OPENING DOORS AND YOUNG MINDS

Aboriginal youth are connecting traditions and the modern world in job placements, gatherings and high-tech links around the globe.

Making the link: Carmen Daniels works with children from the Injinoo Aboriginal Community at an outdoor festival in North Queensland, Australia.

photo: courtesy of Carmen Daniels

Carmen Daniels is a world away from her Alberta Cree community, living and working with Native youth in Australia. But with only a few keystrokes, she connects young Aboriginal dancers in northern Australia for an on-line chat with a dance and drum group in her hometown of Edmonton.

Daniels is no stranger to travel and high-speed communications with foreign lands. At 30, she is one of a new generation of young Canadian Aboriginals who are going global—without forgetting their roots.

Melina Laboucan-Massimo of Alberta's Lubicon Lake First Nation last year spent six months in Brazil creating on-line links for Indigenous peoples across Latin America through TakingITGlobal, an international youth network that addresses global issues. Now 23, she's back in Canada developing Native content for the organization's Web site.

Stephanie Peter, a member of the Cowichan First Nation on Vancouver Island, passionate about preserving her own people's culture and eager to travel, spent six months on a job placement in the South Pacific that taught valuable life lessons.

Energetic and committed to social change, many of Canada's Native youth are seizing new opportunities to meet their counterparts in other countries and are making the most of new communications technologies to promote Indigenous identity and culture.

The Canadian government, in partnership with non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies, is tapping into the aspirations of these youth with Web sites, global youth parliaments and international job placements and internships that target them.

"Technology is a means to present and preserve Indigenous culture, no matter where I work in the future," says Daniels.

Her belief in the Internet as a tool to inform and empower Native youth grew out of her experiences in 1999 as a coordinator of the Aboriginal Youth Network, a Web site that connects Native youth to each other and to social and health services across the country, with sponsors including the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Health Canada. A year later, sponsored by Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC), she travelled to Sydney, Australia as a delegate to Oxfam's first International Youth Parliament, which brought together 300 young people from around the world to work on issues from youth engagement to poverty and education. The experience inspired her to pursue a long-held dream to live and work in Australia. Over the past three years, she has developed Web sites that serve Aboriginal youth in remote northern communities there.

But Daniels maintains strong ties to home. Last year, she developed the cross-cultural dance project linking Australian Aboriginal dancers with her Cree grandmother's White Buffalo Dancers and Drummers Society in Edmonton.

With Daniels as intermediary, the young dancers have learned what they have in common: a rich tradition of oral story-telling and, sadly, a painful past of residential schools. "I was proud to facilitate this kind of cultural exchange and proud to be able to connect with my own culture back home," she says.

Laboucan-Massimo remembers when things clicked for her, as one of some 60 Aboriginal people at the second Oxfam Parliament earlier this year in Sydney. "We started calling each other brothers and sisters, even though we are from completely different countries," she recalls. "We had this intrinsic understanding of what it was like to be an Indigenous person."

Technology helps her maintain those person-to-person connections, with initiatives such as TakingITGlobal, a Web site sponsored in part by Corrections Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that is designed to teach Aboriginal youth how to tell their stories to the world.

In Canada, the federal government provides another powerful connection