

Native Solidarity Day brings Indians together

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At least 300 native Canadians got a taste of Indian life as a community at the Native (Onkwehonwe) Solidarity Day Festival at Chiefswood Park on Wednesday.

The Assembly of First Nations declared June 21 as a national holiday for native Canadians to acknowledge the achievements of the first people in North America. June 21 was chosen because it is the longest day of the year.

The day was primarily for native Canadians, but Dawn Hill, coordinator of First Nations Rights for Education, had said earlier that non-native Canadians were welcome to attend the festival.

Although very few non-natives attended Ms. Hill felt the day was successful.

"It's going really well," she said. "Inviting non-natives was a gesture on our part but the celebration is primarily for native Canadians."

The solidarity day festival was held to help teach native people about their history and to bring the community together. But the main issue and theme this year was education for natives.

After opening ceremony and a history lesson about Indians, the

day got into full swing with dancing, a skit and games.

Entertaining the crowd were costumed children known as soft shoe dancers, and a hoop dancer Rusty Thomas.

A skit titled Educating Eric, written and performed by two natives, outlined the problems and frustrations of a mother raising her son in the city, and her consideration of returning to the reserve.

One of the writers and actors, Tina Louise Bomberry, told the audience later that she was proud to have been able to open up and share her own feelings with others.

Those who attended the festival said it was worthwhile.

"I think it's really good because we need to learn more about our culture and bring Indians together," said Michelle Thomas.

"I think it's good to let kids out of school so they can learn what being an Indian is about."

But some native Canadians, those who do not work on the reserve and those who work for the federal government such as the school board may not be able to join in the celebration because employers will not allow the day off without a loss of pay, reprimand, or dismissal.

Linda Staats, a school teacher on the Six Nations Reserve, took the day off work to join in the Solidarity Day but says there are many other teachers who did not for fear of the consequences they may suffer.

She believes she will face either a reprimand or a loss of pay. But she says she was willing to suffer the consequences.

"It's an important enough cause that I'll stick my neck out," she says.

But she says some teachers feared reprimand and stayed at work rather than rock the boat.

"It's a day to unite together. To me, that's important. I'm willing to suffer the consequences," she says.