



NATIVE AFFAIRS

Bigstone's lost opportunity

Alberta's Bigstone reserve has so much money, it could buy its way out of despair. The neighbouring municipality of Opportunity has already done it. Reporting by Tamsin McMahon, photographs by Jessica Darmanin.

CHAPTER ONE

At 14, Willow Auger boasts a dizzying array of accomplishments befitting a girl who dreams of one day being premier. She has medals for science, school spirit, sportsmanship and student leadership. Her athlete-of-the-month award is hung on the wall next to a pink-flower night light, which she keeps lit because she's afraid of the dark. When she pulls out the ring she received for an Alberta government Great Kids Award, she breaks into a smile as bright and cheery as the lime-green walls of her bedroom.

Her dream is to become a coach and then perhaps a politician, like long-serving MLA Pearl Calahasen, the first Metis woman elected in Alberta, or even a premier like Alison Redford. ("Well," says Willow, "not the part where she spends all the money on travel.")

Willow lives on Bigstone Cree Nation reserve, 300 km north of Edmonton. Like many other First Nations communities across Canada, Bigstone suffers from a litany of problems: terrible housing conditions, poverty, high unemployment, alcoholism and gang violence. Unlike most other remote Aboriginal communities, Bigstone sits in the middle of the Alberta oil sands, the richest region of the richest province of one of the richest countries in the world. What's more, Bigstone shares control of the area with another local government, a municipality that is so wealthy, it decided to name itself Opportunity.

What really sets Bigstone apart from the typical story of

First Nations poverty is that the band is anything but poor. Thanks to a historic land settlement with the federal government in 2011—the biggest in Alberta’s history—Bigstone inherited \$231 million in cash. It’s money many hoped could be used to better the community for generations to come. Instead, thanks to overly restrictive rules and petty disputes between the band membership, the money has stayed locked away in a bank account gathering interest, even though Bigstone is home to a cluster of reserves that Statistics Canada says offer the lowest quality of life almost anywhere in the country.

It’s a testament to Willow’s determination that she’s carved out positive space here. It was not so long ago that she lived in one of the band’s rundown trailers, the second-youngest of seven kids in a home marked by violence and dysfunction. When her family’s trailer was burned down over an unpaid debt, she moved into a cosy and cheerful home with her grandmother, whose steadying influence has helped Willow achieve a report card of As and Bs in a high school where kids are far more likely to drop out than graduate.

“Life is short, eat more cupcakes,” reads one of the many posters and drawings that fill her room. There are paper plates covered in handwritten affirmations: “Pretty! Beautiful! Amazing!” There’s a pencilled note from her best friend, Destiny Lee, who moved away to Toronto over the summer. “Willow, I love you. You’re gorgeous. You’re a babe. You’re my sister and I love you so, so much.” There

are Willow’s drawings: the picture of a party dress she drew for her nine-year-old sister, Nipin, who is repeating Grade 3 after having missed all of last year due to what Willow refers to as “the family problems”; a picture of an eagle with the words “Native Pride.”

Willow is the kind of girl who relentlessly insists on believing in herself in the face of



overwhelming negativity, but she is the exception here, where three-quarters of adults don’t have a high school education, 60 per cent of the adult population isn’t working and half the homes are in disrepair.

She refuses to smoke, even though people tell her that everyone here takes it up sooner or later. She still plans to go to university to become a sports coach, even though a teacher recently told her it was a ridiculous idea because most coaches don’t get paid. She’s currently

working on what she hopes will be her latest accomplishment: student council president. While classmates have told Willow she’s not popular enough to win the fiercely competitive race against seven others, she has faith that her platform to upgrade the school’s outdated water fountains will eventually win over her detractors. If anyone might one day figure a way out of Bigstone’s seemingly intractable problems, it’s going to be someone with Willow’s unflappable optimism and determination. “I get a lot of doubt,” she says. “But I like to think that a little doubt can push you harder.”

