

# A woman in action for aboriginal youth

*Two years ago, inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, teachers at Dawson College launched The First Peoples Initiative to offer support services to young aboriginal people. Last February, the First Peoples Centre opened its doors. CSQ News met with the Centre's coordinator, Orenda Boucher.*

NICOLE DE SÈVE COLLABORATION

"Born in Kahnawake, I grew up in a single parent home. My mother was always studying. It was a priority for her that my brother and I get an education," she says. It wasn't easy for her, not knowing where to find the resources to help her stay in school. "Coming from a culture in which oral tradition is important, I learned differently, more by listening and experimentation than through books."

## A DEEP DESIRE TO CHANGE THINGS

During her time in school, Orenda Boucher never met an aboriginal educator. "When I got to Dawson as a student, there were no services specifically for aboriginal students. I felt alone. I kept to myself. And it was the same at Concordia University," she adds.

She also noticed the absence of aboriginal people in school books and programs. "I quickly understood that the system was designed to exclude us. This motivated me to further my studies, because I wanted to change that!"



Photo: Jean-François Leblanc

**Orenda Boucher, member of the Fédération du personnel professionnel des collèges (FPPC-CSQ)**

## AN IMPORTANT PLACE FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH

After four years of teaching at Odanak's Kiuna College – the first cégep dedicated to the education of aboriginal students – and with links to her community and her research as a PhD Candidate at University of Ottawa, Orenda Boucher is ready to meet the challenge.

"The First Peoples Centre is a place for young aboriginal people to get together, decompress in a safe environment, have access to computers for their work, and get the pedagogical support they need."

## AN IMPORTANT CONFIDANT

As a first line of support, Orenda Boucher is a confidant to many. "For students who have left their communities to pursue college studies, loneliness becomes a significant problem."

She sometimes guides students towards the college's different services, notably pedagogical support. "Sometimes, I hold their hand to accompany them to their first appointment or support them in emergency situations."

## HIGH STAKES

There are several initiatives underway at the centre: the Three Sisters Garden, the harvest festival, the involvement of young aboriginal people in community volunteer projects, and the organization of activities related to First Nations' culture designed for the cégep's student population.

The experience is new, but the stakes are high. This year, 22 new aboriginal students will attend Dawson College. The challenge: to allow them to develop a sense of belonging and succeed at school. Stay tuned for more information. ■