

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE ONTARIO NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

SHE *is* WISE

FALL/WINTER 2019

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Inspiring a New Generation

**Dorothy Wynne's
extraordinary life of service**

A MAJOR WIN FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Provisions to Bill S-3 get the go-ahead

RECLAIMING A VOICE

Women speak out about sexual violence

THE BUSINESS OF GIVING BACK

Jenn Harper's success with Cheekbone Beauty



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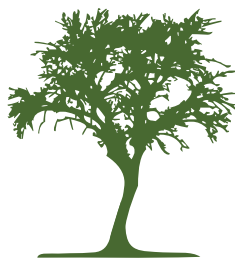


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“My sister and I went home with our parents and spoke nothing but the Cree language”

Dorothy Wynne
ONWA Honorary Grandmother



On the Cover: From left, Kayla Meekis, Dorothy Wynne, Autumn Sky Cooper (Photo courtesy of Mariah Abotossaway)



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CELEBRATING OUR SUCCESSES

Here at the Ontario Native Women's Association we are very excited to release the inaugural edition of *She is Wise* magazine. We feel this is a wonderful opportunity to share our commitment to Indigenous women, families and communities with all Ontarians, Canadians and the rest of the world.

When Indigenous women, families and community come together in a safe and supportive environment, an important foundation is created to ensure that past injustices are no longer repeated. ONWA's new magazine is a part of that very environment, both in print and online in the new digital world.

She is Wise is about more than just challenges. It is also about celebrating the successes and inherent leadership of Indigenous women who have ensured the vitality of traditional knowledges as well as their importance in contemporary society.

This magazine is a platform that will empower Indigenous women and support our ongoing work to end racism and violence. I personally want our sisters to realize the full potential we were given by the creator and that we still have in our hearts. It will serve as a reminder for the generations to come that we have the potential to achieve our hearts' desires in our ancestral homelands.

Please take the time to explore this exciting new magazine, learn about the extraordinary life of our Grandmother Dorothy Wynne, the success of entrepreneur Jenn Harper, and the letters to Indigenous youth that speak to the hopes and dreams in our communities, and so much more.

This is the first edition of many editions to come. We hope our stories will help our readers to disrupt their own preconceptions and embrace the strength and beauty within, which we all need in order to begin our journey on the road to real reconciliation and healing.

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We prayed for change, we hoped for change, and we worked toward change. And now we are seeing change.

When we say “Thank You,” we know that creates miracles. Please accept this humble expression of our gratitude and awe to all of the women that lead us on our journey towards the healing of ourselves and our communities— and we thank each and every one for building bridges, forging pathways, and sharing whatever is in their baskets.

Grandmother Renée Thomas-Hill

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Cora McGuire-Cyrette
Executive Director, ONWA

CHANGING THE DIALOGUE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

It is my honour to share with you the first edition of *She is Wise* – ONWA's new biannual magazine.

Our intent with this publication is to empower Indigenous women and girls and to highlight their extraordinary leadership qualities in taking up their responsibilities.

Indigenous women are effecting change every day, in many cases directed at creating a safer community for future generations. From parenting to politics, Indigenous women continue to demonstrate their strengths in the face of numerous barriers, be it violence, racism or discrimination.

The *She is Wise* framework centres on Indigenous women's leadership. It honours our collective wisdom by reclaiming that which colonization had targeted: our voices, our leadership and our sacredness. The act of reclaiming is a powerful decolonizing tool. When we begin by focusing on our own individual healing, we are also planting a seed for community healing.

Survivors of violence have bravely shared their truths as an act of *breaking the silence* and reclaiming themselves. By sharing our stories, our journeys and our resiliency, we build a clear path towards reclaiming Indigenous women's leadership.

I would like to acknowledge all survivors of violence, highlighting their bravery in speaking out against violence and their courage in not letting their trauma define them. As a survivor of violence myself, I stand with you in changing this dialogue for future generations.

Miigwetch

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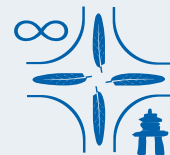
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Dorothy Wynne with Autumn Sky Cooper (far left) and Kayla Meekis (far right)
(Photo courtesy of Mariah Abotossaway)

INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION

By Sarah B. Hood

**ONWA's 'Honorary
Grandmother'
Dorothy Wynne
and her
extraordinary life
of service**

“

I'm 85 years old and I hope I'll be going around another couple of rounds," says Dorothy Wynne. The ONWA Honorary Grandmother, who now lives in Moosonee, is a well-known figure within the country's Indigenous community. She is an admired trailblazer for Indigenous women and a great friend and helper to Indigenous children in particular.

A member of the Fort Albany First Nation, Wynne has built an astonishing history of community service, working with the Noojimawin Health Authority in Toronto, the Moose River Heritage and Hospitality Association in Moose Factory, the Ka-Nen/Our Children Our Future program in Thunder Bay, the Aboriginal Peoples Alliance in Cochrane and Keewaytinok Native Legal Services in Moosonee.

She has served with MoCreebec Council of the Cree Nation, Kapuskasing Indian Friendship Centre, Moose Factory General Hospital (now WAHA), Ontario's Status of Women Council and the Canadian Diabetes Association, among other organizations. In 2015, to no one's surprise, she received the well-earned Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship.

Wynne's extraordinary life began way back in January 1934, when she was born on her father's trapline in Hannah Bay, south of James Bay in Ontario. As a child she was sent to Bishop Horden Memorial School, a residential school on Moose Factory Island where she and her sister were forbidden to speak their native Cree. "We were beaten with a yardstick if we spoke our language," she says.

But a double-negative turned into a positive when her father gained full-time employment with Ontario Hydro and, as per regulations at the time, he and his family lost their Indigenous status. "So we were not allowed to stay in the residential school," Wynne says. "We went home with our parents and spoke nothing but the Cree language."

This led to a strong proficiency in the language as well as a passion for languages overall, and Wynne went on to dedicate innumerable hours to interpreting on behalf of her community. She also eventually worked as a court interpreter across northern Ontario – in Chapleau, Hornepayne, Cochrane, Kapuskasing and Timmins. Alongside her love of language, Wynne developed a lifelong love of reading, something she credits to a much-admired teacher at her next school, Miss Chalmers.

Wynne eventually married, settled in Kapuskasing and had seven children of her own. One day the local Children's Aid Society (CAS) offered to train her as a social worker – but it was an offer she kindly declined. "I would have

to leave Kapuskasing, and my kids needed me more than the CAS did," she explains.

Nonetheless, that initial offer led to her assisting the CAS in other ways. "If the kids were in foster care, they'd be crying their eyeballs out, not able to communicate," says Wynne. "I would talk to the kids in their native language and hold them and love them and tell them that their foster mother would do the same. And they would go to her, and she would, and they would stop their crying."

CHAMPION OF MIDWIFERY

Within Wynne's community service work, midwifery was also an important focus, which is hardly surprising given both her mother and grandmother practised midwifery in their communities. Wynne even delivered the first of her own children with the help of a nurse-midwife when the doctor came too late and missed the birth. When her second child arrived, her husband Ken was called into service for a pre-term birth in the back of an ambulance on the way to Cochrane.

When Wynne learned of the many barriers facing northern midwives – which she discovered as part of her involvement with the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) – she unhesitatingly stepped in to fight on their behalf. As an ONWA member, Wynne sat on the Transitional Council of the College of Midwives, whose mandate was to prepare for the proclamation of the *Midwifery Act* and the *Regulated Health Professions Act* and to act as the self-regulatory Indigenous body for midwifery.



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"There were huge consultations going on across the province," says Christine Roy, a registered midwife with Neepeeshowan Midwives in Attawapiskat and active advocate for Indigenous midwifery. "ONWA ended up creating an important paper on this and telling the Transitional Council: you guys go ahead and set up your *Midwifery Act* and legislation and say what it takes to be a midwife, but don't tell the Indigenous community what it takes to be a midwife. We want to have the right to say what it is for our people."

In many Indigenous communities, women were required to leave their family and travel by air to deliver their babies in a hospital. Roy and Wynne became determined allies in the campaign to change this. "Dorothy has been really dedicated for a long, long time. I started hearing from her before I opened this practice," says Roy.

In this capacity, Wynne was instrumental in bringing an exemption clause for Aboriginal women into the *Midwifery Act*, allowing Indigenous communities a degree of autonomy in choosing how their midwives are trained. Consequently, their residents may now choose an Indigenous midwifery program like the one at the Six Nations Birthing Centre. "She helped me greatly over a year ago when our regional organization's chief of staff put a limitation on the Attawapiskat midwives' practice," notes Roy.

And when Roy recently told Wynne that Attawapiskat had only one birthing bed, Wynne quickly took action. "It was a nasty old metal bed that was stuck in the lying-down position, extremely uncomfortable, with a very old mattress," says Roy. It became clear the health authorities would not replace it, so Wynne spearheaded a private fundraising drive to finance a new bed, quickly raising \$2,500. "I just really adore this woman and am quite honoured to know her," says Roy.

