

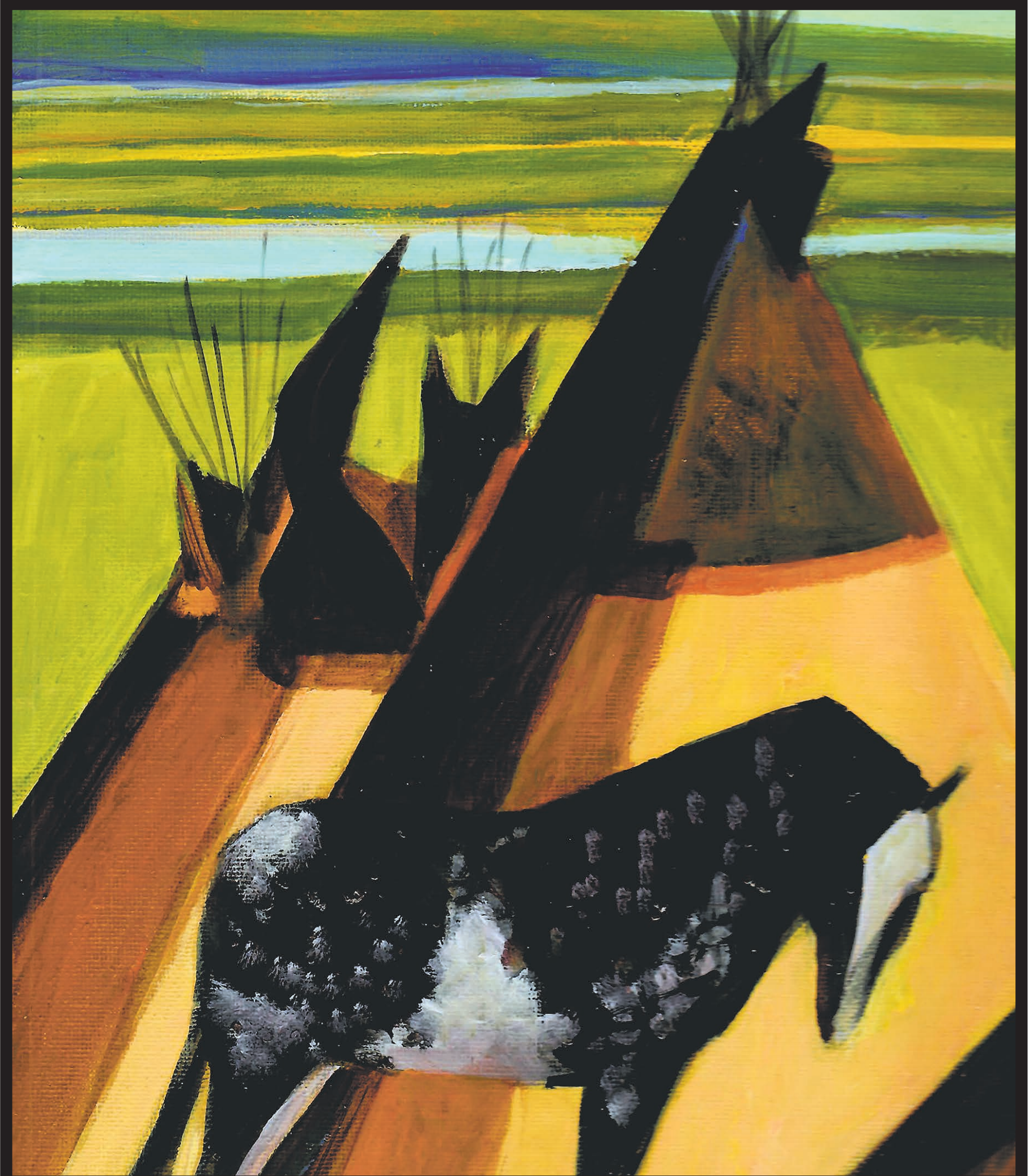
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Indigenous leaders and Northern Alberta Medical Program team gather in Grande Prairie, Alberta.

New medical program will train doctors in Northern and Indigenous communities

Sponsored by the University of Alberta

This August, a new generation of doctors will start their medical education closer to home, culture and community.

Thanks to a new partnership between the University of Alberta and Northwestern Polytechnic, medical students can now take all of their training — both classroom and clinical — in Grande Prairie and surrounding northern Alberta communities. Instead of requiring them to move to Edmonton or Calgary, this program will allow future doctors to train in the communities that need them most.

Beginning in the fall of 2025, the Northern Alberta Medical Program will provide 30 spots for students to learn the realities of medicine in rural and Indigenous communities. Program director Richard Martin says these experiences will set future doctors and their patients up for success.

“It’s so important that people learn in the spaces where they’re needed to practice,” he explains. “[These communities] are only an abstraction when you aren’t there. For the people who are there, this is the reality of life, so it’s very important that everybody has a better grounding in those realities.”

Those realities include not only the way care is delivered in rural areas, but also the cultural contexts that come with serving Indigenous communities.

“This puts us in a very unique situation where we’re in a rural and regional part of Alberta and

we have very close proximity to nations,” explains Wayne Inuglak Clark. Clark is the executive director of the Wápanachakos Indigenous Health Program at the University of Alberta, which supports Indigenous medical and dental students.

Clark highlights that students will experience firsthand how the health-care service model looks different for Indigenous communities and nations, especially when compared with urban sites.

“This program offers a new vantage point to deliver culturally safe and community-informed physician training,” he says. “Health-care providers will have a lot more knowledge of Indigenous cultures because it’s more present than in big-city hospitals.”

The University of Alberta collaborated with local and Indigenous communities before the program launch to ensure that the education doctors receive reflects the people they will serve.

“We’ve engaged the community on how we’re going to do this right at the beginning,” says Clark. “They’ve told us what they want and we’re not setting it up and then saying, ‘Does this work for you?’ We’ve involved them in the whole process.”

While the medical curriculum is the same as in Edmonton, this northern program provides new learning opportunities such as land-based learning, as well as Elders and Knowledge Keepers being involved with the program from its

foundation.

Although the U of A has existing support systems for Indigenous applicants and students in Edmonton, Martin and Clark both hope that providing a complete medical education closer to home and closer to students’ support networks encourages more Indigenous people to consider becoming doctors.

“One of the strong benefits of taking medical education and distributing it into other places is that it helps to open the door for people from those spaces who might not have imagined being a doctor as a career, and makes it feel more reachable,” says Martin. “They can go through the process much better supported because they’re just closer to their people, their land and everything else that is their foundation.”

“[Students] will be closest to the land that they know, and if they can have their education as much as possible in that same land, the chance that they go back to practising in High Level or someplace very similar is much higher.”

Martin, who has worked in rural family medicine for his entire career, says that context allowed him to become deeply integrated into his community more than he might have been in an urban setting. Rural communities gave him the chance to practice medicine from cradle to end-of-life, all while keeping relationships at the centre of care.

Continued on page 9

Become the Doctor Your Neighbor Needs

Train where you’re needed most—home. The Northern Alberta Medical Program offers medical training in northern and rural communities, grounded in connection, culture and care.

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Jesse Lafontaine, MD student.
Member of the Métis Nation B.C.
and the Kelowna Métis Association.



Opening remarks by Rachelle Venne, CEO of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW), She is joined on stage by esteemed elders, dignitaries and guests who gathered to honour the day of healing and remembrance.

A Day of Healing, Remembrance, and Community: AFCC’s Red Dress Powwow a Resounding Success

CALGARY, AB – An incredible community spirit filled The Big Four Roadhouse on May 24, 2025, as the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary (AFCC) proudly hosted its 2nd Annual MMEIP (Murdered Missing Exploited Indigenous Peoples) Red Dress Traditional Powwow. The event drew a massive turnout for a powerful day of remembrance and a profound healing ceremony.

The Red Dress Powwow serves as a vital beacon, illuminating the ongoing crisis of MMEIP. As AFCC CEO Shane Gauthier shared, "Together, we honour the lives of those who have been lost, embracing healing and unity through the vibrant expressions of our traditions." The day featured a breathtaking Grand Entry, powerful rhythms from Host Drum the Blackfoot Drummers and Invited Drum Groups, and was skillfully guided by MCs Dr. Kent Ayoungman, Sayder Duck Chief, and Sarah Good Medicine. A moving Honorary Tribute to MMIWG2SBM included a blessing by Elder Leanne Sleigh and Special Tribute Songs by Sings Many Songs Women.

Sincere gratitude is extended to our Sponsors, esteemed Dignitaries including Mayor Gondek, Rachelle Venne (IAAW), Dr. Tyler White (FNHC/OKAKI), Karen Young (United Way), Patricia Jones (CHF), Tiffany Pompana (Inn from the Cold), Umida Sobirova (CBFY), Lindsie Bruns (The Confluence), and Lowa Beebe (NAIG 2027), our MCs, Drummers, Dancers, Vendors, and the tireless AFCC board, staff, and volunteers. Special thanks to Elders like Grandfather Clement Leather (Opening Prayer) and Grandmother Leanne Sleigh for their wisdom.

More Than an Event: AFCC’s Year-Round Commitment

While the Red Dress Powwow is a significant annual gathering, the AFCC works tirelessly year round. Guided by "Many Nations. One Family," AFCC is a vital hub for connection, support, and healing in Calgary’s urban Indigenous community. Key initiatives include the Encampment Support and Transition Program (ESTP), providing essentials and culturally

safe support to individuals in encampments, and the Status Card Clinic, offering crucial assistance with applications. AFCC also provides robust Elders’ Programs, housing initiatives, youth empowerment, and cultural reconnection activities.

The AFCC is deeply grateful to everyone who made the Powwow a profound success. It was an honour to gather in support of MMEIP and witness such strong community. The journey of remembrance, action, and healing is ongoing.



Community leaders gather at the AFCC Red Dress Powwow. Left to right: Alanna Manybears (AFCC), Patricia Jones (President & CEO, Calgary Homeless Foundation), Dr. Tyler White (FNHC & Okaki), Mayor Jyoti Gondek, Elder Clement Leather, Shane Gauthier (CEO, AFCC), and Karen Young (President & CEO, United Way of Calgary).

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First Nations leaders provide response to King’s Speech

By Jeremy Appel, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

First Nations leaders from across Canada gathered in Ottawa to provide a unified response to the May 27 Speech from the Throne delivered by King Charles III, with a statement from some of the leaders highlighting the “profound gap between ceremonial gestures and the reality of unfulfilled Treaty obligations.”

Prime Minister Mark Carney asked the King to deliver this year’s Speech from the Throne, normally delivered by the governor general as the King’s representative in Canada, as a symbol of Canada’s independence from the United States.

A small group of First Nations leaders were invited to the Senate for the King’s speech as dignitaries, including Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) Grand Chief Kyra Wilson.

In a joint news release from the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Confederation of Treaty 6 First Nations, Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN), Southern Chiefs’ Organization (SCO) and AMC, Wilson said she finds it “concerning that not all First Nations leadership were present or included in this historical moment.”

Grand Chief Wilson struck a more optimistic tone at an Ottawa news conference responding to the Speech from the Throne, noting that it’s a positive development that the King mentioned Indigenous rights and reconciliation in his speech.

“That makes me hopeful [for] the renewed relationship that we can have as First Nations people with the Crown,” she said. “Going forward, my hope is that Canada can respect our Treaties, respect who we are as First Nations people and work together, because we are not going away.”

FSIN Vice Chief David Pratt of Muscowpetung First Nation, located 65 km northwest of Regina, called on Carney “to meaningfully engage our chiefs.”

“Don’t just placate us with nice words. That day and age is over,” said Vice Chief Pratt. “Don’t come and try to take resources out of our backyards without sitting first with our Elders

and treating us with the respect that we deserve.”

Carney has come under criticism from First Nations leaders, as well as labour, climate and faith groups, for legislation enabling projects deemed to be in the “national interest” to receive approval before moving through regulatory and consultation processes.

In the Throne Speech, which is written by the government but delivered by the Crown, King Charles said the government wants to reduce the average timeline for approving major projects to two years from five.

Pratt called it “a shame” that not a single Cabinet minister or representative of the Crown attended the First Nations’ pipe ceremony on Parliament Hill.

