Gail Wilton, principal, says of MANS students. “It’s natural for them to share.” She relates an example of the long-term power of families sharing their experiences and what they are learning at MANS about the Bible: A father with a rough history recently enrolled his daughter in Grade 1. “My grandmother was a godly woman,” he told Wilton, “and she told me the Bible stories. That’s what got me through a lot of tough times, and I want my daughter to learn those stories too.”

Hope: The Common Denominator

Whether it’s Brayden the conductor or Krista the budding entrepreneur/artist, there is a common thread when they talk about MANS: They want a good future, and Mamawi Atoskitan gives them hope. For them, MANS is a manifestation of God’s goodwill expressed in Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans that I have for you ... to give you a future and a hope” (NASB).

New Growth and Friends in the Community

Even before the NAD recommended expanding the school in its post-accreditation visit report, Calgary contractor William Piersanti designed and built a two-room addition to accommodate the rising class of 2015. He was touched by the story he had heard at campmeeting of MANS students who, fearing the harsh realities of their high school options, had asked to be failed at the end of Grade 9! They did not want to leave the school that had shielded them from gang violence and impressment and allowed them to focus on their studies.

About the time Piersanti started addition construction in 2013, Camrose Rotarian Ron Grue heard a presentation on MANS’s high school growth aspirations and saw some of its students perform. He was impressed and turned up at the school a few days later.

The Rotarian found Piersanti and Steven Van Rensberg labouring on the addition. Having managed several Rotary building projects overseas, Grue immediately knew he had found kindred spirits. Over the next weeks, Grue watched and interacted with staff and students on a day-to-day basis. He firmly believes that MANS is giving First Nations kids a real hand up and making a fundamental change. He has become a staunch supporter of MANS in the local business community.

Broad Church Support: ASI, NAD, SDACC

As the need for a new building was affirmed by the NAD, the Alberta Conference applied to Adventist Lay Services Industries (ASI) for help to further expand MANS’s high school. Though it is unusual for ASI to fund a first-time application, MANS was one of the projects selected from over 300 applications. The NAD Stewardship Department has designated MANS as a 2015 investment project—something that can only happen for North American projects once every five years.

To send a clear message of support to MANS’s ground-breaking graduates, the SDACC provided \$1,000-scholarships for Burman University to each 2015 grad. The gesture deeply touched the parents of the graduates.

Change, One Ripple at a Time

When asked what he would say to people who wonder whether Adventist education can make a difference in a tough environment, SDACC vice-president Dennis Marshall smiled. “Well, simply invite them to Mamawi,” he declared with a chuckle. “They will *see* the difference.”

“The students are so welcoming,” said Marshall, recalling his visit with the NAD accrediting team. “Very hospitable,” he added. “They are willing to take you to their different classes, they are willing to speak with you, and they are very polite. I really believe that the school is doing a wonderful job.”

As the crowd melted away from the Milestone Celebration after sharing a meal, Toms, who first established the Adventist education presence on the reserve, reflected on the afternoon. She was astonished at the mission school’s transformation from a small lean-to on a church with 17 students crowded cheek-to-jowl, into a complete Kindergarten to Grade 12 facility that turns away dozens of students each fall.

“Our little drop in the bucket sometimes doesn’t seem very important,” said Toms. “But,” she continued with an air of new understanding, “when everyone puts their own little marble in, pretty soon you’ve got something amazing!”

“That’s pretty powerful.” ■

Lynn McDowell, Director of Planned Giving/Philanthropy, continues to be amazed at the changes in students she’s observed.



Mark Johnson and MANS student Krista Abt, beadwork artist, present Elizabeth Tym with a beadwork medallion created by Krista. The students and conference wished to recognize Elizabeth’s role as personal representative in fulfilling the wishes of founding donor Mary Kryzowaty.