

Tradition meets science at Southlake celebration



By Brock Weir

Southlake Regional Health Centre is not necessarily the first place one thinks of when considering the holistic and spiritual health offered by Canada's first nations.

But traditional medicine and healing came together with scientific innovation last week in Southlake's inaugural Aboriginal Culture Awareness Celebration at Southlake. It was a day of traditional healing in a very modern setting as First Nations elders held a series of programs throughout the day for staff and patients at the hospital. Focusing on First Nations performing, visual, literary, and culinary arts, it was a chance to explore how Aboriginal culture and traditions can impact hospital experiences, particularly at times of birth and death.

"I fully understand the healing circles that go on in our culture," said hospital board member Cathy Proudfoot, herself a Cree woman.

"At Southlake we talk about wellness and healing," added Dr. Dave Williams, President and CEO of the Hospital. "Spirituality is such an incredibly important element of healing. Art is such an incredibly important element of healing and we're so proud to be able to celebrate First Nations culture at Southlake when we have our art program and raising awareness of the importance of spirituality and healing."

Leading the programing were Suzanne Smoke, a member of the Alderville First Nation, the Mississaugas of Rice Lake who sits with the Bear and Medicine clans, and is a leading driver of the Georgina Arts community, and her stepson Jake Charles, who sang a song of welcome.

Mr. Charles led a lesson on the drum circle, explaining how they helped transform his life. Growing up, he wanted a stronger traditional name like "Running Bear" or "Killing Wolf", but traditions through drum circles helped him accept who he was and the importance of such traditions.

"A drum brings out a lot of feelings," he said. "When I sing I feel good and proud and it helps me deal with a lot of emotion, be it anger, shame, nervousness, or anything I have to deal with that day."

With the drums, however, come a lot of responsibility. Such was the responsibility that during his youth he tried to give them away many times. Drumming, singing, dancing, and other forms of self and spiritual expression were frowned upon into the 1960s, he

recounts, explaining to the audience about the effects of residential schools on the native population and culture.

?This kind of thing was taken away and left our community in quite a bit of disarray and pain,? he said, noting community elders and visions, put him back on the spiritual path, becoming a leader in his own community.

?This drum has to be given water, you have to talk to that drum. There is spirit in that drum and it is alive. We take care of it with very high respect. Sometimes the eagle gets a hold of you when you're holding items like this and sometimes the spirit will knock you down a notch to keep you humble. There are many teachings in this drum. We pick up these sticks instead of our war clubs and we sing together on these.?