He added that it would be a meaningful gesture for the King to return to Canada to visit Treaty First Nations, with the 150th anniversary of Treaty 5 coming up in the fall and Treaty 6 occurring next year.

Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations Grand Chief Greg Desjarlais, who also serves as the chief of Frog Lake First Nation in eastern Alberta, said he was “very disappointed” that the King spoke of reconciliation without any mention of the Treaties.

“I’m grateful to be here to share some words, to encourage each and every one of you, the chiefs, to keep pushing, for the people to get behind the chiefs, the leadership, and not to fight,” said Desjarlais.

Chief Derek Nepinak of the Minegoziibe Anishinabe, located on the western shore of Lake Winnipegosis in Manitoba, was another chief invited to the Senate to hear the Speech from the Throne.

He told First Nations people to “get ready” for the government fast-tracking resource projects.

“This is the time for us to be prepared for what’s next. Some of you can participate, some of us won’t, but let’s protect the water first,” said Chief Nepinak. “That’s the most important thing we have.”

Chief Kelsey Jacko of Cold Lake First Nations in Treaty 6 said he was one of the First Nations leaders who “travelled across Turtle Island



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Victoria Gubbels connects and bridges Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Peoples

By Laura Mushumanski, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The longest journey a person will take in their lifetime is 18-inches – *the journey from their head to their heart*. This journey is as unique as the individual that is walking on this path, and at the same time it is a journey about humility. Along the way, there will be teachers of many kinds, walking with their own wisdom from their heart. In this case, what our Métis sister Victoria Gubbels has come to know about her own journey from her head to her heart – is the importance of connecting and bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to learn about one another in a good way.

“When I moved to Regina, I got to meet with the Métis and First Nations communities and started to go to ceremony – that’s when my life changed,” shared Gubbels, current manager of the Indigenous Learning Initiatives with the Government of Alberta. “The Creator brought me to people and places to help me on this journey. My original plan was to teach English and Christian ethics in a Catholic high school. I ended up spending five years in the Sweat Lodge, going to Sundance, and having such incredible healing and experiences in the Sweat Lodge with my ancestors – it completely transformed me. And after 5 years, I realized the call of the Creator, that I had a calling and was asked to do the work that I am doing today.”

The importance of connecting and bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for Gubbels began one day when her mother came home with a textbook that was being used in the Winnipeg school systems. It shared misinformation about Indigenous people and was being taught to children. Victoria’s mother was a strong advocate for Indigenous peoples, always encouraging her to get involved by sharing accurate information about Indigenous peoples and histories. This became a lifelong journey for her and sparked her passion for education.

“I have been gifted in the sweat lodge to do this work and to really be patient with people because if they don’t know, they don’t know,” shared Gubbels. She is passionate about educating learners. “My role is to provide learners with accurate information so that they know, but also to engage their heart. Because education without the heart is no education at all. If you want to transform people’s hearts and minds, and to do things differently, then you have to reach them at that heart level.”

Gubbels first started her journey, “after that cleansing in the Sweat Lodge, ‘the journey from my head to my heart.’ The doors opened with the Government of Saskatchewan, and I was hired to build partnerships beginning in the health sector

between First Nations and Métis communities, government agencies, unions, and educational institutions – completely innovative partnership agreements to increase the hiring of Indigenous people in the health sector.” This led Victoria to invite everyone to the table, speaking to boards and unions across Saskatchewan about the importance of partnerships and preparing the workplace with Indigenous cultural training to support the retention of new Indigenous hires. The partnership approach led to language in collective agreements to educate health care staff and resulted in 32,000 healthcare workers receiving Indigenous training.

“This is a pathway of learning,” she said. “It is so amazing how we take somebody with passion and know they are committed. This is my responsibility to my ancestors; this is what my role is, to begin to educate people, to bridge that understanding of how we can come together to know one another’ like the Elders teach to build those good relations. So, we don’t have what we are facing today – the results and the impacts of oppressive policies of racism.”

Gubbels’ current role is leading Indigenous training for Alberta’s public servants, agencies, boards and commissions, on the myths and

Continued on page 17



Victoria Gubbels with her son Indigenous facilitator Michael Gubbels

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NorQuest College honours Mallory Yawngnhwe

On June 3, 2025, during this year's convocation ceremony at the Edmonton Expo Centre, NorQuest College conferred an Honorary Diploma of Indigenous Entrepreneurship on Mallory Yawngnhwe.

Each year, NorQuest honours individuals who exemplify excellence, leadership, and community service by conferring Honorary Diplomas – one of the institution's highest recognitions.

Mallory Yawngnhwe is a trailblazer in Indigenous business, supply chain development, and economic empowerment. As the Founder & Co-CEO of Indigenous Box, she has redefined Indigenous entrepreneurship by creating a scalable, high-impact business model that strengthens Indigenous supply chains, expands market access, and drives economic reconciliation in action.

With a Bachelor of Commerce in Supply Chain Management from MacEwan University, Mallory is the first Indigenous woman to hold an SCMP designation. She is a sought-after advisor, strategist, and speaker, consulting for organizations such as Global Affairs Canada, Supply

Chain Canada, and the Government of Alberta, ranging from Indigenous trade policy to procurement reform. Her expertise has led to global recognition, with invitations to speak at The World Economic Forum Peru, the G20 Summit in Brazil, and numerous high-profile industry panels. Mallory's work bridges the gap between Indigenous entrepreneurs and corporate Canada, ensuring Indigenous businesses are not only included in modern commerce but positioned as essential contributors and leaders in the global economy.

During the ceremony, Mallory offered powerful remarks to graduates. She said: "For many of us, the stories we've been told – by society, by people who didn't believe in us, and too often, by our own inner voice of doubt – who all tried to shrink our potential to fit their expectations.

"They suggested we wouldn't make it, that we weren't smart enough or strong enough.

"That spaces like this – colleges, lecture halls, and convocation stages, weren't meant for people like us.

"But we're here. In our caps and our gowns.



NorQuest College Board of Governors Chair Rob Heron and President Carolyn Campbell with Mallory Yawngnhwe. Photo by: Mary Malott

With our family and friends watching; authors of our own futures."

Cleansing with Sage as a Walk of Life

By Laura Mushumanski, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

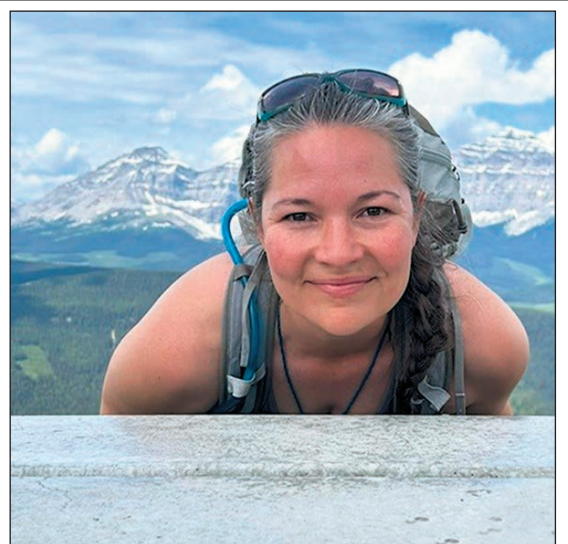
Let's begin with striking a match against a box of Redbird matches and watch as a flame ignites, and then as the flame is placed gently next to a rolled-up ball of dried horse sage, watch closely as the medicines start to interact with each other and become one. Now as the smoke is slowly making its way up to Creator, cleanse your hands in this carefully and thoughtfully harvested sage that brought you teachings of connectivity, and walking in a good way. Bring the sweet smelling smoke to the top of your head while saying out loud: 'think good thoughts,' next to your eyes: 'see good things,' your mouth: 'speak good things,' ears: 'hear good things,' your heart: 'follow your heart,' the front side of your body: 'beware of what is in front of you,' your bum-bum: 'take care of yourself first,' and lastly your feet: 'walk gently on Mother Earth.'

These teachings of connectivity with the body, the heart, the mind, and spirit, all interconnect with each other in teaching us how to walk in a good way. As we smudge and engage with the union of earth, wind and fire, while speaking

good things out loud, over time our nervous system starts to reorganize neural pathways, teaching the body to walk in a good way, be a good relative, do good things, be conscious of our actions, behaviours, thoughts, feelings and emotions. All to walk gently and take care of everyone and everything that resides upon Mother Earth.

This journey for Thalia Aspeslet, the current manager of Indigenous Relations with AIOC, started 20 years ago, when she first walked into the Indigenous student space on campus at the University of Calgary. Aspeslet, our Metis sister, had recently obtained her Metis status; she was initially greeted with compassion and understanding, 'don't ever feel like you are not native enough,' followed by her first encounter with smudging sage as a walk of life.

"The use of the smudge [over time, taught me] to be accountable, to look at the root source [of everything] and make better choices," Aspeslet shared in relation to her journey of how she started to reshape who she was. "For my whole




AIOC Manager of Indigenous Relations Thalia Aspeslet

life I felt I wasn't respecting myself...smudging helped reshape who I am as a woman and taught me respect and how to release emotions."

Aspeslet's journey was not linear. Before obtaining a degree in geophysics, the path that chose her, she had to do the hard work, be accountable for the previous choices she had made in her life. Thalia started with upgrading her high school courses, that ultimately led her to the University of Calgary campus where she would eventually meet Knowledge Keepers and Elders that would impact her life in good ways.

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Members of Dene Tha', Loon River and Peerless Trout First Nations evacuated due to wildfires

By Jeremy Appel, local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Members of four First Nations in northern Alberta have been forced to evacuate due to ongoing wildfires in the region, with no clear date set for a return home.

As of June 10, residents of the Dene Tha' First Nation in Chateh, Big Stone Cree Nation in Lake Chipewyan, Loon River First Nation and Peerless Trout First Nation remain evacuated after being forced from their homes on May 29.

The Sousa Creek Wildfire, burning 5 km south of Chateh, has more than quadrupled in size since May 30, reaching 41,242 hectares.

Chateh residents have been evacuated to High Level, the nearby Dene Tha' reserve, Bushe River, and Peace River.

The Bushe Four Chiefs Complex has hosted Stanley Cup finals watch parties for evacuees to see the Edmonton Oilers take on the Florida Panthers.

According to Dene Tha' First Nation's June 9 wildfire status update, heavy equipment operators were working to contain the fire along its northeastern and northwestern perimeters. A helipad is slated for construction on the northeastern side of the perimeter to support aerial operations.

A sprinkler system has been set up on the southern edge of Chateh to provide structural protection.

There are 91 firefighters, nine helicopters, two heavy helicopters, three bulldozer crews, two air tankers and an Alberta Forestry incident command system working to contain the fire, according to the First Nation's status update.

Further south, the Loon River and Peerless Trout First Nations, as well as Bigstone Cree Nation members who live in Chipewyan Lake, were forced to evacuate due to two out of control wildfires in the Red Earth East Complex, one of which was 68,565 hectares in size and the other 12,661 hectares as of June 10.

In a live video recorded at 2 a.m. on May 29, Loon River Chief Ivan Sawan ordered his community's evacuation to Edmonton, with a reception centre established in Slave Lake for mandatory registration. Peerless Trout band members were also evacuated to Edmonton.

In a June 7 video update, Chief Sawan thanked Loon River community members for abiding by the evacuation order.

"I know it's frustrating, I know it's very tiresome, and people are uneasy and anxiety starts to set in sometimes," said Sawan.

As of the previous day, he said, all oil and gas activity is prohibited in the wildfire areas.

"Unless there is significant rainfall or Alberta Wildfire crews can gain some containment, we don't know when people will be able to return home," said Chief Sawan.

Once the fire is confined, he added, it will likely be five to seven days before evacuees can return.

A June 10 update on the Red Earth East Complex from Alberta noted that the previous day, helicopters were actively bucketing the northwest and east sides of the larger wildfire. Heavy equipment operators, meanwhile, fortified containment lines on the northwest corner and another moving northward from the southwest to northwest side of the fire.

On the smaller wildfire, helicopters were bucketing along its east side while heavy equipment crews attempted to connect containment lines with nearby Peerless Lake and Long Lake.