CHAPTER TWO

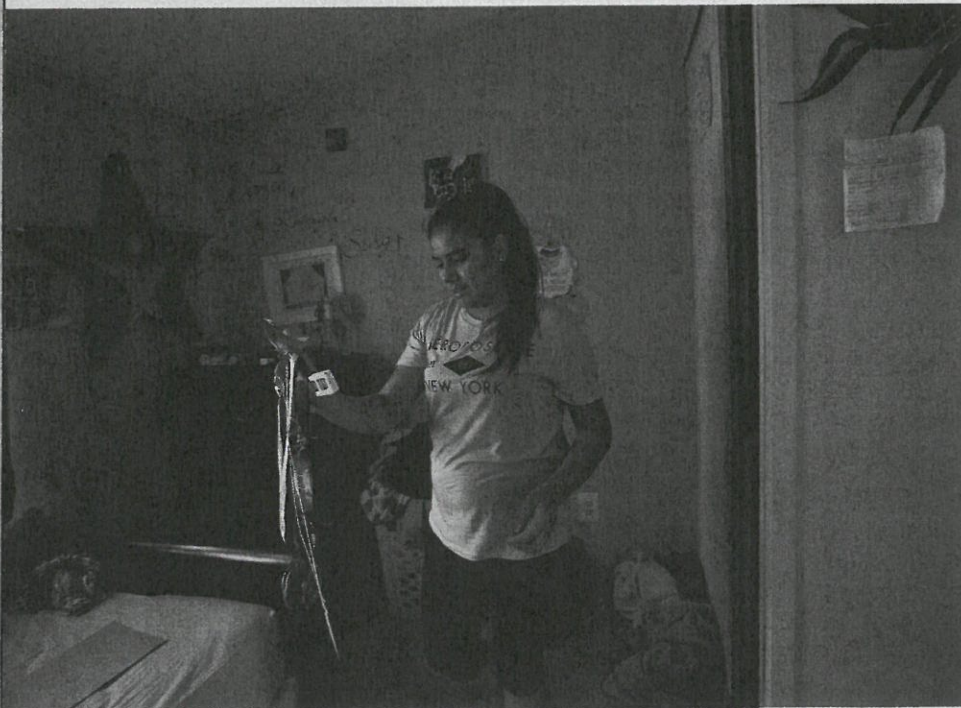
When Alberta gave rural northern settlements the go-ahead to create their own municipalities in the 1990s, it didn’t take long for local officials to come up with a name. “We thought Opportunity,” recalls deputy reeve Dollie Anderson, “because, where is there more opportunity than here?” Today, thanks to Canada’s oil and gas boom, Opportunity is Alberta’s richest municipality per capita.

There is little that actually distinguishes the border between Bigstone and Opportunity: no geographical features to divide the two, no obvious distinction in the population, which, on both sides of town, is predominantly Aboriginal.

Spend some time driving around, however, and the physical contrast between the two communities becomes clear. Past where Opportunity is working to build a downtown from scratch, the pavement ends and Bigstone’s muddy, unpaved roads begin. The restaurants, hotels, fitness centre and arena fade away, replaced with bush interspersed by the reserve’s tightly packed rental housing and pockets of rundown trailers. “We don’t even have the money to demolish trailers,” says Bigstone councillor Clara Moberly, as she drives past a dilapidated mobile home whose owner was forced to relocate to a homeless shelter three hours away after her roof nearly caved in last winter. Many homes don’t have indoor plumbing. “It’s like a Third World country.”

Today, twice as many Opportunity residents now have a post-secondary education compared to Bigstone, and there is a \$20,000 gap in the median income of households living on and off-reserve. The key distinction between Bigstone and Opportunity lies in who controls the vast expanse of surrounding uninhabited land. While Bigstone claims the entire area as its traditional territory, it only has direct authority over the 77,000 hec-

Determined: Willow Auger’s room reflects her positive outlook and many accomplishments





Economic disparity: (above) Local heavy-oil operations enrich Opportunity's coffers; (below) homes in (left) Bigstone and in Opportunity



tares of land that make up its reserves. The royalties the band receives from the limited oil and gas pipelines that flow within its borders are held in a trust administered by the federal government. By contrast, Opportunity controls 3.14 million hectares of Crown land, which allows it to collect a large cut of provincial resource royalties from oil and gas production in the area. As a municipality it also has the right to directly tax oil companies on the value of the work camps they build there.

As a result, nearly all of Opportunity's roughly \$80-million annual budget comes from oil and gas taxes, both a cut of the provincial pipeline royalties and the 20 per cent development tax that Opportunity charges oil companies to build their work camps. By contrast, Bigstone earned about \$2 million in oil and gas royalties last year. The vast

'We don't even have the money to demolish trailers,' says a Bigstone councillor. 'It's like a Third World country.'

majority of Bigstone's \$52-million budget comes from Ottawa. Of the nearly \$45 million in federal transfers last year, the band spent \$11 million on housing and social services, and more than \$33 million on health care and education. Opportunity spent \$30 million on roads and public works alone.

