



Opening Doors: New First Nations Staff Model Change, Enhance Students' Perspective

By Linda Steinke*

Recognizing the need to mentor students beyond academics and to expand their cultural growth, Mamawi Atosketan Native School (MANS) administration sought to add two key individuals—a Guidance Counsellor, and a Native Cultural Studies specialist. For these positions, First Nations heritage would be significant, but could this combination be found?

With God, all things are possible!

Brad Dennis, MSW, Guidance Counsellor

In the spring of 2013, Brad Dennis, a fifth generation Adventist and First Nations therapist from the Huu-ay-aht nation of Washington State, was wondering what God's next move for him and his family would be. Working as a mental health therapist in the Portland Adventist Medical Center, Brad was intrigued when he was invited to apply for the MANS guidance counsellor position.

Brad liked what he saw: A positive, "We can be anything!" attitude pervaded, and Brad saw himself making the kind of front-line difference in a First Nations community that he wanted to make. Thus, in May of 2013, the Dennis family became part of the MANS family.

Brad has a passion for preserving people. "We need the positive to process the positive!" he says. "And the solutions are right here in the community!"

Common Needs, Extreme God

At base, says Brad, needs at MANS are no different than anywhere else. "We [First Nations communities] have a lot of problems," he observes, then on reflection, revises his observation. "No, we have a lot of strengths and talents! That's what I look at—that's what God looks at. That's what I want to call people to look at.

"There is a tremendous amount of great work going on in this community," Brad says. He is working to tap community resources to mentor a new group of youth to emerge from the Maskwacis (formerly Hobbema) community, which is home for most of MANS' students.

"I trust God!" he says, and sees promise all around him.

Connect with Professionals, Change Perceptions

Brad is impressed with the complex system of purposeful services to be found in Maskwacis. He works to mobilize the people providing these services to mentor and grow students' confidence, skills, and character. He endeavors to make the invisible visible.

"We don't see the native doctor, the First Nations executive director, the Cree newspaper producer, the native professor," he says. Part of his work, he believes, is to change that perception among those in his life space—at work, and wherever he is.

Part of Brad's perception change and connection mission involves working with a local newspaper editor, who helps the Grade 7 class to produce a school newspaper every two weeks. The parents, especially, look forward to the bi-weekly communication. The Maskwacis Restorative Justice Coordinator is also working with Grades 7 & 8 students to teach and mentor conflict resolution. High School students are being taken to visit colleges and universities in the province to make them aware of choices and careers open to them—doors of opportunity. But Brad's job has protective and mediation dimensions, too.

"Part of my job is to help the bully, the bullied, and the by-stander," he says. "When I'm here, things don't accumulate and escalate. We talk, we problem solve, and then we go back and work."

Strengthening an Atmosphere of Constructive Planning and Growth

Principal Gail Wilton says that Brad's work at MANS has created a greater student sense of safety, making it increasingly a place where problems can be worked out

and constructive planning happens. "We are working together," says the principal, "to help our children grow positively and productively from infancy to the outside world."

"I don't always know why God called me here," says Brad, "but I'm here. I'll do His work! I want to give hope to the students at MANS. The future is in God's hands!"

Ramona MacKenzie, B.Ed., Native Cultural Studies teacher

As Brad Dennis was getting settled at MANS, Ramona MacKenzie, who was teaching in Port Hardy, BC was searching to expand her teaching horizons. MANS opened the Native Cultural Studies door and Ramona walked through it. A positive atmosphere of learning, growing, and identity is emerging.

Ramona's childhood and teen years were often less than ideal. There were some poor choices, yet as God knocked, Ramona answered, stepping over the threshold—often seemingly blind—yet trusting in a power that continuously brought her peace and a better life.

Adventist Elementary Experience a Major Factor

Grades 1-6 at Thunder Bay Academy in Ontario provided her first Christian foundation. "Going to an Adventist school was the best thing that happened to me in my childhood," she reflects. "The environment was safe, so even if I was sick, I went to school," said Ramona.

