

Elder Ekti's Tipis take her from Northern Lakes College to International Acclaim

When Elder Ekti (Margaret) Cardinal arrives for her OnCourse with NLC podcast interview, she is bubbling with energy. It is a beautiful fall day and she has just made the drive from her home near Jousard to the Northern Lakes College campus in Slave Lake. Moments after stepping into the building, she has a heartwarming reunion with a former colleague. A longtime instructor in the Aboriginal Arts program, Ekti taught in that capacity with the College for 23 years.



Known as Margaret when she worked at the College, today she goes by Ekti, which means “over there” in Cree, “the true one” in Norwegian, and “she rides her horse along the ridge” in Sioux. Ekote in formal Cree, she was given this new name by her Elders, as ‘Margaret’ reminds her of the ten years she spent at boarding school, a time she wants to leave behind.

Ekti requests that we start the podcast recording with a tribute to her most important teachers, her parents. Her mother taught her tent- and tipi-making. Her father taught her doll-making and imparted cultural teachings. “They really lived their teachings. They were the knowledge keepers,” she comments. It is evident through her heartfelt words that she holds her parents in high regard.

Ekti learned to make tipis in 1975 when her parents were commissioned to make 40 tipis and a moose hide tipi. She, her three sisters, and parents made the 41 tipis in three months, working many hours. “My mother said you cannot call yourself a tipi-maker until you’ve made at least four tipis. She said that you had to make enough in order to learn from your mistakes,” laughs Ekti. Ekti documented all of the steps of the tipi-making process during that time, and still uses the same process today in her tipi-making sessions.

In 2006, Ekti was invited to participate in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. She was one of 156 Albertans selected to represent Alberta’s culture and history at the Alberta at the Smithsonian pavilion. She brought her tipis, tents, and dolls.

Today, Ekti runs her own business, Kamahmahkos, providing cultural sessions and teachings to a variety of groups. She particularly enjoys teaching baby and small child moccasin-making sessions to young mothers in local communities. “There is a lot of history, protocol, and folklore that goes along with the making of the moccasins,” she explains. She also facilitates workshops at the annual Knowing our Spirits Conference,



including sessions called Turtle in my Tipi and Buffalo Travels. Ekti has even branched into film, with a role in Season 4 of the acclaimed Outlander series.

Ekti also teaches Conversational Cree through the College's Continuing Education & Corporate Training department, often to professionals who want to expand their cultural understanding. She wants to do her part to ensure the Cree language continues and to share its poetry with all. As she explains, "The Cree word for pencil, masinahikanatik, means 'writing stick'. I always tell people that Cree is like a collection of tiny sonnets, full of descriptive words and images. When you speak Cree, you are speaking in sonnets."

To hear these and other stories, listen to the OnCourse with NLC podcast episode featuring Ekti, which airs in early 2020. You will find the podcast on both the App Store and Google Play.