

First Nations dancers bring message of unity to Pan Am celebrations

By Brock Weir

Over the last few years, the White Pine Dancers have become a familiar fixture at Aurora's community celebrations, often bringing with them a powerful message of family transcending millennia.

As athletes from North and South America descend on the Greater Toronto Area next month for the Pan Am and Parapan Games, this message of family will be stronger than ever as White Pine plays an integral role in Aurora's ceremonies next Thursday, June 25, marking the arrival of the Pan Am Torch.

"This is what the Pan Am games are all about," says Aaron Bell, Ojibwa Storyteller with White Pine. "It is a group of family. They may not be from the same countries, but they are all participating in the same sports. It is about unity at the Pan Am games and that is what we'll be sharing: the ability for nations to come together under one common goal of unity in sport for the benefit of all."

There is a tremendous "coming together" of dancers to make their Pan Am performances something to remember. To mark the occasion, White Pine has brought together a collective of dancers from Toronto, the Mississauga Nation of New Credit and Six Nations Orillia to welcome the Torch and Pan Am participants.

They plan to line the route as torchbearers carry their precious cargo up Yonge Street, across Wellington Street and up Industrial Parkway North, before converging at Lambert Willson Park for a late morning and afternoon community party.

White Pine came together with something different in mind. They have seen many dance troupes come and go, but oftentimes they were very "stoic and closed faced" in their performances, says Mr. Bell. They wanted to convey and share their joy, passion, and sense of fun with the audience, be open, and welcome people in with every movement they make, and this is very much their mandate today.

"We always try to leave the audience with smiles on their faces, smiles in the hearts, and smiles in their spirits," says Mr. Bell. "We try to leave them with a little bit more understanding of what First Nations culture is. We try to create more understanding today so there is less misunderstanding for our children in the future - not just our children, but everyone. If just one person walks away from our presentation with a better understanding of the First Nations culture that has lived beside them for the past 500 years, hopefully their children will have a better understanding and so on. Generations from now there will be a lot more understanding, communication and unity."