

New Canadian, graduate, and valedictorian reflects on privilege of receiving rural Alberta education



When Charlie Shi gave his valedictorian address at Cremona School's graduation ceremony last week, the words he spoke gave the entire crowd cause to pause and reflect with gratitude, for the educational system in Alberta.

Charlie moved to Canada from China with his older brother and parents in 2016. As a second child in a country that had permitted families to have one, Shi began his life in a challenging circumstance.

"I was born illegally in China. My father, a courageous defender of human rights, faced relentless persecution from the government. Because of this, my family was forced to live in the shadows," explained Charlie Shi.

"People looked down on us, and I couldn't attend ordinary schools like most children could, leading to two missed years of primary education," said Shi in his valedictory address.

"Yet, despite these challenges, my father's unwavering belief in the power of education remained deeply rooted in me. We lived in fear, yet he always encouraged me to pursue my dreams relentlessly, emphasizing the value of knowledge. He understood that education is not just a path to personal success but a powerful tool for change," said Shi.

When the Shi family arrived in Canada, they settled in Calgary. Surrounded by neighbors who spoke Chinese, Shi's parents wanted a more full immersion in English for their sons, so they sent them to live with an uncle in Cremona.

That was nine years ago. 11-year old Charlie, without any ability to speak English, and having missed two years of school, began attending Grade 4 in the rural Alberta school.

"At first I couldn't really talk to anyone else," he said. "I was nervous. The other students were kind to me, and invited me to play. They included me. And they told me when I made mistakes in English," said Shi.

In his valedictory address Shi acknowledged the power of his school friendships. ***"I want to thank my classmates and my teachers, because I wasn't able to speak any English, not one word. You all helped me learn the language. Thank you," he said.***

Between Grade 4 and his graduation, Shi applied himself to learning the language, and catching up in school. He shared that ***"when I finally arrived in Canada, I was awestruck by the opportunities available here."***



Left: Charlie Shi on graduation day with his family

Below right: Charlie Shi, and his family, in 2016 when the Shi family arrived in Canada. Charlie is in the centre of the photo.

"I could attend school freely, learn without fear, and express myself without the looming shadow of persecution. I poured my heart into my studies, striving to make up for those lost years. With determination, I sought to seize every opportunity that this new land offered," he said.

"We are very proud of Charlie," said Darryl Korody, Principal of Cremona School. **"He has consistently applied himself, and works incredibly hard. His resilience is remarkable."**

Korody cited one recent example: Shi is the only student participating in calculus and is taking the responsibility of independent learning seriously. **"And he has made friends throughout the school. Everyone likes Charlie,"** said Korody. **"He's on everyone's side."**

Shi's accomplishment of becoming the school's valedictorian, only a handful of years after arriving in Canada, is a testament to the power of rural education, said Korody. **"For Charlie, the advantage of a smaller rural school was a full immersion in English with supportive peers. And we've all benefited from having Charlie in our school. Increased diversity and perspectives are incredibly valuable for all of us."**

Charlie's uncle, Joseph Shi, said, **"We are very proud of Charlie because he has overcome many life obstacles and graduated with quite satisfying marks. It's really meaningful to get an education in Canada, because he learns real knowledge and about being honest which will be helpful in his future life."** He said, **"we hope Charlie can get further education in Canada or in the United States and be a useful person for society."**

Charlie Shi does hope to take post secondary training. He is interested in engineering.

As he begins to walk the journey towards his own dreams, Charlie Shi encouraged his peers. **"I urge you to pursue your dreams fearlessly. Let your passion guide you, and your education empower you,"** he said.

And Charlie Shi encouraged fellow graduates to appreciate their education and the opportunities that come from living in a democratic country.

"As we leave this school and venture into the world, let us remember the privileges we enjoy, the opportunities we have, and the responsibility that comes with them," he said.

"Let us be thankful for living in a democratic and constitutional country. We are adults now, and taking part in democracy is both our right and our duty. If we take it for granted, we might lose all of these privileges, and our next generations may suffer bitter experiences like mine. We have a duty to use our education to make the world a better place."



Spruce View School receives \$20,000 board grant for student-led hydroponics project

Students at Spruce View School were delighted to learn, recently, that the school will receive a \$20,000 grant from the Chinook's Edge School Board.

Spruce View students plan to use the funds to purchase hydroponics equipment so they can grow vegetable crops year round. This is the latest project to receive a Flourishing Stories and Innovation Grant.

"We're pleased to see the efforts of the students rewarded," said Claire Funk, Principal of Spruce View School. "They worked hard at developing the submission to the board. They have a great idea and we believe it will grow now that we have the Board's seed money in place."



Top right photo (L to R): Natalie Marx, Austin Noirot, Jackson Walsh - all students involved in the project. Also, Rick Dunnigan, teacher, is on the right.

