

All the colours have teachings to share

BY SANDI BOUCHER

I AM Anishnawbequek, an Ojibwe woman. I had my children young. I have known violence at the hand of my partner. I have known poverty at levels no one should ever experience, and yes, I have struggled as alcohol almost destroyed my life.

You may think you know me or others like me. You may think I am stereotypical, that I am a drain on this fair city, that I have nothing to offer. You would be so very wrong.

For you see, I no longer live in one of the projects and I am no longer on assistance. Those were merely supports I needed at the time.

My name is Sandi Boucher, and I am the general manager of the Thunder Bay Centre of Change, a centre built on the idea of "community."

Ojibwe settlements were communities, built according to our clan systems. Each clan had a role to play and if we each did our part, the



ONE CITY
MANY VOICES

community thrived.

In line with that teaching, no one is alone at the centre. We work together, we listen to each other, and we don't demand solutions; we create them.

We care about our building, our neighbors, and this great city we live in. We give back and together we have been able to save one of the most loved buildings in the city — the former Hillcrest high school.

To be clear, our project is not aboriginal. We are simply "inclusive."

We care about our financial health as much as we care about emotional satisfaction.

I am proud of what we have accomplished, as I should be, for I am one of the founders.

You see, three years ago I returned north, not to see what Thunder Bay had to offer, but to see what I could give to the city that has done so much for me.

I came home to find beautiful brown faces working in Safeway and Tim Hortons, a sight unseen just one decade ago.

I was invited to speak of my teachings and a multitude of people — from all races and backgrounds — embraced and purchased my book, longing for information in an effort to understand.

They realized that all the colours of the medicine wheel — white, black, red and yellow — have teachings to share and that only through listening and expanding our own knowledge base can we grow.

Now, I use my voice and my teachings to encourage inclusion without ever disrespecting

the teachings of another and in turn I enjoy a level of respect so long denied.

I am part of the solution, and although racism still exists my energy is directed to developing a future that is welcoming and supportive for all our residents.

Yes, I am proud of the city I am assisting to build.

Through respect I have found positive change, through knowledge — growth, through conversation — solutions, and through collaboration — success.

Honour me by sharing your teachings, Honour me by listening to mine.

Sandi Boucher is general manager of the Thunder Bay Centre of Change.

The City of Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to encourage dialogue and address common assumptions or misconceptions. The committee hopes to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

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