

# Education key to a better life

The toughest problem is the severe cultural shock that devastates many native students who go to college or university.

By Alan Bass  
*The London Free Press*

When Ron George was a kid on the Kettle Point Reserve, he wanted to be a lawyer.

But by the time he got to high school, he'd learned a hard lesson. Native children don't grow up to be lawyers.

Ron George is 38 now, and he's about to rewrite that childhood lesson. In June, after six long, hard years at the University of Western Ontario, he'll graduate with a law degree.

When Val Cheyne was a kid at Kettle Point she wanted to be an artist, but there were no art facilities at her school.

So she quit in Grade 10 to learn a trade in what seemed the closest achievable alternative — hairdressing.

Thirty years later, Cheyne is taking fine arts at Fanshawe College, learning everything from printing and sculpture to photography and video production. A grandmother now, she believes childhood dreams can come true.

**LONG, HARD STRUGGLE:** To Marshall George, Val and Ron (Marshall's cousin) represent one more step in a long, hard struggle.

"We as native people have to realize that education is the most important tool we have to make a better life for ourselves," he says.

"If we as native people want our fair share of the great American dream, we have to prepare ourselves for the opportunities that exist. We have to become educated."

As director of the year-old First Nations' Post-Secondary Counselling Services, it's Marshall George's job to help that happen for the native people of Southwestern Ontario.

It isn't easy.

There are no accurate statistics on native education, but George

estimates only 20 per cent of native children graduate from high school. Of the few who enter post-secondary programs, about 10 per cent graduate.

The importance of changing that dismal pattern is something the federal government has acknowledged for years, and most natives who want to earn a diploma or degree can obtain relatively generous financial aid.

**DIFFICULTIES:** But the problems that stand in the way of native education go much deeper than financial distress.

The toughest of all is the severe cultural shock that devastates many native students who go to college or university.

Natives often have an extremely low sense of self-esteem and find it hard to cope in a world that's mostly white, mostly middle-class and extremely competitive.

"Within yourself, you ask: Am I as good as the other people here?" George says.

Too often, he adds, the answer is: "I don't have the money they do. I'm not as beautiful. I'm not as smart."

George says building up a student's confidence is one of his organization's most important tasks. But despite the assistance of three First Nations' counsellors, many students still drop out.

"Most we reach, but we miss quite a few," George says.

Ultimately, he says, the problem won't be solved until native children stop losing their belief in their ability to fulfil any ambition.

That's going to take a lot of help from parents, teachers, social workers and native leaders. It's also going to require more successful native role models, which is why George smiles every time a native student graduates.

"The whole purpose is to help native students and help the native cause."

counsellor

says

## COUNSELLING SERVICE

**Purpose:** To provide financial assistance and counselling to native students from Southwestern Ontario.

**Financing:** Operates on federal grant and distributes about \$3 million a year in student aid.

**Clients:** About 330 full-time students, including about 40 at Western, 90 at Fanshawe College, 75 at Lambton College in Sarnia and others scattered throughout Ontario, Canada and the U.S. Handles a total of about 650 students a year, part-time and dropouts.

**Student aid:** Includes tuition, books and supplies, child care, travel and living allowance that ranges from \$675 a month for single student to more than \$1,300 for student with several dependents.

**History:** Founded a year ago by several native bands when federal department of Indian and northern affairs closed its London office.

**Member bands:** Oneida, Caldwells, Chippewas of the Thames, Kettle Point, Chippewas of Sarnia, Moravian, Munsee-Delaware.