

# Trades program piloted at Goodfish Lake opens employment doors for indigenous women

## Goodfish Lake partners with Women Building Futures

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Journal Staff

Whitefish Lake First Nation created a unique opportunity for indigenous women in the area recently when it provided a construction skills training program at Goodfish Lake last month. Program partners believe the success of this initial program has laid the all-important groundwork to expand employment training on the reserve.

Rennie Houle, the band’s Employment Training Program manager, said his band’s partnership with Women Building Futures (WBF) was the key ingredient in the delivery of the three-month program that saw 10 women graduate, with most of them employed within a month.

“With all the barriers and the limited opportunities that females have, we thought we would target the women, so they can be role models from other ladies throughout our nation,” Houle said, explaining how making trades training available to indigenous women in their own community will open doors that may otherwise remain closed.

And while the program’s operation was a first for Goodfish, it was also something new for WBF. This is the first time WBF has delivered a comprehensive training session that included hands-on skill building entirely on reserve, according to Jacqueline Andersen, WBF director of stakeholder relations. The non-profit organization specializes in recruiting and training women for careers in the trades industries.

“We promote opportunities in trades and related work that aren’t always obvious to women, indigenous or not, and then we provide them with the supports and the readiness to really be successful,” Andersen, explained. “Indigenous women and communities were asking us to bring our programs to their communities for a long time.”

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**PARTNERSHIP** - Pictured left to right: Rennie Houle, Employment Training Program manager, Whitefish Lake Band Councillor Kevin J. Half, Jacqueline Andersen, Women Building Futures, and Whitefish Lake Band Councillor Stan Houle during the graduation celebration.

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# Continued

from page 9 Construction skills training program provides opportunities

However, up until now, she said the right situation with the right partnerships to pilot such a program hadn't presented itself. She said Houle and the Whitefish Lake Band deserve credit for creating a partnership that was focussed on success right out the gate.

"While the training took place at Whitefish, there were six different first nations whose community members took the training and that was through Whitefish Lake's leadership putting politics aside and working on what was best for women, not just in their own community. That showed incredible leadership," Andersen said.

"Ten women graduating, and it filled the entire community hall with community members, leaders, family and friends. There was just so much support," she said. "It was pretty amazing understanding the impact that this will make; changing 10 women's lives and giving them that kind of hope."

The training is no walk in the park and students have to be committed in order to be successful, according to Andersen. Time is spent learning about best practices for successful construction workplace competencies. It is a huge part of the program to ensure the participants, among other things, have important life skills, understand employer expectations, know how to be productive employees, develop communication skills and understand how the apprenticeship process works.

"We call it workplace culture. Every program has a component of that and it's pretty critical to our success."

The hands-on skill component of the program was delivered using a mobile training unit provided by WBF's training partner, the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC). Students were trained in the proper use of a variety of construction tools, building several projects to hone their skills.

For 26-year-old Robyn Houle the opportunity to receive the training in Goodfish Lake was significant as it allowed the mother of three to obtain some skills to pursue employment in the construction industry, without having to leave her home community or family to do it.

"It was awesome," she said, genuinely excited about what the program meant for her. She has worked construction before, but as a flagger and a labourer,



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**CELEBRATION** - Graduates of a the construction skills training program held at Goodfish Lake celebrated their graduation in late June. The class members included: Heather Fox, Michelle Lafleche-Cardinal, Violet Mountain, Robyn Houle, Katie Houle, Melissa Waskahat, Stephanie Matchatis, Mikayla Mathiot and Rachel Janvier.

and is now focused on "moving up the ladder" to better positions in the industry. "It was good because it was all female and the majority of the instructors were women. We all got along, and we make a good team."

Robyn is following up the training by taking a heavy equipment operator course this month and said once she's completed that, she already has a job lined up working road construction at the reserve.

For band councillor Kevin J. Half, the program's success is just the beginning. He said the reserve has offered several trades training programs over the last five years including scaffolding, pipeline and security

that were limited to the band membership. He sees a bigger opportunity to potentially develop a training centre at Goodfish Lake open to all neighbouring first nations.

"The Women Building Futures program was an opportunity, first of all to showcase our community but also to allow us to identify and justify that need for our own training facility," Half said. "This one was strictly for the ladies and it turned out awesome. Now it gives us the business case and establishing a training centre will do exactly that . . . not only providing training, but creating employment opportunities for our people."

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