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Blackfoot culture and identity explored in joint project between Opokaa'sin and U of L research institute

The Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society, with support from the University of Lethbridge's Institute for Child and Youth Studies (I-CYS), is helping to ensure that Blackfoot history, language and values will not only endure but help shape future Blackfoot generations.

On Saturday, March 5, 2016, a special photo exhibit titled Raising Spirit: The Opokaa'sin Digital Storytelling Project opened at Park Place Mall. The display features photos of local Blackfoot families in everyday moments of childrearing, a testament to Blackfoot culture and identity as it continues to thrive despite disruptions such as the residential schooling system, among others.

The exhibit runs for two weeks and is one facet of a larger project, of the same name, in which Blackfoot Elders and children will come together to develop interactive digital recordings of traditional cultural stories – a way to preserve the past and help its rich heritage influence future generations.

“We are very excited about this project because it speaks to the strengths of the Blackfoot people,” says Tanya Pace-Crosschild (BSc '98), executive director of Opokaa'sin. “Blackfoot people were traditionally very family-oriented. With the colonization of our people, we saw significant challenges to our traditional way of life, especially in respect to childrearing practices.”

The storytelling project builds on the earlier work done between Opokaa'sin and I-CYS, led by principal investigator Dr. Jan Newberry, a U of L anthropology professor. That project was initially featured in a small exhibition at the Galt Museum & Archives and will now reach a wider audience as it makes its way into a busy community space. In addition to the photos, participant-photographers, people at powwows in Blackfoot territory and Elders were asked to respond to the pictures. A book featuring the photos and the responses is in the works.

“The intergenerational transmission of stories, language and values is central to the project. What's terrific here is the inter-disciplinary reach of the project and how all of

this aids a local community organization in raising issues of First Nations families,” says Erin Spring, a Post-Doctoral Fellow for I-CYS. “Not only does this raise community awareness of Opokaa’sin’s work and the resilience of local families, it also showcases how powerful local, collaborative research can be.”

The Raising Spirit project will enhance Blackfoot language skills, transmit stories from generation to generation and create an archive of material that will be available in both Blackfoot and English. It has already involved multiple areas of the U of L campus, from the humanities, social sciences and fine arts (students from the Museum Studies program were essential in creating the photo exhibit) and has the potential to incorporate high school students in the future.

“We are currently working on securing STEP (Summer Temporary Employment Program) funding that will give local high school students the chance to work on the project and enhance their research and digital skills,” says Newberry. “Eventually, we want to share this digital library with the southern Alberta community as a whole.”

Opokaa’sin Early Intervention Society is an Aboriginal child and family organization that was a joint initiative created in 1996 by various Aboriginal service agencies that shared a commitment to improving the well-being of all Aboriginal children. Among its founding principles is a belief that supportive relationships with grandparents and Elders helps decrease anti-social behavior and increase social competency, thus fostering resiliency in children.

“Raising Spirit is a project that captures traditional core values that are still evident with today’s Blackfoot families,” says Pace-Crosschild. “It examines traditional value systems in a strength-based approach that align with Opokaa’sin’s ideology of drawing on the strength of our Indigenous people and recognizing of the strength in our traditional cultural systems.”

The photo exhibit appears in Park Place Mall March 5-19, 2016. A formal public reception for the opening of the exhibit will take place on Monday, March 21, 2016 from 5 to 7 p.m. at Opokaa’sin Early Intervention Society. The exhibit will then rest there before it eventually moves to CASA. Select photos from the exhibit will also be displayed on CASA’s external message board.

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