

Former Georgetown resident receives Order of Ontario

By Kathryn Boyle
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A former Georgetown resident is being recognized for his work of breathing new life into Native languages.

Yesterday (Jan. 20), Parkhill, now living in Halifax, was one of 26 Ontario former or long-term residents to receive the Order of Ontario, the province's highest official honour. The award recognizes who has demonstrated a high level of individual excellence and achievement benefitting people anywhere in the world, an honour Parkhill never expected to receive.

"I was absolutely not expecting this," he told The IFP, quoting the message from Dave Carnegie's book, *Stop Worrying and Start Living*. "If we create this life for ourselves, then we will be working with our natural strengths, not fighting our own shortcomings. My wife (Heather) and I structured our lives as such, and it is amazing how much passion can help create a contagion which picks up momentum."

While employed by Microsoft as the director for the education sector,



Former Georgetown resident Mike Parkhill received the Order of Ontario yesterday for his work with his organization SayITFirst, which works to preserve native languages.

Submitted photo

Parkhill was involved in working in the Iqaluit and Inuktitut languages. After learning how important those languages are to the First Nations people, Parkhill decided to leave his job and do something more.

"An Inuit lady named Leena Evic

took me through the importance of the language as it ties her culture to land and the Spirits," Parkhill said. "I felt as though I was 46 years old when I received my first Canadian history lesson."

So in 2009, SayITFirst was created

by Parkhill: an organization focused on working with Aboriginal communities and elders to revitalize Canada's languages through technology and to keep the spark in Native communities alive.

"According to Stats Canada, half of the Elders teachers of the language will be dead in five years. The languages are all having near-death experiences," Parkhill said. If the languages were to disappear, so would our cultural diversity, he added.

"When I understood how language loss affected the First Nation, Inuit and Metis demographics, I felt I needed to bring my unique skill set developed at Microsoft to help support individuals trying to reconnect to their ancestral knowledge," Parkhill said. "By reversing language loss within Native communities, we can often times develop very positive self identity in the youth. The leaders, educators and parents I support can have the ability to stave off suicides, gang activity and substance abuse."

Through the organization, Parkhill has helped produce more than a doz-

en books and DVDs to help teach children and adults alike. To help with the two mediums, Parkhill has employed people of Native descent to read in mi'Kmaq, Maliseet and the Ojibwe languages, not English.

According to Parkhill, helping keep the languages alive is too important a role not to fill.

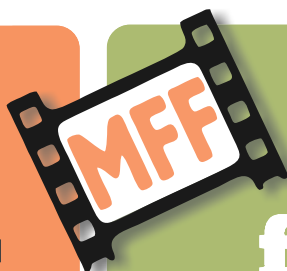
"I saw too many injustices happen to be comfortable enough to not help," he said. "It ticks me off when I hear people say, 'we should just assimilate them.' The word 'them' and 'they' creates a dual world within my head, and these are the two most bigoted words in the English language. I see 'us' and 'we,' not 'they' and 'them.'"

Parkhill hopes the award will help bring positive social outcomes and to provide SayITFirst with more credibility to continue to help the Native communities.

"In our own way, we all support doing our own part to provide for a better Canada for future generation," he said. "My efforts are focused on the richness of diversity in language and the joy of learning."

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