indigenous masculinities identities & mino-bimaadiziwin
This booklet has been produced by the Bidwewidam Indigenous Masculinities (BIM) Research Project (www.IndigenousMasculinities.com), in association with the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres Kizhaay Anishinaabe Niin Program (www.OFIFC.org) and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com).

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This booklet is based on insights and words from the following Elders:

- Jim Albert, Urban Elder
- Wil Campbell, Metis
- Reggie David, Nuu-chah-nulth
- Ray John, Oneida
- Jules Lavalee, Metis
- Albert McLeod, Cree
- Rene Meshake, Anishinaabe
- Joseph Morrisson, Anishinaabe
- Tom Porter, Mohawk
- Ray Peters, Quw’ut sun
- Ted Quinney, Cree
- Dominique Rankin, Algonquin

Cover Art: Rene Meshake
Booklet photography, original artwork and design: Rene Meshake

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Toronto 2013

Funded by:
**BIDWEWIDAM means to come speaking in Anishinaabe.**

The book cover art is called UNCLE BIIDAN. We say Biidan for Peter because there is no letter R in Anishinaabemowin.

The book title Bidwewidam means bid (come), wewidam (speaking). Picture yourself in the forest and as you sit still, you hear someone’s voice becoming clearer and clearer as he/she comes near you. Bidwewidam describes the way indigenous masculinities, identities and mino-bimaadisiwin come speaking as one voice.

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It is said that when the Black Robe Missionaries came to our communities, they burned our flutes and the music died. When I began painting, I woke the music up! Now, I play the traditional Red Tailed Hawk flute. I may not read music, but I can read the music on this painting. When I see images, I hear music. My paintings are more than stories, they come speaking!

**Artist Statement by Rene Meshake**

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**Gibwanasi Pipigwan by Rene Meshake**
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This booklet explores ideas about Native men’s identities and masculinities. It offers the words and insights of twelve Elders from different Indigenous nations across Canada, with the intention of opening dialogue among Indigenous men and others with an interest in Indigenous masculinities.

The material comes out of a research project entitled “Bidwewidam Indigenous Masculinities.” (www.indigenousmasculinities.com) As listed on the previous page, we are a group of policy/program workers and researchers with an interest in Indigenous men’s identities. In 2011, we set up a project to explore how identity influences Native men’s health and wellness.

The first step of our project was to interview twelve Elders (see list on previous page), as we wanted to consider how our history might inform our future. As is often said, “You have to know where you are coming from to know where you are going!” We therefore asked our Elders the following questions:

1.) What can you share about Indigenous men’s traditional roles and responsibilities in your culture?
2.) What do you think happened to Indigenous men’s identities and well-being as a result of colonization?
3.) What are some of the needs you see for our men in terms of achieving bimaadiziwin (the good life)?

In writing this booklet, we organized the Elders responses according to themes, which included reflections on our history (Section I), our strengths (Section II) and moving forward (Section III).

Our hope is that we inspire thinking and discussion about the sacredness of our men and boys – those uncles, grandfathers, queer-two-spirited relations, newborn sons, and others that we need to make our communities whole. We want to honour and celebrate these boys and men, while recognizing the struggles faced by many to live healthy, fulfilling lives as family and community members. This material can also be useful as we develop programming for Indigenous men through Friendship Centres or other organizations.

We hope you enjoy this visit with our Elders, and that you take their offerings back with you into your families and communities.
SECTION I

OUR HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

Before, the men’s job was to carry the bones of ancestors, into the future. That’s a big responsibility. It involves teachings. It involves hunting, fishing, and it involves ceremonies of all kinds. It involves songs by the hundreds and hundreds. It involves where the constellations of stars are moving, and when and how that coordinates with what is growing and what’s available for hunting and everything. We need that connection.

