

Residential school survivors fundraise for Ottawa trip

By Denise Titian
Ha-Shilth-Sa Reporter

Port Alberni, BC - Surviving students of a 1958 - 1960 Alberni Indian Residential School art class have been busy fundraising to attend an exhibition of their childhood paintings in Ottawa.

According to AIRS survivor Jeff Cook, he, his colleagues and supporting family members were busy all summer working to raise about \$20,000 so that the group could travel to Ottawa to view their paintings, which are now on display at the Canadian Museum of History. They made the trip to Canada's capital from Oct. 11-14.

The paintings were created in the late 1950s and early 1960s by First Nations children attending Alberni Indian Residential School. The art classes were taught by Mr. Robert Aller.

Robert Aller was an accomplished artist in his own right, said University of Victoria Anthropologist Dr. Andrea Walsh. Some of his works are at Port Alberni's Rollin Art Gallery. Dr. Walsh noted that he survived a difficult upbringing, impoverished and abused. He volunteered to teach the art class once a week at AIRS and would tell the children to paint whatever was in their hearts.

They painted wildlife and landscapes, fishing boats and cultural symbols like hinkets headaddresses and thunderbirds. Aller asked only that they allow him to keep one of their paintings.

He saved those and hundreds of other paintings for more than 50 years, until his passing in 2008. The Aller family eventually donated the collection to the University of Victoria where Dr. Walsh and some of her students began repatriation work.

Two years later Walsh, with the help of UVic Anthropology students, began the work of identifying the child artists. The following years were devoted repatriating the paintings and following cultural protocols.

In 2013 the commissioners for the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) requested that the paintings go on display at a national event in Vancouver as part of the Gesture of Reconciliation closing ceremony.

In June 2015 the paintings were included in the official closing of the TRC in Ottawa. Dr. Andrea Walsh raised \$30,000 to bring survivors to Ottawa for the final Truth and Reconciliation event.

In Ottawa, survivors recorded their stories of the repatriation of their paintings. The recorded stories and paintings will be included in the Canadian Museum of History's new Canada Hall, which opened

this summer.

Cook says the exhibit opened July 1 but the survivors decided not to go for a variety of reasons.

"July 1 was Canada's 150th anniversary and everything was booked, it was too expensive and there was no dedicated time for us (to speak about the art)," he said.

So the group delayed their trip, opting to go at a less hectic time in October. Cook says survivors would be paid for their speaking engagements, which will offset the cost of travel, but they won't get the funds until they arrive back home.

"Some of us could take care of our own trip but there are others who could not afford it, so we worked together to raise the funds so that everyone could go," Cook added.

The group has raised \$18,500 through concession stands, raffles, auctions and generous donations. There were 17 people who travelled to Ottawa for the exhibit; 14 AIRS survivors and family members along with three UVic students.

Cook said 47 paintings, the works of about 35 AIRS students, were donated to UVic. Not all were Nuuchah-nulth. Some have passed on, some couldn't be located and some did not respond or were very reluctant to speak about their works.

"We are sensitive to this fact, that many of them still have a difficult time talking about their memories of residential school, so we did not pursue them," said Cook.

"Hopefully, with stories like ours, more of the artists will be more comfortable telling their stories," he added.

The Alberni IRS paintings were collaboratively exhibited at the Legacy Gallery in Victoria in 2013, the Penticton Museum in 2014, the Alberni Valley Museum in 2014/15 and the Emily Carr House in 2015, according to Dr. Walsh.

She went on to say that all of the exhibitions have an educational component for students. School groups attend the exhibitions and survivors from the repatriation project have given talks to students.

Cook says the \$18,500 they've raised for the trip will be enough to cover airfare and accommodation thanks to generous donations like the one from Dr. Walsh. She gave \$3,000 from the \$10,000 award she received for her work repatriating the paintings, which entailed engaging groups and communities with the survivors and their paintings.

