

ALSO IN THIS SECTION:

- » WE SING THEIR SONGS
- » FOUR MYTHS ABOUT BLACK WORSHIP
- » GRANDPA FREDERICK
- » WHAT MEAN THESE STONES?
- » KING OF KILLER HILL

CONNECT



Mamawi Atosketan Native School

A true Adventist mission

When they hear the term “Seventh-day Adventist mission,” the first place that comes to mind for many people living in Alberta, Canada, is Mamawi Atosketan Native School, or MANS for short. Strategically situated next to a First Nations Cree reserve in the Maskwacis community near Ponoka, Alberta, MANS exemplifies mission. That’s because in this Adventist-owned day school, not one student is a Seventh-day Adventist—not one.

Maskwacis is primarily a First Nations district. Most of its 14,000 residents belong to the Cree tribe and live on reservations. The region has attracted national media attention



BY SANDRA BLACKMER

in Canada for its high rates of crime and violence; combine that with statistics indicating that First Nations students nationally are six times more likely to drop out of high school than nonaboriginal students,¹ and you see that the chances for the academic success of this region's youth aren't high. That's where MANS comes in.

With 200 students in grades K-12, the school is full to capacity, and has an annual waiting list. Principal Gail Wilton credits this positive reputation to the school's Christ-centered program, quality academics, caring staff, an emphasis on the students' Native heritage, and a safe environment.

"This is truly a mission venture," says Wilton, who has served as principal for almost six years. "Parents tell us they choose to enroll their children here because we are a Christian school that still honors their Native heritage. And we offer a safe and caring environment."

Poverty, a high unemployment rate, and gang violence plague the four Maskwacis reserves, and many parents are desperate to provide something better for their children.

"Families know we have zero tolerance for bullying, that MANS is a safe place to be, and that the students are well taken care of here," she says. "They trust we will educate them, but you can't do that if safety is not present. We also provide the students with nutritious hot meals."

"What's most important is instilling in them a hope in God, a hope for a better world, and a hope that they can make a difference in the community."

The daily attendance rate schoolwide averages 90 percent. Newer students often struggle academically, but according to school statistics, the longer they are at MANS, the better they generally do on provincial exams, many scoring above the national average. Although the national suicide rate among First Nations people is alarmingly high—five times the national average for males and seven times for females²—MANS has not lost a single attending student to suicide within the past decade.

Wilton says this is because the school offers young people hope.

"We talk with them about what happens when a person dies, about God's grace for us, and what forgiveness is. We discuss having hope," Wilton says. "Education alone is not enough."

The school employs a full-time guidance counselor to help students deal with issues from suicide to teen pregnancies to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Local tribal elders and law-enforcement staff lend support as well.

"We've also recently brought in a full-time chaplain," Wilton says. "He's involved with school worship programs, spiritual counseling, career counseling, and helping students prepare for the future."

THOSE WHO TEACH

Some might assume that the unique challenges at MANS would deter quality teachers from applying, or affect longevity, but that doesn't appear to be the case. The average tenure of the 15 teaching staff at the school is eight years, and some boast up to 13 years. So the question is: Why here?

"There's such a great need," says sixth-grade teacher Cheri Notice, "not just for academics but also for someone to care for these students and show them that they can achieve more. They're involved in such things as sign language classes, volleyball tournaments, nature activities. It all helps to develop the whole child."