Despite a general attitude among locals that together, Opportunity and Bigstone function as one big happy family, the financial disparity causes lingering bitterness. "I found it very tough when they were able to

build a \$3-million pool and we were trying to keep our elders' lodge open," says Silas Yellowknee, who spent a decade as a Bigstone councillor before losing the race for chief in September. "It seemed that Bigstone struggles to find money to build the small stuff while, with the municipality, it was like they had a never-ending pot of gold."

The gap between the two is only likely to get bigger. Right now, the area around Bigstone and Opportunity produces about 70,000 barrels of oil a day, almost all of it occurring in Opportunity's territory. It's a relatively small share of the nearly one million barrels Alberta produces each day. However, the community is at the centre of what many believe will be the next frontier of oil sands development. Most of the region's oil deposits consist of "carbonates," rock-hard bitumen trapped

inside deposits of limestone or minerals. Until recently, the carbonates were considered too expensive to recover, but new technology is quickly working to make them viable. Already, companies such as Shell and Osum, headed by former Suncor CEO Rick George, have poured billions into pilot projects that hope to unlock the carbonates. If successful, they could open up access to an astounding 400 billion barrels of oil carbonates, making any battle for control over the territory a fight worth potentially trillions of dollars.

HOW THIS PLACE came to be divided between Bigstone and Opportunity is a familiar refrain in the history of Canada's relationship with First Nations people, one with dramatic consequences still evident today. The area was the last stop for the federal government's so-called "treaty and half-breed" commissioners in August 1899. Officials came offering the local Aboriginal population a choice: Sign a treaty with the Canadian government and receive money and reserve lands, or accept "scrip": a piece of paper that could be exchanged for land and would absolve Ottawa of any future obligations. Those who took scrip could "look at themselves as the white people," Marvin Beaver, an elder, told a young local researcher in 1968 in an oral history known as the Wabasca Tapes. Those who accepted the treaty negotiated by Chief Joseph Bigstone would get \$15 up front and \$5 a year. They would become members of Bigstone Cree Nation, safeguarding a piece of land and rights for their children and grandchildren, Beaver recalled. "But the piece of land that you will be given—that you will be choosing—that is all you will own."

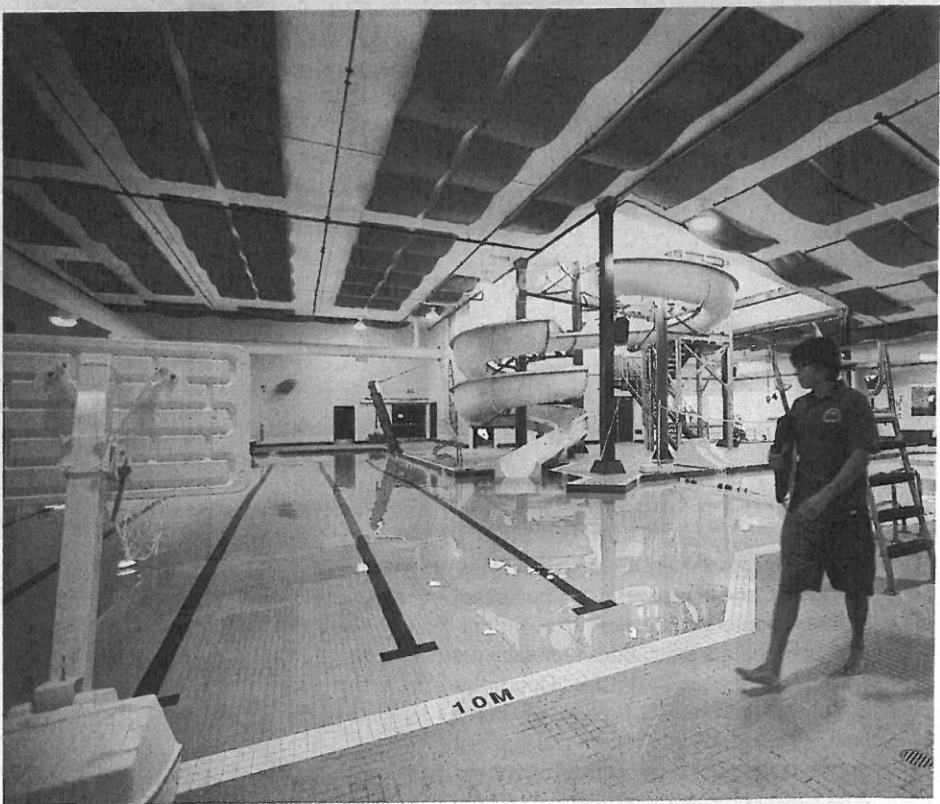
The decision cleaved families apart. Some were barred from accepting the treaty because their skin was too light. Many others were missed altogether. It was a defining moment in local history that would have repercussions for generations to come.

