

Native cultural revival helps educational integration



by Karen Burgess

Native students in the school system today have many opportunities to learn about their cultural heritage that their preceding generations were denied.

Walter Paul, one of the native students councillors at Fredericton High School recalls a time when he would have been punished for speaking in his native language within the federal school system. Now Paul, who was among the first native students to be integrated into the Public school system in the early 60's teaches a native studies program to native and non-native students in grades 11 and 12.

Native studies 120 is one of the programs offered at the high school created to enlighten students about spiritual and cultural aspects of Micmac and Maliseet lifestyles. Paul believes that the program is beneficial to all the students who take it, even if they are not directly involved with the native community on a day to day basis.

If you look back to 63 when native people were first integrated into the public school system, the schools weren't prepared for us - we weren't prepared for it. There was a culture shock, and because of it we couldn't succeed or stay in school. What's going on in the school system now is that we've implemented a lot of native programs which helps both parties - Indian people and non Indian people. To Indians it helps to instill that sense of pride, and then on the other side, that is non-native people, it can show them that we've got positive aspects to our culture. It helps us to get over that portrayal of Indian people that we were just sav-

ages."

Programs at FHS such as Native Studies 120, Native Arts, and programs in the Maliseet language offered at the elementary and junior high levels, provide students with a great deal of knowledge about native culture and history but more importantly, says Paul, it gives native students a sense of pride in their cultural identity.

"They have a sense of pride in this knowledge of their own background, their own cultural heritage. If they have this sense of pride in being native people then it makes it easier for them to make it through school."

Local artist Ned Bear, who is an instructor of FHS' Native Arts program feels that the course gives the students "something to identify with, something that belongs to them." He says that the course helps to bring students to school each morning, and once at school, students are more

likely to attend all of the other classes.

Paul says that the appearance of more and more programs oriented toward native studies is indicative of a move back to traditional values.

This movement, which Paul says maybe spreading slower in the East where native traditions and ceremonies were lost almost completely, is evident across Canada. he says, The Micmac and Maliseet people have knowledge that these kind of ceremonies existed in within our societies but we're had to get people from out west (who were less hard hit by European contact) to us some of these teachings about the sweat lodges, about the sweet grass ceremonies - and we've taken these teachings on and applied them everyday to our own societies."

"It helps us to get over that portrayal of people as just savages."