

Immersion school facilitates first class

by Paul Barnsley
Staff reporter

OHSWEKEN - It may not look all that impressive from the outside but there is something very special about that homely clump of portable classrooms on Third Line near the corner of Mohawk road. Ask the teachers and they'll tell you it's the kids; ask principal Edward Staats and he'll tell you that the teachers are also very special.

It hasn't been easy for the dedicated people who have caught the dream of educating Native

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children in their own traditional language and culture and made it a reality. But they are doing it every day.

Most of the staff who started this program eight years ago are still on the scene and enjoying the rare privilege of seeing a dream come true.

Deborah Martin-Hill is one of these people.

"I'm just so impressed with my kids," Martin-Hill will tell you,

proudly, as she tries to deflect any credit for the great strides her pupils are making.

"Debbie is an excellent teacher who deserves a lot of credit," Principal Staats will tell you, later. He also reports surrounding high schools are finding graduates of the Mohawk Immersion are competitive with graduates of the English language curriculum.

Debbie Martin-Hill remembers stories her grandmother told her about the Mush Hole, a school where Natives' children were punished severely for speaking their native language. She and her co-workers take great pride in perpetuating the Mohawk language and culture.

After years of struggling to have any kind of school at all, that little collection of portable classrooms looks pretty good.

From the day when a doubter asked her derisively when she was going to open the school and an impulsive answer committed her and the other supporters to rush it into existence in a short three months, Martin-Hill has fought for the goal of native language education.

They started with no money, no teachers and no building. They weren't funded that first semester but they begged and borrowed everything they needed and pulled it all together by sheer force of will.



Business as usual at the Mohawk Immersion School.

Things were not exactly well planned out: they hired teachers a short two weeks before the first class was held.

Martin-Hill related a long history of the fight to gain funding and acceptance which is too long for this limited space. She wanted, however, to thank and recognize a number of people who made it work. She mentioned her old professor, Jake Thomas, who taught her Native Studies Sociology at Trent University. J.C. Hill, Amos Key, Graham Smith, Ima Johnson, Lottie Key, Roberta Jamieson and many others figured in the success story.