Ramona's training for her current position as teacher of Native Cultural Studies for First Nations students began in her mid-teens. She recognized and appreciated the "normal" diversity that she had experienced in her Seventh-day Adventist community.

By age 17 Ramona knew that she had to make some changes in her life.

She accepted an invitation to live with a native Christian friend who led Ramona to pray the Sinner's Prayer and live a life in Christ. "From here on, things began to change," Ramona related. "Education became the key for me."

Ramona also began attending the Thunder Bay Adventist Church. While there, she met former

teachers who had made a huge impact on her life. She now fondly refers to them as "my Christian family." Ramona was baptized May 15, 1999. "Becoming a Seventh-day Adventist has been a huge blessing," says Ramona. She has completed a two-year mission service in Korea, received a Bachelor of Education degree from CUC, taught elementary school in Port Hardy, BC, and in September of 2013 accepted a position at MANS. "I'm living a dream!" she continues.

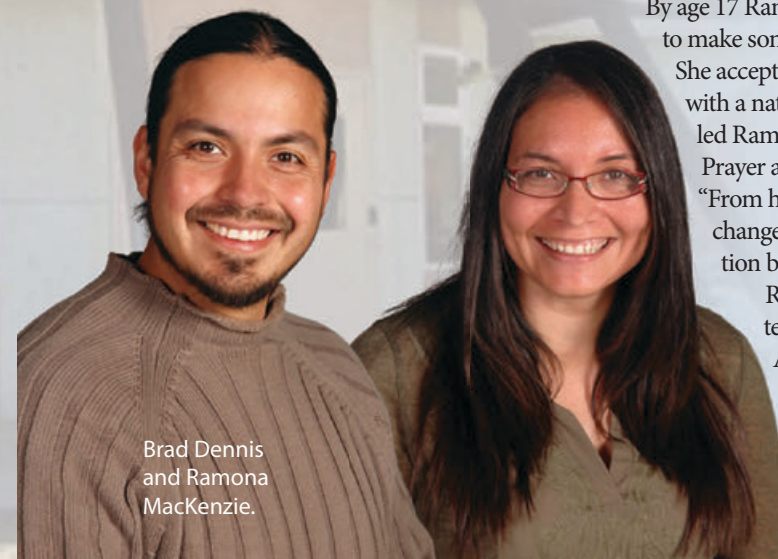
While living with her "Christian family," Ramona became involved with a group of volunteers called, "My Brother's Keeper." Here she had opportunity (the door opened yet again) to be mentored, to improve her professional skills, and to develop her abilities with multi-cultural groups. She learned how to facilitate "getting along" with those different from yourself, as well as mentor others who are seeking to improve/change their circumstances or themselves. Each step of the way, Ramona has walked through doors opened to her...sometimes miraculously and often not knowing the outcome, but knowing that God is in control.

Ramona is keenly tuned in to learning and growing into a more useful instrument in God's "tool kit," and her position allows her to do just that. She is Ojibway—one of the largest groups of First Nations people in North America—and is able to relate on a personal level with her kindergarten-Grade 11 students. "We're glad that you're here," one student recently told Ramona. "You saved us!"

Students at each grade level participate in Native Cultural Studies three times per week. This year they are recording their stories alongside the stories of other cultures such as ancient Egyptian, Australian aboriginal, etc. Through drawings, beading, cooking, photography and more, the students are learning how to tell their story as they explore the culture of other people groups, and then investigate their own heritage.

Ramona's cross-Canada life experiences have connected her to numerous key people who will now help her mentor MANS students to make positive life choices. Ramona smiles broadly and confidently as she says, "I am where I belong!" That security can only radiate to those with whom she works, and those for whom she works—her students!

*With contributions from Communications staff.



Brad Dennis
and Ramona
MacKenzie.