



River Christie-White of "Hoops for Hope" visited Donald Young School in Emo on Friday afternoon to perform a hoop dance in the gym. The 16-year-old hoop dancer travels all across Canada and the U.S. to raise awareness around autism, inclusion, and the impacts of bullying.

—Sam Odrowski photo

Hoop dancer spreading awareness

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Donald Young School students filled the gym there Fri-

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day afternoon for an electric traditional hoop dancing performance by an indigenous teen who has Aspergers.

River Christie-White, from the Onedia Nation of the Thames located southwest of London, Ont., visited DYS to give a "Hoops for Hope" presentation.

He travels to schools across Canada and the United States to give these presentations, during which he raises awareness about autism and the need for on-reserve supports for families who are affected by it.

Since starting "Hoops for Hope" four years ago, Christie-White has visited well over 100 schools to dance and raise awareness.

"I created the organization as a way to sort of educate people on autism, and make them more aware of the differences but not only the differences, also the similarities," he explained.

Christie-White first picked up hoop dancing from his grandfather five years ago and

it has helped him build up a lot of self-confidence.

"Hoop dancing has gotten rid of a lot of my fears of being around people," he noted. "When I was younger, I didn't like being in crowds of people and things like that.

"It's also driven up my confidence in myself, as well, because one thing, especially when I was younger, I had severe lack of confidence in myself."

Christie-White, who was bullied a lot when he was younger, has used "Hoops for Hope" to educate others on the impacts of bullying, indigenous issues, suicide, and inclusion.

Besides spreading awareness around autism and bullying, he also is advocating with Autism Ontario for more on-reserve resources for children and families with special needs.

"I believe there needs to be more supports, especially in northern communities." Christie-White stressed.

"And the supports need to be put directly onto reserves so that people don't have to drive off-reserve for about six hours to get to the nearest city that has those supports," he noted.

Christie-White has seen firsthand how difficult it can be for remote communities to access these support services.

When visiting the Pessamit First Nations reserve in Quebec, he discovered those in the community affected by autism have to drive 12 hours to get to the nearest city offering autism supports.

Christie-White said the situation in Pessamit isn't uncommon in more northern or remote areas, and reiterated how those affected by autism in these places could greatly benefit from on-reserve supports.

Moving forward, he hopes to continue his work with Autism Ontario to help set up those on-reserve supports that are specific to the communities and designed in a way that respects their traditions.