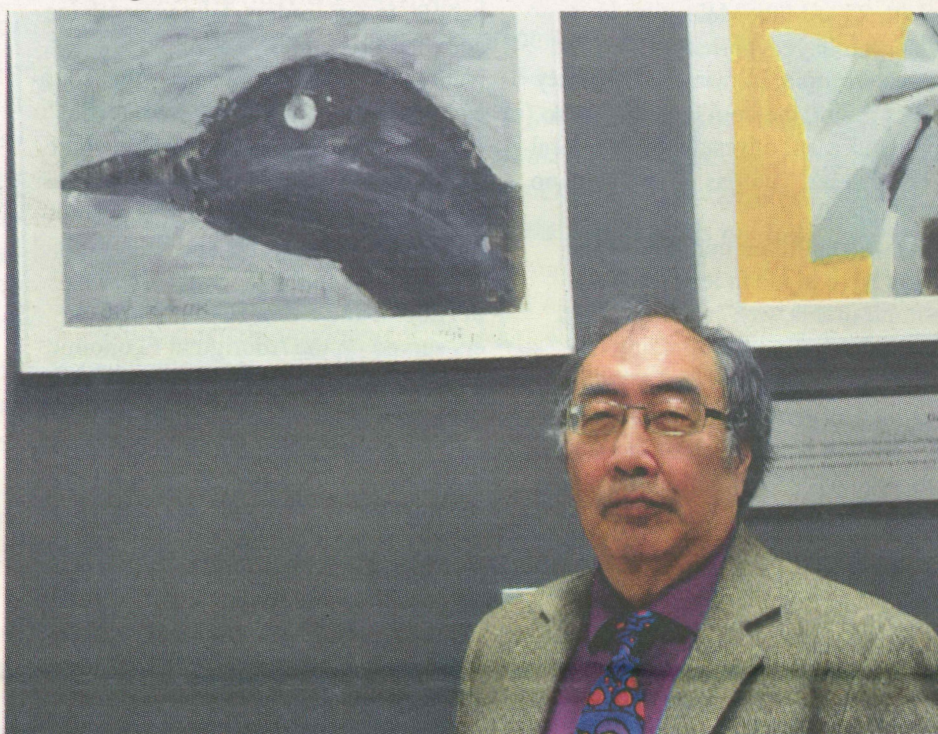
Other donations came from UVic's Anthropology and Native Studies Union, Aboriginal Neighbors of Victoria and a group from Alert Bay.

In addition, the survivors had vendor fees waived at the Port Alberni Toy Run,



Chuck August

Photos by Shayne Mor...

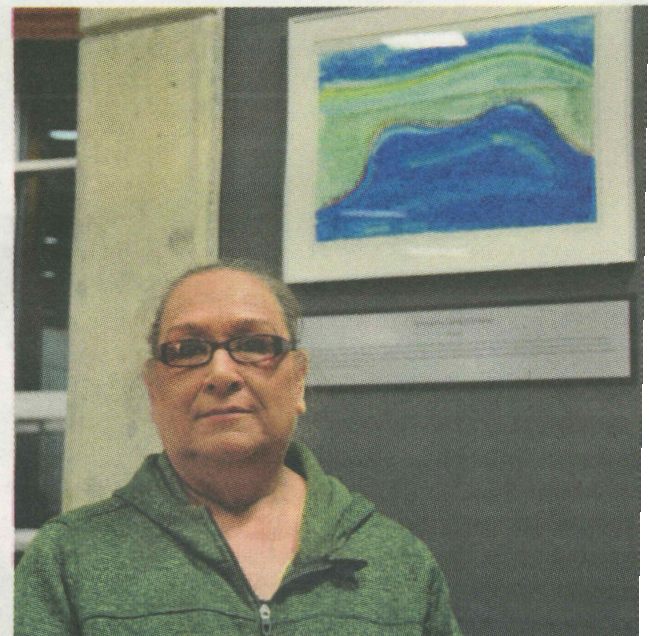


Jeff Cook

the NTC Tlu-piich Games and received discounted rates at Port Alberni's Pizza Factory and the Alberni Athletic Hall.

Survivor Wally Samuel received a generous sponsorship that covered airfare and accommodations for up to six survivors from Aimia Aeroplan.

If you wish to donate to the group, please email Jeff Cook at Jeff.Cook1950@icloud.com. He accepts e-transfers at that address.



Georgina Laing