



# LEADING TOGETHER

INDIGENOUS YOUTH IN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP







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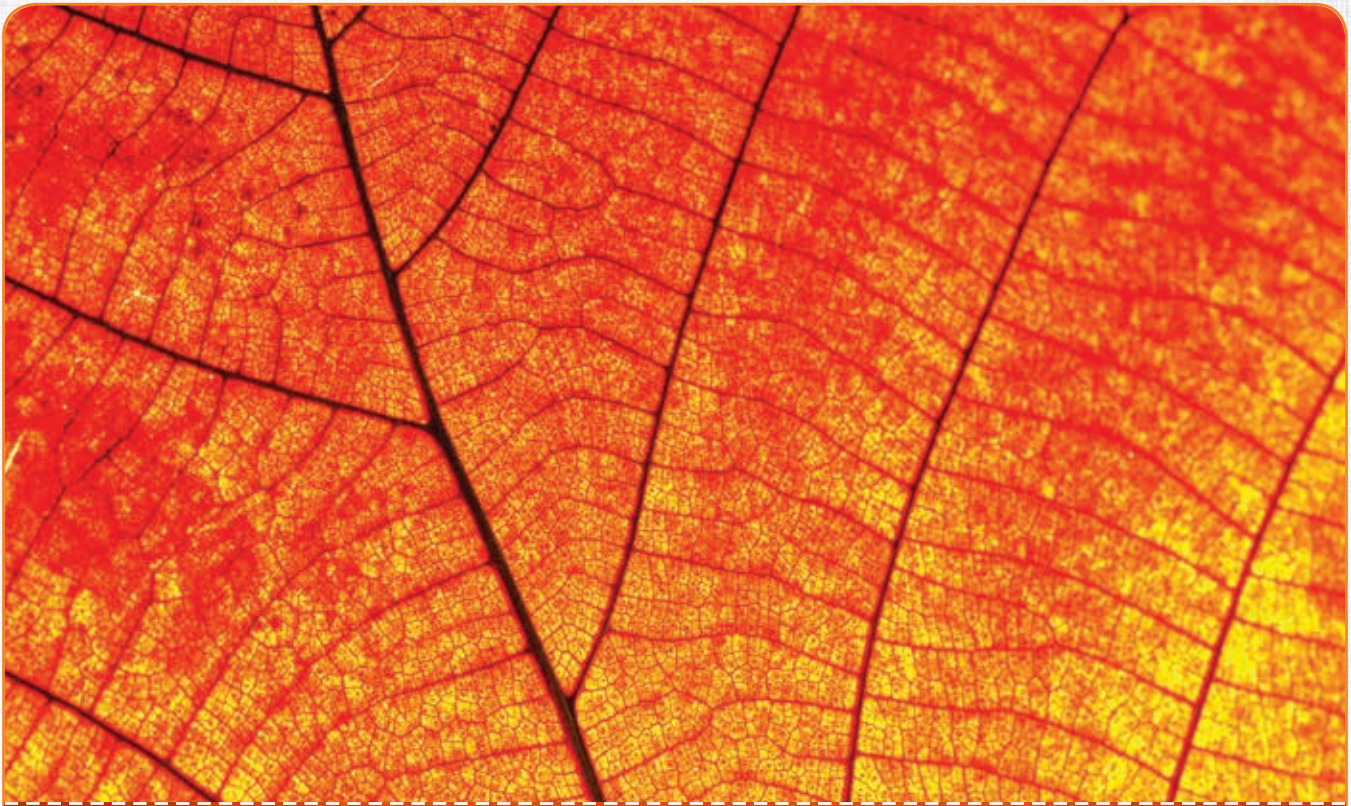
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# Forewords

## A Better Canada

Samuel de Champlain arrived at Tadoussac in 1603 with the notion that European and Indigenous peoples could live and trade together. The Innu and Algonquin who had already gathered at the place where he landed welcomed him, and later, seeing how poorly the settlers fared over winter, provided the support they needed in order to survive. John Ralston Saul describes this as the philanthropic act at the heart of Canada's founding.

In those early days, respect and reciprocity were such that the First Nations men led their French counterparts in exploring the continent, setting up fur trade networks that formed the basis of a partnership economy.

In 1763, King George III issued the Royal Proclamation, a cornerstone of the relationship between the Crown and First Peoples, recognizing Aboriginal title and the Crown's legal duty to consult with Aboriginal peoples on matters involving their



rights. The numerous treaties by which modern Canada was shaped, covering parts of what are now the Northwest Territories, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, were negotiated accordingly. As some put it, we are all treaty people.

Since then, history has not been kind to this relationship. Trade networks became the pathways by which alcohol and disease spread. Treaty terms have not been honoured. Indigenous land rights have been ignored. Cultural practices were outlawed and languages extinguished. Generations of Indigenous children lost their sense of home, family and cultural identity to the Residential School experience. A pervasive legacy of intergenerational trauma continues to this day.

Today, five years after the federal government issued an apology on behalf of all Canadians for the Residential School program, we stand at an historic crossroads.

In vision and in law, we see the outlines of a partnership society, based on principles of respectful and constructive engagement. We can discern it in our history, and in the awakening that is currently taking place across Canada, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission carries out the essential, nation-building work of bringing what has been shameful, hidden and ignored about residential schools into public view. We see it when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people walk together in solidarity, and wherever Indigenous people are moving from dependency to responsibility and accountability. It is there in the upraised voices of Idle No More.

The path through reconciliation to a better Canada, now open, will not remain so if we do not take it, boldly, today. We can honour and learn from the best of our history. We can respect and care for one another, acting with patience, sensitivity,

forgiveness and determination to admit wrongs, to heal, and to provide redress. We can move forward together, to build a society that we're proud to bequeath to our children's children. The alternative is hardly worth mentioning.

Dechinta, Youth Fusion, Wawatay/JHR, and the other articles collected here describe some of the new, welcome and long-overdue partnerships between Canada's philanthropic and community sector and Indigenous youth. To these young people, we say:

Through our mistakes and misfortunes, we have given you much to do. We dedicate this book to you, in the hope that the work described here will encourage others to follow these first brave steps on the path to true and enduring reconciliation.

*Stephen Kakfwi*

Kakfwi and Associates

Premier of the Northwest Territories, 1999-2003

*Stephen Huddart*

President and CEO

The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation



## How Do We Inspire Indigenous Youth?

It's a question I asked myself often, during the six months I spent filming a documentary on the inexcusably low graduation rates of Indigenous high school students.

Four teens from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation let us into their classrooms and homes. One was an artist and an athlete and charming guy. But his dad wasn't around much, and he was struggling in school. He'd been suspended twice for smoking marijuana. We were there, with cameras, the day he was expelled. Accused of being stoned during school hours, he was upset, and swearing at school counsellors. He was shortly escorted off school grounds toward an uncertain future.

I found it incredibly disturbing to witness the breakdown of such a talented young man.

But that's what a 50 per cent dropout rate looks like. That's reality for a lot of Indigenous youth.

Too many are poor—they don't have breakfast in the morning. Too many are surrounded by despair—substance abuse, family dysfunction, unemployment. Too many are uninspired by school.

The stories in this collection talk about reciprocity and philanthropy. These are noble goals. But, when it

comes to the “giving back” theme of this conference, we should be asking: how do we inspire Indigenous youth, and are we teaching THEM to give back?

When I think of “giving back,” I think of Robbie Matthews Sr. He's a Cree trapper I lived with for several months in James Bay. Robbie was in his fifties, then. Robbie could track animals. He could read their shit. He knew where—and even when—the animals eat. He watched and observed their patterns, and compared them to years of experience. But, he never took hunting for granted. He knew animals are shy, and not always easy to find.

So, when he would trap beaver, Robbie would sing songs to that beaver. To me, it was a tuneless kind of song. But, they were songs that had been passed on to him, his way of saying thanks. After feasting on beaver, Robbie would ask me to slip the bones back in the lake.

### **This is giving back.**

“Giving back” is engrained in the traditions of many Indigenous peoples. At pow-wows, giveaways mark everything from a birthday to an award received. The person marking the event gives away what they can, to everyone from singers and dancers, to veterans and elders.





Giving back is part of who we are as Indigenous peoples. The land is part of who we are as Indigenous peoples. But are we ensuring it is part of who our kids are?

Well, the stories in this collection give me hope. No, there's no magic pathway to success. But, these projects offer important hints to how we—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—can learn from the Indigenous spirit of giving back.

Here's one key finding: we have to re-imagine education for Indigenous youth.

Take Angela Sterritt's piece on Dechinta, the Northern Bush University. By bringing students back to the land, and incorporating classroom learning, Dechinta offers us a blueprint for a new educational paradigm that draws from the best of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural traditions. Or consider Haley Cullingham's assessment of Youth Fusion, a project that's connecting university students from Montreal with Cree and Inuit youth, to help redefine what it means to succeed in school in James Bay Cree Nation.

Another important finding: we must use technology to reach Indigenous youth.

Check out Trina Roache's piece on The Red Road Project, a youth-led initiative to get youth off liquor and drugs and into traditional cultural activities—in groups organized through social media. Twitter and Facebook is also a crucial part of Haley Cullingham's article on Apathy is Boring, an initiative that finds lessons in the Idle No More movement to show how best to use technology to politicize Indigenous youth.

A final crucial ingredient: we need to empower Indigenous youth to take ownership, by leading projects themselves.

In Lenny Carpenter's piece, we see how the youth of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug in Northern Ontario were able to create a genuine exchange experience, so that southerners were able to put themselves, literally, into the lives of those living in the remote north. Similarly, Nicolas Renaud's analysis of the work Montreal-based Exeko has done in Kanesatake shows how the youth bring healing to a community (supported minimally by Exeko staff) by rebuilding a radio station that's been silent since the Oka crisis.

It's all encouraging stuff. Despite what you may hear in the news, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canada isn't always mired in conflict. This collection of inspirational stories—too often untold—points Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the right direction, toward a relationship based in shared leadership and mutual respect.

Philanthropists and social innovators, in particular, will find these articles provide tips toward developing successful strategies that transform dismal statistics into exciting futures for Indigenous youth. These are grounded, real-world stories, that show how to inspire Indigenous youth, teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to work together and, perhaps most importantly, offer us all lessons on the importance of giving back.

*Duncan McCue*  
CBC-TV News Correspondent

With files from

*Rachel Pulfer*  
Executive Director  
Journalists for Human Rights





# Dechinta Bush University: Learning Off the Land

A new paradigm for Northern education blends land knowledge and traditional teaching with modern academics

*Photo courtesy of Amos Scott*



## By Angela Sterritt

It is late afternoon at Blachford Lake in Akaitcho Territory, Denendeh, the Dene name for the Northwest Territories. Indigenous youth circle around an open fire on rocky terrain to learn about self-determination and the land. They are students gaining knowledge in a unique university, one rooted in the land and life on it. It's called Dechinta—the bush university.

Dechinta combines theory and academia with land-based cultural activities—like tanning moose hides—and Indigenous knowledge. It was mandated to develop an institution of higher learning in the Canadian North.

Erin Freeland Ballantyne, the Territory's first Rhodes scholar, ultimately started the Bush University in 2008. The self-identified "settler" said Dechinta grew out of the need to provide an alternative to mainstream education in the North.

A fifth generation Caucasian northerner, born and raised on Yellowknives Dene First Nations Territory, 32-year-old Freeland Ballantyne said she was always aware of differences in treatment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous high school students. She remembered taking a Native studies class, and being told that the Yellowknives Dene were extinct (while living amongst many).

Witnessing such a prominent discrepancy between the sophistication of Dene education on the land and how that was discounted in classroom learning, Freeland Ballantyne was inspired early in life to question her responsibilities, as someone who recognized the conflicted environment around her.

"What is the settler responsibility to Dene land claims and the state's denial of their rights and title to the land? How do you reconcile that?" she said during an interview at her home in Yellowknife in the

summer of 2013. "Are you acquiescing if you are not actively doing something to tear it apart?"

Freeland Ballantyne said that she was taught if you want change, you have to commit your resources.

"Mine were my family, education and white privilege. I realized I have to dedicate myself to make things less destructive and less awful."

In the north, the petroleum industry was conventionally viewed as the primary means of economic opportunity and sustainability. The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline hearings opened up a new dialogue about other options. Freeland Ballantyne was part of a group that was allowed intervener status at the hearings. It pressed her to think seriously about northern alternatives.

While doing her PhD in 2006, Freeland Ballantyne lived in Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, and worked with a group of young Dene women. These students were innovative, intelligent, and creative, but treated as the opposite in high school. Teachers didn't respect the base of knowledge they carried. Her premise—that students would benefit by shifting the educational paradigm in the north—then crystallized.

In 2008 Freeland Ballantyne wrote a vision document to propose the idea of a northern university. She distributed it to everyone she knew—mentors, leaders, Elders, Ministers of the territorial government and members of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. Within a week she had an advisory circle: a mix of big-name academics, Elders and northerners.

Discussions crystallized to proposals, and the advisory circle began to shop the project around to funders in 2008. The result: a \$50,000 grant from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation to put on a conference in 2009 that would act as a strategic planning session.



From the conference, the advisory produced a “massive” report. After consulting with Elders from various regions, group member Besha Blondin suggested the name “Dechinta.” It means “Bush” in the Dene language.

With a comprehensive economic and academic strategic plan to demonstrate the feasibility of Dechinta, the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation granted another \$75,000 in 2009.

With it, Freeland Ballantyne hired Kyla Kakfwi-Scott, the daughter of former NWT Premier Stephen Kakfwi, and current Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Marie Wilson. Freeland Ballantyne said Kakfwi-Scott’s first year was all about building political relationships—with the Government of Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, for example.

“It was a way to get the project from being a great idea on paper to being a living breathing organism,” Kakfwi-Scott said from her office at the Government of the Northwest Territories.

She said she had not heard of Dechinta before Freeland Ballantyne approached her. But she immediately understood the importance of it, based on her own experience.

“Like every northern student, I had to leave the north for university. And I really struggled when I started working on my degree in Ontario. I remember being really lonely—it wasn’t cold in October and I needed it to be cold. At a First Nations event they served corn and fry bread, which is fine, but it made me feel even lonelier because they were all great people but I needed my caribou.”

“From my own experience, I really connected with the idea that there needed to be a northern university.”

She said there was a clear gap in higher learning

that recognized the significant developments—in particular political developments—that have happened in the North over the last forty years. There was also the need for higher learning opportunities for northerners, particularly ones that would provide youth with skills and knowledge relevant to their lives and communities.

But Kakfwi-Scott was adamant that the lessons and history imparted were important for everyone to learn—not just Indigenous people and not just northerners.

“For the changes to be made over the coming years and for the next generation of leaders to face the challenges they are being asked to rise up and take on, there needs to be a common knowledge base and a good solid working relationship.”