More than 120 years later, Bigstone Cree Nation is not so much a community as it is several pockets of land carved out of a huge swath of northern Alberta. Meanwhile, what land wasn't set aside as reserves was eventually merged with other surrounding communities to create Opportunity, and the municipality was given control over a vast tract of forestland about the size of Belgium.

For an isolated northern community, Opportunity has lived up to its name. In the past decade, it has poured hundreds of millions into infrastructure projects. It built a massive sports centre for \$10 million. Another \$10 million went to construct a five-lane indoor pool and fitness centre. An 18-hole golf



The big divide: (above) Life in Bigstone Cree Nation; (below) Opportunity's five-lane indoor pool



course and clubhouse, still under construction, is expected to cost \$22 million. There's a hockey arena and a new daycare that can accommodate 150 children. After the province threatened to shut down the local hospital, Opportunity began recruiting its own physicians, building a medical clinic and rental housing for doctors. It's had no trouble attracting four doctors, who each receive a salary of \$250,000, on top of what they bill

Alberta Health Services for working in the local hospital, which could be as much as \$350,000, based on the average payment to physicians in Alberta last year. When Bigstone recently lost its lone physician, Opportunity agreed to hire one more of its own. "People were applying before it was even advertised," says Everett Gottfried, a municipal councillor.

These days, Opportunity is in the midst of a construction boom in its fledgling down-

town. There are two hotels and a conference centre, along with a new luxury apartment building geared to oil and gas workers. While many are nervously watching as oil prices plummet, Opportunity's reeve, Paul Sinclair, says there is still talk the area could become the next Fort McMurray.

At 68, Sinclair is the only reeve Opportunity has ever known. Before he was elected 20 years ago, he was active with Metis organizations and remembers the days when the local Aboriginal population looked at the prospect of running its own municipal government with a mix of skepticism and envy, given the kind of support Ottawa gave to First Nations governments. "We wanted to be treaties, because treaties were treated a little better than us," he says. "Now it's different. We're not doing too bad."

It's a point of pride here that nearly half the population of Opportunity are members of Bigstone and other First Nations bands who have opted to work, live and pay taxes off-reserve. That includes three of Opportunity's municipal councillors and many of its employees. "The staff is all First Nation. The CAO [chief administrative officer] is First Nation," says Leo Alook, Opportunity's longest-serving councillor. A Bigstone band member, Alook has been involved with local government for 32 years and even helped to negotiate part of the band's recent land claim with Ottawa. But he nonetheless favours municipal districts such as Opportunity, not reserves, as the ideal form of government for Alberta's Aboriginal communities.

"I'm a full-blooded Aboriginal treaty, but I don't like the system of the First Nations," he says. "This is the best way for Native communities. We're isolated, but we've got the best roads. We've got lighting all down the street. We've got roads that are way better than the reserves."

A BUMPY DRIVE away from Opportunity's municipal headquarters, Gordon T. Auger, the fiery 70-year-old chief of Bigstone Cree Nation, fumes about the state of the roads on reserve. Aside from the fact that it is far more challenging to navigate Bigstone's muddy, unpaved streets than to drive on Opportunity's smooth pavement, for Auger, the roads have come to symbolize everything that is wrong with the way the provincial and federal governments deal with First Nations communities. "When you drive in, you know where the revenue stops," says Auger. "Just look at our roads. That's not equality; that's a one-way street."

Opportunity's biggest challenge seems to be how quickly it can spend the tax revenue that

rolls in from the likes of Cenovus, Husky and CNRL. Given that most of the local oil production happens off-reserve, Bigstone has continued to struggle to negotiate meaningful partnerships with oil companies who don't require their permission to start drilling. "They'll say we'll put on a community feast, or we'll help you with some mattresses or an air conditioner," says Bigstone councillor Clara Moberly. "But that's not something we can plan on."

To date, the only substantial project to take place on Bigstone is a joint venture the band signed in 2006 with Bronco Oil and Gas. Under the terms of the deal, Bigstone allowed Bronco to drill for oil on a 14,000-hectare section of reserve lands in exchange for five per cent of the



Unsupported: Freda Alook-Gambler visits her ailing 93-year-old grandmother, Agnes Gambler

operation's revenue. "They were going to make Bigstone rich," says former band councillor Silas Yellowknee.

