



Cree Communicator

News of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band

April 2006



Above: The game-winning PAGC Chiefs, including Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River MP Gary Merasty (fourth from top left), hoist the autographed Maple Leafs shirt.

Right: Kitsaki Management CEO Russell Roberts carries the shirt for Senator Bird into the crowd.



A Bird on the ice is worth two in the bush

➤ *Senator remembered for his favourite pastime*

Allan Bird, who died suddenly on March 15, was a highly-respected elder, war veteran, former Montreal Lake chief, member of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) senate, and father of FSIN grand chief Alphonse Bird. However, the night after he fell fatally ill during the FSIN's general assembly, he was remembered as something else entirely: a devoted fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Speaking from centre ice, five minutes before the close of a charity game between the PAGC Chiefs and the one-game-only Churchill River Banana Blues, a sweat-soaked Gary Merasty spoke affectionately of the late senator's passion for the Leafs. In particular, the new MP and former grand chief of the Prince Albert Grand Council recalled Bird's habit of urging

people to ask him what time it was, then telling them with a grand flourish of his arm to show off his Maple Leafs watch.

Merasty then asked the assembled crowd of spectators to sign a Toronto Maple Leafs shirt, as a sign of respect and affection from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. After the game, the shirt was hand-delivered for signing to the bedside of Senator Myles Venne, a member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's council of elders

and the band's former chief. Remembering the teasing rivalry between himself and his late colleague, Venne agreed to autograph the shirt – on the condition that he could add the emblem of his favourite team: the Montreal Canadiens.

The shirt was buried with the late Senator Bird at his funeral on Monday, March 20.



Kirsten Nelson and Chief Tammy Cook-Seanson watch as Senator Myles Venne puts his own touch on the shirt for his late colleague.

Message from the Chief



As your elected chief of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, it gives me great pleasure to report on behalf of the band council, management, staff and membership. It's been an exciting and challenging year for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.

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Storytelling Week

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Radio phone debate

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Trapper's festival

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I am pleased to present our *Cree Communicator* to update you on what's been happening, and to celebrate our accomplishments as a band and as individual band members.

Our multi-community First Nation government has put into reality many of its plans in the past year. We have been able to bring about many positive and exciting initiatives in our communities including the opening of our modern hockey facility on Far Reserve, the implementation of the home ownership program, which is the first of its kind in Saskatchewan, and the successful completion of the historical Sucker River land exchange process. In addition, community control in Hall Lake has been implemented through the self-administration agreement.

As a band, we have gone through some major changes in the last year. There are new people at the helm, including our executive director Russ Mirasty, who has returned home to our community after an impressive 29 year career with the RCMP. Our former executive director Douglas McLeod is now in charge of the economic development for the FSIN. Our new CEO for Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership is Russell Roberts. After working in management and economic development roles with agencies such as the Prince Albert Grand Council and Northern Affairs, Russell returned to La Ronge last spring and has been working under the mentorship of our outgoing CEO, Ray McKay, who has spent the last few months working part-time on several special projects for KMLP. Please feel free to congratulate his wife Nancy on finally convincing him to retire – at least

from his office job - as he will continue working at the family fishing camp at Shadd Lake.

On band council, we have several first time councillors: Brian Hardlotte of Stanley Mission, Thompson Charles of Grandmother's Bay and representing La Ronge, are Pam Mirasty, Doris Morin, and Hillary Cook. Re-elected councillors are Lester Roberts of Stanley Mission, Jimmy Roberts of La Ronge, John Boy Halkett of Little Red, Leonard Halkett of Hall Lake and Kenny Ratt of Sucker River. After a break from politics, Bernice Roberts and Keith Mirasty have also returned to council to continue serving our communities.

This year, our regular chief and council meetings have been held not only in our chambers in La Ronge, but also in Stanley Mission, Hall Lake and Little Red River, with plans for meetings in Grandmother's Bay and Sucker River. We have also held community meetings in most of the communities, including Pinehouse Lake and Brabant Lake. You will have seen us at various community events all year. We look forward to celebrating with you during the many upcoming events held throughout the year and our forthcoming Treaty Days on May 15-19.

Rotating our meetings has created opportunities for members of council and our council of elders, staff, and officials from the Prince Albert Grand Council, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and other governments to see our beautiful communities. The response from the membership has been incredible when we go into the communities. The welcome that we have felt has been overwhelming and we want to thank the host communities for

their northern hospitality.

Regular communication with the band membership is critically important to us as a council and rotating council meetings is one of the best ways to achieve this. The meetings give us opportunities to see and hear first-hand what the issues are in each community, and to come face-to-face with people who otherwise might not feel comfortable sharing their concerns with staff or elected officials. Holding council meetings in each of the communities has also provided a great educational opportunity for students to observe and participate in our government first hand.

In regards to communication, tools such as *The Cree Communicator* and our revamped website, www.llrib.ca, are also important ways of sharing information with you and it allows us to reach a wider audience. We are in the process of updating the site so that it is a more useful resource, with constantly updated content such as an events calendar, job advertisements, a photo gallery, stories about band members' accomplishments, and more. *The Cree Communicator*, which we plan to publish every two months, will update you on band projects, events happening in our communities, and the work that we as a council are doing on your behalf.

Communication is an important two-way process. If you are not aware of what we're doing, you won't know our goals, or what we're doing to accomplish them. When we have input from you through your suggestions and ideas you will allow us to serve you better. I want you to be confident that your band council, program directors and administrative staff are working for your best interests and to the best of our ability.

Chief's message continued on page 3

"Count yourself in" on census

On May 16, Statistics Canada will be collecting census data from across the country, including the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's communities. Your participation is vitally important, because the information compiled by Stats Can – done on this scale only once every five years – affects not only the band's own planning, but also the amount of government funding the band can access on the basis of population needs.

