



## Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.

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### **MKO Grand Chief Reflects on Visit to Stony Mountain Institution**

**Treaty Five Territory, Thompson, MB** – Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc. (MKO) Grand Chief Garrison Settee was able to spend a day at the Stony Mountain Institution earlier this week.

***He shares the following reflections on his visit to the largest and oldest federal prison institution still operating in Canada:***

"I was honoured to meet MKO citizens who are incarcerated at the penitentiary. I express my sincere appreciation to the MKO citizens who took the time to smudge with me and to sit with me in a sharing circle. Sitting together and hearing insights from the people living on site was a powerful experience.

The leadership team at Stony Mountain, including the Warden, also made time to meet with me. Two Indigenous Community Development Officers accompanied me throughout my day at the institution and they expressed their commitment to providing ongoing support to the Indigenous inmates and to building relationships that may improve the successful re-integration of offenders into society.

This spring, I read disturbing stories about Stony Mountain, which inspired me to request a visit to see the conditions firsthand. While the rates of COVID-19 were high, I was not permitted to visit.

As some restrictions were lifted, I was able to travel to Stony Mountain this week. I visited multiple units, including the minimum-security Rockwood Institution, where I met people from a variety of MKO communities. They were open to sharing their experiences, their gifts, and their lessons with me.

#### **Everyone has a gift**

The people living in Stony Mountain have gifts and artistic talents. I received a beautiful handmade beaded lanyard and a jar of honey during my visit, both of which were produced by people who live at this institution. I admired the paintings produced by one man living in a minimum security unit. I enjoyed a lunch of bison stew and bannock made by an MKO citizen incarcerated at the institution.

I toured two beautiful, newly-constructed houses, built by people learning carpentry. I saw an area where people learn to work with textiles and where they learn small engine repair skills.

The staff at Stony Mountain I met with are concerned about the ability of people to earn a decent living upon their release from the institution. I encourage them to keep going in terms of providing people with the opportunity to learn valuable job skills. Ensuring people have career options upon release from Stony Mountain provides them with a sense of hope and strong earning potential so they won't revert or turn to drug trafficking.

#### **Difficult life lessons**

Many men I met are fathers and expressed the love they have for their children and the regret they have that their choices took them away from their children. They expressed their desire to turn their lives around to enable them to become better fathers.

Sitting in a sharing circle provides people with time to express whatever is on their mind. The circle is central to First Nations culture and in a sharing circle, we are all equal. It was my honour to spend time with MKO citizens in this way and to remind them that they are not forgotten.

### **Access to culture is crucial**

In our circles, some participants expressed that prison was the first time they encountered and learned about their Indigenous culture. Some lamented the lack of culture in their life before they became involved in criminal activities—they wondered whether they would have been on a better path had they had access to cultural teachings earlier in life.

Some people living in Stony Mountain have ample access to Elders, smudging, sweats, and ceremonies—some staff are working to ensure these supports are in place for people once they are released, but people do fall through the cracks.

While there are cultural supports in Stony Mountain, there are no language lessons—I encourage staff to explore options for offering language lessons. The people I met with expressed their gratitude that they have access to their culture.

### **A message for youth**

A man who is serving a life sentence had much to share. He expressed his disappointment in the choices that led him to life in Stony Mountain. He wanted to encourage Indigenous youth to carefully consider their options, so they don't end up incarcerated.

Lamenting the impact and the loss of his friends to suicide and violence, he wondered about his options for employment upon release and expressed he has no family supports as someone who was involved in the child welfare system and the Sixties Scoop.

### **Overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system**

Colonization has an ongoing impact on First Nations people of all ages. In Manitoba, we have high rates of Indigenous people involved in our justice and child welfare systems. Between 65 to 70 per cent of the inmates living in Stony Mountain are Indigenous people.

While the solution to the overrepresentation of Indigenous people involved with these systems is not simple, the fact is that our people have the answers.

### **Indigenous knowledge an essential element at all levels**

It is essential for Indigenous people to be involved in leadership positions at all levels within these systems. It is also essential for Indigenous people to become part of the parole board.

There is a clear need to continue to move towards restorative justice and to work to ensure MKO citizens have a safe place to live when they complete their sentences—there are currently no half-way homes in Northern communities. Staff expressed concern that people who have never even been to the city are released to live in a half-way house in the North end of Winnipeg. The sense is people may be more successful at reintegration if they could be housed in Northern Manitoba.

Indigenous people of all ages need to have access to culture, Elders, ceremony, and language lessons. With the reclamation of our culture comes the return of our pride, self-esteem, and overall health and wellness. Our culture provides sacred teachings that help us to treat each other with kindness and love.

Visiting Stony Mountain was no trip to the park. While I do not agree with the violent and harmful actions that lead to incarceration and cause harm to our communities, I do feel everyone deserves a second chance. It was my honour to spend time with people from MKO First Nations in Stony Mountain this week and it is my hope to continue visiting and meeting with MKO citizens who are incarcerated in institutions across the province.”

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