

Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence surprises Northwestern Ontario Water & Wastewater Conference

By Rick Garrick Jan. 2008

Paul Otis surprised delegates with his unscheduled presentation on the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence's training programs at the 2007 Northwestern Ontario Water & Wastewater Conference.

"It was like we turned on a light for many of the people at the Northwestern Ontario Water & Wastewater Conference," says Otis, the former program manager of the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence who has been seconded by the newly created Regional First Nations Water Services Agency - Anishinaabeg Kakenwaydemiwatch Nepi (AKN). "It was amazing that people in Thunder Bay just don't realize how many First Nation communities there are in the region. They all have water systems and water treatment plants."

Otis, who was asked to fill in for a cancelled Day 2 presentation and jumped at the opportunity to promote the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence at the late Oct. 2007 conference, recalls plenty of positive and appreciative feedback from the delegates, who were representing Thunder Bay and other municipalities across the region:

"Wow, we didn't know about the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence. We didn't know about your accomplishments. Keewaytinook was the best presentation at this year's conference!"

"They were very gratifying comments considering the conference was opened up by a presentation from the CEO of the Walkerton Clean Water Centre-WCWC," Otis says, noting that the awareness he raised about the successful training of First Nation water treatment operators made the whole effort worthwhile.

While the conference usually has few First Nation delegates, Otis hopes that First Nations in the region will become more involved as delegates and presenters in future conferences, sharing their water and wastewater experiences and networking with their municipal counterparts.

The Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence was developed by Keewaytinook Okimakanak in 2001 to provide affordable, professional, technical and academic training programs for First Nation water treatment operators so they would meet the new requirements in education, experience and knowledge standards resulting from the May 2000 Walkerton tragedy.

"We're going into our fifth year of operations, which is quite an accomplishment from our First Nations," Otis says, noting that the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence moved into their current building in Dryden in 2003 and has trained operators from over 70 Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Grand Council Treaty #3 and Union of Ontario Indians communities and 21 northwestern Ontario municipalities. "We've really addressed training for operators far and wide in our region."

Over the past five years, the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence has offered Class I, II and III Water Treatment and Distribution and Class I and II Wastewater Treatment/Collection training programs, Operator-in-Training (OIT) certification, as well as a variety of GED, Academic Credit and Continuing Education Unit courses, such as Safety Training: First Aid/CPR; WHMIS; Transport & Handling Dangerous Goods, Biological Wastewater Treatment OCWA, and Watermain Disinfection & Repair OCWA.

“Now there is a trained or certified operator in every First Nation community in the north,” Otis says. “Last fall we had our first Class III water treatment operators pass through our Centre and be successful with their exams.”

Otis is proud of the number of operators who have been trained by the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence over the past few years, describing it as “a measurable success story.” Although the original plans projected the training of 150 water treatment operators over the past three years, many more were trained, including wastewater plant operators and wastewater course.

“Our numbers far exceeded that,” Otis says. “Most of our operators have OIT or Class I certification.”

Barry Strachan, the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence interim program manager and a long-time Keewaytinook Okimakanak staff member, is committed to continuing the transfer of skills to First Nations operators with the eventual goal of self-sufficiency in First Nation communities.

“My goal is to ensure that First Nation members have access to affordable and current training opportunities,” Strachan says. “We cannot compromise this vision if we are to empower people to grow and become self-reliant. The Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence was created to enable this to happen in the area of water and wastewater operations, but this is only a beginning.”

Strachan looks forward to the point when the Keewaytinook Centre of Excellence will begin training First Nations people in fields other than water and wastewater plant operations.

“There will always be a need for water and wastewater plant training, but given enough time and effort the need should drop off,” Strachan says. “Then we can focus our efforts wherever the need is in the future.”

Keewaytinook Okimakanak, in partnership with two other regional tribal councils, Pwi-Di-Goo-Zing Ne-Yaa-Zhing Advisory Services in Fort Frances and Anishinaabeg of Kakapikotawangag in Kenora, recently created the not-for-profit Anishinaabeg Kakenwaydemiwatch Nepi (AKN) in order to provide services directly to First Nation clients, including mentorship and training of water plant operators by qualified personnel in their home community on their own equipment as well as taking on overall responsibility for the individual operations until the First Nation operator achieves sufficient accreditation.

Strachan explains that the goal is to use qualified First Nations personnel as much as possible to meet these objectives.