

Breaking stereotypes with dance

BY SIMONE JOSEPH
Staff Writer

Five men are seated around a drum in Georgina Island's community centre, chanting "Ay-ay-ay."

As the men chant in the native language of Ojibwa, York Region public and Catholic students from three elementary schools sit at circular tables, watching.

The drum represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

Two native adults say this at separate times during this celebration of native culture Tuesday to commemorate National Aboriginal Day.

One of these native adults is Suzanne Smoke, community co-ordinator for Georgina Island's elementary school. Her other native name is Ginew Kwe, which means Golden Eagle Woman in Ojibwa.

Ms Smoke has a seven-year-old daughter named Cedar Smoke-Charles (her other name is Ogema Geeziko Kwe, which means Head Woman of the Sky World).

"She (Cedar) has been listening to that drum since she was in my womb and she has been around ceremonies and powwows," Ms Smoke said.

For a people who have long feared the loss of their culture, passing traditions on to their children is especially important. One effective tool for passing on that culture is dance.

"We dance to celebrate, heal or tell stories," said Georgina Island school teacher Tanya Leary.

Georgina Island is inhabited by the Chippewas of Georgina First Nation who also live on Snake Island and Fox Island. The islands lie about 2 kilometres off the southern shore of Lake Simcoe. The largest nearby centre is Sutton, which is on the mainland about 6.5 kilometres to the southwest.

Formal aboriginal dance classes are extremely rare. Most dance techniques are taught through ceremonies and powwows. Children often learn to dance from the time they can walk and some families follow powwows across Ontario, going to a different one each weekend.

But Ms Leary (whose native name is

Seaultaux), teaches kindergarten and Grade 1 at Georgina Island's elementary school and has actually worked native dance into her curriculum. Every Thursday, while her male students are drumming, her female students learn hand drumming and dancing.

"It gives kids a sense of identity and pride. It's an expression of self and storytelling," she said.

Native dancing is about a lot more than just movement of the body.

Learning dance is also good for warding off peer pressure, said Ms Leary, who has an eight-year-old daughter named Sage.

"It (dancing) grounds you culturally, gives you a sense of where you are. It keeps you out of trouble and mischief."

A native man named Somosi showed students parts of the regalia he wears when dancing. While the piece he shows is heavy, it is only part of a full regalia that can weigh 50 to 75 pounds.

It took about four weeks to design and another four weeks to put together. The piece he shows students is made of bone, glass beads, smoked moose hide and deer hide and is what warriors wore into battle, he said.

"We're still wearing it, still protecting society. My battle is against racism and ignorance," Somosi said. Somosi, a drum maker and dancer, has led cultural workshops around the world. Children love learning about their culture through dance, he said.

"People talk to them all day. It (dancing) is a visual, tactile experience. That makes it real, not something they have read in a text book. It brings it alive."

In what seems worlds apart in Markham, Carol Ngai, 12, has studied at the Toronto Chinese Dance Academy for eight years. Her dancing has taught her about Chinese geography, she said.

"I learned more about places and nations," the young dancer said.

Richmond Hill resident Isha Jairath started classical Indian dancing at age five and has been studying dance under Menakka Thakkar at the Canadian Academy of Indian Dance (Nrityakala) in Thornhill for the past nine years.

Her mother, Neelam Jairath, never had the opportunity to learn classical Indian dancing while growing up in a small town in Northern India, but desperately wanted her daughter to have that chance here in Canada.

"I wanted her in touch with her culture. Classical dance has spirituality in it. Each dance movement is related to God. It brings out inner soul, personality," Mrs. Jairath said.

Her daughter has been learning a style of classical dance called Bharatanatyam that originated in South India and expects dance will remain an important part of her life.

"It is sometimes hard to figure out where you are, living in two cultures. Dance helped me form a cultural foundation for myself," said Ms. Jairath, a 19-year-old dancer and performer with the Menaka Thakkar Dance Company.

"It is active learning. You ask questions. I could learn about culture in a fun way. The learning environment was good. It was learning the way I want to learn in a very loving, caring environment."



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...The fanciful, naive notion by social engineers like former prime minister Pierre Trudeau and the left-lib, pseudo-intellectuals who supported him is that a nation can somehow be forged by weaving together a patchwork quilt of different races and cultures from around

the world. The thinking was that all these new Canadians would happily co-exist and build a brave, new Canada, distinct and unique in the world.

Trudeau, a vicious ideologue, despised the notion of the U.S. melting pot (no surprise, since he hated Americans), believing instead that state-sanctioned and funded multiculturalism would be superior to any system in the world...



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