One of the greatest challenges has been the Northwest Territories’ Education Act. The legislation, as it stands, recognizes only Aurora College as a credit granting institution in the Northwest Territories. “The Education Act does not allow Dechinta to be a credit-granting organization. However, Dechinta can continue to grant credits indefinitely through partnerships with other universities,” Kakfwi-Scott said.

She said the organizers’ drive to push ahead and run a pilot program in 2010 demonstrated to potential funders that Dechinta could work, regardless.

In 2010 Dechinta was awarded an estimated \$300,000 from the Canadian Northern Development Agency. By the summer of 2010 Dechinta had funding to run an accredited three-week pilot program. A six-week winter/spring program followed in 2011, supported by the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency. Thirty-eight students and teachers, including a baby and an 87-year-old, traveled by skidoo to Dene communities with a temperature of -28 degrees Celsius. They





*Photo courtesy of Amos Scott*

trapped, hunted and engaged with such topics as Indigenous self-determination, communications in media, moosehide tanning, health, and medicines.

Kakfwi-Scott said that pilot was the most important step the organization took.

“We had a small cohort of six students who came out of it and said this is, bar none, the most important experience of my life so far, the most transformational thing I have done in my life. And they all spoke publicly about it and continue to do so because they felt other people needed to have that experience.”

Currently, each Dechinta semester is 12 weeks long. In the beginning, students spent the first five weeks at home in their own community, reading and preparing assignments. That component has since changed, as a lot of the material is heavy and hard to digest alone. Now students start their reading in groups, on site.

Students and faculty spend the semester engaging in lectures, workshops, daily experiences, fire sessions and out-trips. The majority of instruction takes place outdoors. Entrance is based on interviews by the advisory circle; admission requirements are based on

life experience, willingness to learn and dedication.

Students choose up to four University of Alberta degree credit courses, on topics ranging from building sustainable communities amidst climate change to Dene self-determination.

Stephen Ellis is Tides Canada’s first Northern Senior Associate. He is also one of the current directors on the board at Dechinta. He said the land element provides an essential balance to heavier topics such as treaties, the relationship with the Crown, first contact and racism. Said Ellis: “Having that balance with Elders on hand to counsel students is critical.”

“The most important part of this work is really truth and reconciliation,” he said, “as a way to foster a better understanding of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, and to ensure everyone has a voice and understands the role of treaty people.”

In the winter of 2011, the newly-married British Royal couple Will and Kate announced they were coming to Yellowknife. Dechinta wrote a very formal letter to them and found they were on the short list. This inspired a conversation about ethics, according to Freeland Ballantyne.



“How do we welcome them in our space? This is ultimately a conversation between the Crown and the grandchildren of people you signed a treaty with that you have not honoured. So what was our responsibility?”

While the visit didn't achieve what Freeland Ballantyne called naïve goals, it did, as some have speculated, raise awareness about Dechinta.

Ellen Bielawski, a northern Alaskan scholar who had lived in Lutsel'ke, Northwest Territories, helped facilitate getting Dechinta accredited by the University of Alberta. In the spring of 2013, Dechinta's directors signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Alberta's new Dean of Native Studies and can now run a minor program. They have a similar relationship with McGill and are in discussions with the University of British Columbia.

Eugene Boulanger is the current Director of Strategic Partnerships at Dechinta. He is Shutahgotine Dene,

born in Tulita in the Northwest Territories, but only recently moved to Yellowknife from Vancouver.

He said accessing core funding and thus finding and keeping permanent staff has always challenged the school. In the past, the Government of the Northwest Territories and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development funded specific programs, but never provided core funding. That has since changed, and core funding is now a distinct possibility.

Director Stephen Ellis said part of the problem was that Dechinta was not registered as a charity until about a year ago. Today, after successful grant applications from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Tides Canada, Dechinta is able to employ longer-term staff: a two-year contract for Boulanger and money for an in-house program coordinator who works part time. Ellis said the ultimate plan is to have instructors and professors engaged year round.



Photo courtesy of Amos Scott





*Photo courtesy of Amos Scott*

Ellis said there are many current young leaders in the north that have participated in Dechinta in the past and continue to contribute. There are also Elders in all the courses—many of whom return each semester.

Kakwi-Scott said the alumni are the most important elements of Dechinta. She said they continue to dedicate their time and energy to creating a buzz about Dechinta, which lends to the university's credibility.

“It feels so rewarding, when someone said it changed their life to have that available. There is nothing better than that,” she said. “To have the privilege of getting to know those students and play some small role, it has been one of the greatest experiences of my working life.”

Said Eugene Boulanger: “Dechinta provides a very unique function in the social fabric of the Northwest Territories, it creates youth who are hungry for their culture. It creates people who are willing to go the extra mile to make their lives better.”

**THE NEED:** A Northern, land-based university that would honour the knowledge and culture of Indigenous peoples.

**THE PROJECT:** Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, Canada's first northern university.

**CHALLENGES:** Obtaining core funding needed to keep a permanent staff; legislation that prevented Dechinta from becoming a credit-granting institution.

**WHAT WORKED:** Perseverance: despite some skepticism and early challenges, Dechinta is growing stronger and stronger; constant meetings and relationship building with the upper echelon of governments.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Be responsive to the needs of the community—for example, the land-based component of Dechinta was crucial. Also, alumni can be a source of great strength and support.





Photo courtesy of Clark Ferguson



Photo courtesy of Clark Ferguson

# Bringing Legends to Life with Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace

Montreal-based tech group helps Indigenous youth define their own identity—through gaming

By Angela Sterritt

**T**ehoniehtathe Delisle's thumbs flew furiously as he took on his rivals. The 21-year-old Kanien'kehá:ka youth was deeply immersed in a computer game called Skahìòn:hati: Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends—a digital adventure that tells the story of a man who must fight a Stone Giant, Tree People and the Flying Head on his path

to becoming a warrior. Delisle isn't just good at the game, he helped invent it.

He gained the skills to bring the legends to life as a producer, writer, and junior research assistant of a video game design workshop at Concordia University called Skins, which he first attended five years ago.

"Skins came to Survival School, the high school I went to, and asked if we wanted to make video games,"



Delisle explained. “The goal was to make a video game that showcased our culture and got it out there.”

The workshop series is aimed to give youth gaming design skills—but it’s also busting stereotypes.

The curriculum begins with the basics of traditional storytelling, then teaches participants how to tell a story through virtual environments and video games. Students learn skills for video game production such as game design, art direction, 3D modeling and animation, sound, and computer programming.

Delisle participated in the first Skins workshop program, back in 2008. At that time, the program was targeted at high school students. Now, Skins works with a slightly older age group—youth aged 18 to 25.

To date, Skins has produced four different games over four workshops from 2008 to 2013, first hosted by Kahnawake Survival School and then later by Concordia University. The most recent took place May 27 to June 14 of this year. During the three-week intensive workshop, participants worked as a team, taking on game-industry roles to turn one of their stories into a playable video game.

Tehoniehtathe Delisle said creating the games gave him the opportunity to see his people represented in an accurate way.

“The latest game is called *leniën:te* and the *Peacemaker’s Wampum*,” he said. “It’s about a female archaeologist, who comes back to her town. She has to relearn her culture to get back to her community, and save them from people who are trying to steal the peacemaker’s wampum.”

That story came from a student’s imagination and research. But Owisokon Lahache, a teacher, artist and highly regarded knowledge keeper, also provided stories to the youth. She’s been a cultural advisor

and teacher in the Skins workshops from day one.

“This kind of project is really to help the rest of the world understand us,” Lahache explained, “so these games are extremely important.”

The idea of carving paths to culture, home and identity through gaming came from Kanien’keha:ka artist Skawennati Fragnito.

“For the first time, with this new medium—with the Internet, with computation—we are able to get in on the ground floor of a new technology and represent ourselves,” said Fragnito in a telephone interview.

The Skins program is an initiative of Montreal-based Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC)—a research network that aims to expand an Indigenous presence online. In 2012, Skins was honoured with an Ashoka Changemakers award for innovation in Indigenous education.

Skawennati Fragnito is an AbTeC co-founder. She said the research network started out in around 2004 as just an idea she shared with Jason Edward Lewis, a Cherokee and Associate Professor of Computation Arts in the Department of Design and Computation Arts at Concordia University.

In 2007, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council offered a brand new grant for Aboriginal research networks. Fragnito and Lewis called upon like-minded individuals in their network to play with them. This included Steven Loft, a Mohawk of the Six Nation and a curator, writer and media artist, and Loretta Todd, a Metis and Cree Filmmaker.

“We wanted to see more Native people being not just the consumers of, but the producers of the [cyber] space,” Fragnito said. “We wanted to have youth doing what they like to do—playing video games, for one.”



AbTeC conceived of the Skins workshop, began creating a curriculum and invited the members of the research network to prototype the workshop. But they needed to learn the technology themselves first. They were at ground zero—as new media artists, they had never made games.

Fragnito said because of the requirements of the grant they had to find a community organization to work with, so they approached a number of them.

It wasn't easy.

“Though the individuals we approached were supportive of our idea, they may have faced some challenges when trying to push this idea through their institutions. As a result, we faced a lot of rejection.”

Fragnito said it's no secret that many Indigenous communities often feel 'over-researched'. Many outsiders come into the community and want to do projects to 'help the people'.

Finally, Fragnito ran into her cousin Owisokon Lahache, who worked at the Kahnawake Survival School (KSS). She suggested Skins be run in the school. Soon after, the with KSS began.

Fragnito said in the early stages, AbTeC and KSS did not have a formal partnership, but soon realized that needed to change. In 2010, Fragnito and Lewis had a meeting with the Kahnawake Education Center, under which KSS operates, and forged an official relationship.

AbTeC has always had a formal partnership with Concordia University, which continues to be a home base for Skins. The institution provides space and a significant portion of Lewis' time, and also helped fund one of their Summer Institutes. Other resources—equipment, staff—are funded by external grants. Fragnito said AbTeC has also maintained a partnership with the ImaginNative film and media arts festival throughout.

Owisokon Lahache incorporated the Skins workshop into her classroom as part of a once-a-week extracurricular program at the school. In her class she would talk about traditional stories. Then AbTeC staff would launch into the tech component. About ten to 15 students took part, working to create their own game. For some, this also included participating in AbTeC's intensive weekend courses, also held at KSS.

Fragnito said the workshop encourages youth to not just be consumers of cyberspace but producers of it. She said it's empowering to draw links between old stories and new mediums.

“It gives rise to valuable skills in technology, all centered around the gaming industry,” she said.

Skins has the potential to reach hundreds of youth—some who play and some who make the game.

Through the youth participants and workshops, AbTeC has also realized what works, and what doesn't. Accessibility was one challenge they experienced. For example, some kids had access to the Internet at home and others did not. Some didn't even have computers. This made getting in contact



Photo courtesy of Clark Ferguson



with the participants and assigning them homework difficult. Thankfully, this changed over time as technology became more readily available.

She also said they found participants were only mildly interested in programming. Further, as the most time-consuming aspect was working with a game engine, they had to find more user-friendly technology than the engine they used when they started.

But Fragnito said the biggest challenge of Skins has been teaching youth all they need to know in just a few weeks. They've tried many different formats: a weekly class with intensive weekends; 14-day-straight intensive; two separated one-week intensives with a couple of months of bi-weekly afternoons of instruction; and the last one, a three-week intensive with weekends off.

Delisle said he couldn't really play the first game on his home computer because it wasn't powerful enough. He said it would download, but play very slow and hence the character's movement was very choppy.

He feels now that although the game doesn't look as realistic in the 2D version, it makes it more accessible for their target participants—Indigenous youth.

Delisle has contributed to four games. As a screenwriter, creative director and producer, he's considered a leader among his peers. He is working to bust stereotypes and paint or program a real picture of what Mohawks look, sounds and act like. And he's doing so through one of the most popular and widely accessible mediums on the planet.

According to Delisle, creating and being a part of this game has led him one step closer to his dream. He's now returning to college in hopes of becoming a filmmaker.

**NEED:** Ways for Indigenous youth to rewrite their cultural heritage and bust stereotypes.

**PROJECT:** SKINS, a workshop coordinated by Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace that provides training for Indigenous youth in storytelling and video game design.

**WHAT WORKED:** Allowing the stories and concepts of the games to come from the youth themselves; taking advantage of technology to find new ways to represent Indigenous culture.

**CHALLENGES:** Initial difficulties included sourcing a partner organization that understood SKINS' goals and needs, finding the most effective workshop format through which to deliver all the required training.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Be flexible and experiment to find the right technology to meet the needs and realities of both the organizers and participants; persevere even when people can't get their heads around what you are doing.





# WASAC: Sports as Exit from a Road to Nowhere

Finding a vital sense of belonging at the Winnipeg Aboriginal  
Sports Achievement Centre

*Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton*



By Wawmeesh G. Hamilton

Jessica Lavallee said she was headed down a bleak road if it hadn't been for the Winnipeg Aboriginal Sports Achievement Centre.

"A lot of my old friends never graduated, are in trouble with the law and some even have kids. I'd be there too because I was such a follower," said Lavallee, 18, who is Métis-Cree and lives in Winnipeg. "I graduated from high school in May, am working at the Manitoba Human Rights Commission for the summer and am attending the University of Winnipeg in September. I couldn't have accomplished this without WASAC."

WASAC builds capacity in Indigenous youth by offering them a mix of courses in leadership and mentorship. Participants then hone their skills in children's sports and recreational programs. The programs are free, because almost all of WASAC's participants are from families barely getting by, said Executive Director Trevor LaForte.

WASAC began in 1999 with six employees and 40 children. Since then, more than 15,000 children have participated in its after-school programs and summer camps. The organization's \$1.7 million annual budget is underwritten by agencies that include the federal government, Manitoba provincial government, and the Winnipeg School Division. "We're funded 70 per cent by government and 30 per cent by private donations. We hope to change that to 50-50 within three years," LaForte said.

Programs and camps—including transportation, sports equipment and snacks—are open to children in Grades 4 to 6, who come from more than 100 schools in Manitoba and from communities in the province's northern region. Beyond athletic instruction, participants are given the chance to learn about Indigenous culture and where their true potential lies.

Jessica Lavallee certainly knows about obstacles. She's faced them from the time she drew her very first breath. She was born premature and with a genetic disorder that caused her intestines to be located outside of her abdominal cavity – but nothing that is egregious or correctable in an erratum. "Mom could have chosen not to have me because of those complications. I was labelled a 'miracle baby,'" she said.

Lavallee lived a chaotic early childhood with her parents and two sisters. The family moved several times, she kept changing schools, her parents split up. After that, "my father wasn't really a part of my life." Lavallee's grandparents raised her from the age of eight, when they introduced her to jigging and square dancing, both staples of Métis culture. That's how she met WASAC founder Kevin Chief. "He was learning how to dance and we were there. He became a really good friend of our family and he told my sisters and me about WASAC."

