

# Alumni recipients of Governor General's History Award for Excellence



Photo credit: Serge Cloutier

(L-R) Naomi Fortier-Frèçon, Noel Starblanket, and Leia Laing Bac alumna and current PhD candidate Naomi Fortier-Frèçon (BE'd'07) and Bac alumna Leia Laing (BE'd '08), who are teachers working in French in Regina, were presented with the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching by Governor General Julie Payette at Rideau Hall in Ottawa in November 2017.

The award recognized Fortier-Frèçon and Laing for co-founding the Treaty4Project in 2014, a response to the realization that their students were responding academically to Saskatchewan-mandated treaty education, rather than as a reality to be lived out. Laing says, "We were troubled [because our students] weren't necessarily applying their knowledge in their lives. In other words, they seemed to know the 'right answer' on paper, but unfortunately that reality was not reflected in their actions or relationship with their friends and the community around them."

Seeking a solution, the teachers approached Calvin Racette, the Indigenous Education Coordinator with Regina Public Schools. Racette was supportive and suggested they consult with Noel Starblanket, Lifespeaker and Knowledge Keeper at the University of Regina, and Sandra Bellegarde, Indigenous Education Consultant with Regina Public Schools. Starblanket says that when he met the teachers, what he appreciated was that "they were genuine." He adds, "These teachers themselves did not know this history, so when they were asked to teach they searched out people like me who have been in advocacy for many decades. We are very happy to help them, to spend many hours with them, and in their classrooms and schools. That to me was the most significant aspect of all of this."

Once Racette, Starblanket, and Bellegarde were involved, news spread and Monique Bowes, Hillary Ibbott-Neiszner, Dr. Angelina Weenie, Dr. Kathleen O'Reilly, Ray Keighley, and Lloyd Dubois joined the effort, forming a group of elders, Indigenous artists, university professors, and educators who became the founding committee. "Together we started to imagine the Treaty4Project," says Fortier-Frèçon.

The Treaty4Project is a multi-school educational project that gives "students opportunities to explore the idea of treaty citizenship in order to understand the role of their generation in Treaty 4 in Saskatchewan today and in the future" (<http://treaty4thenextgeneration.blogspot.ca/>).

Laing initiated the use of art for exploring the meaning of treaty, which resulted in two murals: One mural created by Cree-Métis Artist Ray Keighley at Regina's Scott Collegiate in 2015 and a second mural by Cree-Ojibway Artist Lloyd Dubois with 200 elementary students, created in 2017. The artwork is on display in the resource centre at École Elsie Mironuck Community School in Regina. Starblanket assisted with proper protocols in the installation of the artwork. Fortier-Frèçon's and Laing's Treaty4Project roles have expanded to include the management of these murals.

The Treaty4Project founding committee organized what has now become an annual youth conference, which gives students an opportunity to learn from and develop relationships with members of the community, such as elders and Indigenous artists, who share their personal stories with the students. Starblanket says, "The project is very visual, very hands on, a lot different than just a person standing up in front of a class and speaking or teaching." By the end

of May, more than 700 students will have participated in a Treaty4Project activity since its inception in 2015.

Noel Starblanket was central in guiding the teachers in their understanding of treaty and the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Fortier-Frèçon says, "His presence allowed us to learn in a personal way about the importance of treaties. He also guided us regarding the respect of Indigenous protocols and offered support to our students." Because of his essential role, the teachers invited Starblanket to go to Ottawa with them to receive the Governor General's History Award. Starblanket says, "I didn't expect to go. I was merely doing my job, helping out the students and the teachers and I didn't expect any recognition or acknowledgment. When they asked me to go, I was thrilled." Starblanket was also happy the teachers were being "recognized for what they were doing for treaty education in the province," especially because of where they were teaching, in a middle-class school in which the majority of students were non-Indigenous. "I was pleased to help them understand and to impart what I have acquired over the years about treaty. ... I hold them dear and close to my heart. What they do—they are very generous. I love them, both of them," says Starblanket.

Starblanket was included in the McDowell-Foundation-funded research conducted by Fortier-Frèçon and Laing to explore students' experiences with the project. Starblanket says, "To hear the students talk about what they had learned was truly instructive for me, and I talk about that experience to this day as I talk to students: high school, university, even elementary students." One student who volunteered to participate in the research particularly impressed Starblanket: "One young lady ... had heard a lot of the discussion about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, but she hadn't realized the full impact until she participated in this project....She learned a new respect about how to treat other people, specifically Indigenous people, so she will not sit idly by anymore and listen to sexist or racist remarks about Indigenous people. That was her commitment from that teaching. That really struck me, really moved me. She was genuine and sincere, honest. I could feel that from her. I'm sure she will continue with that in her lifetime." It was particularly impacting for Starblanket to listen to the students who participated in the research talk about what happened to them from the experience of the Project, what they had learned, and how they are carrying it forward with renewed commitment to developing better relationships with themselves, their communities, and Indigenous peoples.

"Four years later, we are amazed to see how the project has evolved. The collaboration

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between the committee, teachers and our partners is what we believe is the true meaning of reconciliation,” says Fortier-Fréçon. And the project continues to grow and evolve, “We are now planning a collaborative project between students from Regina Public Schools and the Conseil des écoles fransaskoises. The purpose of this activity is to allow students to meet with students from another school (and another school board) to start building relationships and reflecting about the meaning of ‘We are all Treaty People.’ During this time, students will learn about

the Métis culture in Saskatchewan with Calvin Racette.” This year there will be a language component, with Historian Laurier Gareau presenting on “the historical place of languages in Saskatchewan and the presence of assimilation politics that unfortunately removed all languages except English in the province 100 years ago.”

Treaty4Project was made possible thanks to the support from Saskatchewan Arts Board, First Nations University of Canada, Faculty of Education (U of R), The McDowell Foundation, and Regina Public Schools.

The teaching team since 2015 are all Faculty of Education alumni: Heather Findlay, Tamara Ryba, Tana Mitchell, Tiffany Agopsowicz, Janine Taylor, Jessica Moser, Elizabeth Therrien, and Tracey Ellis.

Education faculty such as Drs. Anna-Leah King, Michael Cappello, Shauneen Pete, and Jennifer Tupper have participated in the youth conferences and UR S.T.A.R.S. (Education students) offered the Blanket Exercise in 2016.