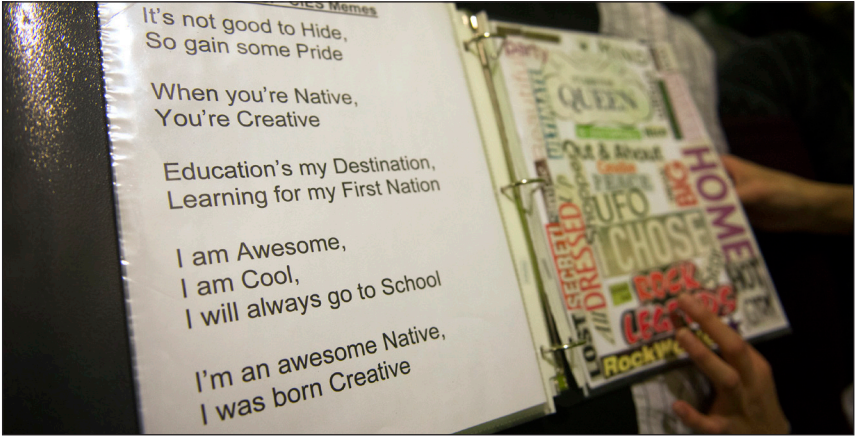




Azure-Dee, 16, looks through a binder from elementary school, at a page she wrote about herself and her family in Ojibwe, the native language of the Beausoleil First Nations.

Just To Get To School

Story and photos by Franki Ikeman



Azure-Dee Cass (Azh) is a member of the Beausoleil First Nation on Christian Island, on the southern tip of Georgian Bay.

Azh wakes up every morning at 5:30 a.m. She gets ready for school, and walks to the ferry, which leaves the island at 7:30 a.m. and arrives at Cedar Point at 8 a.m.

When they arrive, the students run toward their school bus, trying to get the back seat. Azh, who is in Grade 11, gets off at the second of three stops, Midland Secondary School.

In a small-town Ontario high school, it's not uncommon for students to travel up to an hour to get to school. Small towns surrounding Midland feed their students into the school.

For the students of Christian Island, however, it means leaving an elementary school and a community where their First Nations culture was taught and celebrated, to a school that deals little with their culture.

"Basically, we did a lot to deal with our culture... They try to drill it into our brains so that we don't lose it, but once I got into high school I completely lost it, and I don't know as much as I did before which really sucks," said Cass. "I want to get back into learning more about my culture and the language and stuff, because I don't want to lose that. It's kind of really important to me."

As winter approaches, Cass and the rest of the students from Christian Island are getting ready to move into their boarding homes. The students board Sunday night to Friday for either four or seven months (depending on their extracurricular schedules) for the winter months, when the ferry becomes too unreliable to be used daily. They move in with families in the Midland and surrounding areas, visiting their own families and community only on the weekends, when the weather allows.

"I think boarding is a pretty cool experience because I get to see what it's like to be out of my house for a while and only go back on the weekends... for like an entire four months which is kind of exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time," said Cass.

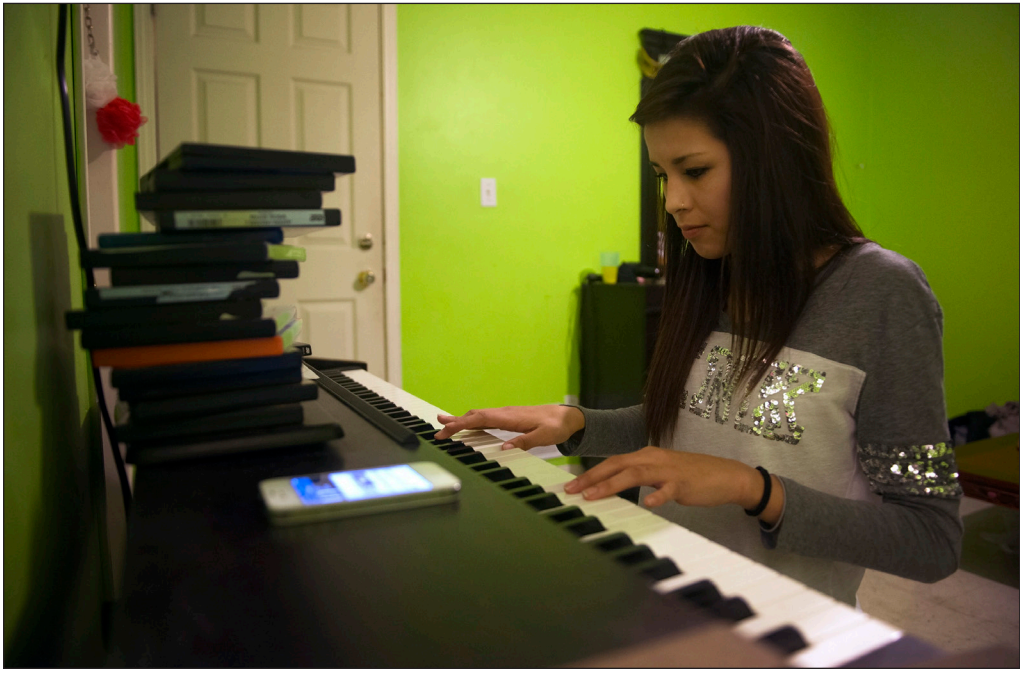
Cass loves school. She has been actively involved in sports, music, photography, and is well-liked by students and teachers.

Still, she recognizes that there is sometimes a divide between the students from the island and the rest of the students. She and her sister joke about the other kids being intimidated by the 'tough natives'.

"Being an aboriginal isn't as easy as people think... We get our race bashed on quite a lot and we've lost a lot of our languages and we've had a rough history. The thing that I don't really like is they don't teach much about what happened to the aboriginals and how it came to what it is now," said Cass.



Azh and her sister, Karissa eat dinner together in Azh's room in their Christian Island home.



Azh learned to play piano in Grade 5 when she discovered her passion for music and arts.



The school bus waits at Cedar Point as the ferry pulls into dock around 8 a.m.

multimedia... <http://www.frankiikeman.com/video/2015/1/12/just-to-get-to-school>