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M E D I A R E L E A S E

UWINNIPEG'S ECO-KIDS CAMP LEVELS PLAYING FIELD FOR INNER-CITY YOUTH

Environmental-themed camp offers Aboriginal values, Indigenous science and hope

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WINNIPEG, MB – More than 700 inner-city youth are participating this summer in The University of Winnipeg's Eco-Kids Camp, one of the largest day camp programs in the city aimed at Aboriginal and inner-city youth. Another 35 high school and university students are being employed as leaders.

"We are providing Aboriginal and inner-city youth with an enriched and fun summer experience that they could not normally afford, and using environmental and cultural activities to engage them and build environmental awareness," said Kevin Chief, Coordinator of the University's Innovative Learning Centre. "We are also employing inner-city high school students to work in community development."

To remove all barriers, children are provided free transportation to Eco-Kids Camp, as well as lunch, snacks, t-shirts and equipment. The day camp, located at Sargent Park Arena, is divided into four program areas – Fire, Earth, Water and Wind. Activities for the seven to 12-year-olds include hands-on environmental science and sustainability experiments such as oil spill simulation and discovering how an aquifer works with the aid of Smarties. As well, campers are responsible for tending to a community "pizza" garden and a circle garden at The University of Winnipeg and they will take part in daily activities related to their ecological footprints, recycling, composting and other sustainable practices that teach respect for the earth.

Cultural teaching is also an integral part of the Eco-Kids Camp experience. Children will learn the seven Ojibway teachings of truth, honesty, respect, wisdom, courage, love and humility (illustrated beautifully by animals); participate in smudging ceremonies; and experience storytellers. Field trips include a daily swim at Sargent Park Pool and visits to the Living Prairie Museum and Assiniboine Forest.

"This is a unique approach offering free, high-quality summer programming aimed at inner-city youth, providing jobs and experience for Aboriginal high school students as camp leaders and the opportunity for inner-city youth to engage in meaningful, community work," said University of Winnipeg President and Vice-Chancellor Dr. Lloyd Axworthy. "As the city's urban university, we are dedicated to reaching out to our neighbours and leveling the playing field for Aboriginal and inner-city youth through our innovative Eco-Kids Camp."

The Eco-Kids day camp is an extension of the Innovative Learning Centre's Eco-Kids and Enviro-Techs programs that operate out of inner-city and North End high schools during the school year, encouraging participation in extra-curricular activities, academic success and graduation.

In cooperation with the Winnipeg School Division, Eco-Kids explores the relationship between culture, science and the environment, and links the Aboriginal community's traditional teachings with science curriculum. Children, ages

10 to 14, in the Eco-Kids program participate in a wide range of field trips as well as hands-on environmental science experiments. Each activity gives participants an opportunity to experience success within their school environment.

Enviro Techs, aimed at high school youth, incorporates traditional Aboriginal teachings with environmental science. It taps into academic potential by training teenagers in Creative Problem Solving and other techniques to promote academic and personal success. The high school students undergo leadership training as well to enable them to work with Eco-Kids and contribute in other positive ways to their community. These programs serve as a “tap on the shoulder” to inner-city youth that there is a place for them at university and they are welcome.

Last February, the University announced its new Opportunity Fund with a benefit concert by Chantal Kreviazuk. This flexible bursary and tuition credit account program is another step in UWinnipeg’s bold approach to target students at a young age who until now could only dream of a post-secondary education.

“By addressing the financial obstacles to attending university and encouraging youth to complete their high school education, UWinnipeg is opening a door of possibilities to Aboriginal and other inner-city youth to get them thinking at an early age about a future that includes university,” said Dr. Axworthy. “According to several recent reports, almost half of our city’s Aboriginal youth do not graduate from high school. The Opportunity Fund – combined with innovative programs such as Eco-Kids and Enviro Techs – demonstrates the University’s commitment to closing that ‘graduation gap’ and enabling inner-city and under-represented students to achieve their full academic potential.”

The Eco-Kids Camp runs Monday – Friday for six one-week sessions throughout July and August. For many of the participants, their week at the Eco-Kids Camp will be a highlight of the summer. “We have had positive responses from the youth who have so far participated, and they are returning day after day with smiles on their faces,” Chief said.

As for the high school junior leaders, Chief says the response has been equally satisfying: “They’re feeling good about themselves, having a summer job and being engaged in community activities,” he said. “Employing inner-city youth is an important component of the Eco-Kids Camp that will pay dividends for the kids themselves, who will consider post-secondary education and other possibilities, and give them hope for the future.”

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