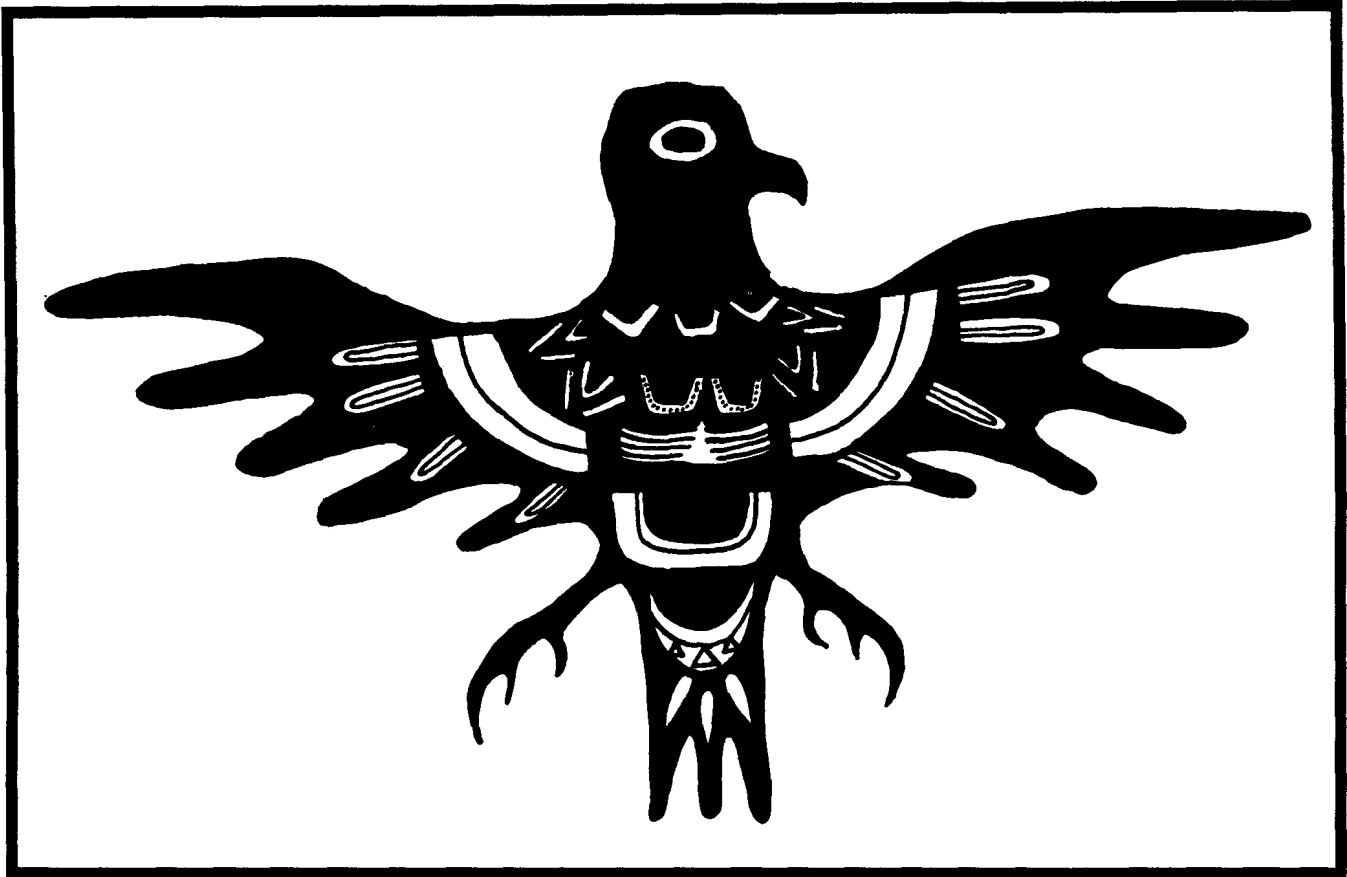

Native Women and Literacy

BY KIM ANDERSON



The subject of Native women and literacy has received little attention over the years. This is unfortunate, considering that literacy is a tool of empowerment, self-determination, and independence. In the future, it will become a necessity for survival.

Statistics on Native people and education have proven consistently that Native education levels are much lower than those of the general Canadian population. If we take into account that one in four Canadians is functionally illiterate, consider the ratio for Native people. Unfortunately, that ratio may be dropped even lower for Native women — perhaps as low as one in two. It should

be noted that there are no statistics on Native literacy levels, and that there is demand and a need at this time for such research.

The purpose here is not to give another bleak outlook on Native education — or to add to existing negative stereotypes — but to consider the need of Native women for literacy, and to look at the programs that have been developed in Ontario to address those needs.

At present, Ontario has 25 Native-run literacy programs, some of which are operated out of Native women's centres. These programs offer many Native People an opportunity to learn in a system that belongs to them for the first time. In these programs,

many Native women are discovering a sense of self-worth and self-confidence through their acquisition of literacy skills.

Many Native women working in these literacy programs have identified the problem that Native women have been discouraged from completing their schooling. Education was something that was seen as unnecessary for the Native woman — homemaking skills were all that was needed.

