

MANS at British Columbia's
Native Campmeeting

Encountering
Jesus
and Witnessing



Tashina, pictured in traditional Jingle dancer costume, is part of this year's Grade 6 class and the Total Praise group that will be going to the Native Campmeeting in Port Hardy, B.C., in May.

GRADE 6 IS A BIG YEAR FOR MANS students. It is their last year as elementary school students; they begin learning American Sign Language and become adept at performing it to Christian music as part of Total Praise; and they get to go to the week-long Native Campmeeting in Port Hardy, B.C.

For many, it's their first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains and first time outside Alberta; for others, it's a whole new encounter with coastal First Nations culture and a campmeeting that is distinctly First Nations in focus. These students share Christ with others while also experiencing Him more deeply in their own lives.

Cyrus was with the first group to go to Port Hardy three years ago. Though he was younger than the rest of the group, his skill as a traditional Cree singer and drummer, which he has adapted to Christian music, secured him a place on the bus. As part of the MANS Ambassador and cultural exchange group, he soaked up the new First Nations culture and the whole Native Campmeeting experience. He looked forward to returning!

Last year, however, Cyrus was dismayed to discover that his hockey team was scheduled to play in a tournament on the same days as the campmeeting. Cyrus felt so at home at the campmeeting and so wished to return that he sent a moving handwritten letter to the Port Hardy church pastor, Randy Elliott. Expressing his disappointment at not being able to return, he asked Pastor Elliott to extend the same hospitality to the new group of MANS students.

Cyrus' friends were not disappointed. A musical group called Total Praise visited a First Nations school on the reserve and performed Christian songs for their peers. They were very well received. The group stayed in a hostel close to the reserve, and their enthusiastic practices attracted hostel workers to the Port Hardy Seventh-day Adventist Church to see Total Praise perform.

"They love to perform," says MANS principal, Gail Wilton. For them, each practice and performance is an opportunity to witness for Jesus and share His message, and connecting with other First Nations groups at the campmeeting is a life experience they can't get in a classroom.

"It exposes them to a greater Christian community, and the kids come back with a completely different outlook on Christianity," says Wilton. "They are learning to trust, to let go and let God." ■

Melissa Myers volunteered at the Maskwacis Reserve church as part of CUC's First Nations ministry group.

Lynn McDowell is director of Planned Giving and Trust Services/Philanthropy for the Alberta Conference.