

Support urged for native languages foundation

By Sam Colalacovo, Expositor Staff

April 30/90

The drive to establish a national native languages foundation must get grassroots support to be successful, a conference was told at the weekend.

"We have to say our language is alive," said Ruth Norton, education director for the Assembly of First Nations in Ottawa. "From our language comes our culture and the concepts of self-government."

She said people should establish "core groups" to create awareness of native languages.

Once that awareness is established, elected councils can be approached to promote languages by such things as requiring employees at band offices or senior citizens' homes to speak native languages.

"We need to make it alive. Everything we do and everything we say must be in our language."

Ms. Norton was speaking about efforts needed to support Bill C-269, a private member's bill that would create a foundation to provide funding and

encourage the retention and promotion of aboriginal languages. The bill was introduced last November by Ethel Blondin, a Liberal MP for the Western Arctic.

She was among speakers at the second annual conference of the Sweetgrass First Nations Council at the Woodland Cultural Centre on Mohawk Street, which opened last Thursday and ended Sunday. About 85 people attended the event, which drew people from across Canada and from the United States.

The council was founded last year to "attain and regain" fluency in native languages, said Amos Keye, a spokesman for the group and language co-ordinator at the cultural centre.

Mr. Keye said he is confident the council, which has about 75 paid members, is here to stay.

"That fact that people know that we exist, and that there is a co-ordinating body on language, are positive things that come out of this."

Mr. Keye said statistics demonstrate the urgency of promoting native language.

Only about two per cent of the nearly 31,000 members comprising 16 bands in the Sweetgrass council are fluent in their native tongues, according to a survey completed in March.

No one younger than 10 was found to be fluent. Most who are fluent are aged 51 and older.

"We can go through the whole thing of blaming the damn white man, but that is not going to do anything. We have to help ourselves.

"We've been indoctrinated. We've bought the whole thing that English is what it has to be. It is like a 99-year lease that we can't get out of."

Mr. Keye said many participants at the conference were teachers. They will be able to apply things they learned to the classroom. Workshops ranged from methods of teaching second languages to using computers to speak a language.

Sessions also were held on developing new native words for things such things as microwaves, coffee maker, Jello, punk rocker and computer.

"I think even some of our people are surprised by the numbers" on fluency, said Mr. Keye. "The

hard reality is that once these 300 (older fluent people) go" the chances of survival of their languages is diminished.

The conference received some encouraging reports from Hawaii where four pre-schools have been established to teach Hawaiian to children aged two to four. Children can speak fluently in four months.

Another speaker, Walter Currie, suggested several things can be done to promote native languages, starting with lessening the use of English.

"When you are with your fellow brothers and sisters, why don't you use your native language?"

"When we go out in public, right away we are English only. Why? Some say it is because we want to be polite. That sounds weak to me."

The council also issued its first lifetime achievement awards. This year's recipients and their languages are: Reginald Henry and Bessie Lazore, Ogwehowe; Lena White and Fred Wheatley, Aanishnaabeg.