But the promise of millions in oil profits never materialized and, in 2010, Bronco sold its operation to a company called Legacy Oil and Gas, which made no secret of the fact that it had purchased the drilling operation in hopes of eventually selling it. (It remains up for sale.)

Auger says the last meeting between Bigstone and its partner was three or four years ago. Despite the failure of the joint venture, the Alberta government still boasts that the Bronco project is "the biggest oil sands project ever undertaken on First Nation reserve lands in Canada."

When Gordon Auger meets with oil companies these days, he pulls out a chart of a pyramid. At the bottom are the billions in corporate profits, then the billions that go to the provincial government and the millions that go to Opportunity. On the top, he says, is Bigstone "with a big fat zero."

That is not entirely true. In fact, Bigstone is quite rich, albeit not with oil money.

Three years ago, Bigstone signed the largest land claim in the province's history. It was the culmination of more than 30 years of work to prove that Ottawa had never properly recognized the full scope of Bigstone's membership. The agreement with Ottawa came with about 57,000 hectares of new land—tripling the band's reserves—and \$231 million in cash. Every band member got a cheque

for \$3,500, while another \$3,500 was set aside for every child to access on his or her 18th birthday. The rest of the money, many believed, could be used to fund projects that would improve conditions on reserve for generations to come. Instead,

all it has done so far is expose deep divisions within the community and serve as a harsh reminder to both Ottawa and Aboriginal communities themselves that more money isn't always the solution to the problems that have dogged First Nations reserves for generations.

CHAPTER THREE

One proposal to use some of Bigstone's hard-won, \$231-million cash settlement was a plan to buy gravel and finally repair the slick, muddy reserve roads. "I told my wife not to vote on it, because she has nothing to gain for it," says Jason Supernault, who lives off reserve, but works at an oilfield construction company on reserve. "She wasn't going to get any gravel, so why should she want to spend the money?"

Silas Yellowknee, the former band councillor and Supernault's co-worker, shakes his head. "Guess where he and his wife drive everyday to get home? Through the reserve. That's why she's on her second vehicle in the last three years."

When the band signed its settlement with Ottawa, it agreed that all proposals to spend the money would have to be supported by a majority of Bigstone members, who vote in a series of annual referendums. In three years, the community has spent 10 times more on trust administration fees than it has paid out in projects to improve life on reserve. So far, band members have voted to accept just one proposal: a plan to give a total of \$100,000 in home-heating rebates to a handful of residents.

The stalemate reflects the level of distrust, division and apathy among band members. A plan to create a support group for off-reserve

The community has spent 10 times more on trust administration than on projects to improve life on reserve

members living in Edmonton was rejected by off-reserve members in Fort St. John, B.C. An idea to create a "community construction company" to employ locals fixing roads, doing yard work and building picnic tables, lost by just two votes. Even as 93-year-old Agnes Gambler has been forced to spend the \$6,000 she saved for her funeral on repairs to her condemned trailer, Bigstone members rejected a request by the band administration to use \$450,000 to remedy critical housing problems on reserve. (As a compromise, her granddaughter, band councillor Freda Alook-Gambler, once suggested that each of Bigstone's 300 employees donate \$100 a year toward a fund to fix the band's massive backlog of housing repairs. She received just one donation.)

Most proposals have failed because people simply don't bother to vote. "A lot of the elders, and even a lot of the young people, think, 'Why should the chief and council touch my money?'" says Yellowknee. "That money will never be touched. It will sit there and collect in perpetuity."

The hope was that by keeping the money out of reach of the chief and council, Bigstone could avoid the problems other First Nations governments have experienced when a poor community suddenly inherits a cash windfall. Piikani First Nation near Lethbridge sunk most of its \$64-million federal settlement into an investment corporation that made a series of questionable loans to band-owned businesses and has since filed for bankruptcy restructuring. In Saskatchewan, leaders of two different bands have been convicted of theft and fraud for misappropriating settlement funds. Samson Cree Nation, outside of Edmonton, handed out six-figure cheques to band members on their 18th birthday, leading to the sorts of problems one can expect when giving teenagers a giant wad of cash.

Auger admits that trying to avoid similar problems means Bigstone is now suffering from a devastating case of democratic paralysis. "It was the first time the Nation ever had any money," he says. "It was our call. It really wasn't the government telling us what to do; it was us." He hopes to restructure the trusts to make it easier for the band to access some of the money, although the trusts are subject to legal agreements that aren't easily modified.