As Statistics Canada explains, Aboriginal governments and organizations at all levels require good quality data for strategic planning, resource allocation and monitoring of programs. Accurate and complete census information at the national, regional and community levels helps decision-makers understand and address the conditions of Aboriginal peoples across Canada. As well, Aboriginal communities and organizations can use census data to influence federal and provincial funding for programs, policy and research.

Census information is essential for planning schools, public transportation, community programs and services for everyone from children to elders. The data is used to determine funding for education, daycare, health care, housing and more. It can also be an important source of social and economic information (eg. age, education, employment) that can be used to raise awareness and influence public policy.

"Given the many important uses of census data, it is essential that it be complete

and accurate," said C. Jerry Page, Statistics Canada's director for the western region and the Northwest Territories. "Every person counts, especially in smaller communities, where the non-participation of a single person during census can result in a loss of thousands of dollars to the community in terms of funding, programming and service delivery."

Two collection methods will be used in the 2006 census: self-enumeration – where questionnaires are dropped off or mailed to households before census day, and can be completed either on-line or by filling out and then mailing back the pre-paid envelope – and canvasser enumeration. In the latter case, a canvasser comes around to homes and works with the householders to fill out the form. This is done primarily in northern areas and on-reserve.

Some early enumeration has already been done in areas where a large percentage of the population moves to hunting or fishing areas in the spring. If you have not been approached already, look for the census questionnaire in your mailbox or on-line at www.census2006.ca on May 2.

To learn more about what census data is used for, or to make use of the information yourself, contact Statistics Canada's Aboriginal communications manager, Jerry Potts Jr., at (403) 965-4094 or e-mail jdpotts@telusplanet.net. Statistics Canada also produces a quarterly newsletter, *Aboriginal Network Newsletter*, to keep people up to date. Data is available on-line

from the 2001 census; search www.statcan.ca for "Aboriginal" to find community profiles, thematic maps and data such as labour force characteristics, education levels and income levels for communities and groups, sorted if you so choose by ethnicity, geography, age or gender.

Aboriginal children's survey underway

In addition to compiling census data, Statistics Canada is also working on a special report on aboriginal children under the age of 6, both on- and off-reserve.

Specialists in Aboriginal early childhood development, service providers and parents are all involved, ensuring that the survey is relevant and that the perspective of Aboriginal people is respected.

The survey will be done by personal interview or by phone, starting this October and finishing next March, with the final report due out in the fall of 2008. Participation in the survey is completely voluntary.

For more information, call (613) 951-3321 or toll-free 1(800) 461-9050, or e-mail ssd@statcan.ca.

Old stories get fresh hearing

Acknowledging the value of stories told by the elders, both from legend and from their own lives, was the focus of the third annual Aboriginal Storytelling Week organized by Saskatchewan's libraries.

The provincial launch for this special week was held Feb. 5 at Jonas Roberts Memorial Community Centre (JRMCC) on Far Reserve, with a focus on "preserving our culture, story by story." The winter date for Aboriginal Storytelling Week was chosen because this season is the traditional time for storytelling in First Nations and Metis communities.

After opening remarks from town councillor Ron Woytowich (who shared the proverb that "when an elder dies, a library burns down"), Pahkisimon Nuye?ah

Library System director Audrey Mark, Saskatchewan libraries rep Wendy Sinclair and Naomi Atkinson, who represented event sponsor SaskPower, Chief Tammy Cook-Searson kicked off the storytelling with a tale explaining why the loon never walks on the ground. (For the record, the blame goes to that mischievous trickster Wisahketchahk!)

Elders Henry Roberts and Mary Cook also dug into legend, telling stories of a



Elder Mary Cook.



Stories belong to everyone, no matter what age.



Elder Henry Roberts tells a tall tale.

mermaid couple that supposedly lived beneath the rocks in the Sucker River and the brave young warrior who tried to capture them, and of the Big Dipper being formed from the body of a man who infuriated his wife so much that she tossed him over her shoulder into the sky. Elder Louisa Sanderson chose the story of a tribe rescued from the rule of an evil medicine man by a girl who saw through his shapeshifting trickery.

The audience was also treated to a square dance from a group of Grade 3 students from Pre-Cam School, Cree renditions of the songs "O Canada" and "This Land is Your Land" by Edna Mirasty's singing group, and fiddling by Ralph Opikokew. Accompanying herself on guitar, Laura Burnouf sang a song honouring grandfathers, and a Cree version of Elvis Costello's "These Shoes Keep Walking Back to You", which had been translated with the help of elder Mark Cook.

During the week, aboriginal storytellers spent time at libraries throughout

the Pahkisimon Nuye?ah Library System. Elder Henry Roberts, for example, told stories every afternoon at the public library housed at Senator Myles Venne School, sharing about life on the trapline and in residential school. He brought along a suitcase of artifacts, such as bones, which fascinated his young listeners.

As well, each library received a copy of the children's book *As Long as the River Flows*, in which author Larry Loyie shares stories of a summer spent with his grandparents on their trapline.

Chief's message continued from page 2

We also want to celebrate along with you, by sharing and spreading the good news about your accomplishments. If you have a story or an idea to share, call the central office and arrange to speak to one of your elected officials or to our communications officer.

In January, we held our very first strategic planning session to develop a draft guide for our band's future direction. The draft strategic plan will be current, relevant and reflect the interests of our Band. Developing a Strategic Plan will allow Band Members to decide on a future course of action and when completed properly, will provide the Band with a road map to get where we want to go. The second stage of the strategic planning session will be held at the end of April. Please take some time to review the draft vision, values and guiding principles in this issue of the Communicator. We welcome your written submissions which can be provided to me, your councillors or the executive director Russ Mirasty. This is your opportunity to participate in laying the foundation for our band's future.

