

Dr. Richard Bird: Comments for the Grand Opening

The Ptarmigan Charitable Foundation and Bird Construction, for which the Cree Cultural Centre and construction shop are named, are new friends of Mamawi Atosketan Native School who were introduced to MANS through the Bridge Campaign. The comments of Dr. Richard Bird, prepared for the September opening event, provide insight into the hearts of thoughtful people who have observed and believe in the power of the education provided at Mamawi Atosketan.

Good afternoon from Ptarmigan Charitable Foundation and Bird Construction Company, both affiliated with the Bird family of Calgary. I wish I could be present to share in today's opening event for the new Mamawi Atosketan Native School facilities and associated programs.

First, congratulations to the students, parents, staff, Board and all supporters for the remarkable achievement of funding and constructing the new high school and supporting facilities. I think they will make a strong contribution to MANS' continued progress in providing a high-quality education to its students. Of course, this wouldn't have been possible without a tremendous effort from all, but I want to especially note the contribution of the current students and their families to the development of these facilities, not just for their own immediate benefit, but also for the benefit of their fellow students for many years to come. I would certainly not have been nearly so encouraged to support the project were it not for the positive testimonials from the students about their experience at MANS and their plans for their lives, and the positive environment I observed on my visit to the school. I believe that all students can rightly feel that they "own" these new facilities as much as anyone does, and that they will care for both the facilities and MANS' underlying values in the years to come, as owners do.

Education that Matters

I have been asked to comment on why I feel that a rejuvenation of the Cree Culture needs to be an important part of the educational experience at MANS. It starts with my belief in the importance of education itself. There is so much to learn and know about the universe that we all live within and about the development of humanity in all its variations within that small corner of the universe that we occupy, for now. There is the opportunity for personal joy just from the learning of a new thing and for resulting enrichment of one's life that everyone should have the benefit of, even if there were no other practical benefits. But of course, there are immense practical benefits from education and increased knowledge. Education opens up life choice options that otherwise wouldn't exist or would be very difficult to access. Regardless of what choices each one of us makes, it is better to have more choices available than fewer, or none at all. Education provides a broader perspective from which to make those choices and a better chance to make the choice that is best for each one of us. And education increases the likelihood of enjoying a successful, creative and fulfilling life within whatever choices we do make.

As to the Cree culture, on the one hand, I think there is a much better understanding now of the importance of language and culture to individual personal identity, to who we are. That was the terrible failure of the residential school system above and beyond the forced removal of children from their families, and an abysmal governance system that permitted widespread abuses. The forced stripping of language and culture from those generations of children was also stripping away a large part of their personal identities, their very selves. For most the gain in educational benefits was not worth the resulting loss of self.

That's on the one hand - the First Nations people were themselves deprived of the benefits of being grounded in their own culture and were obviously the primary victims. But all of humanity itself has lost something as well. Cree culture and traditional knowledge is part of the diverse development of the overall human experience and has value to the broader society, including though not limited to, both natural science and art. This, too, we all stand to lose if language and culture education is not paired with other forms of education. However, there is no reason why it must be one or the other. It can and should be both, and that is the purpose behind the Ptarmigan Cree Cultural Centre, which we are pleased to have been given the opportunity to support.

An Invitation to Explore

I have also been asked to comment on how the Bird Construction Building Technologies Shop fits with getting a good education. Of course, this bit of the educational panorama is focused on the very practical career opportunity side of things, and a very specific type of career opportunity. It certainly won't be for everyone, but how will you know that it is or isn't for you unless you have the opportunity try it out in high school, at least a little? And I don't mean just the young men among the MANS student body, there is no reason why young women cannot enjoy well paid employment in construction as well. On that note, Construction is an industry where there is a strong demand for trained employees, with good wages and lots of opportunity, and there always should be, so it's a good option to have in your pocket.

I'll close by saying once again, congratulations to you all for what's been accomplished. Make the best of it! And thank you for the opportunity to be involved.

Richard Bird, PhD, MBA