Lavallee went to day camps that summer with other children from her jig troupe, finding herself immersed in new activities and surrounded by new friends. And none too soon. "In Grade 6, the crew I hung out with started to skip class a lot. They started stealing," she said. Amongst Indigenous youth in the region, suicide is so high as to be termed "endemic" by a Service Canada report. "Suicide prevention work is a key reason why WASAC was brought in to work with northern First Nations," LaForte said.

WASAC launched its programs in the northern town of Shamattawa first, spreading to other small communities. But many rural students go to the big city to attend school, so, in Winnipeg, WASAC provides after-school programs with tutoring and other supports. "Moving to a city from a remote place can be a big burden, so this is a way to meet and stay connected with friends," LaForte said.





Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton

Winnipeg has the highest percentage of Indigenous and Métis youth of any city in Canada, according to Statistics Canada. In a province where Indigenous youth are incarcerated at a rate eight times higher than non-Indigenous youth, gangs hold a dark allure. They feed off a yearning to belong—especially in someone who may have experienced abject poverty, placement in child welfare, lack of education, or exposure to family violence, the social planning council paper notes.

WASAC's driving aim is to provide a positive sense of belonging, LaForte said. "If you don't, kids will find it somewhere else."

Over the years, WASAC has added programs that teach CPR, first aid, healthy relationships, leadership skills. Partnering with the University of Winnipeg, WASAC teaches ecology at their summer camps. Another partnership, with the Winnipeg Jets, helps kids learn to skate and work with ticket sales and special pre-game promotions.

What about kids who "age out" after such

programs end in Grade 6? Beginning at age 13, through WASAC, many become volunteers for after-school and summer camps. From age 15 to 17, volunteers are encouraged to work as junior leaders at summer camps.

Lavallee progressed through each level, eventually working as a junior camp leader for the past three years. "I still remember when I got my first paycheque. That was a really big thing," she said. WASAC employs about 10 youth during the school year and up to 100 during the summer months, making it one of the largest employers of Indigenous children and youth in Canada, according to LaForte.

And now, for some after age 17, there is another stepping stone. This year WASAC partnered with the Manitoba provincial government to create 10 youth internship positions with various departments in the civil service. Lavallee is one of those interns. Her work with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission helped her discover that she'd "like to help people someday with discrimination issues."

Recently, Lavallee graduated from a model secondary school based out of the University of Winnipeg Collegiate. WASAC had helped connect her to the program, which provides educational and social supports to students from under-represented backgrounds that face financial barriers.

In May, wearing a black cap and gown, Lavallee walked the stage and received her diploma. There, witnessing her achievement, was her mother Claudette, whom she counts as her best friend, her grandmother, who was a huge supporter, her two sisters, and WASAC co-founder Kevin Chief, whom she'd met on a dance floor years before. As Lavallee scanned the room, her surprised eyes found another face. "I saw my father in the audience. It was the first time in a long time that I saw him and that was really huge for me." Recalling the moment, her voice trembled. Tears streamed down her face.



Now, as she readies to enter the University of Winnipeg, Lavallee believes she might become a teacher. “I think about my old friends. They never had the support that I did, and having that someone who cares really makes a difference. It was a struggle. But I did it, and I want to show kids that they can do it too.”

Back at WASAC’s headquarters, LaForte talked about what’s next for WASAC: more internships for WASAC grads. Perhaps a partnership with community colleges for trades training. Definitely an alumni association that will give participants a way to stay in touch and network. “I have the best job in the world,” LaForte said. “It’s no small thing to know that you are making a big difference in the lives of kids.”



*Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton*

**CHALLENGES:** “Making sure we have enough resources to maintain our standard of programming is always our biggest fear,” said Trevor LaForte.

**WHAT DIDN’T WORK:** “We might have focused a little too much on sport in the first three years but we’ve learned not to be narrow minded and focus on one thing.”

**WHAT WORKED:** “Not re-inventing the wheel. We’ve had success partnering with schools because they’re on the front line with the youth, the people we are trying to reach.”





## Gen7: Young 'Messengers' of Hope in the City

Indigenous urban teens defeat isolation and despair by learning to mentor others.

*Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton*



## By Wawmeesh G. Hamilton

Jessica Savoy remembers the mentors who made a difference in her life while she was growing up in East Vancouver. Now, thanks to a program called GEN7, the freshly graduated high school student is a mentor to a new generation.

“This program has given me the opportunity to make a difference with kids in the community and that’s important to me,” Savoy said. “But it’s also taught me what it’s like to be a parks board employee and to learn about the parks board system and how we can fit into that.”

The GEN7 program operates under the auspices of Motivate Canada, a Canadian charity dedicated to improving the lives of youth. Its mentors are called “Messengers.” Once chosen, they are trained by Motivate Canada in role modelling, public speaking and leadership.

In Vancouver, the GEN7 program ran for seven weeks in five community centres: Ray-Cam, Hastings, Britannia, Strathcona and Trout Lake. One Messenger was assigned to each centre to work with Indigenous youth after school.

This was a breakthrough, according to Scott Clark, who spearheaded it as the Executive Director of the Aboriginal Life In Vancouver Enhancement Society, or ALIVE.

GEN7 had been tried in other settings, but not community centres. Too many Indigenous kids couldn’t afford to pay program fees, and so they perceived the centres as unwelcoming, Clark said. “But community centres are the living rooms of our communities,” he said. “Each should have some kind of an urban Aboriginal strategy.”

Two events underpinned bringing GEN7 to Vancouver, Clark said. One was a suicide pact by

more than 30 Indigenous youth in a Vancouver high school in fall of 2012. Although the pact was stopped when authorities with support services intervened, it was a canary in a coal mine, said UBC psychology instructor Rod McCormick, who specializes in Indigenous psychology and mental health.

The pact illustrated the degree of isolation felt by Indigenous youth in the city. “On reserves, services are central and can respond quickly, and culture and environment are immediate and can play a role in healing,” McCormick said. “There are services in the city, but if they’re not culturally sensitive and are underfunded, then youth won’t use them.”

“The fallout from Indian residential schools has endured and youth such as those who entered into the pact are its progeny,” McCormick said. “There’s a legacy of pain, abandonment, disconnection, fragmented families and substance abuse that has been passed down intergenerationally.”

A program like GEN7 is a good start to reversing that brutal current. “If you have Aboriginal mentors who are doing well in life, who can role model and inspire youth to get support, then that’s got to be a good thing,” McCormick said. “No one should feel like they have to die to belong.”

The second event was a conference in Nanaimo in 2011 at which ALIVE official Ambrose Williams listened to a presentation about GEN7 by an official from Motivate Canada. Williams brought the idea back to ALIVE. “We discussed it and thought it would be a perfect fit for here, so we got to work on it,” Clark said.

The need no doubt exists. The government counts more than 40,000 Indigenous people residing in Vancouver. More than four in 10 are estimated to be under the age of 24.

Clark made a pitch for a GEN7 project to the



Vancouver Park Board and all its 24 community centres. Five centres committed to support the program this year, contributing \$5,000 each in funding. ALIVE kicked in \$20,000, while the Park Board and city anted up \$10,000 each, marking the first time GEN7 was attempted with an institution in an urban setting.

When ALIVE canvassed for GEN7 Messengers in fall 2012, 30 applications rolled in—many more than expected. The five messengers chosen trained with Motivate Canada the following January.

Jessica Savoy, 18, traces her ancestry to the Nisga`a village of New Aiyansh on her mother's side and to Acadia on her father's. But Savoy grew up in Vancouver and calls home the Commercial Drive area, not far from the Ray-Cam Community Centre on Hastings Street, where she worked as a GEN7 messenger.

Savoy was inspired to join GEN7 by two mentors of her own. One was a childhood friend named Rebecca Jules: "a really good role model to me when I was a

kid." The other was her Grade 12 teacher, Spirit Lavelle, "an inspirational and empowering Aboriginal woman."

Ray-Cam is located adjacent to the Stamps Place Housing Project. Formerly known as the Ray-Cam Housing Project and once nicknamed the Raymur reserve, the project was once populated by a high percentage of Indigenous peoples from different bands. Today, however, the project's population is equally split between Indigenous residents and international immigrant families. Savoy finds herself a role model not just for Indigenous kids, but also children from China, Vietnam, Africa and the Philippines.

Savoy worked as a GEN7 Messenger at Ray-Cam on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school, supervising basketball, soccer, badminton and exercises, and overseeing a healthy snack. Mentoring others meant sacrifices for Savoy. Her grandfather in the Nass Valley passed away but she never made it to his funeral. She was pressed to complete her studies as she prepared to graduate from high school.



Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton



Savoy intends to enrol in a university transfer program at the Native Education Centre this fall. Said Savoy: “I want to work as an advocate for youth one day. But there’s so much I want to do with my life, like travel and see the world.”

Savoy and other messengers benefited from GEN7 in other ways. The program was structured so that Messengers were auxiliary employees with the Vancouver Park Board. “They learned what it is to be a union member and how to work with schedules and time sheets,” Ray-Cam’s Carole Brown said. “More importantly, they became known to community centre staff, and are now aware of job opportunities in the system and how to apply for them.”

Not every experience was positive. One Messenger, who declined to be interviewed for this story, split his time between Trout Lake Community Centre and later Ray-Cam, and his experience was difficult, according to GEN7 training coordinator Steven Eastman.

Other challenges are institutional, Clark said. If more than the original five Vancouver centres are to take up the GEN7 program, funds have to be found. “There’s this fee-for-service mindset that ignores the impoverished that aren’t able to pay fees to access programs. It takes the word ‘community’ out of community centres,” Clark said. “And there’s this tendency to funnel Aboriginal people to just one place for programs and services. Well, our people should have full opportunity in all 24 centres.”

Clark said ALIVE and its partners are evaluating the GEN7 experiment in Vancouver. The city and the Park Board have committed to continuing the program. Clark hopes to eventually extend GEN7 to every city in Canada. “We’re talking about kids’ lives here,” he said. “It’s just the right thing to do.”

**CHALLENGES:** “We encountered a lack of preparation within some community centres to support youth in learning policies. Some did not have youth workers. Some centres are not used to hosting non-fee-for-service programs; therefore, they were too ready to give up very early in the project. And some centres lacked knowledge about the importance of inclusion policies that are culturally sensitive for Aboriginal peoples,” said project initiator Scott Clark.

**WHAT DIDN’T WORK:** “Initial attempts. We got rejected over 10 times from various funders for this project and eventually found the money to start it. We still haven’t got presidents of all community centres to support in principle the GEN7 project, though the motion was tabled over 12 months ago.”

**WHAT WORKED:** “Persistence. We managed to get the City of Vancouver and the Park Board of Vancouver to jointly fund this round two. This is first time those two levels have jointly funded a pilot project of this nature. If successful, this could be an ongoing program that receives annual funding until it becomes sustainable in all 24 Vancouver community centres.”

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Don’t make assumptions based on lack of communication. When emails and phone calls go unanswered, don’t assume that there is nothing happening. Success can’t be tracked based on numbers, but rather by being invited back into the Indigenous community.





## North-South Partnership: Community Engagement with a Long Horizon

Ontario-based leadership initiative helps the community of Neskantaga heal through art—while determining its needs from economic development

*Photo courtesy of Shawn Bell*



By Shawn Bell

A youth art show was far from anyone's mind when the Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win: North-South Partnership for Children (North-South) first arrived in Neskantaga First Nation.

The Toronto-based organization is run under a governance circle featuring a majority of northern First Nations chiefs. It was invited into Neskantaga to conduct an assessment of what the community wants from companies looking to mine on its traditional land.

North-South's first visit to Neskantaga took place in September 2012. Ontario's former child advocate and North-South's co-chair and co-founder Judy Finlay, together with Senator Landon Pearson, brought a small team with her on that visit. As they always do, the North-South people kept the first visit short—meeting with community members and introducing themselves, doing what Finlay described as starting the process of developing long-term relationships at every level of the community.

By the time North-South was preparing for its second visit to Neskantaga in February 2013, the situation on the reserve had altered dramatically. A series of youth suicides and attempted suicides had rocked the community, leaving Neskantaga in crisis.

While work on the community assessment continued, the suicide crisis brought North-South's other abilities—youth capacity-building and leadership, and partnerships and exchange—to the forefront.

It was during North-South's work with youth during the February trip that the idea for an arts festival took root.

"The youth decide what it is they want to do, and what they want to work on, and we facilitate that," Finlay explained.

Over the next few months, as the art festival started coming together, the suicide epidemic in the community worsened. It reached a head in late April, as two more youth committed suicide in the same week. The deaths prompted Neskantaga's chief and council to declare a state of emergency, pleading for outside help.

"Our community is exhausted emotionally and physically as we try to pick up the pieces from these tragic events," Neskantaga's chief said at the time.

The youth, perhaps most of all, were feeling the strain of losing friends and family members. As 23-year-old Josh Kendricks explained, in a small community everybody is affected by a suicide.

"No matter if you're related, everybody knows everybody," Kendricks said. "If you're not directly affected, you know somebody who is directly affected. It's like a circle. If you lose one member, the circle is not complete."

Kendricks, a talented artist, was battling depression, like so many others in his community. He said he stayed away from the North-South team during their first two visits to Neskantaga, preferring to keep to himself and avoid personal connections. But when the idea for the arts festival took hold, and the North-South team arrived back in the community for its third visit, he finally gave in to the urging of his friends and brought some of his drawings to show the visitors.

Their appreciation of his talent, followed by the display of his work to his community at the arts festival, has become a turning point in his life.

Kendricks said the art show in Neskantaga brought everyone together and showed both the youth and the adults how much talent exists in the community. And it gave him the confidence to continue on the creative path.



“Ever since then my style has changed drastically,” he said during a July art show in Toronto, where his paintings were displayed for the first time to a big-city audience. “They have teachings in them, more positive meaning. I’ve got a sense of what I want to do now, since I finally realized there are things I can do to help the youth connect to the elders, and connect to the culture, through art.”

While Finlay did not reference Kendricks directly, the reluctance he had in connecting with North-South at first, and his gradual acceptance of their work in his community, symbolizes what she has seen in many communities with which North-South works.

She called it the “three cups of tea” method of developing relationships.

“The first visit to the community, it’s like they barely acknowledge us,” she said. “The second visit is more of an engagement. And the third visit we have more of a true relationship developing.

“And the fact is that we keep going back,” she added. “It isn’t just about collecting the information and giving them back what they ask for. We do it over a long period of time and we keep going back to nurture the partnership.”

Finlay repeatedly emphasized the perseverance required to build and maintain relationships with the communities. Not only must the North-South team be flexible and willing to reschedule around the countless things that come up in communities facing so much hardship, but they must remain committed to the long term even in the face of challenges.

In the case of Neskantaga, Finlay said the partnership was tested repeatedly over the first year by constant crises the community faced. She said the North-South team was asked over and over whether it was leaving for good. The community, like so many First Nations in the north, has dealt before with southern

organizations coming in to do a study or other work and then leaving and never being heard from again. That history may be the biggest challenge North-South faces, Finlay said.

