

Gwichin chief says now is the time to teach traditional knowledge

Written By: John McFadden

The chief of the Fort McPherson-based Tellit Gwich'in Council says the coronavirus threat is a time for Elders to impart traditional knowledge and wisdom to young people.

Chief Wanda Pascal says that while students are out of school, she is encouraging her community members to share their traditional knowledge with young people while their studies are on hold.

Many of the Elders knew this (pandemic) was coming," Pascal told the Dene Nation. "A lot of the Elders have been talking to the young people about previous epidemics in 1918 and 1921. Even for me when I was 10 years old and out on the land in a tent my grandparents used to tell us stories in the evening when the work was done. I remember my grandfather telling me that some day there was going to be a big flu come back. He said when it comes back you are going to see people dying from it - and they have."

Pascal says when young people are taken out on the land, they are often taught traditional knowledge.

"You can't rely on the schools to teach it. You have to do it yourself. I have my grandchildren at my camp and I let them do all the work," Pascal said. "They are working with meat, collecting snow and other tasks. They are all tired by the end of the day."

Pascal adds that getting kids out on the land helps them in terms of social distancing from others as well as giving them the opportunity to learn about everything that goes into keeping a camp safe and productive.

Pascal says along with traditional knowledge comes traditional medicine.

She says community members have been using spruce gum and drinking tamarac tea as ways of clearing the body of toxins during the coronavirus threat.

Pascal adds that community members have been going out on hunts to make sure people in Fort Mac have enough to eat.

She adds that Elders and others have been staffing the microphone at the community's well-known and often listened to radio station.

She says they have been announcing important health information and relaying messages for folks who want to communicate with relatives and friends.

Pascal wanted to thank the health care workers in McPherson who have been hard at work trying to make sure that COVID-19 does not spread into the community.

She agrees that we will get through this but it remains important that we continue to do it together.

There remains five diagnosed cases in the NWT.