

# Curve Lake First Nation



*In late June the youth group went to Curve Lake First Nation and the surrounding region for their annual service trip. Three of the group offer reflections on what they learned, experienced, and carry with them still.*

*Rebecca starts us off with her reflection on her experiences.*

For our youth group trip this year, we went to a first nations reserve on Curve Lake in Peterborough. This was definitely one of my favourite trips we have done so far because we got to learn so much about the culture and lifestyle on this reserve. One thing I really noticed about this culture was that people were so caring. People there support each other through anything, and get through hard times by believing that it shows them what's right and builds them stronger. It is almost the opposite to our society today where many people are so negative about tough times, and don't see any good in them.

The community members help people experiencing these hard times, and forgive people for bad choices rather than just cast them away as a lost cause and reject them.

I heard many stories about how proud the community was of people who pushed through bad times. A specific

story that stuck out to me was about two boys in high school who had turned to drugs and whose grades were dropping but then, with the help of the community, turned their lives around by creating an organization to help other aboriginal children get through school. We heard many other stories like this that showed just how positive and loving the community was. I saw how strong the culture was in this place and how much love people all have for each other.

I now fully understand how horrible residential schools were because they tore apart this amazing culture. During our time on the reserve we not only heard many stories about these residential schools but we got to talk to someone who had actually been in one. This was incredible to hear because, instead of just reading it out of a textbook we got to hear somebody's actual opinions and experiences about this issue. Talking to someone who had experienced these things first-hand really personalized and gave me much more in-depth information on what residential schools were really like.

Overall this trip was very inspiring and made me want to visit more places just like this. This was a great trip and I look forward to all our trips in the future!



*Phillip wasn't able to be with the group on their first day. He shares what he experienced throughout his time there.*

I joined the group on the second day because I was sick when they left Toronto. When I got there, the rest of the group was at the Whetung Gallery and they were talking to Mr. Taylor, the artist. He told us his experiences being homeless and getting his life back on track. It was an interesting experience to walk into on my first day, as I was actually able to see the reasons why his art is so amazing.

I remember how cold and hard the basement floor of St. Barnabus Church was, even with puzzle piece mats and a blow-up mini-mattress. It still felt like sleeping on concrete. We went into Lakefield and we worked at a house run by Youth Unlimited where we did yard work. There was a very tricky tree stump that we had to pull out. Tom didn't think we could do it, but we did. My wood chopping experience at the cottage helped! We enjoyed lots of mini cheese Ritz crackers.

We also went to the Petroglyphs Provincial Park, which is made up of the largest set of petroglyphs in Canada. I was pretty amazed at how many there were in that general area.

All in all, the trip was pretty amazing. I learned a lot about the people that were here before European contact. The leaders were awesome, and we had fun.

*Declan's experiences on the trip are rooted in giving thanks and the lasting legacy of this time away.*

Tobacco plays an essential role in the life of giving thanks, as *sema*, the Ojibway word for tobacco, is used in almost every ritual and practice the Anishnaabeg way of life. Tobacco joins its sister plants cedar, sage, and sweetgrass on the medicine wheel as the four ritualized plants used frequently on the reserve. Tobacco is used extensively for giving thanks, something that is done frequently throughout the community.

We heard several stories from our Ojibway guide, Ann Taylor, about the ways in which the Anishnaabeg people were thankful, which put their rituals in a whole new light for me. I saw many hand woven baskets in the cultural centre on the reserve. These baskets, woven from black ash trees used porcupine quills



throughout. The basket makers try to solely use porcupines found as road kill. After using its quills, the basket makers give the porcupine a proper burial, complete with the sprinkling of sema over the body in thanks. This initially seemed like an astounding practice to me, but as Ann continued to talk, I became more and more humbled by the practices of giving thanks used by the Anishnaabeg. For example, Ann told us that when they were crossing a body of water, ceremonial sema was sprinkled on the water for a safe crossing. When hunting, the unused remains of an animal (and there were few that went unused) were also given a proper burial, as close to the land where they were killed as possible. What also speaks to me about these practices is the connection with nature in all of them. The native way of life depends so much on what the Creator has given in nature, enabling a true unification between humans and the land.



On June 29, the third day of our trip, part of the plan for the day was to visit Petroglyphs Provincial Park. These petroglyphs were carved (not painted like pictographs) around 900 CE, and have had strong religious and cultural significance since. There are over 1,000 carvings on the small expanse of rock, which have been preserved by the repainting done by archeology students. In the mid 1980s, the whole rock was enclosed by a building made of corrugated metal and glass. This building allows the carvings to remain visible, and attracts outsiders to the site, introducing them to First Nations culture. As this was a religious site, I was surprised not to experience the special calming feeling that I often have at other religious sites. I asked Ann Taylor, and she agreed with me, pointing out that the building really interferes with the connection of the rock to its natural surroundings. Although Ann had this complaint, a seemingly major one for a site of such religious significance, she spent more time giving thanks. Ann proceeded to say that although she felt the building might have dampened the spirit of the rock, she was grateful that it protects the rock, and also that the Ojibway people have such a good relationship with the park, as well as Ontario Parks. When we asked her what she meant about the native relationships with provincial parks, Ann told us that before the rock became part of the park, they weren't allowed to practice religious ceremonies there: now they can on special occasions. Through all of our conversation, she maintained

a genuinely happy, thankful attitude, which thoroughly impressed me.

On the last day at Curve Lake, we received a smudging at the cultural centre. This was a cleansing ritual, something Ann told us she did every morning. This was a fascinating thing to observe and participate in. While burning sage, Ann prayed to the Creator about various things,

largely based on giving thanks, but not understood by me since she was speaking in Anishnaabemowin. At the end we each brought the smoke towards ourselves with our hands and passed it over our hair, eyes, mouths, ears, and hearts. The prayer ended with the Native word for thank you—*Miigwetch*—repeated three times.

Shortly before leaving for the trip, a friend from my work asked what I was doing on this particular week off, and I told him I was spending part of it on a native reserve north of Peterborough. Very quickly he became interested and asked me what I knew of that culture. I had to say “very little” as I had never been to a native reserve before. When I got back to work, I was telling him my take-away from the trip, which I will now say to you. There is a phenomenal, and very positive connection with nature in the Curve Lake community, largely based on taking only what you need and giving thanks for all that you take. This seems like a concept that can be adapted into our own lives and was further reinforced for me through conversations about environmental science with our leader Elise. So all I can say to those on Curve Lake is *Miigwetch*. For the stories, the knowledge, and the hospitality, Curve Lake was an incredible learning opportunity—*Miigwetch, Miigwetch, Miigwetch*.

*We look forward to hearing more from the youth group about last year's trip and what they have planned for this coming year. Thank you to them and to their leaders for bringing back to our community their experiences so that we can learn from them. Miigwetch.* ❏