Part of overcoming the negative history is perseverance, she explained. It is also crucial to develop strong relationships with the community members. But North-South also works on its own structure to ensure that anything it begins will be seen through.

For example, any staff or student working with North-South in a northern community is asked to commit to keeping up relations with northerners for 10 years, in an effort to encourage southerners to think of long-term relationships with the north. And on a deeper structural level, North-South is set up with a governance circle composed of six northern chiefs and five southern delegates—so the north always has a voting majority.

The result of taking the time to build relationships and think long term is that North-South has managed to become part of the fabric of the communities it partners with, Finlay explained.



*Photo courtesy of Shawn Bell*



“We wouldn’t be anywhere doing anything if we didn’t have the relationship piece,” Finlay said.

“We’re welcomed into the community. They know us, and they work very closely with us, which doesn’t happen that often. But it’s because we’ve spent the time and energy through the partnership developing the relationship.”

It has also seen interest in its work spread throughout the north, as five more communities have requested North-South do a community assessment with them.

As Neskantaga councillor Kelvin Moonias said, North-South has taken the time to get to know the people without making promises or offering more than can be met.

“Some groups will come in and promise you all kinds of things,” Moonias said. “North-South has said ‘we’re not going to promise anything, but we’ll continue developing the relationship.’”

“I’m very honoured to know these people,” Moonias added. “It shows there are people out there who care.”

While the work on Neskantaga’s community assessment is nowhere near completion, for the youth in the community North-South’s involvement could not have come at a better time.

Kendricks knows he is not the only youth in Neskantaga to feel a new sense of hope for the future. The efforts that he and the other youth put into organizing the art show, and the fact that the show brought the entire community together, has them energized to do more. And getting to exhibit their work in Toronto as a community was something none of them would have thought possible even one year ago.

“We all have our own talent,” Kendricks said. “If you put that all together, I believe Neskantaga can do something to put itself on the map.”

**NEED:** A dialogue to assess what the community wants from companies looking to mine on its traditional land.

**PROJECT:** North-South Partnership—an effort to build long-term community engagement and relationships, youth capacity-building, and leadership, in this case through an arts festival.

**PARTNERSHIP:** Direct engagement with the Neskantaga community and council, and a governance circle featuring a majority of First Nations chiefs.

**CHALLENGES:** A suicide epidemic that rocked the community throughout the first year of the program led to reticence to participate; mistrust of motives.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** The importance of perseverance, and the value of building strong relationships with community members over a long time horizon.



A young man with short dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt under a blue and yellow plaid shirt, stands in a natural setting. Behind him is a calm lake, a dense line of green trees, and a clear blue sky with a few white clouds. A vertical wooden post is visible in the background to the left of the man.

# On the Rez in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug

A group of Indigenous youth show southern Canadians what life in a remote northern community is really like

*Photo courtesy of Lenny Carpenter*



By Lenny Carpenter

When four youth in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) First Nation decided to send an open invitation for average Canadians to come spend five days in their remote community in northwestern Ontario to build bridges across culture and get a clearer sense of what life on a remote reserve is like, many in the community did not take them seriously.

“There were people who said it’s impossible,” said Leona Matthews, one of the youth organizers. “They say, ‘they’re just youth, they don’t do anything.’ But we worked really hard and got it done.”

The original goal was to have 25 Canadians come into the reserve, located nearly 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay. Clearly, the letter worked: 43 Canadians answered the call. The group flew into the community on July 17 to spend five days and four nights in KI, also known as Big Trout Lake.

“I didn’t think this was going to blow up like this,” said youth organizer Justin Beardy during the event.

“It snowballed—totally exceeding my expectations.”

The visitors stayed with local families, and experienced first-hand life in an isolated First Nations community in northern Ontario.

They toured homes to get a sense of the housing conditions, and learned about substance abuse and unemployment issues. During an open forum with the chief and council, they learned about the frustrations of trying to work with what one visitor called a “paternalistic” federal government.

But they also experienced the Ojicree people’s traditional activities such as fishing, canoeing and medicine picking. They ate traditional meals of geese, moose, fish and caribou prepared by local Elders. And they learned how tight-knit and resilient

a community of 1,300 can be.

Peter Love, a part-time lawyer and member of the Toronto Rotary Club, said most Canadians know little about Indigenous history and their perspective.

“We’re terribly ignorant,” he said. “But this [KI trip] is the process of learning.”

Connections were made, friendships formed, and cultural gaps bridged. Both visitors and hosts were sad at the conclusion of the week.

The first such youth-coordinated exchange initiative of its kind in KI, the program’s inspiration can be traced back six years ago, to the arrival in KI of a young Ottawa filmmaker, Andree Cazabon.

Herself a child of foster homes, and since an award-winning filmmaker/activist, Cazabon had heard about eight children in the community who had become orphans after their mother and stepfather committed suicide a month-and-a-half apart.

When she arrived to produce a documentary on the socio-economic issues within the community, she met with some reticence—despite having the blessing of the chief and council.

“The first thought was anger. My nephews and nieces had been through a lot—and now somebody was filming them and asking them questions,” resident Tina Sainnawap said after the film’s premiere. “I felt like she was going to hurt my nieces and nephews.”

But when Cazabon explained her reasons for filming, and made a commitment that she would continue to work with the Indigenous community for 10 years, many relented.

“As an individual, I was responsible to make a commitment to the community,” said Cazabon, who is a Francophone-Ontarian. “I would not make another film until we made a difference.”





*Photo Courtesy of Lenny Carpenter*

The documentary was titled *3rd World Canada*. After its premiere in 2010, Cazabon took the film on several tours in various cities in Ontario.

Youth from the community—including some of the film’s subjects—came along to speak at the screenings in Ontario. That proved to be a challenge. “You’d be lucky to get a sentence out of them,” Cazabon said.

But as the tours progressed, the youth grew more comfortable.

“It took two years,” Cazabon said. “Youth engagement is not something done overnight and you need people to lead with their voices.”

## “Youth engagement is not something done overnight and you need people to lead with their voices.”

Through the tours, *3rd World Canada* evolved from a film into the KI exchange project.

This past January—at the height of *Idle No More*—Cazabon visited KI. She wanted to meet with youth, and brainstorm ideas and possibilities on what to do next to bridge those cultural gaps.

Inviting Canadians to spend a week in the community was one of them.

But instead of taking the lead on the idea, as she had done with the tours, Cazabon turned ownership of the project over to the group. She insisted the youth needed to spearhead the initiative, in order for it to be a success.

Beardy and Karyn Paishk were involved from the start. Although they had never engaged with *3rd World Canada*, they had previously helped organize local events related to *Idle No More*. Matthews and Faith McKay joined up later on. And while other local youth took part in meetings and volunteering, those four would be the core group behind the KI event.

Cazabon served not only as a mentor but a partner in the initiative through her production company, Cazabon Productions.



“I told them I would donate four months of my time,” she said. “We drafted up an agreement, they threw me a budget and we would all be responsible.”

Being a grassroots initiative, the project lacked major funders. So the youth fundraised and sought sponsors in the north while Cazabon covered the south. Wasaya Airways, an Indigenous owned airline, came on board through youth efforts, while the Toronto Rotary Club, which hosted screenings during the tours, agreed to sponsor the event.

“Our fundraising campaign promised deliverables that have to do with funders’ objectives,” Cazabon said.

The whole initiative was a “scary project,” for the youth, Cazabon said. “They learned the best way to erase the fear is lean on each other.”

There were times the youth thought the event might never happen.

“We almost gave up but we always kept pushing each other,” Matthews said. “We were a great team.”

Within a few weeks, Paishk and McKay went on another short 3rd World Canada tour in Toronto, Peterborough and Ottawa, where they were hosted by visitors from the KI event.

Immediately following the event, another group of KI youth travelled to Lisbon, Portugal to attend a Rotary International Convention, which was attended by 25,000 people from around the world.

“I’m so proud to be from here, KI. This is our home,” Paishk said on the last night of the event. She noted the laughter around the community grounds. “You see this? This is the spirit of KI, and I don’t think it’ll ever die.”

**NEED:** For Canadians to have a clearer understanding of what living in a remote community in the North is like.

**PROJECT:** A youth-led initiative that invited a group of Canadians from across the south to come spend a week in KI.

**PARTNERSHIP:** The project was inspired by the work of Andree Cazabon and her research into producing the documentary 3rd World Canada, but was led by Indigenous youth from the KI First Nation.

**WHAT WORKED:** Putting the youth in charge of all aspects of the project implementation.

**CHALLENGES:** Building youth confidence they could actually make the project happen; obtaining project funding.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Strategize fundraising so as to promise deliverables that align with funders’ objectives; ease the fear factor by reminding the youth to trust and lean on one another.





# Youth Fusion: Remaking High Schools in James Bay Cree Nation

One Quebec project reimagines Northern schools through an Indigenous framework—with massive success

*Photo courtesy of Youth Fusion*



By Haley Cullingham

The ballots from the high school student council election were just in when one of the teachers called a meeting with Youth Fusion's leadership project coordinator. "This kid shouldn't be the president of the student council," the teacher told Joe Allen, referring to the shy but notorious student the school's population had chosen. "He's a bad kid." But Allen didn't think they should deny the contender the job. After all, what would the school be teaching the young people in this Cree community about democracy if it didn't respect their votes?

Later that year, someone at the school started setting off the fire alarm. After a week and a half of this daily routine, the principal came to Allen and asked if the student council president would speak to the school.

The prez wasn't so sure. Despite his credibility amongst the students, he hated making speeches. But Allen told him he thought it would be good for the kids if he said something.

The next day, he stood at the front of the school auditorium and said, in Cree, "Who's been pulling the fire alarm?" The entire student body looked back in guilty silence. The president explained that what was going on was dangerous. He talked to the students about what would happen if there was a real fire. "He was definitely a strong leader," recalled Allen. "Especially when he was speaking his own language." The false alarms stopped the next day. No one pulled the alarm again for the rest of the year.

This victory illustrates the valuable place Youth Fusion coordinators hold in the 11 northern Cree and Inuit schools in which they work.

Youth Fusion was founded five years ago in Montreal by Gabriel Bran Lopez, whose social entrepreneurship was recognized through a

prestigious Ashoka Fellowship in 2011. Originally, the goal was to combat high school dropout rates. Bran Lopez toured schools in Quebec, talking to students about engagement, and their responses inspired the program. Youth Fusion trains university students and recent grads as coordinators to lead in-class and extracurricular programming, giving students an incentive to stick around at school until the end of the day. Project coordinators work 25 hours a week over the school year—a commitment of more than 950 hours per coordinator. Partnered with 11 different universities, the organization currently works with 65 schools across Quebec.

## Youth Fusion has helped raise graduation rates from 1.6 percent to 15.6 percent.

Four years ago, after an initial success in two high-risk schools in Montreal, Youth Fusion expanded to work with the students in Quebec who are most likely to drop out: Indigenous youth living in remote northern villages.

It was Bran Lopez's friend Alanah Heffez, experienced as an educator with the Cree Health Board, who brought the crisis of dropout rates in the James Bay Cree Nation to his attention. At that time, less than 10 per cent of Cree School Board students were graduating from high school each year. Bran Lopez asked Heffez to reach out to schools and gauge interest in Youth Fusion, and in 2010 Heffez put together a pilot project and headed up north.

When Youth Fusion began programming in this area, only 1.6 per cent of Cree School Board students graduated within five years. Since 2010, Youth Fusion



has been able to help raise that rate to 15.6 per cent and counting. Now, Heffez is Youth Fusion's Director of Operations for English and Northern schools, and the organization serves 1,250 students in nine James Bay Cree communities, as well as one Inuit community.

"They gave me experience to be a leader in my community," said Neesha Shecapio, a graduating senior in Waskaganish.

Youth Fusion coordinators aim to transform northern schools from places where kids are obligated to be into welcoming environments that reflect students' interests. When Shecapio was in her first year, there wasn't much going on at her high school. She was unsure of herself, and scared. "And then I heard about Youth Fusion," she said. She and her fellow students began coming up with activities they could organize. "Everything started to be different," she said. "I became more comfortable being in high school." Shecapio is running for president of the student council this year, and she said Youth Fusion has helped a lot of the shy students step outside of their comfort zones. She's hoping the school will make another trip to a Cree culture camp they attended last year with students from Oujé-Bougamou, where they went snowshoeing and cooked bannock.

Implementing Youth Fusion's program up north was different from working in Montreal, but the last half of the organization's name proved to be the key to working in the northern communities. "There's a lot of openness and collaboration," Heffez said. Youth Fusion coordinators create links with local health workers and youth councils; community organizations provide financial support so students can travel to participate in leadership conferences and sports tournaments that Youth Fusion organizes. Fostering these connections not only makes Youth Fusion's northern programs possible, it also helps

make the school a part of the community.

The list of reasons students have so much difficulty in these high schools feels as long as the history that contributes to it. Remote northern schools sometimes lack the resources to diagnose and address learning disabilities, noted Christina Roos, a Youth Fusion coordinator who will begin her second stint in Mistissini this fall. In addition to learning barriers, 51 per cent of students who participated in a survey told Youth Fusion they were having a difficult time at home. "If their basic needs aren't being met," said Roos, "It's very difficult for them to grow."

Some students grow up in unstable homes, where they may be exposed to overcrowding, abuse, neglect and addiction. Many students need to seek support beyond their families, and Youth Fusion coordinators provide some of that support. That encouragement, explained Shecapio, makes it possible for students to focus on positives.

## Coordinators must get used to the Cree comfort with silence.

"They're like friends," she said of the coordinators. "They encourage us, they give advice." She said they also help to overcome the sense of alienation many students feel with their teachers.

Building links within the school has been just as integral as building links with the community. Allen became a teacher after working as a youth coordinator for six months. He was surprised to find that students were less willing to open up to him once he assumed a position of authority. "Suddenly it was like the walls went up, 'He's one of them.'" When asked to name one change she thinks would





Photo Courtesy of Youth Fusion

help northern schools the most, Shecapio suggested hiring more teachers who are there for the kids, not the paycheque.

Students are frustrated not only by the high turnover of staff and administration at their schools, but by southern-focused material and the way it's taught. The issues are exacerbated by the fact that the majority of the teachers in the James Bay Cree schools are, themselves, from the south, and might not be as familiar with the learning styles of their northern students.

The education children in the James Bay Cree communities get at home is very hands-on, Allen explained. For instance, they learn about hunting and skinning animals by being involved in a real-world process: "As a very small child, you're handed a knife and told to watch and partake." At a school in the south, he said, students would be shown the knife and then told all the reasons



Photo Courtesy of Youth Fusion

it was dangerous. "You'll get to use it eventually, but first we have to go through the entire process for a month." This southern style of education is completely counterintuitive to the way these kids are accustomed to learning. "I think the curriculum really does need to be adapted to their reality," said Allen.

