

# Cook reflects on career and commitment

When Harry Cook wakes up tomorrow morning, he might just do something he's waited 18 years to do: turn to his wife Rose and ask her, "What are we going to do today?"

The question has been a long time coming. Since he was first elected as chief of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in 1987, Cook's priority has been not the plans he and Rose might have, but the needs of a band membership that has grown to nearly 8,000, largest in the province. Now, he is officially retired, with the top job having been passed to long-time band councillor Tammy Cook-Season.

And while his own daughters — Tara, now 33, and Janet, 25 — often saw little of their father during the work week, Cook's role as the band's top politician also saw him playing a "father" role to many of his band members. Over the years, he has had to learn to emotionally distance himself somewhat in order to effectively deal with the needs of his people.

"I have an open door policy," Cook said April 1, the day after the band's general election, "and people walk in and sometimes they close the door and just in confidence tell me about their life." Sometimes these stories are full of joy and celebration — a new baby, a graduation — and then that person leaves and the next comes in with devastating news, or a tale of grief or shame.

"You can't have your emotions up and down all day, so you have to be very patient," Cook said. "If you laugh one minute and cry the next, how long can the emotions last?"

He has had to apply that same level-headedness to dealing with members' requests, evaluating situations on the basis of the band's financial resources rather than on a gut reaction or personal ties — and there are many in First Nations, where leaders are related to a big portion of the populace.

The complex role of a chief is often misunderstood, and that can lead to some awkward situations. As Cook put it, the premier of Saskatchewan

would likely never get a phone call from a child saying, 'I have no way to get home,' and an adult with a flat tire near Prince Albert would never call the mayor of La Ronge to say, 'I'm your citizen, and I've got no money to replace my tire.' "We get those calls," Cook said.

In his mind, the chief's duty is not to hand out money like a doting parent; it's to be an advocate for the people, "to nego-

ship, currently holds 14 portfolios, from hotel management and organic food processing to catering and insurance. KMLP's flagship is Northern Resource Trucking, a joint venture with Trimac Transportation that was the band's first major initiative after Cook was elected in 1987.

"What we found was that many of our people who were starting to get

— he is on the board of directors for Cameco Corp., and worked with the Indian Government Commission — Cook has not taken his political ambitions beyond the confines of northern Saskatchewan.

Although he grew up in Stanley Mission, Cook left the North as a young man to work as a welder in Regina. "When I came back (in 1979), our band needed a lot of help in the

developments that other people enjoyed that I've seen down south," such as basic water and sewer infrastructure in homes, he said.

Since then, in his work with the band's housing department, a term on council (1983-85) and 18 years as chief, Cook has maintained that local focus.

"If you concentrate more on the needs of the people that you're serving rather than the broad-based picture, you can be more effective," he said. "I've always aspired to look after the band membership and... northern people."

After 18 years, however, it was time to let go. The main reason is health: Cook, who is 61, was diagnosed 10 years ago with diabetes, and in recent years, his travel schedule and erratic mealtimes have played havoc with his body. He also wants more time to spend with Rose and his girls, and perhaps to pursue other opportunities — maybe even in the larger political realm. He has already received several job offers, but plans to take until the fall to just relax.

"I want to be able to

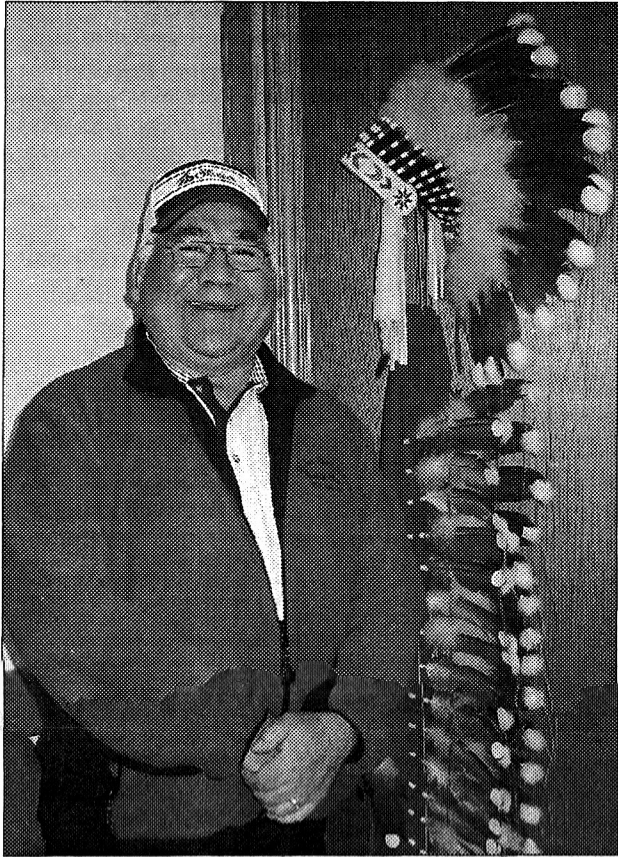
enjoy some free time while I can with some health," he said. "I could easily carry on, but if I died on the job, a lot of people would say, 'Well, we thought he was smarter than that.'"

