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Rec specialist to aid Aboriginal youth in healthy lifestyles

by Lindsay Kelly

AUNDECK OMNI KANING-With the cases of obesity and diabetes on the rise amongst youth in First Nations communities, Noojmowin Teg Health Centre is employing a new strategy to encourage physical exercise and healthy lifestyles amongst the Island's vulnerable.

Mark Peltier has been hired as the health centre's Aboriginal children's recreation specialist-a position designed to guide youth into healthy habits through organized recreational activities that are open and free of charge to youth across the health centre's catchment area, which includes the six Manitoulin First Nations as well as Whitefish River.

"Obesity and diabetes are becoming big problems in the Aboriginal communities, so it's something we're targeting to reduce or prevent," he explains. "But the program is not just focussed on physical activity; there's also mental health, Aboriginal traditional teachings and nutrition."

Mr. Peltier, who has an extensive background in the field of recreation and fitness, said the decision to introduce a recreation specialist was made following the success of the Manitoulin First Nations Triathlon.

The event drew an astonishing 72 participants in its first year, and that encouraging start prompted the organization to consider what events could be added to their mandate in future years.

"Noojmowin Teg did have recreational events in the past, primarily the triathlon at Sunshine Alley in Whitefish River," Mr. Peltier explains. "But they wanted to make a change, since a lot of people looked forward to it every summer, but with only one event, they couldn't satisfy every community on a year-round basis."

In Mr. Peltier, Noojmowin Teg has found a qualified, eager specialist who brings extensive training and experience to the position. After graduating from the fitness and leisure management program at Cambrian College, Mr. Peltier worked as a professional fitness trainer in Toronto for a number of years before returning to his hometown of Wikwemikong. He was employed under Wikwemikong's recreation program before taking on his new role, which is funded by the Ministry of Health Promotion.

The program got under way last November, with Mr. Peltier introducing after-school activities like broomball, badminton, floor hockey and ice skating to the youth in the various communities.

"Our main goal is to provide recreation and physical activities for the community, free of charge-there is no cost to anyone," he says, noting that the focus of the program is on kids aged 12 and under, but everyone is welcome. "My goal is to assist in preventing obesity and diabetes through physical activity-that's a huge component of that."

The new program has also allowed for collaboration with the recreation coordinators in each of the communities, as well as Noojmowin Teg's vast array of specialists.

In conjunction with his junior golf program, for example, Mr. Peltier brought in the health centre's dietitian, Zsolt Toth, to offer a lesson on the difference in nutritional content between energy drinks-often laden with sugar and high in calories-and a simple glass of water. As an alternative, he gave the kids a tutorial on how to make more healthy energy drinks at home.

During another lesson, Dan Garcia, the health centre's fetal alcohol spectrum disorder specialist, offered advice on substance abuse and its associated consequences.

Most activities don't require pre-registration-youth can just show up and participate-and Mr. Peltier was pleased with the turnout for activities held throughout the fall and winter. "Participation (was) pretty good," he says. "It's nice to see the kids come out with their families and parents."

Now that he's secured extended funding for the program, he's eager to implement some new ideas and expand the options available to youth.

He's already brought in some expert assistance to aid in teaching kids about the various activities he organizes. For example, this summer, paddling enthusiasts Heather Pennie and Mark Gibeault were brought in to offer guidance on things like learning the parts of the kayak and different strokes for a kayaking and canoeing program.

He also brought in a member of the Sudbury Smashers Table Tennis Club to offer tips on bringing up the kids' table tennis game.

Kids' sport camps are another new idea being introduced by the rec specialist. Offered in six-week blocks, the camps are designed around activities like soccer, slo-pitch, canoeing and kayaking, and ball hockey.

"It provides different recreation and sport opportunities for kids," Mr. Peltier explains. "Every week there's a different sport we work on."

The idea is to introduce kids to different sports they may not have played before, to allow them to get a taste of what they like and don't like.

In Whitefish River, a dryland camp will focus on various sports, and will work on kids' cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, muscle strength, endurance, and balance. The program is open to any interested youth, regardless of whether or not they are in training for a sport.

With all this activity taking place, Noojmowin Teg is embarking on a study, with parents' consent, to record and monitor the body mass indexes (BMIs) of the youth enrolled in the programs. "It's a way of measuring the success of the program," Mr. Peltier says, "and to see if the kids are losing weight."

To his knowledge, no other such study is being undertaken in Canada, and he says there may be opportunities to roll the data into a larger study at some point in the future.

So far, Mr. Peltier hasn't put a cap on the number of kids in each program, but the numbers in the fledgling program are promising.

In a larger community like Wikwemikong, he might see 20 to 30 kids enrolled in a program, whereas in Sheshegwaning or Zhiibaahaasing, the numbers are closer to five to 10 kids. But many of the smaller communities may only have 15 kids registered at the school, so it's a radio about which Mr. Peltier is pleased.

The response from parents has also been positive, because it helps out families who may not be able to afford to enroll their kids in the more expensive sports, but their children still get the benefit of a physical activity, along with valuable lessons on healthy lifestyles.

"There's a good variety of athletic and non-athletic teachings," he says. "And that's really what the program is trying to do to target these kids."

Community members can look for upcoming events in their monthly Noojmowin Teg newsletter.