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The Northern Star Worker Co-op Inc.

Northern Star blankets are stories stitched together by history, tradition, and art. Sewn in the heart of Canada's largest urban Aboriginal community, the artisans of Northern Star Worker Co-op create unique Star Blankets in the Aboriginal tradition, to honour, respect and bless both the giver and receiver.

To give a Star Blanket is to show utmost respect and admiration. To receive a Star Blanket indicates that the giver holds you in very high esteem for your generosity and accomplishments. Northern Star Originals reflect not only the traditional expertise and values of the Canadian Great Plains Aboriginal Peoples, but the beauty of the Great Plains natural and cultural settings.

In 1998, a group of women began sewing together at a local resource centre as a social activity. After refining their skills and fostering a collaborative work environment, this group formed a collective and then a co-operative owned and operated by a multi-cultural blend of artisans, including First

Nations and Metis women. The Northern Star Worker Co-op was incorporated in 2000, and workers continue to develop and sew contemporary Star Blankets in the Great Plains tradition as well as pillow shams, oven mitts, tote bags, shirts, parkas, and more.

The Star Blankets themselves, however, have a much longer history, dating before European →



→ contact. Many variations of the star design can be found across North and Central America. Centuries ago, in what has become Manitoba, the Aboriginal Plains People would decorate various objects with the eight-point star design. The most sacred of these objects was the buffalo-hide robes worn during ceremonial events. These robes represented honour, protection and ceremony, and are where the tradition of the Star Blanket stems from.

After European contact, the Plains People began to replace traditional materials of sinew, bone awls and animal hides with imported materials and fabrics. Although the materials changed, the handiwork required to create the ceremonial robes and blankets remained the same. The same skills used to create ceremonial robes before European contact are now used to create each Northern Star Original.

The six women of Northern Star (as of May 2009) create Star Blankets in the Great Plains tradition, using skills passed down from previous generations. The Star Blanket represents the Morning Star, a symbol of the dawning of a new day. Among the Great Plains People it was understood that seeing the Morning Star, symbolized the Creator's gift of another day of life. Each Star Blanket tells a story through its diamonds, which represent many natural elements: brilliant stars, sheltering trees, snowy mountains, vast plains, cool rivers and more. Traditional colours of yellow, red, black and white are seen in many Star Blankets, and represent the four directions,

peoples, and stages of life.

The Northern Star Worker Co-op is located in the heart of Winnipeg's Core area. Although this neighbourhood has a rich history, its residents now face a number of social and economic challenges. Within this neighbourhood, the Northern Star Worker Co-op is an example of enterprise, hope, and opportunity where Aboriginal culture is preserved and promoted.

Members of this co-op are dedicated to democratic ownership and decision-making, and are committed to respecting co-workers, customers, suppliers, and the community in which Northern Star members live and work. Once per month, the members meet to discuss and make decisions regarding sales, new marketing plans and their financial status. The Northern Star Worker Co-op is a member

of the Canadian Worker Co-op Federation and the Community Development Business Association of Winnipeg. Although it is on its way to becoming self-sustaining, support and mentorship are currently provided by Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations.

Workers at this CED initiative invite us to imagine blankets that not only represent a rich history, but symbolize hope and economic opportunity.

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