

THE GAZETTE

Montreal Diary: Wapikoni mobile offers a creative outlet

Aim is to break the sense of isolation being felt by First Nations children

By Laura Beeston,

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*Wapikoni mobile participant Lina Gunn shoots video on location.
Photograph by: Véronique Lanoix*

MONTREAL — Travelling long stretches of road to remote destinations, they may very well look like any other recreational vehicles on Quebec’s open highways — but they are not. Racking up thousands of kilometres to reach small, aboriginal communities and reserves past Sept-Îles, Chibougamau or Schefferville, these RVs are on a mission: Wapikoni mobile is a studio on wheels.

A fleet of three reconfigured motor homes, the Wapikoni mobile RVs are equipped with cameras and mics to bring on location. One room has been transformed into an editing station with a few desktops and Final Cut Pro. Another acts as a small sound studio, while the kitchen has been transformed into a projection and screening area used like a classroom.

Destined to reach 21 communities and reserves across the province, their purpose is to break the sense of isolation among youth who live there by giving them tools and skills to express themselves, finding their voices through art, music and filmmaking.

Manon Barbeau is the co-founder of the Wapikoni mobile, which she started in 2004 after the sudden road death of a close colleague who had initially inspired the project. A celebrated Québécoise filmmaker and documentarian in her own right, Barbeau recently won two awards on the same day, Oct. 17, taking home this year's TELUS prize for community excellence and a Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec business award.

“We're trying to create a network of resources for First Nations all over the world so that youth feel less alone, less invisible” Barbeau explained. “We aim to show these videos and works to non-natives as well, as film is an excellent space for people to lose their sense of prejudice, racism and all that ... and to discover another point of view, history or experience.”

Established in association with the Atikamekw Native Council and the First Nations Youth Council of Quebec and Labrador, Wapikoni mobile also has two permanent studio locations in Quebec with the Kitcisakik and Wemotaci first nations, located respectively near Ville-Marie and La Tuque.

The Wapikoni training offers youth between the ages of 15 and 30 the chance to learn a highly technical skill set, with many of those who pass through the program advancing into professional and semi-professional positions in the film industry working in sound, editing or direction.

Others simply become empowered, said Barbeau, explaining how, often, youth make up roughly half of the population of their reserve communities and how they are affected disproportionately by violence, alcohol or drug abuse, and depression. A shameful reality remains that Canada's aboriginal population has among the highest suicide rates in the world, and Barbeau said they witness many youth struggling with a sense of seclusion and identity.

Wapikoni mobile offers them “an opportunity to express themselves, to want to live,” Barbeau said.

“Making film and music works against depression and suicide in these communities. When they make these films, they cultivate pride in their aboriginal heritage and storytelling. And they are able to share and show their work,” she said. “Audiences are also open to it. We listen and watch — we respect their voice. And suddenly, they don't want to die anymore; they want to continue to read and write and work on their film projects. This is the strongest point (that motivates) what we do.”

Approximately 2,000 aboriginal youth have participated in Wapikoni mobile, creating more than 500 short films to date. While one of the RV's put on over 16,000 clicks last year, the body of work created through the Wapikoni mobile program has travelled even farther — creating networks with other native communities from South America to Catalonia and earning international acclaim from both aboriginal and non-aboriginal audiences alike. Wapikoni mobile films have won 57 national and international awards since 2008.

Montreal audiences will get the chance to see two of their award-winning short films as part of the Wapikoni mobile's second benefit concert at Club Soda on Monday. Hosted by Anishnabe hip-hop artist Samian — who was among the first youth to make music out of the flagship RV back in 2004 (and subsequently launched his career) — the Wapikoni mobile benefit will also feature the musical and spoken-word talent of Manu Militari, Zachary Richard and Gaële. The money raised will ensure these youth keep the cameras rolling for years to come.

More information: Tickets for the benefit concert are still available online or by phone at 514-286-1010. For more information, check out www.wapikoni.tv

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