

Uu-a-thluk contractors and members of the Nashuk Youth Council attended the third annual traditional foods conference for Vancouver Island First Nations in Victoria, April 16-17.

They represented Nuu-chah-nulth Nations, sharing knowledge and learning about traditional foods. NTC president Cliff Atleo also participated in the conference, presenting on the First Nations Fisheries Council and ways to increase access to fisheries resources.

"It was an amazing experience for everyone," said Norine Messer, Uu-a-thluk's capacity building coordinator. "The youth met people from around the Island and saw that they have important roles to play in the preservation of traditional food knowledge."

Central to the experience was the presentation of digital stories created by youth council members. In the days leading up to the conference, Messer, Melody Charlie, and five of the youth council members attended a digital storytelling workshop where they created visual presentations to share with conference participants. The presentations included personal stories set to music and photographs.

"All of their stories got shown at the conference," Messer said. "Some of them, like Damon Rampanen, who was also called to witness the event, stood up and talked about their stories to the audience."

Focussing on the theme of food, the digital stories allowed youth to express themselves and be creative in a familiar medium. "Their stories are powerful," Messer said. "They show the youth's strengths and give them a voice in a realm where they can bring traditions from their families and make them their own."

In addition to creating personal stories to share at the conference, the digital storytelling workshop was also designed to bring youth and elders together. Maggie Ignace and Bernice Touchie accompanied the Nuu-chah-nulth youth, sharing knowledge from their childhoods about traditional foods. Ignace also worked on her own story, using a computer for the first time in her life.

"We knew technology was something that youth are plugged into and that was the reason we chose digital stories as a way to reconnect them [to their culture]," said Nitanis Desjarlais, network developer for the Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities Indigenous Food Network (VICCIFN). "Some of the youth who were learning the Nuu-chah-nulth song were listening to it on their iPhones. Some elders used computers for the first time to make their own stories."

Overall, the digital storytelling workshop was hugely popular. "We totally surpassed what we had envisioned for the project. We thought we might get three or four stories to share. We ended up getting 23," Desjarlais said.

The VICCIFN will show the stories publicly in Nuu-chah-nulth communities in the coming months. The stories will also be available online.

Back at the conference, Messer, Charlie, and the youth council members (Damon Rampanen, Nikkie Watts, Keenan Jules, Belinda Lucas, and Mitch Touchie) were named as "2010 Traditional Foods Champions" and presented with awards.

Nominated by health professionals and community development workers prior to the conference, the Nuu-chah-nulth recipients received cedar leaf oil and a certificate for their efforts. "That was quite an honour," Messer said. "The youth loved it. Some of them couldn't believe they had been recognized like that.

It was a great way to end the experience."

Top: Evan Touchie learns to cook prawns in a bentwood box. Bernice Touchie assists.

Middle: Mitch Touchie learns how to prepare a skin as part of the traditional foods conference.

Bottom: Belinda Lucas works on her digital story with Maggie Ignace.



The University of Victoria and the Tsawout and Songhees First Nations hosted the third annual traditional foods conference in Victoria, B.C. The conference is currently looking for a 2011 location on the west coast. For more information, log in to Facebook and search for "VICCIFN."

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