In addition to the one-time funding the province provides for wildfire evacuees (\$1,250 per adult and \$500 per child), Loon River First Nation is providing evacuated members with a daily stipend of \$130.

Loon River First Nation is hosting a series of activities for evacuees in Edmonton, including a scavenger hunt at the West Edmonton Mall and hide-and-seek at an indoor playground, both with Peerless Trout evacuees, a beach volleyball tournament at the University of Alberta for junior and high school students and a youth cornhole tournament.

On June 1, Bigstone Cree Chief Andy Alook revealed that the wildfire had spread into Chipewyan Lake hours after its evacuation, with



firefighters revealing the apparent destruction of 27 buildings, including the seniors centre, water treatment plant, church and health centre.

During a June 6 update from Chief Alook and MD of Opportunity Reeve Marcel Auger, Alook said an aerial investigation revealed that the damage was significantly worse, with the destruction of 38 structures, representing nearly half of all structures in Chipewyan Lake.

"The information is still not 100 per cent accurate until we have a boots-on-the-ground assessment completed," cautioned Auger.

"We will need to complete assessments of the community. We will also need to conduct a major cleanup and rebuild damaged infrastructure."

Alook added that he's attempting to obtain temporary housing for band members in the Bigstone Cree territory of Wabasca.

The epicentre of the wildfires burning across the country has been Manitoba, with at least 21,000 residents forced to evacuate from 27 communities, including the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation (Pukatawagan), Marcel Colomb First Nation, Pimicikamak Cree Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation in northern Manitoba.

The four Anisininew Okimawin First Nations—Garden Hill, St. Theresa Point, Wasagamack and Red Sucker Lake—and Misipawistik Cree Nation have evacuated vulnerable residents.

In B.C., Fort Nelson First Nation issued an evacuation order on June 6.



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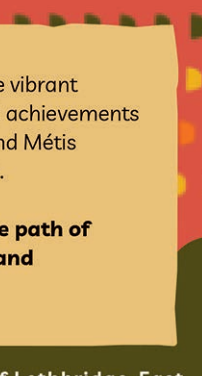
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BDC and First Nations Bank of Canada boost business acquisitions

First Nations Bank of Canada (FNBC) and the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) have announced a \$100M initiative to increase business acquisitions by Indigenous communities and economic development agencies across the country.

The timing is crucial as a significant number of Canadian entrepreneurs will retire in the next few years, and are actively looking to sell their business built over decades. This creates a unique opportunity where there are more companies for sale than there are buyers. The new joint financing initiative, with an expected average deal size of \$5M, will make business acquisitions much faster.

In the spirit of economic reconciliation, this initiative will enable Indigenous communities and economic development agencies to have more access to capital for business acquisitions and support majority-owned Indigenous businesses.

“When I took the helm of the FNBC two years ago, we decided as a team to accelerate growth opportunities for wealth creation in Indigenous communities. The unique demographic challenge we face over the next few years is a major

opportunity for Indigenous communities and their economic development agencies. It will allow them to acquire companies with strong track records. And with Indigenous ownership, the companies will be more competitive for many reasons including procurement policies that favour Indigenous-owned businesses,” said Bill Lomax, President and CEO of the FNBC.

“The initiative between FNBC and BDC is a great example of how a common desire to take action towards economic reconciliation can lead to concrete business deals that benefit all players,” said Isabelle Hudon, President and Chief Executive Officer of BDC. “First Nations Bank has the trust of Indigenous communities across the country and know their unique needs the best. BDC will provide an innovative financing solution in collaboration with First Nations Bank to help Indigenous communities grow and make business acquisitions. Together, we can accelerate the

rise of the next generation of Indigenous business champions.”

The number of Indigenous business owners is expected to grow by 23% in the next decade. They are one of the fastest growing segments of entrepreneurs in our country and more than double the 10% increase projected for other Canadian entrepreneurs. Fully engaging them could result in a significant annual increase in GDP of 1.5%.

This initiative is part of BDC’s Community Banking ambition launched last year. It provides financing and advice through trusted partners, aiming to have a multiplying impact, ignite entrepreneurship and reach 100,000 more entrepreneurs in the next 10 years. This initiative complements BDC’s Inclusive Entrepreneurship team’s \$50M loan envelope and a \$100M investment platform to support Indigenous-led businesses, which will be operational in the coming months.



New medical cont. from p 2

“When I went through medical school, I had a hard time choosing between all of the different things you could do,” he says. “I knew at that time that my choice had to be family medicine because then I could do everything. I did surgery. I delivered babies. I worked in the emergency department. I took care of patients in their care

facilities. I love the different places where I can provide care. I love the different types of things that I do. And quite frankly, I just love taking care of people.”

“That relationship building, with patients and their families and my colleagues, was really important to me.”

Both Martin and Clark hope the Northern Alberta Medical Program makes medical

education more accessible for students from rural and Indigenous communities and educates the next generation of doctors to be deeply grounded in culture, relationship and community.

They encourage potential students to reach out to the Wápanachakos Indigenous Health Program before applying to learn more about the supports available to them.

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Eagle Medicine Coaching with Robyn Soulier-Ritcho

By Laura Mushumanski, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Nature can only thrive within reciprocal relationships, where they need to be sustainable. Some know this as symbiotic relationships. And specifically for trees, during the spring months, the starch, sugars in the roots of a tree start to thaw and slowly make their way up to the tree's branches. But where do the nutrients for these mighty trees within our own Homefire come from? ... In order to survive and thrive in its natural environment, the tree is interdependent on life all around it. During the autumn months, after the tree's leaves have gathered nutrients from Grandfather Sun, the wind, and rain, the leaves begin to transition into another stage of the tree's life...They become part of Mother Earth once again, in different ways, eventually becoming part of nature's life cycle, soil, providing nutrients for all life that lives upon Mother Earth.

Robyn Soulier-Ritchot is the founder of Eagle Medicine Coaching & Consulting. Her journey of transformation came when she started to see that looking inward nurtured her emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. "Loving myself has been a lifelong journey and the biggest impact of my life," she said. And similar to any tree in our own backyard, it takes medicines in the form of patience, grace, compassion, and understanding for any person to come to know things differently.

Eagle Medicine Coaching is an Indigenous social entrepreneurship based on helping people break free from limiting beliefs about themselves and reconnect with their gifts to create meaningful, purpose-driven businesses and lives.

"In order to move forward with anything in life, a part of you has to [lay to rest]. You have to surrender and trust. That part of you that still lives with doubt and fear and not trusting the processing can't come with you to this new version of yourself, or the new level of you in your life," Soulier-Ritchot shared as an understanding of how she came to create Eagle Medicine Coaching.

"Everything is energy, so when we come to a place and we start prioritizing ourselves and our well-being, and we are honest with ourselves, then we can identify those things that are blocking potential opportunities and abundance. I don't just teach these practices or offer tools and strategies; I've embodied them in my own healing first. Everything that I have applied and what I

learned in the time being with Eagle Medicine Coaching, came from me being my greatest client."

Growing up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Soulier-Ritchot found herself not wanting to be conditioned and limited to becoming a product of her environment, "I was [an Indigenous] kid living in West Central Winnipeg. No one talked about our future, no one talked about our goals, no one asked us about what we wanted to be doing in life because what we were surrounded by was dysfunction, chaos and survival – that was my normal. I didn't see a future because this was what I was constantly around. But I knew at a very young age that I didn't want to be a product of my environment... and that's why I initially created a free online program through Eagle Medicine to allow Indigenous youth to reconnect with their gifts and medicines. I'm doing this work because I know what it feels like to grow up without role models or mentors. I stepped into this path to contribute to future generations, to give back to my community, and most importantly to build a legacy I envision through the work I'm creating with Eagle Medicine."

The more time and space that Soulier-Ritchot continuously gifts herself, the more healing she contributes to her journey, and in turn how she can walk beside the people she supports with becoming successful, purpose driven entrepreneurs and people. "The more I go deeper into myself and identify what are my values, who am I, not only as a professional coach, [but also] as a mother and a community member," she said, while reflecting on, "what is the legacy that I want to leave behind in my business and for my children?"

For Robyn, Eagle Medicine is, "so much more than professional development, it's personal before it gets professional. I say this a lot in my workshops: [We have been] taught to disconnect from ourselves and our spirit. We need to get back to that place within where we are reconnected and grounded in self. Because that's the place where we create. And when we are disconnected from ourselves, what are we really creating?"

And that tree again – the foundation that supports the integrity and development of the tree, is rooted in the same understanding for Soulier-Ritchot in how a business flourishes: a



Eagle Medicine Coaching founder Robyn Soulier-Ritchot.

foundation created on self. "What makes a business flourish? – a foundation created on self. Because if I am messed up and not taking care of myself, how does my foundation look? Pretty cracked...If I am not taking care of myself and doing all the things I need to flourish and thrive, [if something is wrong] right away we want to understand this. We figure out a solution, so we need to look at that within ourselves. We need to sit with that in order to understand [what is going on]...A lot of things I take into consideration with that reflection component, introspection – that honest truth of self, even the hard things, getting curious about the things we were conditioned to believe were shameful or that we should feel guilty about...The medicine only comes through when we sit with the discomfort – getting comfortable with the uncomfortable," Robyn shared while emphasizing the questions she asks herself when she wants to be curious about why she feels stuck instead of moving forward. "Why do I not feel worthy? Where does that come from?... So, I started getting curious about my trauma...why do I talk to myself like this? Where does this come from?"

Sustainability within our own lives starts with self, loving ourselves, being kind to ourselves, compassionate, showing grace, and walking gently. The Eagle Medicine continuous to nurture us emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually in understanding that, "you already got here...you survived, and you are here now. You have the ability to do whatever you want to do... Transformation can happen overnight...your story is going to attract your ideal client. Your story is going to attract the people that you are destined to serve, not because you want, because you are meant to."

The journey ahead

We're on a journey to reconciliation. We strive for an inclusive future with Indigenous interests and knowledge integrated into our business to create sustainable outcomes for generations to come. We're listening, learning, collaborating and adapting to create change. Because when we step up and meet the challenges of today, tomorrow is on.

The next ALBERTA NATIVE NEWS prints on July 9, 2025 and the deadline is July 7, 2025

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Life is Sacred: Ruby Littlechild’s understanding of being good to one another

By Laura Mushumanski, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Any tree that is firmly rooted into Mother Earth is nutrient dense because of the soil, which is the foundation that gives a tree its beauty and wonder. A tree is often looked at in awe of how this creation continues to gift life to all those that live upon Mother Earth. Some trees are deformed, or have different shades than others, or come from a faraway place and are not like the trees we are used to seeing. A tree is never shamed or blamed for its short comings or put in harm’s way based on its differences. And yet human behaviours, thoughts, and feelings towards the differences amongst our relatives’ rich in diverse understandings are usually rooted in harm instead of harmony. The contrast between trees and people – and what we can learn from one another – is deeply rooted in ‘all life is sacred.’

“It’s been a journey,” shared Ruby Littlechild when she spoke about how as a First Nations woman, she had to “armor [her]self with higher education” so that she could survive in a world that continues to typecast and undermine Indigenous peoples because of their differences. A world that denigrates instead of honouring the wealth and depth of knowledge that Indigenous peoples walk with as stewards of the land, rooted in understanding that all life is sacred and treating all people, places and things with respect, love, humility, compassion, and kindness as if they are our kin.

At the age of 16, Littlechild became a teenage mother, and was unable to graduate high school with her class. This led to the educational journey of her post-secondary research that “single First Nations women are the poorest demographic in Canada.” Littlechild’s research was rooted in understanding oppressive behaviours and thoughts and how they impact systems of oppression. She also came to know lateral violence within First Nation communities as a product of traumatic experiences during Indian Residential Schools. The traumatic experiences that Ruby came to know directly relates to the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health and well-being of our First Nations brothers and sisters on and off reserve. These traumatic experiences are what conditioned our Indigenous relatives to live in a continuous state of hypervigilance. Starting from in the womb till the age of 12 years old, their brains and nervous systems developed to be in a constant state of survival, continuously detecting perceived threats, in this case everyone and everything around them.