“ *I would talk to the kids in their native language and hold them and love them* **”**

Dorothy Wynne

ONWA Honorary Grandmother



CULTURAL FOCUS

Besides keeping the Cree language alive, Wynne has also spent many years practising the traditional Indigenous crafts of making moosehide slippers and parkas, a passion of hers that goes back to the 1960s. In fact, it was in the 1960s that Wynne and a group of other "gutsy women" got together to make and sell authentic handmade crafts when the Polar Bear Express began to run to Moosonee. The proceeds went to community elders in need rather than the pockets of their main competitor, which imported cheap, Asian-made wares.

For Wynne, the connection between culture, language and craftwork is a critical part of her Cree identity. She considers it a precious commodity, and one that is often lost when people are torn from their families, their language and their culture. "I have a red T-shirt and you know what it says? 'Residential School Survivor: They Didn't Beat the Indian Out of Me.' I'd love to go to one of those church meetings and wear that thing," says Wynne.

Wynne's has been a long, sometimes arduous, but highly productive life, and one that serves as a great inspiration for younger Indigenous women just starting on the path of their adult life. Throughout it all, Wynne has been surrounded by close friends and family. This year, she celebrates her 65th wedding anniversary with her husband Ken, a milestone celebrated with their eight children, 15 grandchildren, 21 great-grandchildren and even one great-great-grandchild.

While many women would be taking it easy at this stage of their lives, Wynne is not one known to slow down. We can expect to see more from her in the years to come. At least, as she noted earlier, a couple more rounds. ●



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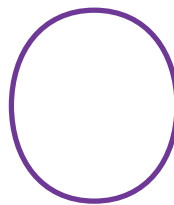




A MAJOR WIN *for* GENDER EQUALITY

By Matthew Bradford

**Groundbreaking provisions
to Bill S-3 finally give
Indigenous status to all
descendants of women
marrying out of
the community**



On August 15, 2019, the Government of Canada made good on its promise to bring all provisions of Bill S-3 into force, ending a decades-long battle for Indigenous gender equality. The groundbreaking, long-overdue move restores the Indigenous status of all Indigenous descendants of women who “married out” of their communities under the old *Indian Act* rules.

Officially called the *Act to amend the Indian Act (elimination of sex-based inequities in registration)*, the enforcement of Bill S-3 in its entirety marks a historic step, and Indigenous women across the country are celebrating their long-awaited victory.

“We’ve been waiting for this decision a long time,” says Dawn Lavell-Harvard, president of ONWA. “Even though a lot of women like my mother fought to get these provisions in place before Bill S-3, many of [these women] were still excluded.... For them, this is a real act of justice because they finally get some closure on these issues.”

The last roadblock addressed by the August decision was the *Indian Act's* 1951 “cut-off,” which denied eligibility to descendants born before September 4, 1951, when the modern Indian registry was created. Bill S-3 rights these wrongs by de facto restoring full 6(1)(a) status to all descendants of Indigenous individuals born to women who had lost their designation after marrying a non-Indigenous man, regardless of the descendants’ date of birth.

LONG BATTLE

Eliminating all traces of gender inequality from the *Indian Act* has been an exceptionally long and frustrating journey. While earlier amendments paved the way, they all fell short of granting full equity. “Women had won the right to reclaim our status after marrying non-Native men before Bill S-3, but those [earlier] amendments put us in a ‘lesser’ category, 6(1)(c), and didn’t let us pass that status down to our children and grandchildren,” explains Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, a long-time proponent of the bill and Lavell-Harvard’s mother. “This was never an issue for our men, who kept their full status even when they married non-Native women.”

For Corbiere Lavell, a born and raised member of the Wiikwemkoong community, the fight began way back in 1970, when she lost her “Indian” status after marrying David Lavell, a non-Indigenous man. “All of a sudden, I was no longer recognized as part of my own community,” she recalls. “I lost that sense of belonging to my people, and all because I married David. Meanwhile, that wasn’t a rule that applied to men.”

Corbiere Lavell fought back by filing a lawsuit against the federal government. She argued that her loss of status amounted to sex discrimination and violated the Canadian Bill of Rights. Her case moved up through the court system and was ultimately defeated by one vote in a 1973 Supreme Court decision. Undeterred, Corbiere Lavell continued her battle against gender inequity through her roles as president of the Native Women’s Association of Canada, president of the Nishnawbe Institute, and founding member of the Ontario Native Women’s Association.

In 1981, Sandra Lovelace Nicholas, Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), joined the cause after returning to her community to discover that neither she nor her children were recognized as official members following her marriage to a

“Women had won the right to reclaim our status after marrying non-Native men before Bill S-3, but those [earlier] amendments put us in a ‘lesser’ category and didn’t let us pass that status down to our children and grandchildren”



Jeannette Corbiere Lavell
Indigenous Gender Equality Activist

non-Indigenous man. She took her case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which ruled in her favour, declaring Canada in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

This prompted Ottawa to pass the pivotal Bill C-31 in 1985, which reinstated Indigenous status to women who had lost

it through marriage to non-status men. While it marked a huge win, it was a bittersweet victory: the women were classified under a new 6(1)(c) category that denied status eligibility to their children and grandchildren, who were placed in a separate 6(2) category. By contrast, Indigenous men who married non-Native women, and their descendants, remained classified under 6(1)a.



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The upshot of this confusing web of classification was that Indigenous women married to non-Indigenous men could still not pass on their status to their children, as men could. “Bill C-31 may have restored my status, but... our children and their children were still being discriminated against, which was contrary to our rights, freedoms and our sense of belonging,” recalls Corbiere Lavell.

So in 2009, yet another Aboriginal activist turned to the UN Human Rights Committee for help. This time it was Sharon McIvor who petitioned the global body to address the lingering gender bias: specifically, rules that denied her son the right to claim Indigenous status. It took the UN body nearly a decade to reach a decision, but in the end it ruled that Canada was still discriminating against Indigenous women.

This resulted in yet another piece of Canadian legislation that offered improvement: introduced in 2010, Bill C-3 finally allowed Indigenous status to be passed on to the grandchildren of women who lost their status when marrying a non-Indigenous man. This too, however, marked a bittersweet victory because it still failed to elevate reinstated women or their descendants to the full 6(1)a category.

“That was the fundamental sticking point throughout all this,” says Dawn Lavell-Harvard. “From the beginning, all we wanted was to have the same rights that our brothers, uncles, fathers and grandfathers have, and the same right to pass on our citizenship to our children. The point wasn’t to create new rights or lesser categories; it was to make women 100 per cent equal.”

The faulty legislation was contested a year later in the landmark Descheneaux case, which saw three members of the Abénakis of Odanak First Nation arguing that Bill C-3 did not go far enough to extend status eligibility to all descendants of women who married non-Native men, including cousins and siblings born out of wedlock between 1951 and 1985. Four years later, the Quebec Superior Court ruled there was still discrimination based on sex and in violation of equality rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The ruling in the Descheneaux case would serve as the catalyst for Bill S-3. Passed by the Senate in 2017, Bill S-3 put forward amendments to the *Indian Act* that would finally restore 6(1)(a) status to

GENDER EQUALITY TIMELINE

PRIOR TO 1985: An Indigenous man marrying a non-status woman can retain his Indigenous status for himself and his descendants, while a woman marrying a non-Indigenous man cannot. A non-Indigenous woman marrying an Indigenous man, however, receives full 6(1)(a) status.



1973: Jeannette Corbiere Lavell sues the federal government arguing the *Indian Act* is in violation of the Canadian Bill of Rights. Her case is ultimately defeated by Canada’s Supreme Court.

1981: Sandra Lovelace Nicholas takes her fight to the UN Human Rights Committee, which rules in her favour and pronounces Canada in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.



1985: Ottawa passes **Bill C-31**, reinstating Indigenous status to women who had lost it through marriage to non-status men. However, because they remain in the lesser 6(1)(c) category, they cannot pass this Indigenous status on to their children and grandchildren, who remain in a 6(2) category.

2009: Sharon McIvor petitions the UN Human Rights Committee to draw attention to lingering gender discrimination that denies children of women marrying non-Indigenous men the right to claim Indigenous status. It takes 10 years for the Committee to rule in her favour.



2010: Ottawa passes **Bill C-3**, allowing Indigenous status to be passed on to the children and grandchildren of women who had lost their status for marrying a non-status person. However, it does not elevate reinstated women or their descendants to the full 6(1)a status (as held by men).

2011/15: Stéphane Descheneaux, Susan Yantha and Tammy Yantha, of the Abénakis of Odanak First Nation challenge lingering *Indian Act* rules that deny full status to women marrying non-Indigenous men. Known as the Descheneaux case, it makes it to the Quebec Superior Court which rules the act discriminatory and holds Canada accountable for making appropriate amendments.

2017: The Senate of Canada passes **Bill S-3**, restoring 6(1)(a) status to descendants of Indigenous individuals, however it excludes the descendants of Indigenous women born before Sept. 4, 1951 and earmarks that decision for further consultation.



2019: Lynn Gehl launches the “6(1)(a) all the way campaign.” The government finally brings all final provisions to Bill S-3 into force, eliminating the 1951 “cut-off” and allowing for full 6(1)(a) status to all descendants of Indigenous individuals, male or female.

descendants of Indigenous individuals. Yet here too, there was a stumbling block that remained: what the bill failed to do was restore the status to all descendants. Instead, it opted to push the removal of the 1951 cut-off to future consultations.

