Beardy’s hears anti-bullying message

BY JASON WARICK, THE STARPHOENIX  JANUARY 28, 2012

DerRic Starlight, the Canadian voice behind several Muppets characters, was at Beardy’s Okemasis First Nation in Saskatchewan Friday delivering an anti-bullying message.

BEARDY’S & OKEMASIS FIRST NATION - As Darnell Sutherland and Maycie Gardypie sat in a packed gymnasium Thursday morning watching comic DeRic Starlight’s anti-bullying puppet show, both were reminded of the taunts, beatings and other abuse they once endured at school.

“I used to be really skinny. They’d push me around and steal my food,” said Sutherland, 15.

“I’d usually say nothing. Sometimes, I’d try to fight back, but that made it worse.”

Gardypie, 11, said other girls would tease her about her weight or call her a boy.

“That would really hurt. I didn’t want to go to school. Boys are more physical bullies. Girls talk about other people,” she said.

Sutherland said he eventually told his friends. They stuck up for him, and the bullying stopped.

Gardypie said the bullying has gradually subsided as her classmates got to know her better.
They say their experience has helped them to speak up when they see others being bullied, and both hoped to learn more during the full-day anti-bullying workshop at the school.

“I want to see how others dealt with it. I want to see how to make a change for other kids,” Gardypie said.

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For more than an hour, the voices of Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy, Bert and Ernie, and even wrestler Hulk Hogan fill the gym at Cst. Robin Cameron Memorial School.

The school's students, as well as those from neighboring Stobart Community Elementary School in Duck Lake, laugh and sing along with DerRic Starlight. The veteran entertainer has worked on the Muppet Show, won a Gemini for his characters from hit Canadian series Wapos Bay and speaks across Canada about how to stop bullying.

“You got to remember, kids out there,” Starlight says while moving a Cookie Monster puppet.

“You have to tell parents, tell teacher, or tell best friend, okay? Don't be shy. No more bullying. Now where's my cookie?”

He repeatedly tells students to be proud of who they are. He gets one of his biggest laughs with an impression Mickey Mouse singing pow-wow, and students enthusiastically mimic his movements as another character sings “If you’re proud to be a Native, stomp your feet.”

Starlight speaks from experience. He was repeatedly called “gay” and other names when he’d bring his Kermit the Frog puppet on the school bus. His late Grannie, the inspiration for a prominent Wapos Bay character, told him to simply show the students his impressions, which were already well-developed by age seven.

The kids loved it, and he became “the most popular kid on the bus.

“I always wanted to work on the Muppets, and I did. You've got to remember there is life after school. You can be a lawyer, a doctor, a pro wrestler.

“Choose your dreams, and don’t let anyone tell you different.”

Following the presentation, students mobbed Starlight for photos and peppered him with questions. The rest of the day was spent in smaller workshops, hearing from ex-convicts and others.

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Cst. Robin Cameron School is named for the local RCMP officer shot and killed by Curtis Dagenais near Spiritwood while responding to a domestic violence report.
Her cousin, Tyler Cameron, is now principal. He hopes sessions like the one this week will start a discussion in the classrooms, but also among the students. He said bullying is one of the causes for the high dropout rates at many First Nations schools.

“We want to make sure they feel safe here,” Cameron said.

This year, Cameron and other staff decided to work closely with teachers from Duck Lake. Gardypie and her classmates came for the anti-bullying seminar, as well as other sessions earlier this year on gang violence. Other topics such as self-esteem and substance abuse are covered later in the year. Stobart has reciprocated, hosting Beardy’s students for other events.

“We’re trying to work more closely. It’s all the same community,” said Cameron.

Friday evening, Beardy’s and Duck Lake students were scheduled to make further connections at a video dance party. Only students with consistent attendance records are allowed at the dance.

“We try to create incentives for students to stay in school,” Cameron said.

As for bullying, Cameron said they have zero tolerance. Following the first incident, the student is sent home. A second infraction results in a meeting with parents. If the bullying continues, a “healing circle” of community elders, teachers and others is convened to rule on the matter. Outcomes include restitution, counselling or expulsion. So far this year, only one healing circle has been called for bullying.

“We try to give everyone chances, but I want bullying kept to a minimum,” he said.

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