

University College of the North to Graduate First Underground Core Mining Students in Manitoba

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Students in the first underground core mining course in Manitoba will graduate from University College of the North this week. The ceremony will be held at 1 p.m. on Friday, May 1 at the Kenanow Centre in Wabowden, Manitoba. All of the graduating students are from the northern Manitoba communities of Cross Lake and Wabowden.

The program is the result of a collaboration between University College of the North (UCN), Crowflight Minerals Inc. (CML), and the Northern Manitoba Sector Council. Generous contributions from Manitoba Education and Training, the Manitoba Métis Federation, and Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak also helped make this course a success.

“These graduates are the role models for what is possible and what can happen. This partnership program truly demonstrates the path to the future, where Northerners are helping to bring solutions to northern economic and social development,” says UCN President Denise K. Henning. “UCN is proud of what has been accomplished with this project.”

The Underground Core Mining course took about five months to complete. During that time, UCN students received hands-on training at CML’s Bucko Lake Nickel Mine near Wabowden. The mine is just commencing production.

“We were very selective in the assignment of the course leader, as well as selective in the course participants,” says Paul Keller, Vice-President of Operations and Chief Operating Officer at CML. “These selection and assignments resulted in a group that is now eligible for employment in the mining industry.”

In fact, CML has already hired some of the UCN students. One of them is Giselle Ducharme. She’s a single mother from Wabowden, and the only woman in her class. She is the class valedictorian.

“I like to be able to work, sweat, and get my hands dirty,” she says. “I always think you have to earn your money. That’s how my parents raised me.”

Course instructor Fred Fitzner says he's proud of his students and would be happy to work with any of them. He's been an underground core miner himself for about 30 years. As a resident of Wabowden, he's pleased that this training opportunity came to people in his part of the province.

"They're living in an isolated community and there's not a lot of opportunities to get out into the mining industry--to get into any industry at all. There's not that much for them to do," he says.

Glen Settee says he heard about this course at the perfect time. After losing his job, he had been on public assistance in Cross Lake for about a year. He was just about to go to Winnipeg to interview for a job cleaning sewers. At age 36, he's the oldest student in the class, and older than most beginning miners. He overcame his claustrophobia to finish the training.

"I'm no stranger to hard work. I was just happy that I got the opportunity to be one of the lucky ones they picked first for this program," he says. "On a personal level, it was really uplifting. It made me feel like I belong."

The same partnership resulted in a four-week course on mineral processing. Those students graduated in December, and almost all of them are now employed with CML. The Underground Core Mining training is significantly longer because of the complexity and potential hazards of an underground operation, as well as the variety of equipment used.

- 30 -

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