This prompted the rise of a new “6(1)(a) all the way” campaign, launched by Algonquin Anishinaabe advocate Lynn Gehl in an effort to move Bill S-3’s remaining amendments beyond the consultation stage and make good on a long-overdue promise to restore full 6(1)(a) rights to all descendants, no matter their sex or ancestry. “You don’t need to consult on rights,” Gehl told the press. “A right is a right. If you have to consult on it, it’s not a right.”

THE FINAL WIN

Gehl’s advocacy, combined with the countless voices and campaigns that came before it, helped move the issue forward, and this past August, the 1951 cut-off was finally abolished with the enforcement of all Bill S-3 provisions.

One century, multiple bills, and countless voices later, the journey to remove gender inequality from the *Indian Act* finally reached its end, and upwards of hundreds of thousands of people will now have their Indigenous status rightfully reinstated as a result.

The importance of this achievement cannot be overstated, especially for female descendants who have faced years of hardship resulting from the restrictive and unfair rules. “The bottom line is that these women weren’t being recognized by their communities, which left them in poverty and without support,” says Corbiere Lavell. “For a lot of those women, the alternative was to go into the cities and do what they could to survive. We’re all aware of some of the crimes and hardships that came out of that.”

Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, the first woman to challenge sex discrimination in the Indian Act, receiving the Order of Canada from Governor General Julie Payette

(Photo courtesy of Sgt Johanie Maheu, Rideau Hall @ OSGG, 2019)



As for what comes next, Lavell-Harvard hopes the changes will finally give women who were negatively impacted by the old rules a renewed sense of belonging and support, while enabling Indigenous communities to rebuild. “I know of several communities where the membership was quite low before some of these changes had been implemented. They were disappearing and they weren’t going to have any more children or grandchildren being born into their communities. Now, because of these provisions, those communities are viable again because they can reinstate

that maternal line,” says Lavell-Harvard. “It’s the difference between communities surviving and communities disappearing.”

“It’s been a long struggle,” adds McIvor. “We had to win the fight for equality for First Nations women both legally and politically, and it took a lot of work by a lot of people. The sex discrimination in the *Indian Act* has been a very effective tool of assimilation that even modern Canadian governments were not ready to give up. I am proud to say that I have helped in my own way to bring this shameful part of colonial history to an end.” ●

THE BUSINESS *of* GIVING BACK

By Kim Wheeler

Cheekbone Beauty's Jenn Harper aims to make a strong social impact, one lip gloss at a time



Jenn Harper's dream job literally began with a dream – a dream of young Indigenous girls covered in lip gloss. When she woke up, she was filled with inspiration. And that is how Harper's cosmetics company, Cheekbone Beauty, was born. Today the company sells everything from contouring kits to liquid lipstick, and, yes, lip gloss.

While the idea of a cosmetics company may have come to Harper quickly, raising that beautiful baby entailed 100-hour work weeks and a day job to help support her family, all while investing in Cheekbone Beauty to take the company to where

it is today. It was only three years after launching her start-up that Harper was finally able to quit her day job.

While the beauty industry is a lucrative, multi-billion-dollar industry, Harper's venture into creating her own cosmetics business isn't just about making millions. It's also about giving back to the Indigenous community that drives her and the reason why she considers Cheekbone Beauty as much a social enterprise as a money-making venture.

Social entrepreneurship, Harper explains, is about companies developing and implementing solutions to the cultural,

environmental and/or social issues around them. In the case of Cheekbone Beauty, Harper is doing her bit to help all three.

CULTURE

Part of the evolving story of Indigenous peoples in Canada is a hidden history, stresses Harper, whether you were one of the many Indigenous young people sent to residential schools or are an intergenerational survivor of these and other hardships.

For her part, Harper didn't know the true history of Indigenous peoples; she did not learn about residential schools nor the many horrors that took place in them. Nonetheless, like residential school survivors, she was made to feel ashamed of her Indigenous heritage, and she regularly faced racism that alienated her from her Anishinabe culture.

One day, however, that all changed. "When I learned the truth about the history of Indigenous people, it was life changing and I cried in shame of being ashamed," says Harper, adding this was how the system wanted to make her feel.

"My shame came from other people's views. I knew I looked different from my mom and her family. My mom was young, and she told me things I probably should not have known, like how my grandparents felt about my birth or that my life was going to be hard because I

Cheekbone Beauty owner Jenn Harper donates a portion of her profits to programs helping Indigenous youth





A DAY IN THE LIFE

Jenn Harper wakes up before 6 a.m. to start every day with prayer and meditation. Then it's into the pool in the summer to swim laps or, in winter, a cold shower. "The cold water gets my cells pumping," says the young owner of Cheekbone Beauty, a growing cosmetics company.

Harper regularly walks the Short Hills close to her home in the Niagara Peninsula to soak up some nature and cites exercise as being important to her well-being. She tries to do at least 30 minutes of exercise each day, combined with three more challenging workouts a week.

Then it's time to get her two kids up for school, but mornings aren't as hectic these days with both kids in high school and more self-sufficient. Following that, Harper works until 3:45, when they get home. "I always plan to be ready to talk with my kids when they get home from school and we always have dinner together."

Then Harper works for herself and her company from about 7:00 p.m. until midnight.



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was half-native,” says Harper. “She wasn’t wrong, but a kid doesn’t need to know all the details. As I got older it got worse. People say things – friends, families, kids at school, then work mates, bosses etc. I [was] made to feel not worthy. I never felt like I belonged anywhere. I do forgive myself for feeling that way.”

ENVIRONMENT

Harper also took steps to incorporate traditional values into her beauty company to help reduce her carbon footprint, and that of her customers as well. In December, Cheekbone Beauty will introduce its first line of biodegradable packaging made of waste or by-products, with plans to have the company move to zero waste by 2023. “As a brand, we’re developing and creating this new line to do things better, but a massive education has to happen,” says Harper.

Part of that education will be directed at encouraging smaller communities to participate in group ordering instead of individual shopping. “We have the ability to make these changes. It costs more but we all know what is at stake,” says Harper. “We [realized] we needed to do better, resource better options. This goal is hard, but we will do whatever we can to figure this out.”

SOCIAL IMPACT

Another important part of Harper’s professional aspirations for her company is about giving back to the community, especially to programs that help Indigenous youth. Cheekbone Beauty donates 10 per cent of all its sales to Shannen’s Dream, an educational initiative spearheaded by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society.

“When I learned the truth about the history of Indigenous people, it was life changing”

Jenn Harper, Cheekbone Beauty

The program is named in loving memory of Shannen Koostachin, who together with her Attawapiskat First Nation community spent three decades fighting for a new school after a diesel spill near the old one made both staff and students sick. Tragically, Koostachin passed away in 2010 and never saw the new school finally built in 2014.

Shannen’s Dream strives to give First Nations children and youth a quality education in a way that respects their Indigenous language, culture and heritage. For Harper, the program touched a chord. “Discovering Shannen’s story and that Cindy Blackstock (executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society) was involved made this an easy decision. Both are truly inspirational Indigenous women, true role models for all of us,” she says.

In addition to her many contributions to Shannen’s Dream, Harper also set out to create an Indigenous youth scholarship in her grandmother’s name – Emily Paul. “With an incredible gift from Desjardins (a financial service company), Cheekbone Beauty will be starting this fund in June 2020. Cheekbone will get to handpick a deserving student and help them with their education goals,” says an excited Harper.

Harper often asks people to imagine they’re in another country and overhear talk about Cheekbone Beauty. It sounds something like, “It’s this incredibly sustainable lipstick company that donates profits to Indigenous youth. It was founded by an Indigenous woman and they’ve now given out hundreds of scholarships.” To date, notes Harper, Cheekbone Beauty has donated over \$5,000 and another \$1,900 was donated in the company’s name by other organizations.

For Harper, the end goal is all about reaching “as many Indigenous youth as possible, as long as that takes.” She’s clearly on her way. In 2017, Harper was recognized for her community efforts with the Social Enterprise Award at the 17th Annual Women in Business Awards by the Women in Niagara Council and the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce. The annual awards recognize the leadership and success of women in the Niagara business community.

For Harper, this is only the start. She’s still dreaming of cosmetics and of tapping into her growing business success to aid an Indigenous community that she now proudly calls her own. ●



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The background features a complex, abstract design inspired by Indigenous art. It includes a large, dark blue, curved shape in the top left corner, a yellow, stylized floral or sun-like motif in the top right, and a circular, fan-like pattern in the bottom right. Wavy lines, some solid blue and some dotted, flow across the page, creating a sense of movement and connection.

INDIGENOUS HEALTH PRIMER

The Indigenous Health Primer (2019) is designed to provide key approaches, ideas and background knowledge for healthcare providers, learners and educators in caring for Indigenous Peoples. The Primer was written and edited by Indigenous authors, many who are practising physicians from a breadth of specialties. Each reference section is linked to detailed sources, the majority of which were created by Indigenous organizations. In addition to the theoretical and medical content, we aimed to include stories to illustrate the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in the health care system.

Quotes, testimonials, historical accounts and Indigenous physician perspectives are woven throughout the document as a way to honour Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and also to promote self-reflection amongst readers. Whether you are a learner, teacher or practising professional, we hope that the Indigenous Health Primer will be an important resource on your journey to become a culturally safe provider for Indigenous patients, families and communities.