I will close by saying that we must always acknowledge the contributions of our elders. Their knowledge of our Woodland Cree culture, our language, and our traditions will continue to sustain us into the future, as we pursue our goals as a progressive organization.

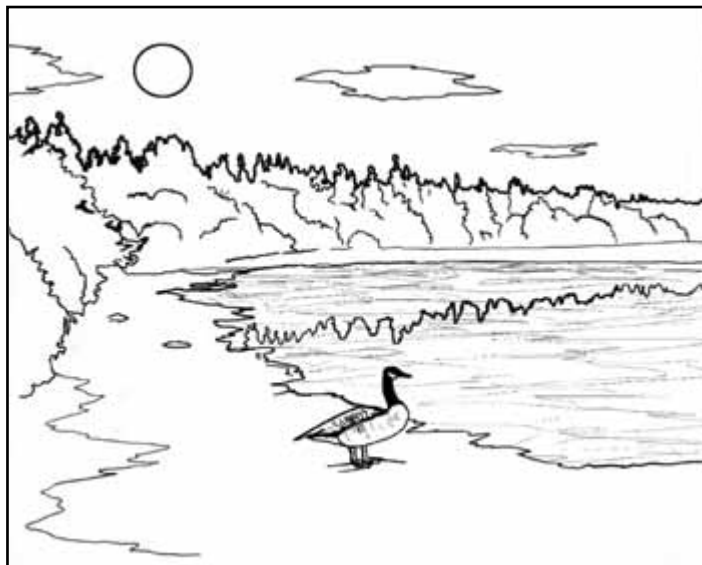
Chief Tammy Cook-Searson
Lac La Ronge Indian Band

Learn a Cree Word

Drawing by Jeff Bell

Syllabics by Rita Cook

Provided by LLRIB Education



sīkwan
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Spring

Gentle spirit, firm grip

➤ Stanley Mission judoka snags medal at Sask. Games

Looking down at the silver medal between his fingers, Robert McKenzie stood silently in a busy hallway behind his coach.

"What's it like to have the medal around your neck?" he's asked. No response.

Ronnie McKenzie translates the question into Cree, verbally nudging for a response.

Robert whispers back in Cree.

"He feels very, very happy about it," Ronnie says.

The name of the sport that Robert competes in means "the gentle way" in Japanese. That describes what the 15-year-old from Stanley Mission is like, but only off the judo mat.

"He's a very competitive athlete," said Ronnie, who's also Robert's cousin. "He likes it. He wants to go out there and win; that's what he likes to do."

It took Robert five matches to reach the 48 kg judo final at the Saskatchewan Winter Games in Melfort on Feb. 16. He faced Andrew Yuen from Zone 2 (Regina) in what he called a "tough match," losing by only one point.

Ronnie turned toward his athlete and asked how many medals he'd won since stepping on the judo mat four years ago. Robert was eager to answer and listed off that he'd won six gold and, as of that afternoon, two silver. His shyness was quickly overcome by his enthusiasm for the success he's had.

This was the first large tournament he's participated in, but he said it won't be the last. He wants to compete at the national judo championships one day, but not yet. He said he needs to practice more than only on Mondays and Wednesdays when his team trains. Workouts include jogging, sit-ups, push-ups and sparring on mats that aren't made for judo.

He says the sport beats soccer, volleyball or any others offered in his community because it's physical.

Ronnie said his club has 30 athletes and, after he sent three of them to the Games, there's been a lot more interest. With Robert's win, there's bound to be even more respect given to the somewhat obscure sport in a community that's dominated by hockey.

With just a smile Robert tells you he's proud of the hard work he was able to translate into a silver medal.

By Matt Kruchak, *The StarPhoenix* (reprinted with permission)



Robert McKenzie of Stanley Mission (right) bows to his competitor in the judo bout that won him a silver medal at the Saskatchewan Winter Games.

Students reap rewards for achievement

The band's education department has handed out its academic achievement awards for 2004-05 to nine students in Grades 4 through 12.

The students were recognized as the top achievers in the band's schools for their grade level. After being nominated by their classroom teachers, the students were evaluated by a committee made up of two staff from the education department and a teacher from each of the schools with eligible schools.

In order to qualify, a student must be a strong academic achiever and have a high rate of school attendance. He or she must also display a positive attitude and good behaviour, participate in community service, and show evidence of strong skills in Cree language and knowledge of Cree culture.

The three youngest grade level winners each receive \$100, the next four \$200, and then the Grade 10, 11 and 12 receive \$400, \$500 and \$600 respectively. As well, each of the students nominated by their classroom teachers but not chosen by the committee as the top student overall receives \$50.

This year's awards went to:

- Gr. 4 Sharon Halkett
Bell's Point Elementary
- Gr. 5 Rolanda Ratt
SMVS
- Gr. 6 Alexis Roberts
SMVS
- Gr. 7 Miranda Ratt
SMVS
- Gr. 8 Naomi Halkett
Sally Ross School
- Gr. 9 Sherri Halkett
SMVS
- Gr. 10 Rayshell Charles
SMVS
- Gr. 11 Yvonne Ross
SMVS
- Gr. 12 Lydia McKenzie
SMVS



Far left: The SMVS winners (back row) and school administrators Jonah Sweatman and Doris Carlson (front row) pose with LLRIB education director Gladys Christiansen (third from back left), Chief Tammy Cook-Searson and executive director Russ Mirasty.

Near left: Education director Gladys Christiansen, Gr. 4 winner Sharon Halkett and Chief Tammy Cook-Searson.

Top: Band members from Hall Lake welcomed Chief Tammy Cook-Searson to Sally Ross School, where she presented Gr. 8 winner Naomi Halkett with her award.



Province, northerners debate radio telephones

Elders, trappers, outfitters and others who live and work in the bush say that the province's Northern Radio Telephone Service (NRTS) is a lifeline, vital to their business operations and their safety.

