

# MECCS

*A newsletter for Mother Earth's Children's Charter School to share its successful traditional and innovative programming.*

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**MECCS is on Facebook!**

**Find driving directions and more at [www.meccs.org](http://www.meccs.org)**

## Celebrating 20 Years of Student Success

Join MECCS in celebrating our upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> year of operation and help us continue to be a place where students grow, learn and share what makes them unique.

There are many good reasons why you would want to send your children to this amazing school to learn with its wonderful staff.

Hundreds of students have attended MECCS since it began operating in 2003.

You need only look at the many names of former students that decorate ceiling tiles in our corridors or painted doors along our driveway. (Check the undersides of tables and insides of lockers for more names!) Names like *Millie*, *Seneca*, *Jake*, *Keesha*, *Jayden* and more remind us of all the children who have shared their unique gifts and talents with our school community over the years.



*MECCS student Shelby Bull as a recent high school graduate (right) and as a young student.*



# Celebrating 20 Years of Student Success



*Derek Bird and Danae Rain as high school graduates (above) and as young elementary school students (above and right).*



Our MECCS alumni include gymnastics coach and cake decorator extraordinaire Keesha Charlebois, children’s book illustrator Chloe Bluebird Mustooch, soon-to-be university graduate Tuskonne Blais, and talented musicians the Bearhead sisters and solo artist Allie Bearhead.

Whether they’re sharing the gift of music, working with children, completing post-secondary studies or raising their own families, our former students have gone on to have fulfilling, successful lives. The staff at MECCS is so fortunate to have been a part of these journeys.

At MECCS, we “grow great kids.” Part of this process is embracing the philosophy that we are preparing our students for a greater role within society. We do this by looking beyond our school walls when seeking opportunities for them to build new relationships and experience new situations.



*Jayden Lewis as a high school graduate surrounded and supported by his family (left) and as a junior high student (right).*



# The MECCS Staff Who Make It All Work

Our former and current staff members have all played roles in making MECCS the success it is today. We're grateful for all of their contributions.

After leaving MECCS, some of our former teachers have moved on to teach in faraway places like Shanghai, China, and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Some have transitioned to new career paths, like policing and social work. Others have been able to take the knowledge of and appreciation for Indigenous culture they gained while at MECCS and share it with new learning communities.

Our staff has included two recipients of the Governor General's Award for Excellence in Teaching: current teacher Maxine Hildebrandt and former teacher Michel Blades-Bird. This would be an incredible honour for any school, let alone one so small, and we are beyond proud of both of them.

Here are profiles, often in their own words, of the amazing individuals who will be at MECCS in the upcoming 2022–23 school year. Our school community couldn't be as successful as it is without their hard work and dedication.



## **Erin Danforth, Principal/Teacher**

“Looking back on the last 18 years, I realize that MECCS has shaped more than just my teaching career. It has shaped my understanding of children, my own life and that of my family because of the shared experiences I have had with so many of you. My own children have grown up to be better and more well-rounded because of their connections to the Mother Earth community.

Through the many changes in my personal life the one constant for me has been this school, and I guess I could say that has been both a blessing and a curse at times. I have had the opportunity to meet many milestones along the way, but truthfully working here with these children and this school community has not always been easy as we faced many challenges together along the way.

I have been fortunate to have had the chance to learn and to grow in my roles first as a classroom teacher and then as a principal and teacher/leader. I think I have had many experiences here that I probably would not have had the good fortune to encounter if I had been in other places.

This will be my 18<sup>th</sup> year in this school and it has been my privilege to give children some of their first experiences, such as taking an airplane trip and seeing other parts of Canada. I have been able to mentor them through life-changing events and watch them grow up and change from student to friend and, in some cases, becoming a parent of current students.

I have forged many long-lasting relationships with remarkable people, and I get to work with and for some of the most amazing educators and children I have ever met. MECCS isn't just the place I work, it is a part of who I am and will forever be a part of my story as an educator, as a leader and as a person.”

## **Mark Ehnes, Teacher**

“This will be my 18<sup>th</sup> year as a teacher at MECCS. I had heard stories about this new ‘charter school,’ and coming from a reserve school I thought I would be working at a more ‘typical school.’ I would say it has been anything but typical

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for me, from teaching just about every grade to driving a school bus, taking students on field trips, coordinating a healthy schools initiative, coaching, becoming the staff ‘expert’ on Indigenous games and subsequently teaching those skills to other teachers in different schools.

I’m proud of my students for their accomplishments. Seeing former students go on to graduate from high school is very gratifying. I’m also proud of the five student teachers I have supervised and mentored, as all five were able to go on to have successful careers.

