**David Matrious Sharing My Culture through My Work**

Misizahga’igani Anishinabay Izhi Twah Win (Mille Lacs Ojibwe Language and Culture Center) opened its doors seven years ago.  Albert Churchill gave the ground blessing in front of a large crowd on a beautiful May day in 2000.  The property, once a public campground, consisted of 67 acres with more than 50 campsites and amenities in various stages of disrepair.

I was one of the first five employees, along with an Elder Advisory Committee and an Overview Board of Directors.  I started as site manager, developing plans for activity areas, trail systems, and some programs.  Eventually I got into curriculum research and development, writing and presenting information about the activities our people did throughout the seasons.

The knowledge I learned growing up has greatly helped my work today.  I did a lot of cultural activities with my parents and family growing up in the Aazhoomog area of the Mille Lacs Reservation.  We took part in cultural ceremonies (like the big drum, midewiwin, and personal ceremonies), harvested wild rice, and made maple syrup and sugar.  We also picked berries in the summer.  My father and uncles hunted and set traps and snares in the fall and winter.  They taught me how to spear fish through the ice in the spring and hang hooks along the riverbanks for catfish.  I also gathered birch bark, basswood bark, and plants for my aunt when she visited in the spring and summer.  I remember a lot of the traditional ways of harvesting and preparing those resources to eat.

Teaching about our culture, our history, our relationship with the environment, and the tools and necessities for survival is just one side of the “big picture.”  One day we had more than 450 students from East Central Elementary School at our site for two presentations.  It was a challenging but rewarding experience.  They sat through six hours of presentations with great interest and respect.  My good friend and colleague, Clara Jackson, deserves equal praise in this event too.

Some of our visitors come to us to use our facilities for retreats and other meetings.  We usually supplement their agendas with relevant presentations and speakers.  Activities usually include demonstrations, nature walks, arts and crafts, games, and social events.  Other visitors include Canadian tribes from Thunder Bay; Sault Ste. Marie; and Fort Francis, Ontario; as well as guests from neighboring states and reservations.  Anishinabay Wi Yung, a regional language consortium, held its summer language conference here, which was well attended.  Native families from the Twin Cities urban area have been our most consistent visitors.  We have created a four-season activities camp to complement their own programmatic activities.

I have learned many things working at the Mille Lacs Ojibwe Language and Culture Center.  I greatly enjoy working with our Elders and native speakers.  Building wigwams with Ernie Kegg and Doug Sam Sr. was truly a magical experience.  Listening to stories of Jim and Jessie Clark, Beatrice St. John-Taylor, Dorothy Sam, Norman Clark, Francis Staples, and many others has a way of transporting one back in time.  My work has given me great personal satisfaction – I’m doing something positive and constructive in helping preserve our culture.

David Matrious is a resource specialist for the Mille Lacs Band Ojibwe Language and Culture Center.  For more information about the center, contact Matrious at

320/233-6169.