

THE WOODLAND VOICE

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Mille Lacs Band Breaks Ground on Early Education Building

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe broke ground in July on a new building for its early education department. The 47,600 square-foot building, located adjacent to the Band's District I Community Center, will accommodate approximately 200 students ages 0-5 years old.

The new building reflects the growing demand for the Band's Head Start and Early Head Start programs, which integrate Ojibwe language and cultural instruction into the standard curriculum. The program currently serves 117 students in District I (north of Onamia), with 70 children on the waiting list.

"Education is one of the Mille Lacs Band's highest priorities. At a time when many school districts have had to make hard cuts, we are humbled to have the opportunity to invest in the future of our youth and our education system," said Dennis Olson, Mille Lacs Band Commissioner of Education.

The Mille Lacs Band early education department is a combination of six programs: federal Head Start, Minnesota Head Start, federal Early Head Start, Early Childhood Family Education, and Early Childhood Special Education (provided with the Onamia Public Schools), and childcare. The Band's Head Start, Early Head Start, and childcare programs are available for children in all three reservation districts.

The new early education building will include 17 classrooms, a gymnasium, large motor play areas, spaces to serve family needs, and integrated storm shelters. The building will also feature a cultural room where Elders will teach Ojibwe traditions, including drumming, dancing and



Mille Lacs Band Head Start and Early Head Start students helped break ground on the Band's new early education building in District I. The building is scheduled to be complete in August 2012.

crafts. The design incorporates cutting-edge green building techniques, including natural lighting and a geothermal heating and cooling system.

The Mille Lacs Band is funding the majority of the \$9.5 million construction project. Additional funding is provided by the federal government through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) Early Head Start grants.

The project will create between 75-100 construction jobs. To fully staff the building, the early education department will need to hire 21 new positions.

"Education needs to begin at an early age," said Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Marge Anderson. "This new building will give us the resources to educate the next generation of Mille Lacs Band leaders."

The early education building is scheduled to be completed in August 2012. 

Nurturing Our Children

Mille Lacs Band empowers yo

The Mille Lacs Band has always considered educating the next generation of tribal leaders a key to its success. However, like many tribal communities in rural regions, the Mille Lacs Band has struggled through decades of poverty – a major factor in student achievement.

Thanks to gaming and the Band's progress made under self-governance, the Band has become increasingly committed to developing its youth by supporting the Nay Ah Shing Schools and student participation in programming designed to promote life skills, preserve Native culture, and engage them in the community.

Creating a support system

In early 2011, the Band started Boys & Girls Club chapters in each reservation district to improve community access and exposure to opportunities designed to help youth find success.

The Band's Boys & Girls Club chapters focus on education, career, character, leadership, life skills, the arts, health, fitness, sports and recreation. The organization has staff members who specialize in each area to better assist participants.

"The Boys & Girls Club has been around for 140 years. It's a successful model for fostering healthy, productive youth," said Justin Beaulieu, director of operations for the Band's four Boys & Girls Club chapters.



District II Mille Lacs Band Boys & Girls Club members participate in a recreational lacrosse game.

“Our youth are our leaders of tomorrow. By helping them learn about the history of their ancestors and participate civically at a young age, we can help them become leaders in tribal government and good role models for other American Indian youth.”

– Elizabeth Scott
Mille Lacs Band
local community coordinator

Fostering personal growth

Several young Band members have participated in educational camps and conferences to enhance their cultural knowledge and civic engagement.

In July, 15 Mille Lacs Band youth participated in the United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) conference as one of the largest tribal representations in attendance. At the conference, they discussed major issues affecting tribes today, including health, families, culture, education, economic development, the environment, and tribal governments. In addition to the discussions, participants attended an education and career fair, and heard from government and economic leaders, including Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Marge Anderson and President Barack Obama (via video message).

Band youth also took part in the Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota (NVAM) Youth Civic Camp and Yes! Camp, an American Indian Business Leaders camp hosted by Central Lakes College in Brainerd.

