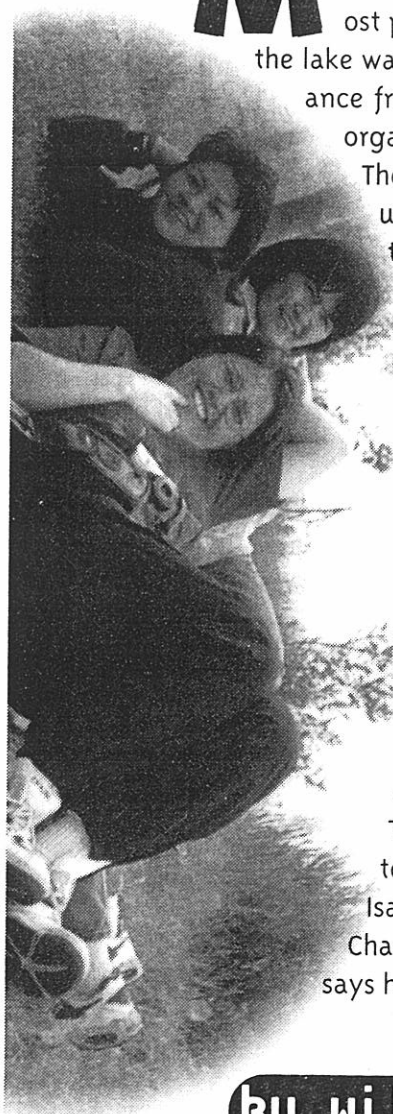
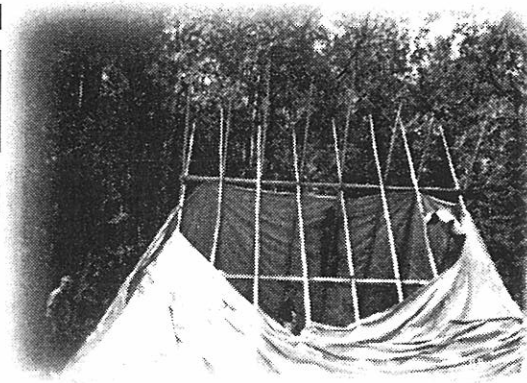


# Working Together Respecting the differences



**M**ost people may not realize it but Mistissini's traditional youth camp up the lake wasn't entirely built by the Mistissini Crees. Mistissini received assistance from a Quebec program called Chantiers Jeunesse, a Montreal-based organization.

The program is much like Katimavik or European organizations in that it uses youth volunteers. Any community in Quebec can request these volunteers to come and work on a community project. One of the requirements is that the project must benefit everyone in the community. Cleaning up a park, building a playground, working on a community centre are just a few of the past projects that Chantiers Jeunesse has worked on.

The other goal of the organization is a social one, according to Jessie Sutherland, a group leader. "It is where youth between 16 and 25 can have an intense living experience, gain more work skills to encourage leadership within youth and autonomy," said Sutherland.

It has only been in the past two years that Chantiers Jeunesse has been doing Native projects. There have been two or three in Inuit communities and this is the second for the Crees. Both have been in Mistissini building the culture camp. Six Mistissini youth and six Québécois youth participated, learning from each other and Cree Elders while building the culture camp. It was a month-long project and many bridges between peoples and generations were built leaving a structure that many can be proud of. Two of the Chantiers Jeunesse participants dropped into The Nation's offices to talk about the project and how they felt about it — Jessie Sutherland and Isabelle Gauthier, a 23-year-old Québécoise and three-time volunteer for Chantiers Jeunesse. Gauthier's first two projects were non-Native but she says her favourite was the last one she did in Mistissini.

by **william nicholls**



**Q.** THE NATION: Did you find a lot of difference between the project in Mistissini and other projects?  
**ISABELLE GAUTHIER:** The difference was that I found the project didn't come about in the same way. It was structured well but not in the same way as others.

**Q.** What do you mean by that?  
 In the other works it was foreseen what you were going to do all the time. It was planned out. In this project, work got done but you never knew what you were going to be doing the next day. And that's what I liked about it, too.

