

A Rez Boy at Heart

Reflections on Webequie First Nation by Jeremy Proulx

Working with DAREarts as an artist-as-teacher continues to be a life-changing experience for me. Knowing how the arts changed my life and then to have the wonderful opportunity to be able to share my passion through the DAREarts principals of the First Roots Program with many First Nation youth continues to inspire me. Giving young people the tools to discover they have a unique and powerful voice in which to let the world know they exist can have amazing ripple effect on the rest of the world, especially for young people.

For my first time visiting the community of Webequie First Nation I was pleasantly surprised at how many of the younger children greeted and responded to me. Naturally, there were many stares on account of my towering height. It's a pretty normal reaction I've gotten used to, especially with younger children. I joked with my DAREarts colleague, Cathy Elliott, that I probably came across to many of the kids as a giant Sasquatch figure who happened to shave, clean up really nice and then step out of the northern wilderness. Upon my arrival on the first day I discovered that none of my luggage had made it with me. All I had were the clothes on my back and my trusty Mac Book. So I set out on a mission to find their local store called the Spruce Shores. Upon venturing out into the community decked out in my sharp and professional urban attire, I carefully treaded along the mushy and muddy dirt roads scattered with potholes. As I passed many kids having a blast playing outside, I politely asked where the store was located and they pointed me in the right direction. I eventually found the store, an old shack on the other side of the rez without any visible sign that it was an actual store, and was able to purchase a few items to hold me over until my missing luggage arrived the next day. I quickly realized that all I could do was laugh about my predicament. There was simply no point in getting upset about it.

It was that very same sweetness and kindness I received from the children during my first day in Webequie that I also received from the high school students who I was going to be working with for the next week. It was very genuine and heartwarming. In my introduction, I shared with the students that even though I was an urban First Nation professional, living and working in metropolitan hub of Toronto, that I was also a rez boy at heart. It seemed to put a lot of them at ease knowing that I grew up and came from a life on the rez just as they were living it.

From previous DAREarts trips there are usually one or two students who stand out for me. On this particular trip to Webequie First Nation it was a young man named Percy. I loved his commitment and dedication. He invested in every aspect of what DAREarts threw at him, from the creation and design of his own vest, to painting an original artwork design on a stretched canvas, to video recording and editing the raw video footage and finally singing the original song that the group had written and performed titled "Spirit of the North". Watching Percy with all of his high school peers, decked out in his beautiful vest singing "Spirit of the North" with all his heart, and in front of his

own community nonetheless, was truly a magical moment for me as his DAREarts mentor. He sang as if nobody was watching which was beautiful to experience. Percy was also especially fascinated with the process of filmmaking and editing which I helped guide him through based on my own experiences as a multi-disciplined artist, filmmaker and storyteller. Throughout the course of the week many other students, including Percy, were shown how to operate and use the HD flips cameras to document the behind-the-scenes process of the collective teamwork it took to create their final multimedia fashion show. Students were also given an opportunity to use the digital still cameras to take photographs representing pride, which were later incorporated into the final multimedia performance via a special preshow slideshow for the entire audience of community members to see. I cannot begin to describe the many expressions of pride that beamed on the faces of all the community members sitting in the packed audience of the school auditorium as they witnessed what their youth had created.

Reflecting back on the whole experience in Webequie First Nation has shown me that DAREarts made a lasting impact on the lives of many of the students. I only hope that they continue to utilize the tools there were given and pass them on to others within their community. The arts changed my life. And I know in my heart how DAREarts has impacted and changed the lives of so many talented First Nation youth in many of Canada's remote northern communities. But yet somehow, as the young and bright future leaders of tomorrow, they are often the ones who are consistently ignored. Through DAREarts continued support, encouragement and belief in these First Nation youth, may their artistic voices continue to speak a powerful truth about their pride, spirit and humanity. And to let the world know, "We're still here!!"