

CFUW-50 years of community involvement

Supporting Aboriginal students

Submitted by the CFUW

Imagine what it must feel like to have lived your whole life in a closely-knit community, then suddenly find yourself in an educational environment hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, where your culture is not necessarily represented in the environment around you, nor in the course material you study.

“This is the reality faced by many Indigenous students when they choose to pursue a post-secondary education” said Randi Heatherington, Coordinator of Aboriginal Services at Champlain Lennoxville. “Here at Champlain College Lennoxville we have developed a variety of services designed to address these challenges in order to champion Aboriginal students in their pursuit of academic success. In recent years we have been very fortunate to be supported in our endeavors by the CFUW Sherbrooke & District, and the Lampe Foundation, which have contributed to our efforts in multiple ways,” Heatherington added.

In 2015, spurred on by CFUW’s Quebec Provincial Council that had prioritized support for Aboriginal education initiatives, Sherbrooke & District CFUW reached out to learn about the program at Champlain. The CFUW Quebec City Club had been providing scholarships for Aboriginal students from the Huron-Wendake nation to attend Laval University for many years. “One of the things that we learned from their experience”, said CFUW member Carol Mooney, “was to ask (rather than presume) what their needs were and how we could best assist them.” When the CFUW met with Randi Heatherington, she explained that the

students often plan to return to their home communities upon graduating to help address some of the systemic, often colonially based challenges facing their people – abuse, violence, corruption. These young people realize that education is key to addressing many of the complex challenges facing their people and their communities. It will allow them to become role models and facilitators of change in their communities, enabling their communities “to walk side-by-side with non-Indigenous communities”.

A widely held perception is that Aboriginal students are fully funded to attend CEGEP or university, when in fact one of the greatest barriers facing Indigenous students pursuing an education is financial. Many of these students have to leave their communities to pursue an education, sometimes leaving behind jobs or roles that were supporting their families or community. When they come to College, having their own apartments or living in student residences is a necessity, not choice. While some receive assistance from their band council or education centres to defray the cost of accommodation and living expenses, many do not. The Assembly of First Nations pointed out that even with federal government support, most bands don’t have the finances to assist all their students in need. At Champlain Lennoxville, students often struggle near the end of term to buy food as their funds are nearing depletion. In response to this need, and to help bridge that funding gap, the CFUW established a food card program and to date has gathered more than \$1,350 through member contributions to help Aborigi-



nal students at Champlain Lennoxville buy groceries.

During discussions with Heatherington, the CFUW learned that another area where the students could use some help was with applying for nationally funded scholarships. Many scholarship programs require students to write letters of introduction/application and often it is these letters that are an important determinant in students being selected as scholarship recipients. Many of the local CFUW members are retired teachers so it was a natural fit for members to volunteer to assist students with their letters. Heatherington explained, “English is often their second or third language and they are competing with students from across Canada whose first language is English or French”. In 2017, one of the students was successful in acquiring a \$1,000 scholarship thanks to the help received from CFUW volunteers.

The club’s affiliate, the Lampe Foundation, also established the Dr. Roberta Cameron Aboriginal Awards in 2017. Three awards of \$400 each are given to students in the Aboriginal program at Champlain Lennoxville who, despite many challenges, have demonstrated determination and perseverance to succeed in their studies. In addition, the CFUW Club and Lampe Foundation are currently raising funds to establish an Indigenous Scholarship in the Education Department at Bishop’s University.

A potluck dinner provided by the CFUW members has become an annual tradition that many Aboriginal students

at Champlain Lennoxville look forward to each January. It is a chance for the students and the volunteers from CFUW to come together to celebrate the students’ success. It also provides an opportunity for sharing and an exchange of cultural understanding. Members of the club bring an array of dishes to provide a buffet for the students. This year, 23 students attended the supper prepared by 10 volunteers from the club. This is also the event where the Dr. Roberta Cameron Awards are presented.

Students from the Aboriginal program recently sent a note thanking the club for its support. “All of these efforts (food cards, scholarships and potluck suppers) encourage us to obtain our goals in life. They are much appreciated!” the note read. Heatherington also added her thanks. “Your continued support is an important part of what helps students succeed-and they are succeeding!”

“What could be more inspiring than knowing you are making a difference in the lives of these students!” said Judy Hopps, Club President.

This is the second article in a series about CFUW, Sherbrooke & District who are celebrating 50 years in 2018. Its vision is to be a dynamic club for all women in the Eastern Townships, engaged in our community by promoting education and life-long learning in a gender-equal society. To learn more about CFUW Sherbrooke & District, please contact at cfuwsherbrooke@gmail.com.