“A lot of women that come here (into the literacy programs) think that they can’t do anything — an attitude that is fostered in the schools, I’m afraid,” says Barb Benson, President of the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, an advocacy and support group for Native Literacy work. “There is that attitude that women don’t need an education, unfortunately an attitude that is still prevalent today.”

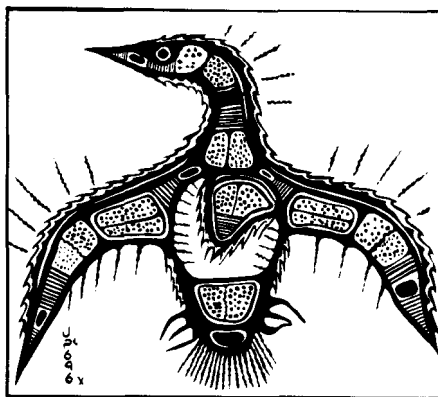
Florence Gray, Coordinator of the Sault Ste. Marie Friendship Centre Literacy Program, finds that low self-confidence among Native women is a problem that prevents participation in the programs:

In turn, “... if they are married and they want to do something for themselves, they have to think about the old man,” says Gray. “With increasing self-confidence gained through literacy work, they are not under his thumb anymore and the whole family must adjust.”

A major problem in most Native Literacy programs is getting women with young children involved. With little provision for daycare, young mothers are eliminated from the programs when, in many cases, they are in great need of these skills. The basic needs of survival and childcare take priority, as well they should, but, without literacy skills, many women find themselves caught in a cycle of unemployment, unfulfillment, and dependence.

One way to deal with the problem of childcare has been to bring the programs into low-income housing complexes. This allows the mother to learn in her own environment, and saves her the hassle of having to pack up the children for an outing.

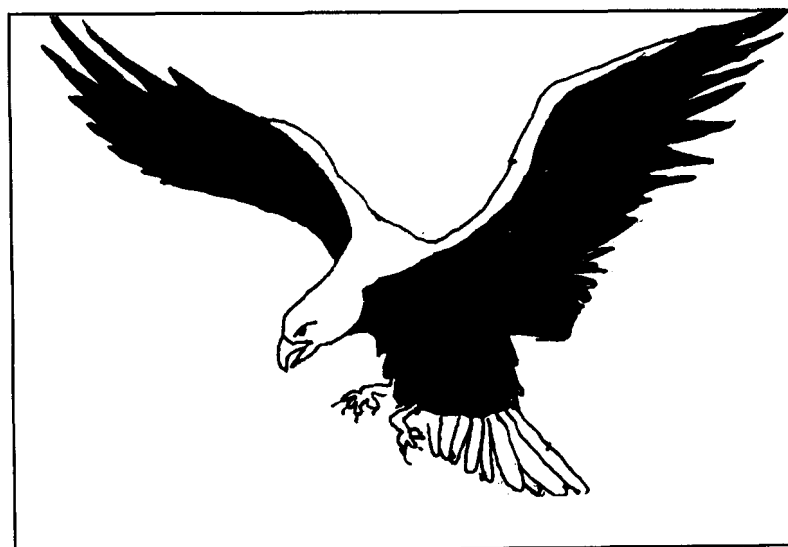
Some literacy programs have linked up directly to employment training pro-



grams. This is true of the Nokee Kwe Centre in London, Ontario. There women spend time in training programs, including lifeskills and computer operation, but are also given the opportunity to improve literacy skills. Many of the women in the literacy program, however, are there because the coordinator, Ellen Sands, has pounded the streets, talked to people at the Native Friendship Centre, and frequented the immigrant women’s restaurant to generate interest and awareness for her program.

Sand’s approach is very well grounded in the women’s lives: “The things that worked in this program were finding out what they enjoy,” says Sands. “Most of the women come into this program ready to quit. It’s a matter of using recipes — anything that will interest them from the start.”

A program operating out of the Friendship Centre in Thunder Bay has successfully combined the survival needs of the women attending with literacy work. In their literacy classes, they often dealt with the problems that the women were facing as topics of discussion or exercises. Learn-



ing how to write a legal letter, and how to express oneself, were examples of practical issues that were dealt with in literacy class.

Most important, the group became a support group for the women involved. It was a forum for them to discuss their needs and problems, joys and successes — and for them to gain the confidence for the next step.

Several of the women involved in Native literacy programs are not there for employment goals, but solely for self-development. In many cases, their children are old enough to be independent, and these women have the time to attend literacy sessions. One success story related by a literacy coordinator is as follows: “I had one woman come in here thinking that she had nothing to offer. Now she has run for the Board of Directors and has made it on!”

The success stories make the struggles worthwhile. What is needed for these programs to continue in the future, however, is funding — as all Native literacy programs that applied for funds last year were given much less than they required. There is a need for more programs of this kind as well — that address the needs, interests and learning styles of Native women. What is most needed, in the end, is support, encouragement, and time. Literacy work is slow, and often it takes many years in a community to develop trust in the work that is being done. In time, hopefully more Native women will find the courage to take advantage of a literacy program.

If women are the true teachers of the next generations, it is important that their learning be supported as well, particularly if we want to see an improvement in Native education and value of education in the future.

Florence Gray of the Sault Ste. Marie program puts literacy work with Native women into perspective well: “... in the Sault, it is the (Native) women who take the action. They can see further ahead. While men are crisis-oriented, we have to stop and think about our grandchildren.”