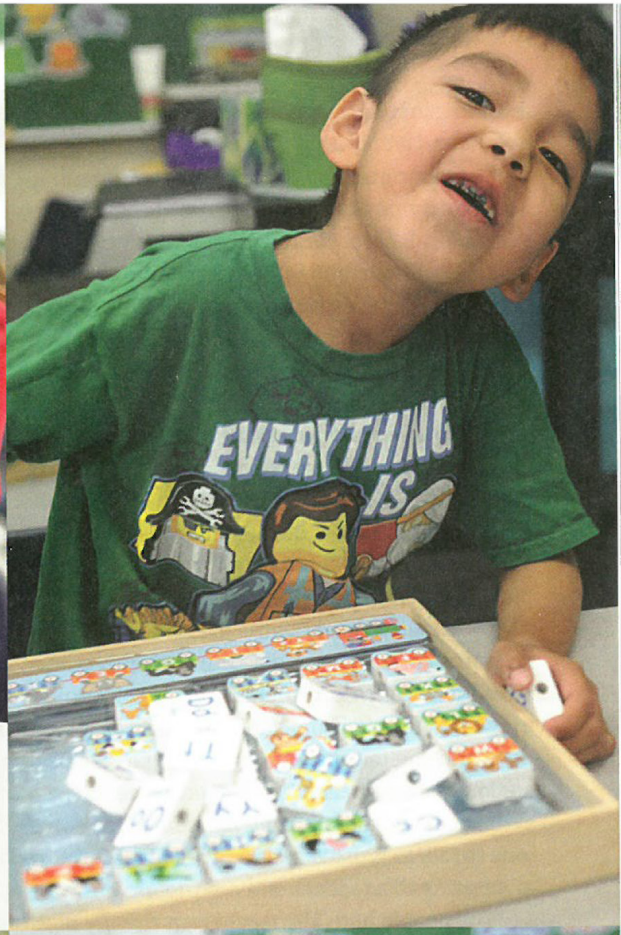
Even though MANS is an Adventist school, Notice says they teach "basic" Christian standards. She describes the Cree culture as involving a "deep spirituality" that frames God and Christianity differently from the way traditional Adventist Christians may view them, and says the teachers have to be creative in how they present God to the students. One method Notice uses is music.

"I teach my kids to do sign language to music," she says. "They don't realize how much they're learning about God when they sing along to the songs."

Discipline, she says, is another method.

"I talk to the kids about God wanting them to make good choices, and that He has given them the ability to make good choices. We weave it into the way we discipline and the way we teach.

"What's most important, though," she adds, "is



instilling in them a hope in God, a hope for a better world, and a hope that they can make a difference in the community.”

Educational assistant and school cook Audrey Hirschhorn also feels a strong commitment to the students. She left a high-paying job in the Newfoundland public school system to come to MANS. Her reason?

“I just felt called,” she says. “I make a lot less money, but God uses me. I haven’t looked back. I love being here and working with the kids and the faculty. I call these people my family.”

THOSE WHO LEARN

The efforts MANS teachers and staff are making to help students be successful don’t go unnoticed.

“[The teachers] show me every day that they care about me,” says Krista, an eleventh grader. “Stuff like Mr. Willing picking up a work application form for me [from a local business] because he wants me to get a job, or offering to take us to get our driver’s permit if we need a ride.”

If she had a major problem and needed someone to talk to, Krista says she would feel comfortable going to a teacher.

“The people here, the teachers, are really nice,” she says, “and the students, too, are respectful and nice.” She also believes she has a brighter future because of the school, and feels equipped to pursue her career choice of cosmetology.

“They’re focused, they’re engaged, and I know it’s because of the teachers.”

Seventh-grader Ahanu³ describes his experience at MANS as “great!”

“I get to learn about my culture here,” he says. “All the teachers and the other students care about me. My mom wants me to finish up to grade 12 here.”

An animal lover, Ahanu’s goal is to become a veterinarian.

“Most of the people at the school care about animals,” he says. “The school changes people’s hearts sometimes.”

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

MANS teachers strive to involve community families in the life and mission of the school. Some contact parents whenever their child has accom-

plished something noteworthy, so they’re not hearing from them only when their child is in trouble. They help the children create small crafts and make cookies and cards to give to local residents. They also assist with community cleanup projects and other needs.

“We have to continue to work hard at [connecting with the community],” Notice says. “It’s a joyous thing for both the parents and the school to have a strong connection.”

THE CONFERENCE PERSPECTIVE

MANS is run under the auspices of the Alberta Conference, located about 20 miles (32 kilometers) from the school. Conference officers serve as school board members and are part of the decision-making and planning.