During the NVAM Youth Civic Camp, the youth learned about tribal history, tribal

Nurturing Our Children

Youth to be leaders of tomorrow

sovereignty, and the importance of civic engagement and voting. Guest speaker Elizabeth Scott, Mille Lacs Band local community coordinator, shared how she became interested in politics and how she has applied that passion in her professional career. Scott has served as an election director for two legislative districts and as a state delegate at the Democratic convention in 2008 and 2010.

“Our youth are our leaders of tomorrow,” said Scott. “By helping them learn about the history of their ancestors and participate civically at a young age, we can help them become leaders in tribal government and good role models for other American Indian youth.”

Encouraging healthy habits

As a part of educational and nutritional programming, the Nay Ah Shing Schools have planted four gardens for the past three years with a variety of fruits, vegetables and herbs.

This year, the vegetable garden yielded corn, carrots, lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, shallots, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, onions, and bell peppers. The fruit garden produced raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, asparagus and rhubarb. The herb garden harvested parsley, basil, sage and thyme. The fourth garden,



For the past four years, students, faculty, and staff of the Nay Ah Shing schools have planted gardens as part of the school's educational and nutritional programming.

nicknamed the vine garden, grew pumpkins, squash, zucchini and cucumbers.

Each year, Nay Ah Shing students tend the gardens, learn about the produce, and eat the food during taste-testing sessions and school meals.

The gardens have helped the Nay Ah Shing Schools and Mille Lacs Early Education Program exceed federal guidelines for the amount of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables served at meals.

As part of the Band's health initiative, several youth were involved in the creation of a public service announcement aimed at encouraging families to make healthy food choices. In the video, which is titled “Wiisiniwin-Mino-Bimaadiziwin” (meaning food-good-life in Ojibwe), students are featured picking fruits and vegetables from the Nay Ah Shing gardens.

The advertisement has been posted on millelacsband.com in addition to being placed at schools, clinics, and other locations around the Mille Lacs community to promote healthy habits for people of all ages. 🌿



Chief Executive Marge Anderson joined 15 Mille Lacs Band youth who attended the United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) conference.

Investing in Homes

Band Responds to Housing Needs

Quality, affordable housing in rural areas can be difficult to find. On the Mille Lacs Reservation, the Mille Lacs Band has invested in community infrastructure and quality housing and worked to overcome housing shortages and homelessness. Since 1991 the Band has built nearly 400 new homes and renovated many existing homes.

Despite the Band's investment in housing over the past two decades, the housing department's waiting list still has more than 400 households. The typical wait is five years.

"We estimate that half of the families on our housing waiting list are homeless or living in overcrowded conditions," said Arlene Weous, the Band's director of housing.

The Mille Lacs Band is working to address the problem of homelessness among Band members with the help of a \$25,000 grant from the Blandin Foundation, which was given in October 2010. The grant was used to develop a 10-year strategic plan to end homelessness.

"Due to unique cultural and social implications, homelessness among American Indian populations cannot be addressed in the same way that homelessness is addressed in other populations," said Sam Moose, Commissioner of Community Development. "The Mille Lacs Band is working to break down the barriers that create homelessness and provide safe and affordable housing that addresses the individual and cultural needs of Band members."

Some of the Band members who need an extra level of help have recently moved into a new 20-unit supportive housing development. Tenants and




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their families are paired with case managers, health care professionals, educators, and others who help them develop individualized plans to become independent. Families live in the supportive housing units for up to two years.

The development, which opened in May, was quickly filled with 20 families, and 13 families are on the waiting list. Families are selected based on need, and rent is determined by each resident's net income.

"The response for these units was overwhelming," said Weous. "I'm excited for the opportunities this program brings our families, children and community."

In addition to offering rental homes, the Band also operates a home loan program and home improvement grants for Band members who want to buy their own home. 



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