VISIT: www.royalcollege.ca/rcsite/health-policy/initiatives/indigenous-health-e



RECLAIMING A VOICE

By Sarah B. Hood

**Three
Indigenous
women speak
out about their
experience
with sexual
violence in an
effort to help
others –
and themselves**



Silence and secrecy are an abuser's best friends, but people who have experienced sexual violence are often reluctant – for many reasons – to speak out about it. Three remarkable Indigenous women, however, have courageously raised their voices to speak publicly about their own experiences, resolving not to stay silent in the hope of helping others.

Award-winning Inuit singer-songwriter Susan Aglukark is famous for her beautiful voice, which has rung out in concerts and recordings since the 1990s. What fans of her early albums did not know about her, however, was her experience of childhood abuse.

In Nunavut, at the age of seven, Aglukark was a victim of a sexual assault. “[It was] by a known pedophile who himself claims he was a victim of the residential schools,” says Aglukark. The story remained untold for about 13 years, until Aglukark found out that her abuser was still active in the early 1990s.

“I knew I had to join the case against him,” she says. “We won the case, but it’s still a fly-in system, where the judges fly in every six months, so our case took a good 18 months to resolve.” Having spoken out and received a degree of closure, Aglukark moved on, first with her job as a translator in Ottawa, and then, increasingly, with her blossoming music career. But she would later be called upon to speak out again.

In the winter of 2018, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women came to Nunavut. At that time, says Aglukark, she had moved on. “I had left it behind me, so I wasn’t ready and couldn’t decide whether to contribute,” she remembers. “There are many cases that are more violent than mine. I felt like somebody else needed that space and I didn’t.”

But when the singer happened to arrive in Nunavut at the same time as the inquiry, her two sisters told her the abuser has been charged again. “I knew then that I had to go public,” she says. “I said ‘You have to let me name him publicly. We have to make the

“We’re slowly investing in changing the community’s way of addressing abuse. These are incredible, beautiful places, and we have to take the fear out”



Susan Aglukark
Arctic Rose Foundation

community safe again.’ That day and for the next few days, I must have gotten 200 to 300 Facebook comments. Many were from his other victims.”

Aglukark, who is working on a new recording, also founded the Arctic Rose Foundation to help change the narrative for young Northerners. “If they can experience emotional and physical safety and know they have access to it every day, they will change,” she says. “We’re slowly investing in changing the community’s way of addressing abuse. These are incredible, beautiful places, and we have to take the fear out.”

SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

Kathy Absolon brings a different perspective to the discussion around finding healing through the court system. She is Anishinaabekwe from the Flying Post First Nation and an associate professor in the Indigenous field of study in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University in Kitchener, Ontario. She is also the director of the Centre for Indigegogy there. “My current critique of the justice system is that it is set up for perpetrators and people who are convicted, versus the victims,” says Absolon on her decision to speak out.

In 2007, in Regina, Absolon filed a police report to document the violence she had been subjected to in a relationship. The perpetrator, however, left the province, and the police could not execute the charge. Absolon subsequently moved on to a new job in Ontario and tried to put the experience behind her.

But in 2014, the incident resurfaced in a disturbing new way when she was subpoenaed as a victim-witness against her former attacker. This time, she learned that photographs of herself and others had been manipulated into pornographic images. The process of viewing them was traumatizing, she says. In fact, she even

questions whether viewing the photographs was necessary.

Furthermore, because court procedure only allows witnesses to give short, ‘yes or no’ answers, Absolon felt censored. “I don’t really feel I had a voice,” she says. “That was frustrating. I don’t think there’s anything healing about the justice system for women. I think the justice system has a lot of work to do.”

As a social worker, Absolon has often encountered women who are unwilling to press charges against their abusers. She says her own experience helps her understand where they are coming from. “I used to be so frustrated,” she says. “It wasn’t until I experienced it that I understood how your confidence in yourself gets chipped away. You start to doubt and mistrust yourself. I talked about it because I wanted other women – and not only women – to know that when you’re stuck in that situation, it’s not your fault.”

In discussing her own case, Absolon feels she can regain her own voice about her experience. “That’s where I feel I can have a voice, and maybe that’s on behalf of all of those who don’t have a voice,” she says. “The law doesn’t always protect us. I want to say on behalf of all the victims that we



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can break the silences and put people on notice that this is not OK. And if systems were set up for victims in a better way, then people would feel safer in the systems that are set up to protect them.”

DISOWNING SHAME

Fay Blaney is a retired educator who has worked at the University of British Columbia and Langara College. A Xwémalhkwu woman of the Coast Salish Nation, Blaney is also a founding member of the Aboriginal Women’s Action

Speaking out is only part of the healing process, says Blaney. “It’s a much bigger and deeper struggle than people who haven’t been impacted by sexual violence realize,” she points out. Helping others is an important motivator, because there is still much stigma toward survivors of sexual abuse. “When I do speak, I still feel that people think less of me. Amongst my feminist allies that I work with, I think that they think I’m emotionally wounded and not thinking so-called objectively or clearly. [So] each time I do speak out, I find it empowers other Indigenous women to say, ‘Me too.’”

“It’s a much bigger and deeper struggle than people who haven’t been impacted by sexual violence realize”



Fay Blaney

Aboriginal Women’s Action Network (AWAN)

Network (AWAN), which has worked with Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre and other organizations, especially on behalf of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). She is also an abuse survivor. “I’ve been speaking out for a decade about what I experienced, which was childhood incest,” she says.

Encouragement to speak out came partly through courses Blaney took in women’s studies and from hearing the stories of other women, especially during an occupation of the B.C. regional office of what was then known as the federal Department of Indian Affairs. As with Susan Aglukark, an urgent impetus to speak out came from “knowing full well that this was still going on with other girls in not only my community but most other Native communities,” Blaney says. “I went home in the early 2000s, and it really broke me when I came home.”

Blaney says she’s heard “many, many times” from women who say she has helped them by opening up about her own past. “I do believe that speaking out is a very important way of disowning the shame,” she explains. “We spend a lifetime blaming ourselves.”

Blaney also points to generations of sexism embedded in non-Indigenous views of Indigenous women, and even sexism enshrined in legislation, assigning and perpetuating a low status and a stereotype of sexual availability.

In this context, Blaney feels that speaking out about sexual violence takes on even greater importance. “It’s a revolutionary act when Indigenous women speak out against all of that and speak out about the forces that oppress us,” she says. “I think that speaking out is an act of decolonization.” ●



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CREATING SAFE SPACES

By Matthew Bradford

ONWA releases report aimed at improving services to survivors of human trafficking

This past May marked the publication of a report into one of the most daunting and damaging crimes committed against women in the Indigenous community: human trafficking.

Titled *Journey to Safe SPACES: Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Engagement Report*, the initiative was led by ONWA as part of the Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Liaisons project (IAHTL), which itself is part of Ontario's Strategy to End Human Traffic initiative.



Attendees at the launch of ONWA's Journey to Safe SPACES report, from left: ONWA Community Development Manager Collin Graham, Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Liaison Jessica Wilson, Hon. Patty Hajdu Constituency Assistant Megan Wyant, Thunder Bay Chief of Police Sylvie Hauth, Fort William First Nation Chief Peter Collins, Knowledge Keeper Mona Hardy, Thunder Bay City Councillor Rebecca Johnson

The report aims to draw attention to this disturbing, ongoing threat. Its goal is to engage community members, provincial partners and human trafficking survivors in developing more effective prevention measures as well as healing supports.

“This entire report is survivor-focused and survivor-led,” says Collin Graham, ONWA’s community development manager and lead for the IAHTL project. “These women are the real experts, the real knowledge carriers when it comes to this issue and community safety.”

Graham says the strength of the report is owed to the women who have experienced human trafficking firsthand. They are most in tune with the needs of human trafficking survivors, he notes, and know what measures are already working and what new ones need to be added to support them better. “For these women, this process is about building capacity within their communities and themselves as leaders to provide better access to more effective services for women who have either gone through similar experiences or who are vulnerable to this type of exploitation,” explains Graham.

In addition to capturing the experiences of human trafficking survivors, the ONWA report provides a blueprint for creating safe spaces for those impacted by the trafficking experience. The 40-page document includes 14 recommendations for combating human trafficking, guided by feedback from over 3,360 participants, including 250 self-identified Indigenous human trafficking survivors.

The recommendations are divided into seven main areas of focus: Prevention, Survivor’s Safety, Supports for Survivors, Transition to a Different Life, Policy and System Reform, Agency Training and Collaboration, and the need to pursue a Culturally Based, Gender-Based Trauma-Informed Approach.

To help lead the way, the report also outlines a six-part “SPACES” approach for implementing its recommendations. That strategy includes:

- **Survivor-centred and survivor-informed services** that are culture and gender-based and delivered in a trauma-informed approach.
- **Prevention through education, training and public awareness campaigns**, both in print and in person, targeting those who are most at risk and those who can

respond first to the signs, namely peers, parents and educators.

- **Access to safe and respectful spaces** at service delivery agencies that offer women-only programming so women can speak openly and without fear tied to their experiences.
- **Core supports for transitioning to a new life**, including emergency funding for immediate relocation, which is delivered in an expedient and efficient manner
- **Evidence-based policy and system reform** informed by survivor expertise and the successful extraction of Indigenous women by ONWA’s multi-partner collaborative network that works across government, different disciplines and professions.
- **Streamlined supports** offered through a barrier-free simplified process.