The idea started with teacher Rick Dunnigan, who teaches Career and Technology Studies at the school, as well as math and science. Dunnigan approached administration and asked to offer an enterprise and innovation class, so that students would have the opportunity to develop a project and learn the lessons from the process, including how to apply for a grant.

Then, with students enrolled, the brainstorming began. **"We were looking for something that would meet the conditions of the school, and keep in mind the criteria of the grant too," said Dunnigan, "and what we landed on was hydroponics."**

"I hope that our school becomes known for agricultural education," said student Austin Noirot, a Grade 10 student. "We are starting with hydroponics but I am hoping we can go much bigger to include chickens, and crop growing for instance."

Noirot said he thinks the focus is a good fit in an agricultural area, and it's the agricultural focus that made him excited about the class and the project.

Grade 10 student Jackson Walsh had a different reason for being a part of the project. **"I am interested in business and marketing, and I'm thinking about studying that in post-secondary. I thought this would be a good way to test the waters."**



"I like planning a project as a whole and sequencing and sculpting the organization of it all. I like expressing creativity in this way, and throwing ideas at the wall to see if they will land. I'm excited to see this idea get up and running," said Walsh.

Noirot and Walsh worked well with other students to form a team, with each bringing different interests and skills, said Dunnigan.

"Everyone learned from each other," said Dunnigan.

"We operate kind of like an ecosystem," agreed Walsh.

Dunnigan said a second class was also important to the beginning of the project; a class where students learn the ins-and-outs of growing plants, which will support the project. This spring the class used an existing greenhouse to grow vegetables, flower medley pots and hydrangeas. Students sold the plants after a school event last week, and proceeds will help purchase supplies needed for the hydroponics project.

"I liked learning more about plants," said Natalie Marx, a Grade 10 student. "There's a lot to learn. It's more than just seeds, dirt and water," she said. Marx added that she liked gaining the knowledge because, ***"it's a survival skill to grow your own food."***

Learning they had been successful in applying for the grant was an exciting moment, the students said.

"I still remember where I was when I found out," said Walsh.

"Yeah, Mr. Dunnigan came up to us and said it so casually," said Noirot.

"But there was so much feeling and emotion behind that," said Walsh. "We worked hard to earn that. It is so gratifying to have received the grant. It's a dream come true."

"I was so surprised," said Noirot. "And it's great. It seems like other schools always have this happen to them, and now this time it's us!"

"It was an amazing moment," said Dunnigan. "I thought at the time - that's amazing - and also now we have our work cut out for us. Now the work begins. We need to deliver on our goals. Also, I thought about how proud I am of these students. They set a goal, and together they achieved it."

Dunnigan said the hydroponics equipment has been ordered and will arrive in the fall. The school selected a double sided mobile cart with the ability to produce 360 plants at a time, and provide enough light even in Canadian winters.

The school plans to produce lettuce, cucumbers, and possibly green peppers and tomatoes. The class will provide plants to the school's foods classes, and plans to sell plants to the community as well.



École Deer Meadow and Holy Trinity students work together to give the community a heartfelt gift

Grade 8 students from two schools in Olds have been working together to contribute to an important community project.

The community of Olds has been rallying behind the Mountain View Emergency Shelter Society to build an emergency shelter in town, named Kirsten's Place, after Kirsten Gardner who was killed in Bowden in 2021 in a case of domestic violence. The man who admitted killing her pleaded guilty to second degree murder.

Grade 8 students from École Deer Meadow School painted a decaying wood fence with lilac colored paint, as purple is a symbol of domestic violence. Then they took the newly painted boards down, with the intention of creating benches for the emergency shelter.

At that point, Holy Trinity School Grade 8 students joined in on the project. They dried and measured the boards so that the wood could be converted into benches.

Last week Deer Meadow students walked to Holy Trinity, and together the students from both schools added positive and encouraging phrases and quotes to the boards. Together they are calling it a "Legacy Project", because it is what they are giving to their community at the end of their middle school years and before entering high school.



The idea came from Kendra Weisbrodt, a Success Coach with the Youth Empowerment & Support (YES) program. Weisbrodt coordinated with the two schools, with the project leaders and the Mountain View Emergency Shelter Society, with a vision for students to "be a small part of something big".

"We were blown away by the creativity and involvement of the students, and their initiative in doing what they can to help," said Dale Rosehill, who is on the Board of Kirsten's Place. "This is such a thoughtful idea. Having youth that age get involved is important. And it's also good that students this age are considering what is a healthy relationship."

"The Holy Trinity students had a great time gathering, drying, and prepping the boards for the large group painting session on June 12," said Monica Andrew, a teacher at Holy Trinity School.



"We are grateful for the opportunity to collaborate and bring students from both schools together to build community and contribute to the Mountain View Emergency Shelter initiative," said Andrew.