The government – which pays to keep the system running – says it's dead technology, and it's time the system was shut down.

Now what?

For now, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's answer is to keep the two sides talking. That is what happened Feb. 17, with a meeting in council chambers between concerned band councillors and NRTS users, and the provincial government, represented by cabinet ministers Maynard Sonntag (First Nations and Metis Relations, and minister responsible for SaskTel) and Joan Beatty (Northern Affairs), their senior staff, and officials from SaskTel.

Last October, SaskTel announced plans to shut down the service, due to concern over the stability of the technology NRTS relies on. According to a letter sent to NRTS customers, the supplier of the switch equipment for NRTS is no longer in operation, and there are no means of support available to SaskTel, so if the system breaks down and SaskTel can't fix it, the service can not be re-established. SaskTel's plan was to get permission from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), which regulates all radio systems, to destandardize NRTS service in December, with full withdrawal by Feb. 1, 2006.

This news upset and angered the system's customers and others who recognize the scope of NRTS's use in the North as a means of communicating between isolated locations. This resulted in several public meetings and letters sent to SaskTel and the CRTC, outlining concerns with SaskTel's plan and their proposed alternative, satellite phones. Amongst these concerns are the high cost of the phones, and the fact that they required complicated, frequent recharging, neither of which is

practical for traditional land users. As well, sat phones normally only allow communication between two users, so translation by a third party is impossible.

In December, having reviewed several opinions sent to the CRTC by concerned users, SaskTel sent customers another letter, acknowledging that "HF radio is an integral part of northern society." This time, SaskTel offered to put off re-filing the application to shut down the system, and in the meantime work with northern organizations, customers and government entities to find a new operator for the La Ronge keystation and the radio system it supports. According to the letter, "SaskTel is of the view that it (NRTS) would be better operated by a community organization familiar with the North."

In her submission to the CRTC on Feb. 6, Chief Cook-Searson agreed to support the revised deadline of July 7 for SaskTel to withdraw from NRTS, conditional on long-term funding and a suitable operator being found. This led to the Feb. 17 meeting, where elders and other traditional land users had their say, with the ministers and SaskTel officials hearing first-hand what the radio system has meant to northerners.

Elder Bob Keighley shared the story of nearly losing Bobby Jr. after an accident on the trapline, and how he trekked through the bush to use a two-way radio to arrange a medical flight for his son. "If they didn't have the radio... he could have died," Keighley said. He said that while he knows the system doesn't make much money for the government, they need to pay attention to it, adding that he was very concerned that politicians seem to ignore northerners and their concerns between elections.

Elder Jonas Bird talked about the importance of the system for not just personal safety – which he knows first-hand, having to rely on the radio to get medical help after his father fell through the ice – but for the viability of running a business operation in an isolated area. "Without



Bob Keighley explains his concerns with the government's proposal to shut down the trappers' "lifeline".

that (system)," he said, "there never would have been commercial fishing on Wapawekka Lake."

Henry Ratt of Sucker River explained to the visiting officials that while NRTS only has 90 customers, each radio-phone is relied upon by a network of neighbouring land users. "It's a way of life for us (to use this equipment)," he said. "Please don't take it away from the people who need it."

Stanley Mission band councillor Brian Hardlotte, meanwhile, expressed concern about the economics of shutting down the system and replacing it with satellite phones. "Sure it makes sense for a licensed contractor who makes lots of money... (but) you can't expect a trapper to buy a satellite phone, with the expense of the technology," Hardlotte said.

"You've got to have money (to use sat phones)," agreed Henry Ratt. "We don't."

Rose Hegland worried aloud about the impact that removing the system would have on people who've lived their lives in the bush. With the radio, "somebody always knows that you're safe and sound," she said. Line cutters, exploration companies, trappers and outfitters all rely on the same technology – "whoever you are out there, a two-way radio is your connection back to civilization."

The meeting not only allowed the visitors to hear about and see the technology, it also enabled them to clarify some misconceptions, such as that the government is doing this solely because of money (the bigger concern is making sure the system keeps working, so that land users always have a line of communication open), that they will abandon the users (the system will stay operational as long as it is wanted), or that NRTS makes the government money (it is actually heavily subsidized). "We will work with you to try to keep it going," promised SaskTel official Mike Sanders.

That was good enough for Bob Keighley. "We see now that you don't forget us," he said.



Cabinet ministers Joan Beatty (centre) and Maynard Sonntag (right) examine a two-way radio phone at the La Ronge keystation, under the direction of Aboriginal Affairs assistant deputy minister Richard Gladue (left).

Businesses thriving amidst changes

➤ KMLP continues to grow

Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership is working on several fronts to try to improve existing businesses and take advantage of new business opportunities that may arise in the North.

The La Ronge Motor Hotel is in the midst of a makeover. The lobby is being renovated and a separate entrance to the lounge is being constructed. Also, many of the rooms are being renovated and computer systems modernized. It has been several years since the rooms have been updated and the hotel has now developed a policy to renovate a few rooms every year to make sure that the hotel always keeps bright, modern and up-to-date.

Forestry continues to be a focus in spite of the fact that there are some challenges in the lumber, pulp and paper industries. However, out of challenge comes opportunity. We believe that our band should have a big say in how the forest is managed for coming generations. If there is to be a forest industry in the North, we want to ensure it is environmentally sustainable, and if there are jobs, we want to make sure our band members are involved. We don't want to rely on outsiders to make these decisions for us.

Athabasca Catering has become one of the largest employers in northern Saskatchewan, and we are trying to build on that strength. There are more potential mining developments in the North, and we are constantly promoting Athabasca Catering to try to grow this business and increase job opportunities. Kitsaki and our other partners in this business want to see it continue to grow and prosper.

The staff of Kitsaki wishes Ray McKay, their recently retired CEO, and his wife Nancy, a great retirement with lots of good hunting and fishing.

