

VIU offers mentorship workshop for Aboriginal students

Ian Caplette will co-facilitate a mentorship workshop for First Nations students at Vancouver Island University.

A new mentorship program for Aboriginal students at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo will get off the ground in September thanks to the efforts of student Ian Caplette.

Caplette, of First Nations descent himself, was once a high school drop-out living on the streets to survive. Today, he's turned his life around and is completing a Bachelor of Arts, major in First Nations Studies at VIU.

Come September, Caplette will join forces with coordinator Jo Acampora to co-facilitate a mentorship workshop for Aboriginal students based on a program Acampora started at VIU two years ago. That program, funded by the Counselling Foundation of Canada, has received national accolades.

"I took Jo's mentorship training program last September," Caplette said. "I was asked to help develop something further and co-facilitate. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to help other students. "I see the student-helping-student approach as a two-way benefit. When you help someone, you are helped. You give a little of your time and have the potential to change someone's day for the better, perhaps their entire week. That's the reward."

Caplette's goal is to see 30 trained Aboriginal mentors by the end of the 2009/2010 academic year. "My hope is to help Aboriginal students find a voice and strengthen their skills as personal leaders," he said. "I want to encourage them to get involved in campus life, build bridges between people, and take the principles of mentorship into their own lives."

The Aboriginal population is the fastest growing segment of Canada's population, and VIU has one of the highest Aboriginal participation rates of any post-secondary school in BC. Approximately nine percent of VIU's student body is Aboriginal.

"Yet the retention rate of Aboriginal students is an on-going issue," said Caplette. "We need proper support systems in place to address it. I've been at the brink of dropping out of university myself. There were times when I thought, 'what am I doing here?' But I've realized I'm not alone. We all go through crisis points in our lives. We fight our own battles, doubts and stereotypes, and during those times, we need support."

"Aboriginal students, many of them, are facing intergenerational effects of residential schools," he added. "There's guilt, shame and anger. Others, like me, arrive here with an overdeveloped sense of ego as a way of coping with low self-esteem. Some of us are afraid to reach out because of fear or intimidation."

Caplette recalls a time when he saw a woman sitting on a bench on campus, crying. As a student mentor, he approached her and listened to her story. "That's all she needed," he said, "someone to listen. She figured out her problems all on her own."

Caplette himself overcame enormous personal obstacles to change his life and pursue his education. At 15, he was living on the streets, working two jobs and struggling to make it through grade nine. Feeling angry and out of place, he



left school and spent 16 years jumping from job to job.

Feeling unfulfilled working as a labourer in the oil fields, on commercial fishing boats and in other areas, Caplette decided to return to school at VIU. He was impressed with the elders in residence program, where local elders mentor and consult with students, get involved in the classroom, and share their traditional and academic knowledge.

“The community aspect of learning at VIU is huge,” he said. “Bringing elders into the learning process is very important. Students have opportunities to liaise with their bands and learn from elders and that is incredibly valuable.”

For Caplette, that combination of traditional and academic learning was a perfect fit. He upgraded his education in 2006 through VIU’s Adult Basic Education (ABE) program, then enrolled in the bachelor degree program, working towards a major in First Nations Studies and a minor in political science.

Right from the outset, Caplette became an active member of the campus community, serving as Aboriginal representative on the Student Union from 2006 to 2008. He is a current member of the VIU Senate, the Joint Planning Committee and the Planning and Resources Committee until his terms ends in the fall.

He speaks highly about Acampora and the value of her mentorship program. “Now it’s time to involve more Aboriginal students in this worthwhile program, and show them it can make a huge difference in their own lives and the lives of other students.”

For more information about mentorship at VIU, email Jo.Acampora@viu.ca. For information about First Nations programming visit the website at www.viu.ca/firstnations.

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