



Levi Cannon blessed Rodman Hall in St. Catharines Friday with the smoke of sacred medicines.

staff photo by Bob Tymczyszyn

Native display promotes 'tolerance'

By **MATTHEW VAN DONGEN**
Standard Staff

Visitors stopped to watch as Levi Cannon walked the corridors of Rodman Hall in St. Catharines Friday night, gently spreading the smoke of his stick of sacred medicines throughout the building.

"It's a blessing for the building and the people in it," he said of the smoking medicines, which included buffalo and sea sage, juniper, tobacco, sweet grass, larch and birch.

Cannon, the artist-in-residence for the Rodman Hall Arts Centre, had a chance to explain the significance of the blessing to a flood of visitors who gathered Friday to celebrate three important milestones for natives in Niagara. The kickoff for a summer-long program of native exhibitions and activities at the centre falls not only on National Aboriginal Day, but also on the 30th anniversary of the Niagara Regional Native Centre.

Cannon, an Algonquin sculptor, smiled widely when asked about the

significance of the event for Niagara. "This sort of thing is great for promoting understanding and tolerance," he said. "But the best thing, the absolute best thing, is when you see the kids' eyes light up. It's the spark in the eyes of children that's going to catch fire and grow."

Eyes were sparkling with interest all over the exhibit Friday, as visitors were introduced to the work of 37 native artists from across Niagara.

Terry Graff, curator of the centre, said the focus of the exhibition is illustrated in the title: Reclaiming and Sharing 2000. "The history of this area is larger than St. Catharines," he said. "There's a lot of native history here, of different nations coming together and trading peacefully."

He said the search for traditional and contemporary native artists went beyond "political boundaries," stretching across the border into the U.S.

The result of this search was a showcase of painting, sculpture, storytelling, drumming and dancing that

"blurs the line between so-called art and craft," said Graff.

While the main hall overflowed with wide-eyed visitors intent on the pounding beat of traditional drums, others investigated a wealth of native foods. A steady stream of visitors walked through Montreal artist Scott Macleod's exhibit, *The Great Hunger*, a series of paintings showing a parallel between the suffering of the Irish during the potato famine and that of the Plains Natives after losing their main food source, the buffalo.

A special exhibit was set aside for the late Ann Pineault, a local artist well-known in the community for her work with the Niagara Regional Native Centre.

Cathy General, the centre's executive director, said it was "fantastic" for the community to have the opportunity to see contributions from artists such as Pineault.

"We're so very proud of our people, and this provides such a great educational experience for everyone," she said. "Events like this are the best way to combat racism."