

# GWAAPID/LAUGHING

## Don Kelly's humour bridges cultural gap

By Suzanne Keptwo

OTTAWA – Funny man Don Kelly is no fish-out-of-water when standing in front of a live audience, as he was at Carleton University's 8th annual New Sun Conference.

The star of APTN's *Fish Out of Water* series centred around his sometimes futile attempts to master traditional Native skills seemed a perfect fit to speak on this year's theme -- Inspiring Resilience. Genuine, charming, intelligently humorous and an all-round good sport, Don easily captures the interest of his audience, much easier than he could a bear in a handmade trap on one of his show's episodes.

Kelly is a professional communicator. He has worked as a writer-broadcaster for CBC, as well as in strategic communications and media relations. He has served as a researcher with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and Communications Director for the Assembly of First Nations. He continues to do contract work for the AFN when he is not too busy hosting and writing his Gemini-nominated television show, or performing his standup comedy routine at clubs around the country.

A citizen of the Ojibways of Onigaming in northwest Ontario, Don Kelly's family moved to Winnipeg when he was five, around the same time he first discovered the unifying impact of comedy. Observing members of his extended family share in the laughter prompted by Bill Cosby, Don realized that comedy "crosses all cultures, ages and genders" and can serve as a "vehicle to reach a lot of people".

He is the first to admit that he's an urban Indian, or as he was once called, a "cement Indian" – his feet have seldom walked on anything but concrete.

Never exposed to the traditional way of his father's people, he was a perfect fit for *Fish out of Water*, which exploits his genuinely bumbling attempts to master traditional skills that have sustained First Peoples for millennia.

"The show captures the way

Aboriginal Peoples teach and learn: by getting out there and doing it," says Kelly. "And part of learning by way of doing is, to 'screw up' – without a scolding but with laughter". Whether using a travois, erecting a tipi, or making a fire, it is obvious to viewers that Don Kelly – like many of them – is a genuine Cement Indian.

The series, airing on Tuesday nights at 9pm Eastern time, addresses the plight of many First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples who, for many reasons, were not raised learning the survival skills of their ancestors. Kelly explains that over fifty per cent of aboriginal people are currently living in urban areas, meaning many do not regard the deep woods as "pharmacy, grocery or department store".

The essence of *Fish Out of Water*, he says, is to build bridges between the rural and the urban, the traditional and the contemporary. It also offers a rare glimpse at traditional Elders in a different, less stereotypically stoic light, one that demonstrates that humour permeates the identity of First Peoples.

Coming from a strong storytelling tradition, First Nations have, as Kelly puts it, "been working the room" since time immemorial. A good story-teller is aware of structure, key points and impact, combined with the flexibility to deliver what the audience is most receptive to. He sees these traits as embedded in the culture, for example, in the humour of trickster stories.

Kelly sees teasing as typical of Native humour.

"It is often gentle and self-deprecating," he observes, and also used to softly remind others to keep their ego in check. In front of an aboriginal audience he is able to go a "little more inside" and make jokes at his own expense whereas in front of other audiences, he feels he has a responsibility not to reinforce negative stereotypes.

It is also timeless, Kelly reminds us. "Laughter has been echoing across Turtle Island for thousands of years."



Don Kelly gets archery lesson from Mohawk Elder Peter Isaacs at Six Nations of the Grand River territory.