

Metis Ambassador

By Margaret Wanlin
Thunder Bay Ventures

He's got a smile that lights up a room. An upbeat, positive energy and commitment to people make Cam Burgess an asset to any project he works on.

Cam is the representative for Region 2 on the Provisional Council of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO). This is the north of Superior area with community councils in Thunder Bay and Greenstone; and citizens in Dorion, Nipigon and along the north shore. Cam was heavily involved in the 14th Annual Assembly of MNO held this July at Chippewa Park. No small undertaking, this weeklong event involved 380 Métis citizens from across Ontario and resulted in approximately \$1.2 million in economic spin-offs for Thunder Bay and area.

Growing up in Longlac, Cam was unaware of his Métis heritage. It was a cousin who first started him on the path of learning about his family tree.

As Cam points out, a unique aspect of MNO is its membership registry. A potential member must supply genealogical documentation and proof of Aboriginal ancestry according to this definition adopted at the Métis National Council in 2002. "Métis" means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of Historic Métis Nation ancestry, and is accepted by the Métis Nation.' Over 12,000 people have submitted this documentation; more continue to self-identify. There are 783 registered Métis citizens in the Thunder Bay area.

Métis communities have existed in Ontario since the early fur trade days. Their communities grew up alongside First Nations communities along the traditional water routes from the Ottawa Valley north to James Bay, west through the Nipissing/French River area, around the upper Great Lakes, north of Lake Superior and west to Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods. Section 35 of *The Constitution Act, 1982* included Métis people as one of the Aboriginal peoples whose collective rights were recognized and affirmed.

Founded in 1993, MNO is governed by the 19-member Provisional Council elected in province-wide ballot box elections. Cam and eight others represent the regions of the province. There are also executive members, four senators (like elders), youth and post-secondary student representatives.

Louis Riel said, "Our people will sleep for 100 years, and when they awaken, it will be the artists who bring



Cam Burgess

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their spirits back." That cultural revival is underway. A visit to the MNO Assembly this summer provided a glimpse into the music, dance, visual arts, traditional skills, costumes and sense of community that involved people of all ages in a celebration of their culture.

A source of pride for the Thunder Bay Métis Council is the community centre on May St. across from City Hall, formerly the Branch 6 Legion. This refurbished building houses a variety of programs including health, employment and training, economic development and a youth centre. The housing program operated there serves the whole province of Ontario. And the hall is available for rental for dinners, dances, parties and events.

The hatband in Cam's photo is the Métis sash. The Métis adopted the sash as a symbol of their proud heritage. Not only functional, but colourful and identifiable as Métis apparel, the sash serves as a key holder, first aid kit, washcloth, towel, and as an emergency bridle and saddle blanket. Its fringed ends could become a sewing kit when the Métis were on a buffalo hunt. In Thunder Bay we are most familiar with the sashes worn at Fort William Historical Park. Count on Cam and his group to keep the Métis culture alive, flourishing and contributing to the rich diversity of Northwestern Ontario.

Everyday Heroes is a community initiative by Thunder Bay Ventures. Everywhere there are people living, working, playing and contributing to the fabric of our city. Nominate a hero - heroes@thunderbayventures.com. Read about past heroes at www.thunderbayventures.com