

Preserving and Sharing Ojibwe Culture

Written and photographed by Gloria Hildebrandt except where noted.



Elementary school teachers at Ojibwe Cultural Foundation learn native crafts to teach to their young students.



Ojibwe Cultural Foundation in M’Chigeeng on Manitoulin Island is available for all to use and enjoy, First Nations and non-First Nations people alike. All that’s needed is an appreciation for culture, history, language, or all three.

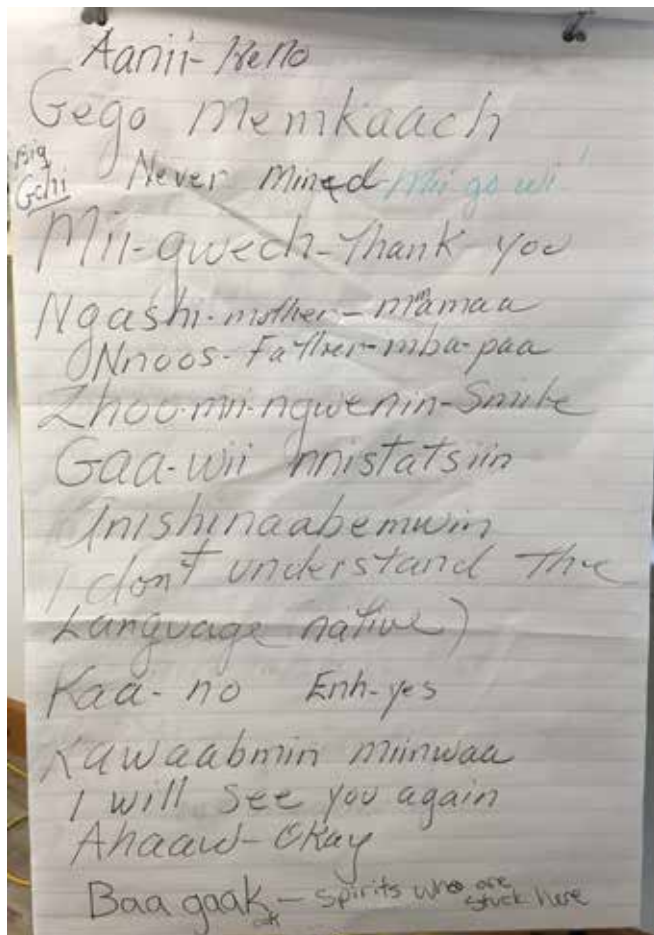


▲ Medicine bags in the process of being made and decorated with beadwork. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

Elementary school educators are at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, having a professional development day to learn about Ojibwe culture and share the knowledge with their young students. They're making leather medicine bags and drums. The bags have been worked on all week and tonight, supper will be served and beading will be done into the night.

Darlene Bebonang has been teaching beadwork and leatherwork there for 12 years. She offers public crafting sessions with materials provided, open to anyone, not just First Nations people. Every day from 10am to 2pm there is Open Studio Time with Darlene featuring a weekly craft, but anyone may use the studio as needed. Craft Night on Tuesdays between 5 and 8pm includes a meal as well as time to work on a selected craft piece.

On this day, Darlene



▲ Language notes on a flip chart: learning and practising the Anishinaabemwin language is the most important goal of the OCF.





◀ Beaded creations by Darlene Bebonang.

▼ Among the wealth of beads in the studio, from left, Eria Panamick-K, Valerie Assinewai and Darlene Bebonang.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.





▲ The healing lodge lets everyone sit as equals around the central fireplace where sacred items are ready for use. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



▲ One side of the entrance wall outside the OCF. The pictographs are the work of the late Carl Beam.



▲ Executive director Glen Hare in the central lobby or atrium. In the floor is the Thunderbird image, part of the symbol for M'Chigeeng First Nation. Changing art exhibits line the space. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

herself is working on a beaded bear band for a top hat. "I married into the Bear Clan," she explains. Her own beadwork can be bought in the building's Gift Shop, with her drop earrings, necklaces, sun catchers and other items available for sale.

She continues giving a tour of the crafts room, showing the beadwork that the women are working on, deer hides in different stages of processing, from off-the-drying frame to the softest, white version after being smoked and dyed, capable of being sewn with a needle without the aid of a thimble.