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GAINING PERSPECTIVE

The fight against human trafficking has drawn many to the cause, and for ONWA, it's a fight that has been informed by the Indigenous community at every step. "When I first started doing this work, I garnered the advice of an elder who had survived human trafficking," recalls Graham. "I talked to her about exploitation and what that looks like, and said the work would be very hard considering it dealt with one of the oldest professions in the world. That's when she rightly

corrected me by saying it was actually the third-oldest profession behind agriculture and motherhood."

"The moment she said that," continues Graham, "I knew that the only way we'd make an impact was if we approached the issue in a way that was inclusive and nurturing. We knew from the start how important it was to help these women become leaders so they could be the ones leading the charge to prevent this from happening to any more young girls."

IN THIS TOGETHER

ONWA's *Journey to Safe SPACES: Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Engagement Report*

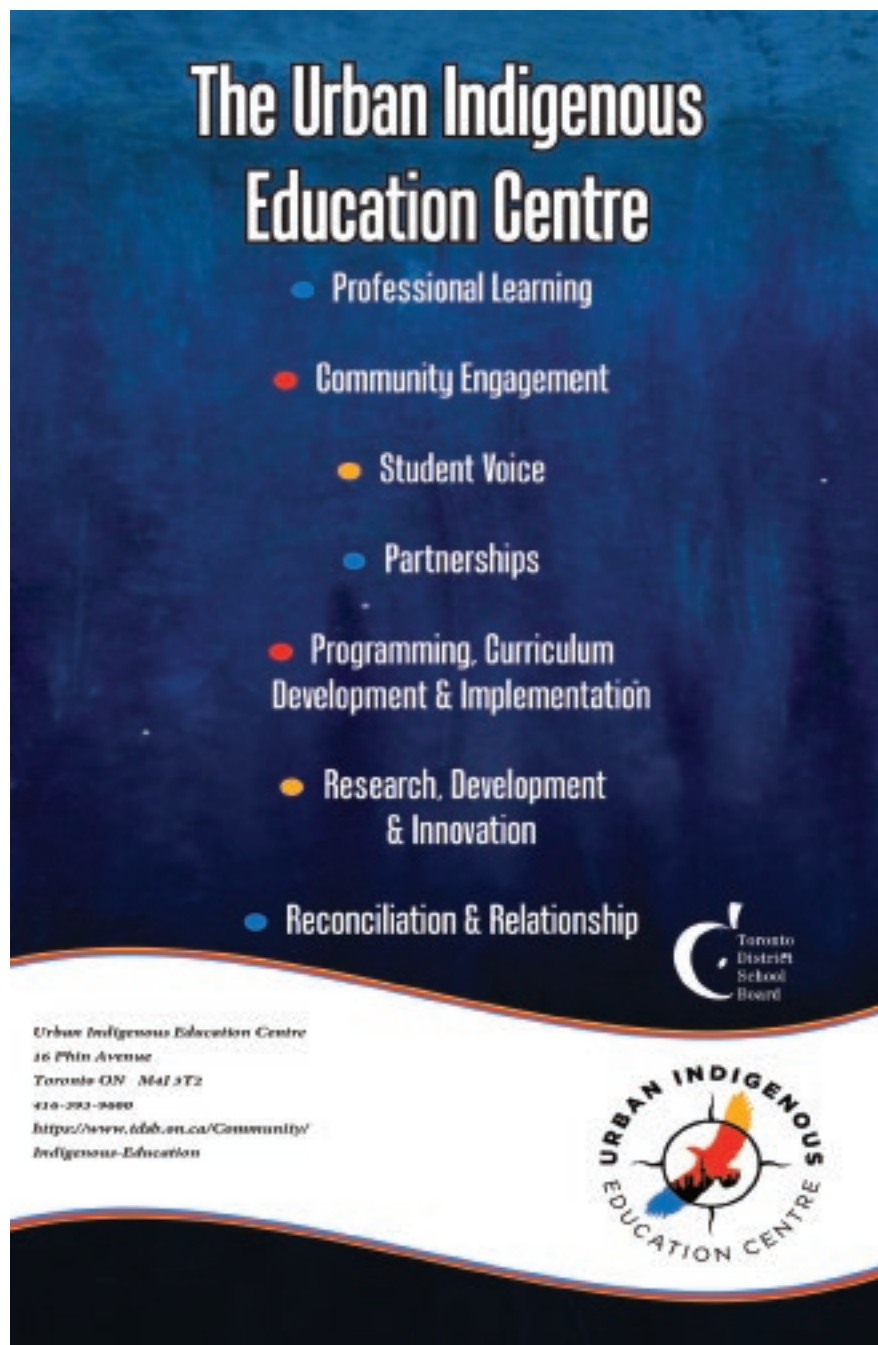
was developed as part of Ontario's Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Liaisons initiative, which launched in 2017.

This initiative included establishing six key partnerships across Ontario, with the following organizations:

- Métis Nation of Ontario (Ottawa Region)
- Nishnawbe Aski Nation (Northern Ontario)
- Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto (urban GTA)
- Fort Frances Tribal Area Health Services (Treaty 3)
- Chiefs of Ontario (Golden Horseshoe (Windsor, London))
- Ontario Native Women's Association (Thunder Bay Region)

This survivor-led focus has informed much of the *Journey to Safe SPACES* report, as well as the program's next steps. Beyond tailoring ONWA programming to encompass its findings and recommendations, the association hopes to leverage the report to raise knowledge, awareness and capacity around human trafficking prevention and healing among all its partners.

"We have to make sure that we're building capacity not only within our own agencies, but with our frontline workers and community members," says Graham. "If we want safer communities, we all have an inherent responsibility to engage and look out for one another." ●




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


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A PLACE TO CALL HOME

By Matthew Bradford

**Ensuring safe,
permanent
housing is
essential for the
well-being of
Indigenous
women and
a priority for
ONWA**

When Indigenous women have access to safe and affordable housing, they are able to flourish, taking up their leadership roles within their families and communities. Finding safe and permanent housing for Indigenous women is a priority for the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA). While there is no overnight solution, every helping hand, open door and active advocate plays a crucial role in supporting Indigenous women and addressing issues of housing and homelessness.

ONWA PARTNERSHIP

ONWA was invited by the Violence Against Women Learning Network to write Issue 25: *Indigenous Women, Intimate Partner Violence, and Housing* newsletter, which was launched in June 2018.

ONWA's newsletter was widely publicized by the Learning Network and shared at the Women's Shelters Canada National Conference that same month.

Within the newsletter, ONWA addresses the violence, housing issues and homelessness experienced by Indigenous women that requires that we confront the deep-seated colonialism, racism, sexism and poverty that continues today. ONWA focuses on the strengths of Indigenous women and girls, and their communities, to promote recovery and overall well-being.

"Bringing attention to Indigenous women's need for safe housing is critical as it relates to all aspects of self, family and community and is essential for safety, identity, connection, health and well-being – their lives depend on it," says Cora McGuire-Cyrette, ONWA's executive director.

“Access to
safe, quality
affordable housing
– and supports
necessary to maintain
that housing –
constitute one of
the most basic and
powerful social
determinants
of health”

Kim Abercrombie,
Housing is the Best Medicine:
Supportive Housing
and the Social
Determinants of Health

HOUSING & POVERTY REDUCTION

Many people in Indigenous communities have stepped up to address homelessness among Indigenous women, yet challenges persist. Indigenous women often find themselves homeless or in precarious housing situations when fleeing violence or when moving to seek new environments or opportunities. This is further compounded by the racism and discrimination that Indigenous women often encounter when they do move.

For this reason, ONWA understands that housing, as it relates to Indigenous women, intersects with all policy work and issues pertaining to poverty, violence, mental health, well-being and addictions, child welfare and discrimination. Indigenous women experience these multiple intersecting issues when faced with the prospect of accessing and retaining safe affordable housing options.

ONWA's position advocates that priority must be given to Indigenous women and their families, especially those fleeing violence and human trafficking who require swift access to safe and affordable housing.

“For Indigenous women, the issue of homelessness speaks to the gap in equal access and consistent, reliable services. It responds to their need for safety, culture, gender and human rights-based approaches and the elimination of systemic barriers,” says McGuire-Cyrette. “Homelessness places Indigenous women at

increased risk of violence and human trafficking and contributes to the high rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, as well as [women] losing their children to the child welfare system.”

OPENING DOORS

Central to ONWA's holistic approach is improving access to safe, affordable housing while advocating for a human rights-based approach that removes the barriers faced by Indigenous women and children experiencing homelessness

Congratulations on the first issue of ***SHE IS WISE!*** Precious few have had the courage to write on the challenges of Indigenous women's leadership, business and community.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, and our CINA members we are enormously proud of ONWA and the great honour that you have provided to the Indigenous people in Ontario. Your success will lead the path for generations to come.

We look forward to being part of your articles as you endeavour to address the forefront to change!



Marilee A Nowgesic
Chief Executive Officer

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Leanne Flett Kruger
Regional Manager
T.E. Wealth Indigenous Services



so they can be rapidly re-housed. To that end, ONWA focuses on providing housing policy, research, analysis and recommendations informed by a culturally relevant gender-based lens. The association's aim is to support the safety of Indigenous women and their children in their effort to attain culturally appropriate housing.