At the core of Cook's success as chief is his relationships — with his family and with God. He and Rose have a 37-year marriage based on trust and mutual understanding, and any visitor to his office is likely to be treated to a run-down on the accomplishments of his daughters. It is also in that office that he makes time every morning for connecting with his Creator.

"All the days that I've worked, even today, I kneel down before I start my day and pray," he said. "I'm a human being, I have a lot of weaknesses — (I say), 'help me throughout the course of my life, each and every day. It's the only thing I would say that has helped me, spiritually, to be strong.'"

Carmen Pauls Orthner, for The Northerner

Cook's thoughts on business & politics: p. 6



*Former chief Harry Cook says he's had to learn to distance himself from the very personal ups and downs of his band members in order to do his job over the last 18 years. Too look after their needs, he has focused on economic development and job creation.*

tiate with any other agency that might enhance our ability to get a little more than we've currently got."

"Chief and council are not bureaucrats. A lot of them were not trained to administer programs.... Once that (budget) is approved, it's up to the directors to run their programs as effectively and efficiently as they can, with the budget they have. It's not up to the chief or the councillor to decide who gets what and who does not get anything."

It's that sort of thinking — combined with accountability — that earned the Lac La Ronge Indian Band a place in the nation's top five effectively-run First Nations in a recent study by the Auditor General of Canada.

The LLRIB has also become noted for its economic development initiatives, which Cook lists as his proudest achievement. The band's business arm, Kitsaki Management Limited Partner-

a good level of education had no opportunities within the band system... so we decided, we're going to have to do better than this. We have such a young population, and we have to utilize our resources," Cook said. So, the band studied the markets and saw a need for a means to haul supplies for uranium mines.

These days, KMLP consistently appears on an annual list of the top 100 businesses in Saskatchewan and has won the band numerous awards for successful business practices. KMLP is even known internationally because of its exporting of wild rice and mushrooms, and Cook has made frequent trips overseas to meet with European and Asian clients and attend trade shows. "We're very much exposed to the world picture now," he said. "It starts with one good idea, and building on that."

Although he has become well-known in political and business circles

**LA RONGE PROPERTIES 425-9282**

When it comes to real estate, we take care of

## YOUR HOME

**RESIDENTIAL • COMMERCIAL • INDUSTRIAL**

*New Listing*

**LA RONGE PROPERTIES**

Dave Longpre

**425-9282**



Country charm throughout, this home offer peace and tranquility. Lots of room for the family, c/w appliances, and new furnace and waterheater. **\$124,900.**



2700 sq ft quonsent workshop/storage located on a large lot with good access. yard to be cleaned by vendor. Ideal for a storage yard **\$79,000.**



Great home for a new family. This home has some upgrades in windows, siding and basement development. Large fenced yard. **Asking \$99,000.**



Very well kept 3 plus 2 bedroom home. Freshly painted, oak hardwood flooring. Fenced with double detached garage. Close to park in a great neighbourhood to raise a family. **\$139,900.**



Very attractive home with oak trim package throughout. 2 bedrooms up and one down in a finished lower level, appliances included. **Asking \$88,000.**



Custom home with large living/dining room. Pine cupboards, breakfast bar. Appliances included. Lakeside of Avenue. **Asking \$87,900.**



Titled lakefront winterized home at Wadin Bay. This home has lots of charm and a views of the lake. Many features of this peaceful setting. Don't miss out on your piece of lakefront. **Asking \$185,000.**



This home is situated on a large lot with views of the lake. Many features of this peaceful setting. Don't miss out on your piece of lakefront. **Asking \$299,000.**



Recently renovated, this home has laminate flooring in living area with large kitchen that opens on to a covered deck. Basement is finished with a bachelor suite. Heated garage, fenced lot with privacy. **Asking \$95,500**

**LOT FOR SALE c/w basement in place. Asking \$11,000.**

Located beside The Northerner on La Ronge Ave.

**visit us at: [www.larongeproperties.com](http://www.larongeproperties.com)**