Submitted by KMLP staff



Renovations are underway in the La Ronge Motor Hotel lobby.



Chief Tammy Cook-Searson presents long-service awards to Athabasca Catering staff at the McArthur River uranium mine (top) and the Key Lake uranium mill (left).

Keethanow meets challenge of rapid growth

The Lac La Ronge Indian Band is literally building one of its newest businesses into an economic success.

In August 2003, the band purchased Boreal Furniture, a furniture and gift store located on-reserve just south of Air Ronge, from Gerry and Gladys Christiansen. The business was re-named Keethanow Lumber and Furniture, and a lumber yard was added to the business.

Since then, the business has grown so rapidly that according to Gerry Christiansen, whom the band hired on as manager, "it surprises us every day." In the first seven months, Keethanow made \$600,000 in sales. In its first full fiscal year, 2004-05, sales grew to \$1.7 million, and by 2005-06 it was up to \$2.5 million.

The key to the business's success is that, Keethanow is not just a source of revenue for the band, it is a primary supplier for the band's construction projects, including housing and offices. This past year, Keethanow supplied lumber, insulation, fittings and furnishings for 37 homes in three communities, plus six teacherages for the newly-expanded Sally Ross School in Hall Lake. With the band planning to build another 41 homes through its CMHC housing program in 2006-07, Christiansen predicts that Keethanow's sales will increase to \$3 million.

"When you're your own best customer, it gives you a comfort level that a lot of businesses don't enjoy," Christiansen said.

The rapid growth has meant that Keethanow has had to do some construction of its own. The business acquired the old go-cart track next door for lumber storage, and a 40' x 60' cold storage warehouse was built to store weather-sensitive materials such as building supplies and appliances. The warehouse was intended to replace six portable storage garages acquired early in the company's history, but business has been so steady that that plan didn't work.

"We've filled them (the garages) up, and they've remained full," Christiansen said. "We're still pretty crammed up in here.... But if you don't have it (on hand), you can't supply it."

Keethanow's services are not yet being used by all of the band's six communities, but Christiansen is hopeful that that will change as the business continues to grow and the communities see not only the advantages to buying from a band-owned company, but also the quality of service Keethanow provides. "We have to earn our business; we don't just get it given to us," he said.

Other potential areas of expansion include acquiring purchase contracts from other First Nations (while Boreal Furniture sold to other bands on a regular basis, the amount of business its new owner has generated has pushed that to the back burner), and getting into the business of building ready-to-move (RTM) homes. The band's new on-reserve home ownership program could make this a viable business venture, Christiansen said. The municipalities of La Ronge and Air Ronge are also



Keethanow Lumber and Furniture is committed to the construction business for the long haul.

growing, and there are no other RTM businesses in the area.

In addition to the contributions Keethanow makes to the band's coffers and its housing program, it has also been a source of employment and training for band members. Keethanow currently has 10 staff, and recent training opportunities have included a bookkeeping course and truck driver 1A certification. Moving into the area of RTM construction could mean even more jobs and training opportunities.

Overall, Christiansen is excited by Keethanow's development over the last two-and-a-half – even if it has kept him from retiring from the business as soon as he'd like. "Because the growth has been so strong, and the amount of homes we've done, it's taken a bit longer (to wrap up his part in the operations)," Christiansen said. "It's been a good endeavour for the band."

*Article and photos by
Carmen Pauls Orthner*



Keethanow's new warehouse is constantly being re-filled with supplies needed for on-reserve home construction.

Charting the waters

➤ Leadership begins strategic planning process

Anyone braving the reef-filled waters of Lac la Ronge needs a map to navigate safely. Taking its cue from the lake from which it gets its name, the Lac La Ronge Indian

Band is also working on a map, in the form of a strategic planning process that its leaders hope will provide the band with clear direction for its future.



The formal strategic planning process began with a three-day retreat, held Jan. 31-Feb. 2, with Kitsaki Management officials, chief and council, program directors and manage-

Members of the band leadership team confer at their strategic planning session. The team is developing a plan that will provide direction for the band in both the short- and long-term. A draft version of their ideas is available for your review on page 9.

ment staff from all six communities all sitting down to brainstorm. The band is working with a consultant, Karen Wianecki, but as executive director Russ Mirasty stressed, "the ideas come from the people at the table."

The process involves all areas of the band, including services such as education, health and social welfare, as well as its businesses. Together, the leaders developed a vision statement and a list of core values the band holds dear, and looked closely at both internal and external political, social and business factors that have an effect on the band – everything from mad cow disease to the U.S.-Canada trade dispute over softwood lumber.

Those at the table also listened to Wianecki's interview-based report on how the band is viewed by others, drawing on businesses, governments and other agencies with whom they have close working relationships.

Right now, the process is still in its early stages, with the councillors reporting back to their communities and program directors speaking with their staff. Another round of planning meetings is scheduled for the end of April, with a final document anticipated by this summer.

However, even when the plan is complete, "it won't be written in stone," Mirasty said. "Like any roadmap, it can change.... It's a fluid document."

Who's who on council



The current Lac La Ronge Indian Band council was elected on March 31, 2005, and officially sworn in by Senator Allan Bird at a ceremony and lunch provided at Keethanow Bingo North on April 7.