ONWA's *Nihdawin My House - A Place Where I Live* program is an example of this effort in action. This program assists Indigenous women in Thunder Bay who are at risk of homelessness and those already experiencing homelessness. The intent of this program is to support Indigenous women 15 years of age or older during their interactions with the criminal justice system who are at risk of homelessness.

Family and community are central to the *Nihdawin* program. Through it, staff and volunteers assist Indigenous women at risk of child welfare involvement due to poverty, or at risk of homelessness, to support their traditional roles as life-givers and caretakers. They work with the entire family to promote recovery and nurture their overall wellbeing.

Indigenous women accessing *Nihdawin* are supported with a number of critical services, including housing search and relocation assistance, life skills training, healing resources, cultural programming and teaching, education and employment referrals. They are also guided through *Nihdawin's* Housing First Framework recovery model, which works to place those facing chronic and/or episodic homelessness into permanent housing.

"Programs like *Nihdawin* are vital for addressing homelessness as Indigenous women find it very difficult to find an emergency shelter that will offer them space for themselves and their children," says McGuire-Cyrette. "One of the greatest outcomes of the program is keeping Indigenous mothers and their children together as family units and working with them to promote recovery and overall well-being." ●



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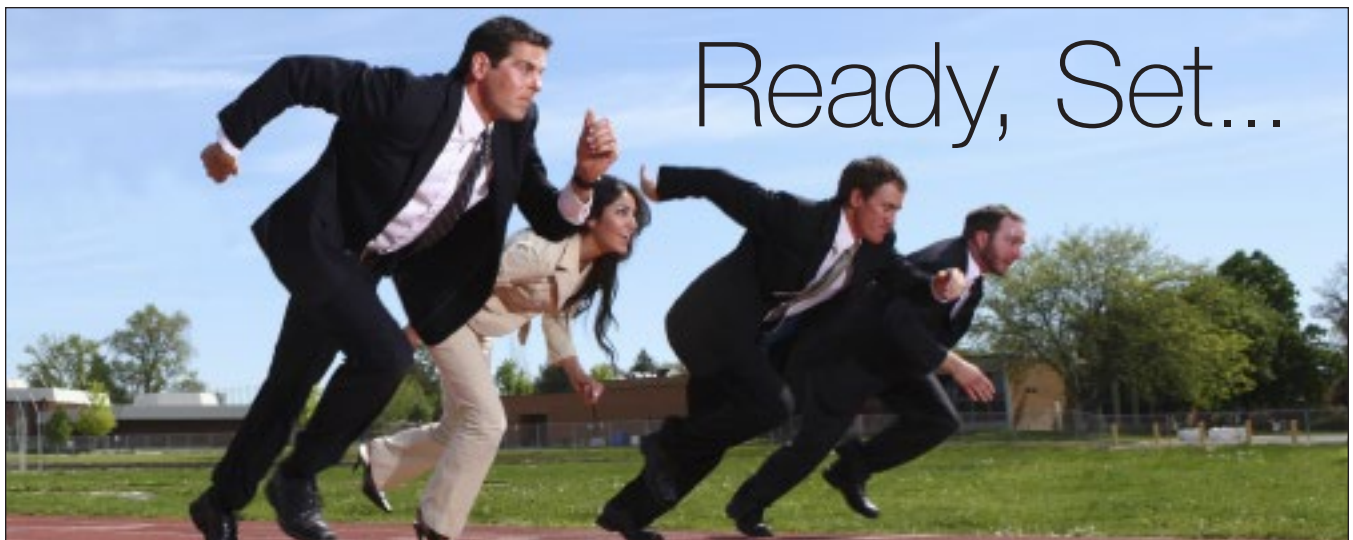
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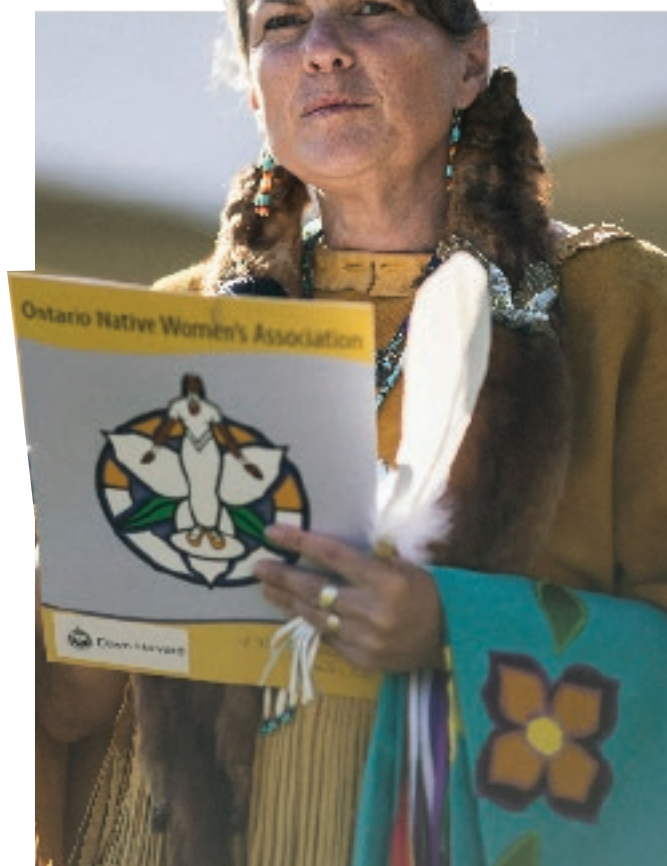
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A SPECIAL POW WOW

By Kim Wheeler

**The community
comes together to
remember missing and
murdered Indigenous
women and girls**



As summer winds down and the pow wow trail draws to an end, dancers, drummers and spectators gathered in Thunder Bay, Ontario for a special pow wow to honour the many missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG).

"This annual MMIWG Pow Wow honours the lives of Indigenous women and girls who have been taken far too soon and all of their families," says Jessica Goodman, ONWA's Circles of Care training coordinator, of the September 8 gathering.

The association saw a need to create a safe place for families to gather and share memories of their loved ones, to help them begin their healing journey and to support one another through ceremony and dance. The creation of the MMIWG Pow Wow gives families this place.

“This year we had 650 people walk through the gates and support these families, 650 people who offered prayers, shared memories and helped create that safe place that ONWA wanted to create,” says Goodman, who was moved by several generations coming together to support one another.



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ONWA also provided families with a space to talk with elders and offer tobacco and prayers to the sacred fire, which stayed lit for the duration of the Pow Wow.

Created and organized by women, the MMIWG Pow Wow was held on the grounds of ONWA at the association's Thunder Bay satellite office. The host drum was the Grassy Narrows Women's Drum Group, while three other drum groups from Thunder Bay also participated. They were Spirit Wind Drum Group, Black River and North Thunder Drum. Giizhigo-Ikwe Drum from Manitou Rapids also took part, and the Pow Wow emcee was Todd Genno while the arena director was Nathaniel Moses.

A special circle was held to acknowledge the lives of MMIWG and their loved ones. "All those affected were called on to come into the circle while everyone surrounded them offering support and love. It was a true reflection of healing that happens at the ONWA MMIWG Pow Wow," says Goodman.

While there is no accurate number of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls, some estimates say over 3,000 Indigenous women and girls have gone missing or been murdered across Canada. It is clear that this epidemic has affected families and friends and far exceeds estimates.

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released their final report on June 3. It included 231 Calls for Justice, including a chapter on Confronting Oppression - Right to Culture. This chapter examines the links between loss of culture and violence against Indigenous women and girls.

"Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls has been a major priority for the Ontario Native Women's Association," notes Goodman. "ONWA stands behind and supports the families of MMIWG who have been impacted by the violence and is committed to supporting and advocating for culturally rooted, gender based, and trauma informed solutions." ●

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BREAKING FREE FROM FAMILY VIOLENCE

Indigenous women experiencing violence or involved with the child welfare system have unique needs. ONWA's Breaking Free from Family Violence program supports these women in a culturally rooted, holistic way. Formerly known as Circles of Care, this special initiative:

- Helps Indigenous women navigate the complex systems they face when experiencing violence or dealing with the child welfare system
- Provides safe spaces tailored to the individual woman and her family that are culturally rooted and trauma informed
- Helps Indigenous women to create, build upon and share their "bundles"



If you or someone you know is facing these challenges, the program can be accessed at one the following ONWA Program Service Delivery sites:

KENORA

136 Main Street S,
Kenora, ON P9N 1S9
Tel: 1-800-667-0816
Fax: 807-623-1104

OTTAWA

283 McLeod Street,
Ottawa, ON K2P 1A1
Tel: 1-800-667-0816
Fax: 807-623-1104

TIMMINS

145 Wilson Ave,
Timmins ON P4N 2T2
Tel: 1-705-360-1877
Fax: 807-623-1104

The Breaking Free from Family Violence program is also delivered via the following ONWA Chapter sites:

Fort Erie (Niagara
Chapter of Native
Women)
1088 Garrison Road,
Fort Erie ON L2A 1N9
Tel: 905-871-8770
Fax: 905-871-9262

Midland
(Georgian Bay Native
Women's Association)
562 King Street,
Midland ON L4R 4P3
Tel: 705-527-7043
Fax: 705-527-4513

Thunder Bay
(Beendigen Inc.)
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Tel: 807-622-1121
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Hamilton (Hamilton-
Wentworth Chapter
of Native Women)
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Aboriginal Circle)
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Email: info@nwrct.ca

For any Indigenous woman experiencing family violence, the Breaking Free from Family Violence program is there to offer support.

