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Breaking barriers

Natives face unique challenge

by Gavin Wilson

Renate Auger has her hands full as a third-year law student and a single mother of six children. Being a native Indian hasn't made tackling a law degree any easier.

"I've probably seen the underbelly of the beast more than most law students," she admits.

Auger is one of about 150 native Indians enrolled at UBC, mostly in programs designed to attract native students. A tightly knit and mutually supportive group, they still face struggles unknown to most other students.

"I've had some advantages, I guess," says the 43-year-old mother of six daughters, aged seven to 23. "But maybe I'm just unusually pig-headed. I see it as a very special gift to be able to raise so many future mothers. Maybe it's given me the courage to persevere."

Beverly Scow, a third-year Arts student and president of the Native Indian Student Union, says most native students on campus come from reserves, where poverty, remoteness, alcohol problems and poor education conspire to drive many young people away from the opportunities of the classroom.

"The whole sociological background is not good for education, for being an achiever," she says. "The people who are here have broken down a lot of barriers."

Scow's own family has its pioneers. Her uncle, UBC law graduate Judge Alfred Scow, was the first native Indian in Canada called to the bar and the first to sit on the bench. Grandfather William Scow was president of the Native Brotherhood in the 1950s when it was a powerful voice for native rights.

UBC has programs in two faculties, education and law, which encourage native students with courses aimed at native interests and, in the case of law, flexible entry requirements.

The law school has graduated twice as many natives as any other in the country, including Atlin MLA Larry Guno.

But there can be a price to be paid. Law student Mike McDonald, a Metis from Manitoba, says it's not easy for a native Indian to adjust to the competitive environment of a faculty such as law.



Photo by Warren Schmidt

UBC native Indian students Beverly Scow, president of the Native Indian Student Union, and Ron Peigan, president of the Native Law Students Association of Canada

"You have to adapt to a different way of thinking, but you still have to remember who you are. That's the difficult part," he says.

Sam Stevens, a law instructor who heads the native Indian law program, says it's all uphill for native students at university.

"It's like comparing a three or four mile run to a marathon. They have to try harder."

Although law is a popular choice among native students at UBC — 17 are currently enrolled — more than 100 are in education. Others are enrolled in nursing, computer science and anthropology. There are 20 graduate students and about a dozen faculty members who are native Indian.

The Native Indian Teacher Education Program began in 1974 and has since graduated 100 teachers.

Despite its success, native educator Verna

Kirkness says enrollment should be put into perspective. If native Indians attended university in proportion to their numbers in the general population, there would be 1,200 here.

Kirkness is director of the First Nations House of Learning, a campus body set up to look at ways of increasing native enrollment and broadening program and course offerings in other faculties. Medicine, forestry and commerce are among those which have expressed interest.

But plans to give more access to post-secondary education for native Indians come at time when the federal government has capped funding available for native education bursaries.

The Native Indian Student Union is holding a Native Awareness Week on campus, beginning March 14.