Tom Porter, Mohawk

While Indigenous nations across Turtle Island were very different, the stories that the Elders told us show many similarities between our land-based communities of the past. For example, in general our communities were kinship based. Our survival depended on how well we worked with all our relations; human, plant, animal, spirit. In these kinship-based systems, everyone had an important role to fulfil, and health and well-being were dependent on how well each member of the collective fulfilled his or her role. Women, children, youth, elders and men typically had distinct and sacred roles and responsibilities, and no one was valued above the other.

In land-based communities, it was generally the men’s job to protect the community, and to provide for them. Men defended our families and communities against harm and warfare. Through hunting, fishing and trapping, they brought in resources that the women could then distribute to sustain the people. Men also had many other occupations and responsibilities, like carving and artisan work or making snowshoes and canoes. They were medicine men and healers, singers and dancers.

It is important to note that these roles and responsibilities were flexible. The bottom line was that if a job had to be done, it had to be done. Queer/two-spirited peoples also had distinct and
flexible ways of locating themselves within gendered roles and responsibilities, and of defining themselves according to flexible definitions of gender. What is significant is that all community members were valued. Everyone had a purpose and a sense of belonging. Everyone had something to contribute.

Mohawk Elder Tom Porter’s words about how it was the men’s job to “carry the bones of the ancestors” reminds us of the sacredness involved in men’s purpose to sustain our communities. Native men’s responsibilities involved developing and maintaining healthy relationships with all our relations. We need to work at regaining those connections today.

One way of reconnecting is to tell stories about how our men carried out their responsibilities in traditional communities.

We begin this section with stories our Elders told us about what they remember of the men in their families, and what they have been taught about men’s roles and responsibilities in the past.
The man is supposed to protect the medicine, all medicine: plants, fruits, everything. And when we talk about the medicine we talk about the women.

Dominique Rankin, Algonquin

Elder Dominique Rankin was raised in northern Quebec with an understanding that men have responsibilities to protect “the first woman,” our Mother Earth. Dominique remembers being taught “to protect our rivers, creeks, our animals, our birds.” These were the men’s teachings that he received.

Protecting the medicine of “the first woman” extended to protecting women in general. Men did not have domain over women, just as they do not have domain over Mother Earth. It was the men’s job to protect life, and according to our ways this never involved domination or control.

As a young boy, Dominique witnessed respect between his parents. He learned about balance and responsibilities to protect life. At the sweat lodge, for example, he always saw his father go in after his mother, “because medicine goes in first,” and the protector follows. It was Dominique’s father who gave the springtime teachings about protecting life because his mother was the one who “carried the medicine.” His mother had her own teachings, and his father did not interfere. Dominique also learned that women carry water, and there was a tremendous respect for this lifegiving capacity.

Today, Dominique lives according to what he learned from his parents about balance. He works with the women in his family to fulfil his roles and honour women’s relationship with Mother Earth. Dominique says “I can’t take decisions, just myself. If I want the medicine in the forest I’m going to ask my wife first.”
Teachings about women’s connection to water and darkness fit into Dominique’s practice at sunrise and sunset, reminding him of respect and gratitude for his mother and all women. As he says, “I learned about the dark from nine months inside mama. So every morning I drink water; every night when the sun goes down, I drink water and I say miigwetch to mama, because when I was born, the water came in first.”

These connections have been hard to maintain throughout our history. Being pushed off traditional lands created a tremendous challenge to Native men in terms of their identities as protectors, as Elder Wil Campbell points out:

“The role of men was protector and provider, but how can he protect if he has nothing to protect? How can he provide when he doesn’t have the ability to provide and that’s taken away from him by law? How can he be with his son, when they’ve taken him and put him into residential school or into foster care? So now there’s the grief and the loss and the pain and the suffering that traumatized men for the last ten generations.”

Cree Elder Albert McLeod talks about the trauma and the impact on identity connected with residential schooling, noting that many boys not only experienced abuse, but had to witness abuse and be part of the secrecy between the priests and the other boys in their dormitories. Oneida Elder Ray John has noted that it was also a culture of “Don’t say anything to your parents when you get home.” The church had such a strong hold on communities that boys who tried to talk about the abuse were silenced by authorities and even their own families. According to Metis Elder Jules Lavallee, this is part of the
“greywashing” that led families and communities to deny that priests could commit these crimes.

