

Pair credit aboriginal culture for fresh start

Study backs what two native Winnipeggers experienced

By Alexandra Paul

A PAIR of Winnipeggers say they're living proof of what recent Canadian studies show: Urban aboriginal adults who embrace traditional culture are less likely to experience prescription- and illicit-drug problems.

John Oige, 31, and Dawn Simmons, 29, both of Winnipeg, struggled for years with crack-cocaine addiction.

Oige's habit had him in and out of jail for a decade. It was a cycle of break-and-enters, alcohol abuse and physical altercations for the northern Manitoba Cree man, adopted as a four-year old in the big city. "I'd pretty much ruined my life," Oige said.

Simmons, meanwhile, grew up being taunted as aboriginal but had no links to her native culture in the Ukrainian Catholic home where she grew up. For her, crack cocaine was the ultimate anesthetic.

"I was very shy and withdrawn, and it led to drugs. I understand it was a way for me to deal with my life, because I didn't have the tools to cope," she said.

Now, both are drug-free — Simmons since 2009 and Oige since his last jail term ended in November 2012.

She has a full-time job and he's working toward one. Both credit discovering their ancestors' culture through urban

aboriginal centres such as Thunderbird House in Winnipeg for their sobriety and hope for a brighter future.

"Before, life wasn't worth living. It's not like that anymore," Oige said. "I look forward to every day, helping people... At Thunderbird House, I'm attending sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies, smudging, feasts — whatever they have."

Some researchers in Canada are confirming the positive experiences of people such as Oige and Simmons.

In a recent study, University of Lethbridge researcher Cheryl Currie concluded urban aboriginal people who embrace traditional culture are less likely to have drug problems.

"Those participating in aboriginal culture were those who were not using drugs and did not have drug problems," Currie said. "The culture was serving as a protective factor against using and abusing drugs for urban-based aboriginal adults."

The year-long study, published in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*, is based on surveys with about 400 aboriginal people in Edmonton.

The study is small but the findings were definitive, Currie said.

When asked what it meant to practise aboriginal culture in a city, those in the study described participating in aboriginal ceremonies and cultural

events, valuing spirituality and family, and respecting oneself, others and the Earth.

Winnipeg university educators who are aboriginal and embrace their cultures said the findings might be new to science, but not to them.

"The most important part of this study is... it shows the real strength of aboriginal people and that we have these ceremonies and practices that are really protective for our health," said Marcia Anderson-Decoteau, the head of the University of Manitoba's medical faculty section on First Nations, Métis and Inuit health.

Added Wab Kinew, the University of Winnipeg's director of indigenous inclusion: "It is good to see evidence to back up what the indigenous community has known all along."

The other part of the equation is to recognize that drug and alcohol abuse are part of a process that undermined indigenous people.

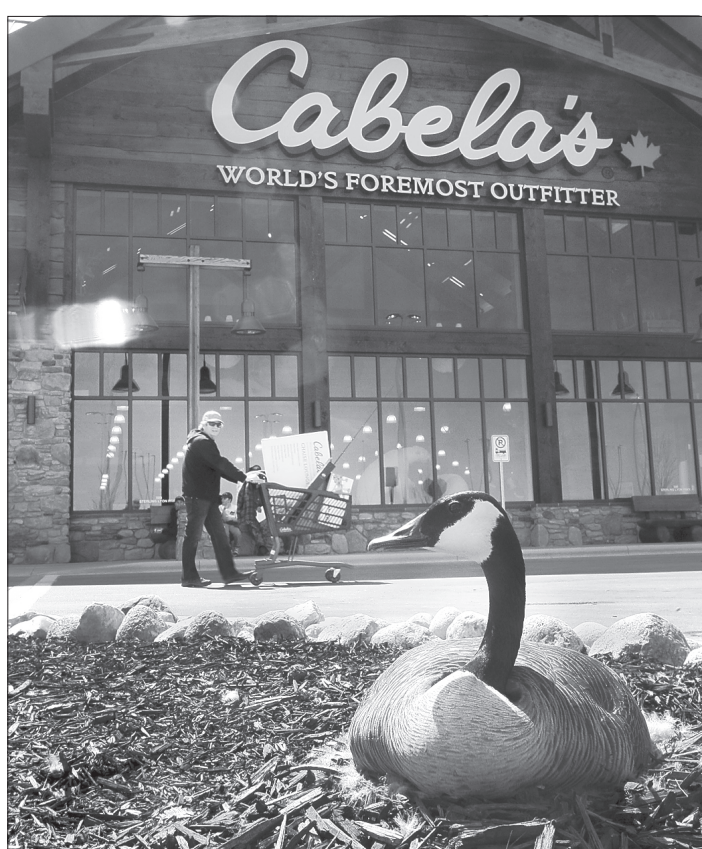
"The reconnection of those ties with community, language and a positive self-image — all things facilitated by traditional indigenous ceremonial practices — are enough for anyone to live a healthy life," said Niigaanweewidam James Sinclair, an associate professor at the U of M.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

John Oige, with daughter Trinity LeBlanc, 9, says native culture gave him a new life.

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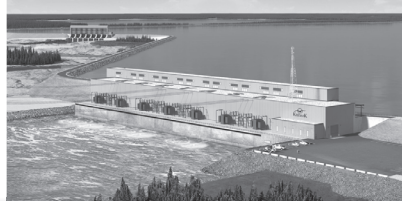
Um... they sell shotguns in there

A Canada goose sets up a nest at the front door of Cabela's new 72,000-square-foot store that opened in Winnipeg Thursday. The new outlet is in the Seasons of Tuxedo retail complex on Route 90 next to the IKEA store.

An Invitation to Attend



Hydropower Limited Partnership



Keyask Public Involvement Program: Round Three

The Keyask Hydropower Limited Partnership is proposing to develop the Keyask Generation Project, a 695-megawatt hydroelectric generating station at Gull Rapids on the Nelson River in northern Manitoba.

Round Three of the Public Involvement Program has been planned to provide information about the format and content of the Environmental Impact Statement, discuss how input received to date influenced the Project assessment, communicate any supplemental information since the filing of the Environmental Impact Statement with regulators in 2012, and document what is heard. You are invited to attend an open house in Thompson or Winnipeg.

The third round of the Keyask Public Involvement Program is underway. Open houses are planned for two communities, including the following:

THOMPSON OPEN HOUSE
Thursday, May 16 (4:00-8:00 pm) at the Thompson Regional Community Centre

WINNIPEG OPEN HOUSE
Thursday, May 23 (4:00-8:00 pm) at the Norwood Hotel at 112 Marion Street in Winnipeg

For more information about the Public Involvement Program please contact Manitoba Hydro at (204) 360-3473 or email Keyask@hydro.mb.ca

For more information about the project, please visit:
The Keyask Project website: www.Keeyask.com

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