

WHEN ART CREATES HOPE



COURTESY OF OPTIK360

Artist Ernest Dominique in his studio in Uashat: He moved to the reserve near Sept Îles five years ago and is starting an art school for Innu children.

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

ART HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIG PART OF ERNEST DOMINIQUE'S LIFE.

Some of his earliest and fondest memories are of using the crayons he stole from his kindergarten class and shared with his three brothers – drawing colourful pictures of animals, people and, most often, Jesus.

The boys drew on used paper bags or on the filthy walls of the hopelessly overcrowded and neglected home they grew up in with their parents and seven sisters in an impoverished Innu community on the outskirts of Schefferville, two kilometres from Quebec's border with Labrador.

"We were so poor," Dominique recalled in a phone interview earlier this week from Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, the Innu reserve just west of Sept Îles on Quebec's rugged North Shore where he now lives.

"We had no running water or flush toilets (and) the windows were covered with ice in winter. The only things we had to play with were the crayons I took."

It was Dominique's art – his innate talent and honed skill at drawing lifelike images of animals and people – that helped him to make friends, defeat substance abuse and become a commercially successful artist.

Now he hopes to provide other First Nations kids with the help and support he wishes he had growing up.

In December, Dominique officially opened his new art gallery in Uashat.

Built next to the artist's home, it features a gallery for his paintings and his workshop. But it also houses an art school with a classroom and rooms for up to seven live-in students.

Dominique will begin teaching evening art classes later this month. About 50 area residents – both Native and non-Native – have already signed up.

This summer, however, he plans to play host, teacher and mentor to a handful of budding Innu artists – from young kids to troubled teens – who will live there full-time over several weeks.

"The residence," reads the new gallery/school's French-only website (www.ernestdominique.ca), "will offer privileged moments to create, but also to open one's spirit."

"It will be a live-in art school," said Dominique. "And it won't just be painting. There will be wood, ceramic, embroidery and other traditional forms."

He said details about schedules and fees are still being ironed out with the help of his wife and partner in the project, Josée Leblanc.

The money for the \$465,000 art school project is coming, for the most part, from Dominique and Leblanc. They are providing \$308,000; the rest of the funding is coming from the local band council, the federal and provincial governments, and mining companies Rio Tinto and Cliffs, who are donating \$15,000 each.

"This is a great project for our community and for the Innu people," said Uashat Chief Georges-Ernest Grégoire. "Ernest

is a gars de chez nous and he is very capable and qualified to do this."

In addition to helping young Innu, the chief said, the project is putting his community on the map. He noted, for example, that the opening of the gallery attracted senior executives from the mining companies as well as Quebec Liberal MNA Geoff Kelly, Quebec minister responsible for Native Affairs.

"Everyone benefits from this," said Chief Grégoire. "We'll do everything we can to help make this project a success."

According to Dominique, who signs his work "Aness" (a wink to his grandmother, who pronounced Ernest that way because the Innu alphabet has no "r"), requests for information and enrolment are already

"I know what's it's like to live in a family with alcoholism and violence (and) to have to deal with poverty and racism. But I also know that art gives you hope (and) can be great therapy."

ERNEST DOMINIQUE

rolling in from Innu bands, schools, families and prospective students.

The latter, he noted, include primary and secondary school students as well as adolescent dropouts, some of whom are struggling with the desperate living conditions and abysmal economic situations that prevail on many First Nations communities across Canada.

"I know what's it's like to live in a family with alcoholism and violence (and) to have to deal with poverty and racism," said the 46-year-old artist. "But I also know that art gives you hope (and) can be great therapy."

Dominique has often experienced the life-altering energy of art first-hand.

His ability to draw both realistic and figurative portraits of people and objects earned him praise from teachers and helped him make friends at the high school he attended in Schefferville, where Innu students were a small and distinct minority.

His late father, Simon, worked as a general labourer at the town's iron ore mine, which was shut down in 1982 under company president and future Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney, forcing

most of the approximately 5,000 residents in the area (80 per cent of them aboriginal) to leave.

