

## What if it started with an Aboriginal language course?

By Patrick Arseneault, Executive Director, Collège Nordique

Language preservation is important to any community. Francophones living in a minority setting know this very well. Indigenous people know it too. By offering courses in Tłıchq, one of the 11 official languages of the Northwest Territories (NWT), Collège Nordique is participating in this effort to revitalize an Indigenous language. It is also its way of contributing to the reconciliation initiated by Canada, as we prepare to mark the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation on September 30th.

The course offered is Tłıchq yati, specifically, one of the 5 languages of the Dene community, located in the northern NWT, and spoken by over 2,600 people today. Since its inception in 2016, more than 300 students have attended the course, which can be taken anywhere in the country in both French and English. Collège Nordique is known for its 10-year-old language school. And because a language carries a whole culture and history with it, we wanted to go further by developing a Tłıchq learning manual that is accessible to the general public.

At Collège Nordique, we respect the principle of never them without them. Thus, the course was developed and is taught by Georgina Franki, a member of the Tłıchq gotıjı, and born in Behchokò, the largest community in the Tłıchq region. Georgina learned the language from her grandmother and now passes on her passion for its language and culture to her students.

The creation of this resource is a collaborative effort of Elders and language experts who are committed to the revitalization of Indigenous languages. Elders Rosa Mantla and Maro Sundberg, retired University of Victoria professor Leslie Saxon and co-author Rosie Benning are among the many people who worked together with Georgina to make available a practical, fun and culturally rich learning tool.

By offering Indigenous and non- Indigenous people the chance to learn an Indigenous language and culture, we hope to be part of this collective effort to increase knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples. For the Collège, located in Yellowknife, a multicultural community, this goes without saying.

It is not easy to learn another language. Students in this course are courageous, curious and want to make a difference so they can communicate with Elders and members of Tłıchq communities in their native language. Culture is lived through language, so this is a concrete and profound gesture for people who are serious about their truth and reconciliation journey. I will be taking this course myself in the fall.

Everyone has a duty to make a difference.

We wanted to share this course with others and since September, the Université de l'Ontario français, located in Toronto, has been offering it to its students in collaboration with the Collège. The course is a little different, with many hours of cultural awareness in

addition to the language course itself. Students from the south will learn more about an Indigenous community in the far north for the benefit of all of us as a society. Collège Nordique is continuing its efforts and will develop other Indigenous language courses.

We have a collective responsibility to act.