

What is the Indigenous Land-Based Program at the U of S?

By Andrea Sherry Custer, B.A., B.Ed. M.Ed.

Tānisi, mīhko asiniy iskwīw nitsithikāson, māhtāwi sīpīhk ōhci nītha. Tāpiskoc nōhkomak, nimosōmak ikwa nitāskocāpānak kayās ōhci omītho askiy kâ-pīwikicik, î-pimātisisocik ikwa î-maskawātisicik. My Cree name is Red Rock Woman. I am from 'māhtāwi sīpiy' like my grandmothers, grandfathers and great-grandparents before me, they have lived here, thrived here and have gotten their strength from these territories since Time Immemorial.

My English name is Andrea Custer. I am a fluent Woodland Cree speaker. I grew up in "Wapāwikoschikanihk" or Narrows of Fear, also known as Pelican Narrows. I have roots on the Churchill and Sturgeon Weir River systems in Northern Saskatchewan, coming from a long line of traditional harvesters and land users in the Iskwatam and Uskik Lake areas, which is at the confluence of the Churchill and Reindeer Rivers, and just upstream from there.

I have a B.A. degree in Indigenous Studies from FNUniv, a secondary level B.Ed. teaching degree from the University of Alberta, and now a M.Ed. from the University of Saskatchewan in Indigenous Land-Based Education.

I currently work at Sturgeon Lake Central School as the elementary Cree teacher. Prior to this position I worked at SICC as the Cree language developer, taught in Beauval, Saskatchewan and Maskwacis, Alberta.

My passion is in the area of language revitalization utilizing land, culture, elders and knowledge keepers. My inspiration stems from the love I hold for my children, family, mentors, home community, ancestors and our powerful history. Working with language has helped me understand that our Cree language teaches us about who we are, where we come from and where we need to go. It shapes our beliefs and values which in turn affects our attitudes and behaviours. There is an intricate connection. This is why I teach language; it constantly amazes what it teaches me and I strive to share this knowledge with the students and people I work with. Ikosi!

More about the Program

The program originated as a pilot at the University of Alberta created by Drs. Stan Wilson and Peggy Wilson. After the short pilot, the program moved full-time to the Department of Educational Foundations in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Students in the program come from Indigenous nations across Canada and the United States.

It was a mentally, emotionally and physically challenging program because it requires you to be away from your friends and family for a couple weeks at a time for intensive field schools where students are learning on and about the lands and waters. While working full-time, students are required to do numerous academic readings, contribute to discussions and write papers that are at a graduate level. Each student is also required to identify a pressing issue in their community and then develop a capstone project that they work on for the two-year duration of the program that addresses a solution to the pressing issue.

The program is grounded first and foremost in Indigenous ways of being, knowing and living. Once students are able to identify and articulate their own Indigenous histories and knowledge systems, they can then explore how colonization has impacted our communities.

Completing the program leads to an understanding of the historical impacts of colonization on people and our traditional lands, understanding oppression in its many forms or all the 'isms' and how they thrive in systems such as education. For example, we explored the connections between racism and patriarchy, and how they impact systems of education, justice, health, and housing.

A highlight of the two-year program takes place during the last field school. Students are required to paddle from Nipawin, Saskatchewan to Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Manitoba, via the Saskatchewan River. This trip allowed us to put our teachings and learnings in to practice. We saw the bounty of plants, medicines, sacred sites, and living creatures that all work in harmony to keep the



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Andrea Custer with Grandma, Sophie Custer.

Saskatchewan Delta alive. And, to the contrary, we also witnessed firsthand, the destruction that humans have caused to the delicate river ecosystem. Although we could have just read articles and books about the region, experiencing and being in relationship with the land and water created an everlasting emotional and spiritual impact and connection for all of us.

We are at such a crucial time in the history of the planet and Indigenous land-based education provides a solution to help people reconnect and to understand the importance of protecting our languages, culture and the environment that sustains us.

Judy Eninew Bio

Judy Eninew is a Nihithaw Iskwīw (Cree woman) from Kimosōm Pwātināhk (also known as Deschambault Lake) of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. Her roots are from Mistahī Sākahikanihk (Lac La Ronge) of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. Eninew is married to Vernon Ballantyne, the daughter of Adam and Rosie Eninew, and the granddaughter of the late: Matthew and Amelia Eninew and Johnny and Betsy Custer.

She has a Bachelor of Education (SUNTEP) from the University of Saskatchewan (2004), a Post-Degree Certificate in Special Education from the U of S (2016), and a Masters of Education (Indigenous Land-Based Program), also from the U of S (2018).

As a passionate advocate for conserving the Cree language and culture, she is, in her position as principal of Kistapiskaw Elementary School in her community, currently promoting and helping with both of these programs. She centres her work on Indigenous Knowledge Systems by implementing the concepts of Mitho-pimātisōwin (the good way of life), storytelling and the promotion of the virtues, as well as by incorporating land-based practices in projects she either leads or with which she assists. She believes instilling and maintaining a love for the land will help students with their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual beings which will build resiliency for their journeys. She would like to acknowledge her mentors, too many to name, who encouraged her and showed her perseverance and resiliency. Without

those, she wouldn't have made it this far in her career.

As Eninew has always had a love for and interest in sports, has regularly volunteered and coached (and continues to do so) at the First Nations Summer and Winter Games, she is active in the sports programs in her community. She has coached volleyball, broomball, and soccer, and helped organize in minor hockey and wants others to experience the "love for the game" in their lives.

Eninew values her Indigenous Woodland Cree identity, and her Cree language, and is a much stronger person by continuing to live by the concept of Mitho-pimātisōwin.



Submitted Photo

Andrea Custer, left, and Judy Eninew upon receiving their Masters degrees.



Judy Eninew Photo

The USask land-based Masters program took Judy Eninew, Andrea Custer and others to Hawaii, studying land-based practices of indigenous Hawaiians. This photo was taken at the island of Oahu.