

# Weengushk Film Institute

## *Learning that Transforms*

PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS  
WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT



**L**ocated in M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Weengushk Film Institute (WFI) is a non-profit, artist-focused film and television training centre. It is intended for Aboriginal youth and people of diversity, and was established in 2002 by award-winning artist and filmmaker Shirley Cheechoo, who serves as executive director and artistic director.

WFI teaches technical skills and creative development, preparing students for employment in media and entertainment. Internships and job placements are available thanks to associations with alumni and professionals. WFI programs also count as university credits for BA degrees.

One of the programs

offered is called Journey for Knowledge, considered to be transformational to students. "We focus on land-based learning, Anishinaabe language, traditional food and cultural exchange," organizers note. A visit last year showed several people at work on their individual crafts and film projects.

Ross Armstrong, an



▲ Serene Manitowabi shows the top part of a dress she's making.



▲ With his traditional dance regalia hanging behind him, Hunter Smith, a Mohawk, is making a wampum belt.



▲ Presley Meawasige, working on a 22-minute film called *Raining Sisters*. She is director, producer and writer of the film.



► Craig Fox, a well-known drummer, shows one of his own creations.



► Gerard Armstrong models a shirt he made.



Ojibwe language instructor and land-based coordinator, shared some knowledge. Of traditional drums, he said “Every drum has a different sound. The first drum you make, you must give away. Then you can make another one that you can keep.”

Of the Ojibwe language, he says that the written language has so many letters, that syllables are not the way to teach people. He prefers to teach through sound. “I show children a thing like leather so they see, feel, smell it,” he adds. “They learn better that way.”

Last June, the Weengushk Youth Group travelled west on a cultural exchange to B.C., coming home through the U.S., visiting tribes along the way. This summer the Weengushk International Film Festival will be held at the AOK Four Directions Complex and Manitoulin Hotel and Conference Centre, from July 11 to 14. The special program this year honours residential school survivors, known as warriors.

Reflecting on the success of WFI since she founded it, Shirley acknowledges “the empowerment of Indigenous voices through film, a medium that can convey the deep and complex histories, challenges and resiliency of these communities.”

She knows that “WFI is not just a place of learning but a place of meaningful transformation, impacting both individuals and their communities at large.” **NEV**

▼ Paul MacIntyre takes a break from working with leather.





▲ Tobacco in red cloth, a traditional gift from Ross Armstrong.

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