

First Canadians on the Summer Solstice

In 1996, the Governor General of Canada proclaimed June 21 National Aboriginal Day, offering Aboriginal people an excellent opportunity to share their rich, diverse cultures with family members, friends and visitors. DFAIT employees in Ottawa are privileged that their city celebrates the day with one of Canada's best Native arts festivals.

On June 21, Canadians from all walks of life participate in the many National Aboriginal Day events that take place from coast to coast to coast. This date was chosen because it corresponds to the summer solstice (the first day of summer and longest day of the year), and because many Aboriginal groups have traditionally celebrated their heritage at this time of year.

And so, as a kickoff to summer, Aboriginal people gather across the land to celebrate and share with spectacular dance, song and theatrical performances—both contemporary and traditional—that bring audiences to their feet. The celebrations are part of the annual nationwide Celebrate Canada festivities that begin with National Aboriginal Day, are followed by Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day on June 24 and Canadian Multiculturalism Day on June 27, and conclude with Canada Day on July 1.

Perhaps the largest celebration associated with National Aboriginal Day is the Summer Solstice Aboriginal Arts Festival, which takes place in Ottawa in the days leading up to June 21. The festival is a popular attraction for DFAIT's Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal employees. Last year's event drew such large crowds to its site on Victoria Island, near downtown Ottawa, that organizers decided to move this year's festival to a larger space on LeBreton Flats, next to the Canadian War Museum.

Len Ouimette, a systems integrator with DFAIT's Secure Systems Operation and an Algonquin, has attended the festival several times. "It's an amazing day, a chance to see different Native arts displayed, to see the traditional costumes and discover new Native artists," Ouimette says. "And it's great that the larger community can learn about the Aboriginal component of Canadian society, especially our diversity—everything from lawyers and construction workers to teachers and students, the same range you find in Canada as a whole."

The festival is officially hosted by a National Aboriginal Day committee, which is comprised of several Aboriginal organizations in Ottawa and is managed by a private group, Aboriginal



Experiences, Arts and Culture. According to President and General Manager Trina Mather-Simard, "The festival is an unparalleled opportunity to promote awareness of Native culture and to bring together First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in Ottawa—all of our urban native community."

This year's festival, the largest in the event's 15-year history, will run from June 17 to 19. The entertainment lineup includes such well-known Native performers as singers Shy-Anne Horvoka and Shane Yellowbird. There will be an exhibition of Native art and several workshops in which Native artists will teach techniques to visitors. There will also be a talent contest for Native performers.

In addition, this year's Summer Solstice Festival has a new event: a powwow competition with \$65,000 in prizes. The Northern Cree Singers, who have been nominated six times for Grammy awards, will be the "host drum"—the performers who play a large drum while singing traditional songs for the dancers.

Donald Bobiash, director general of the Africa Bureau and the department's champion for Aboriginal employees, strongly encourages DFAIT employees to attend the festival. "It brings to the nation's capital talented Aboriginal artists who are playing a growing role on the international cultural scene, a role that we as a department are actively promoting through our missions abroad."

Native employees at DFAIT

DFAIT is proud to count many Native employees in its ranks and hopes to recruit more. As of March 2011, there were 97 self-identified Natives among the 4,637 people on staff. The target is to match the percentage of Aboriginal people in the general population—2.6 percent.