“If it wasn’t for ceremony, I wouldn’t have been able to get my [two Masters] degrees. I always go to ceremony first and ask the ancestors to guide me. They brought me this far,” says Littlechild explaining that ceremony is grounded in everything she does, especially with navigating



AtkinsRéalis Director of Government and Indigenous Relations Ruby Littlechild

higher education so she could support herself and her children. However, when it comes to communities supporting Indigenous women, Ruby says that more must be done. “Our communities have to step-up [and start] valuing and empowering First Nations women, with education, healing, ceremony, truth...Because silence breeds violence that continues to

Continued on page 23

Investigation cont. from p 7

prepped into a pumpable product, or a slurry – a mixture of mined materials, water and chemical – biliary cancer before it can be processed by a plant. This was initially accomplished with large rotating drums, but improved technologies allow the slurry to form as it travels through a pipeline directly to the plant. This process is known as hydrotransportation.

Because of the transportation technology and the properties of bitumen, the resource will attach itself to any available air bubbles within the slurry. By the time it reaches the plant, the bitumen becomes aerated and lighter than water.

The slurry is then fed into a large tank known as a gravity separation cell and the process of gravity separation begins, wherein the bitumen floats to the top of the liquid and creates a froth where it can then be extracted.

Everything else becomes waste materials, otherwise known as tailings.

TAILINGS

Tailings are a toxic by-product of most metal and coal mining operations.

Every one cubic metre of oil produced through froth treatment generates nine cubic metres of tailings. In other terms, for every 1,000 litres of usable oil processed from the sands, there are 9,000 litres of toxic waste generated.

According to the *Oil Sands Magazine* (OSM) – an “independent digital platform” – tailings made during the extraction of bitumen are made up of “mostly silica sand (up to 60%), fine solids (less than 30%) and no more than 5% water.”

The waste materials are then diverted into large storage facilities, known as tailings ponds, where the solids within the mixture settle over time.

However, the OSM fails to mention that the tailings mixture contains dangerous amounts of complex chemicals, such as “mercury, arsenic, lead, ammonia, benzene and naphthenic acids,” according to Environmental Defence.

Some, though not all, proven and possible symptoms of exposure to these materials include: kidney failure, gastrointestinal damage, diarrhea, constipation, muscle/joint pain, fatigue, loss of sex drive, esophageal burns, heart palpitations,

tremors, and death.

While much can be said about the general composition of tailings, our focus right now lies upon one particular set of compounds.

NAPHTHENIC ACIDS

Naphthenic acids (NAs) are organic carboxylic acids released during the bitumen extraction process. In a report by the University of Alberta, it states that NAs “occur naturally in petroleum,” and are made up of a “complex mixture of alkyl-substituted acyclic and cycloaliphatic carboxylic acids.”

While much research still needs to be done on the topic of NAs in general, the corrosive compounds have been evidenced as causing a toxic response in “microorganisms, aquatic algae, aquatic organisms such as fish, invertebrates and vegetations, birds, and mammals.”

However, NAs found in the oil sands are considered more complex than other commercial mixtures.

For one, due to the pKa range of NAs, an estimated 99% of it remains in the aqueous phase, which means that the compounds dissolve in water, “resulting in their concentration at the


water surface in tailings ponds.” NAs are also present in the surface/ground waters that make contact with the oil sands deposits, meaning they are naturally found in the surrounding waters.

Currently, there is no way to distinguish naturally occurring NAs from those created during the extraction process.

To make matters worse, there is no absolute and/or uniform analytical method used to measure or monitor NA levels because “there is no procedure that can separate each NA compound.” Furthermore, “a majority of the organic compounds in oil sands process affected water (OSPW) do not fit the strict formula for NAs,” and additional studies indicate that NAs are not the only compound responsible in the toxicity of OSPW.

Thus, while NAs have been evidenced as causing a toxic response in organic materials, the specific effects and symptoms of exposure to Alberta’s tailings ponds are somewhat unknown. This is due to the mixture of complex chemical compounds and their reactions to one another within the extraction/settling process.

There are approximately 100 confirmed components present in tailings.




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Powwows and Gatherings

It's Powwow Season again!

At *Alberta Native News* we have put together a schedule of some of the upcoming powwow events and other happenings.

Our list will be updated as the season progresses and we hope it gives you an idea of what to expect in the weeks to come. Best wishes and safe travels to all the summer festival participants.

Have a great time!

June 20 – 22

Grande Prairie Traditional Pow Wow
Evergreen Park, Grande Prairie, AB

June 20 – 22

Saddle Lake Cree Nation Pow Wow
Saddle Lake, AB

June 20 – 22

Chief Kahkewistahaw Pow Wow Celebration
Kahkewistahaw, SK

June 20 – 22

Woodland Cree First Nation Treaty Days
Woodland Cree Recreation Grounds, AB

June 21

National Indigenous Peoples Day
Events are held across Canada
Check your local listings for an event taking place near you.

June 26

Prairie Chicken Dance Championships
Siksika Piiksapi Memorial Arbour, AB

June 27 – 29

Siksika Nation Fair
Siksika Nation Fairgrounds, AB

June 27 – 29

44th Annual Kamloopa Powwow
Tkemlups te Secwepemc Special Events Facility,
Kamloops, BC

June 27 – 29

Muskeg Lake Cree Nation 33rd Annual
Traditional Veteran's Powwow
Leask, SK

June 28

Borden Park 1st Annual Traditional
2 Spirit Pow Wow
Borden Park, Edmonton, AB

July 1 – 3

Red Pheasant Competition Pow Wow
Red Pheasant Cree Nation, SK

July 4 – 6

Mosquito Grizzly Bears Head Lean Man
Battleford, SK

July 4 – 6

Alexis Nakota 48th Annual Powwow
Glenevis, AB

July 4 – 13

Calgary Stampede
Calgary, AB

July 11 – 13

Little Pine Competition Powwow
Little Pine, SK

July 11 – 13

Enoch Cree Nation Competition Powwow
Enoch, AB

July 11 – 13

Bear Claw Casino and Hotel & Whitebear First
Nation Pow Wow
White Bear First Nation, SK

July 11 – 13

Squamish Nation Youth Pow Wow
North Vancouver, BC

July 11 – 13

Vyper Reclaiming Youth 4th Annual Contest
Pow Wow
Mission, BC

July 12

Red Deer Two Spirit Pow Wow
Pioneer Lodge, Red Deer, AB

July 15 & 16

Sweetgrass Traditional Pow Wow
See ad on p. 7
Sweetgrass, SK

July 17 – 19

Onion Lake Celebration
Onion Lake, SK

July 17 – 21

Back to Batoche Festival
Batoche, SK

July 18 – 20

Kainai Powwow & Celebration
Red Crow Park, Standoff, AB

July 18 – 20

Peepeekisis Cree Nation Powwow
Peepeekisis, SK

July 23 – 25

Big River Powwow Celebration
Big River, SK



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TsuuT’ina Annual Celebrations
Redwood Meadows, AB

July 25 – 27

Bonaparte BC Pow Wow
Bonaparte, BC

July 25 – 27

Zagime Anishnebek Powwow
Fort Qu’Appelle, SK

July 25 – 27

56th Annual Thunderchild Championship
Powwow and Game Tournament
Thunderchild, SK

July 29 – 31

2025 Youth Teepee Summit
See ad on p. 14
Northeast River Valley Event Centre,
Edmonton, AB

August 1 – 3

Lhtako Dene First Nation 2025
Competition Powwow
Quesnel, BC

August 1 -3

Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation’s Competition
Pow Wow
Sturgeon Lake, AB

August 2 – 3

Muskoday Traditional Powwow
Muskoday First Nation, SK

August 4

One Day Traditional Pow Wow (Alberta)
Lac La Biche, AB

August 8 – 10

Samson Cree Nation Pow Wow
Bear Park, Maskwacis, AB

August 15 – 17

Ministikwan 4th Annual Powwow Celebration
Ministikwan, SK

August 15 – 17

Paul First Nation Competition Powwow
Wabamun, AB

August 15 – 17

Piapot Traditional Powwow
Paipot First Nation, SK

August 15 – 17

Frog Lake First Nation 2025 Powwow
Frog Lake, AB

August 15 – 17

Driftpile Cree Nation’s Annual Powwow
Driftpile, AB

August 16 – 17

Big Island Lake Cree Nation
Traditional Pow Wow
Pierceland, SK

August 18 – 22

Treaties 1-11 Gathering
TsuuT’ina Nation, AB

August 22 – 24

Ochapowace Cree Nation Annual Powwow
Ochapowace, SK

August 22 – 24

Annual Poundmaker’s Lodge Powwow
See ad on p. 24
St. Albert AB

August 22 – 24

Beardys & Okemasis Powwow
Duck Lake, SK

August 29 – 31

Heart Lake First Nation 22nd Annual
Competition Pow Wow 2025
Lac La Biche, AB

August 29 – 31

Flying Dust First Nation Pow Wow
Meadowlake, SK

August 30

Cold Lake First Nations Pow Wow
Cold Lake, AB

September 12 – 14

Stalew Pow Wow
Langley Events Centre, Langley, BC

September 13 & 14

3rd Annual Powwow & Artisan Expo
Lethbridge, AB



September 29 – October 2

National Gathering of Elders
Edmonton Expo Centre, AB

October 3 – 5

National Indigenous Cultural Expo
Edmonton Expo Centre, AB


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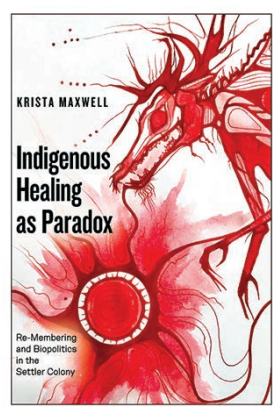
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How Hiding and Seeking saved Randi Sager’s life

By Laura Mushumanski, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The spiritual teaching of the diamond willow tree is embedded in understanding that the tree needs to survive and thrive in its natural environment for 50 years before the fruiting bodies of the plant can share its medicine with us – the diamond willow fungus. During the time of restoration, along with the process of learning and growing, the medicine that the diamond willow tree produces continues to gift us medicine of understanding that all parts of ourselves are gifts, and it is okay to hide until a person is ready to share their gifts with the world. This spiritual understanding is similar to what Randi Sager experienced so far in her learning journey.

“I was born with no identity,” Sager, an Indigenous psychologist, shared. “I didn’t know who I was because my father never grew up with his culture. I was born knowing that I was native but never knew what that meant. My upbringing wasn’t the greatest because we moved around a lot and I felt very lost. I had no idea who I was. In 2010 I got my status. I was officially recognized as an Indian, but what did that mean? All I knew was that I could get cheap gas and cigarettes. I floated for a long time. My 20s were quite lost. I had a lot going on mental health wise. Previously, I developed an eating disorder in my early teens as a result of the trauma that I experienced. I didn’t know I had an eating disorder. I just knew that whenever stress happened, it would show up. For 20 years I had that. And when I say I didn’t know I had it, I was really good at lying to myself when I didn’t think

I had something.”

It wasn’t until Sager’s last year in her undergraduate studies while she was preparing for grad school in Counselling Psychology that she decided she had to help herself first if she wanted to help others. “When I acknowledged and identified that I had an eating disorder, I started day-treatment. I went to the only place I knew at the time. It was both one of the worst and most profound experiences of my life because it led me to where I am today. During that time, I didn’t engage in any culture. As I was in treatment and the way I was being treated, it felt like my eating disorder was being demonized. I really felt like I was being punished. I was viewed as being resistant when I would question things,” Sager said.

“I remember I was at home and heard a voice say: it is time,” Sager shared and she started to have a very strong pull to go to the Indigenous student center at the University of Calgary. “I had identified as being Indigenous when I enrolled, but I never went because I was afraid of going, that I wouldn’t be accepted because I didn’t look native enough, and thought I was going to be rejected. I was welcomed with loving arms. That is when I experienced my first ceremony, it was a Grandmother’s Cree tea ceremony. It felt like home. It was like my ancestors were going, ‘finally.’ When I sat in that circle, I felt like this is what has been missing in my life.”