However, many here, including Auger, still support the idea of keeping most of the

\$231 million locked away in trust so that it can benefit future generations. Even if the band were to spend its trust money on building schools, houses and seniors' facilities, without a steady, long-term income stream, it would eventually run out of cash to keep them going, says Yellowknee. "In five years, we'd be flat broke."

Others say accessing the trust money is a side issue to the band's real mission: pressuring both Opportunity and the province for a share of the local oil and gas revenues. More than a decade ago, Auger made national headlines as chief when he set up roadblocks along the community's main artery to stop oil workers and to demand a cut of their revenues. Negotiations with the province and Ottawa over Bigstone's land settlement forced the band to back down.

Today, Auger says he thinks the courtroom, not the roadway, is the best place for Bigstone to battle both the province and Opportunity for oil revenue. He says he plans to hire more non-Aboriginal economic development professionals, not just unqualified family members, to help the band renegotiate better partnerships with the oil industry and to press for a larger share of the local resource revenue. Yet, a week after Auger brushes off the idea of renewed roadblocks, he and 300 band members set up along the community's two highways to hand out pamphlets to contract-

ors, reminding them they're operating on Bigstone's traditional territory. "Bigstone has been known to be peaceful, but the time for that has passed," he told the local paper. It's not an idle threat: Bigstone's lands are strategically located so that workers and Opportunity residents have to pass through the reserves to reach the oil patch, meaning a full-scale blockade could effectively shut down access to operations in the area.

It's destined to be a long and drawn-out fight. In the meantime, Bigstone's millions sit locked away in trust, even though \$231 million could hire the kind of economic development professionals who could help the band benefit from the region's oil wealth. Darcy Auger lives with his wife and six children in a condemned home with a bucket for a toilet, even though \$231 million is more than enough to solve the band's housing crisis. Young people are dropping out of school in droves and families are leaving by the dozen in search of better schools elsewhere, threatening the community's entire future, even though, with \$231 million, Bigstone could surely find a way to keep them home.

CHAPTER FOUR

For all of its oil riches and trust-fund wealth, there is one thing this entire community shares with the rest of Native Canada: a deep distrust of the education system. Education has become the single biggest problem facing both Bigstone and Opportunity and, so far, neither side has found an answer.

Last year, the Fraser Institute scored the

'Bigstone has been known to be peaceful, but the time for that has passed,' says Chief Gordon Auger



'Protected': Grade 3 student Jolene Noskiye has the answer at the band-run elementary school

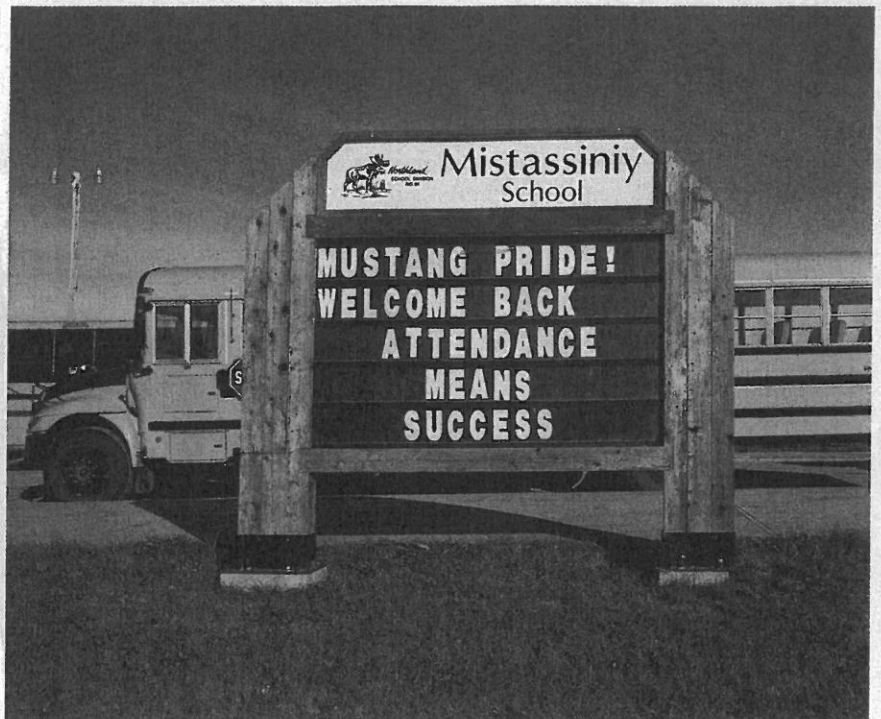
local high school, Mistassiniy School, a zero out of 10 on student achievement, meaning its performance is deteriorating. The school, which serves kids from both Bigstone and Opportunity in Grades 7 to 12, has consistently ranked at the bottom of the think tank's Alberta school rankings. It struggles with a high dropout rate, bullying and gangs. Last year, with 51 students in Grade 12, only 14 students graduated. That's if kids even make it to high school at all. Fewer than half of those who attend the area's two elementary schools will ever set foot in Mistassiniy. Some simply quit school before they get to Grades 7 or 8, while others are pulled out by their parents and sent to better schools in Edmonton and Athabasca.

