



ENTERTAINMENT

Artists work together at Friends United Centre

by **Jake Boudrot** Editor
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KEMPT ROAD: In the midst of a public relations blitz to get the word out about the facility, those in charge of the Friends United Centre point out the vital role it plays in the artistic and cultural community.

Canadian Pioneer Estates Ltd. founder/president Rolf Bouman, and a manager of the Kempt Road facility, told *The Reporter* that one of the major components of the building is a space for artists to showcase their creations and work collaboratively.

Since Bouman immigrated from Germany to Canada in 1986, he has been working on eliminating prejudice and on focusing the world's attention on First Nations people. After researching for many years and working to ensure long-term funding, Bouman founded in 2009 what eventually became the Friends United initiative.

The idea for the convention centre started not long after when Bouman and other land developers were looking to give back to the community and do something socially responsible with their profits.

The initiative and the convention centre complex are funded and supported by the Bouman Group, which consists of *Canadian Pioneer Estates Ltd.*, *Canec Land Developments Inc.*, *Kelly Robertson Consulting Inc.*, and *(Ad) Venture Canada Publishing Inc.*

When the centre first opened, Bouman said the original intent was to tell First Nations stories, help communities and demonstrate the significance of that culture, but that has evolved.

"I had no idea this would be picked up by so many people and go so far," Bouman recalled. "I'm hoping that the press and politicians will see more about it because there is friendship to be found here."

Both the Friends United International Convention Centre and the Friends United initiative aim at educating Aboriginal artists to become self-sufficient and independent entrepreneurs through their art work.

The land developers who constructed the centre started a publishing house where the profits go back to First Nations communities. Bouman said the owners have also initiated a program where artists trade their work for land, deeded to them by the developers. And the artists have a business mentorship program which helps them get established as entrepreneurs.

Since many seminars with an international audience are being held at the centre, it allows the Native artists belonging to the Friends United initiative to display their artwork to a worldwide audience. The Friends United initiative is known to many people worldwide and has assisted in making Aboriginal artists spiritual and cultural ambassadors for Canada.

In addition to Mi'kmaq artists, Bouman said the centre features the work of other First Nations artists, for a total of approximately 40 people using the centre and inspiring future generations. It features the largest private collection in Atlantic Canada of Native art, including Inuit carvings.

"They are working together very closely," Bouman said. "I see where many of our artists who are painting now, are not only making a living for their family, they give the children pride, the whole family works together, it gives the whole community pride and they can clearly show children there is a way and there is something."

The majority of the works at the facility depict har-



This is the view upon entering the Richmond County facility.

Photos by Jake Boudrot

Friends United Centre manager Rolf Bouman surveys some of the many pieces of artwork at the Kempt Road facility.



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mony, friendship, love, and family, but Bouman said the art also portrays the dark side of this experience, like the high child suicide rate in First Nation communities, the disturbing rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and the multi-generational damage caused by the residential school system.

"I think First Nations are in a better position than anybody else to tell the other stories," Bouman noted. "... And since they have very powerful paintings, with powerful meanings, and very colourful settings, I think it's important we can tell stories too. We must make our future generations aware of the fact, and the present one also."

Some of the works also contain environmental messages using traditional First Nation elements air, water, sun, and plants.

"We cannot do to Mother Earth what we have been do-



Rolf Bouman, Friends United Centre manager stands next to more works of art showcased at the Kempt Road facility.

ing," Bouman stated. "It says somewhere in the Bible, we took Mother Earth on loan for our children, yes so we should give it back in halfway decent shape, hopefully better than we found it."



Photo by Jake Boudrot

(From the left): Freelance journalist Nancy Reagan, Indigenous artist Jay Bell Redbird and Friends United Centre manager Rolf Bouman are pictured during a recent publicity blitz for the Kempt Road facility. For more on the Richmond County centre, see page 10.