All of this history has influenced the struggles we have in our communities today. Reflecting on the traditional protector role, Anishinaabe Elder Jim Albert points out how unfitting it is for Native men to be violent to their families. He then asks, “How do we help our men realize that to be a protector is a very powerful, important responsibility and that they can take a little piece of it?”

PROVIDING & CONTRIBUTING

In traditional communities, Native men had responsibilities around providing, although they were not the only ones. Women also hunted, fished, trapped and harvested, and children and elders helped with all of these activities. It was typically men, however, who brought in large game to sustain the people. Anishinaabe Elder Joseph Morrison remembered “as a boy, you looked up to that. Your father, grandfather, they would go out and get the meat, provide the food.” Boys were celebrated for their contributions to family and community.

This might have been a formal ceremony, or something as simple but profound as having older men or boys in the community acknowledge a first catch or a successful hunt.

BOYS WERE CELEBRATED FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Celebrations by Rene Meshake
Anishinaabe Elder Rene Meshake has fond memories of about ten uncles standing on the shoreline, cheering for him when he caught his first northern pike.

For Quw’ut sun Elder Ray Peter, it was his older cousin who initiated him into his role as a fisherman. He remembers “there was a place where we had to go and there was a huge boulder, and [my cousin] started talking in our language, praying, naming me. I had to grab each of my four trout. Bite the head. Put them aside, and he wrapped them up in another gunnysack." Ray then had to give them away to “four special people.” His cousin then told him what the practice was about: “It was just so that I could make personal contact with all the trout, all the fish there, so that whatever was there would not affect me. My cousin said, “the water, the freezing cold will not bite you, you know.”

For Jules Lavallee, providing was acknowledged through celebration. In his childhood community the men would go out for extended periods to hunt. “Celebrations were at least four days and four nights when we came back,” he says.

Although they grew up hunting, our Elders remarked on the restrictions their communities had suffered as a result of government policies in the generations that preceded them. Indigenous nations had previously had access to large traditional hunting territories but had been parceled onto small reserves. Oneida Elder Ray John and Quw’ut sun Elder Ray Peter grew up on either side of the country, but Canada’s policies had the same effect. They both remember the men having to ask permission from farmers to hunt on their lands so they could feed their families.
Wil Campbell talks about how men in the plains were devastated by policies of “take away the gun and the horse and give them rations.” He asks, “From that day forward, where did men fit in this society? They even put laws in place that men couldn’t work, they couldn’t pray, they couldn’t be themselves.” According to Joseph Morrison, “The pride was taken away because the ability to go out and feel good about doing a job or getting lots of work or making money to help, however little it was, was taken away.”

In spite of all this interference, men did what they could in terms of providing, and continued with other traditional occupations such as making snowshoes, carving, and drum making. The art of making a canoe was something impressed Rene Meshake as a young boy. He remembers watching his uncles build birch bark canoes in the 1950s. Rene would help by splitting roots, but his people were moved off their territory before Rene got a chance to make his own, which he says “would have made me the man.” Rene points out that traditional occupations connected men with creation:

“Even when splitting the cedar to make the ribs and the gunwales – the tree talks. When you’re putting the wedge on top of it, and it’s starting to split there is all this tsss chhw. It talks. There’s this relationship with work.”

TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS CONNECTED MEN WITH CREATION

Messenger by Rene Meshake
Having a sense of purpose is critical for well-being, and being recognized for your purpose creates strong individuals and communities.

