

Travelling film school victim of budget cuts

Wapikoni Mobile teaches native youth how to make their own movies

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THE GAZETTE

It was never Abraham Côté's dream to work as a cashier in a cigarette shop, but in the Algonquin village of Kitigan-Zibi there are only so many jobs to go around.

"There's a gas station, two stores and the band council, but beyond that there isn't that much potential for work," he told The Gazette by phone.

"So you're kind of lucky if you can get a job."

Even though Côté wasn't thrilled with his work, he could always look forward to an annual visit from the Wapikoni Mobile – a travelling film school that has been teaching aboriginal youth across Canada how to make their own videos since 2004.

"I had always dreamed about making a movie, but never thought of it as possible," said Côté, whose reserve is an hour north of Gatineau.

"But the people at Wapikoni walked me through the process, gave me access to the right equipment and, after I made my first film, it was just amazing."

Côté went on to make four short films with the help of Wapikoni.

His work has been screened at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montreal and at the Festival des Films Courts in France.

But this year Wapikoni might not be stopping in Kiti-

gan-Zibi or any of the other aboriginal communities it usually visits. In July, the federal government decided to cut its funding of the Montreal-based film school, which uses National Film Board facilities.

Wapikoni Mobile founder Manon Barbeau said that while the \$490,000 it receives from Ottawa represents



about half of the program's annual budget, the cut will make it nearly impossible to keep the project alive.

The Wapikoni Mobile operates out of a recreational vehicle converted to edit film, record sound and take a group of teachers, mentors and social workers to some of the most remote reserves in the country.

"In one case, the RV had to be rigged to a boat to get to our destination," she said. "In another case, we had it mounted to a train because that was the only point of access to the village we went to. It's expensive to get to these places and the federal government has effectively crippled our ability to get there."

Some of the communities Wapikoni has travelled to don't have electricity or running water.

So far, about 2,000 indigenous youth have participated in Wapikoni's activities, producing 450 films and winning 45 awards in Canada and abroad.

Barbeau, herself a long-time documentary filmmaker, says that Wapikoni's

real value can't be measured in accolades.

"The most important thing we do is listen to the kids and try to empower them," she said. "Plenty of these kids won't go on to become filmmakers, but when you give them a camera, you give them a voice. Give them a voice and they'll feel like they're worth something."

Since learning about Wapikoni's financial crisis,

"When you give them a camera, you give them a voice."

FOUNDER MANON BARBEAU

aboriginal communities across Canada have called for the federal government to reconsider its decision to cut the program's funding – with some communities even offering to raise their own funds to bring Wapikoni back.

"The Wapikoni Mobile encourages (youth) to overcome their problems and surpass

themselves," Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come, of the Grand Council of Crees, said in a statement Monday. "It is critical for (Wapikoni) to continue its activities."

Diane Finley is deputy Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development – the body that decided to cut Wapikoni's funding. In an email to The Gazette, Finley's press secretary wrote that the government decided to fund other skills development programs because they could provide a broader education than Wapikoni.

Now, Côté is balancing a construction job with his work on a script for Telefilm Canada. He may no longer need the help of a group like Wapikoni, but he worries for some of the younger people in his village.

"They won't get the chance I had, it's really sad," he said. "We have a strong voice, but we need an outlet for that voice. I feel we can communicate with non-natives much better through film than through blocking roads."

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