"Joe, you sure talk a lot," Allen's students used to tease him. "We can tell you're white." Like the curriculum and most of the teaching staff in the northern Cree schools, the majority of Youth Fusion coordinators come from the south. This means that Youth Fusion must juggle logistical elements like housing, transportation and food allowances in a region where costs are astronomical, and coordinators must adjust to the cultural differences, like the Cree comfort with silence.

But Heffez said that, thanks in part to the community connections Youth Fusion coordinators seek out, bringing coordinators from outside the community





has never had a negative impact on the program's success. Most of Heffez's staff choose to stay in the community and work with the students for the entire school year: "I think the work is rewarding because the project coordinators make strong connections with the kids, and they can see the value of their activities at the school," she explained. And by connecting with the kids both inside and outside the classroom, they compliment the pedagogical expertise of the teaching staff, and help make school more fun and welcoming.

At an annual leadership conference organized by Youth Fusion, students have a chance to share the changes they're bringing to their schools with young leaders across the James Bay Cree communities. For three days in May, kids from the northern schools come together and realize they are not alone in wanting to graduate and succeed. By gathering youth



to learn from and inspire one another, Youth Fusion is able to mount a defence against the influence of peers who might challenge the choice to stay in school.

The defence is working, thanks in part to the presence of the youth coordinators in James Bay Cree schools for the past three and a half years. When Youth Fusion launched its northern programming in Waswanipi and Waskaganish, the communities had the lowest graduation rates in the Cree School Board. In the 2011-12 school year, the graduation rates were the highest in the board: 52 per cent of students in Waswanipi and 40 per cent of students in Waskaganish finished high school in six years.

"It's amazing what can happen when the kids really take on those leadership roles, and that's something we have to be aware of as leadership coordinators"





*Photo Courtesy of Youth Fusion*

said Allen, who is now wrapping up a stint as Youth Fusion's assistant director of northern programs. "Sometimes it's okay to stop coordinating and facilitating. Sometimes you just have to step back and let them take over."

The tone of determined frustration in the voices of Allen and Roos as they described the challenges these kids face signifies perhaps the most crucial way these coordinators encourage kids to stay in school. Someone is frustrated on their behalf. Someone sees their struggles with the system and is willing to help them take it on, maybe even change it. Someone agrees with them when they say the system isn't designed for them, but will push them to get up in front of the school no matter how shy they are, instead of giving up. And as Allen discovered with his student council president, when you encourage these voices to be heard, amazing things can happen.

**NEED:** Combat high dropout rates in high schools in Indigenous communities in northern Quebec.

**PROJECT:** Youth Fusion trains university students and recent grads to lead in-class and extracurricular programming, which makes school learning more relevant to their interests, and gives students incentives to stick around until the end of the day.

**WHAT WORKED:** Listening to youth, and collaborating directly with schools and community partners; being present on a daily basis, throughout the school year; continuously adapting the activities to respond to local needs and interests.

**CHALLENGES:** Engaging students across an Indigenous/non-Indigenous cultural divide in a context where less than 10 per cent of students were graduating in five years, and where more than half reported difficulties at home.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Take the time to build relationships of mutual trust with individual students, creating a foundation for changing their attitudes towards school; reach out to community partners to help build bridges between the school and community.





# The Red Road Project: Trading Substances for Substance

One youth-led initiative in Nova Scotia is getting Mi'kmaq youth off drugs and booze—through culture

*Photo courtesy of the Red Road Project*



## By Trina Roache

**O**n a bright midsummer afternoon, Haley Bernard surveyed the Pictou Landing First Nation with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the rural Mi'kmaq community is like a close-knit family. On the other, it's plagued by drug and alcohol abuse.

She wants to see change—a generation of culturally strong, educated youth who are drug and alcohol free. Bernard hopes the Red Road Project will lead the way.

Started in March 2012, the goal of the Red Road Project is to help Mi'kmaq youth 15 to 29 learn to say no to drugs and alcohol. While the idea came from the Nova Scotia Chiefs, and is administered by the education working group, Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey or MK for short, the Red Road Project is run by youth, for youth.

“We aim to educate Mi'kmaq youth to lead a healthy lifestyle through their culture, language, fitness, connecting with their elders and peers in their community, conquering addiction,” said coordinator Savannah Simon.

Youth leaders like Bernard walk the talk. She graduated in the spring from Cape Breton University with a bachelor's degree in Mi'kmaq Studies. For the summer, she worked as a youth leader. Bernard signed a contract to stay sober, but she said there's more to it than that. “The Red Road Project is about embracing your life and just being happy and doing good things,” she said. With that mindset, Bernard opens the gym at the community recreation centre for basketball, heads a running club and holds traditional craft classes and bonfires by the shore.

With 23 youth leaders in 13 Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, this project is the first of its kind in Atlantic Canada. Representatives

from the RCMP now sit on its advisory committee, and it currently has a budget of \$100,000 funded by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. Further, a connection with the Halifax-based youth network Leaders of Today (LOT) has provided training opportunities in leadership and public voice.

LOT Coordinator Steve Gordon explained that his group helps youth influence government policy. “It's about building leadership and connecting new youth leaders with provincial politics, from the minister down to provincial staff,” he said.

Gordon said networking creates a lot of opportunities for youth groups to learn from one another. He looks forward to working closely with the Red Road team on this and future community action projects.

Laurianne Stevens was also encouraged by early feedback and wants to see these kinds of partnerships grow. Stevens is a director with the education working group that oversees the Red Road Project. She admitted there's a learning curve and changes made in the second year have been successful. Hiring charismatic Savannah Simon boosted morale. And monthly reports made youth leaders more accountable.



*Photo courtesy of Trina Roache*





*Photo courtesy of Trina Roache*

Still, challenges remain. Stevens said the distance between the Mi'kmaq First Nations makes communication difficult, despite the use of videoconferencing. So the goal for next year is to partner with the communities. With plans to secure additional funding, Stevens would like to hire more coordinators.

"It's about getting the band involved. We want the community to have ownership, so everyone knows about it," said Stevens.

In terms of macro project design, the group's strategy has been threefold: strength lies in cultural traditions; youth leaders make invaluable role models; and social media is key.

In addition to its own website, the Red Road Project is on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Contests for logos, rap songs, and videos help spread the word. Assistant Coordinator Brittany Prosper is working on a brochure to hand out to parents, schools, and pow-wows.

Each week, Prosper and Simon combine one of seven

sacred teachings with a chapter from Sean Covey's book, *The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make*, which deals with teen issues. For example, youth leaders will focus on the sacred idea of trust and read about teen sexuality. The coordinators give ideas for activities but the youth leaders adapt that plan to their own community.

The range of activities is broad. Nature walks, sweats, talking circles, sports and fishing have proved popular. Prosper organizes elder visits once or twice a week in her home community, the We'koqmaq First Nation in Cape Breton.

"We just talk and bake, make food like Indian tacos. I like to get their perspective," said Prosper. "We want to tie traditional culture to all our activities."

Part of the challenge is figuring out what works and what doesn't. An even bigger challenge is getting people to show up. But with patience and persistence, organizers can see the combination of social media, youth role models and clear links to tradition starting to work.

Haley partied in her teen years like all her friends. When she started to struggle in school and suffered bouts of depression, she knew she had to make changes. Over the last two years, Haley started taking language courses, going to sweats, and dancing at pow-wows. "I still go out with my friends. I know I'm not missing out on anything. And I make sure they see that I can still have fun and be myself."

All the youth leaders gathered at a cultural camp before the summer. They spent five days in a technology-free teepee and participated in smudges, talking circles and other traditional activities.

"Everybody left with such unity and a strong bond which is so crucial when you are a sober, Mi'kmaq youth leader, because we're very rare," says Simon.





*Photo courtesy of Trina Ronche*

The purpose of the camp is to empower the youth leaders and impart a positive energy they can take back to their community, along with their own Red Road teepee. “When you’re doing traditional activities, you can’t go if you’re doing drugs and alcohol. And that’s what’s broken that connection with everyone and their cultural, spiritual self,” said Bernard.

Looking ahead, Stevens wants to further expand the group’s scope. Red Road leaders visit schools and last March, gave a presentation at a Crime Prevention Symposium in Halifax. Everyone involved wants the Red Road to eventually have a presence in all Atlantic Indigenous communities. And Simon would love to see the Red Road go national.

**THE NEED:** Helping Indigenous youth in Mi’kmaq communities turn away from drug and alcohol abuse.

**THE PROJECT:** The Red Road Project introduces Indigenous youth to a healthy lifestyle through cultural activities, convened by local youth leaders.

**WHAT WORKED:** Adapting cultural traditions to activities, such as organizing the cultural camp for youth leaders; working through youth leaders across social media; engaging outside youth-engagement initiatives such as LOT; bringing on charismatic youth leadership for the project in the second year.

**CHALLENGES:** Building genuine band and community ownership of activities; getting youth to show up to activities in new initiatives.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Work through credible community contacts; adapt cultural practices to context in authentic ways.





## SNAP: Anger Antidote for Indigenous Youth

Stop Now and Plan offers techniques for controlling fury and building a future

*Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton*



By Wawmeesh G. Hamilton

“ probably would have killed someone.” At 31 years of age, Bobby Crane weighed the impact of a program that helped him learn to control his violent temper. “Or joined a gang. And ended up in jail for the rest of my life.”

Crane and others learned how to cope with their anger through techniques taught in SNAP, which stands for Stop Now And Plan.

SNAP is a multi-component program that focuses on emotional self-regulation, self-control and problem solving. A core component of SNAP is a 12-week group for at-risk children and their families. The program serves children aged six to 12 who are experiencing severe behavioural problems. That age range is ideal for shaping self-control and problem-solving skills, said Leena Augimeri, a director at Toronto’s Child Development Institute, which developed SNAP in 1985.

The program uses a cognitive behavioural model that teaches children how to handle difficult emotions and recognize when their behaviour is problematic, examine what fuels them, and replace them with more positive behaviours. “It basically teaches children to stop and think before they lash out,” said Augimeri. “They learn to solve problems when they are small, before they grow bigger.”

“Children develop severe behavioural problems for several reasons,” Augimeri said. “Dysfunction at home, living in poverty, and learned behaviour are just some of the causes.”

Augimeri cited a study showing more than half of incarcerated men had childhood conduct problems. Indigenous Canadians are over-represented in prison populations, making up about four per cent of the Canadian population but 23 per cent of federal inmates. And 21 per cent of all federally incarcerated

Indigenous offenders were under age 25, compared to 13 per cent of non-Indigenous offenders.

“All kids are capable of being ill-tempered and showing bad behaviour,” noted Augimeri. “The difference with the kids we work with is that their tempers go from zero to 100 in a split second and they don’t know how to stop it.”

Sitting in Tim Horton’s in his hometown of Red Deer, Alta., Bobby Crane remembered how he went from zero to 100 when he was a six-year-old student in Toronto. Life had been tough up to that point for the now-married father of two, who traces his Ojibway roots to northern Ontario.

Raised by a single father who worked hard and drank hard, Crane saw his mother only occasionally. He was mostly left on his own at home. “I was like a little man: I lived the life of someone older than me, and I didn’t like being told what to do.”

At elementary school one day, Crane decided he’d “had enough” of a boy who taunted and punched him. “So I asked the teacher for a new pencil, sharpened it, then I quietly walked up to the bully and stabbed him in one fast shot in the shoulder.”

At age 12, after a confrontation with a principal, he ran through a steel-frame door knocking it off its hinges.

Crane was moved into a class with kids who had similar behavioural issues, and also into a SNAP program. Resistant at first, he slowly felt the staff’s patient, positive reinforcement pay off. “I began to open up.”

In weekly sessions, SNAP staff use role playing to show how better to handle tough situations. Children are verbally reinforced, and a prize box is used to reward attendance and the completion of home practice assignments. Use of gym time, games and snacks are also part of the program.



SNAP also hosts summer camps, which had an indelible effect on Crane. “SNAP was reinforced all the time... But at camp, we were allowed to be just kids for eight hours and I can’t tell you how much that meant to me.” By Grade 8: “You know how some kids get trophies for something and they’re proud of them?” he said. “Well, not being violent was like a trophy to me and it made me feel just as proud.”

SNAP has come a long way since that launch more than 28 years ago. Still based in Toronto, it now licenses its program to Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations across Canada and abroad. Along the way, there’s been plenty of learning. What works, said Augimeri, is simple. “Partnering with Aboriginal bodies such as the Cree Regional Authority; incorporating Aboriginal language, culture and traditions into curriculum.” Augimeri went on to list: “Ensuring the process is initiated by the community; establishing a SNAP community advisory team with respected community members. Hiring from within the community. Ensuring adequate time for training and strong communication process to ensure ongoing consultation and support. Being very clear what the program is and what it can offer or not.”

Augimeri was equally clear on what doesn’t work. “When a community felt the program was being imposed on them versus being invited into the community by key stakeholders such as the chief, elders or service providers currently in the community,” she said. “In addition: not engaging the parents/caregivers; and not establishing a strong implementation consultation process that included ongoing fidelity and integrity audits.”

In Quebec, the Justice and Correctional Services Department of the Cree Regional Authority (CRA) has run SNAP programs in Waswanipi and Mistissini, two of nine Cree communities in the CRA jurisdiction, according to Don Nicholls, director of justice and

correctional services for the CRA. Said Nicholls: “We wanted to show this can work in a small community that has limited resources.”

This three-year pilot project has been financed through the National Crime Prevention Strategy of Public Safety Canada. To date, the program has graduated more than 100 children and 40 parents. “Not everyone who takes it graduates, so the outreach has been further,” Nicholls calculates.

The CRA modified SNAP to make it fit Cree culture, people and values rather than vice versa. After consultation with elders, the program was renamed “Mamtunaata,” a Cree word meaning “think before you do something.” The program translated its lessons into Cree, spoken fluently by most residents, including children. And it melded culture and traditions into the curriculum.

Gaining trust of tribal officials and fitting SNAP into reserve culture is a challenge that is not unique just to Aboriginal settings, said Augimeri. “It takes time to get programs like SNAP rooted in communities and to build trust and assurance that it can help, without the fear that it will tear their family apart.” The spectre of child apprehension haunts Indigenous families—half of the 30,000 children under age 14 in Canadian foster care were Indigenous in 2011, according to The National Household Survey.

At the CRA, the SNAP pilot money runs out in October 2013, but the organization is looking at ways to keep offering it in all nine of its communities, possibly by transforming it into a school-based program, Nicholls said. The CRA also may develop a way for SNAP graduates to keep in touch with each other and the program.

“When we first started we wanted to reach kids early in their lives so we didn’t have to deal with them later, once they were into the criminal justice system,” Nicholls said. “The kids have good coping



skills now. There's a strong likelihood now that we won't see them later."

Back in Red Deer, Bobby Crane peered out the donut shop's window, pondering his life since taking SNAP. "I buried some friends I was walking down the same dark path with," he said. "I would have been buried right beside them a long time ago."