Mistassiniy is a shared concern among parents in both Bigstone and Opportunity, but the school has been a particularly difficult place for Bigstone's kids, who are often teased by their off-reserve counterparts for being "rez kids" or "ghetto kids," and who tend to drop out in higher numbers than their off-reserve counterparts. "Kids kill themselves because of bullies at Mistassiniy," whispers one Grade 6 student at the band-run elementary school when asked if she's looking forward to transferring to the high school for Grade 7 next year.

"After they leave here is when they drop out," says Christine Gullion, principal at the band-run elementary school, Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik (OPK), and a former vice-principal at Mistassiniy. "I think it's because we protect them here. If parents need help at home, we go over and help them out. We ask them: 'What do you need? How come your kid is not coming to school?' When they go over [to Mistassiniy], there are so many of them and nobody is saying, 'What do you need help with?'"

Mistassiniy is the largest high school in Northland School Division, a special provincial department set up in the 1960s to assume control of Alberta's residential schools. The church schools may be gone, but Mistassiniy is greeted with suspicion, at best, by many local residents. At worst, there is open hostility. During a community meeting last year, one parent said the high school was directly responsible for the community's high suicide rate.

Absenteeism and a high dropout rate have also become part of a vicious cycle. Ottawa requires students from Bigstone to attend at least 40 per cent of the school year before it will fund them. For those students who show up in class only on occasion, that means the school has neither the staff nor the resour-



Missing children: *Mistassiniy School struggles with a high dropout rate, bullying and gangs*

ces to properly educate them. (By contrast, Alberta funds off-reserve students based on the number of credits they complete.)

It hasn't helped that both the school board and Mistassiniy have been an endless source of controversy. In 2010, the province fired Northland's 23-member board and replaced it with a single trustee, promising an investigation into high dropout rates. That same year, Mistassiniy's former principal was stripped of his teaching licence after he fathered a child with one of his students.

It was into this atmosphere that the current principal, Dafydd Thomas, arrived six years ago after a bad divorce propelled him to leave southern Alberta in search of a fresh start up North. "I wanted to go where it was still magical," he says.

On a Friday in October, Thomas is on a mission. A teacher has come by his office and pointed out a group of boys, known gang members, congregating in the halls. Thomas can see them walking down the hallway on the bank of security cameras that sits behind his desk.

He finds them hanging out in the boys' bathroom. They are barely 14. One of the boys has been in a gang since elementary school. Thomas confiscates his hat, a red and black baseball cap with the letters ASAP, a reference to a local gang.

"What did I say about gang hats in school?" he says. "It's not a gang," replies the boy. "It's a family."

It's a response Thomas has heard many times in the years he has been at Mistassiniy, the last three as principal. "When I came here, the kids ran the school," he says. "It was nothing but kids in the hallway, even after the bell went."

The school's gang problem has diminished in recent years, he says, particularly after Bigstone and Opportunity came together to start a gang-reduction task force run by two reformed gang members. That fell apart earlier this year after one of the outreach workers, a well-known former gang boss turned inspirational speaker, was stabbed in the neck, leaving him a quadriplegic.

There are plenty of examples of what the community can do with a bit of money and a lot of determination. For instance, OPK, Bigstone's stunning elementary school, is a series of joyously light-filled classrooms shaped like little teepees. Designed by a group of elders who wished for a school on reserve, it was partly funded by a \$2-million personal donation from Canadian Natural Resources Limited chairman, Allan Markin.

The local high school, however, has become the obstacle that unites both Bigstone and Opportunity. The municipality's resource wealth has helped it to buy doctors and hockey rinks and water slides. Yet, when it comes to the idea of using that money on the high school, Opportunity's officials say education spending is the domain of the province.

