

# Underground Grads

by Frank Fieber

**University** College of the North (UCN) held a unique graduation in May, 2009.

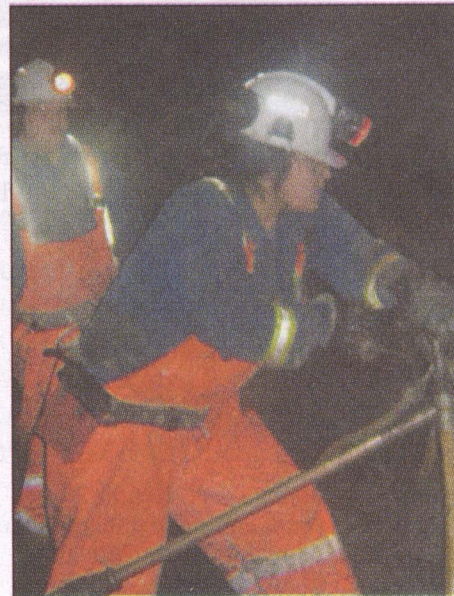
Nine First Nations and Metis students from Cross Lake and Wabowden got the chance of a lifetime when they were selected to participate in an underground mining class in Wabowden.

“These graduates are role models for what is possible and what can happen,” says UCN President Denise Henning. “Northerners are helping to bring solutions to northern economic and social development.” Henning is talking about an initiative that partners UCN with the Northern Manitoba Sector Council, Manitoba Education and Training, Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF), Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) and Crowflight Minerals. All these groups were pulling together to create a ‘local’ work force for Crowflight Minerals, a junior mining company with a nickel deposit at Bucko Lake

near Wabowden, 100 km south of Thompson.

“Thanks to Crowflight, we have nine graduates who don’t have to run half way across the country to get a job,” says Reg Mead, Mayor of Wabowden; “you’ve brought the jobs here.”

Fred Fitzner can relate to Mead’s sentiment, he’s been a miner most of his life. Ten years ago he’d had enough of living away from home so he returned to Wabowden, turning to a traditional fishing life. When the Bucko Lake project began, his two sons wanted to get into mining, so Fitzner decided to return to his former career so he could teach them the ropes. “We came to work at Bucko Lake as a family,” he says, “when Bucko opened we were on the same shift.” Fitzner was recognized as a trainer and was a logical choice when the Sector Council and UCN were looking for someone to handle the hands-on part of the underground training. “Being on the same training field as them, being native really helped,” says Fitzner. Fitzner didn’t just train miners, he caught the fish for the graduation banquet and



**Giselle Ducharme, class Valedictorian, on a jackleg. Below: 35-ton ore truck leaves the mine portal.**

PHOTOS COURTESY CROWFLIGHT MINERALS

his goose soup was the highlight of the feast.

Roger Gauthier, speaking on behalf of Dumas Contract Mining, pointed to the fact that “every man with a job supports five people, so



these nine are supporting 45 people in the community.”

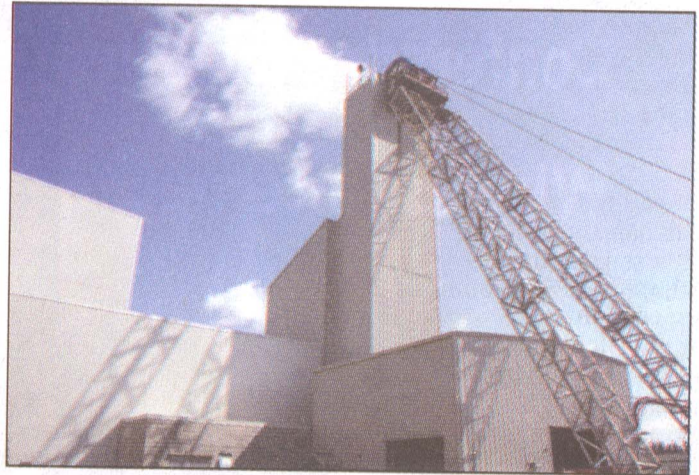
Another first with this program was the inclusion and success of Giselle Ducharme of Wabowden, a single mom with a nine-year old son. Ducharme, is the daughter of Robert Ducharme, a seven-time King Trapper at The Pas’ Trapper Festival and a super competitor. The only girl in a class of nine, she was chosen class valedictorian. At six feet tall with a powerful grip and a broad smile, she’d been a Strong Woman contestant in Norway House and a York Boat rower, so she had no problem keeping up. “People said I couldn’t do it,” says the 29-year old, “but that just made me try harder. My favourite job was rock bolting, but they’ve hired me as a cage tender for now.” Students rotated through all the underground jobs during the five-month course.

Peter Garrioch, a community co-ordinator for UCN says they had 76 applications from Cross Lake and 30 from Wabowden. “We’ve interviewed 20 and taken five from each community. One woman dropped out right away for personal reasons, and so of the nine starting, we ended up with 100 percent success rate.”

Doug Lauvstad heads up the Northern Manitoba Sector Council, an organization with a mandate to search for linkages between education, industry and communities. “Our members are industry,” says Lauvstad, “mining, forestry and hydro in Manitoba.” Don Nisbet, retired from Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting, is a program coordinator with the Sector Council “There’s no guarantee of a job, but we are committed to northern jobs for northern people. Thanks to Crowflight, we’re setting up a model for how things can happen all over northern Manitoba.” says Nisbet. The underground program was preceded by a minerals processing course. All ten students in that program obtained jobs; on surface, in the mill and assay departments.

Crowflight provided the students room and board during the course, the Sector Council purchased training modules, Education & Training and MMF paid tuitions. So far its getting great reviews. Paul Keller of Crowflight Minerals, in his remarks to the 80 people gathered in the Wabowden Rec Centre stressed, “We want to make sure these people are safe, we’re a small company, but we intend to be around for a long time.” ■

*Crowflight announced the Bucko Lake project reached commercial production on June 10, 2009. The mill is operating at 64% of rated capacity. The 1000 tons-per-day mill shipped its first concentrate, 20.3% nickel, to Xstrata’s processing facility in Sudbury, Ontario in February. Crowflight is a Canadian Junior Mining company, debt free, with holdings in the Thompson Nickel Belt.*



Top: Student miners underground at Bucko Lake. (Photo courtesy Crowflight Minerals)  
 Middle: Bucko Lake Mine headframe  
 Bottom: Robert Ducharme with daughter Giselle on Graduation Day.

PHOTOS BY FRANK FIEBER