Into his teens, Crane stayed involved with SNAP, eventually becoming the first leader in training, a SNAP initiative that teaches leadership skills to select participants.

Years later, having moved halfway across the country, he still speaks to communities on behalf of SNAP. "It's important for me to give back because I got so much out of it," he says. "I want to share my story as widely as possible because, unless you tell your story, no one will ever know."



Photo courtesy of Wawmeesh G. Hamilton

**CHALLENGES:** Earning trust in Indigenous settings. "You can introduce a great program," said Leena Augimeri, "but if there is not community buy-in, the successes can be short lived."

**WHAT DIDN'T WORK:** Augimeri lists: "When a community felt the program was being imposed on them versus being invited into the community by key stakeholders such as the chief, elders or service providers currently in the community; not engaging the parents/ caregivers; and not establishing a strong implementation consultation process that included ongoing fidelity and integrity audits."

**WHAT WORKED:** Partnering with Cree Regional Authority; incorporating Cree language, culture and traditions into curriculum. Augimeri goes on to list: "Ensuring the process is initiated by the community. Establishing a SNAP community advisory team with respected community members. Hiring from within the community. Providing adequate time for training and a process to ensure ongoing consultation and support. Being very clear what the program is and what it can offer or not."





# Kids Help Phone's Healthy Communities Initiative: How to Counsel the Counselors

Counselors trained to respond to Indigenous context help youth help themselves

*Photo courtesy of Kids Help Phone*



**By Pia Bahile**

**T**he statistics are staggering:

Twenty-five per cent of Indigenous children in Canada live in poverty.

Every year, Indigenous youth commit suicide at a rate five times higher than non-Indigenous Canadian young people.

Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the Canadian correctional system by a wide margin.

Behind these statistics are children and young people struggling with a host of health and social issues, often with nowhere to turn. Increasingly, they are calling Kids Help Phone.

Established in 1989, Kids Help Phone is a 24-hour hotline that provides anonymous counselling to young Canadians. Children and adolescents can call Kids Help Phone, or access the information-packed website to get professional advice on a wide range of issues, among them peer pressure, eating disorders and bullying. Indigenous youth, who make up about 10 per cent of Kids Help Phone's callers, need advice on those issues as well as culturally specific problems.

Todd Solomon, Clinical Director of English Language Services at Kids Help Phone and himself a person of Ojibway heritage, cites the legacy of residential schools, the physical isolation of reserves, the limited access to resources, lack of opportunity and the small and close-knit communities as the contextual background for the Indigenous youth calling Kids Help Phone.

"Aboriginal youth are still youth," explained Todd Solomon. "What changes is the community and the context they are living in, which we really needed to address for our counselling staff."

The Toronto-based counselors are tucked in the back corner of the office in a quiet section of grey cubicles. On the front of one cubicle is a black poster with two outstretched hands cradling a smudge bowl. Beneath the smudge bowl are the words "You're not alone." The poster is just one of Kids Help Phone's efforts in recent years to improve their outreach to Indigenous youth.

In 2009, Kids Help Phone resource specialist Kristen Buckley reached out to the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, headed by Cindy Blackstock, to provide professional development workshops for counselors in order to better serve Kids Help Phone's Indigenous callers. Those workshops, based on Indigenous-created principles to guide child welfare for Indigenous children, youth and families, comprised phase one of Kids Help Phone's year-long Healthy Communities project.

**"At the end of the day the young people said, 'I just want to be heard.'"**

Funded by the Ontario Government's Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport, Healthy Communities provided Kids Help Phone staff with the opportunity to complete professional development and community outreach focused on Indigenous youth.

The professional development phase, which began in 2010, consisted of the three workshops led by Caring Society staff for about 50 Kids Help Phone counselors at its centres in Toronto and Montreal. The outreach phase, in 2011, involved engagement with five communities—Serpent River, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Kettle and Stony Point and Moose Factory. Twenty Kids Help Phone staff members made the trips to the communities to assess needs.





Photo courtesy of Kids Help Phone

In the 10 workshops, usually about three hours long and with 20 to 30 participants, Kids Help Phone staff asked the youth what they knew about the organization, how it could be a valuable service for them and whether Kids Help Phone's campaigns resonated with them.

"At the end of the day the young people said, 'I just want to be heard. My issues might be more complex but I'm a young person and that's what comes first and foremost,'" said Buckley.

For a project that is all about communication, Solomon said it was important for Kids Help Phone counselors to communicate with Indigenous youth in a way that would allow them to respond with their truth. "Actually speaking to the youth itself was at



Photo courtesy of Kids Help Phone

times challenging," said Solomon. "We had to learn exactly how to ask questions in a way that they would be well-received and the answers would be honest and useful."

"It took us some time to build up a comfort level," agreed Buckley. "We had different activities that we wanted to do and we realized very quickly that interactive-based activities just weren't really taking off, so we changed those activities to writing and thoughtful introspection."

Healthy Communities spurred other partnerships for Kids Help Phone. In 2010, Kids Help Phone partnered with the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) to produce a fact sheet on bullying, and the following year Kids Help Phone held a poster





Photo courtesy of Kids Help Phone

competition, in collaboration with the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT).

Springwater Hester-Meawassige was formerly the Youth Services Manager at NCCT and the Healthy Communities Project Assistant. Hester-Meawassige organized the community visits and facilitated the poster competition.

“Basically every community we went to, the kids said they could not relate to the Kids Help Phone posters at all,” said Hester-Meawassige.

“We had already finished all the community visits and the project was coming to an end and I said, ‘I have access to all these kids. Why don’t we see if they can come up with something?’”

Healthy Communities is based on the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement, which is a reconciliation process of:

#### **Truth Telling**

[All work] begins with a full and truthful accounting of child welfare respecting Indigenous children, youth, and families. Must be told from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous perspectives.

#### **Acknowledging**

[All work] recognizes that child welfare practices imposed on Indigenous peoples, and the values that guided them, are not the right path to follow.

[All work] affirms the child welfare practices of Indigenous people, and the values that guide them.

[All work] adopts equality, fairness, and balance as essential guidelines to child welfare.

[All work] allows for a new path that reflects learning from the past towards a better future based on mutual respect.

#### **Restoring**

[All work] provides an opportunity to work together on new child welfare practice in a positive way that addresses past harms and sets a framework to avoid them in future.

#### **Relating**

[All work] recognizes that reconciliation is an ongoing investment in a new way of being and a relationship to achieve a broader goal: a child welfare system that genuinely supports the needs of Indigenous children and youth.

#### **This process is guided by principles of:**

- Culture and Language
- Holistic Approach
- Structural Interventions
- Non Discrimination
- Self Determination





A group of nine centre regulars designed posters they felt better appealed to Indigenous youth and then voted online to pick the two winners. One of the winning entries is the black poster featuring the smudge bowl that hangs in Kids Help Phone's Toronto office. Two years later, NCCT also has several of the posters still on display.

Because Kids Help Phone is confidential and anonymous, the organization has no statistics to measure the success and impact of the Healthy Communities project, but the level of community buy-in via partnerships and overall impact is



clear. Kids Help Phone lists among its greatest achievements new partnerships with NAHO (defunded by the federal government and closed in 2012), NCCT and the Caring Society. Also on this list: the fact that Kids Help Phone was able to reach over 275 young people through its visits to Moose Factory, Serpent River, Toronto, Thunder Bay, and Kettle and Stony Point. Not to mention, the increase in Kids Help Phone counselors' cultural sensitivity.

"For me it was a good reminder to be curious and open as to what are the important factors in someone's life," said Jessie Kussin, a Kids Help Phone



manager and former counselor who visited Thunder Bay with Healthy Communities. “We can’t know how someone is affected by their culture, by their community and by systemic issues unless we ask.”

“It’s a real honour for Kids Help Phone as a national organization to think that we have a role to play for young people to sort things out so that they move ahead with their lives,” noted Solomon on Healthy Communities.

“The project itself has ended but the impact has not.”

**NEED:** Professional development for Kids Help Phone counselors on how to handle the high volume of Indigenous callers.

**PROJECT:** Healthy Communities, a year-long project professional development program for Kids Help Phone counselors, designed with First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada. The workshops, based on the Caring Society’s Touchstones of Hope principles of child welfare reconciliation, solicited input from Indigenous youth themselves.

**WHAT WORKED:** Changing interactive activities to thoughtful and introspective ones; partnering with Indigenous organizations in program design and implementation, getting feedback from a high number of youth.

**CHALLENGES:** Communicating effectively with youth; figuring out the right questions to ask to elicit honest answers.

**LEARNINGS:** Be flexible—if something doesn’t seem to connect, be it a poster campaign or a workshop method, ask questions and continue to engage with the community until you hit on a strategy that works.





## Outside Looking In: Demanding Excellence in Dance

A dance program's great expectations push young dancers in Northern Ontario to excel

*Photo courtesy of Outside Looking In*



By Shawn Bell

When Jessica Atatise first joined Outside Looking In (OLI) as a Grade 9 student, she ended up getting cut from the program before the end of the year.

As the 21-year-old from the Treaty 3 First Nation of Lac La Croix now says, not making it that first year was one of the best life lessons she ever had. But at the time she was angry—upset at her teacher, but most of all upset at herself for breaking the rules and not making it to dance under the big city lights in Toronto.

The next year Atatise came back to OLI more determined than ever. She set goals, enforced her own strict discipline and, in the end, danced in Toronto.

This summer, as Atatise readied herself for her second year of an undergraduate degree in theatre at York University, she looked back on the experience of rejection in her first year of OLI as one of the defining moments in her life.

“It taught me a really valuable lesson about time management and discipline and hard work, and it taught me to own up to my mistakes, that I have to take responsibility for my own initiative,” Atatise said. “I signed up that second year with higher expectations of myself. I had to say no to peer pressure, ignore people who were critical and strengthen my support system. I really had to work hard to achieve performing in Toronto.”

On the surface OLI is a dance program, created to teach dance to Indigenous youth both on and off reserve. But talk to any of the participants, or the women who created and run the program, and OLI is so much more.

OLI was founded in 2006 by Tracee Smith, a 34-year-old member of Missanabie Cree First Nation

who spent years chasing her dream of being a professional dancer in Toronto, New York and Los Angeles. Lac La Croix asked Tracee to work with their youth for one week, with a goal to practice hard and put on a show at the end. It was watching the youth and how proud the community was of them that sparked the idea of OLI.

“When I saw the community go nuts and you’re seeing the kids walk off the stage, that was the moment I realized these kids were so proud of themselves, and they were standing a little bit taller and just had that look,” Smith said. “They were like, ‘I have a stage to show my parents what I’m good at.’ And the parents had a venue to be proud of their kids too, which doesn’t happen a lot in Aboriginal communities.”

OLI’s process is simple. A community signs up for the program, and OLI brings a dance instructor into that community’s school every other week. Students sign contracts committing to attend all the rehearsals while keeping their school attendance high. The group rehearses three times a week, learning to dance and eventually working on a performance routine. At the end of the school year, the students who make it through travel to Toronto for an intensive two weeks with their peers from across the country, rehearsing for the final performance at the Winter Garden theatre in downtown Toronto.

The first year of OLI was a pilot program in Lac La Croix in 2008. Smith laughed, looking back, to think of how big OLI became in one year. “We were just reacting to what came up, and what the community wanted,” she said.

While many of the changes that have been made since that first year are what Smith calls natural adaptations, the program did face challenges in its early years. Paramount was the criticism and lack of support from some adults in the community, including parents of students who did not make it through the





Photo courtesy of Outside Looking In

program and teachers and school administrators who did not agree with OLI's approach.

One of OLI's main characteristics is strict discipline. Students who break the rules, miss dance classes or skip school run the risk of being cut. Smith said it can be hard to enforce the rules, especially knowing that the youth have so many personal challenges in their own lives. But she maintained that it is essential to push the students to be the best they can be. The trip to Toronto should be a reward for a year of hard work and dedication, and she wants the youth to learn that hard work is essential for success in life.

"A lot of people approach at-risk kids by being easy on them and not pushing them too hard," Smith said. "But we've always pushed them, and because we've seen year after year that the kids are resilient to it, each year it gets harder to get into OLI and harder to stay in for the kids.

"We're not trying to hurt anybody, but we want the Toronto trip to be an amazing experience, and we know it doesn't feel good if you didn't earn it, if you

don't work your butt off to make it," she said.

That strict approach, especially in the early years, ruffled the feathers of some parents in Lac La Croix.

"It is a fine balance of adapting to what people want you to do, but still maintaining your own criteria," Smith said. "You face that adversity from some people. It takes a lot of relationship building, especially with the adults, a lot of effort to include them in the process so they feel involved in the kids' success or failure."

In the first year, only five students made it to Toronto. Eighty per cent of the students who first signed up were either cut or dropped out. The second year in Lac La Croix, 10 students made it to Toronto, a success rate of nearly 50 per cent. Since then the community has continued to increase its numbers.

One of the Lac La Croix youth who made it through the first year was Lance Geyschick. He was 12 years old, and his elementary school teacher had to convince the principal to let him take the high school program. Now, after five years of successfully completing the OLI program and performing in Toronto, Geyschick is planning to attend university, and looks forward to growing into a leadership role in his community.

"Lac used to be a place where everyone was separate, with families arguing and fighting," Geyschick said. "Now everyone has come together, started supporting each other. Today everyone calls each other brother, sister. We're like one big family."

Geyschick's father Clint echoed his son's observations. As a volunteer with OLI for the first three years, Clint Geyschick watched as the adults in Lac La Croix disagreed with each other over OLI. He credited Smith for sticking to the rules in the early years despite some pushback from parents of youth who



were cut. In the end the community respected her for it, he said, and they also respected the fact that she delivered on what she promised.

“It’s hard to hold the tears,” Clint Geyshick said of watching the Toronto performance. “You feel all the pride and joy that you have in your kids, and it gives you the confidence that they have the ability to go through a gruelling program and come out even better for it.”

As for the future of OLI, Smith wants to continue growing slowly. Last year the program was offered in five Indigenous communities, with 54 youth making it to the Toronto performance—the largest group yet.

Yet Smith insisted it is never going to be about the numbers. She said the impact of OLI has to be measured on an individual basis - that the program is successful each time a youth realizes his or her potential.

Atatise is a perfect example, Smith said.

“Through those three years [in OLI] I felt more confidence in my abilities,” Atatise said. “I had grown as a leader, as someone that youth could look up to and someone that they could come to for advice and help and get support from.”

And she strongly believes that the success Lac La Croix has had with OLI will be duplicated in other Indigenous communities across the country.

“Before I started OLI I had no idea how to progress to post-secondary studies. I thought I might have to graduate high school and find a job on the reserve,” Atatise said. “I think it is really going to help a lot of kids. When you take in all the background of where these kids come from, to what they are doing now and all the possibilities of where they are heading, it’s overwhelming and it’s moving.”

