

Culture defines career choices

NURSING IS A WAY FOR THUNDER BAY NP MAE KATT TO PAY TRIBUTE TO HER ABORIGINAL HERITAGE.

WHEN MAE KATT NEEDS THE courage to tackle a new challenge, she thinks back to her childhood on Bear Island. She reflects on growing up in the 1960s as the second-oldest of five siblings on the remote Temagami First Nation, 85 kilometres northeast of Sudbury. She remembers years spent in the wilderness trapping game alongside her extended family. And she thinks about those who came before her. “I look at my ancestors. They gave me the strength to do what I’ve done,” she says.

Inspired by those deep roots, Katt has worked tirelessly to promote aboriginal health while becoming a respected nurse leader over her three-decade career.

It was winter on Bear Island when an eight-year-old Katt asked for a nursing kit for Christmas. She was keen to emulate her grandmother, a traditional aboriginal midwife, and her mother, who she calls a natural caregiver. That Christmas Eve, she caught her mother sneaking the nursing kit – which included a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, thermometer and bandages – under the tree. It may have spoiled her belief in Santa Claus, but it set her on the path to her first love: nursing.

Pursuing that passion led her to Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. It was the mid-1980s, and she was the only aboriginal student in the nursing program. She asked her program director why that might be, and

together they agreed to address this glaring gap. By 1986, they had established Lakehead’s Native Nursing Entry Program, helping blaze a trail for 69 aboriginal students who have since graduated with its help. “That was a really key career accomplishment,” Katt says of



Three things you don’t know about Mae Katt:

1. She loves taking out her motorboat in the summer.
2. She worked as a “fish classifier” at a P.E.I. fish factory.
3. She was *Rookie of the Year* on her university cross-country ski patrol team.

opening doors for others, and taking on an advocacy role within the aboriginal community.

Many more accomplishments would soon follow for Katt, including earning her master’s degree in education in 1995, helping revamp Ontario’s NP curriculum as consultant for the Council of Ontario University Programs in Nursing that same year, and doing policy and management work for Health Canada from 1996 to 2000. She later studied the same curriculum she helped develop, graduating from Lakehead as a primary health care NP in 2001.

About eight years later, as an

NP at Thunder Bay’s Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, Katt’s career took an unexpected turn. While providing primary care for the school’s 150 students, most of whom come from fly-in First Nation(s) communities across northern Ontario, she and her

colleagues noticed changes with some students. “Doing physicals, we started noticing white residue in peoples’ noses (and) they were restless and sweating,” she recalls.

It was 2009, the early days of an addiction epidemic. Abuse of oxycodone, a powerful prescription opioid, was sweeping across northern Ontario. It took a stranglehold in small aboriginal communities already reeling from a suicide crisis that saw about 500 people take their lives over a 25-year period. “The students described losing (family members) to suicide. This accumulated grief seemed to be

the root cause for the (oxycodone) use, because ‘oxy’ makes you feel good,” she explains. To curb the use of opioids, Katt helped create a treatment program at the high school in 2011. Later that year, she worked with northern chiefs, band councils, and local care providers to launch a mobile treatment team, traveling to five isolated northern communities – Aroland, Ginoogaming, Keewaywin, Marten Falls and Neskantaga – to help about 250 clients through their recovery. By empowering clients – and treating them with the respectful care she’s made her trademark – Katt says the program is making a real difference.

That’s why, when faced with her own health crisis, Katt could not stay away for long. Within six weeks of surgery for colorectal cancer in 2014, she was back on a plane with her mobile treatment team colleagues. It’s tough establishing trust with clients in an area plagued by health practitioner turnover, Katt says, and she refused to lose the relationships she worked so hard to build.

By dedicating her career to helping these communities, Katt feels she is giving back to the heritage that means the world to her. “My culture... has never let me down,” she says. “I want people to realize how strong you can be if you identify so clearly with your roots.” **RN**

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