

Kahnawake's Concordia graduates honoured



KATE SHERIDAN THE EASTERN DOOR

Tiawentinon Canadian and her family were part of Concordia's Aboriginal Student Resource Centre's graduation gathering last Wednesday.

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Ten Aboriginal students at Concordia celebrated their graduation during a special gathering last Wednesday, organized by the university's Aboriginal Students Resource Centre.

The centre's Elder-in-Residence Morning Star presented the graduates with a stole they could wear as part of their academic regalia when they crossed the stage at the formal graduation ceremony.

The stole had Concordia's logo on one side and a feather on the other. The feather represented the "strength, wisdom, and honour which you have gained while completing your studies," said master of ceremonies and K103 Radio host Timothy Armstrong.

Several Kahnawa'kehrónon attended the gathering, including Roseann Norton and Megan Whyte.

"We have three generations here," said Whyte, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. For her, having her family here was a crucial part of the experience. "I love to bring my daughter to things like this," she said. "I want her to feel that energy and know those experiences."

While some graduates were celebrating the end of one part of their academic journey, they were also acknowledging a centre that many called a home away from home.

"I think it's important to have these spaces where we can empower each other to build ourselves and our communities," Whyte said.

"On campus, you might feel like you're maybe the only Aboriginal student, or maybe afraid of losing your identity. So stuff like this where you can gather and everyone is family and everyone knows each other - it's really

wonderful," said Tiawentinon Canadian, who graduated with a degree in religion.

Kenneth Deer gave the keynote speech as one of Concordia's honorary doctorate recipients. Deer was selected for his work as a journalist, educator and activist, including his role as the founder and former editor/publisher of *The Eastern Door*.

During his speech, he said the graduating students represented what he had been fighting for on the front lines of the movement - to bring education back under the control of Aboriginal communities and get funding for it.

"I feel a little bit responsible for giving you the opportunity to get the education we couldn't get when we were younger," he said, noting that he never had time to have the same experience.

Deer was formally presented with his doctorate during Concordia's convocation ceremony on Monday afternoon.

Cheryl Lahache-Homer, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in human relations and a minor in First Peoples Studies, gave the last speech of the night on behalf of the class of 2015.

"I'm standing here against all odds," she said, emphasizing that her personal history with alcoholism and addiction imbued the ceremony with extra meaning. "University changed all our lives. It's changed anybody who has walked through those doors. It opens your eyes to so many things."

While Deer closed his speech with some guidance to the graduates that their role in life was to find their role in creation, Lahache-Homer accepted the challenge in hers.

"I know I have a role to find and I'm going to find it," she said.