**NEED:** A way to instill discipline and a sense of pride in achievement and excellence.

**PROJECT:** A program created to teach dance to Indigenous youth both on and off reserve.

**WHAT WORKED:** Not allowing participants to give in to the tyranny of low expectations; setting a high bar and then providing the structure and discipline to enable motivated participants to reach that bar.

**CHALLENGES:** The criticism and lack of support from some adults in the community, including parents of students who did not make it through the program and teachers and school administrators who did not agree with OLI’s disciplined approach.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Stay resolved in the face of criticism; don’t be afraid to push for excellence.





# Exeko: Uniting Kanesatake Through Radio

A project to rebuild a radio station, silent since Oka

*Photo courtesy of Exeko*



By Nicolas Renaud

**K**anesatake (also spelled Kanehsatake) is a Mohawk village about one hour's drive from Montréal, on the Québec shore of the Ottawa River. In early summer 2013, Montréal-based non-profit organization Exeko approached the Kanesatake band council to propose their idAction program—to be launched in a First Nation community for the first time.

A program that looks to stimulate self-realization and social change, idAction's core principle is to nurture a project that must come from the participants' own ideas and initiative.

No one at Exeko at the start of the summer, nor amongst the group of youth who soon enrolled in the program, could imagine that they would spend the next few months working together on a challenging and thrilling project: reopening the local radio station, silent for years.

Founded in 2006 by Nadia Duguay and Francois-Xavier Michaux, Exeko has grown from an idea to a staff of nearly 30 people. Its mission statement is “to foster, through innovation in education and culture, the empowerment and social inclusion of most marginalized populations.” To date, this mandate has covered programs for people with disabilities, the homeless, prison detainees, and Indigenous youth, whether in the city or in Indigenous communities. The idAction program in particular is geared towards teenagers and young adults. It consists of workshops that promote free thought and engagement in social action, within a collaborative and inclusive framework.

Exeko often seeks out partnerships with other organizations, so its educational and cultural services can complement resources already in place. This helps them reach the group of people for whom a program is conceived, in a structure where

those people are already mobilized by the partner organization. These partnerships also involve the use of available locations and infrastructures for hosting Exeko's activities.

The Kanesatake project is a classic example. When Duguay and project coordinator Alexandra Pronovost first went to Kanesatake, they received a positive response from the council and were put in contact with Gabrielle Lamouche, manager of the local Pikwadin project—a training and employment initiative from the First Nations Human Resource and Development Commission of Québec. idAction was integrated into Pikwadin.

Aged 20 to 26, the young men and women, taking part in this employment program were given Friday afternoons off through July, so they could attend the idAction workshops. The Exeko team featured mediators Daniel Blémur and Maxime Goulet-Langlois and coordinator Pronovost. They used the closed youth center as a meeting space.

Lamouche took the lead in coordinating the group, which eventually solidified around five people, all determined to undertake a meaningful project for the community and for themselves. They are Mike Dubois, Shawna Étienne, Tahkwa Nelson, Andrew Gabriel and James Nelson.

The idea to revive the community radio came up early. This is where the idAction approach proved especially fertile. It does not try to commit people to a pre-defined project, but rather lets the project emerge in the process.

“What is fundamental here is that they came up with the idea to restart the radio station. We don't come with preconceived ideas about the problems and a set of solutions. We only asked a few questions and it all started from there”, said Blémur.

Added Pronovost: “As we talked about what they



would wish to change in their community, the main points were the lack of unity—in several regards, the youth not having a voice, the missing connection with the Elders, and not speaking their language enough.”

“All these things can be addressed through the power of the radio,” she continued. “Then, some in the group being musicians and DJs, the idea of music as a simple way to unite people came up.”

Maxime Goulet-Langlois insists that alternative means of pedagogy are central to the success of the project. Instead of a “vertical transmission of knowledge”, they start from what people know and encourage communication on a peer-to-peer basis, in a more circular manner. He also points to their outsiders’ view: “Being naïve actually helps us. We don’t know about past failed attempts or local obstacles, nor do we know everything that is involved in setting up a radio station, but we’re able to take distance and motivate people by saying: Yes, it is possible to do this.”

The station’s small blue building and antenna still stood by a field on a road, abandoned and in bad shape. Birds had made their nests in walls, mice had moved in, light fixtures were hanging from the ceiling and layers of dust covered the soundboard. But the old recording and broadcasting equipment, as well as stacks of tapes, CDs and vinyl records, was still there. So first, the group went in and cleaned up the studio.

Through the weekly meetings, they tackled every issue they had to face to carry the project to its end and keep it going afterwards. They addressed technical needs, drafted programming and a schedule, familiarized themselves with CRTC regulations, and created a Facebook page.

Funding was another big question. Exeko helped by inquiring into potential institutional sources while the participants planned local fundraising, such as

the sale of raffle tickets at a lacrosse tournament and bringing bingo back on the air. Popular in the past, bingo has proved an important source of funding since the radio launched in September.

First they consulted with Elders who were very supportive of the project—“Otherwise we wouldn’t have gone ahead,” says Shawna Étienne. They also recorded a vox pop across the village, and found out that everyone would welcome the rebirth of the radio station. Comparing Kanasatake with other nearby Mohawk communities also served as motivation. “Kahnawake has a radio station, Akwesasne has one... Why don’t we have one?” said Nelson.

They especially discussed the ethical framework in which this broadcasting tool in their community would have to operate. How would politics and religion be handled? How would they screen proposals for talk shows? These concerns intersect with sensitive issues in the community. Political divides, slander and family conflicts had all contributed to the shutdown of the radio station. The hope that the radio can foster unity is reflected in the very name that was chosen for the new CKHQ, United Voices Radio.

Nelson was upfront with the matter: “From the start, some of us here are part of families that don’t like one another. Now we’re talking to each other and working together,” he said. “Maybe not all the rest of those families will follow, but it’s at least a start for uniting everybody again.” It will also mean giving a voice to the youth and to Elders. Dubois, who has taken up the responsibility of drafting programs to appeal to everyone, also intends to support emerging local talent by inviting bands, DJs and other musicians to perform in studio.

Finally, they cannot help considering the place of their project in Kanasatake’s recent history. Some of them were kids in 1990 and fully remember the





Photo courtesy of Exeko

Oka Crisis. Not only did those tragic events isolate the community in Québec and Canada’s mainstream media and politics, it also fuelled internal conflicts and left the community divided.

At the time, CKHQ radio played an important role. While the army moved in, it kept playing music, informed people about the situation and maintained an independent voice on the air. Nelson stayed at the station for days with his mother during the crisis. Those memories form a significant part of the personal meaning he now finds in this project.

By September, technical repairs and upgrades were done, and the station is now on-air part-time, with music programming and radio bingo. Exeko’s team went back September 20 to help put the finishing touches on the reopening of the station.

At the last meeting, everyone was in near disbelief about what had been accomplished in a mere three months. The idAction program provided the initial spark for local youth to commit to such a project, but in return, one could say it helps Exeko by confirming the legitimacy and considerable potential of the program. Shawna cleverly pointed to that circular nature of their exchange: “So, did we help you help us?”

**NEED:** An Indigenous community divided by recent history and the generation gap, in need of a unifying element.

**PROJECT:** idAction—an initiative of Montreal-based Exeko that aims to stimulate self-realization and social change by nurturing a project that comes from participants’ own ideas and initiative.

**WHAT WORKED:** Fostering youth leadership and ownership of an idea surfaced by youth themselves; forming partnerships with an existing organization; use of existing location and infrastructures for hosting Exeko’s activities.

**CHALLENGES:** Funding to re-build the station; questions about the ethical framework to be used in their broadcasting and how to handle sensitive subjects.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Don’t impose preconceived ideas but rather draw out priorities for a community through a peer-to-peer process; make a virtue of naiveté.





# Professional Networking, Indigenous-Styles

Blazing new trails to urban success—with the Aboriginal Professional Association of Canada

*Photo courtesy of Jordan Presseault*



By Lisa Charleyboy

**G**abrielle Scrimshaw's story is a twist on the classic Bright Lights Big City tale: a young twentysomething moves from a small town to the biggest city in Canada, and can't find her feet.

But unlike James McInerney's novel of the same name, in this version the twentysomething in question is not overwhelmed by her new surroundings. Instead, Scrimshaw broadens her path to urban success, so that others can make the same leap.

A Denesuline from Hatchet Lake First Nation, Scrimshaw grew up in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, population 810. After graduating in the top 5 per cent of her class with a business degree from the University of Saskatchewan in April 2010, she found herself on the executive track at Royal Bank of Canada, accepted into the bank's competitive Graduate Leadership Program.

That meant moving to the biggest city in Canada.

"No one in my family had ever worked for a large corporation," said Scrimshaw. She was lonely. She yearned for a place where she could feel centered in her culture—while at the same time pursuing her professional ambitions. But to her surprise there was not one organization in the Greater Toronto Area that fulfilled that mandate. So, she set out to create it, working through Toronto's DiverseCity Fellows program to co-found the Aboriginal Professional Association of Canada, or APAC.

Tracey King, an Ojibway and Pottawatomi from Wasauksing First Nation, is the Aboriginal Human Resources Consultant at Ryerson University. She's also an APAC board member and co-chair of programs.

"There are still challenges our Aboriginal post-secondary students are facing when entering careers, getting their foot in the door," said King.

"Maybe they're a first generation student, the first to get a university or college education. They don't have established networks in their area of interest or in different industries and sectors."

A membership-based organization, APAC is intended to connect, support and promote outstanding leadership within the Indigenous professional community. It offers professional development, network growth and the recognition of excellence.

In the early spring of 2011, Scrimshaw secured a spot in the DiverseCity Fellows program, a one-year leadership development initiative run by CivicAction and the Maytree Foundation. Fellows are invited to pitch action projects designed to facilitate positive change on a given city-building issue.

Another DiverseCity Fellow and now a senior manager at Accenture, Richard Wiltshire encouraged Scrimshaw to put forth her idea for a pitch on APAC. It became one of five that made it forward out of an initial 14.

"I recognize the value of professional development and professional networking," said Wiltshire. "When Gabrielle told me that this type of service wasn't available for a particular community, I realized it was something that could really help."



Photo courtesy of Melissa McCauley





Photo courtesy of Melissa McCauley

Wiltshire's management consulting background was crucial to making Scrimshaw's passion a reality.

"In Gabrielle, we had someone who was willing to take on the responsibility as co-founder," Wiltshire said. "Gabrielle was very committed. She became easy to rally around."

The challenges were many. Getting broad community buy-in was one. Gathering as much community feedback as possible was another. And of course, there was the challenge of growing volunteers and organizing a launch event.

"You can't have a membership-based organization based on one person's idea," Scrimshaw said. "We made as many touch points with the community as we could."

In December 2011, APAC consisted of seven young professional volunteers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It had a large mandate, but limited funding and hours to complete the work.

"We were a train going down the track, putting the track down right in front of us and moving as we

needed to move," Scrimshaw said.

With generous foundational sponsorship from RBC and Accenture, APAC was able to grow its membership to 250 members in two and a half years. Funding from the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, which facilitates community-based partnerships between the government, Indigenous organizations, and the private sector to help improve social and economic opportunities for Indigenous people in cities, has helped APAC shift some of their focus to student initiatives and mentorship.

Russell Evans, a 35-year-old of Cree/Ojibway and Welsh descent, is a PhD Candidate at Queen's University. He first heard of APAC in 2012 when he was in his second year. His degree is focused on Behavioural Accounting with and within Indigenous communities.

Evans grew up separate from his mother's Indigenous culture, and was looking for ways to connect. He became a member and started volunteering for APAC by lending his accounting skills. He joined the Board of Directors in early 2013 and serves as the treasurer.

"When the time comes to completing my PhD, and I need help getting access to individuals [in leadership] on reserve," Evans said, "I have the connections now to make that happen."

Akeesha Nadjiwon, 19 years old and Ojibwe from Rainy River First Nation, is the president of the Indigenous and Allies Student Association at the Ontario College of Art and Design. She attended the inaugural Aboriginal Professional Summit last November and is pleased that APAC is focusing on student initiatives.

"Back in the day, if you were going to be a medicine person, you go and work with Elders. I like the idea of bridging the gap between youth and adults,"



said Nadjiwon. “Every time I work with youth, I’m always so astonished by their potential. Having that professional training as a mentee would really help [tap it].”

APAC is working to bridge those gaps. The ultimate goal is for future generations of Indigenous youth to have an easier time than Gabrielle Scrimshaw did, when making that transition from student to professional.

“In 20 years, whenever my nephews and nieces are finished university or college or whatever they decide to pursue, I don’t want them to feel the same gap in feeling supported as a young Indigenous person that I felt,” said Scrimshaw. “For me it’s about what I can do to make their lives better.”



*Photo courtesy of Victoria Vaughan*

**NEED:** Lack of means for Indigenous professionals to obtain support, network or access professional opportunities, while feeling centred in their culture.

**PROJECT:** A membership-based professional networking association.

**PARTNERSHIP:** Effectively leveraging the skills of colleagues in the DiverseCity Fellows program to build an initiative that serves a community need while bridging between Indigenous and non-Indigenous urban populations.

**WHAT WORKED:** Reaching out to engage a broad swath of the community; taking the opportunity to focus on students.

**CHALLENGES:** Fulfilling a broad mandate with limited resources; getting the feedback to build community buy-in.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** Make as many touch-points with the community as possible.



A photograph of a woman with dark hair, smiling and looking to the right. She is wearing a green and white plaid shirt. The background is a light-colored, textured wall. The photo is framed by a red border.

## The Northern Ontario Initiative: Indigenous Journalists Craft and Share Their Own Stories

Wawatay Native Communications Society and Journalists for Human Rights partner on a revolutionary program to train journalists in remote First Nation communities

*Photo courtesy of Danny Kresnyak*



By Lisa Charleyboy

Richard Spence, a 24-year-old member of the Attiwapaskat First Nation, saw the camera crews come and go last winter, and how they portrayed his community. “All they showed were people in sheds, mouldy houses. Those reports almost made me shameful to be from here.”

Months later, when Spence was invited to learn the basics of journalism in order to tell more complex stories reflecting what he knew of Attawapiskat, he jumped at the chance.

First Nations peoples make up four per cent of Canada’s population. Yet they represent only one per cent of Canadian media professionals.

Launched in the spring of 2013, the Northern Ontario Initiative aims to challenge that deficit. It is doing so by sending two journalism trainers to six remote communities. The goal is to train Indigenous participants to produce and freelance their radio and print stories to media outlets. Fort Severn, Weagamow, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, Moose Cree, Constance Lake and Attawapiskat are all participating.

Richard Spence’s first outing was a report about how his nation’s Education Authority Board members took action to detect and remediate a buried oil leak posing danger to kids at the elementary school.

The Northern Ontario Initiative is rooted in Africa. Designed and managed by Robin Pierro, a young documentary filmmaker and former freelance journalist, the project idea first came up when she was in Ghana, working as a trainer with Toronto-based Journalists for Human Rights, or JHR.