Front row:

Counc. Pam Mirasty
La Ronge 425-9320 (cell)
425-5684 (home)

Counc. Bernice Roberts
Stanley Mission 425-7943 (cell)
635-2009 (home)

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson
425-8144 (cell)
425-5000 (home)

Counc. Doris Morin
La Ronge 425-9701 (cell)
425-3284 (home)

Counc. Leonard Halkett
Hall Lake 425-9712 (cell)
425-2656 (home)

Back row:

Counc. Jimmy Roberts
La Ronge 425-7934 (cell)
425-3431 (home)

Counc. John Halkett
Little Red River 960-2332 (cell)
982-2613 (home)

Counc. Lester Roberts
Stanley Mission 425-7324 (cell)
635-2034 (home)

Counc. Keith Mirasty
Little Red River 961-4105 (cell)

Counc. Kenny Ratt
Sucker River 425-7315 (cell)
425-3301 (home)

Counc. Hillary Cook
La Ronge 425-9928 (cell)
425-5404 (home)

Counc. Thompson J. Charles
Grandmother's Bay 425-7888 (cell)
635-4587 (home)

Counc. Brian Hardlotte
Stanley Mission 635-4451 (home)

The Cree Communicator is the official newspaper of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. Its goal is to provide effective and positive communication between the band's chief and council, staff and general membership. This publication serves the 7,500 band members living off-reserve or in the six communities of La Ronge, Stanley Mission, Grandmother's Bay, Sucker River, Hall Lake and Little Red River. It is published once every two months.

LLRIB departments, staff and community members are encouraged to submit story ideas, photos and news about past and upcoming community events and band members' accomplishments.



The Cree Communicator

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Leaders draft ideas for future direction

These are some preliminary thoughts coming out of the leadership's first strategic planning session. Feedback from the membership is strongly encouraged.

Council seeks direction on elders' subsidy program

A program that subsidizes living costs for elders is currently being reviewed to see if it can be maintained in its present format over the long term.

The elders' subsidy program, which provides financial assistance to La Ronge, Sucker River and off-reserve band members who are 65 years of age and older, was established in 1994. It began as a way to help on-reserve elders who were finding that their pensions weren't providing enough money to cover basic costs of living (rent, power and heat), and was expanded in 2002 to include off-reserve elders. Approximately 60 elders are currently receiving assistance through this particular program, while the self-administrated communities have their own programs.

While the band council sees assisting elders in need as a priority, financial realities are intruding on their plans. When the program was first introduced, it was covered by the Ottawa Revenue Trust Funds Account, and then starting in 1998 by surplus dollars from the band's financial transfer agreement (FTA).

Since this is not a program that the band is required by the federal government to operate, money must be found outside the FTA, either a surplus or band revenue. The band currently uses money from the fuel and tobacco tax rebate program from two La Ronge area gas bars and a portion of Sucker River's allotment of casino dollars to fund the program. Annual revenue from the existing funding sources is approximately \$500,000, but that is not enough. Since 2004, the subsidy program has been running a deficit, which is the reason for council's review.

"The current expenses of this program are exceeding revenues, and the ongoing review of the program is needed to determine if there's a better way of providing assistance to those in need with the available resources," said Russ Mirasty, the band's executive director.

"There is consensus in council that elders in need should be helped, it's just a matter of finding out the best way to do it

Consultation meetings were held last October and then again March 23 at Keethanow Bingo North, as a means of gathering advice both from those affected and by the public at large.

"It's a difficult issue to make a decision on," Chief Tammy Cook-Searson said. "It's important that we get input from the elders on how we manage the program."

Council hopes to make a final decision on the subsidy program by the beginning of April.

Vision:

The Lac La Ronge Indian Band will protect, preserve and enhance our treaty and inherent rights, spiritual, cultural, language and traditional values while supporting our members to achieve a better quality of life.

We will focus on building a positive future for our members by taking a leadership role in providing quality education; promoting health, safety and well being; and focusing on training and economic development opportunities.

We will promote the interests of our band members by strengthening existing and building new alliances with our clients and partners.

We will act with honour and integrity to cherish the knowledge of our elders, respect the importance of family, support our children and work collectively for the betterment of all of our people.

Values:

We value our relationships, whether they are business relationships or personal relationships, and we will be guided by the following values.

WISDOM: To cherish knowledge is to know wisdom.

COMPASSION: To show understanding is to know compassion.

RESPECT: To honour all of creation is to have respect.

BRAVERY: To face life with courage is to know bravery.

SHARING: To give is to know sharing.

PATIENCE: To demonstrate kindness is to know patience.

COMMITMENT: To be honourable is to know commitment.

INTEGRITY: To be honest is to know integrity.

TRUTH: To know all of these things is to know truth.

Guiding Principles:

We will focus on being accountable to ourselves and to one another. We will be guided by the following principles:

- Protect, preserve and enhance the integrity of the band.
 - Continually strive for mutual respect between band leaders, management and staff and our membership.
 - Remain firmly committed to treaty relationships and inherent rights.
 - Promote fair treatment of all of our band members.
 - Equitably deliver programs and services to all of our communities.
 - Recognize and offer support to our band members who are unable to represent themselves.
 - Respect the land, natural resources and our traditional lifestyles.
 - Remain firmly committed to an open and transparent decision making process.
 - Remain firmly committed to a balanced budget, fiscal responsibility and accountability.
- In particular we will:
- Respect the independence of our individual communities while recognizing the benefits of a whole team approach.
 - Promote partnerships to build capacity and benefits for all.
 - Communicate effectively with our members, partners, clients and staff.
 - Work together as a whole team for the benefit of all.

Northerners receive Centennial medals



Northern recipients of the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal were recognized Dec. 7 at the La Ronge Motor Hotel. The medals recognize Saskatchewan residents for their contributions to the growth of their communities and the province. This round of recipients received their awards from Lieutenant-Governor Lynda Haverstock (centre, in black), with assistance from Cumberland MLA Joan Beatty (in green jacket).