“This gives us a lot of guidance as to where we go as a school,” Principal Wilton says. “It doesn’t feel like we’re *their* project, but rather that we are the project together.”

Kenneth Wiebe, Alberta Conference president for the past five years, recounts when three decades ago a First Nations convert to Adventism pleaded his case for establishing a mission on the reserve in Maskwacis. “His testimony about the transformation in his own life moved conference leadership to get involved,” Wiebe says. “We still recognize the need in this distinct community, one that in large part arises from a long history of misunderstandings and systemic problems.”

Alberta Conference Planned Giving and Trust Services/Philanthropy director Lynn McDowell, who assists MANS with communication and fund-raising, sums up the mission of the school by saying it (1) increases student self-confidence through knowledge and skills, as well as positive, healthy interaction with non-aboriginal people off the reserve; (2) provides a safe place to learn and to be First Nations; and (3) conveys hope.

“MANS gives them hope not only for today but also for tomorrow,” she says, “hope that there’s something better out there.”

CONTINUED GROWTH

The school is currently raising money through The Bridge Campaign, headed by McDowell, to expand its facilities in order to accommodate the



Principal Gail Wilton (right) poses with a MANS student.

recent “graduation” to a senior academy. In 2014 a North American Division office of education evaluation team visited MANS and, based on their positive findings, voted to approve their request to expand to a 12-grade school. Previously they had offered up to grade 9. Plans include the construction of a new high school building twice the size of their present facility. It will house a science lab, a computer lab, a home economics classroom, and an industrial arts shop. Also proposed are a new library, a Cree culture room, a music/art room, six new classrooms, and a gym.

“I’m very impressed with the quality of the educational program and the intentional care to foster the spiritual values, academic quality, and cultural heritage that MANS provides,” says Larry Blackmer, vice president for education for the North American Division and team leader for the school’s 2014 evaluation. “Mamawi had the foundation needed to expand and develop their programs and facilities to a senior academy level, and it’s exciting to envision a new facility that will further enhance their mission.”

North American Division president Daniel R. Jackson worked closely with MANS administration and faculty when he served as president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada (2002-2010), and says the school is making a huge impact in its community.

“The violence, drugs, alcohol, and gang activities in that area are incredible,” Jackson says. “Some of the students go home to no food, some to very violent situations. This school is ministering in a very challenged context. It’s a ministry in the trenches, on the front lines. We are thankful that it continues to grow in influence and stature in the Maskwacis community of Alberta.”

MANS is also garnering support from outside organizations. The Canadian Welding Association Foundation (CWAFF),⁴ tasked with addressing the skilled welding labor shortage in Canada, is providing some financial support for the school’s expansion project as well, since MANS will be incorporating trades training into its curriculum. CWAFF executive director Deborah A. Mates visited the school and says that what she saw was “a different group of kids—very different from what I’ve seen in any other aboriginal community. They’re focused, they’re engaged, and I know it’s because of the teachers,” she says.

“The CWA Foundation is very supportive of the new school Mamawi is building,” Mates adds. “We will be working with them to bring welding exposure and career-path knowledge to their students through this new initiative.”

MORE THAN A ONE-WAY MINISTRY

Teacher Cheri Notice says many people have misconceptions about Natives and aboriginals, and admits that before coming to MANS she was one of them.

“Most of us who teach here realize that it’s not just about us helping the kids; it’s about them teaching us,” she says. “We’ve gained a different view of God, and a different view of how we should relate to others. These students do need love and support, but they also give a lot of love and support back to the teachers. We are better Christians because of teaching here.”³

To learn more about Mamawi Atosketan Native School, go to www.mans1.ca, or call 403-342-5044, extension 233.

¹ Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012: www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf. See also The Globe and Mail, Feb. 9, 2015: www.theglobeandmail.com/news/news-video/video-rich-country-poor-nations-11-startling-statistics-about-the-disparity-between-indigenous-people-and-the-rest-of-canada/article22852873/.

² *Ibid.*

³ Not the student’s real name.

⁴ <https://www.cwa-foundation.org/about-us/who-we-are>.