

## **For Immediate Release**

### **Maskwacis Nêhiyawêwin Now is the Official Language**

#### **Maskwacis, Alberta – June 22, 2016**

With loud thunder rolling, lightning flashing and rain pouring down outside of the Maskwacis Cultural College tipi situated at the Ermineskin Cree Nation's Maskwacis Park, a circle of Elders and Leaders sat quietly as the Chiefs spoke having just completed the sacred Pipe Ceremony held for the signing of the Maskwacis Nehiyawewin Declaration. An observation by those participating was one could feel the ancestors dancing for Thunderbirds were so loud, the lightning flashed brightly across the sky with the rain signifying their tears of joy for the action being taken – making Nehiyawewin (Cree) the first and Official language of Maskwacis territory.

Dr. Wilton Littlechild, International Chief stood before those in the tipi; “I was deeply honored to present your Declaration and Resolution to the United Nations in May. You may not fully realize the impact you have made with this step of not only reclaiming but declaring Cree the official language for our territory for it has now gone around the world. Other Indigenous peoples are feeling empowered to follow your lead.” He stated that the Secretary General of the United Nations reported not long ago that every two weeks an Indigenous language dies in the world.

Chief Littlechild spoke about his personal experience of actually seeing an Indigenous language die – he was attending an international gathering of Indigenous peoples and as is custom, an Elder was asked to give the invocation. The Elder stood and said he would pray in his language but before doing so he told the group that he was the last of his peoples who still had his Indigenous language; he said once he leaves, the language would no longer exist. Chief Littlechild said a couple weeks later he received word that Elder had passed on and it hit him so hard because in that moment he realized he personally saw a language die.

Chief Buffalo of the Samson Cree Nation stood and in part said “Our language will not die, it won't die because of what we are doing here today – this ceremony, this declaration – we will never allow our language to die. We will never allow another society to forbid us what is rightfully ours, given to us by our Creator and that is our language our culture and our traditions.”

Leaving the tipi, the leaders moved to the Panee Agriplex where the signing ceremony was witnessed by a large number of community members. Elder Mary Moonias address the gathering in Cree “it is good we are making this declaration, for our children and those who will be coming – they will have the spirit of our ancestors in them and they will be proud to be Cree.

Elder Marvin Littlechild stood and apologized “I want to say I am sorry, I am so

sorry that I did not teach my children our language” his voice full of emotions for he was sincere with his words. He is an Indian Residential School survivor, an era in this country’s history where children were not only forbidden to speak their Indigenous languages but were punished severely if they did so. His words hit the hearts of so many who had gathered.

The Chiefs and Councils of the Samson Cree Nation, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Louis Bull and Montana Cree Nation adopted by Resolution the language declaration on May 04, 2016. The date of June 21<sup>st</sup> was selected to hold the official signing ceremonies as the first full day of the Summer Solstice; a time for growth and it is with prayers that the language of the Maskwacis Cree will grow for many generations to come.

The Government of the Northwest Territories had adopted the Indigenous languages of the NWT as Official Languages, would the Government of Alberta now consider following their lead and not only recognize but officially acclaim the Indigenous languages of the Cree, the Blackfeet, the Dene and the Nakota peoples? This would be a bold move but one truly a step forward to reconciliation and relationship with the First Nations.

Congratulations to the Maskwacis Cree peoples!

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