I am proud to have been part of several firsts that MECCS has been involved with. That would include things like the first YMCA exchange trip to Kingston, Ontario, the first author visits by David Bouchard and Ben Mikaelson, working with HeARTbeat Theatre, Spirit North, the Apple Schools program and especially the many All Nations Track Meets that I helped coordinate.”



## Maxine Hildebrandt, Teacher

“My teaching journey at MECCS has afforded me with rich learning experiences over the past 10 years. I am happy to be able to teach Indigenous students in a school where they are encouraged to embrace their own cultural heritage.



I have been fortunate to be involved in initiating a cultural exchange program in our school to create safe ground for students in other schools with different cultural backgrounds to explore learning from traditional Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

I am so pleased to support one of our school’s Charter Goals pertaining to Indigenizing Education. I was able to play an instrumental role in developing our outdoor cultural classroom to support Indigenous programs. I intend to continue to collaborate with other schools to form ‘cultural bridges’ and promote intercultural understanding among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers.

As an Indigenous educator, I am interested in doing what I can to work toward the advancement of Reconciliation. Indigenizing education in my teaching is one way that I can contribute and promote healthy relationships for all of our students.”

## Naomi Anderson, Teacher

“Although I have only taught at MECCS for five years, I have had such an enriching experience that it is going to impact my life and my career well into the future. I can still remember walking in for my interview the very first day and being captivated by the school location and the incredible facility we are so fortunate to share. I was amazed by what it had to offer but also the potential to do so much land-based learning.

Then I met the staff and was excited to be part of such a caring group of people and to become a part of the team that cared so much about their students and had such passion for what we can do for our students.

I was excited to start my teaching journey here and that feeling remains to this day. I have



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learned as much from my students as they have from me over the years. I have seen firsthand and been able to play a part in MECCS truly allowing students to be proud of their heritage and to flourish and grow in their gifts, culture and identity. I have been exposed to Indigenous education in a way that I could never have experienced elsewhere.

Being involved with families and building meaningful relationships with parents and students has been a highlight of my career.”

## **Anita LeMoignan, Secretary Treasurer**

“Coming up on 12 years at MECCS after a career in another school division and many years of private business, I can honestly say I have met and worked with a lot of good people and some pretty neat kids have passed through our doors. The hugs from the little ones make each day worthwhile. We have a great team and a very supportive board, making my job a whole lot easier. I have developed some lasting friendships as well.



My role is so much more than Secretary Treasurer as I also look after Transportation issues, Infrastructure issues, IT issues and even such things as picking up the groceries for the breakfast and lunch programs every week. I am proud of the work being done by every member of our small but efficient staff, and am happy to count myself part of the team.”

## **Dale LeMoignan, Maintenance Director**

“Looking after a school the size and age of MECCS has not been without its challenges but I like to think I’ve kept the school, property and transportation in good order for the last 10 years using skills I learned growing up and through work experience. Throughout my life, necessity has often been the mother of invention and I have applied the skills I have learned over many years daily at MECCS.

I would have to say that the thing that gave me the most fulfillment was teaching golf to the students. I have my certification as a golf instructor with many years of experience. It was really rewarding watching these students learn the game and have fun. Some of them really excelled at it, which was a real bonus as it is something they can do for the rest of their lives. I thoroughly enjoyed that time.”

## **Janet House, Parent Liaison/Head Cook and more**

It is safe to say that MECCS would not be what it is without the tireless efforts of our Parent Liaison Janet House. Janet and her husband Simon House signed on at the very beginning in 2003 as board members, and their children were some of the first students at MECCS.

In 2006 (or thereabouts), Janet came on staff as a teaching assistant and has worn many hats since then. From driving the bus to cooking to coordinating transportation routes, and just about everything in between (those are just the official roles), Janet can always be relied upon to lend her many gifts to whatever project we have on the go. Students can



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always rely on “Auntie Janet” to give them a place to relax in her office, a warm hug and a friendly face to greet them.

When asked about her favourite memory of MECCS from the last 20 years, Janet remarked that the student exchanges were top of the list. “Seeing the kids’ faces the first time they were taking off in an airplane was the best,” she remarked.

As a trusted staff member, community member and “Auntie” to many of the students, Janet travelled with the school group on all four of our exchanges (Quebec City, Muskoka, Ottawa and Kelowna). Having Janet on the trip provided students with a little bit of home to connect to and eased any parent jitters about sending their children into an unknown situation.

