

A female face on aboriginal recruitment

By Daniel Bland

WHEN Yvette Mattawashish was eight, she remembers playing in the ditches along the roads of her native Mistissini, a James Bay Cree reserve 900 kilometres northeast of Ottawa. “I used to crawl in the tunnels they’d dig to put in the big water pipes and culverts,” she says laughing now at the memory. “I’d curl right up inside them.”

Today, at 22, Yvette is one of only three James Bay Cree women trained and employed as an underground development miner.

And while the path she took to get there is typical in many ways to that of other young aboriginal women in the remote north, it is also extraordinary.

According to a report by the Conference Board of Canada, the annual gross domestic product of mining in Canada’s north, which was \$4.4 billion in 2011, is expected to reach \$8.5 billion in 2020. A lack of infrastructure in roads and energy is frequently mentioned as the major obstacle to development in the remote north.

Given the demographics of most First Nation communities — a very young population most of whom have not completed high school — effective strategies to engage aboriginal leadership and train local aboriginals to do jobs mines will require may prove to be every bit as important as building a road to access a mine or a deep water port to ship ore. Particularly crucial are efforts to target aboriginal women like Yvette.

Yvette dropped out of school in Grade 9. She was 17 and she was pregnant and when, in her words,

she got “too big,” she simply decided to stay home in the morning instead of heading to school. But she made a promise to herself to return after the baby was born. True to her word, as soon as her son had his first birthday, she was back in school. Within a year, she had finished grades 9 and 10. But then, mid-way through Grade 11, she got pregnant with her second child. And dropped out for the second time.

A single mother of two at 20, Yvette found herself in a situation faced by many other young Cree women. For some of them, it is the beginning of a difficult and often very rocky road. But for Yvette, it was a wake-up call. “I knew I needed something. I needed a way to give my kids a future,” she says.

In December 2012, Yvette was accepted into an ore extraction vocational training program, one of two women in a group of 16. The 930-hour, six-month training took place in the small town of Matagami, a seven-hour drive from her home and her two small boys.

Cree trainees typically spend several weeks at a time there, alternating between classroom work and underground training at a nearby mine. But Yvette says it wasn’t the training or workload that was hardest to bear. It was being separated from her two young children. So hard, she says, that after one, six-week period away from them, she decided to take her three-year-old back with her to Matagami. That lasted for two weeks. “He’d cry and plead with me not to go out when I’d leave early each morning,” she recalls. “It didn’t make things any easier.”

Fortunately, Yvette had the support of her mother in Mistissini and her house became the young



Yvette Mattawashish is a Cree miner.

family’s home base. She admits now that without that support she would probably not have been able to see her training through to the end. But she did. And three months after graduating, she found a job with the Creeco Dumas mining company.

For the next nine months, Yvette and another Mistissini miner drove to a small airport once a week to catch an AirCreebec flight to Goldcorp’s new Eléonore gold mine. Part of a crew of five, she worked seven straight days, 12 hours a day, 650 metres underground. Scaling away loose rock on underground tunnel walls, loading explosives in drill holes and mucking ore after blasts. Yvette loved everything about it.

“From the very first time we went underground in training, I knew it was for me,” she says.

Creeco Dumas’s contract at Eléonore ended last fall and Yvette found herself out of work. She hasn’t wasted a moment since then, doing all she can to keep herself work ready and employable.

She passed her road test recently and got her first driver’s licence: “I’d love to drive a truck or operate a Scooptram underground sometime.” She has been making daily trips to the gym: “You need to be fit to work underground.” And she has applied to as many underground mining job postings as she can find.

On the home front, Yvette has a younger sister who is picking up her Grade 11 math credits in order to graduate from high school this summer. What about her future? Has her big sister given her any advice? “I say, ‘Look at me. Look at what I’ve been able to do. It isn’t always easy but it is worth it. Why not give it a try?’”

Mining remains very much a man’s world in the minds of many across the north and attracting more women to the industry is a major challenge facing mining companies and aboriginal communities alike. With one Cree baby in five born to a teenage mother, that means reaching out not only to women but to young mothers.

How to do that? For mining companies operating in the north, put a female face on your recruitment strategy. But not just any female face. Instead of a university-educated mining engineer or geologist, find the Yvettes, the local women whose story and struggles are familiar. Make them the face of your recruitment in the remote north. And work with aboriginal communities to provide support for young mothers whose training takes them away from their children. In-house child care is a good place to start.

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