

- 53 -

Swan River

Bridging the Communications Gap for a Healthier Community

Serina Juechter is a CDPI facilitator and career counsellor in Swan River who is uniquely positioned

to build bridges between the town's aboriginal and medical communities. She is a Metis woman who was born and raised in Swan

River, developing countless friendships and connections along the way. "I know everyone on a personal level, and that makes it effective for me to work with them on a professional level," explained Juechter.

Juechter has a particular passion for diabetes awareness and prevention. The disease is epidemic among Canada First Nations, and the Cree grandmother who raised her was also stricken. "My grandmother died from complications from diabetes, so it always played an important role in my life," she said. "And so I've been so happy with the CDPI money and the role to promote something I strongly believe in."

"It really brings out the whole community – they all play together, and everybody interacts."

CDPI programs are bridging the gap in Swan River between the aboriginal community and the medical community. More than 20 per cent of Swan River's population is aboriginal, and many – especially elders – have difficulty understanding information from doctors regarding their diseases. Because of the difficulties in communicating, some avoid getting the care they need. In cases of diabetes, Cree-speaking patients may not know how the disease is affecting their bodies or why they have been given medication. "A lot of them have language barriers and they might go to the doctor, get pamphlets, and not even know what it says, so I can explain it to them," said Juechter. "That is where I can make the biggest difference."

Preventative programs in Swan River include a diabetes cooking class led by Jenny Cowan of the Parkland Regional Health Authority. The weekly spring and fall sessions are open to anyone wanting to learn healthy cooking. After everyone pitches in preparing vegetables and cooking, a meal is served, followed by a question and answer period. At the end of the seasonal session, all participants get a diabetes cookbook.

Exercise programs are also a major focus for Swan River's CDPI committee, which works in conjunction with the local Friendship Centre. "Most of all what we're working on is physical activity, targeting everyone from toddlers to our elders," Juechter said. CDPI funds have supplied tennis equipment and horseshoes pits for

the centre which are getting plenty of daily use. “The interest level is higher than we’d anticipated – people anywhere from 12-year-olds to elders join a little tournament, sit and visit,” said Juechter. “It really brings out the whole community – they all play together, and everybody interacts.”

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Take Note

In Manitoba, the prevalence of diabetes is almost five-fold higher in aboriginal women than women in the general population. Among men, the prevalence is approximately three-fold higher in aboriginal populations than in general populations.

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/diabetes/documents/strategy/app-a.pdf>

Diabetes is a significant concern in aboriginal communities for a variety of reasons other than increasingly high rates of the disease, including:

- Earlier onset.
- Greater severity at diagnosis.
- High rates of complications.
- Lack of accessible services.

http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/pubs/diseases-maladies/_diabete/2001_evidence_faits/intro-eng.php