



Julean Wapamoose of the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure's Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program inspects the engine of a snowplow.

Right at home with bushings, bearings and ball joints

Don't let her petite five-foot-three frame or soft-spoken voice fool you. At the Yorkton Highways Repair Depot, Julean Wapamoose is just one of the team, complete with regulation blue coveralls and grease-tipped fingers, her long brown braid tucked neatly inside her backwards ball cap.

"I grew up with a bunch of cousins on the reserve – all male – and we were always outside," she begins. "My younger brother and I also hung around my dad as he was fixing cars, taking out motors and putting them back together. I learned a lot back then about how engines work."

Despite Julean's love of all things mechanical, her chosen career path would take some time to reveal itself. Raised on the Cowessess First Nation, she quit school in Grade 9 to raise her own family.

"I have five boys and two girls, and just like when I was a kid, we spend a lot of time outdoors," she says. Despite the busyness of a large and active family, Julean knew she wanted to do something more for herself. So she signed up for upgrading courses and

eventually earned her high school diploma. Then a calendar from Moosomin's South East Regional College caught her eye.



Julean Wapamoose

“I saw some information about the Tri-Trades program at SIAST where you learn about all kinds of engines – from cars, to heavy trucks, to the Ag industry,” she says. “I was a little nervous about applying and I wondered if I was going to get in. My younger brother said I couldn't do it, that I was too small and I didn't have enough muscles, but that just made me want to do it more.”

She was one of 12 students – and the only female in her class. But that didn't bother her. She found out quickly that she had the right aptitude to be successful in the trades.

“It's not just learning about bearings and transmissions and hydraulics and stuff. We use our head to solve problems. We go through a check list and learn how to think about problems to find the right answer,” she says.

After commuting nearly two hours every day to get to school from the Cowessess First Nation, Julean graduated from the 10-month Tri-Trades course in Moosomin with a keen sense of accomplishment and a load of self-confidence. She was approached about becoming a part of the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure's Aboriginal Partnership Program, where candidates are given mentoring and job experience for the four years it takes to become journeypersons. Their wages are cost-shared 25 per cent by a sponsoring band or tribal council. In Julean's case, it was the Peepeekisis First Nation, where she now lives with her common-law husband and their children. Once candidates finish their training, they are given opportunities to apply for permanent staff positions. It was in Yorkton that she met up with Brian Perih, the Ministry's Fleet Services Supervisor.

“He asked me if this was what I really wanted to do and I told him, ‘I'm done having kids,’” she laughs. “He was great and offered me a job back in June (2008). Since then I've really enjoyed working at the Yorkton shop. I'm now trying to get my friend to take the Tri-Trades program, and my oldest boy is also interested in mechanics.”

Julean is proof positive that a little determination goes a long way. And so does a little ribbing from a younger brother.

“He told me I couldn't do it and I proved him wrong. I hope to be the first person in my family to get my journeypersons!”