

**‘Completing the Circle’ Aboriginal Gathering Place Fundraising Launch speech**

*Castlegar, B.C. | September 1, 2011*

*As prepared for delivery by Selkirk College President, Angus Graeme*

Welcome everyone; and thank you Gwen for those beautiful words; and Amber and Betty-Jean for those beautiful songs.

Many of you know that Selkirk College operates within an area that spans from Rock Creek to the West, East to Riondel and the east shore of Kootenay Lake and North to Kaslo, up to Nakusp and all points and communities in between.

So I want to begin this afternoon by solemnly and respectfully acknowledging and expressing gratitude to the sovereign First Nations within whose traditional territory Selkirk College operates.

As we have worked toward construction of this Gathering Place we have also been working to continue to build better relationships with the sovereign governments of the Ktunaxa Nation, The Okanagan Nation and the Lakes/Sinixt People of the Colville Confederated Tribes.

So I very much appreciate Gwen’s presence here today from the Ktunaxa Nation and to have Amber and Betty-Jean who have brought song and drum from the Okanagan Nation. Representatives from Colville Reserve government could not be here today as there are important meetings in Nespalem, Washington.

I would also like to acknowledge the Métis Nation of British Columbia represented here today by Bob Adams. We have been working with Bob and the Métis Nation of B.C. to partner on specific grant proposals that will help raise additional funds for this facility.

I also want to say here that I am grateful to all the First Nations and Métis learners at Selkirk College such as Katie Rivard who will sing for us in a moment. Katie is a student in our Human Services program. All of our aboriginal learners are making amazing contributions to Selkirk becoming a better college.

I realize that this is not the grand opening, but I wanted you all to get a sense of the community who has helped to this point today. We are pushing to the finish line and it has by no means been a lonely process.

It has been a journey about reaching out, about building partnerships and friendships, and about learning. I am grateful also and am glad to see here today members of our community who have made and continue to make such tremendous contributions to our college and the important work of learning and capacity building in this region.

They have provided advice and support on helping us set some very important and meaningful goals for programs, supports, and services to aboriginal students and their families. Some of those represented are here and others were not able to be here, but I think it fitting to name some very important people. They include:

- Gwen Phillips, who spoke earlier of the Ktunaxa Nation Council
- Wayne George and Joanne Lih, of the Action Society for Aboriginal Peoples here in the region
- Ed Pongracz of the Lower Columbia All First Nations
- Marilyn James of the Sinixt Nation Society and the Aboriginal Coordinator at Selkirk College
- Vanessa Mitchell and Pauline Terbasket of the Okanagan Nation Alliance
- Jim Boyd of the Arrow Lakes Aboriginal Society in Inchelium Washington
- Andrew Jarrett, along with Donna Wright and Kris Taks of the Kootenay Boundary Community Services Cooperative
- Audrey Repin of Columbia Power Corporation
- Wally Penner of SNC Lavlin
- Doug Carghill from Celgar
- The school districts, especially Wanda Hecht, Jackie Cole and Andy Leathwood from SD 8, Bonnie Vickers and Bill Ford from SD 20,
- Jessica Morin our aboriginal cultural assistant and a student in our Human Services diploma program
- Theresa Southam currently working to help plan the Gathering Place opening and programming

I must also make something of a special mention of that wonderful organization **Columbia Basin Trust**, Wayne Lundberg and at the beginning Wally who assisted with a significant grant for both this Gathering Place and the Gathering Place at College of the Rockies. I am very grateful to them for helping us leverage the original (much appreciated) grant from our Ministry of Advanced Education to take this project to the next level in terms of design and space.

I also want to mention how grateful I am to the architects Thomas Loh, Chris Fairbank and Allan McLeod, and their work with contractor Vector Construction who have helped us bring this project to completion.

And to Jennifer Pascoe (who works here at Selkirk College) for her landscape-garden plan which will also be coming together in the next year. We hope to involve students in the development of indigenous and medicinal plant garden surrounding this space. We also received a ton of help from Allan Chernenkoff, Ashley Popoff and Ron Zaitsoff in our maintenance department as we have started to undertake the finishing.

## **ABOUT THE NEED**

And I'm so pleased you are here. The Gathering Place is a very important step for Selkirk College.

As we have worked on putting this project together we have become more and more aware of how critically important it is for First Nations and Metis learners to connect their learning experiences with their values, and cultural and spiritual traditions; and that when learning is tied to the support of family and community there is a much greater chance of being successful. So first and foremost this has been a process of relationship building, trust building, and being inclusive- a process of “Gathering”. This is absolutely critical to achieving success in all its many definitions.

I was reviewing the National Action Plan on education published by the Assembly of First Nations recently and Grand Chief Shawn Atleo and others describe the absolutely vital need to improve participation and completion rates for aboriginal youth and returning learners if we are to close the socio economic and participatory gap in our society.

And that the public post secondary system must make a concerted contribution to this goal by making investments in strategies and infrastructure to improve participation, access and completion rates of first peoples learners.

We should know this already: education makes an enormous difference in whether an individual realizes their full potential for themselves and their family. There is not another moment to lose. Selkirk College must do its part to help close this gap.

## **ABOUT WAYS OF KNOWING AND LEARNING**

At the college we talk about learning styles and how a good education and learning environment should link theory and practice to how people learn. We also know that approaches to learning differ widely. But Selkirk College has much to learn about indigenous ways of knowing and learning.

Part of what is so critical about the Gathering Place is the role it will play in creating learning experiences that recognize indigenous ways of knowing; that are well supported culturally, promote lifelong and life-stage learning, value people’s experiences, respects and values our elders, and roots us all in a celebration of indigenous cultures and spiritual traditions.

I envision a typical week at the Gathering Place to include:

- Space created for celebration and ceremony and sharing of traditions, art, culture, and craft from all over Canada;
- There is technology to share these activities with partner Gathering places at other Southern Interior colleges (such as Rockies) and universities through real time video conferencing,
- Elders are here, they feel welcome and engaged, and are supporting our learners;
- There is an aboriginal student council and youth leadership/mentorship development activities;
- Learners are able to bring their children down from the daycare during lunch hour to heat up their lunch in the small kitchen and spend time with them;
- Support services to students are scheduled here, either with our own internal staff or with other partner providers such as the Lower Columbia All First Nations, Nation

employment services, the community services coop, or interior health. Perhaps it could serve along the Friendship Centre concept.

- A place to feature and celebrate travelling exhibitions of art, presentations, or performance of song, flute, drum, or dance from any and all First Nations, Metis or Inuit peoples.
- And I see it as a neutral place to meet and talk and continue to build an inclusive community here on this wonderful landscape.

It's just the beginning. And we hope you can join us.

Thank you everyone, enjoy the afternoon and we are all available for questions.