The honourees (from left to right, starting from back row): Stan Dugan, Tammy Cook-Searson, Bob Keighley, Miriam Cook, Rosie Charles, Gerald McKenzie, Keith Goulet, John Carriere, Dale McAuley, Rachel Jobb, Pierre Settee, Harry Morin, Keewetin Trottier, Elie Fleury, Kevin Roberts, Marg Beament, Nicole Morin, Brenda Nipshank (standing in for medal winner Lionel Bird), Rosalie Tsannie-Burseth (front row), Allan Quandt, Norman McAuley, Mary Venne, Catherine Charles, Elizabeth Charles, Jane Roberts, Mary Ann McKay, Caroline Nelson

Federal government to address concerns

Prior to the Jan. 23 federal election, each of the parties was polled by CTV.ca on what approach they would take on Aboriginal issues. With the Conservative Party of Canada having won a minority government, here is a look at what Prime Minister Stephen Harper's party was promising.

Work to improve economic and social conditions for Aboriginal Canadians.

Transfer the responsibilities of the Northern Development portfolio of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs to territorial and Aboriginal governments, and, where necessary, to appropriate federal departments.

Develop legislation to govern delivery of federal governmental programs for Aboriginals.

Replace the *Indian Act* (and related legislation) with a legislative framework which provides for devolution of full legal and democratic responsibility to First Nations, including the Inuit.

Resolve the backlog of specific claims to provide justice for Aboriginal claimants.

Create a *First Nations Land Ownership Act*, which would transfer reserve land title from the Crown to willing First Nations.

Create a matrimonial property code, in conjunction with First Nations, to pro-

tect spouses and children in cases of marriage breakdown.

Offer choices in schooling for First Nations.

Prime Minister Harper has named Jim Prentice as the new minister of Indian and Northern Affairs. Minister Prentice is a Calgary-based lawyer with 10 years of experience as an Indian claims commissioner, and he served as the Conservatives' Indian Affairs critic under the previous Liberal government, raising issues about safe drinking water and the need for a quick resolution of outstanding residential school claims.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson spoke with Minister Prentice in early March at a meeting of the Canadian Council on Aboriginal Business in Toronto, and he expressed a desire to visit La Ronge. The Lac La Ronge band council wants to see the new

government bring swift resolution to the residential school claims issue, and is also seeking help with several local issues, including improvements to the sewer and water system at Little Red River and the decommissioning of the old bridge at Sucker River, which was part of the land transfer agreement signed last year.



Chief Tammy Cook-Searson and her son Pesim met newly-appointed Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice at a Canadian Council on Aboriginal Business meeting in Toronto.

Update on residential school settlement

The Assembly of First Nations has sent the update below, dated March 16, to First Nations across Canada, in an effort to put to rest rumors about what will happen to the residential school government under the new federal government. This letter was reviewed by chief and council during their March 20-22 meetings in Stanley Mission.

"The Assembly of First Nations successfully negotiated an Agreement in Principle (AIP) on residential schools with Canada, which was signed on November 20, 2005. With cabinet and court approval of the AIP, there will be compensation for all eligible former students who were still living as of May 30th, 2005 as well as an expedited process for those former students who are 65 years of age or older as of that date. It is anticipated that there will be a public announcement when the early payment is to proceed. Application forms would then be made available by Service Canada, and information will also be posted on the AFN website.

You do not need a lawyer for the early payment or common experience payment. However, if you suffered from sexual, physical or serious psychological abuse, the AFN recommends that you retain legal counsel to process a claim against the government.

Since the recent federal election former residential school students are wondering whether or not the new government will honour the AIP. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has assured AFN he would honour the Agreement.

On February 6, 2006, The Honourable Beverly J. Oda was appointed as the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women. Minister Oda is also responsible for the Residential Schools File on behalf of

Canada. The AFN is currently in the process of securing meetings with Minister Oda to discuss the residential schools issue. The AFN is seeking her support to allow early payments for eligible survivors, 65 years of age or over as of May 30, 2005, who attended an eligible Indian Residential School. The AFN is also requesting that she bring the AIP before cabinet for approval as soon as possible.

Once cabinet has approved the final agreement, it will then move through a court approval process, which will take two to three months. By law, there would then be a four- to six-month legal notice period to notify all former students of the settlement agreement.

(Note: Since this letter was sent out, AFN Grand Chief Phil Fontaine has stated that the AFN will push for the four-month legal notice period.) Pending acceptance of the settlement agreement by eligible former students, Service Canada would then be responsible for administering the common experience payment.

Due to the media attention surrounding the proposed settlement, the RCMP has recently issued a warning to residential school survivors who may receive compensation in the future. The RCMP warns survivors to watch out for scam artists and cons who may try to take advantage of them. Unfortunately, elderly people are often seen as easy targets for these types of scams. In the past, scam artists have been known to approach their victims using methods such as requesting charity donations or home repair deals, or offering loans or vehicles in exchange for part of their settlement money.

There have also been past circumstances where family members have taken

advantage of survivors who have received settlement money. The RCMP urges survivors to talk to someone in their family that they can trust.

There has not been any indication that these scams or cons will occur, but people need to be alert at all times and understand that it is still possible they could fall victim to fraud. If it looks or sounds too good to be true, talk to someone you can trust. If you have any questions or concerns, the RCMP urges survivors to contact their local RCMP detachment.

The Assembly of First Nations will continue to issue further information on the residential schools settlement as it becomes available. Thank you for your patience.

Information about the Agreement in Principle is available from the Government of Canada and is posted on the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada (IRSRC) website (www.irsr-rqpi.gc.ca) which will be updated as needed. You may also contact the Government of Canada Residential Schools Help Desk toll free at: 1-800-816-7293. The Government of Canada National Survivors Support Line is also available, 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-866-925-4419."

The AFN has also stated that IRSRC will not verify all the application forms from elders. Only 5% of them will be verified through a random basis, which should speed up the payments to the elders a great deal. However, according to Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations official Harvey Tootoosis, it is likely that the general application forms will all have to be verified, because of the fraudulent claims that will be made by some unscrupulous people.

Chief-turned-MP takes northern issues to Parliament

Okay, so the man who convinced Gary Merasty to run for federal office is no longer prime minister, and in fact has stepped down as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada.