Eria Panamick-K, a summer student, is beading a pair of earrings for the gift shop. "There are lots of different ways to bead, to fix the bead to the work with the nylon thread," she says. The earrings she's making have the four colours of the medicine wheel: black representing autumn, the



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west, the physical; white for winter, the north, the mental; yellow for spring, the east, the spiritual; and red for summer, the south, the emotional.

Mission of OCF

The Ojibwe Cultural Foundation (OCF) states on its Facebook page that it is “dedicated to the preservation, revitalization and growth of the language, culture and arts of the Anishinaabek” on Manitoulin and the north shore of Lake Huron.

From outside, the modern building is intriguing, marked by sloping entrance walls with what looks like ancient pictographs on them, but were actually created by the renowned artist Carl Beam. Designed by the architectural firm Sears Russell of Toronto, inside, the building is even more beautiful. An open central lobby is lined with changing art exhibits and benches. In addition to the crafts room, other rooms radiate off this space: the healing lodge, art

Every person inside is regarded as equal.

gallery and a permanent residential school exhibit down a short hallway. The gift shop and administrative offices are close to the front door.

The healing lodge is a circular space with a central open fireplace where every person inside is regarded as equal. Two levels of seating ring the room. On the ledge around the fireplace are sacred items that must

not be touched: small rocks, palm-sized feathers and elements for burning and smudging: dried tobacco, sage, sweetgrass and cedar. This room is used for ceremonies, meetings, storytelling and other community meetings. The circular form echoes

traditional sapling-and-bark lodges.

The gallery contains a permanent fine art collection of works by the prominent Anishinaabe artists Carl Beam, Leland Bell, Daphne Odjig and others. Temporary exhibits show the work of other renowned visual artists in traditional and contemporary forms.



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Rainbow Lodge, Birch Island

Traditional art features images of flowers, leaves, strawberries. Baskets have been made from bulrushes, sweetgrass, quills or birch bark. One wall displays information about the clan systems and where they have been traditionally based on Manitoulin Island and around the Great Lakes.

It's fascinating to realize that the Great Lakes and all large waterways were used as transportation routes that were faster and more efficient to use than overland trails through forest and bush. Contemporary society thinks of highways and roadways as ways to move around, and shores as end points, not entrances for the movement of goods and people.

Residential School Exhibit

A row of wood lockers identified by individual metal plates of punched numbers initially looks like nothing but old storage units. Yet secrets remain inside each one; photographs and information are displayed about the children who, in the early 1900s, were taken from Manitoulin and the north shore of Lake Huron to residential schools in the town of Spanish. The exhibit asks us to consider the children who were taken against their will, and to “feel their pain and confusion upon discovering textbooks and a society that had already dismissed Indian people as simple savages impeding the march of civilization.”

Making the point further is an exhibit of an old social studies workbook of western Canada. The perspective is completely settler-based, touting the history and achievements of colonizers and showing an utter disregard for the knowledge of First Nations children.

The gift shop sells contemporary pieces, with some costing from very little to around \$100. In addition to beaded items, there are clothing, books, posters and Beam paints. Also of interest here



▲ Wooden lockers hold secrets about the residential school history. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

is a display of replicas of fragments found in various archaeological sites and stored in OCF's collection.

Preserving Language

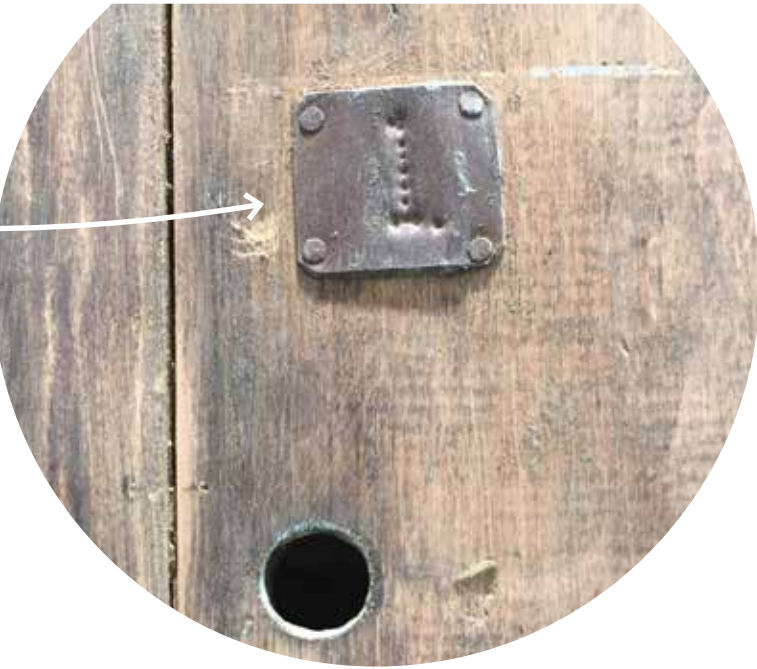
Located in M'Chigeeng First Nation, OCF is vital for all five reserves on Manitoulin.