Tom Porter describes how this works among the Haudenosaunee:
“When we have naming ceremonies we say “We don’t know yet what you were sent here by the Creator to the earth for, but we welcome you here. It may be the Creator sent you here to be a great runner, so you can carry messages from one nation to another nation. When Chiefs need runners you may be the one chosen by the Creator to do the message of the leaders.
Or it could have been that you were chosen to be a great singer of the Great Feather Dance, which is the most sacred song of our Creator. It may be that you were chosen to be one of those to honour the Creator and our people. Or it may be that you were chosen to be a great orator, that you would communicate all the knowledge and stories of our people…There are all those things that one can be, and especially if it is the Creator’s intention”.

Tom stresses that we can recognize these gifts in our youth today. “Our job is to nurture the gift,” he says, “to water it, feed it so it becomes a blooming flower with great identity and no mistake about who they are.”
NURTURING

The Elders talked about how in their childhood communities boys grew into healthy men with the positive nurturing they received from role models and mentors. According to Jules Lavallee, “There was always a man taking us under his wing and teaching us how to be good hunters, good trappers and good fisherman. They taught us.”

The man’s face on the cover of this book is “Biidan,” Rene Meshake’s Uncle Peter. As a boy, Rene loved to watch Biidan work. When working on a canoe, Biidan would leave his tools out so Rene could pick them up and begin learning. Rene also remembers feeling “whoa, I’m a big guy now” when Biidan took him hunting for the first time. As Rene was so small, Biidan had to clear the branches so he could make his way through the bush. “Seeing that,” Rene says, “was a very powerful image of what I would become; setting the pathway to be an uncle to somebody else.”

Rene also remembers admiring the carving skills of “Richard,” a teenage boy in his community. Richard must have noticed this attention, for as Rene recalls “just as he was leaving on a pickup one day, he handed over his slingshot.” Rene identified with these older role models and copied them. “I even combed my hair like Richard,” he laughs. With Richard’s slingshot, the young Rene imagined he was Richard in the bush, hunting partridges. This nurturing was something Rene then passed on: “Eventually I picked up that knife and carved my own crutch,” he says. “And then it was my turn to pass this down to my younger cousins that had not even known how to draw a knife.”

As an artist, Rene works with young people today in the same spirit as Biidan. His tools are now art supplies, which he leaves out whenever he works with youth at Friendship Centres or in schools. Rene reflects on the difference between leaving these tools lying around and the kinds of “tools” some children see: “Maybe they see empty cases of beer. Whiskey bottles, vodka bottles… What kind of tool is this bottle?” he asks. “It’s a permanent imprint on a little guy, it’s creating a different kind of dangerous path, setting
that tool in front of them. And they pick that up.”

Joseph Morrison stresses that in the family the father is a teacher: “Whatever he does within that family, he is teaching his sons about how to be when they get older, what they are going to be like.”

Teaching also happens on a community level, especially among our people who were always community minded. Ray John points this out in a story about grade one children in spontaneous role play about drinking and fighting: “At lunchtime they forgot their lunch,” he recalled, “so one pretended ‘Oh, I like this drink,’ and he downed it down - ‘Just like my family. They do that.’ The other one says, ‘How about we do a mock fight?’ Ray notes, “These boys start fighting because that’s what they see.” In Oneida, there is a word for this, Lonato’lya: tu, which means “they are re-enacting the life of the village.” As Ray says, this word “speaks volumes” about the significance of community culture and vision.

Reggie David is a Nuu-chah-nulth Elder from Vancouver Island. For Reggie, mentoring between men and boys is a significant part of healthy community culture. In his childhood, boys had lots of time to talk with men of older generations, be they uncles, fathers or grandfathers. “We used to be talked to every day,” he says. “I remember my grandfather sitting with me by the riverbank talking...
to me. He’d ask me to come down with him and we’d sit there and he’d talk to me all about life.”

Cree Elder Ted Quinney talks about the power of connections that came with mentoring in traditional communities. “If you were sitting in a camp of 200 tipis, everyone had their place within the community and responsibilities went with it. The old ones would recognize those gifts and then you would be taken under their wing and taught.”