INSPIRING LEADERSHIP

By Kahla Moses

**Three Indigenous
women leaders
who have played
a pivotal role
in empowering
Indigenous
women in Ontario**

They say it takes a village, and in the case of the Ontario Native Women's Association, there have been many inspiring women who have helped make ONWA a valuable source of support and empowerment for Indigenous women and their families.

This network of remarkable Indigenous women is championing ONWA's mission across 11 Chapters and 29 councils representing 20 Service Delivery sites throughout the four regions within the province of Ontario.

ONWA is proud to give centre stage to three of these extraordinary women in its inaugural issue of *She is Wise*. We hope their stories will inspire others to take on leadership roles and help guide future generations.



TANA TRONIAK

Today, Tana Troniak proudly wears red and a smile, but that wasn't always the case. As a child, Troniak spent four years under the care of her loving mom and an abusive stepfather, where she experienced firsthand the fear and anxiety of living in a house that never felt like home.

"I struggled for many years as a young woman," she recalls. "As an Indigenous girl, he made me feel like I was 'less than.' I was told never to wear red and never to date an Indigenous boy, that I shouldn't 'settle.' The damage to my self-worth as a young indigenous woman was heartbreaking."

When Troniak's mother finally decided to leave her husband, together with her two young daughters, they had no plans but to escape the house at night and seek a safe place to stay. Their plight led them to

The Shelter in Thunder Bay, which provided respite in the hard months that followed.

Despite the struggles that lay ahead, Troniak remembers her mother teaching her that she was loved, independent and strong. Moreover, she was raised with the belief that she could achieve whatever she wanted, even in the face of poverty, addiction, racism and violence. "I learned early on that we were not victims, but survivors – warriors!" says Troniak.

In her twenties, Troniak found herself with two small children and looking for employment, a search that led her to the Faye Peterson Transition House in Thunder Bay. She soon realized her story and perspectives needed to be heard. "This is where my life's work began," she recalls. "I knew I found a place I wanted to be, and it was here where I found my voice."

Troniak became the facility's finance manager, an executive assistant to its board of directors and, eventually, its executive director. Throughout, she continued upgrading her accounting and HR skills. She also began doing contract work for the First Step Women's Shelter in Sioux Lookout while the director was on leave, and when an opportunity opened up to become its executive director, she was quick to apply and was hired. "I felt like I found a home," says Troniak today.

In particular, says Troniak, her own personal experiences drove her to help other women find a safe respectful space. "As a strong Indigenous woman, I felt that my goal was to work with Indigenous women to [give them] a voice. I wanted to ensure that they were respected when living in the shelter, that they felt at home, and that they would finally feel safe. This is my life's work. This is why I'm here."

“My goal was to work with Indigenous women to give them a voice”

Tana Troniak
First Step Women's Shelter

The next milestone in Troniak's career occurred when her community opened the Nahnahda-Wee-ee-Waywin – Sioux Lookout Sexual Assault Centre, a place of healing for Indigenous women, children, youth and men. In 2018, she was also asked to help out with staffing at the Sioux Lookout Supportive Housing program for homeless Indigenous men and women, a task that was carried out in partnership with Kenora District Services Board, Nishnawbe-Gamik Friendship Centre,

First Step Women's Shelter and Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services.

Today, Troniak continues to lead with passion and compassion, and to look for ways in which to use her insights from her own past to help Indigenous women find a better future. "I know there is more to be done, more voices to empower, more voices to be heard, and more compassion to be given," says Troniak. "I can only hope that I have helped someone feel safe and loved."

WENDY STURGEON

As executive director of ONWA's Niagara Chapter, Sturgeon has dedicated more than 20 years to developing vital services, supports and resources for the region's urban Indigenous community. This includes the development of groundbreaking programs like the Aboriginal Child Advocate initiative. This, in turn, lay the foundation for ONWA's Circle of Care Family Wellbeing Workers initiative, which led to the placement of nine Indigenous Family Wellbeing Workers across Ontario.

Sturgeon was also instrumental in creating the "Original Pathways" Aboriginal Alternative Dispute Resolution program, which intervenes in possible child protection issues early and helps keep children and their families from going to court.

Beyond these critical initiatives, Sturgeon has brought her wisdom, experience and deep sense of family and community to a number of key leadership roles in the

Indigenous community. She is a founding member and the current president of the Ontario Native Women's Charitable Foundation, a long-time provincial representative with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services' FIMUR Program, and a board member with the Kristen French Child Advocacy Centre Niagara.

As a third-term member of the ONWA Board of Directors, Sturgeon has also played a key role representing the association at the United Nations, the Native Women's Association of Canada, and various deputations.

"I'm proud to have been able to use my gifts to build on the earliest of visions for this chapter, which was to keep Indigenous children connected to family, community and culture through the development of Indigenous child welfare intervention programs that have helped keep many Indigenous children with their families



and/or connected to their communities through attachments to cultural supports," says Sturgeon. "All of this is vital to hedging against addictions, suicide and crime, as well as creating long-term, healthy outcomes for our people."

Sturgeon's passion for the Indigenous community and her love for Mother Earth were nurtured from an early age. Her Anishnabe father would share his experiences as an orphan in Canada's foster care system and often take the family out of the city to camp and fish. Her mother, of Welsh and English ancestry and raised along the Ottawa River, would also share her love of the natural world. And, while born in Toronto, her father's

“I'm proud to have been able to use my gifts to build on the earliest visions for this chapter”

Wendy Sturgeon, ONWA, Niagara Chapter

work in the military would see Sturgeon's family move to many locations.

Sturgeon became the first in her family to attend college and earn a degree – an Early Childhood Education Diploma. She also went on to take courses at the University of Toronto, Ryerson University and Brock University. Outside of her formal education, she has been certified by CANDO (Canadian Association of Native Development Officers) as an Aboriginal Economic Development Officer.

While social service has in many ways been her life's calling, Sturgeon is also

an accomplished artist and has taken time to hone her talent and make a name for herself in the art community. She is an accomplished community artist and a published author whose work has appeared in several regional exhibits. As well, Sturgeon is a founding member of Neto Hatinakwe Onkwehowe Native Arts Canada and a third-party recommender to the Ontario Arts Council.

Of all her endeavours, however, Sturgeon says it's her time spent with her family that she cherishes most today. "I have had the extreme fortune to have been in a long

and loving relationship for 30 years with a woman of great compassion, substance and courage, and to be surrounded by family members who have for the most part been loving, supportive and embracing. That includes a smart, gorgeous granddaughter, who has been such a joy for us all."

Speaking on her journey to date, Sturgeon adds, "It has come full circle for me to realize my true identity as a Two Spirited person and to learn of the greatness of our Two Spirited Ancestral Heritage, which I am still learning but now carry with more pride than ever before."

DEBRA VERMETTE

Helmed by Debra Vermette, the Beendigen Anishinabe Women's Crisis Home & Family Healing Agency bears a fitting name – Beendigen is the Ojibway word for "come in." Vermette, of the Wahpeton Dakota Nation in Saskatchewan, has taken these words to heart, dedicating her career to creating safe and welcoming spaces for Indigenous women and children in their times of need.

"Before Beendigen, my career was focused on the business end of things. Coming in and working with these women from a social work angle was a real eye-opener for me," Vermette says. "I had always heard about domestic violence and had grown up with it, but until then I had put all that in the past. When I saw these women who were suffering and vulnerable, it brought that reality back."

Vermette herself is no stranger to Indigenous discrimination. Born in Saskatoon, she was raised by a mother who had survived residential school and carried the trauma and scars that came with it. And while Vermette spent much of her formative years in Prince

Albert, she was still exposed to instances of racism and intolerance throughout her childhood.

The young Vermette carried those perspectives with her to Lakehead University, where she received both a business degree and Honours degree in psychology. This education provided her with the skill set needed to embark on an early career in business – an experience that proved valuable when Vermette joined Beendigen, first as a relief resident counsellor, then rising through the ranks to become its executive director.

Vermette has played an instrumental role in shaping Beendigen's vision. Under her direction, the agency oversees a host of impactful programs and supports. These include the Anishinabe Women's Crisis Home, Community Action Plan for Children (CAPC), National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (NNADAP), Transitional Housing Support Program, Anti-Human Trafficking Program, and the Talk4Healing 24-hour provincial support line, among many others.



"More often than not, we see Indigenous individuals coming into the city who are not prepared for this type of life – especially in a city like Thunder Bay where there's a lot of racism against Indigenous people and where Indigenous women can find themselves extremely vulnerable," says Vermette. "So to have them come into Beendigen and receive the tools and support needed to live an independent life free of violence is essential."

