FIRST NATIONS WOMEN’S HEALING
Moving from Hardship to Resilience

The Women’s Health Research Project on FASD Prevention in First Nations Communities
How do place, culture, and relationships affect our health and healing? While the impetus for the collection of these photos came from an interest in understanding how to address substance misuse during pregnancy in First Nations women across Canada, it quickly became clear that traditional alcohol and drug ‘awareness’ campaigns and other ‘mainstream’ approaches were of limited value and that new ways of thinking are required.

This Photovoice project was an entry point to developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of women who are concerned about their health, their family, and their culture. Their images and words reflect an understanding of health and healing based on relationships - with the land, with family and friends, with community, and with culture. It is important to develop an understanding that acknowledges the history and the conditions in which women experience and make sense of the complexities of substance use, pregnancy, and mothering.

Health and healing for First Nations women is an individual and collective process. Substance use, violence, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), diabetes - these are examples of collective, not individual issues, rooted in losses that are multiple and inter-generational. There are many First Nations women across Canada who are working to address the health issues of their communities, telling their stories, recording history, and creating new models of caring and healing. We have included excerpts from the writings of some of these leaders in the following pages.

The camera can help us move towards meaningful and respectful dialogue about issues that concern us the most. It has been an honour to hear women’s stories of hardship and resilience - and of hope and survival. I hope that these images and words can help us to understand more about the questions we need to be asking and the breadth of possibilities for answers.

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June 2014

The Communities

Piikani Nation (Alberta)
Population (2011): 1,217

Sandy Bay First Nation (Manitoba)
Population (2011): 2,509

St. Mary’s First Nation (New Brunswick)
Population (2007): 1,394

Woodstock First Nation (New Brunswick)
Population (2012): 941
As Aboriginal women, we have been organizing, helping, healing, and researching throughout history. This has been possible because of the types of relationships, connections, and knowledge exchange systems that we have established among ourselves and with the human, natural, and supernatural worlds around us. There are some overall principles that we can take away from the stories shared by the grandmothers. These include valuing relationship-building with all out relations, the importance of reciprocity, and the need for ongoing processes of intergenerational knowledge transfer. These principles can ground us in Aboriginal research that is based on our own ways of knowing, being, and doing. As we move forward in the development of research focused on Aboriginal women’s health and healing practices, we must continue to gather together, share our thoughts, and seek out opportunities to apply the principle of being notokwe opihikeet, “old-lady raised,” within a modern context, so that our research can enhance the life, health, and well-being of our people.

Kim Anderson, Associate Professor, Indigenous Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University
“My daughter does not see herself like others do ... she says people tell her she is beautiful when she posts selfies but she doesn’t see it herself. I captured her beauty here and she loves it.”
“My grandma is my strength, inspiration and support. She is also support for health and healing in our community. She does men’s groups and works with the women through Child & Family Services. She is 90 years young and still worrying about everyone’s health and well being in their community.”
“As a single parent, you don’t have help, don’t have nothing. I just take it step by step, day by day. And you can make it successfully.”
“My granddaughters - raising them has helped me cope with stress, feelings of depression. They give me a reason to wake up daily.”
“My younger brother passed away in a car accident when he was 25 years old. He left behind a wife and three daughters, one of whom had not yet been born at the time he passed – she was born two days after. He was close to us all and everyone was so broken. We are all learning to heal from losing him and learning to adjust to life without him.”
We must decolonize our homes, which simply means talking to our children, our partners, and our families, and connecting with them; telling them about historic and personal lies and about the beauty of our cultural and social truths. It means talking to our children as our ancestors used to do, before contact and the subjugation of women, before religious guilt and patriarchy took over, before the noisy, distracting inventions of the dominant culture took over everyone’s freedom and minds.

We must acknowledge our collective power as women, which simply means talking to each other, learning from each other, sharing our accomplishments with other women. We must celebrate our achievements, rather than tearing them down. We need to learn to hold up each other’s daily victories as examples of what can be done, and encourage our children, our families, and our communities to do the same.

*Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, Vice Provost (Aboriginal Initiatives) Lakehead University, Nexen Chair in Aboriginal Leadership, Chippewa of Georgina Island First Nation, Ontario*
“It is good to know where you come from. It is good to know who you are.”
“When you grow up here you always remember the wind wherever you go – the sounds of the winds always reminds you of home.”
“My truck is my freedom. Up until two years ago, I always walked or hiked to my destinations. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever owned in my life.”
“The land is important to my health. But sometimes it can also be isolating, especially in the winter. “
“My dad exercised his treaty rights and built this hunting and fishing camp on crown land. It is located a 40 minute drive from the reservation. My family has always hunted these traditional lands and will continue to do so.”
“A male deer in the field by town.”
“It hurts my heart to know that so many families have to bring their children up in homes that are not up to standard and not safe...There are too many homes like this in [our community] but the people have very few choices. Sadly that is why my sons moved away from the community - because there are no homes.”
“I worry for the people in my community who get themselves into trouble. I see a lot of these concerns in the work that I have done for 27 years in social services. There are many reasons for this. Many are bored, live in poverty, and there are no opportunities for our young people ... no jobs, educational opportunities or recreational activities. It seems like there is no way out. Many young people are not getting guidance and they are not encouraged to seek out opportunities outside the community. This is why many turn to alcohol and unhealthy activities.”
“In the wake of Aboriginal peoples’ cultural revival, our spiritual beliefs and practices have become increasingly important in our lives, prompting many Aboriginal women to turn to our elders for the counselling and the healing that they can provide. Looked upon as oral historians, teachers, cultural workers, ecologists and healers, elders’ wisdom is understood as coming from deep within their being, reaching into the past to link our people today to our ancestors and traditions.”