MENTORING IN THE PAST ALSO INVOLVED ASSISTING YOUTH TO DEVELOP THEIR CONNECTION WITH CREATION

Today, there are many distractions but in Ted’s childhood community, there was no power, no running water, and no TV. “Just a battery operated radio,” he says. “This radio did not play all day; you had to save the batteries.” According to Ted, “This is when I began to learn, to understand the cultural way of being, because during the winter is when you pass the stories, oral traditions and all of that, as well as learn the songs.” Mentoring in the past also involved assisting youth to develop their connection with creation.

Tom Porter uses a modern metaphor to talk about this connection: “We were just like those satellite receptors that are taking signals from things going around the earth,” he says. “And that’s why you have those GPS things in your car, because they put that satellite up there. So now you can ride anywhere and the thing will find your car.”

Old One by Rene Meshake
According to Tom:
“Before, all men and women were just like a GPS where we had receptors, but it wasn’t from a satellite that man put up there. It was from the power of the Creator and the Mother Earth and everything that He put in the universe and how it needs to be harmonized and how it needs to be respected. We were the GPS and our clean body and clean mind was the open receptor to that. So we always knew how to make spirituality and when ceremonies are supposed to be done. And the role of the men and women is to clear our receptors; the role of an uncle and father and grandpa is to make sure his nephews and grandsons receptors are clear. It’s about how we have to be clear so when the bird sings we hear it; so when the tree says something, we hear it.”

Tom’s words bring us back to a vision of sacred responsibilities for men, for as he says, “Those men, those chiefs, uncles, fathers are supposed to help us younger ones be good receptors of the universal truths, and how to live in it.” This can be as true today as it as been throughout our history.
SECTION II

OUR STRENGTHS

Throughout our colonial history, the sacredness of Indigenous men, their power, and the authorities they held in balance with other members of the community came under attack. Much if it was taken. In exchange, men were handed false powers of possession and control over women and children.

There is strength in balance. As Indigenous peoples, we are fortunate to have cultures that teach us how to foster this strength. We have a history of equitable relations to build on, and we have learned many lessons in the Aboriginal healing movement. Our Elders reflected on how strength comes in relearning what it means to to be an Indigenous man.

STRENGTH COMES IN RELEARNING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN INDIGENOUS MAN

LIVING IN BALANCE

*I believe we had quite a few matriarchal systems in our tribal affiliations. And so, perhaps a lot of our problems came in trying to live the European patriarchy.*

Jules Lavalee, Metis

Jules Lavalee's comment that in the past “we had quite a few matriarchal systems” reflects what many of our Elders teach us, that patriarchy, a system which gives men ultimate authority over women, children and property/land, was not part of our pre-contact cultures. Even today, our traditional teachings remind us that no one can own children, women or our Mother Earth.

Europeans brought a different system. As Quw’ut sun Elder Ray Peter says, “They came in and looked at women as just chattel... Their job was to stay home, keep the house clean, keep the clothes clean, cook and bear children.” Ray points out that, “our people [were] not that way. They were never that way. And so
that’s one of the things that was broken.” Elder Jim Albert concurs “the newcomers were quite consciously destructive of what they found here in terms of women’s roles.”

As explained in Section I, everyone had valued roles and responsibilities in community.

Principles of respect and non-interference prohibited the kind of controlling behaviour that patriarchy introduced. Cree Elder Ted Quinney points out that patriarchy brought in “a whole hierarchy system.” According to Ted, “no one is supposed to put themselves above the collective whole, because the moment you do that, you put yourself and the collective in peril.”

This was true in Rene Meshake’s community growing up where “every person had merit.” According to Rene, “We depended on each other to stay alive. So if you beat up someone, the whole community dies.” Rene says that he never saw his aunts get beaten, but sadly, violence is a struggle in many Indigenous communities today.

Equity and respect also means being inclusive of queer/two-spirited people. Cree Elder Albert McLeod points out that “the strength of culture is based on whoever enters that eastern doorway (at birth).” A strong culture is one that has “the strength to accept that person and relate to that person.” With reference to the homophobia in many Indigenous communities today, Albert says “for a long time, the doors have been closed. We don’t feel that we have that strength because we are still reclaiming our culture, our traditions, and identity.”

