

Aboriginal artist explores his roots in personal 'Path of Life?'



By Brock Weir

Growing up in North Bay was rough for Donald Chretien.

As a child with a half-Aboriginal heritage, his mother often told him as a child to keep that aspect of his background under wraps.

'She told us not to say we were half native because it was safer that way,' he recalls. 'Then I found out why later on.'

When his mother died, it understandably stirred up many feelings. In addition to mourning, however, it also awakened an insatiable appetite to explore his roots, roots which had been shrouded in so much mystery, at a much deeper level.

Before this significant turning point in his life, Mr. Chretien had already made a name for himself as an artist. In addition to traditional visual arts, such as paint on canvas, his interests took a sharp turn towards animation as well, honing his talents working on such shows as *The Care Bears* and current fare recently seen on such networks as YTV.

This was not the only bend in the road. As he began to uncover his roots, there was another sharp turn ahead, one he illustrates by bending his wrist at a right angle, fingers pointing towards the sky.

'This is my path in life,' he says. 'As I learn, I am rekindling my roots. It has been about 15 years now, but when my mom, who was Aboriginal, passed away, I wanted to make sure I found out the culture and I needed all the help I could get.'

'There are a lot of questions I won't even know about her own childhood and there was a lot of hush-hush stuff.'

To get all the help he could get, he turned to his elders, Basil Johnson in particular, who Mr. Chretien describes as his 'muse.' Johnson has influenced so much of his work, often focusing on clans, to form the building blocks of a greater understanding of the culture shared by Canada's First Nations.

'Eventually I got a commission from Vanoc (the organizing committee behind the 2010 Vancouver Olympics) for an 80-foot mural that is in the Pacific Coliseum permanently,' he recalls. 'At this point I took it as a sign this was maybe the right path I should take. I found out since then that it is definitely the right path I should be taking.'

It is a path Mr. Chretien, now based in Newmarket, has charted on canvas and art lovers and members of the public alike are now invited to join him on this journey in *Mino-Miikana Bimaadiziwin* (otherwise known as 'The Path of Life?'), a new exhibition which

Mr. Chretien introduced to an eager public at the Aurora Cultural Centre last Wednesday night.

It is now on display in the Cultural Centre's Great Hall and Reception Galleries though September 12.

“There is so much to learn,” says Mr. Chretien of what he would like to uncover as he continues on his path. “This is the best time in my life.

Everything I have done up until now is all coming into this ? sculpture, YTV, the Care Bears, the 40-or-so art directors who told me to change things. It is the first time I have ever been free and not planning anything. It is scary as hell because everything was laid out for me, but with this you really put yourself out there. I am just letting myself go now. After all the years of doing this I am just seeing what comes out?and I am happy with what is coming out. I was really scared at the beginning, but now the path is showing me a direction and I am going to keep going with it.”