**Q.** So you thought it was more relaxed, or...  
 Yeah, yeah, really. It wasn't stressful. It was really relaxing and the site helped. We were on a lake. About a half-hour canoe ride. One time I was sleeping outside, I did that a lot and I was thinking. In Montreal you have to pay and go inside to see the stars (*the Planetarium—ed.*) and I had never seen them like that before.

**Q.** Did you get a chance to fish?  
 I went fishing but I never caught anything. One time I saw a big pike. I wanted to take off my shirt and catch it but I wasn't fast enough. Mostly I used to go with Sylvain fishing but I would paddle while he fished.

**Q.** How did you get along with Cree participants?  
 The first three days I found it really, really hard especially because I didn't know what they were thinking because they didn't talk. After, this girl Rosie arrived. Rosie was more extroverted than any of the white participants and even asked me why I wasn't talking so much. After that it unblocked everything and I felt more relaxed. At the end everyone was talking but it was ongoing because there was a rotation of the Mistissini youth. We had to start again with the youth.

**Q.** In the beginning the Québécois participants thought the Crees were rude?

**JESSIE SUTHERLAND:** The Cree participants were not talking and at the very beginning the Québécois interpreted this as being very rude. Some thought that the Crees didn't want anything to do with them and felt very insulted.

**Q.** Did they change their minds?  
 At that time four Québécois came and complained about it. It was all of them. Some would wait or take it another way. When there were intercultural conflicts like that, it was always concerning silence, time or work and personal space. The way I dealt with it when it was raised was to make people aware what was important to them. So if they were saying the silence was being rude, I would say, "So it's important to have someone talking to you or looking at you when you're talking?" So it was a way



of getting the Québécois participants to become aware of their own values and that not everyone has those same values. Also to respect their own values as well as the values of others.

At one point I wasn't sure which way it would turn but in the end that's how people acted. They would say that's important to me and respect the differences. At first it was quite heated until people understood.

**Q.** What do you think you learned?

**ISABELLE:** First of all to live more day by day. The other thing was I used to think, "The forest, I would never go into the forest," and now I would love to stay. It is hard to leave the bush. Another thing is that people laugh and joke about "Indian time" and sometimes people would say they didn't really like it — the Crees are unorganized compared to non-Natives. But I feel it is the opposite, that non-Natives get too stressed out by deadlines. It is something that I learned, just relaxing around time.

**JESSIE:** In Chantiers Jeunesse we have a thing called participatory leadership. It's different youth responsible for committees like food committee, etc. On one of these committees we had a minister of meat (laughter)...

Another time at first we had an Elder showing us everything so we'll just follow him, but in the end one guy, a Cree youth named Timothy Matoush, became the minister of work. The Québécois would be shovelling away getting stressed out about finishing the work and he'd come up and say, "Just relax." There'd be some Cree youth in the tent just smoking and laying down while the Québécois were working and he'd encourage the Crees to work. So he was teaching the Québécois to relax and the Crees to work.

**ISABELLE:** The other thing I learned was to observe. We had an Elder working with us. Roderick and I used to just look at him. Within five minutes I would know what the work was without having to ask or him to tell us but by just observing what he was doing.

**Q.**  
**A.**

Roderick seemed to like that. Maybe it was because he didn't have to talk to me (laughter)... Or maybe it was because the work got done. I would drink 40 cups of tea and I never used to drink tea before. Another thing was that when Timothy Matoush would begin to tell a story I would begin to feel hypnotized. A lot of us felt that way. It was calming to us. After that I would always ask him for a story before going to sleep. He would always talk about his culture and he was very proud about that. Then one day we laughed when he came with a small TV and put it in the trees so he wouldn't miss the Olympics (laughter)... There are two sides to every Cree (laughter)...