As Sager listened to a story being shared about somebody who had schizophrenia and telling



Indigenous Psychologist Randi Sager

those voices that they can stay – but to stay in the stadium seats, not in the field where the person was, “it was so powerful that I had a conversation with my eating disorder, I call him ED. I let him know that I didn’t need him anymore. He could go to sleep. It was after that that my behaviour stopped.” It was the Elder from the Indigenous centre that taught Sager her relationship with her eating disorder through storytelling. The Elder taught her “what was missing was my cultural identity and understanding that ED saved my life. That ED had a purpose, but he was no longer a purpose in my life, that he was harming me, but understanding and allowing that relationship with him allowed him to go to sleep.”

In that moment, Sager didn’t know she was going to become an Indigenous psychologist; she knew she wanted to become a psychologist. She just didn’t know what or how to go about it. “In that experience with the Elder, I wondered why this was not available. I tried the western ways, but it just wasn’t helping. That’s when I decided I was going to be an Indigenous psychologist. I had no idea what it meant or what it looked like. That is just what I was going to do.”

“Creator was like... ‘here you go.’ He cleared that path. Everything was really fast and life changing. I had to let go of my old life and really embrace it. [During] my last year of grad school, I would describe my life like my forest burnt down. I was devastated; I had to start new,” Sager said and she trusted Creator that this was where she was supposed to be. “I went into grad school. I had to indigenize all my courses, I had to do all the extra work, meaning I went out into community, ceremony – that’s scary when you are not from here. I had to put myself out there and start creating community. My dad was so nervous for me because he was afraid that I was going to experience what he experienced. I have in a systemic way, but not the way he has. I have experienced the systemic racism, the covert racism, where he experiences overt racism.”

At one point early on in Sager’s career, she was accused of practicing shamanism by a co-worker who was unaware of Indigenous cultural practices. “My instinct was to hide, that I needed to shut down. I realized that in that moment it wasn’t me that was wanting to hide, it was my grandmothers – that is what they did to survive. I stood in my power, I didn’t hide. I pushed forward. That was the biggest teaching I got from those experiences – to accept who I was – Indigenous and also Scottish and German.”

Working from spirit is embedded into Sager’s practice as an Indigenous Registered Psychologist. “I stand in both worlds,” she shared. “The western world taught me how to navigate that world so I can advocate for my clients. I avoided the helper role for many years. I was afraid of the gifts that I have – those gifts that were given to me. When I wasn’t using my gifts, I was getting sick. I learned this when I was doing my research with my participants who gave me these teachings that I still use today. The teachings that I received from my co-researchers and continue to carry in my medicine bag are community, clients, culture identity, spirituality, and empowerment. These are the powerful teachings that are in my practice that are in my daily life and the teachings that I share with clients.”



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Register for ‘United in Treaty’ conference today

By Regan Treewater, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Karen McCarthy, the Managing Consultant at Inspire Group of Companies LTD instantly sprang to action in response to Bill 54, which proposes provincial separation. “This is a conference dedicated to educating people about what ‘Treaty’ means,” explained McCarthy in a recent phone interview with the *Alberta Native News*.

Inspire Group’s vision is inclusive of all people because promoting more informed decision making is something that benefits all Canadians. “This isn’t just about Alberta. Treaty 6 spans into Saskatchewan,” McCarthy emphasized. This conference, United in Treaty, will be hosted on June 25 and 26 at the Edmonton Inn and Suites with an impressive lineup of panel speakers, scholars, and professionals all dedicated to increasing public awareness of what ‘Treaty’ means. “I see things on TikTok and read posts on social media, and people are missing the true meaning of what ‘Treaty’ is and then other people take these misrepresentations as fact and repeat them,” commented McCarthy. “This is about bringing people together and supporting greater understanding.”

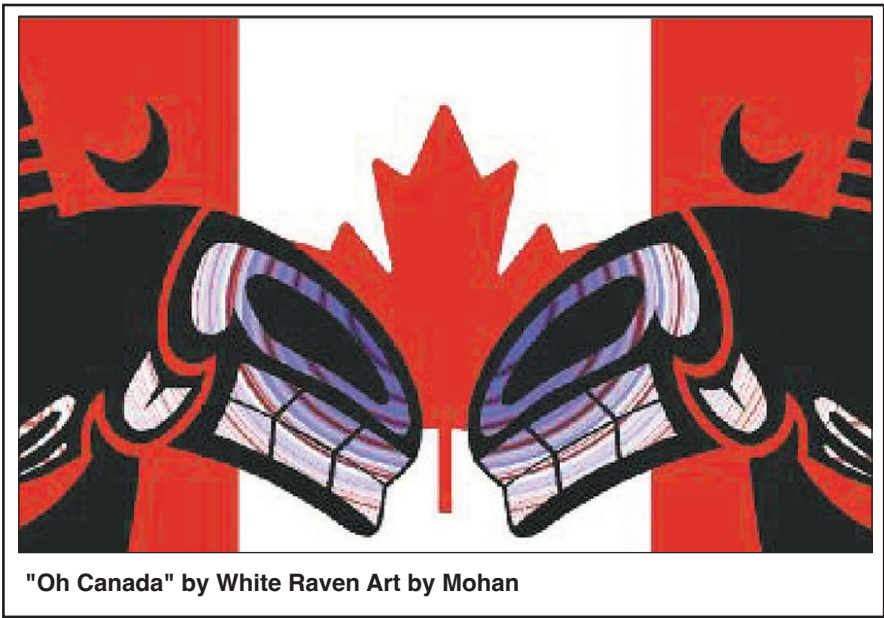
A pipe ceremony will take place on June 24, with the main programming commencing on the 25th emceed by Josh Alexis of the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation and a drum performance by the River Cree Singers from the Enoch Cree Nation. The first distinguished keynote speaker is Sol Sanderson from the Chakastypasin Band of the Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. A 2024 online article in *Northeast Now* called Senator Sanderson a “pioneer in Indigenous governance and education.” After a catered lunch with scheduled entertainment, Sanderson will be followed by Wallace Fox of the Onion Lake Cree Nation. Fox is the CEO and Executive Director at Indian Oil and Gas Canada.

These knowledgeable and informative speakers will be followed by an enlightening succession of scholarly lectures featuring: Deanne Kasokeo

from Poundmaker Cree Nation (in Saskatchewan) and her presentation “Understanding the Implications of Cows and Plows on Claims on Treaty,” Leroy Wolf Collar from Siksika Nation, and his talk, “Infringement of Treaty Rights From Provincial Governments,” and Randy Ermineskin from Ermineskin Cree Nation and his discussion titled, “Living the Spirit of Treaty: Our Past, Our Governance, Our Future.” McCarthy emphasized: “Bill 54 and its potential impact is not an Alberta only issue. Treaty was not agreed upon with the Province, but with the Crown, so this is a Federal discussion.”

The second day of the conference, after breakfast is served, will kick-off with an illuminating panel of Elders discussing Treaty history and implementation. The respected Elders who will be on this panel include: Elder Sol Sanderson of Chakstypasin, Treaty 6, Elder Dr. Mike Bruised Head of Blood Tribe, Treaty 7, and Elder Clarence Wolfleg, from Treaty 7 territory. This proceeding will be moderated by Deanne Kasokeo of Kasokeo Law.

The second day’s keynote addresses will be delivered by Dr. Leroy Littlebear of Blood Tribe followed by Regena Crowchild (Minor Chief) from Tsuut’ina Nation. To ensure that attendees leave the conference armed with a wealth of information and knowledge there will also be a panel of experts commenting in detail on provincial separation attempts. This panel will feature: Dr. Andrew Bear Rose from Siksika Nation, Dr. Matthew



Wildcat from Ermineskin Cree Nation and Dr. Leo Baskatawang from Lac des Mille Lacs First Nation in Treaty 3 territory. This informative, and highly relevant panel will be moderated by Carolyn Buffalo of Montana Cree Nation.

McCarthy added that: “It is really important to note where all of these experts are coming from, because this is not an issue that is only relevant to Indigenous and First Nations communities, but one that everyone should be concerned about. Yes, it directly impacts Treaty, but it’s relevant for everyone. That’s why we are reaching out to the larger public, because we all need to be informed.” Registration is now open for those interested in attending, but to make this valuable event accessible to people in remote communities, online attendance is also possible at a reduced rate.

For more information, or to register online today for United in Treaty, please visit the Inspire Group of Companies LTD website: <https://www.unitedintreaty.ca/> and join those dedicated to “standing together in knowledge and action.”



"Going for a Dip" by Linus Woods. On exhibit at wakinagallery.com.

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Our cover artist Linus Woods

By ANNews staff

The beautiful image on the cover of this month's *Alberta Native News* is titled 'Kiowa's Horse' by acclaimed First Nations artist Linus Woods.

Woods, who lives on the Long Plain First Nation reserve in southern Manitoba, is an artist's artist. He loves creating art and is most himself with a brush in hand. Although many patrons have encouraged him to market his art with limited prints or greeting cards, he has so far preferred to only paint and sell originals, while keeping his rates affordable for everyone to enjoy.

Woods is no stranger to Amiskwaciy Waskahikan. He has served several terms as a popular artist-in-residence at Highland Junior High School in northeast Edmonton and his art is much sought after in Alberta's capital city.

Woods credits his work's appearance at galleries, including Wah-Sa in Winnipeg and Bearclaw in Edmonton, for helping him build a large following, but these days he tends to eschew art galleries, because he doesn't want to be limited in the types of paintings he pursues. Those looking to purchase his art can do so via the boutique Wakina Gallery in Edmonton (wakinagallery.com).

"I don't have one style of painting," he told *Alberta Native News*. "I paint so much and there

are so many things I like painting." Woods describes much of his art as "whimsical," including paintings of rabbits in different scenarios, inspired by his natural surroundings on reserve.

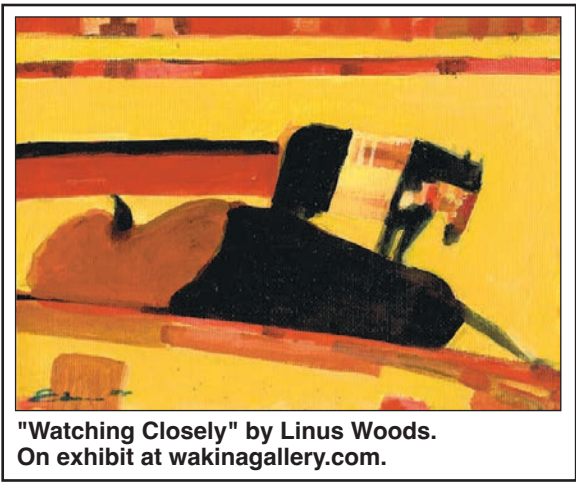
"It's half realism and half cartoon," he explained. "Because I paint these little, hidden characters. We used to call them spirits. I had no way to explain them to some viewers. I called them 'little grandfathers' hidden all over the place. In some of these paintings, you really have to look to find a little cherry tree in there."

Linus's good nature and sense of humour shine through in conversation and sometimes in the titles of his art. He also has a spiritual side which comes through in his art.

Woods said he's not constrained by the traditional stylings of his nation's art, which is Ojibway and Dakota, incorporating stylings from Cree, Inuit and South American Indigenous Peoples as well.

Some of his paintings reflect his deep concerns about the impact of industry on the environment and the dwindling habitat for northern wildlife. He also loves painting aliens.

Woods also communicates a broad spectrum of emotions in his art. In some paintings, he tells a story of movement where you can feel the speed



"Watching Closely" by Linus Woods. On exhibit at wakinagallery.com.

of a galloping horse or the crashing waves of a river. In others, he conveys the still of a meadow or a cloudy sky with such detail that you immediately feel at ease.

There are many elements contained in each of Woods' images. His large paintings are breathtaking, but even the smaller images and the portraits are full of surprises and expression – and his use of colour is amazing, sometimes vibrant, other times layered but always interesting.

Woods' mastery of his craft continues to amaze art lovers – the range of his subjects and techniques is diverse and elicits a sense of awe and wonderment in everyone who views his art.

Linus Woods' paintings can be viewed at wakinagallery.com.

National Indigenous History Month at CPL celebrates Treaty 7

National Indigenous History Month at Calgary Public Library is bringing the community together to celebrate the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Treaty 7 with events, activities, and resources.

The month has become a significant tradition for many Calgarians. More than 200 people attended the kickoff event over the May long weekend — a film screening of *Singing Back the Buffalo*. The film shared the stories of the Indigenous visionaries, scientists, and communities that are rematriating the buffalo to the heart of the North American plains. This was the first of many more programs that will educate and inspire throughout June.