Madeleine Kētēkwew Dion Stout, MA, RN, Recipient of the 2010 National Aboriginal Achievement Award for Health
“I enjoy sewing, beading for my children, for the community. It gives me pride, watching people dancing and showing off the work I have done for the people.”
“My husband was a basket maker. I miss the sound of him pounding ash and making strips. I love to see his work.”
“My Catholic background is sacred to me. Smudging is also equally important to me and essential for cleansing and helping me stay connected to my culture.”
“Sage - I use it with my tea. Tobacco - I will put down if I am going to take something from Mother Earth, out of respect. I didn’t have a chance to live this side of my culture as I was in residential school for 11 years. My granddaughter is teaching me now and we are learning together.”
“Learning about the history of First Nations people has really helped shaped my thinking and beliefs in how I live my life. I have gained a deeper understanding of the many hardships and struggles of the First Nations people, but have also learned that our people are very resilient. Understanding the hardships, socio-economic conditions that plague First Nations people and their communities has helped me to live a healthy lifestyle. My choices I have made in my life are a reflection on the stories I have heard along with the many negative statistics on First Nations people and I chose long ago to not be another statistic for the Canadian government.”
“Only a piece of wood remains in the spot my husband, the fire keeper, would have his sacred fire. Any time there was a death or a need for a sacred fire in our community, he was called upon to tend it. We made many offerings to this fire...."
My story has been lived in spite of the many effects of residential school. My story is one of challenge, change, and a returning home to the richness and joy of being “self” and a remembering of the far distant past, before the numbing began, and the darkness hid the truth. My story is about the living of a life where the glory of a far distant past was brought cautiously into the present, where light shines forth from a life held high, and people can be given hope that they too can experience choice and walk with pride in this world. It did not come easily though, and it did not come young. It came with massive uncertainty, shame, a giving away, and a terrible loss of dignity. How can we know, and who can teach us those things that will help us pass safely through the gates of hell on earth and into the arms of a life well lived?

Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, Vice Provost (Aboriginal Initiatives) Lakehead University, Nexen Chair in Aboriginal Leadership, Chippewa of Georgina Island First Nation, Ontario
AFTERWORD: MOVING FROM HARDSHIP TO RESILIENCE

A topic like alcohol and pregnancy requires dialogue that is respectful of community and context. Different levels of awareness and different understandings about the challenges that contribute to overall poor health and issues such as addiction require finding a shared understanding of possible solutions. These issues are a reflection of a history of individual challenges in a woman’s life but are also linked to the legacies of trauma that are geographically and culturally bound within communities.

Identifying the daily practices that relate to health and healing is an important first step. The centrality of relationships in these images remind us that social disconnection is often at the heart of ill health and imbalance. The process of growth, change, and healing does not happen in isolation. And we know that many of the women who are most at risk for using alcohol and drugs during pregnancy have experienced disruption in their relationships with family, with culture, with place, and with their spirit. The images and text in this photoessay bring to the forefront the importance of relationship within families, in communities and with culture as a critical foundation for health and healing.

Paying attention to creating and rebuilding these relationships can help to shift an individual’s story from a story of hardship to a story of resilience, from a story of disempowerment to a story of self-determination, and from a story of cultural loss to a story about ways of bringing together the old and new. This work was only possible through the sharing spirit of women who became deeply engaged with this Photovoice project focused on health and healing in Alberta, Manitoba and New Brunswick. Thank you.

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June 2014
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Photo Credits

All photos were taken by the 37 First Nations women who participated in a community research project exploring perspectives on what they believe is helpful in preventing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in First Nations communities. Women were asked to explore the question “What does health and healing look like for you in your community?”

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Text Excerpts


This photoessay is part of *The Women's Health Research Project on FASD Prevention in First Nations Communities* (2013-2014) conducted by the Canada FASD Research Network. Learn more about the Network at www.canfasd.ca.

For more information about the research project, please contact: Dorothy Badry, PhD, RSW badry@ucalgary.ca

*Support for this project was made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of Health Canada.*
The Women’s Health Research Project on FASD
Prevention in First Nations Communities

Funded by the First Nations & Inuit Health Branch
(2013-2014)