Merasty himself has survived both badmouthing of his campaign and his supporters by former Conservative MP Jeremy Harrison, and a judicial recount that narrowed his win in the Jan. 23 election to a mere 67 votes. He's had to wait weeks beyond the election to even have an

Ottawa phone number assigned to him, never mind an office.

But on April 3, Gary Merasty will finally take his seat in House of Commons as the Member of Parliament for Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River.

He will represent the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's six communities and the rest of northern Saskatchewan as the riding's first Aboriginal MP, and despite the setbacks he's faced in the last two-and-a-half months, Merasty is determined to make his win matter for northerners.

Asked why he willingly participated in the recount despite Harrison's public accusations via the CBC that Merasty's team had reportedly "driven around threatening natives that they wouldn't get their cheques if they didn't vote native," Merasty had a straightforward reply: "If we won, I wanted to know that we won fairly."

"In all fairness," he added, "everybody ran a fair campaign. He (Harrison) brought out a lot of voters, and so did we, and the NDP did a good job too."

After the election, there were a lot of questions raised about a raffle voters were allowed to enter on the Atahkakoop First Nation, whose polling station was the last to report in. With a high number of Liberal votes, Atahkakoop swung the win to Merasty after it had been declared for Harrison. While the Atahkakoop situation remains controversial, Merasty is convinced it had little to do with either the high overall voter riding-wide – an increase of 25 per cent overall from the 2004 election – or with his win.

With the Liberal government having worked out both a settlement deal for residential school survivors and a \$5.2-billion, five-year aboriginal social development deal called the Kelowna Accord, and the Conservatives poised to take away the reins of power, "the issues were hot, and of concern to the constituents, so everybody had... some issue they wanted to speak to with their vote," Merasty said.

"Virtually every election in this riding has always been close," he added, pointing to former MP Rick Laliberte's first win in 1997, when the Reform Party candidate had been declared the winner by the CBC right up until the last polls reported in. "That's the nature of this riding, and I think people have caught on to that, and

so we've seen an increase (in voter turnout) just to make sure that they participate in the process and have a say."

Merasty also feels that his track record with the Prince Albert Grand Council brought him a lot of positive name recognition amongst voters. As grand chief of the PAGC for six years, he not only worked closely aboriginal leaders, but also spent time with community people, built partnerships with non-aboriginal agencies such as regional health authorities, and greatly expanded the PAGC's business development arm. He also built ties to the federal government and its staff, ties that will serve him well as an MP.

"I believed in building bridges and in the common agenda of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, while I was a chief," he said. "So I have good relationships with the non-aboriginal community and the Aboriginal community, and have a heads-up on the issues that now I take and move through the parliamentary system.... It's a lot of the same issues, a lot of the same people, but you use a different vehicle to move the process."

When Merasty was first approached about running for federal office by former Prime Minister Paul Martin a few years ago, he had recently been re-elected to another term with the PAGC. He turned Martin down at the time, saying it wouldn't be fair to leave PAGC in mid-term, but when his term expired last fall, he decided not to run again. The federal election was called in November.

The new MP attributes Martin's interest in him to the success the tribal council had, under his leadership, in pursuing innovative solutions in areas such as education (an area dear to his heart, as a former teacher in his home community of Pelican Narrows), health – especially Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder – and economic development. "These were all initiatives that were wanted across the country, and they happened under our leadership, with the co-operation of the 12 (individual PAGC band) chiefs," Merasty said. "His request to me was, we'd like to see this happen across the country."

With the Liberals now out of office and Martin stepping down as party leader, Merasty is not yet in a position to put his plans directly into action. Instead, he will use his critic's role to goad the government into positive action, especially on the Aboriginal agreements. He is already concerned by changes the Harper administration has made, such as moving the residential school file from Indian Affairs to Heritage Canada. Considering the delicate negotiations that resulted in that agreement, he said, "any amount of tinkering could collapse it."

He is also troubled by the lack of clear funding commitments for the Kelowna Accord. "The current minister of Indian Affairs (Jim Prentice) has a real battle, because he may be committed (to implementing the deal), and he says he's committed, but he's got to convince his cabinet colleagues, who drove a campaign that promised big-ticket items and the aboriginal file was not of them," he said.

Still, as northern Saskatchewan's MP, he intends to fight not only for Aboriginal rights, but also for recognition of what this riding needs – and what it can contribute. Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River is experiencing a baby boom while the rest of the province is aging, and it is also very rich in natural resources. Merasty feels that investing in education and job creation for the North's young people is what Saskatchewan needs. He is also concerned about the backlash that is coming from First Nations and Metis people as the province "gets rich on the resources of our backyard" while they are cut out of the resource development happening in their traditional territories.

"This provincial government and the federal government must work together with the First Nations to benefit everybody," he said. "They (the issues of youth and resource development) tie in together, because if you spark the economy, then those kids – we can therefore invest in them and have the jobs for them once they are educated, and keep them in Saskatchewan and actually make this area much more vibrant."



Gary Merasty



For the first time ever, all three of the Cumberland riding's most recent Members of the Legislative Assembly were in the same room together, with Norman McAuley (left) and Keith Goulet (right) both receiving Saskatchewan Centennial Medals from sitting MLA Joan Beatty on Dec. 7.

La Ronge Trapper's Festival 2006



Clockwise from top left: Trap setting contest; An axe hurls toward the target; Making bannock in the snow; Trappers' events organizer Sam Bird; Broomball fever; Queen Trapper competitors line up for the buckskin parade; Animal calling judges Gerald McKenzie and Franklin Carriere confer; Goalie down!; PAGC Chiefs team member and Member of Parliament Gary Merasty at the charity hockey game; Blowing on the fire; Southend square dancers at the language festival; Language festival MC Minnie McKenzie; Two boys share a laugh during the Junior King Trapper buckskin competition.

