

Teacher brings tradition to addiction education

by Eli Johnson

The kindergarteners sit in a circle on the floor, where guest teacher Hope Flanagan has laid out a venn diagram – two overlapping wooden hoops. She has explained that students should put items that can be used in a good way within one circle, and items that can be used in a bad way within the other. “If it’s both, put it in the middle.”

Flanagan hands one girl, Jocelyn LeGarde, a tin of American Spirit tobacco. The girl puts it in the overlapping region.

“Why’d you put it there?” Hope asks.

“Because you can pray with it,” LeGarde says, “but you can also smoke cigarettes with it.”

Flanagan’s role at Anishinabe Academy, a pre-K through 10th grade school in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis that focuses on American Indian values, includes teaching the various classes about tobacco in all its forms and uses. She has many props that she’s collected, traditional blends of tobacco that have been sent to her, roots, red willow cuttings, “rabbit” tobacco, sumac, red osier dogwood, nicotiana rustica, and more. Flanagan can talk about each of these plants, and their uses, in depth.

Her position is Storyteller and Alcohol, Tobacco and Drug Prevention Specialist 1, though much of what Flanagan (Seneca) does at Anishinabe Academy consists of forming and building students’ connections to their heritage early on.

Back in Mr. Paul’s kindergarten classroom, Flanagan continues with her lesson, eyes wide as she removes an eagle feather from her items. The kindergarteners have seen this before, and several of them shout, “I know what that is!” This particular feather is to remind them of their job to follow the good path, Anishinaabe-bimaadizowin, and Hope’s finger traces the shaft of the feather as she drives home the point, repeating that there will be many temptations to “fall off the path,” one of which is the pressure to smoke cigarettes.

In the holistic teaching environment of Anishinabe Academy, Flanagan cannot talk about addictions without also talking about healing and

traditions. Language also plays a big role in every lesson. Younger classrooms, like Mr. Paul's, see more of this effect, which adds up to students making cultural associations with positive messages, like the one Flanagan brings.

Flanagan brings her anti-addiction curriculum into every classroom of Anishinabe Academy, from pre-K to 10th grade. Of course, the lessons and projects vary with grade level; not all are as straightforward as her message to the kindergarteners. She recently helped South High students create a video for cable access and streaming online. The middle-school-aged students she visits created posterboard displays with topics ranging from smoking-related cancers to cigarette advertising. These projects were on display at a recent parent night.

For Flanagan, the common strand is making it accessible to the students.

"I always ask, 'How would I like to learn, if I was in my class? What would be interesting?'"

Mirroring this philosophy, her office is a veritable treasure trove of plant matter and herbal lore. Valentines from students are tacked on the wall; next to them an assortment of authentic bows and arrows lean against one corner. The Ojibwe trickster, in the form of a rabbit, sits on a shelf, waiting for next year's winter storytelling. A marionette bear hangs from the wall, something Flanagan wants to use as a model for student puppets in the future.

She brings a youthful energy to the curriculum she develops, but on the subject of addiction she remains serious and committed.

"To me, sobriety is a big part of walking the Red Road," Flanagan said. "I believe that when you're under an addiction, you're enslaved by that addiction, and there's a spirit that can get ahold of you."

Substance abuse education, of which the tobacco curriculum is a part, requires a great deal of sensitivity at a school where some of the students' close family members and parents are dealing with addictions. For some students, it's hard to see past that.

"We had a second grader say, 'I don't want to be Indian, cause people are just drinking and using, and [joining] gangs.' The change that we can do is so powerful, the change that we can do in a good way, [of] reclaiming who we are."

Flanagan counsels all students to ask for help through a tobacco offering, reminding them to include those who are suffering from sickness or addiction when they make a gift of tobacco.

With a self-deprecating sense of humor, she quickly admits that the influences toward healthy living at Anishinabe academy go way beyond her.

One such influence is Dennis Jones, an Ojibwe language professor who gave the school a sobriety song, with the hope that students will eventually learn it. The song reportedly comes from an Ojibwe man 300 years ago who had lost himself to alcohol addiction, was no longer able to hunt, and had given up all hope on his life. As the story goes, the man collapsed in the snow, ready to die, when a wolverine appeared before him and gave him a song. The song came from the wolverine because the animal is strong and fierce, the qualities needed to fight an addiction.

Flanagan tells the story with a mixture of reverence and hope.

When asked what fuels her fire to teach in such an excited irrepressible way, Flanagan quotes Fiddler on the Roof.

"To life! To life! L'Chai-im!" she shouts.

In a strange way, that sounds Ojibwe.