Since 2002, JHR has worked to strengthen independent media in sub-Saharan Africa by helping local journalists report ethically and effectively on

human rights and good governance. While in Ghana, Pierro witnessed the power of journalism to spark positive change first hand. She thought, “Why not take this model and tweak it to a Canadian context and start working on improving human rights issues in our own country?”

Upon returning to Canada in September 2011, Pierro got busy developing her idea with JHR in Toronto. First step? Make respectful inquiries about how JHR could be of service. In practical terms, that meant Pierro spent a year speaking with First Nations people in their own communities, as well as with other stakeholders, to gain their perspectives.

JHR found not only valuable counsel but a powerful partner in the Wawatay Native Communications Society, which for nearly four decades has serviced the remote First Nations communities of Nishnawbe Aski Nation located in northwestern Ontario. Begun as an emergency information network that distributed CB radios and dropped leaflets from airplanes, Wawatay Native Communications Society now operates the Wawatay News, three quarterly magazines, daily radio programs, television production services and a multimedia website.

If JHR could train new First Nations journalists, those graduates would have a ready outlet through Wawatay.

It took a first proposal, and then a refined version, to earn funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (an agency of the government of Ontario). Key to that second-push success was Joyce Hunter, Cree from Weenusk First Nation, now the Aboriginal Liaison Strategy Coordinator for The City of Thunder Bay. Hunter joined Wawatay as its Special Projects Officer after the first JHR proposal rolled in. Hunter saw potential in the idea, but also recognized there needed to be increased dialogue and buy-in from the communities.





Photo courtesy of Robin Pierro



Photo courtesy of Danny Kresnyak

“Joyce was a huge help in strengthening the second proposal,” said Pierro. “She offered a unique perspective as an Aboriginal person from a remote community who worked in journalism, and Wawatay assigning her to work with me on the proposal showed their buy-in and commitment to making this happen.”

The Ontario Trillium Foundation approved the second pitch in February of 2013. Accenture Canada soon came aboard.

“We are providing \$50,000 worth of free technology consulting and with that money we are building a robust online portal to bring together the journalism trainees, the trainers and the broader community,” said Theresa Ebdon, Director, Media and Analyst Relations (Canada) at Accenture. “We will have

things like tutorials, a discussion board and connect these journalists in training with real editors who will really buy their stories.”

Wawatay News has budget for purchasing stories from the newly trained community journalists and has already published some. Many other media organizations have shown great interest in running the content, provided it meets their editorial standards.

Two months into the initiative, Danny Kresnyak, a roaming journalism mentor currently stationed in Attawapiskat, said he is gaining as much knowledge as he is sharing. “People don’t want to be talked to, they want to be worked with,” he says. “The main issues right now are visibility and inclusion in the process.”

“Community partners need to be included in the design of goals for the project to function. Both sides must work to create a mandate they can effectively buy into. I cannot just be here, take the story and leave,” said Kresnyak. “I need to leave a legacy for the work to be sustainable and the project to be a success.”

Kresnyak said simple acts of listening and learning have been key to fostering a better relationship with the First Nations community.

“Attawapiskat has become a lightning rod for major media stories about social problems on Reserves. Many people here feel their community has been painted in an unfortunate light,” he said. “As a result, many in the street don’t trust journalists and there is often an opacity when dealing with outside government, band office, and local bureaucracy. Much of my effort is dedicated to shifting this paradigm.”

Kenny Thomas is head councillor at Fort Severn First Nations Band, where the project’s second trainer, Kimberly Stinson, has been working since June. Fort Severn is the northernmost community in Ontario. “The reason why training and journalism is



important is to provide news to others and to show others that despite our hardships we are still here and enjoying life,” said Thomas. “And the stories that are written are to be written in a way that people will understand and enjoy.”

Pierro hopes the Northern Initiative can expand into other provinces. Ultimately, she said, the aim is to build partnerships with universities to create fellowships and implement curriculum on how to better cover Aboriginal issues.

On June 13, Aboriginal Day, Wawatay and JHR won the 2013 Innovation Award from the Canadian Ethnic Media Association.

As training proceeds, one person is particularly eager to see the results.

“The thought that this time next year we might have six freelance writers in six different communities who are regularly contributing to the newspaper and to the magazines is really exciting and positive for Wawatay,” said Shawn Bell, editor of Wawatay up until July of this year. “It’s going to make Wawatay so much stronger to have those stories.”

Richard Spence hopes to be one of Wawatay’s writers. He’d like to balance journalism with attending college to become a music teacher and teach in Attawapiskat. Before Danny Kresnyak seized his imagination by suggesting he could tell his own community’s stories, Spence was without plans for his life. Not anymore. “This project helped me see that I could improve myself and improve my community by being able to write stories about it, and help give all of Canada an idea of what it’s like on the rez.”

**NEED:** Lack of representation of Indigenous voices in Canadian media.

**PROJECT:** A vocational training initiative designed to provide journalism skills, training and key media contacts to mentees in Indigenous communities, while breaking down barriers to coverage across the culture divide.

**CHALLENGES:** Mistrust of media; lack of access to information when dealing with government, band office, and local bureaucracy.

**WHAT DIDN’T WORK:** The first proposal to the Ontario Trillium Foundation fell short on design for achieving collaboration with and buy-in from Indigenous communities who would be involved.

**WHAT WORKED:** Forming a partnership with a major Indigenous organization that brought four decades of experience facilitating communication in Northern Ontario. Wawatay Native Communications Society’s experts helped refine the grant proposal, and its network provides ready outlets for trainees’ journalistic work.





# Apathy is Boring Engages the Rage

In the era of Idle No More, this Montreal-based organization helps Indigenous youth find their political voice



By Haley Cullingham

The first sound to crystallize over the crunching snow was the drums. Thrum, thrum, thrum—just a hair faster than a heartbeat. As the crowd advanced, the singing began. A break opened in the line of heads held high—two small boys at the front of the procession, proudly pounding their instruments. The banners brushed the bottom of the traffic lights and, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, the crowd stretched the width of the street. This was Dec. 15, 2012, in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. Here, as in so many other places around the country, Indigenous peoples had gathered to lend their voices to the Idle No More movement.

“Idle No More spoke to the most oppressed and marginalized members of Indigenous communities—women and youth,” said Eugene Boulanger, a director at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning and a member of the movement. Youri Cormier, Executive Director of the Montreal-based national organization Apathy is Boring, described the movement as a flash, illuminating on the international stage a new generation of Indigenous youth. Politically savvy and actively engaged, they’re one of the fastest-growing voter groups in Canada.

Apathy is Boring and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) have put together a series of materials for Indigenous youth to encourage that engagement, called Find Your Voice. The project, which went through a pilot process beginning in February 2013 and is now expanding in earnest, is designed to give Indigenous youth the tools they need to effect change.

Find Your Voice has culminated in a toolkit of downloadable presentation resources that enable young people to run leadership workshops in their communities and inspire their peers. This is the result of a painstaking collaborative effort between CAP and Apathy is Boring to adapt the voter mobilization materials developed by Apathy is Boring

to the needs of Indigenous youth.

Communication was one of the many challenges. The manual begins with the word for hello in 16 different languages, and the materials were revamped to add more visual elements. There are three headings throughout the guide: “Ask An Elder,” encouraging the youth to seek wisdom and guidance; “Make it Yours,” which suggests they put their own spin on something; and “Go Further,” a push to seek out more information on the topic at hand. The Find Your Voice project wants to help young leaders translate their knowledge and energy into direct influence, but with Indigenous youth, participating directly in the Canadian governmental process comes weighted with questions of history and identity.

**“The paradox of ‘to vote or not to vote’ is definitely a theme that the movement is stirring up”**

CAP and Apathy is Boring hope to inspire youth to fight for change in their communities, said Jessica Bolduc, CAP’s national youth representative. That could mean getting stop signs put in place, writing a Member of Parliament, or even running for band or municipal councillor. One CAP member from Prince Edward Island says, in a video made about the project, “Before I do anything now, I think—it’s going to sound funny, but—seven generations ahead, what will people in the future think of the decision I’m making right now?”

As part of the pilot project, weekend-long workshops were held all over the country to gather feedback from youth participants. The reaction to the first



workshop, in Moncton, was telling: participants wanted longer and more frequent sessions. “It’s so cool to know that there are youth who are that keen to make their voices heard,” said Laura Dunn, a former Apathy is Boring intern who worked closely on the project. The conferences created a space where elders could tell young people why participating in democracy matters to them. As elders were sharing their stories of civic engagement, Dunn said, you could feel the excitement of the younger generation that was gathered in the room.

The Find Your Voice materials are designed so that the youth have access to everything they need to host their own workshops, but recently, Cormier travelled to North Battleford to deliver the presentation to 80 Indigenous youth leaders himself. Gathered in the room was a more engaged, passionate and aware group of young people than he had ever seen, way ahead of non-Indigenous youth of their age group that he’s worked with. “They blew my mind in terms of where they were at in their level of analysis and deconstruction of the system, and political savvy,” said Cormier. “Idle No More was a spark of interest in what it means to be a citizen. That’s where, a lot of people decided, we need to start getting the vote out.”

But while politicians and activists may be setting their sights on the Indigenous youth vote, many of these young people don’t feel there is anything to be gained by taking an active role in a process of governance that has never respected their needs.

“The paradox of ‘to vote or not to vote’ is definitely a theme that the movement is stirring up,” writes Colby Tootoosis about Idle No More on the website Last Real Indians. Tootoosis goes on to describe both sides of the argument, saying pro-voting Aboriginals believe their ancestors fought for the right to vote so they could change the system from within. On the other hand, he writes, treaty fundamentalists see voting as conforming to the colonial system. Indigenous nations are independent—why should they participate in

another country’s electoral process?

“If the government does recognize the needs of Indigenous youth, beyond economic development potential within a petro-capitalist framework for the benefit of Canadian markets,” said Boulanger, “it will be a cautiously prescribed recognition. What Idle No More called for at the very core of its messaging and ideals was resurgences of Indigenous values, which are often incompatible with the North American status quo’s values of materialism, individualism and commercialism.”

Cormier thinks the gap can be bridged, that youth might begin to see a way to shift the balance of power through electoral channels as well. “A lot of them turned that political energy into cynicism rather than positive thinking,” said Cormier. He’s quick to point out that cynicism isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but he does encourage youth to transition from being cynical to being critical. “There’s a history of policies in Canada that have been racist and very destructive to the communities. I think there’s a lot of resentment,” Cormier said. Idle No More was an expression of that resentment, and it led to what he calls an indirect power. His hope is that Apathy No More can help these young leaders transform that indirect power into a direct electoral influence.

Issues of identity are always at play when the Indigenous youth movement interacts with the Canadian government. Bolduc thought the Find Your Voice project could help work through some of these challenges by bringing a discussion of history into the conversation, helping to overcome the disconnect youth feel from their culture and their history. “In my experience, Indigenous youth who are aware of their history are always willing to work for change in a variety of processes,” said Boulanger.

But it’s not just the youth who will need the benefit of such awareness. It’s a context all Canadians need to understand. Enabling Indigenous youth to express





their history themselves could be empowering. “I think it gives people confidence to own whatever it is that they want to do,” Bolduc said.

Another tool that has been a great asset to that empowerment has been the Internet. “Idle No More was afforded the magnitude and virality it is recognized for through access to new tools such as web-based social networking platforms,” said Boulanger. This is a medium where young leaders are savvy and comfortable, and the second element of Find Your Voice capitalizes on this system of communication and connection. “Idle No More perhaps did serve as the catalyst of a new generation of ‘digital natives’ who will explore what Indigenous struggles for self-determination will mean for them today, building on the legacy of their ancestors,” Boulanger said. To that end, CAP and Apathy is Boring have collected exhaustive resources to help youth navigate the bureaucracy of change.

“You never get the big thing all at once,” Cormier said, “But as soon as you gain little victories here and there, they accumulate, they inspire, they lead to more.” Cormier believes Indigenous youth are in a position to completely redefine the country. Idle No More was a spark, and the Find Your Voice movement is one of the many hands helping to fan the fire.

**NEED:** Lack of political engagement amongst Indigenous youth.

**PROJECT:** Leadership training and workshops to help Indigenous youth find their political voice.

**CHALLENGES:** Youth not seeing the use of engaging politically in a system they neither respect nor feel reflects their background and values; creating workshop materials for a multitude of languages.

**WHAT WORKED:** Adapting workshop materials to an Indigenous audience; building youth awareness of cultural, historical and political context; effective use of the Internet to organize and coordinate groups.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** The value of perseverance: taking a long time horizon, recognizing that some youth may transition from being cynical and angry to being critical and influencing the system through electoral power.





## About the Journalists

**Pia Bahile** is a Congolese-Canadian Toronto-based journalist with a passion for international issues. She is currently an editor at Journalists for Human Rights.

**Shawn Bell**, a Metis, spent the past six years working as a journalist across Canada's north, before beginning law school at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay in September 2013.

**Lenny Carpenter** is a journalist, writer and filmmaker from Moosonee, Ontario, and a member of Attawapiskat First Nation.

**Lisa Charleyboy** has over eight years experience as a published writer. Hailing from Abbotsford, British Columbia, she has Tsilhqot'in (Dene), Mexican, Cherokee and Dutch roots.

**Haley Cullingham** is a Montreal-based writer and the Editor-in-Chief of Maisonneuve Magazine.

**Wawmeesh G. Hamilton** is a member of the Hupacasath First Nation in BC, and is an award winning journalist/photographer who has worked in mainstream media since 2007.

**Nicolas Renaud** is a filmmaker, visual artist and writer living in Montreal and a member of Wendake Huron-Wendat First Nation.

**Trina Roache** is a freelance Mi'kmaq journalist in Nova Scotia who has covered Mi'kmaq issues and communities for APTN National News and CBC radio.

**Angela Sterritt** is a Gitksan journalist, visual artist and mother. She currently works at CBC News as a TV Reporter and Editor.





## About this Project

**T**his book was published to coincide with The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada's All My Relations Gathering, October 21-23, 2013. It was produced by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation in partnership with Journalists for Human Rights and the Tye Solutions Society.

Rachel Pulfer of Journalists for Human Rights and David Beers of the Tye Solutions Society were the managing editors, commissioning stories and working with the writers and videographers. At the Foundation, Erin Montour managed this project, working closely with Vani Jain.

Book design and production were by Changemakers, of Winnipeg.

*Aussi disponible en français*

There are videos that accompany several of the stories in this book:

**Bringing Legends to Life with Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace**

**Dechinta Bush University: Learning Off the Land**

**Exeko: Uniting Kanesatake Through Radio**

To view these videos, visit  
[www.mcconnellfoundation.ca](http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca) or  
[www.philanthropyandaboriginalpeoples.ca](http://www.philanthropyandaboriginalpeoples.ca)





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