

we all gathered in the healing room for a sending off ceremony," she said. "There's usually a prayer, a smudging - a burning of the sacred medicines - it's releasing the body, the spirit. It's a four-day process."

The first step of the ceremony started in the healing room, and then moved back to the First Nations community where family and friends kept a fire burning for the four days, she said.

Ms. Pamajewon said she remembers the difficulties traumatized families faced when trying to mourn or heal in the old hospital.

"There was still a lot of racism going on and people felt that when they went to the emergency," she said. So her husband, Shawanaga First Nation Chief Howard Pamajewon, contacted hospital chief executive officer Norm Maciver.

"And it started off from there," she said. "It's important for people to gather and say their goodbyes, but to me this project was about education, awareness and healing."

Hospital and First Nations leaders alike have put great emphasis on using the room to educate one another. Representatives from the Shawanaga First Nation have hosted training sessions for hospital staff there and at the Shawanaga centre.

"We have, and are planning to continue with cross-cultural training sessions, just basically trying to create, or generate, or sustain good relations, positive relations," Mr. Whetung said. "It's really good, hospital staff are responding."

Mr. Maciver, who pushed for the healing room from day one of planning for the new hospital, said he continues to learn about First Nation culture since his first meeting with Shawanaga Chief Howard Pamajewon in 1988. Mr. Pamajewon and three other First Nation men are credited with spearheading the project.

"I learned a great deal from all four of those individuals," Mr. Maciver said. "I invited them to meet with me and advise how we could accommodate them at the health centre. We now have a focus on First Nation spirituality and education and training. I think it has been a very valuable point of contact between the Health Centre and the native communities."

To add the room in plans for the \$80 million hospital, which opened in June of 2005, project organizers had to push for upper-level government funding and convince the Ontario Ministry of Health to allow First Nation treatments not sanctioned by health professionals.

Now, at least one other Ontario hospital plans to include a version of the Parry Sound

healing room in the construction of a new building. Several other hospitals have also asked questions about the room as they look to the future, Mr. Maciver said.

"It's one of the first in Ontario to develop a program which recognizes the spirituality of First Nation communities," he said. "Their culture has differences compared to mainstream western culture. It's important to recognize and understand those differences."

Hospital staff and First Nation leaders planned to hold their official opening for the room on the first day of summer last year, but the deaths, one after the other, of three of the four First Nation men credited with leading the project and raising First Nation money meant the ceremony was postponed.

Duncan Pegahmagabow died in October of 2004 after a lengthy illness. Roger Jones died in December of 2005. Chief Pamajewon died of a sudden heart attack at 52 years of age on June 17 of last year, four days before the opening ceremony was to take place. The fourth man, John Rice, lives in Wasauksing First Nation.

Four white cedar trees have now been planted outside the room's entrance in honour of the four men. "These were the four individuals that gave the information required to make sure there was a floor space dedicated to traditional healing and cultural awareness," said John Lee, grants development officer for the hospital. "Howard was a leader, a facilitator. He was a go-to guy in First Nations who could make things happen. He was that driving force to collaborative work with other First Nations. He was the spark." ❁



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