Executive director Glen Hare states that the number one function of OCF has been preserving the language. A former Ontario Regional Chief with 39 years in politics, he adds “Our language is still at risk. It can't be used in some places. We can't use the language in the halls of school. In politics, I would say to the French, I respect your language, please respect ours. The cultural kicks in after that.”

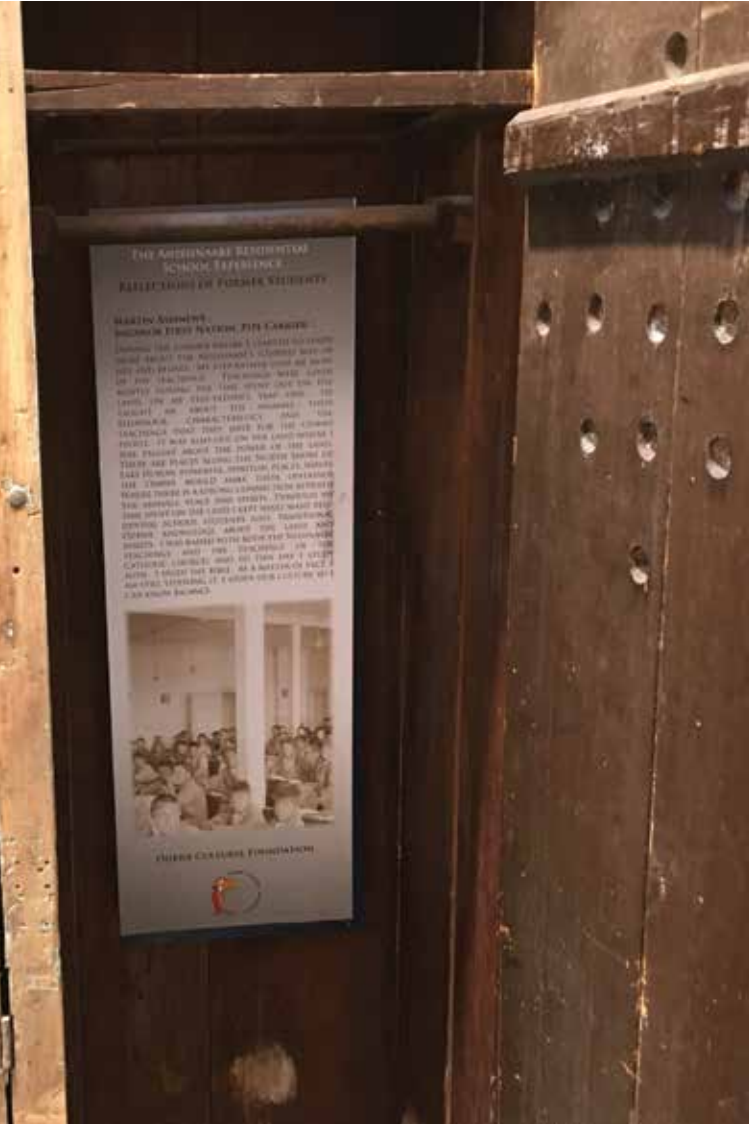
“We're very welcoming,” adds finance officer Valerie Assinewai. “There's positive energy coming from here. It's helped with my own creativity. It was started because of a lack of Indigenous resources in schools. We're blessed to have this in our region.” **NEV**



▼ A punched number plate on the outside of a locker.



▼ Inside each locker is a plaque of history about the pains of residential schools.



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Solitary Sandpiper photo taken by Rob Wray