

life



Photos courtesy of the Innu Meshkenu Project

Walking to awaken hope and a dream

An Innu surgeon's 4,000-kilometre pilgrimage from Labrador to Quebec aims to inspire confidence in First Nations youth

by Mark Cardwell

DR. STANLEY VOLLANT says walking an average of 35 kilometres a day along asphalt highways is murder on the feet. But the first aboriginal surgeon in Canadian history calls it a small price to pay for the chance to deliver a message of health and hope to First Nations communities across Labrador, Quebec and Ontario.

"My pain is nothing compared with the conditions in which my people live," Dr. Vollant told the *Medical Post* while walking along Highway 170 between Jonquière and Alma, 200 kilometres north of Quebec City, in late September. "I tell them, the kids in particular, not to despair, to look ahead and think about their future."

He was on the third leg of a 4,000-kilometre pilgrimage, dubbed "Innu Meshkenu" (meaning "Innu Path"), which he plans to complete over the next four years. The walk is a personal initiative he undertook in an effort to inspire and

mobilize First Nation youth in the communities he visits.

It began a year ago this month when Dr. Vollant walked 620 kilometres in 30 days and visited a dozen communities—native and non-native—along Quebec's rugged North Shore. He did a second walk in the region in March, using snowshoes and a sled to cover another 440 kilometres in 18 days.

His latest trek began on Sept. 6 near Baie-Comeau and included a stop in the nearby Innu community of Pessamit, where Dr. Vollant was born and raised. It ended 21 days and 800 kilometres later in the Atikamekw community of Opitciwan, 300 kilometres northeast of Montreal on the north shore of the Gouin Reservoir.

Thanks to widespread media coverage across Quebec, Dr. Vollant received a hero's welcome in native and non-native communities along his route, and was invited to address primary and secondary school students at almost every stop.

In addition to promoting the importance of regular exercise and proper nutrition, Dr. Vollant talks up the many career opportunities that exist for native youth in every field, particularly in regard to health care.

"There are more than one million First Nations people in Canada but only a handful of First Nation doctors, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, you name it," he says. "So I tell the kids, stay in school and get an education because our people need you."

Native curriculum

To aid that goal, the living role model—a Montreal surgeon and former head of the Quebec wing of the Canadian Medical Association (a posting that distinguished him as the first aboriginal to head a mainstream North American medical group)—is helping his alma mater, the University of Montreal, develop a curriculum that is better suited for aboriginal students.

He recently developed a similar program at the University of Ottawa.

According to Dr. Vollant, 70% of First Nations youth



Dr. Stanley Vollant, Canada's first native surgeon, began his four-year pilgrimage a year ago, covering 35 kilometres a day. He is shown (top) entering the Innu community of Pessamit, Que., where he was born, and (above) pausing for a breather along the route. "My message is very simple. I tell them to take one step forward and look ahead, not behind. The past is painful but the future is bright."

drop out of school and 50% face problems with alcohol, drug abuse and violence. They also represent by far the highest suicide rates among youth in Canada.

He says he is trying to change that by stirring up interest through his pilgrimage.

"My message is very simple. I tell them to take one step forward and look ahead, not behind. The past is painful but the future is bright."

Walking, he adds, is a much more effective way to deliver that message than driving or flying into native communities.

"Walking is a very hum-

bling experience and it makes it easier for the kids to relate to me. They see me come down the road with my walking stick and my packsack. And I've got a beard and I smell bad."

Their reaction, he says, is both electrifying and uplifting. "When I go into the schools I can see the flames of enthusiasm in their eyes. When I ask, 'Does anyone here want to be a doctor or a nurse?' 50% of the hands go up."

"When I was a kid, no one would have put their hand up because it was an impossible dream."

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Dreams, however, have always been a big part of Dr. Vollant's life and are the reason he is doing the walk. Raised by his grandparents in the traditional Innu hunting-and-gathering manner that revolved around the seasons, he was sent to far-off Quebec City for an education as a young teenager. And despite experiencing regular verbal abuse and racial hatred, he became the first Innu from his community to

reach university.

During a trip home as a student, a man Dr. Vollant vaguely knew told him he had seen him in a vision as a medical doctor. Being deeply spiritual, Dr. Vollant says he focused on that goal and a year later was admitted to medical school.

It would not be the first time a vision would play a key role in his life.

During a pilgrimage he made to Spain in 2008, Dr. Vollant had several life-altering

visions of his own. One was related to an unattended blister he had on the middle toe of his right foot. "I'm a surgeon, so of course I didn't take care of it properly," he quips, but the ensuing infection spread to his leg, sparking a dream in which he was being held on a table by six men in Napoleonic times, with a field surgeon advancing toward him with a saw ready to amputate his leg.

The next morning Dr. Vollant checked into the nearest



Dr. Vollant, shown greeting his Grade 6 teacher in Pessamit, Que., was the first Innu from his community to reach university.

hospital and spent five days there being treated for fasciitis. He was then able to continue his pilgrimage and, dur-

ing the last night, had another vivid dream from which he awoke up at 2 a.m. drenched in sweat. "I had a vision of walking on our lands toward Ottawa, talking to elders, and telling youth to be brave, to look to the future."

He recounted the dream to a travelling companion who told him it was a calling. The vision stayed with him upon his return to Canada, and, after several months, he decided to act on it. "I had to do it. It was a big vision, but it's always good to have big visions."

With donations and technical support from several native and non-native sponsors, he developed an itinerary and website that allows visitors to track every step of his walk thanks to a GPS he carries (www.innu-meshkenu.com).

Dr. Vollant confesses to a moment of doubt at the outset of his pilgrimage, when he first looked down at the road he was going to walk from the plane that was carrying him to his starting point. "It was more like a panic attack," he says. "I thought to myself, 'What am I doing? I must need psychiatric help.'"

His fears quickly vanished, however, when he saw the excited look on people's faces as he entered Innu communities. "That excitement and energy has been growing ever since. This is turning into something much bigger than I ever imagined."

The upsides, he adds, far outweigh the physical discomforts he is experiencing from his walk, including acute pain in the middle toe that was infected in Spain. "I am learning a lot talking with elders. I'm also gaining energy from the Earth as I walk across the lands of our ancestors (and) a whole new appreciation for their incredible stamina and strength."

"First Nations people have a lot to be proud of."

Mark Cardwell is a freelance writer in Quebec.

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