

Miss Indigenous Canada uses platform to highlight realities of wildfires



With or without the crown?

That is one of the first questions Jessica McKenzie asks when she sat down with *The Auroran* earlier this week to talk about her time as Miss Indigenous Canada as she prepares to hand over the regalia to her successor later this summer.

It was a fair question as the beaded crown is laden with symbolism, but it's also acquired a bit of extra heft over McKenzie's reign as she's used her title, and all that goes along with it, to raise awareness of ? and much needed funds for ? Indigenous peoples who have been displaced by an ongoing rash of wildfires across the country this year.

McKenzie, an associate of Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, who has been instrumental in guiding municipalities on their individual paths towards reconciliation, is a proud member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, who currently lives in Toronto.

The forest fires impacted her Northern Manitoba community, and surrounding communities directly, and among these three impacted areas, 17,000 individuals were evacuated from Manitoba to southern Ontario for capacity ? and with a goal of making sure these tightly-knit individuals were safe and maintained strong community bonds.

When the reality of the situation began to sink in, McKenzie and her cousin began brainstorming what they could do to help their people. They considered a simple fundraiser or a social media campaign to raise awareness, but the longer they thought, the more cousins joined the conversation, and they decided to try and have the biggest impact they could.

Together, they fanned out to raise much-needed funds and items for those displaced, with anyone who donated \$100, or items of a similar value, receiving a beaded necklace as an extra incentive.

?It was a way to really bring awareness to what's happening as not a lot of people saw anything on the news, not a lot of people saw it on social media, and our main goal was just raising awareness and, if people had a means to support, here's how they could do so, she recalls. ?We had more people from the community come out and actually support, and we ended up raising around \$34,000,

which was really fantastic.

'Once we heard that a majority of the evacuees were pretty close to Toronto, in which myself and a number of organizers actually reside, we said, 'Let's actually personally deliver it to them.' We reached out to the community members directly and said, 'Okay, we have these funds, how can we best support you?' There were a number of brand-new mothers that needed items for their babies - they needed formula, they needed diapers, but there were also some elders who said they needed traditional medicines. It was really a whole range of different essential items that people needed and it was really important to hear it directly from themselves and the rest of their families.'

They were also keen that it would not just be a one-time drop-off, and they were there to meet needs as they arose - and, for some, they continue to arise amid ongoing uncertainty over their futures.

'Many of the evacuees weren't allowed to bring any of their pets, so I even see on Facebook people saying if anyone is still in the community, such as a few firefighters or people that are there to support, 'Please feed my dog. My dog looks like this, this is their name, please just check them out and make sure that they're safe.' What people also don't realize is that they were allowed only one small backpack to actually take with them to be evacuated. When they ask for things like essentials, they really do need them because they basically weren't allowed to bring anything.

'Our message is there are Indigenous peoples out there that really need your support and really need your attention, even if it is not a physical donation - just your awareness and your empathy and understanding is absolutely necessary during these times,' she says.

When McKenzie first stepped up to be considered Miss Indigenous Canada, she did so knowing it came with a certain cache and platform. In many ways, even if she didn't fully appreciate it at the time of her win, it came with the ability to change lives.

One of the ways she's made this a reality is through her Help Your Sibling program, which started when she brought 17 Indigenous youth together from across the country, ranging in age from 18 to 30, making sure they had the guidance and mentorship they needed for 'creating your own path to the future.'

'I'm sure a lot of us dealt with mental health challenges during COVID, where I actually gained really, really heavy anxiety around being in crowds and being out there, and I kind of forgot myself and that sense of direction that I have,' she shares. 'The reason why I signed up [for Miss Indigenous Canada] is just a reminder to love myself and learn how to love myself. Once I won, I was like, 'Oh, my goodness, now I have a big responsibility. How do I actually use this to create change?' I think in the beginning I felt a little bit more of like my own self and my own needs pushing it; having the crown and really connecting with my community - it's our values, it's our traditions, it's our teachings that really brought that crown to us.

'It's a big congratulations to the Opaskwayak Cree Nation because that's theirs, right? It's ours. It's so interesting because it started with me and why I wanted it, but now this is important for the community. No, this is actually important for all Indigenous peoples.'

By Brock Weir