

## Cenovus Changes it Up in Janvier

by John Copley

The first half of a one year pilot project that offers a specialized course to Aboriginal youth and young adults has been completed on the Chipewyan Prairie First Nation (CPFN) at Janvier, Alberta. The course is for participants who are unemployed, underemployed, out-of-school and/or lacking in the essential skills and core competencies required by most companies operating in Canada. The program, Change It Up,, began on February 8, 2010 with an enrollment of 27 participants, most of whom come from the CPFN and the municipal hamlet of Janvier. It concluded on Wednesday, July 28, when 22 graduating participants received their diplomas and took part in a full graduation ceremony at the Chipewyan Prairie Multiplex.

"Program organizers," explained Reg Curren, a Media Advisor with Calgary-based Cenovus Energy Inc., "with the help of a local Band Counselor, went door-to-door in search of youth aged 15 to 30 who were disengaged from the education system. Twenty-two of the 27 people who enrolled in the program, graduated."

Most of the funding for the project came from the federal government's Economic Action Plan, which included a two year initiative to help establish the Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund (ASTSIF). The fund supports short-term,



Several Change It Up! participants celebrate their graduation from the skills training program with their facilitators outside the community hall in Janvier, AB, on July 28

focused initiatives designed to help Aboriginal people get the specific skills they require to benefit from economic opportunities, including those generated by the federal stimulus package.

ASTSIF was designed and implemented to help strengthen partnerships between Aboriginal organizations and employers to help Aboriginal people gain the skills they need for the labour market today and for the long term. The initiative also supports greater investments in training for individuals who face barriers to employment, such as low literacy and a lack of essential skills. The main

objectives of the program include the generation of concrete, guaranteed job opportunities by establishing partnerships with small and medium-size employers; supporting projects that assist Aboriginal people with barriers to employment, including literacy and essential skills, through the support of projects that test innovative approaches to Aboriginal labour market programming. The initiative has both regional and national components.

Cenovus Energy, in partnership with the federal and

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*Best wishes to all students and educators for a successful school year*



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provincial government, launched the Janvier initiative in February this year. The feds provided the largest piece of the funding but the Province of Alberta also contributed to the initiative.

"Cenovus," explained Curren, "provided additional money, 30 laptop computers, stationery supplies, trailers for accommodation and some transportation."

Derek Bruno, one of the onsite coordinators in Janvier, moved from his home on the Samson Cree Nation to run the program. His wife, Theresa Callihou, coordinated the project.

"The program was a very big success and the graduation ceremony was both heartwarming and rewarding," noted Curren. "About 150 people attended the graduation ceremonies, which included a dinner and an awards presentation. Community Elders also took part in the ceremony, which was a lively and activity-filled event where you could actually feel the pride and understand the sense of accomplishment that these young men and women were experiencing."

Classroom Connections Executive Director, Heather McTaggart agrees. Her company developed the training module and she was one of those who went door-to-door to explain the initiative and search for participants before the actual course got underway.

"It was a very rewarding experience," she assured. "The success of the first phase of this initiative clearly indicates that if you want to get people on the right track as far as education is concerned, you have to step outside the box. There's no clear-cut 'one education system for all' and that is particularly true when dealing with First Nations communities and individuals. Those people who participated in the course are talented, thoughtful and strong. They have many skills and many talents and with a 90 per cent-plus graduation rate, you know that this is just the beginning for them. Education needs to be revisited; there's no one-model-fits-all program that works; every person is unique and every culture has its own way of learning. We have to begin putting our educational priorities in line if we want to see the type of success stories that we witnessed at Janvier last month."

During the first eight weeks of the five month-long course the students participated in baseline assessments, skill self discovery and asset building. The program was endorsed by Chief Vern Janvier for the difference it was making in his community and because of this, one of the major projects that Change

It Up! was involved in, was planning the youth portion of CPFN's Treaty Days. "The group also completed a community mapping project with goals of community beautification," added Curren.

Cenovus Energy Inc. has a keen interest in helping Aboriginal people gain the knowledge they need to compete in northern Alberta's workplace. It just makes good sense, socially and economically.

"Our company is continuing to expand and grow," noted Curren, speaking about the importance of local community involvement. "We will require people to work in these northern regions, and who is better qualified than someone familiar with a region, someone who lives in or near the communities we are working with? It just makes good business sense to work with and train individuals who already live in the area where our business is being developed. There is plenty of opportunity right now, and there will be even more opportunities in the future for people with the skill sets and knowledge required to work in our industry. Cenovus works in and around numerous Aboriginal communities, many of which are located in isolated rural regions. We work in unison with these communities and their leaderships to ensure that we are working together to create every opportunity possible. It just makes good business sense to train, educate and employ people who already live in the regions we are working in. At Cenovus we appreciate the contributions that Aboriginal Canadians have made to this province and this country and we are working to ensure that local communities are included, and that includes employment opportunities."

The second training course gets underway at Janvier next month.

"We expect to see five or six of the graduates from the first course join us again next month for additional



Several participants in the Change It Up! skills training program share a laugh at their graduation ceremony in Janvier, AB, on July 28.

training," noted McTaggart, speaking about some of the changes that will take place in the program. "This second course will include more focus on family so this time we'll also incorporate a segment on parenting skills. A smaller group will concentrate on entrepreneurial opportunities, a session that will be run by Derek Bruno, who is quite familiar with entrepreneurship and what it takes to succeed in today's marketplace. We've also hired Mara Nokohoo, a local resident with experience in both Aboriginal literacy and parenting. She worked with us a couple of times a week during the first course and this time around she'll be a full-time member of our training component. Several of the participants who graduated from the course have already been in touch with me, so I know they are anxious to put the skills they've acquired to good use."

For more information visit [www.classroomconnections.ca/en/initiatives.html](http://www.classroomconnections.ca/en/initiatives.html) or [www.changelearning.ca](http://www.changelearning.ca)

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