Likewise, no one is suggesting that Bigstone spend its trust money to hire more teachers or otherwise improve the state of the high school. For all the debate over resource revenues, the one thing that will truly allow the entire community to fully benefit from the oil and gas development in its own backyard will be education.

Despite his school's abysmal performance, Thomas is keen to point out the kids who are beating the odds and, in doing so, are challenging the community's lack of faith in its school: kids such as Christopher Auger, who is in Grade 11 and is applying to law school,

Some are hopeful: 'There's a whole generation that hasn't been affected by residential schools'



Cultural capital: Gerald Auger drums with children at Bigstone Cree Nation's elementary school

or Janaé Logan, who is graduating this year and wants to be a registered nurse. Or Willow Auger, the Grade 9 student who's running to be Mistassini's next student president. "These are the community's kids," Thomas says. "They're going to be the thinkers, the ones who stimulate the conversations. These are the quiet movers and shakers in the community."

CHAPTER FIVE

When the votes are counted for student president, Willow comes in second place, six votes shy of the lead. She later learns the vote was so close that the school awarded her the vice-president post. Quickly, she meets with the new president to tackle her first order of business: "We're going to get new water fountains," she says.

The source of Willow's strength has been her *kokum* (Cree for grandmother), Ruby Marie Yellowknee. "She's my best friend,"

Willow says. "I tell her everything. We trust each other completely."

It was Ruby who took Willow to live with her full-time three years ago, when she was desperate to get out of a family house beset by alcohol, dysfunction and violence. Willow was named for her grandmother's store, Willow Video and Confectionary, and it was Ruby who rebuilt the business to double its size after vandals burned it to the ground two winters ago. It was Ruby who bought Willow her school clothes, paid for with the money she earned collecting bottles and cans. It was Ruby who suggested that Willow assemble a

say it's a better education, and I kind of want a change, too," she says. "I've lived here all my life. I want to try something new."

It's an example of how easy it is for Bigstone's success stories to slip through the community's fingers. But it could prove to have a happy ending. If Willow returns one day, she wouldn't be the first to have left in search of opportunity, only to come back home. For all of the tensions between the band and the oil industry, resource development has lured educated members back to the reserves with the promise of well-paying jobs. Others, like new band councillor Josie Auger, come armed with Ph.D.s, looking to make a change. Former chief Romeo Cardinal returned home two years ago after a long career as an RCMP sergeant. Gordon Auger, himself a residential school survivor and recovered alcoholic, says he recently met with a group of young band members who were attending university to remind them of the good they could do for their community.

Among those who have come back is Gerald Auger (no relation to Gordon). His is a harrowing story of having run away at age 12 from an abusive home, of living a violent life on the streets, only to clean himself up and graduate from college. He has since gone on to a successful career as a filmmaker and actor in movies and TV shows, such as Steven Spielberg's *Into the West* miniseries, AMC's *Hell on Wheels* and, most recently, CBC's new feminist period drama, *Strange Empire*.

He returned home in 2011 and now works at the band's elementary school, where he teaches Cree language and culture and has lunch with his six-year-old grandson. Having come from a childhood of darkness and despair, he now sees hope in the generation of young people growing up on the reserve. "There's a whole generation that hasn't been affected by the residential schools," he says, "just like there is a new breed of us that is coming out that is educated and business-astute."

Just as leaving gave Auger the strength to better himself and return, it might do the same for Willow. Perhaps one day, having achieved her dream of finishing university and travelling the world, she'll come home again. Maybe as a coach. Maybe as someone who can bridge the divide between Bigstone and Opportunity. Maybe even as premier. ♣



To meet some of the residents of Bigstone Cree Nation and for an exclusive inside look at life on the reserve, see this week's iPad edition of *Maclean's*

photo book of her remaining baby pictures for her mother, after local gang members burned down her mother's trailer, destroying most of the family's childhood memorabilia. "She cried for two weeks," Willow says of her mother.

When Willow was in Grade 6, hanging out with the wrong friends and contemplating whether to drop out of school, it was Ruby who prodded her each morning until she finally got out of bed and headed for the school bus.

Now, it is Ruby who is talking about moving to Edmonton so that Willow can access better schools, and her seven-year-old cousin can take figure-skating lessons. Ruby and Willow's aunt will take turns living with the girls and travelling back to Bigstone to run the store.

While Willow is excited about her plans for student council, she's energized by the prospect of leaving the reserve. "Lots of people