"National Indigenous History Month is an important opportunity to create spaces for conversation and learning and to celebrate the vast cultures of Indigenous peoples across the country and right here in Wîcîspa, Guts'ists'i, and

Moh'kinstsis," says Sarah Meilleur, CEO of Calgary Public Library. "Stories are shared, voices celebrated, and community is at the heart."

Guided by the Calls to Action and White Goose Flying report, the library is committed to increasing awareness and understanding of Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing by listening to, learning from, and building relationships with local Indigenous communities. Throughout the year, patrons can meet with elders from different nations at the Elders' Guidance Circle, visit ten locations with Indigenous Placemaking — installations by artists from or with a connection to Treaty 7 — and so much more.

This month, all 22 Calgary Library locations will have buttons, Land Acknowledgement bookmarks, and Indigenous Placemaking booklets. From film screenings, storytimes, and special guest appearances, there are also plenty of programs to take part in throughout June.

"Working with community members for events like National Indigenous History Month ensures

we are sharing directly from the root of the culture and is a vital part of helping everyone feel they belong at the library," says Kelli Morning Bull, Service Design Lead at Calgary Public Library. "It's an honour to have a platform like the library to share people being their authentic selves and to have a space to share who they are."

Kelli was recently recognized as a 2025 Mover & Shaker in the Library Journal's annual issue as a Community Builder. The Movers & Shakers Award winners include people across North America who are shaping the future of libraries through their innovative, proactive, and supportive work.

Kelli says she's humbled and honoured to receive this recognition.

"It's nice to be recognized for the hard work that everybody contributes to. It makes you reflect on what Indigenous Services at the Library started as and what it's come to be. There's still lots of work that needs to be done but it excites me to see things progressing," says Kelli.

People attending multiple events this month can pick up a bingo card with various activities and tasks, bringing it back to the library at the end of June for a special prize. For more information on National Indigenous History Month programs, visit calgarylibrary.ca/indigenous-services.

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NSD's reconciliation work earns top award

Northland School Division (NSD) received a special award from the Public School Boards Association of Alberta (PSBAA) for its work in advancing one or more of the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).

The award was presented at the PSBAA Spring General Assembly in Calgary on June 4, 2025. Northland was recognized for putting reconciliation into action in schools, as described in the division's 2024-2027 Education Plan, nsd61.ca/download/453870.

NSD's work supports TRC Calls to Action 10, 14, 62, 63 and 64. This includes:

- Teaching students on the land and helping them learn Indigenous languages.
- Working with Elders and adding Indigenous language signs in schools.
- Creating Elder & Knowledge Keepers and Youth Councils to help guide school decisions.
- Offering training to help staff better understand Indigenous cultures and histories.
- Hosting Cree language and culture events with Elders and Knowledge Keepers.
- Working with families and community members to improve education.

Over the past two years, Northland has also hosted a series of community engagement sessions. Feedback from these sessions helped shape the division's priorities, outcomes and strategies. This helped make sure the voices of families, Elders and students guided the division's work so that Northland students thrive.

"This award reflects the voices and contributions of the communities Northland serves," said Tanya Fayant, Board Chair. "We are deeply honoured to be recognized for this work. It shows what can happen when families, Elders and staff work together to support students. The division's efforts are guided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the vision families have for their children."

"Families told us what needed to change. We listened," said Cal Johnson, Superintendent of

Schools/CEO. "Their feedback shaped the Education Plan and helped guide the work happening in schools every day. We are seeing real improvement in student results, including a significant increase in high school completion, and greater satisfaction with the quality of education in the communities Northland serves."

See how Northland School Division is supporting students and communities in Year 2 of the Education Plan at nsd61.ca/download/512929.

In other news, Northland School Division's proposal to offer collegiate programming has been approved by Alberta Education, along with funding to support program delivery. Starting in the 2025 to 2026 school year, students will have more access to hands-on learning that connects directly to careers in skilled trades, healthcare, and education.

Programs will be offered in Wabasca-Desmarais, Paddle Prairie, and in Fort McMurray. Students will build real-world skills, earn high school credits, and explore future job opportunities in areas like carpentry, welding, heavy duty mechanics, cosmetology, Health Care Aide, and Educational Assistant.

The collegiate model was created with input from students, families, and community members. It focuses on learning that is practical, flexible, and reflects what students need to succeed after graduation and what communities need to



On May 23, Northland School Division hosted its Long Service Awards. Leanne Gladue was presented with artwork in recognition of 25 years of service. She was joined by the Board Chair, Vice-Chair, Superintendent, and the Principal of Mistassiniy School.

grow and thrive.

"When we listen to families, we hear that they want their children to be proud of where they come from and to feel confident about their future," said Fayant. "These programs give students real skills and a clear path forward."

"This programming reflects what we've heard from students, families, and school staff across the division," added Johnson. "It opens the door for more students to explore careers while finishing high school and staying connected to their communities. I'm grateful to Associate Superintendent Mark Owens and Director of Engagement and High School Completion Amy Savill for helping bring this work forward."

The program is supported by Northern Lakes College, Keyano College, Alberta Health Services, Bigstone Health, and local industry partners including Rick Sim Trucking, Atoske Action Group, and Suncor.

Victoria Gubbels cont. from p 5

misconceptions of Indigenous peoples within Canada. The training is supported by Elders from across Alberta and facilitated by Indigenous facilitators teachings Indigeous history from an Indigenous perspective. The Elders teach that it is important that we always start in Ceremony. Therefore, Elders begin the training in Ceremony to provide a 'safe space' for participants to learn about our shared history and the history of residential schools which many have never heard about. Today, Gubbels is passionate about continuing this work of educating others based on the Elders teachings, their guidance and doing it in a good way – without blame, shame, or guilt about this shared history. She feels that in Alberta, we have one of the most innovative training programs in Canada because of the many diverse Elders that support and are involved in the training provided, "the truth path to reconciliation is through education."

Gubbels continues to immerse herself into her work, gifting people the information that will help them make connections and build positive relations. To date there have been 20,500 participants across government that have taken this training. "My role is to honour all cultures by making sure everyone comes to the table and is included in our policies and in our systems and workforce," she concludes. "We address every misinformation by opening peoples' hearts and their minds."


Happy National Indigenous Peoples' Day

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Thank you, Hai, Hai, Masi Cho.

Tree planting frenzy kicks off National Indigenous History Month in Edmonton Kihcihkaw Askî

Article and photos by Terry Lusty, LJI Reporter

The city of Edmonton's Root for Trees initiative has again opened its doors, inviting the public to step up to the plate in its quest to plant two million trees in and around the city. That's right, I did say two million trees!

Partnering with the city's Indigenous Relations Office, the tree planting on Sunday, June 1st, 2025, welcomed scores of volunteers from far and wide. On that particular day, many of the volunteers were from Edmonton's Indigenous community with their own concerns for the wellbeing of the city's ecology. And what better time for them to give of themselves by aiding the environment than June 1st - the start of National Indigenous History Month. After all, many Indigenous people consider themselves to be "Keepers" and/or "Protectors" of the environment.

Offering words of welcome, along with an opening prayer, were Elders Emil Desrocher and Betty Letendre who often serve the spiritual needs of urban Natives.

The event then proceeded under the guidance of fancy dancer, Larson Yellowbird Sr's six-member dance troupe. Yellowbird, a renowned and highly skilled dancer spun a story of the origin and development of the "sacred" land that the people were standing upon, land referred to as

"Kihcihkaw Askî." The site, he continued, was traditional ceremonial land where the Cree often gathered and conducted their ceremonies when travelling in the area. Today it is flanked by Fox Drive on one side and Fort Edmonton Park on the other.

Yellowbird spoke of the need to properly care for our environment, especially the plants and animals, the clean waters and clean air, cool, shaded areas along city streets in the hot summers, etc. – all of which contributes to an enhanced biodiversity.

The selection of this sacred land resulted from a lengthy process, dating back to 2006 when the Edmonton Indigenous Resource Counsel requested the city to consider a deep and troubling absence in their spiritual lives. That immense void they stated was the loss of their permanent site where they once gathered to uphold their cultural practice, ceremonies and teachings.

Timing, being what it is, especially when it comes to politics, has to be perfect. A positive response did not surface at the time. However, numerous communities across Canada were conducting investigations into the dark sides of the Residential Schools. Through gatherings, conferences and story-telling, the shameful truths surfaced. The public and governments felt ashamed of that dark and horrific past that robbed Indigenous people of their languages, traditions, beliefs and practices, their identities, arts, hunting rights and much more.

Right into 2014, the stories erupted and tore at the heartstrings of society. A record-setting crowd turned up at a 2014 Residential School Survivors gathering in Edmonton's Shaw Conference Centre which set the tone whereby governments, churches and Canadians in general witnessed, firsthand, the adverse effects and damages those institutions created as well as the inter-generational trauma that the schools left in their wake.

Thus, the tone was set, society knew the wrongs needed mending. It was this era that proved the time was "right" for Edmonton's



Larson Yellowbird Sr. performed a high-energy fancy dance solo.



Planting young trees in Edmonton

Indigenous people to acquire what they'd lost in terms of a gathering place. A committee was formed, consisting of approximately 40 Elders and a few city officials. They laid out their plans, desires, protocols, concerns and designs to create Kihcihkaw Askî (Sacred Earth) - the site where the existing Alfred H. Savage Centre was then situated.

City council went along with the plan and the site was formally opened after the world pandemic fizzled substantially - around 2021-2022. In Sept. of 2023 Kihcihkaw Askî was officially opened and placed into the keeping of the city's Indigenous population. Now they were able to grow medicinal plants, construct sweatlodges, host ceremonies, and facilitate intergenerational learning.

Continued on page 20

King's speech cont. from p 4
hoping to speak to the King of the nation we entered into Treaty with.”
“I know he is busy, but imagine if you haven’t seen your business partner in 150 years,” said Jacko.
He called on King Charles to collaborate with Prime Minister Carney to establish a Royal Commission on Treaty in the 21st Century to

uphold and affirm Treaty rights in the face of changing biodiversity and growing loss of water.
Grand Chief Trevor Mercredi of Treaty 8 First Nations in Alberta, in which the oil sands are located, noted the amount of “resource revenue ... coming from our lands each and every day while our people are suffering.”
“Our people come here in duress today. We don’t come here with peace on our minds,” said Mercredi, the former chief of Beaver First Nation.

He added that it was “unacceptable” that most Treaty First Nations leaders were forced to stand “outside here on the sidewalks” while King Charles spoke in the Senate.

When the King spoke of “barriers and red tape removal, he’s talking about us,” said Mercredi.

National Dene Chief George Mackenzie, who represents five First Nations in the Northwest Territories, contrasted the “modern infrastructure” in downtown Ottawa with the “broken windows” and poverty on First

Nations reserves.
“Our young people should be strong in their culture, language, can survive on the land and be proud of it, [and] at the same time, be the best they can be in education,” said Chief Mackenzie. “We need to be given that opportunity.”
Chief Billy-Joe Tuccaro of Mikisew Cree First Nation in Treaty 8 noted that there are few things all Treaty First Nations leaders can agree on.
“Among the chiefs, we all have different agendas, but one thing we have in common is the Treaty, and we must fight for that for the future generations to come,” he said.
He said the government’s promise to reduce project approval timelines by 60 per cent is “very alarming” for members of his community, given the impact of tar sands mining on their health.
Addressing the federal government, Dene Tha’ First Nation Chief Wilfred Hooka-Nooza emphasized the “shared journey” of reconciliation.
“It requires more than promises. It requires action. It requires you to listen to our stories, understand our struggles and work with us to address the wrongs of the past and present,” he said.
“It requires you to honour the Treaties, not as historical documents but as living agreements that are vital to our collective future.”
To his fellow First Nations leaders, Hooka-Nooza offered a message of hope, “for it is hope that sustains us and guides us towards the future generation.”

Committed to real reconciliation via the 94 Calls to Action of the TRC and the 231 Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into MMIWG

Heather McPherson
Member of Parliament
Edmonton Strathcona

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A portrait of Heather McPherson, a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blue jacket, standing in front of a colorful, abstract background.