Vermette also sits on the board of directors for Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario and is involved at a provincial level in the VAW (Violence Against Women) Sector certificate program. For her, it is all about extending a helping hand to the Indigenous women who need it most and seeing the extraordinary domino effect that results. "When we help these women come into their own, we're helping their children, grandchildren, and future generations down the road," says Vermette. "It's a ripple effect." ●

“When we help these women come into their own, we're helping their children and grandchildren”

Debra Vermette, Beendigen

LETTERS OF LEGACY

By Jessica Goodman

ONWA spearheads a poignant letter-writing initiative with the goal of inspiring future generations



What are some words of wisdom you would like to share with young Indigenous people?

That is the question that was posed to those attending the Nibwaakaa Inaadiziwin (She is Wise) provincial conference hosted by ONWA in March 2018. Conference participants were asked to write a letter to the youth of today, to future generations, and to their grandchildren's grandchildren. We called this *Letters of Legacy*.

Participants were encouraged to share lived experiences, advice and stories to assist youth facing the many challenges affecting Indigenous communities. The aim was to write letters for future generations with the intention of providing words of wisdom from those living today. What are some words of wisdom they would like to share with young Indigenous people?

Conference participants were then invited to share their letters and read them aloud to the youth in attendance. It was an extraordinarily liberating experience, and the youth were at the centre of it all. They were able to sit and listen to these words of encouragement and leave the conference feeling empowered and strong. These were youth who, earlier, had bravely told their own stories of overcoming challenges and who are themselves working towards changing the story for generations to come.

It was an inspirational exercise, and one that has been incorporated into many other ONWA presentations. The association has even received letters from as far as Sydney, Australia, as part of its presentation at the Healing our Spirits Conference. These letters will be compiled into a book that will be published in the hope of inspiring Indigenous youth to take on leadership roles in their communities.

EXAMPLES OF LETTERS OF LEGACY

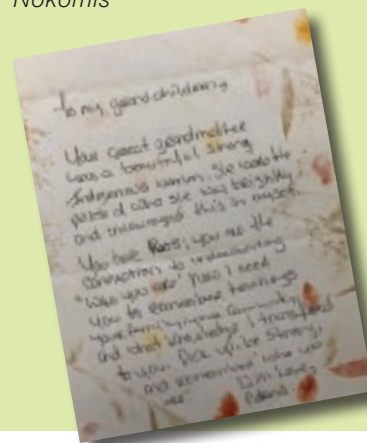
Here is a sampling of letters written as part of ONWA's Letters of Legacy initiative, which asks community members to write inspirational letters to future generations.

To my grandchildren,

Your great grandmother was a beautiful, strong Indigenous woman. She wore the pride of who she was brightly and encouraged this in myself.

You have Roots; you are the connection to understanding "Who you are." Now I need to remind you to remember teachings [from] your family, community and what knowledge I transferred to you. Pick up, be strong and remember "Who you are."

*With Love,
Nokomis*



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The Letters of Legacy initiative proved ideal for the She is Wise Conference, which is designed to fill our cultural bundles with wise practices that support Indigenous women's leadership. The event invites all generations to attend and speak their truths, share their experiences and help build upon the amazing work that ONWA is already doing.

The first day began with an Elders panel consisting of four elders representing various heritages, Ojibway, Mohawk, Inuit and Métis. The panel theme – the importance of storytelling – is an important part of Indigenous culture and the foundation to building relationships, teachings, our connection to Mother Earth and learning about our past, present and future.

“The letters will be compiled into a book in the hope of inspiring Indigenous youth to take on leadership roles”

To ensure all generations were represented at the She is Wise Conference, there was also a call out for youth and community to submit a picture, video, paragraph or point-form telling us how this conference will help build capacity to support Indigenous women in their community. At last year's event, there

were over 65 youth submissions, including some very artistic and heartfelt pieces. The Conference wrapped up with a youth panel consisting of young women who attended the Conference the previous year sharing how they supported community and other youth in their work over the past year. ●



The Aboriginal Women's Association of PEI is a non-profit, representative organization, administered by a voluntary Board of Directors and an Executive Committee. AWAPEI Inc.'s programs and services are to enhance, support, educate, and empower the well-being of Aboriginal women through capacity building, focus groups, prevention, awareness, and equal opportunities. AWAPEI Inc. is committed to working with all Federal/Regional/Provincial/Band governments and other service organizations to improve social, educational, and employment opportunities for Aboriginal Women in Prince Edward Island.

Historically, AWAPEI has proven that by acknowledging our women's health and wellness, it creates a sense of healing. We recognize that aboriginal women play a significant role, as agents of positive and sustainable change, for our communities. It is fundamental that when we support their personal leadership development, we are supporting community development.



Programs and Services



- Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS)
- Finding Our Way, through Knowledge and Preventions, Family Violence Prevention Program
- Annual Sisters and Spirit Vigil, October 4th
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD); Funded By: Health Canada – First Nations and Inuit Health Branch
- Awakening the Matriarch; Path Planning
- **Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre & Wekatesk Aboriginal Head Start.** The Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre provides Parenting education, support and advocacy for off reserve Aboriginal families with children 0 to 6 years of age.

Message from the Executive Director

We know how important it is to continue the legacy and dedication Aboriginal women have imprinted on our society and environment here in Prince Edward Island. We must utilize and acknowledge our gifts; spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. It is fundamental to keep our traditions in balance in order to have healthy and happy families and to awaken our matriarchal leadership as mothers, sisters, aunties and grandmothers in our communities.

On behalf of the Board of AWAPEI INC., we would like to offer thanks to our local champions: Our Community Elders, Abegweit First Nation, Lennox Island First Nation, The RCMP, The Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI and the Native Council of PEI. In addition, we would like to thank our Federal and Provincial Supporters: The Government of Prince Edward Island, the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Advisory Council of the Status of Women, Interministerial Women's Secretariat and the Eastern Door Indigenous Women's Association.

Wellalín, Samantha Lewis
www.awapei.org



Our motto is; **“Creating Stronger Women Creates Stronger Communities”**

EXAMPLES OF LETTERS OF LEGACY CONT'D

Dear Future,

I hope the world has not become the world we are afraid to become. Treat the earth with love, care and compassion. We don't learn early enough that life is precious. Only when we don't expect we learn the hard lesson. Remember the teaching of kindness, the teaching that runs through our veins. Be kind to yourself and remind yourself that you deserve to be a part of the big picture. We do have control of what and who we are and play a big role in who we become. Be mindful in your actions and how each move we make impacts everything around us. Be the person your future generations need you to be.

Good Luck,
Another walking a similar road.

Boozhoo to my Grandchildren,

Always remember and honour your ancestors. They are a part of you and you are a part of them. No matter your life's journey, they are always with you. You are never alone. They love you.

Love,
Your Grandfather and your Grandmother

Dear Youth,

I am so proud of you, your strength and resilience shines through in everything you do. You are beautiful inside and out and worthy of love. Find out what your gifts are and share them with the world. Be proud, Be you.
Miigwech and much light and love

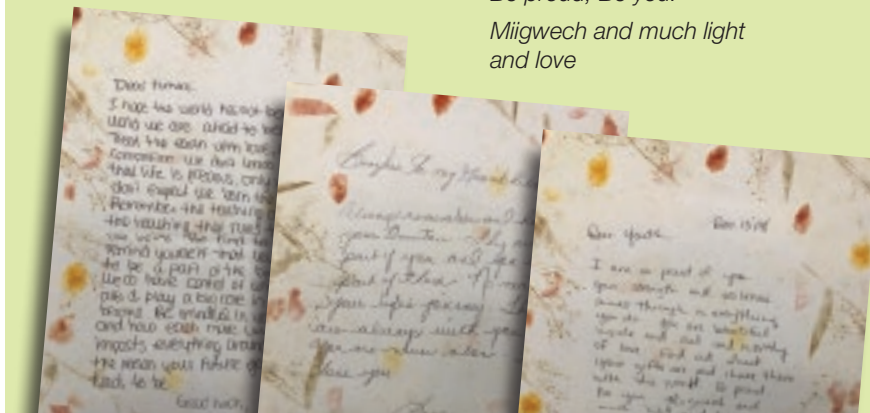
To: The Indigenous Youth,

I want you to know that you are loved and valued. You are important and you matter. Please always be kind to yourself and know your worth, never settle for anything less. Carry on your traditions/culture and language. Always remember you can achieve anything you want to. Dream big and be proud of who you are.
With lots of love

Dear Our Beloved Youth,

You are meant to be here even though it doesn't always feel that way. Our paths aren't always clear but that's part of the journey... Keep moving forward... even baby steps eventually take us where we need to go.

When you are scared or feeling uncertain, close your eyes and imagine your future self standing strong and bold holding your hand. Learn to be your own best friend, take care of your spirit – it doesn't have to be in a big way either... wrap your arms around yourself and say "I am loved," drink a cup of tea and feel the warmth move through you... anything that honours your body, mind and spirit. You are loved, you are sacred, you are valued, YOU ARE NEEDED.



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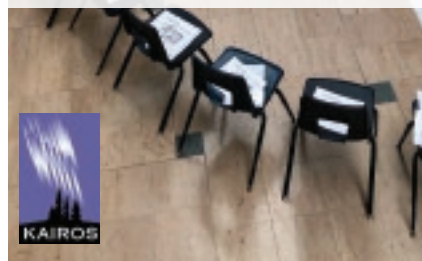
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CONGRATULATIONS on ONWA's inaugural issue of 'She is Wise'!

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