

Mamawi Atosketan Native School Hosts Milestone Celebration, Celebrates First Gr. 12 Graduating Class

On Saturday, April 25, 2015, supporters of Mamawi Atosketan Native School (MANS) packed the school gymnasium as they attended the Milestone Celebration & Open House to celebrate 12 years at its location and the addition of Grade 12, making it a complete K-12 private school.

MANS, situated just north of Ponoka, serves the First Nations students of Maskwacis, AB exclusively, but is located off the Reserve. MANS, which is underwritten by the Alberta Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, began adding high school classes one grade at a time in the 2012-13 year even though that meant admitting fewer students due to space limitations. Both of this year's Grade 12s successfully completed first semester departmental exams.

MANS' friends and supporters gathered for an afternoon of celebration, reflection, and entertainment—including a meal and a performance by MANS' musical sign language group—to celebrate this milestone in the school's development, and recognize the many private donors who built the school, which opened at its present location in 2003.

Three medallions beaded by Grade 10 student Krista Abt, a student at MANS since Grade 1, were presented to developer/contractors Alfred Breikreuz (Ponoka) and Ken Taylor (Camrose), Lacombe resident Elizabeth Tym as representative of deceased founding donor Mary

Krysowaty (also of Lacombe), and to Sandra Kiehlbach Toms, who was the founding teacher/principal of the school at its first location on the reserve in 1985.

Students presented customized MANS mugs packaged with a variety of homemade cookies to those present who contributed labour or cash to construct the present building. Handmade thank you cards with personalized thank you messages from Mamawi students were displayed on tables. One Grade 5 student wrote, "Thank you for helping me have a safe place to go to school. Thank you for building our school. We love our school. We all love you for making our school."

A recently-completed addition to the existing facility, added through generous donations of labour from Camrose Rotarian Ron Grue and Calgary contractor William Piersanti, created enough additional space to allow MANS' first Grade 12 students to complete high school in June of 2015.

The "perseverance of the vision of the school" stood out for attendee Becky Masson of Lacombe. "There were hard times and various challenges, but they kept at it—and look where they are now!"

Toms, who lives in Calgary, also expressed amazement at the school's transformation from a one-room school with 17 students to a complete K-12 school that is bursting

at the seams.

"You do your little bit, and wonder whether you make any difference—like tossing a marble into a pond," said Toms. "But when many people toss in their marble, look what it can become!"

Principal Gail Wilton explains the reason for expanding to Grade 12. "By carrying students from Kindergarten through to the completion of Grade 12, the school can also provide direction to students for college and higher education opportunities."

The current high school completion rate among First Nations youth across Canada is 39% of those who register for high school. MANS supporters believe that by extending the unique learning environment that has allowed students to score above average on Alberta Standardized tests, MANS students will far exceed national graduation rates. This year's 100% completion rate is a good start.

MANS is dedicated to providing an excellent academic program that respects and responds to each student's cultural and academic needs within a safe and caring rural environment. MANS is on its way to becoming a model of First Nations education noted for exceeding and changing expectations.

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