

CHC2P Unit 5: Canada's Century

Activity 2: Aboriginal Personalities

Overview

In this activity, you will examine some of the important figures in Aboriginal communities.

Lesson

Paul Okalik



He had trouble with authority and alcohol. He was the youngest of ten children, and in high school, his older brother committed suicide. In Grade 10, he was kicked out of school for drinking. At age 17, he was in jail for break and enter. He considered ending his life.

This was the early life of Paul Okalik, the person chosen as the first Premier of Nunavut at its birth in 1999. At age 20, Paul received a government job as a researcher. He gained confidence in himself, returned to school, and with support from his parents, overcame alcoholism. Knowing that his brother Norman took his own life to avoid jail, Paul was determined to help his people in their dealings with the justice system. Overcoming his fears of the unknown, he moved to Ottawa and earned the university degrees in political sciences and law that made him Canada's first Inuit lawyer.

Ilira and Feelings of Awe



The Innu have an unemployment rate of 22% and a welfare dependency rate of 33%. As a people, they have the highest suicide rate in the world. The profound difficulties of the Innu arise from their tragic inability to adapt to such enormous cultural change. The arrival of white society in the North of Canada disrupted traditional caribou herd migrations and the Inuit nomadic lifestyle.

In their language, the word "ilira" describes the feeling of fear and awe that the Innu felt toward the white missionaries, traders, and policemen that entered their land. It is the same feeling we have when we face an

intimidating father or vice-principal. Ilira is that tendency in all of us to give the answers that powerful questioners want to hear, not what we really believe.

Inuit parents' feelings of *ilira* allowed for the placement of their children in government residential schools. There, the children were prevented from speaking Aboriginal languages and were given numbers as substitutes for their traditional Inuit names. One can readily imagine the guilt and identity problems that developed within Inuit society.

Jordin Too Too and Nunavut

Another Nunavut resident who is known outside the Territory is Jordin Tootoo, the first Inuit athlete to play in the National Hockey League. After starring for Canada at the 2003 World Junior Championships, Jordin played the next season with the Nashville Predators.

The demons that have haunted Inuit life entered Jordin Tootoo's existence in August 2002. His close friend and brother, Terence, also a professional hockey player, tragically ended his own life after being charged with impaired driving.

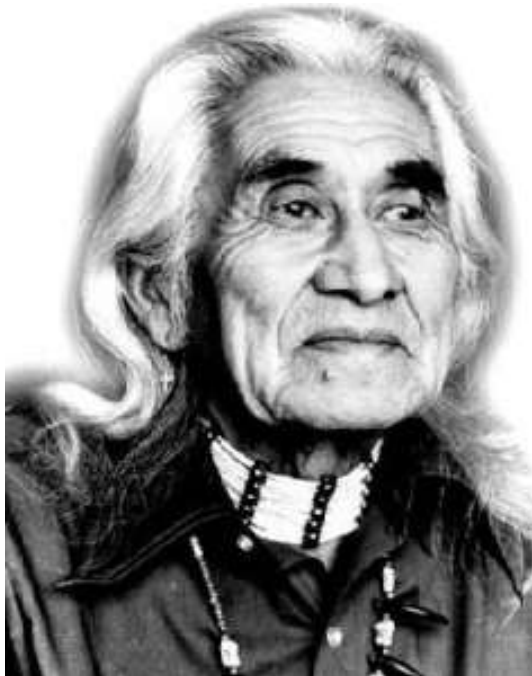
Nunavut, meaning "our land" in the Inuit dialect, is the territory - with the capital Iqaluit - that was carved from the former Northwest Territories. It is hoped that self-government will bring the same rebirth to the Inuit people of the region as that experienced by their first Premier.

Words to a Grandchild

*Excerpt from "Words to a Grandchild"
by Chief Dan George (1899-1981) of the Salish Nation in British Columbia:*

"You come from a shy race.
Ours are the silent ways.
We have always done all things
in a gentle manner,
so much as the brook
that avoids the solid rock
in its search for the sea
and meets the deer in passing.
You too must follow the path
of your own race.
It is steady and deep,
reliable and lasting.
It is you
- if you let it happen."

"You are a person of little,
but it is better to have little
of what is good,
than to possess much
of what is not good.
This your heart will know,
- if you let it happen."



Assignment

1. Describe three obstacles that Paul Okalik needed to overcome before becoming the first premier of Nunavut.
2. What does “ilira” mean in the Innu language?
3. Read about substance abuse by children in Innu community of Sheshatshiu at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/aboriginals/sheshatshiu.html>. Describe some of the reasons why the Innu people are encountering major challenges in their lives.
4. After reading the excerpt from “Words to a Grandchild” by Chief Dan George, list what Chief Dan George believes are two characteristics of his people.
5. Conduct research to find information on the following Aboriginal personalities and indicate the source of your research. Describe how each of the following persons has contributed to Aboriginal well being.
 - a) Roberta Jamieson. Mohawk lawyer and chief;
 - b) Phil Fontaine, head of the Assembly of First Nations;
 - c) Matthew Coon Come, former head of the Assembly of First Nations;
 - d) Inuk singer Susan Aglukark.