

Torch receives emotional welcome in Lac La Ronge

By Carmen Pauls Orthner
For Eagle Feather News

From tanning hides and drying fish, to cooking wild meat and telling stories from long ago, fire has always played a key role in Woodland Cree culture.

But it's unlikely that any flame has ever been greeted with as much pomp and ceremony as the one that touched down in the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's traditional territory on Nov. 7.

After being unbuckled from its front row seat on the jumbo jet that arrived at the La Ronge Airport mid morning, the "ever lasting flame" that symbolizes the Olympic spirit was transported to the home of Lac La Ronge elder Demar Mirasty, on Kitsaki reserve.

Mirasty's home was chosen as the torch relay's starting point in La Ronge in part because of its proximity to the band office – as each torchbearer runs just 300 metres – and in part because of her son, Russ Mirasty, who is RCMP's director general for National Aboriginal Policing Services, and as such is the top ranked Aboriginal officer in Canada. Chief Superintendent Mirasty flew in from Ottawa for the occasion.

At Mirasty's home, the flame was used to light the torch carried by Lac La Ronge band member Emma Charles, who ran it to Kitsaki Hall.

Tanner Cook, who like Charles is from Stanley Mission and won a gold medal for volleyball at the 2008 North American Indigenous Games, then carried his torch from the hall to the band's central office.

Upon Cook's arrival, the cheering crowd turned quiet as Elder Catherine Charles – her gloved hand wrapped firmly around the base of Cook's torch – prayed a blessing over the Olympic flame.

After the prayer, Aileen Searson, 12, wearing a beaded buckskin dress and sporting a pair of homemade Olympic medals around her neck, sang a clear, sweet voiced rendition of "O Canada" in Cree – leaving a number of spectators wiping their eyes clear of tears.

Searson then handed off the microphone to her mother, Lac La Ronge Chief Tammy Cook Searson, who welcomed the Vancouver Olympic Committee and visiting media to her band's traditional territory – which includes both the reserves and the nearby municipalities of La Ronge and Air Ronge – and spoke of the gratitude she feels that, after much lobbying, Lac La Ronge was chosen as a host community for the Olympic torch relay.

Chief Cook Searson, who is a competitive marathon runner herself, encouraged young athletes to believe in the possibilities that lie ahead.

"I do hope that one day we will see someone from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band competing in the Olympics as an athlete," she told the crowd, who responded with enthusiastic applause.

In recognition of Veterans Week, the chief also singled out Woodland Cree military veterans, many of whom were gathered – in full uniform – in front of the large tipi set up at the band office for the event.

Band councillor Irwin Hennie, a Canadian Forces veteran whose son, Eric, is currently serving a second tour of duty in Afghanistan, also spoke briefly, as did Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations Vice chief Morley Watson.

With the ceremony concluded, the flame continued on its run through La Ronge, passing through the hands of several torchbearers, including another Lac La Ronge member, Electra Charles.

It finally arrived in the parking lot of the Mel Hegland Uniplex arena, where torchbearer Natasha Boyes lit the ceremonial cauldron at La Ronge's "celebration community" event.

Band members also participated in the La Ronge celebration, both as performers – including the New Dawn drum group and the Grandmother's Bay square dancers – and doing demon-