Janet continues to help make MECCS a place where kids are valued for their gifts, where they can feel safe and secure, and where they can learn and grow in a supportive and caring environment.



## **Theresa Bird, Stoney Instructor**

Elder Theresa Bird comes every week to our school to teach the Stoney language. Our students come from both Cree and Stoney backgrounds, so it is important that we expose them to both languages.

Theresa spends a period with each class introducing them to the oral aspects of Stoney and teaching them common words and phrases, numbers and more. Students keep a written record of the words they learn over time.

Theresa is also able to introduce our students to cultural learnings through the development of their oral language skills.

## A Timeline of MECCS

The concept for MECCS originated more than two decades ago with a group of dedicated visionaries who saw the need for a different way to serve Indigenous students.

The original long-term vision was far-reaching and, as is now clear with the benefit of hindsight, unrealistic. That vision was to build a school on land on the shores of Lake Wabumun, on land owned by interested investors. Students would be brought in from nearby reserves and towns, and even as far away as Edmonton.

Transportation challenges and concern about long bus rides for students meant this vision was not achievable.

The reality was that the student population would be limited to students from Paul Band and to off-reserve students from Parkland County schools. Occasionally students from Warburg, Stony Plain or Spruce Grove might attend, and—when there were enough students to justify the transportation costs—some could come in from Edmonton.

**In May 2003**, Minister of Education Lyle Oberg granted government approval for the school to begin operating in September of that year.

# A Timeline of MECCS

The facility at the time was a former Home Hardware store in the village of Wabumun. It included two sets of unattached double portable units. The playground was just a strip of asphalt between the buildings, measuring about 60 by 30 feet. A chain link fence separated the portables from the CN mainline, where 15 or 20 freight trains passed each day. This made conversation difficult and disrupted learning opportunities.

**In 2009**, we had the opportunity to move to the former St. John's School of Alberta. That May, Minister of Education Dave Hancock gave permission for the Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Society to lease the school and property. This gave us a proper gymnasium, abundant classroom spaces, a maintenance shop and outdoor spaces that met the needs of our program.

One big advantage with this new facility was its cafeteria and fully equipped kitchen. This has allowed us to provide breakfasts and hot lunches to our students over the past 13 years.

**In 2012**, with the help of our charitable fund-raising arm Friends of MECCS Education Foundation (FOMEF), we were able to begin the purchase of the school and property by securing a 10-year mortgage with Company of the Cross, the original owners.

**In 2019**, FOMEF was able to pay off the mortgage and now has full ownership of the school and property.

## What to Expect at MECCS This Year

Much of our focus this year will be on further Indigenizing our program. We are excited that our students will once again be able to experience many cultural activities and learning activities in our *Oski Kisikaw Ena Mahkochih* all-weather culture camp and outdoor classroom.

*Oski Kisikaw Ena Mahkochih* means "New Day for Mother Earth," and is a rough translation of a combination of Cree and Stoney words.



*Tyrell Baynes, Ethan Bull and Ollyn Baynes sitting in a student-built lean-to shelter (above).*



*Oski Kisikaw Ena Mahkochih, our all-weather culture camp outdoor classroom (right).*

# What to Expect at MECCS This Year



*Left: The 3D bear and elk archery targets are set up for our new archery course.*

*Below: Elder Annie Thomas demonstrating to students the traditional method to dry meat.*



*Below, from left: Mark Holmes from HeARTbeat Theatre, award-winning author David Bouchard, and former MECCS student and current university student Tuskonne Blais, who often helps out at the school when she is home.*



In 2021–22, we completed our shelter, tipi and fire pit. This work was part of phases 1 and 2 of creating the culture camp and outdoor classroom for MECCS.

Phase 3 is ready to go this year with our new archery course. The course includes 3D deer, elk, bear and wild turkey targets for students to use to develop their skills. Maxine Hildebrandt and Erin Danforth are both certified archery instructors, and students will learn from them indoors and on the outdoor 3D course. The outdoor course is modelled on the Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association archery course at the Alford Lake Conservation Recreation Centre near Caroline, which we visited in June.

We also plan on continuing Stoney and Cree language learning for all students. Elder Teresa Bird and Maxine Hildebrandt are our cultural resources for this program.

We can once again bring our partners back into the school. Students will be able to work with award-winning children's author and Member of the Order of Canada David Bouchard and with a revamped HeARTbeat Theatre. We will also continue our partnership with Spirit North for more outdoor activities, including cross-country skiing.

Finally, we anticipate setting up several exchanges with our partner schools to introduce Indigenous culture to them and to learn about their school communities.

In short, it's going to be another great year for our learning community at MECCS.