Even so, Dominique said, he and his fellow Innu students weathered racial slurs on a daily basis.

"For the first time in my life I realized that I was different and that white people were a lot richer than us," he recalled. "I was very troubled by that. I felt inferior."

He blames those sentiments for the widespread substance abuse among youth that plagued – and in some cases continues to plague – many Innu communities across Quebec and Labrador.

Dominique himself started drinking at age 15 after moving to Jonquière to complete his final year of high school.

"I was far from home and I was in complete cultural shock," he said.

He soon dropped out of school and stopped drawing and painting with acrylic, as he had been doing.

"My life was a mess," said Dominique.

At 18, however, he met and fell in love with a woman who helped him get his life back in order.

He stopped drinking (and has remained sober) and started painting again. He finished high school.

Dominique also decided to pursue the dream he'd had since age 12, when he saw a book by Canadian artist Robert Bateman.

"My life changed when I saw that book," recalled Dominique. "A light went on in my head and I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I decided to follow that light again."

He began painting pictures of Innu in traditional dress, as well as of animals like eagles, wolves and caribou.

At age 19, he sold his first painting – a winter scene at sunset with a prospector's tent that modern Innu use – for \$150 to a white man in Jonquière.

Dominique estimates the value of the painting, which he has tried unsuccessfully to locate and buy back, is today around \$1,500.

From Jonquière, he moved to Quebec City. His big break came when, at age 23, he sold 18 of the 24 paintings he showed at a Quebec City art gallery on the exhibition's opening night.

Two years later, he went to France with a group of First Nations artists from across Quebec who put on an exhibit at the Louvre in Paris.

It was the first of many international shows in which Dominique's works have appeared over the past three decades, including one at the United Nations headquarters in New York City.

Most of the 1,000 paintings he has sold to date, however, have been snapped up at

private art galleries in Quebec City, Montreal and Calgary.

"Ernest is a great painter and a rising star in Native art in Quebec," said Marie-Pier Bédard, owner of the Portal Art Tour Gallery in Quebec City's historic Lower Town – the same gallery where Dominique had his breakthrough exhibition.

According to Bédard, both the quality and authenticity of Dominique's paintings, many of which feature Innu in traditional dress and in realistic scenes that he often painstakingly researches from historical sources, appeal to Europeans and other connoisseurs of North American aboriginal art.

"What he does is really quite remarkable for an artist who is self-taught," she said. "His compositions smack of reality."

Five years ago, Dominique moved from Quebec City to Uashat, where many of the Schefferville Innu resettled in the 1980s. Two years later, Dominique retrieved all of his paintings from other galleries and now shows his work only in his new gallery in Uashat. He sells many of his works to private collectors like Michel Bernard, an Abenaki businessman who owns about 30 of his paintings, and former Huron chief Max Gros-Louis.

The idea to combine his gallery with an art school for Innu kids had been simmering in Dominique's mind for years.

"I've been giving talks in schools since the 1980s and many students ask me to look at their sketches and to help them," he said, adding that he wasn't surprised by the number of Innu kids who are interested in art.

Like other First Nations, Dominique noted, the Algonquian-speaking Innu, who now number some 16,000 people in 11 communities across Quebec and Labrador, have expressed themselves artistically for millennium, from prehistoric bone carvings and contact-era beadwork to contemporary paintings and sculptures.

"What surprised me was when I realized that the kids looked up to me as a role model," said Dominique.

Role models, he said, like Kashtin, the hugely successful Innu folk duo of Claude McKenzie and Florent Volland, and Dr. Stanley Volland, the Innu surgeon who is on a five-year walkabout through First Nations communities in Quebec and Ontario, provide hope and encouragement for aboriginal youth who often live in desperate conditions. And he is happy to have the chance to play a similar role.

"It's a big responsibility that I take very seriously," said Dominique.

"I want to do everything I can to help our people."