

## **FROM THE CLASSROOM TO A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY**

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**THUNDER BAY** — Every class has its character. But only rarely does he embody both meanings of the word.

Jimmy Kakepetum is sitting at his Grade 12 graduation lunch. He is 19 and already a large man, yet filled with so much boyish energy his jackhammer right leg is making the cutlery dance on the opposite side of the table.

He is wearing his dark graduation suit – tie tied by Google – and his graduation cap is the striped Gatsby-style hat that hasn't left his head in months.

He runs his finger over the brim of the water glass until the room is ringing and teacher Judy Flett is forced to rise from her table, come over and remove the glass.

He listens to master of ceremonies Pat Lang, president of Thunder Bay's Confederation College, praise Flett to the skies for her remarkable success in teaching business entrepreneurship to aboriginal youth – “She's so passionate ... she's so committed” – and Jimmy cannot resist jumping in with a loudly whispered: “She's so stressed.”

Sometimes when you are the class character, you are funny when you don't even intend it. Lang is thanking the special guests this afternoon – former Prime Minister Paul Martin; Chief Joshua Frogg of Wawakapewin First Nation; Charles Fox, former grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation; various elders – and spins around, asking whether she has forgotten any elders just as Jimmy happens to raise his hand to ask a waiter for tea.

An accidental crack – but he'll take it.

It takes some work to get through the joker to find the businessman. But Jimmy Kakepetum is happy to hand over his card. He has a license duly granted by the government. He has a business bank account and receives his monthly statements at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. He has a business plan, a mission statement and even a PowerPoint presentation, which he has just given in a crowded lecture hall. He has written and illustrated a comic book. It is brilliantly drawn and tells the story of Cody and Luke. But it is really the story of Jimmy himself and his best friend, Stanley. The two were inseparable growing up in the isolated Ojibwa-Cree community of Sandy Lake, right up until Jimmy took a float plane out to attend this high school and Stan, only 17, put a rope around his neck and hanged himself.

The comic, entitled How to Save a Life, shows Cody standing on a shore speaking to the sky. He talks to Luke about their past together – the forest fire they almost started, the stupid way Stan (Luke) would lick the outside of a cold can of pop – and then Cody gets serious.

“I missed you at my graduation,” he says.

He tells Luke of his new life – college coming next – and vows to return soon for more talk with “my brother.”

“I promise you, Luke,” the comic ends. “I'll live for the both of us.”

The trilingual comic is intended for children of the North. Jimmy believes, absolutely, that “if I had been there, I wouldn't have let him do that.

“There's more things to live for,” he says. “I have a new perspective since I got here. I want to show kids that there is more to life than drinking and smoking.

“There's so much more.”

More than words  
The irony was not lost.

On Wednesday afternoon, they had gathered in the cafeteria of their high school and watched Prime Minister Stephen Harper deliver the national apology to those who had been put through the residential school system.

There were tears shed, both in gratitude and in memory. Some left the room, unable to listen through it all. Some, such as former grand chief Charles Fox, stayed in his own home, uncertain as to how he would react.

Fox had been born at Bearskin Lake, deep in the north woods. At 9 he had been sent off to a residential school and did not return home until he was 20.

He was what some residential schools would consider a victory: his language erased completely, his habits now white, his interest in returning to the aboriginal life non-existent. He was working as a surveyor when the call came in on an old radio phone – the only word he recognized was “over” at the end of every Cree sentence – and when he finally got the call translated, he discovered it was his father asking him to come home.

He did, thinking it would be a two-week vacation. But his father took him far back in the bush to a summer camp, and when Charles said it was time for him to leave, his father just smiled and wished him luck. He stayed, rediscovered his language and discovered native politics.

Several times, he says, he tried to return to that residential school.

Only once did he make it through the front door and then everything began to spin so wildly he had to leave. He and his family, he says, are slowly, but successfully, working their way through those demons.

“I want to thank the people of Canada for that apology,” Fox told the graduates at lunch. Such a sincere apology, he says, gives young people like this “hope.”

“Do not hold yourself back,” he said. “You can fly ... you can reach for the sky!”

Jimmy Kakepetum, leg still jack hammering, could not resist.

“First Indian prime minister?” he hissed.

It was impossible to say how this crack went over. As all around him, the graduates were already grinning.