**Q** And yourself, Jessie, what did you learn?

**JESSIE:** Well, one of the things I noticed centred around the observation thing was the Cree youth would be standing, watching and talking around the work to be done. I was there earlier and the other group leader and myself got to work with the Cree youth. I noticed that there would be a lot of observing and talking about the work. The Québécois would just pile into the work and stress out on the work to be done. A lot of expenditure of energy where the same amount of work would be done when the Cree youth were working together but they wouldn't use as much energy and would be much more relaxed. The Québécois would work a whole day to get the same amount of work done that the Cree youth would do in an hour. The Crees would work the whole day but there would be a lot of talk on the strategy of how to get the job done. It was something I noticed, the relaxed way of tackling the project to get the job done.

I definitely learned also how to be comfortable in silence. At first in group situations where there is silence I would feel all this anxiety to fill up the silence. Especially as a group leader I would have to do things and be entertaining but by the end I was very comfortable in silence. When I got back to Montreal I was blown away by how verbal everyone was and that sort of shifted the joy of being in silence together.

When Isabelle got back to Montreal her friends were saying, "You're not talking to much, what did you do there?" and she would just say, "Lot's of things, I don't feel like talking." She didn't feel like being in Montreal. People kept asking why she didn't feel like talking but she didn't see the point in talking for the sake of talking.

**Q** So I gather Isabelle enjoyed her stay in Mistissini?

**ISABELLE:** I would like to go back in the fall and visit for all the seasons. I would like to do another project but I'm getting a little old for it. Maybe as a group leader.

There was an open house at the end during a general assembly and about 60 or so people came and saw what we had done.

**Q** So you got a response from the community on your work?

**JESSIE:** All the responses in my experience were very positive. We let people know through posters and meeting people what we were doing here.

**ISABELLE:** People were surprised. Especially because there were a lot of women on the project. I really enjoyed the sexism (laughter) because we got to sit down a lot (laughter)...

For example, if it was windy out we would get to go in the motorboat and the guys would have to canoe. So we were always going, "Vive la sexism!"

Once we went to Ouje-Bougoumou. There were con-

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certs by different Cree rock bands as well as Kashtin. We stayed at the hotel but we only had enough money for one room so Timothy Matoush suggested that all the girls stay inside and the guys camp outside. "Vive la sexism!" again! I went to sleep outside anyhow. I wanted to sleep at the culture camp so I slept there with the guys.

**Q.** Is there anyone you would like to thank?

**BOTH WOMEN ANSWERED THIS ONE:** Roderick the Elder, I really appreciated him. Also his entire family. It was really a good project; everyone was really happy. Christian, who had done the request for the project. Larry and Edna, they were very helpful when we were there. The whole Youth Council, Calvin especially; he would often be in his police car when we needed him (laughter)... Everyone, there is many people who were very helpful. The parents of Cindy Neeposh, I don't know their names but they were very helpful. The people from the Band Council.

People were always friendly and dropped by to see if we needed help. One night we wanted to go see the Miss Mistissini Princess Pageant and we weren't sure if we were going to go because all we had were canoes and the half-hour trip in the dark was difficult for us. But each one of the Cree youth invited one person to stay at their house to sleep over. Every family was very generous giving up their beds for us.

We can't forget our friend who used to visit us at 5 a.m. every morning. It was a fox, Isabelle met it every day. One of the Creë participants, Kathleen Rabbitskin, named the fox "Arnold." One of the participants from Montreal, Dominique, had cookies in a can and the fox came and ate out of the can. He started visiting twice a day towards the end. Before and after we worked.

I would like to thank two other people from the Cree School Board, Judy Cooper and Kathy Shecapio. I stayed at Judy's place when I had two days off. It was great. Also Alice Petawabano who put us up for a week.

*For Cree or other Native communities wishing to have Chantiers Jeunesse come to their community to participate in a project, the deadline is October 24 to submit a project. Call (514) 252-3015 and ask to talk to Marc André Caron. Call early since you'll need to have the papers done by the 24th. Chantiers Jeunesse pays for the volunteers while they are in the community but the community is expected to supply a few things. If there are Cree youth between 16 and 25 who would like to volunteer for any Chantiers in Quebec or Europe they can apply any time from now until next year. **end***

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