"When our students were together last week there was such a powerful connection. It was so powerful that people were drawn into the space to witness what these kids were doing," said Sandi Hoppins, a teacher at École Deer Meadow School.
"These students will be a force in this community. When they understand that they can make a difference, it's beautiful."

A Grade 8 student from Deer Meadow, Shiloh, said they were nervous to go into another school with students they didn't know, but "**it was a good idea overall and it gave me the chance to do something nice for the people in the emergency shelter.**"



Another Grade 8 student from Deer Meadow, Harper, said, "**I think this project is very important for our community and for ourselves. We left our mark in a great way, and I'm sure the people sitting on the benches will really enjoy them. I feel this was a very positive thing to add into our town.**"

And a Deer Meadow student who asked not to be named, said, "**I think that the Legacy Project this year with Mrs. Hoppins was a great way to give back to the community and to connect with the kids who will be joining us at the high school. I feel that using old fence boards to create benches at the emergency shelter is creative and helpful to the community.**"



Andrew and Hoppins, are both grateful for Weisbrodt from the YES program. Andrew said Weisbrodt contributed an ***"incredible effort in envisioning and organizing this project."***

The YES program appreciates the support for their work and for this project, specifically, from Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) in Olds.



Chinook's Edge graduation ceremonies include celebration of Indigenous culture



If you've attended a graduation ceremony at a Chinook's Edge school this year or in the last five plus years, you may have noticed some graduates wearing Métis sashes. There have also been Indigenous graduates wearing medicine pouches.

These protocols are now included in graduation events as a part of the division's commitment to Truth and Reconciliation, and to ensuring Indigenous students feel welcome, safe and celebrated in their heritage and culture. Students and families are asked in advance if they would like to be honoured in this way.

The Métis sash is a symbol of accomplishment and achievement and is presented to Métis students with pride, and positive energy for their journey ahead.

The medicine pouch represents wisdom, and a connection to the creator. It is filled with a white stone to give Indigenous students the feeling of connection and being grounded. It also contains sweet grass, a medicine in Indigenous cultures that represents kindness, strength and resilience. It is given to remind students to encourage them to love themselves and others, to move through life with kindness, and to remind them that they are strong and resilient.

An Indigenous Elder smudges the sashes, the medicine pouches, and their contents prior to schools receiving them, with the intent of having students blessed with good thoughts, words and wishes as they begin their journey into adulthood and the next stage of their life. The Elder asks the creator to keep graduates grounded, safe and loved.

Top left: Graduates at Ecole H.J. Cody School recently, included some wearing a Metis sash.

Below: Elder John Sinclair smudges Metis sashes and medicine bundles prior to their use in graduation ceremonies.



Leah Sorensen, a Métis graduate from Didsbury High School, said, “***not being close to my culture, wearing the Métis sash felt good. It felt more embracing of my culture. It made me want to get to know more.***” Sorensen said projects in school helped her learn more about her heritage. “***I think it's important to include this in graduations so you can learn to embrace where you come from,***” she said.

Sorensen said her Mom works as a Métis advisor at a post-secondary institution, and that she “***was happy that our school lets us embrace who we are.***”

Mya Badger is a member of the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, and is a Didsbury High School graduate. “***I felt really proud to wear the medicine pouch at graduation,***” said Badger. “***I felt recognized that the school did that, and explained it to everyone. It was another outlet to be heard.***”

Badger said her family was surprised to see this was a part of the ceremony, as well as the land acknowledgement, because it hadn't been included in graduation ceremonies in previous generations.

“***We weren't encouraged to be proud of our background. But to have it be a part of graduation ceremonies, having a chance to celebrate the new beginning in my life by including my culture was important,***” said Badger.



Above: Mya Badger (right) with the medicine pouch she received at the Didsbury High School graduation, and with her friend and fellow graduate Ashton.

Below: Ecole H.J. Cody graduates, some of whom are wearing Metis sashes and medicine pouches.



Seleah Organ, an École Olds High School graduate received an eagle feather, presented by her mother, during her graduation ceremony.

"I was honored to accept it. The symbol of the eagle feather reminds me of the responsibility I have to share my knowledge with my family and community," said Organ.

Organ said she appreciates that the school was open to providing her family with the opportunity to practice their traditions. ***"I felt a sense of pride to have my Mom do this in front of my school and local community. This opportunity to acknowledge Indigenous peoples inside our school by presenting traditional elements from our culture meant a great deal to me. This shows how we embrace everyone for who they are, and how each person is valued for their uniqueness."***

Meaghan Reist, Principal of École Olds High School said, ***"Every graduation brings a special memory for students, but ensuring our Indigenous students are recognized with sashes and medicine pouches not only positively impacts the student's graduation experience, it also models for all those in attendance what small steps in reconciliation look like, and what it means to celebrate all aspects of a student's educational experience."***



Seleah Organ, a graduate from Ecole Olds High School, was presented an eagle feather by her mother at her recent high school graduation.