Strength comes from accepting all community members, as the health of the individual is based on the health of the collective and all the relations. Whereas men and women’s tasks may have changed, principles of respect, acceptance and
non-interference are timeless. They are sources of strength for family and community because they foster healthy relationships.

**FAMILY, KINSHIP AND COMMUNITY**

The foundation of our societies has always been family. Child rearing was typically done in extended family groups, and as a result children grew up with a sense of belonging to the collective. Cree Elder Albert McLeod reflects on how this would have worked for his people “We lived in groups, three or four families, extended families, and roles were much more complex. Within that role, children were enabled to become who they were meant to be and contribute what they were meant to contribute.”

Since our first contact with the settler population, our family systems have been under attack. Today we have many community members who have lived through residential schools and the child welfare system. Wil Campbell calls the fallout from the attack the “geographical cure” where families and communities have been displaced. “The result is that many of us don’t know where we have come from. We may have spent lives moving from one foster home to another,

**STRENGTH COMES FROM ACCEPTING ALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AS THE HEALTH OF THE INDIVIDUAL IS BASED ON THE HEALTH OF THE COLLECTIVE AND ALL THE RELATIONS**

*Eastern Doorway by Rene Meshake*
moving to different urban centres, or from the home community to the city and back.” All of this can cause disruption to family and community cohesion. But in spite of it all, the strength of the Aboriginal family continues to exist, sometimes showing itself in new ways.

Sometimes Indigenous men find family and community in institutions where they have opportunities to connect with Elders and cultural practices. Wil Campbell works as an Elder in the prison system, and talks about how this was a starting place for his own healing journey. “In jail, where men are amongst men, they pray together, and they share together,” he says. “I know. I went to prison, and I tell you, that is where I really found family, because the men took care of each other -- what they call the Native Brotherhood.” Jim Albert points out that prison can also be a place where Native men can face their pasts and come to terms with unhealthy behaviours with the assistance of the Elders they meet there.

In some cases, Indigenous men participate in gang activity in response to displacement from family and community. As Wil Campbell points out, “If you don’t know who your mother or your father is, or if you have no connection to our community, that is trauma.” According to Wil, “That plays a big role why young people go into gangs; why they get involved in crime. Because there is nothing that gives them what they need.”

In his work with Native men, Ted Quinney tries to address the need for belonging by replacing negative associations with culture-based practices:
“We had one young guy that wanted to drop his [gang] colours. He didn’t have any cultural education, nothing. But I’m sure he could have educated me beyond a shadow of a doubt, in regards to gangs and gang mentality, and everything included in that. I said to him “Look; drop your colours. We’ll give you new colours that you can carry. There’s colours in our traditional way of being, and those colours have meanings. We call them print, flags, protocol. We will teach you about those colours. I can give you five immediate colours that you can carry at all times. You’ll either use these colours when you go to ceremonies, Sun Dances, sweat lodges – this is a total different way of being from what you’re used to and have been exposed to in regards to your colours as a gang member.”

Alternative families can be a great source of strength for our Indigenous men. Albert McLeod gives an example of how two-spirited people have built strong urban families and communities, who parent and adopt each other. “There’s a society in Vancouver that has done this for over thirty years,” he says. “These are mostly two spirited people from across Canada who were shunned or neglected and left their communities.” The solution was to “create their own family groups.” To Albert, this type of initiative comes out of Aboriginal tradition, which valued kinship and built strong family networks.

Of course, many Indigenous men have their own children who are a source of strength for them. Indigenous men can also take on the role of parenting blended families, as in the case of Reggie David, who did not father any children but raised five stepchildren.

