

## Metis canoe-maker encouraged by young audience

Posted By Susan Hundertmark

Posted 1 month ago

Sharing the birch bark canoe his ancestors shared with Canadian settlers, Marcel Labelle says the welcome he receives from school children across Ontario is a healing force.

"I don't want my grandchildren to go through what I did and when these children ask me about my culture with a glow in their eyes, I am encouraged," he says after a visit last Thursday to St. James School in Seaforth.

Growing up as a Metis in Northern Ontario - his dad is French and Algonquin and his mom French and Iroquois - Labelle says he was pushed aside no matter where he went, not fitting in with the English, French or Aboriginals.

"I had some rough times as a kid. But, I come to schools now and I'm welcome. These students want to know my culture and that's going to heal this country," he says.

Labelle, born in 1955, grew up learning to become a trapper from his father in the forests around Mattawa, Ont.

Trapping from September until spring and working as a plumber throughout the summer, Labelle earned a living for his family doing what his ancestors had done until the early 1990s.

Travelling into the city as a representative of the Ontario Trapper's Association, Labelle says he started to get death threats from members of animal rights organizations and was forced to abandon his lifestyle in the fur trade.

"In my family, people were proud of what they did but when I went into the city, people wanted to kill me because I killed animals," he says.

Leaving a trade that had such deep roots in his culture was difficult. While he went back to school and graduated with a degree in geography and environmental studies and got a job working with heating systems in Southern Ontario, Labelle began feeling chest pains and was treated for a heart condition.

But, it wasn't until he went on a vision quest, spreading tobacco in the Rockies of British Columbia, that he found a way to live that would still honour his heritage without the chest pains.

"The message was to do something more culturally appropriate and show people how we used to live," he says.

He adds that he got a vision of a canoe, which he began to build on his kitchen table in 2006.

He now builds three canoes every year and travels to Aboriginal symposiums and schools across Southwestern Ontario.

"I give the Metis perspective - the bridge between the two cultures," he says.

The canoe he brought to St. James School was commissioned by the Ontario Arts Council.

He tells the students how he walks through the bush looking for trees that will give him the permission to harvest the birch, cedar and spruce he needs to build his canoes.

His canoes are completely handcrafted using traditional tools and he says that while no one taught him how to make the canoes, he brought a lifetime of experience in the bush to know how to find the necessary materials and childhood memories to put it together.

"Although I could not find a living soul to show me how, by listening to elders' stories, smelling the wood in order to identify it, feeling it, learning about how and when bark is peeled, roots and wood can be used: I accomplished my dream of regaining that part of my culture," he says.

Seven weeks ago, he was invited to have breakfast at the Canadian Parliament and told some of the politicians he met that he'd like to build a canoe on the lawn someday. He received an email back that his idea would be an excellent heritage project.

He is also building a canoe along the banks of the Grand River in Kitchener as a project whose focus is to heal those affected by residential schools.

Labelle says he believes that by sharing his culture with children, the damage done to the Aboriginal culture through residential schools, government regulations and the refusal to honour land treaties will be healed.

"Four hundred years ago, this was the means of transportation," he says, patting his canoe. "Now, it's the vehicle I share the culture with. We're starting afresh and this time we have an open-minded audience."