The road to recovery

By Xavier Kataquapit

As a First Nation person I have been terrorized by alcohol and drug addiction all my life. I grew up with this reality and continue to witness the effects of addictions today. From the time I was a child I realized how terrible life was because of alcohol and drugs. I vowed to never head in that direction however, as soon as I went into my teen years I joined the party.

Lucky for me, my cousin, who had gone to treatment, studied as a drug and alcohol First Nation counsellor, returned to my community and started up an Alcoholic Anonymous healing group. I joined that group and began to figure things out. Thanks to that help, support from others on the road to recovery and traditional and cultural healing guidance I have been sober now for almost three decades. It has not been an easy road but believe me it is much easier than being a slave to alcohol and drug addiction.

I commend all those who are involved in health, social services, drug addiction counselling and our leaders who are doing their best to help our people recover from these terrible addictions. Sometimes those in power and leadership are also dealing with addictions and they resist efforts to deal with drug and alcohol addictions simply due to the fact that they feel threatened and perhaps if they are in denial and they do not want to deal with sober addiction workers. Our First Nation communities have been dealing with difficult and challenging lives with all kinds of abuse, violence, dysfunction and hopelessness for what seems like forever. That is what happens when people are alcohol and drug addicted with communities and families being turned upside down and torn apart. I urge more of our young people to seek education in drug and alcohol addiction and to face any addictions they have so that they can help our communities recover. I also

encourage our First Nation people who have dealt with addictions to drugs and alcohol, gone for treatment, been educated as drug and alcohol counsellors and most importantly who are in recovery to return to our First Nations and help others with their knowledge and experience. We need this to happen so that we can deal with all of the terrible results of colonization, residential school trauma and racism we have experienced over more than 100 years.

I am so exhausted with dealing with the news of people I know passing away at young ages due to addictions to drugs and alcohol. These days the drug reality on the street has changed and we see substances that are so addictive and so powerful that once a person gets hooked it is very difficult to recover and heal. Yet it is possible to save people and I give thanks to all those front line drug and alcohol addiction workers who are dealing every day with this terrible epidemic killing and wounding our people. We need these survivors who are in recovery to help our people. We need First Nation counsellors and workers with experience first hand in recovery, relapse, the use of AA, NA, traditional and cultural healing to give our future generations hope.

One of my favourite stories I picked up years ago gives us an idea of how important it is for our people in recovery to be a big part in helping our communities suffering with alcohol and drug addictions. It goes like this:

A man is walking down a street when he falls in a hole. The walls are steep and he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the man shouts up, 'Hey you, can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the man shouts up 'Father, I'm down in this hole, can you help me out?' The priest



kneels down and recites a prayer for the man in the hole and then moves on. Next a psychologist walks by and the man in the hole calls out for help. The psychologist suggests that the man think about his childhood, trauma experiences and consider making an appointment for counselling. Lastly, a fellow walks by and the man in the hole calls out for help saying 'I'm in this hole and can't figure out how to get out'. The fellow jumps into the hole, where the trapped man says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' His new friend says, 'Yeah, don't worry I've been down here before, and I know the way out.'

We need First Nation survivors who have been through the journey of recovery to help our communities. We need people who already know how to crawl out of the dark hole of addictions to help those who are still trapped. These people are precious to us and are a great part of the solution to healing First Nations.


For more columns by Xavier Kataquapit visit www.underthenorthernsky.com



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Tree planting cont. from p 18

Fast forward to June 1st, 2025, when 200 or so turned up at the site for the annual Root for Trees event. This project of the city, partnered with the city's Indigenous Relations Office, led the charge. City councillor Karen Tang read aloud the city's proclamation, designating June as National Indigenous History Month and handed the document over to Elder Desrocher. The program lead of Root for Trees, Lindsay Vander Hoek, thanked the tree-planting volunteers for the generous contribution of their time and efforts to the project.

After the opening speeches, the Indigenous entertainment segment swung into motion with the calming and melodic flute playing by Mark Taylor, who tours the city mentoring so many youngsters along the way.

Taylor was followed by Bobbi Jo Starr who engaged her audience with some of her own compositions as she backed herself up on guitar. One might want to keep an eye open for her new CD being released in the very near future.

Fiddler Brianna Lizotte, originally from northwestern Alberta, got toes tapping with her lively, smooth fiddle tunes. Every time this writer happens to come upon her performing at one place or another, she seems to always introduce something new and wonderful that she's added to her repertoire of great numbers. Really, she is a gifted artist,

The Inuinnait Drum Dancing proved a strong and interesting addition in contrast to southern music, song and dance. Goota Desmarais introduced the audience to dance performers Jaynine and Connie McCrae who shared Inuit dance stylings that are different from southern styles, yet very appealing. Desmarais also



The wee wagon was a real hit!



A brief Round Dance invited all people to join hands and dance with the performers at the Root for Trees event held in Edmonton on June 1st at Kihcihkaw Askî.

extended an open invitation to all present to stop by her tupic (Inuit tent) so she could show them examples of real-life Inuit culture.

While the performing artists commanded deserving attention, the planting of young trees moved forward with a vengeance. Dozens of volunteers kept the planting area hopping as the planters scurried to and fro to dig a new hole and plant yet another tree.

The tree planters were of varying ages, backgrounds and interests. The one shared commonality they seemed to exhibit was the drive and commitment to do exactly what they came to do in the first place - to plant trees. Many laboured feverishly to plant a tree, then dash off, pick up another young tree or two, and hurry off to get it planted. Overall, a most pleasing scenario.

As for those who were all done planting by 3 p.m. or thereabouts, they were fortunate enough to be treated to the spectacular dancing performance of fancy dancer Larson Yellowbird Sr., in addition to Larson Jr., Juliaan and Alexandra Yellowbird, Sage and Soren Jay Desjarlais and Pesim Thunderbird Woman.

Larson Sr. explained the different dances to his audience and wrapped up his own performance by executing a solo to the delight and applause of the crowd.

Anyone wanting to help Root for Trees programs can do so by emailing rootfortrees@edmonton.ca. We're sure, they'd be more than happy to have you jump onto their band wagon.



Top: Performer Bobbi Jo Starr
Bottom: Performer Mark Taylor

Cleansing cont. from p 6

"I was a real asshole at times," shared Aspeslet. "At the same time, being kind to myself, I know that I was just growing to get to the point where I am today. Looking back now, recognizing my behaviour and knowing that it wasn't okay, being remorseful for it but not continuing to carry and sit in that. [I can] acknowledge it and let it go." These are the understandings of what it has meant for Thalia to be accountable while not carrying

those emotions forward, instead putting them to rest in a safe place, and what Elders and Knowledge Keepers have taught her over the years.

But before smudging and being in ceremony became a walk a life for Aspeslet, (and in her life before her son was born), she knew that the choices she was making for herself were harmful to her and everyone around her while understanding the root source of being directionless. "I didn't have a solid grounding and

understanding of who I was," she shared, "to be proud of who I was. [It was] never talked about."

Fast forward 20 years of choosing the path less traveled every day while being grounded in ceremony, knowing it is not always butterflies and rainbows, Aspeslet continues to honour the understanding that "there is always a better way," along with choices to be accountable and how these choices show up in spaces so we can respect one another.

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LEGEND

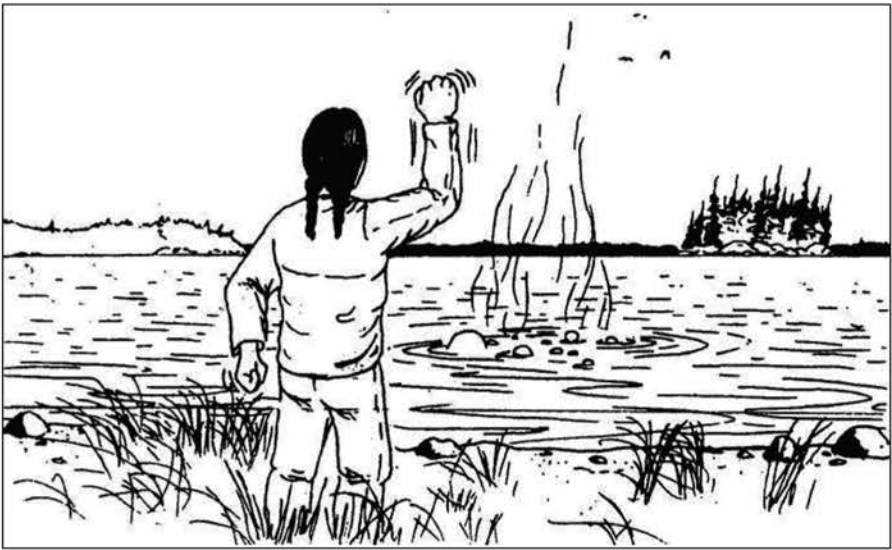
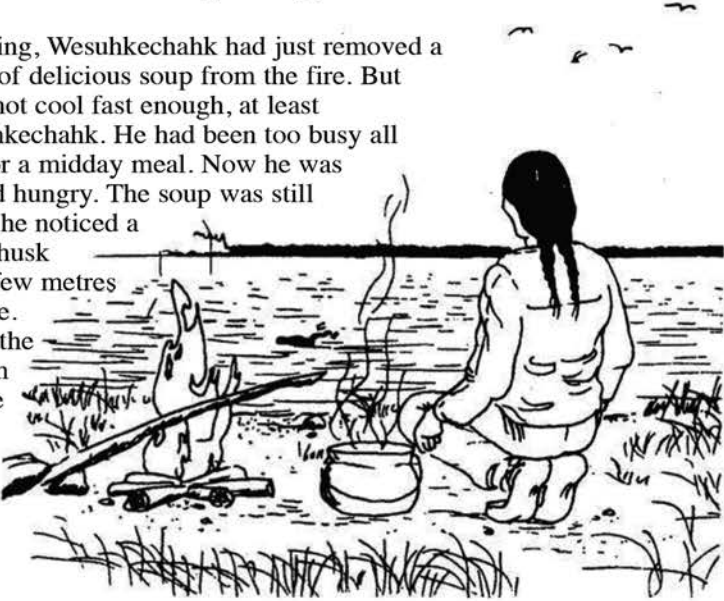
How the muskrat got its tail is provided by the Lac La Ronge Band, Curriculum Resource Unit who are dedicated to providing quality educational resources to all the people of the First Nations.

How the muskrat got its tail

Collected and illustrated by: James Ratt
Told by: Percy McKenzie

It was evening, Wesuhkechahk had just removed a cauldron full of delicious soup from the fire. But the soup did not cool fast enough, at least not for Wesuhkechahk. He had been too busy all day to stop for a midday meal. Now he was dead tired and hungry. The soup was still too hot when he noticed a muskrat Wuchusk swimming a few metres from the shore.

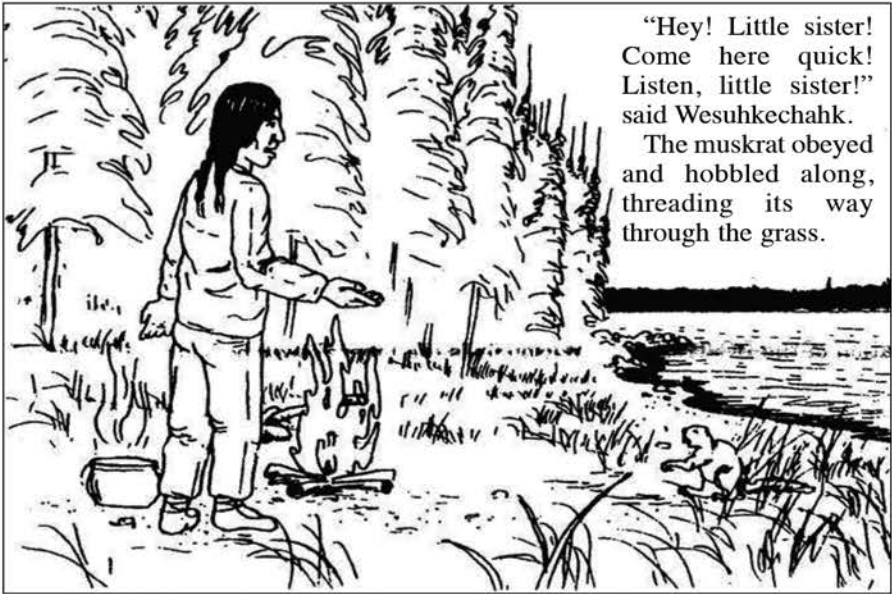
Sometimes the muskrat swam on the surface of the lake, sometimes diving and disappearing further away.



