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NEW LADYSMITH SECONDARY COURSE INTRODUCES YOUTH TO FIRST NATIONS CULTURE

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Ladysmith Chronicle

Ladysmith, First Nation, Stz'uminus

A young teenager rests his hands gently on the bark of a 14-foot long cedar log in John Marston's workshop, his eyes cast intriguingly on the Stz'uminus carver who is explaining the importance of the tree to First Nations culture.

It is nearing the end of the first week of a new semester and the boy is among a class of 30 Ladysmith Secondary School (LSS) students who are enrolled in a new course focused on First Peoples.

"We're really open to the ideas of different teachings we can involve with the kids," Marston said.

"With the cedar tree, that really is our culture all wrapped into a tree. There's a lot of different things that we're going to be able to talk to them about in terms of that."

The new class is called *Language and Land-based Learning* and students are taking photos, writing, carving, weaving or participating through other forms of physical education - such as canoeing or walks in the forest as the weather permits.

The young minds will also have the opportunity to learn the traditional Coast Salish language, Hul'qumi'num, while meeting with Stz'uminus elders.



"The idea of this is for the students to find their own strengths," said Mandy Jones, a Hul'qumi'num teacher at the high school.

It was close to a decade ago when LSS teacher Bill Taylor first sought to bring more Coast Salish elements into the foyer, and only more recently when the right combination of people, including teachers Moira Dolen, Jones and Marston, made that possible.

Timber West donated a 44-foot long cedar from which the Stz'uminus carver created House Posts that were installed last year.

"As the interest and the healing energy of the cedar came into the building that started to help us understand what we needed to do next," Taylor said.

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LSS's principal Margaret Olson then asked Taylor if he would be prepared to offer a more community-based course on First Nations.

He visited schools in Saanich and Cowichan before pitching the concept for the new class to the Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District.

"We would like students to realize that they're working together and are on this journey of learning together and that we're in front of them creating this idea of a home within our school and changing around how education feels," Taylor said.

"The future of the program for me too is dependant on the availability of the people because the idea is that First Peoples' understandings are based on relationships.... so it's important that relationships be in place."

Last week, Marston described to the youth gathered around the cedar how it will become a Welcome Figure for their foyer over the coming weeks and months.

They responded with a budding interest, asking what he enjoys most about his large industrial workshop below the waterfront gallery, and how he goes about establishing a vision for his carvings.

Teachers are hoping to make the walk from LSS regularly so students can witness the roughing in of the carving before it is transported to the school where the finer details will be completed.

Marston concedes the danger of carving knives could mean they explore other ways for students to work with cedar bark while visiting.

"Having this work being done creates a lot of opportunities for all of us to learn about our culture," said Marston, who's hoping during the next visit to have the students bless the tree first before any work is initiated.

One of the main reasons the project has got to this stage is because of the support from the Stz'uminus community, Marston said.

"The greatest thing about it, I believe, is it's the individuals from our community that saw this as an important thing for our youth to go through and learn from," he said.

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