



Honouring Feast at SFU

By: Christina Coolidge | Indigenous Program Researcher

This year's *First Nations, Inuit, Metis Graduate Honouring Feast*, that took place at the Diamond Alumni Centre on June 12, 2013 was a beautiful gathering that was quite impactful for me. This was the first year I attended the feast, both as a volunteer and as a guest.

A deep sense of community was my first impression, as many volunteers banded together. Familiar and friendly faces worked to hang signs and decorations, organize the seating arrangements, greet and seat guests, serve our elders and facilitate set up and take down. With the direction of Lorelei Lester, the volunteers did an amazing job pulling everything together. I would first like to acknowledge their dedication.



Volunteers

- Mona Min
- Helene Irving
- Marisol Cruz
- Shiraz Ramji
- Alissa Nguyen
- Angela Semple
- Matt Andrew
- Allison Doiron
- Nina Rebchuk
- Tysun Tallman
- Joseph LaVallee
- Stacey Berryman

Masters of Ceremonies

- Rudy Reimer
- Jennie Blankenship

The event began with a Welcoming Song by the Semoya Dancers from Chiyom, Stsalis. Darwin and Francine Douglas led the group and included Darwin Jr. aged 10, Ava Semoye aged 5, Justice aged 11 and Alexis aged 8. They presented three dances throughout the evening, the Welcoming Song, the Paddle Song and an Honour Song.

There were many guests in attendance and the graduates enjoyed the company of their friends and family to witness the blessing of accomplishment. One of our elders, Margaret George said a prayer before SFU President, Andrew Petter addressed the group.



I was pleased to learn through Mr. Petter's address that two years ago, during convocation ceremonies, they began and continue to acknowledge the traditional territory of the Coast Salish upon which SFU is built. For me, this is a sign of respect and a willingness to learn about and to recognize the First Peoples of this territory and this country.

The food was amazing, with candied salmon, smoked salmon, baked salmon, whole salmon, potato salad, barley salad, green salad, grilled vegetables and portabella mushrooms, chicken corn chowder, bannock, buns, fresh fruit, nanaimo bars, brownies, carrot cake and much more, I tell you, I was in my glory. My mouth is watering as I write this. And as good as the food was, my feeling of gratitude was even better.

At one point during the event, the words of elder and guest, Verne Bellegarde from the Little Black Bear Band in Saskatchewan, touched me. He was funny and eloquent as he said,



“I’ve learned to laugh at life. If you want to change your life then change your attitude. Learn to love people. Creator put us here to love one another, to help one another. I’m not afraid to die because I know where I am going. My Creator has claimed me.”

And as the beat of the drum led the graduates wearing their blankets and their cedar headbands and carrying their feathers into the room, I had what I can only deem to be a spiritual awakening. In that moment I knew that I was exactly where I belonged. I knew that everything I had been through, all the pains, the joys and struggles, the failures, the successes, all of it had brought me there. I knew I was apart of something bigger. I was witnessing the healing of nations through the discipline and the dedication of these graduates that were leading the way for me, for their communities and for future generations. I have often felt the hopelessness surrounding many of our people as so many succumb to alcoholism and other effects of residential school and colonization, but watching the resiliency displayed by these graduates brought me a deep sense of peace and hope in knowing that education will and is, once again lighting the way.



From myself, I would like to also acknowledge Gary George, Wit'suwit'en, and the Indigenous Student Centre's Student Life Coordinator as well as Masters recipient for providing a sense of security for me in the day-to-day life of an Indigenous SFU student. He was my first point of contact when I first started my journey at SFU and his presence on campus has brought me an enormous amount of comfort.

And to all the graduates, thank you for your dedication. You are an inspiration to all that will follow. I feel blessed to have witnessed your special day.

Acknowledgements

- First Nation Student Association funding contributor
- Office for Aboriginal Peoples
- Indigenous Student Center
- Aboriginal Recruitment

Photos provided by Marisol Cruz

ABOUT AUTHOR



Christina Coolidge is currently attending SFU as a Communications Major. She is the Indigenous Program Researcher with the Career Services department. Christina is a member of the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation and her matrilineal ancestry includes Cree and Scottish. She hopes to help build a bridge between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities in order to better understand one another and to live together in a spirit of unity.
