

Council of Elders plays unique role in sharing Indigenous culture in Edmonton Catholic Schools

Betty Letendre recalls a time where Indigenous elders didn't want to come into Edmonton, feeling tired of the discrimination and misconceptions that they faced on a daily basis.

But in her work with students at the Edmonton Catholic School District, she saw a need for those Indigenous knowledge keepers in city classrooms. It led to the formation in 2008 of the district's Council of Elders, the first of its kind in Canada. Members of the council are volunteers who provide guidance on improving Indigenous lessons and share their cultural knowledge with trustees, administrators, staff and students. The district serves about 42,000 students, of whom eight percent self-identify as Indigenous.



Betty LetendreSupplied

"Our people are coming because our children need them," says Letendre, the Cree elder who founded and now manages the Council of Elders.

The council's eight members, who come from the First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities, lead various traditional activities, such as pow wows and round dances, harvesting medicines (herbs used for their healing properties) and sacred pipe ceremonies. They also work to promote understanding.

Letendre explains that the greatest misconception about Indigenous peoples in

general is that they only live on reserves, and that all medical and other expenses are for paid by the government.

“We all don’t live on the reserves, and we pay all our taxes. We do not get everything for free.”

And while this misconception has alienated the Indigenous community from many Canadians, she says, it hasn’t deterred the elders from serving on the council.

“Now, we are an Indigenous voice of the board, so we’ve made a lot of progress in speaking and making that partnership,” she says.

The council elders, many of whom are Catholic, have also had an opportunity to demonstrate the relationship between faith and their culture. Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith has met with them to learn about Indigenous spirituality. Letendre recalls that when he and Ukrainian Catholic Bishop David Motiuk came to a pipe ceremony, they immediately saw parallels with the Mass.

“In a church, we go in a church and get the bread and wine. Well, with the pipe in our ceremonies, we have ceremony and tea, because we don’t use alcohol. But that’s what (Archbishop Smith) referred to it as, as the bread and wine. And we had a feast after.”



Archbishop Smith chats with a student at Ben Calf Robe School

The students also enjoy having the elders visit their classrooms, and Letendre says they play a key role in sharing and preserving her people's knowledge and culture.

"We have to remember our residential school survivors. This is a generation whose parents – a lot of their parents – have gone to residential schools. A lot of the culture, the languages, are gone from that family," she says.

"It's probably going to take another maybe one or two generations to get half of what we lost, especially our languages. We'll never fully get back what we lost."

Letendre began working for Edmonton Catholic Schools in 2004, in what is now known as Indigenous Learning Services, a program that focuses on the needs of Indigenous students. She soon noticed that no elders were involved.

"I asked my assistant superintendent at the time, 'Where are the elders? Where are the knowledge and wisdom keepers?' He told me, 'I don't know, go find them.' So, to his surprise, I found many!" she recalls with a laugh.

The council had its share of frustrations in the early days. Some teachers and schools booked the elders to teach crafts such as bannock-making or beadwork, which had nothing to do with the teachers' lessons.

"That's not who we are," says Letendre. "Yes, we celebrate our food and celebrate our beads, but we carry so much history."

Letendre organizes the elders to speak at various schools, where they often teach Indigenous skills like mapmaking and navigation and share stories from Indigenous history. Some also choose to share their own experiences during the Sixties Scoop, a time when thousands of Indigenous children were placed into foster care or adoption with non-Indigenous families, or their time in residential schools. An estimated 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children were taken from their families to be educated in the schools, which were established by the federal government and often operated by religious groups.

Letendre, herself a residential school survivor, says it's important to talk to students about these topics in a way that shows the truth about what happened but is also age-appropriate.

"You don't want the children to be so traumatized that they go home and say this might happen to them," she says. "You talk with them in a way that they're OK before they go home, to say 'this happened a long time ago' – and actually not long ago, the last school closed in 1996 – but to tell them that this will never happen again."

Letendre is based at Ben Calf Robe, an inner-city school with a large Indigenous student population. Its walls are graced with crucifixes and Catholic images as well as Indigenous imagery and art. Sitting in her narrow office, it's not difficult to hear the sounds of children laughing and playing outside her door.

It's because of those kids that the council continues its essential work, she says.

"My hope (is that) all children that we teach in all of our classrooms will have an opportunity to be identified and celebrated for who they are."