

# The People of NunatuKavut

## Film explores life and times of southern Labrador Inuit

story and photos  
by Jenny McCarthy

A newly-released documentary film is shedding light on the history of the Inuit descendants of southern Labrador.

The People of NunatuKavut, as it's fittingly titled, is a mixture of modern filmmaking and historical re-enactments based on archaeological and historical research. It's the culmination of years of work carried out by the Community University Research Alliances, or CURA, a team of archeologists, researchers and academia, with the help of knowledgeable community members.

It all began with the unearthing of homes once lived in by the ancestors of members of the NunatuKavut Community Council (NCC), formerly known as the Labrador Metis Nation.

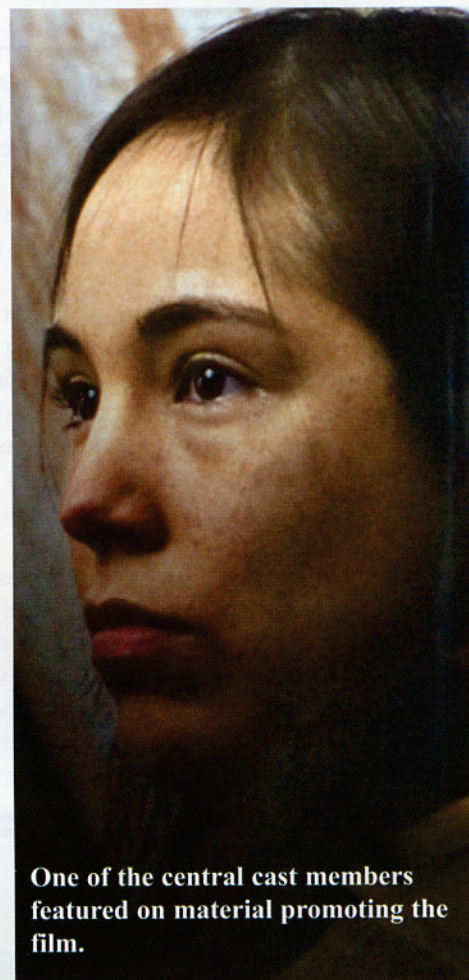
These sod houses, and the artifacts found in and around them, help to tie the people of Labrador's south coast to the direct Inuit lineage they have always professed.

Darlene Wall is a member of NCC and became a new representative with the just before the film was released. The public viewing at the Lawrence O'Brien Arts Centre in February of this year was the first time Wall had the opportunity to see the film in its entirety.

"Aside being on the CURA governing board, as a member of NunatuKavut, I was proud," Wall said.

"Most people were in shock and thought, 'this is about us' It's the first time we'd been documented in that fashion."

NunatuKavut President Todd Russell echoed the feeling of pride. He was the MP for Labrador at the time the film first got its star, but he was happy to



One of the central cast members featured on material promoting the film.

## history and heritage

play a role of commenting it.

“We appreciate the efforts of CURA and seeing that someone recognizes that there is a very significant, important and exciting part of our history that needs to be told, I think it demonstrates a level of respect,” he said.

The film documents the arrival of the Thule Inuit to Labrador’s coast and their history thereafter, including the relationships with the European settlers, who, as in other areas, would mix with the population through intermarriages.

Dr. Lisa Rankin is an associate professor of archeology at Memorial University. She is also the lead investigator for the five-year project that led to the creation of the film. She was also the film’s executive producer.

The project is called *Understanding the Past to Build the Future*. It is funded by CURA through a SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) Outreach Grant, along with support from local community partners.

In her role as lead investigator, Rankin said what they have discovered so far shows an unquestionable continuation of Inuit lifestyle on the south of Labrador without interruption.

“We know for certain there have been Inuit in the Sandwich Bay area for several hundred years.”

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NunatuKavut President Todd Russell, center, with his aunt Pauline and uncle Aubrey Russell during the film’s launch.

The archeologist have excavated four different Inuit home sites.

“They were the first clue that there was year-round settlement of Inuit,” Dr. Rankin said, who’s been researching the Inuit presence in southern Labrador for more than a decade.

Dr. Rankin began her work in south-eastern Labrador in an area known as the Porcupine Strands where hundreds of archeological sites have been discovered. Since then she has continued to return to southern and central Labrador to continue her work.

This work has been important to NunatuKavut-both in affirming its members the history they had been trying to explain for years and also in establishing the unbroken continuance of the southern Inuit - right up to those who inhabit the communities today.

For a group fighting to have a land claim recognized by the federal government, the ties between NunatuKavut and their Inuit heritage are strengthened by

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evidence unearthed by Dr. Rankin and her team, all of which is laid out in the documentary.

A website created for the project and in the name of the study, *Understanding the Past to Build the Future*, documents the work involved in the study which includes archeology, as well as genealogy, ethnography and archival studies through sources such as ships’ logs and church records.

The funding for the current project runs out next year, so this summer will be the last dig for the archeology team. Through the knowledge of people living in the south coast communities the archeologist have determined a location to excavate the site of the remains of another southern Inuit home.

In the meantime the film is scheduled to be released on national television this summer.

Russell said he hopes all members of the aboriginal group will see the film. He said the film could help to build a sense of pride for its members that their story is being told – not only to themselves, but also to the rest of the world.

“I hope it encourages our own people to learn more and for our elders to be able to say that all the things we were saying were true,” Russell said.

“We hope people embrace this film because our history is not just ours alone. It is a shared history with people in the province and country.”