Wesuhkechahk emptied the soup into a moose hide vessel which he tied with a cord. The muskrat plunged under the water bearing the precious burden. However, just at the moment when the vessel was going to disappear under the water, the cord gave way and the animal's tail received a shower of boiling soup. The vessel disappeared and the soup mixed with the waters of the lake.



In an angry rage, Wesuhkechahk stormed and fumed. Wuchusk, the muskrat, came out of the water with a scalded tail! Wesuhkechahk saw that all the hair was gone from its tip. He made a vow that no hair would ever grow or cover the tail of a muskrat from one generation to the next. To this day, Wuchusk has a naked tail!



"Hey! Little sister! Come here quick! Listen, little sister!" said Wesuhkechahk. The muskrat obeyed and hobbled along, threading its way through the grass. "What is it, big brother?" asked Wuchusk. "Will you do me a favour? My soup is too hot and I am dying of hunger. Will you plunge it into the cold water of the lake for me?" "Gladly!" she answered.



Celebrate National Indigenous Peoples Day

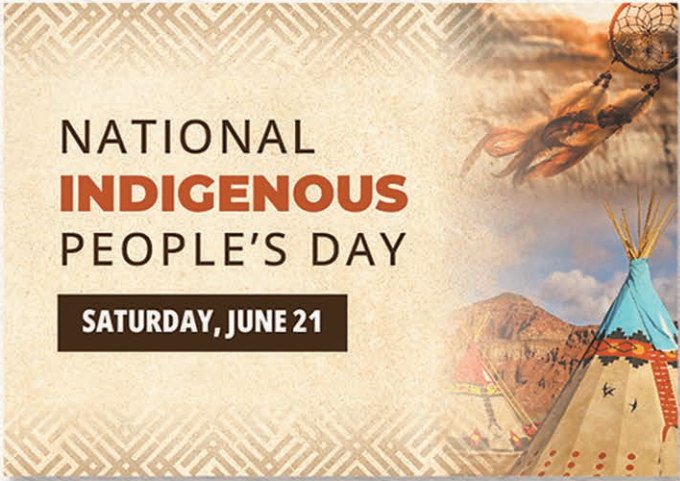
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Treaty Rights first: Alberta needs First Nations’ consent to separate

By Kinnukana, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

For several years now, the Alberta government has voiced dissatisfaction with a number of federal policies on things like energy, taxation and equalization payments and believes that its economic contributions are not matched by federal support. The Alberta government is asking for more control from the federal government. These ongoing concerns have led some Albertans to begin a petition calling on Alberta to separate from Canada. Treaty First Nations’ (First Nations) have stated that decisions about separation cannot be made without consultation and agreement with them on this matter. However, the Alberta government has been responding to the call and making legislation more responsive to allow a referendum on this issue. The Alberta government cannot unilaterally make this decision on their own and must address Indigenous rights and Treaty obligations based on legal, constitutional, and historical facts.

In May 2025, Premier Danielle Smith introduced Bill 54, which lowers the threshold for initiating a referendum and now a citizen-led petition only requires signatures from ten percent of eligible votes within a hundred and twenty days, down from the previous twenty per cent requirement. Premier Smith has stated that if there is sufficient public support for separation, a referendum could be held in 2026. Some activists have also proposed that Alberta join the United States of America as its 51st state, while others say this is ridiculous. Critics also argue that a separation from Canada risks economic and political instability in Alberta. This issue is causing a strong divide in the relationship between Alberta and First Nations, not just in the Province but across the country.

It is important to understand and recognize the rights of First Nations who have inhabited this country long before Canada and Alberta were established. These right are laid out in legislation and legal decisions that already define why Alberta cannot unilaterally separate. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 establishes Indigenous land rights. This proclamation was issued by King George III after the Seven Years’ War. It recognized Indigenous land rights and set out that only the Crown could buy land from Indigenous Nations through formal Treaties. This document was later affirmed in court decisions.

One hundred years later, in 1867, the British North America Act (Constitution Act, 1867) created the Dominion of Canada and Indigenous affairs was placed under federal jurisdiction. In 1870, Britain transferred Rupert’s Land to Canada, which included what would become

Alberta. Between 1876-1899, Treaty 6 (1876), Treaty 7 (1877), and Treaty 8 (1899) signed formal agreements with the Crown, not the provinces. These agreements cover Alberta, parts of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories. The First Nations title to land was not extinguished.

The Treaties in Canada were intended to share the land and ensure peaceful co-existence. However, these Treaties were negotiated in bad faith, with the Crown making promises—such as the provision of education, healthcare, and support that have not been fully honored. Many First Nations leaders entered these agreements with the understanding that they were entering into a partnership based on mutual respect, but the Canadian government frequently failed to uphold its side. Colonization further deepened these injustices, bringing forced displacement, residential schools, and the erosion of languages, cultures, and traditional ways of life. The impacts of these actions are still felt today, as First Nations communities continue to fight for the recognition of their rights, proper implementation of Treaty promises, and meaningful reconciliation.

When Alberta joined Confederation in 1905, First Nations were not consulted and Treaty obligations remained with the Crown. Alberta did not inherit Treaty authority. Any attempt by Alberta to separate would directly violate these Treaty relationships and the sovereignty of First Nations. Alberta has no authority over these Treaties, and First Nations are not bound by any Alberta referendum. In fact, First Nations leaders across Alberta have consistently affirmed that Treaty Peoples never surrendered sovereignty, and that no Alberta government has the right to act on their behalf in separation talks.

There are other constitutional principles and precedent rulings that come into play. The Constitution Act was established in 1982 and section 35 recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights. The Constitution Act outlines the structure of government and the rights of provinces. Section 91 and 92 divide powers between federal and provincial governments, but there is no constitutional mechanism for a province to separate. In 1998, there was a ruling regarding Quebec entitled *The Reference re Secession of Quebec* (Supreme Court of Canada) which ruled that a province cannot unilaterally separate from Canada, even with a clear referendum result. A province would be required to enter negotiations with the federal government and separation would require a constitutional amendment, which involves not

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just Parliament but also all the other provinces. In short, Alberta cannot simply vote itself out of Canada.

Also, the 2007, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognizes Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination and to their lands, territories, and resources. Canada fully endorsed UNDRIP in 2016 and passed the 2021 UNDRIP Act which requires all federal laws to align with UNDRIP. This is now considered an International standard. Alberta’s Action on UNDRIP states publicly that “We continue to work together [with First Nations] to ensure: Indigenous constitutional rights and First Nations Treaty rights are respected.” Action on UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | Alberta.ca

Even if Alberta held a referendum and the majority voted to separate, the province does not have the legal authority to unilaterally leave Canada. If Alberta continues to pursue separation, the process will have to include meaningful, nation-to-nation negotiations with First Nations whose inherent and Treaty rights are constitutionally protected. Without free, prior, and informed consent from First Nations, any separation effort would be unlawful under both Canadian law and international frameworks. While frustration with the federal government is real and valid for many Albertans, the notion that Alberta can unilaterally separate from Canada is not only unconstitutional but also ignores the fundamental legal and moral obligations Canada and its provinces owe to First Nations. Alberta cannot go it alone.

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Coalition of First Nations contest the Mineral Tenure Agreement

By John Wirth, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

In Canada, provincial governments hold jurisdiction over many aspects of mining. These include the development and enforcement of mining regulations, the issuance of permits and licenses for mineral exploration and extraction, and the negotiation of agreements with mining companies. These agreements encompass critical areas such as environmental protection, royalty payments, and community benefit arrangements. With high tariffs on Canadian exports looming, gold prices have reached record highs this year, likely due to market uncertainty.

Meanwhile, a powerful coalition has formed to challenge the Mineral Tenure Agreement policy change. In its challenge, the Gitxaala Nation is standing with the full support of the Union of British Columbian Indian Chiefs (UBCIC).

Furthermore, the First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC) and British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) all stand against changes in policy that would attack their sovereign Indigenous territories.

The esteemed Chief Linda Innes of the Gitxaala Nation offered comment, “Last month the BC Court of Appeal heard Gitxaala Nation’s partial appeal of the BC Supreme Court’s 2023 ruling that BC’s UNDRIP legislation (DRIPA) was not legally enforceable in the courts. Our goal is for the BC Court of Appeal to clarify that DRIPA does in fact create legal obligations for BC, and where BC and First Nations disagree about whether laws are consistent with UNDRIP, the courts have a role to play in holding the BC Government to account for their own legislative commitments.”

The Gitxaala Nation is appealing the Mineral Tenure Act (MTA) which does not uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). In an effort to address this, the province responded by

developing a framework known as BC’s Mineral Claims Consultation Framework (MCCF).

Gitxaala Nation Chief Innes asserts that, “the Province of BC’s draft Mineral Claims Consultation Framework is a disappointing reflection of the Province’s view of their duty to consult Indigenous title holders.”

While the province is satisfied in their framework, it falls bitterly short of what’s considered fair.

Chief Innes continues, “It is nothing more than a standard referral process, like so many others the province has been running for decades, with no reference to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples standard of free, prior and informed consent.”

She points out that the MCCF is only a “standard referral process” acting as consultation. It does not have any meaningful strategies for ensuring free, prior and informed consent, enshrined in UNDRIP.

BCAFN Regional Chief Terry Teegee clarifies, “The Declaration Act requires the province to work with First Nations to take all necessary measures to ensure the Mineral Tenure Act is amended to address that inconsistency.”

Adding a process in the MCCF framework that bypasses the “consultation phase” entirely when there is “no response,” doesn’t beat allegations of tokenism and reveals a fundamental disrespect for Indigenous decision-making processes.

This framework falls squarely within the established pattern of “consultation” as a procedural formality rather than a genuine attempt to build nation-to-nation relationships based on mutual respect.

The Gitxaala Nation’s legal challenge, currently before the BC Court of Appeal, aims to make clear what is the legal enforceability of DRIPA. This case has big implications for the



future of Indigenous rights in British Columbia.

A favorable ruling could establish a precedent for holding the province accountable for its commitments to UNDRIP and free, and informed consent. On the other hand, an unfavorable ruling would further tip the power imbalance and dig a deeper hole for the ongoing violation of Indigenous sovereignty.

Indigenous Communities’ voices have not been respected in these discussions of mineral extraction in British Columbia because historically, the province and corporations have profited from regulation concerning Indigenous Title Holders.

It’s more than just the development of the land, its big picture is that the MTA and the new framework attempts to dispossess people from their lands and thereby severely impact their right to self-determination. One huckleberry bush requires many generations of good ancestors to even begin to provide for their community, but only one generation to knock it down. We can all think of a medicine just like that in our home territories. And that’s why First Nations and other groups are standing with the Gitxaala.

The Gitxaala Nation’s challenge to the MTA is a crucial step in this process, offering an opportunity to move beyond the legacy of resource colonialism and towards a future where Indigenous sovereignty is truly respected.

One can read further details on this issue as they happen on the BC government website at www.gov.bc.ca.

Life is Sacred cont. from p 11

perpetuate violence in forms of self-hate and self-loathing. We need fathers stepping up and empowering our daughters.”

The choice that Littlechild made to further her education led her to understanding that, “this is my journey. When you understand oppression, you learn not to perpetuate it [because] you are

conscious of it.” Ruby walks her talk and teaches others how to walk in a good way. This had led her into the work that she does as the National Director of Government and Indigenous Relations with AtkinsRéalis. Learning how to best work with non-First Nations allies, Littlechild’s advice she would gift to her younger self, is: make friends with people from different nationalities. “We all have been mean to each

other; pray, go to ceremony, seek higher learning and stay on that road.”

Ruby Littlechild was the recipient of the 2025 Indigenous Women in Leadership Award, sponsored by LNG Canada – an annual award presented to an Indigenous woman who has demonstrated exceptional leadership, mentorship, and impact on her community.

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