

Celebrating his heritage helps student find his future

Skylar Lightning loves to raise his voice in song.

The Camrose Outreach School student is a singer with a drum group known as Cree Confederation, and describes his role with them as being to sing the “high high” notes.

As he explains, the first and second leads in the group sing in a mid-range, while the third lead sings a bit higher and the fourth lead – Skylar – carries the highest range.

He feels lucky to have earned a place in this outstanding group and is proud to be part of all that they represent.

Skylar says he joined the drum group in 2017, after he “proved himself to be good enough”. There are eight other male singers who come from across Alberta and beyond, as well as one female back-up singer. The group leader scouts potential members, but not everyone is invited to join.

“We’re held to a pretty high standard,” he explains. “We’ve got to be on point and represent our culture and our nation well.”

Skylar and his group have been doing a great job of that in recent months. Last summer they won a \$10,000 first prize at an event in Fort Hall, Idaho, pictured at right. Skylar is second from the left, in a red hat.

They’ve also taken the same prize at Navajo Nation, Arizona. In February the group came fifth at a competition in Washington.

Now, they’ve been given the privilege of hosting a competition in Arizona from March 30 to April 2. “We won last year, so this year we get to be the hosts and judges,” Skylar explains. “We also get to be the opener and sing the first song.”

According to Skylar there are often thousands of people in attendance at a competition. Any group can attend, he says, but only the best compete. Usually there are 15 – 20 groups involved in the competition and other groups also invited to perform. The events usually also have much more than singing, with other ceremonies and an emphasis on other traditional activities too.



“What makes it special is to sing for those who can’t sing and those who wish they could sing,” he explains. “I sing for my culture.”

Skylar, who lived in Edmonton for much of his life and then moved to Maskwacis at age 15 to live with his Dad, says life on the reserve made him “fall in love with my culture.” Skylar wants to leave the past in the past, but still celebrate his heritage and find the meaning in traditional ways. His first introduction to singing came from Conan Yellowbird, a teacher at his Maskwacis school and also a member of the Northern Cree group.

He recalls that, in the beginning, he almost gave up singing. “I wasn’t very good at first and I got told so. That made me want to be better and gave me the courage to try harder.”

Skylar believes that being part of the drum group has helped him be a better person. “It has helped me grow up,” he says. “I used to make bad decisions (including leaving high school). If I hadn’t found singing I probably would just be doing bad, crazy things. But now I don’t have time for that.”

The drive to be better has given Skylar goals about how he wants to proceed with the drum group – he claims to have a lot to learn about keeping the beat and tempo on secondary songs, as well as having a growing desire to learn traditional dancing. Plus, the drive to be better has led Skylar to come to Camrose Outreach School, with a goal of achieving a high school diploma. Now age 20, he is expected to graduate this spring.

“I know finishing high school is something I need to do. If I could I would choose to just sing all the time. I will get an education and I hope I will also be singing for the rest of my life.”