

Money for research project

BY KERRY BENJOE, LEADER-POST NOVEMBER 12, 2009

Researchers are hoping that theatre and art will help to create informed and healthy First Nations youth.

First Nations University of Canada (FNUUniv), in partnership with File Hills Qu'Appelle Health Services (FHQ Health Services) and Concordia University, has launched a four-year project to study aboriginal health leadership through theatre.

FNUUniv's Dr. Jo-Ann Episkinew said she's pleased the Canadian Institute of Health Research has chosen to fund the project. It has received \$380,000 over the next four years to carry out the research project.

The researchers will use theatre and other art forms to help youth analyze their decision-making processes regarding healthy and unhealthy behaviours and document it. It all developed about three years ago as a pilot project, Episkinew said.

She explained that Researchers Studying Aboriginal Youth Health Leadership Through Theatre is similar to the Anti-racist, Cross-cultural Team (ACT) development program that's offered in Regina Public Schools. She thought such a program could work in First Nations communities and schools and wanted to get involved.

So, after some discussion with the creators of the ACT program -- which included Linda Goulet from FNUUniv, Warren Linds from Concordia and Karen Schmidt from FHQ Health Services -- the pilot project was born.

"We want to help (First Nations youth) realize that they have choices," said Episkinew.

Since 2006 several workshops have been held in Fort Qu'Appelle and a few First Nations schools within the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council. The workshops usually run over a few days and include a mix of games, theatre and discussion.

"We've had 150 participants attend our workshops," Episkinew said, adding more workshops can be held now that there is funding.

She said the funding will also be used to hire a youth and an adult who can be trained to run the workshops.

"We want this to go on beyond us," Episkinew said, adding she hopes that the program will continue beyond four years.

The idea is to train others who can deliver the workshops so that more young people can participate.

Episkinew said the workshops are designed to build self-esteem and confidence in youths and based on her

experience she believes it has made a difference in the lives of young people.

Although Episkinew enjoyed hosting the workshops and interacting with the youths, she would like to concentrate on the research part of the project.

"All the workshops are a way to collect information," said Episkinew, who's looking forward to helping compile the research.

Once complete, the findings will be shared with other indigenous youth, community members and policy makers.

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