

The Mi'kmaq Tradition of Quill Basket Making

A sense of Mi'kmaq pride resonated in a classroom downstairs at the Wagmatcook Cultural Center just before Christmas 2010. Mi'kmaq artisan, Beverly Julian of Millbrook, held a three week Traditional Porcupine Quill Workshop for 14 lucky students, who gained an ancient Mi'kmaq skill that will last them a lifetime.

Over a hundred years ago, the intricate art and fine detail the Micmac Quill Box was sought after and traded throughout North America and Europe. The Mi'kmaq were often referred to as the "porcupine people" because of their elaborate quill work. The quill work on birch bark was an ancient art that the Mi'kmaq specialized in. The attention to detail and sophisticated patterns made the Micmac quill work easily distinguishable compared to other Native quill work.

Today that ancient artistry has almost disappeared and is only maintained by a handful of Mi'kmaq artist in Atlantic Canada. Beverly is playing her part to reverse those numbers. Beverly has taught all throughout Atlantic Canada. For her, "As an instructor, I have been blessed to be able to teach quillwork to our people," and she added, "Many students show great potential to be future teachers, to carry on this Mi'kmaq tradition."

That is the hope Beverly has for her students, to keep the art alive. Beverly was taught by the late Jane Julian of Paqtnkek almost 20 years ago and she has never stopped. Beverly is more than willing to teach anywhere.

This course occurred because of the will of the Wagmatcook people and the support of the band. As they say, "Where there's a will. There's a way." The Wagmatcook Band looked at many possibilities of how to get funding for this program. Surprisingly they found funding through the Aboriginal Ministries Circle of the United Church of Canada through the "The Mission and Services Fund."

Every student had an opportunity to express their appreciation to Beverly and the Traditional Porcupine Quill Workshop. These are a few words from the Wagmatcook students.

Francis Pierro was honored to take this workshop, "It's a beautiful art porcupine quill making. I've been taught a very special art. I'm very proud of what I know today. It will be with me forever and teach whoever would like to learn."

For Colleen Googoo, the course couldn't have come at a better time, "I think this course is great, it means a lot to me to be able to make these baskets, particularly because it's an extra way to support my 2 children. I sold my three baskets already so it really helped financially for Christmas."

Patsy MacKay wants to improve, "The quill work course was extremely interesting and well organized. I hope to take an advanced quill course with Bev in the future."

Alexandria Bernard said it simply, "Quill basket are hard work, time and patience. Loved every minute of it."

Vickie Price was amazed what great preparation it took just to begin making a quill basket, "What I gained from this course is how and when to acquire your materials and prepare them. I was also happy to work with a team of Mi'kmaq crafters."

Mi'kmaq elder and locally known crafts person, Anna Kay Pierro, has been waiting for a long time to learn this craft, "I always wanted to do this kind of craft. I enjoyed this porcupine quill work. Now I really know how much hard work it takes to make a quill box. It also shows how much harder it was during the good old years for our elders to make quill boxes."

Judy Googoo, who owns her own craft store in Wagmatcook, says many tourist drop into her shop looking for quill baskets. "This summer, I will have a supply of quill baskets, and will be proud to say, we make them here, right in the store. I will have demo's made right in the shop so the tourist will have full appreciation of how much work it takes to produce a porcupine basket, raw material to a finish form of art."

For all, the course and the opportunity to work with Beverly is something everyone will cherish forever. Many friendships were formed and many were renewed. For Beverly, the three weeks working with the students has been gratifying, "I have been so impressed by the dedication of the 14 students that took this course. Equally impressed by their natural talent."

If your community is interested in having this program in your community contact Beverly Julian at her website www.sweetgrassartscentre.wordpress.com.



Quillgroup -Proudly displaying their baskets are 12 of the 14 students that took part in the 3 week Traditional Porcupine Quill Workshop



Making miniature quill baskets under a magnifying glass.



For this lady, quill work was natural to her. She already made and sold 3 quill baskets. Extra money really helped out before Christmas.



This craftsperson, has long been waiting for such a course to come to her community.



The Traditional Porcupine Quill Workshop students showcased some of their amazing quill work. Instructor, Beverly Julian, said many students were naturally gifted. Today these quill boxes can go high as 400 dollars per quill box.



Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative

George G. Paul

Communications Officer

Kwilmu'kw Maw-Klusuaqn, Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative

851 Willow Street

Truro, Nova Scotia, B2N 6N8

Millbrook - 902-843-3880 fax 902-843-3882

Eskasoni - 902-379-2209 fax 902-379-2186

Blackberry - 902-890-4830

georgepaul@mikmaqrights.com

www.mikmaqrights.com