Ted Quinney sums up how significant family can be for Indigenous men, stating, “At the end of the day, when you’re called to the other side, all you care about – for me anyways, is how my family will view me, my accomplishments, the love, the caring, and everything else.”
One of the results of coming through a difficult history is that Indigenous peoples have developed a capacity and know-how in healing. Indigenous men have these resources in their communities and can draw from the strength and lessons of others who have gone before them.

Many of our Elders talk about the strength that comes in recovery from addictions. When asked about the strength of Native men, Rene Meshake replied, “Sobriety is the first strength.” Like many Native men, Joseph Morrisson has shared that “when I sobered up, my life started to change.” Jim Albert has remarked on the potential in recovery, saying “I’ve worked with and seen enough people who had no existence anymore except alcohol and drugs and living on the street. But then, I know them five years..."
later too, and you see who they are and what they’re capable of, and how they came through that. It’s incredible what they have.”

Many Elders will say that alcohol abuse has been the enemy of our people throughout our histories. Ray Peter recalls how his dad’s success as a farmer was compromised by alcohol. He explains, “they [settlers] started taking things from him, and giving him liquor.” According to Ray, “That was the downfall of all our men folk.”

Ray also laments that many of his friends from residential school died alcohol related deaths, and he talks about the reasons: “You have to take into consideration how we took a shot to our sense of self-worth. Being told over and over again that you are good for nothing by our teachers. That we’ll never measure up.” Some Native men, like Dominique Rankin, began drinking after residential school because of the sexual abuse they experienced, and the silencing around the issue.

Residential school trauma is the reason behind addictive behaviours for many, but Native men’s histories include other reasons to use alcohol or drugs. Jules Lavallee has pointed out that low self-esteem can result from not providing or contributing. “I think the main reason Native men turn to alcohol or drugs today is to feel good, temporarily as it seems,” Jules says. “Because then you can feel for a little while, that you’re on top of the world.”

For Native men, pain can result from being cut off from home territory and land-based means of providing. As Ray John explains, “These communities are so small now -- men drink and carry on because there’s nothing to give them meaning. It would be gathering things before. They were hunting in the wintertime, fishing, gathering in the spring and summer. But now the reserve is a wee thing. And we have a law that tells us how to act. There’s no place to go.”

Of course, providing and contributing can take on new and multiple meanings for Native men in the modern world. But connection to land can be a critical piece to recover. Stories about this connection can also inform us about pathways to healing.

Rene Meshake links the connection to land and home territory to Native men’s health. He knows this because he witnessed how the men in his community lost something when this connection was disrupted. This is when Biidan, Uncle Peter (pictured on the cover) started to drink.
Rene’s community had managed to stay off reserve in their traditional territory until they were forced to move onto a reserve in the 1960s. For Rene, this is when everything changed: “Being off the land, on the rez, I started to see uncles getting drunk, including Uncle Peter (Biidan). That same uncle that was so strong out there in our traditional territory of Pagwashing, now became very docile.” For Rene, this behaviour was connected to the loss of traditional lifestyle, the grandmothers/head women dying, and the inability for Biidan and others to provide and function in this new system. “The whole independence was taken away from us guys,” he says.

Some Elders talk about changes they saw in the men in their communities over time, as connection to the land decreased and alcohol increasingly took hold. Ray John learned later in life that his grandpa used to sneak away with the village preacher to drink back in the bush. He notes that “he knew enough to respect his grandchildren and his family, so he went out.” According to Ray “When he came home, he was still the same way that I seen him every day.” Ray’s memories of his grandfather thus remain of him working his bountiful gardens.

Ray saw a generational difference when the men in his father’s generation started drinking: “In the 1960s, I saw people starting to drink, including my father. And of course, he had a lot of cousins and friends, and it seemed like that’s their only determination anymore because they learned to make their own wine and beer.”

Indigenous peoples are now trying to reverse these patterns, and have learned that healing begins with the self. As Joseph Morrison said, “The changes begin when you begin to respect yourself. You know that you can provide for your family, that you learn to respect yourself and feel good about things that you can do.”

Tom Porter has shared these words about healing the self:

“We have to believe ourselves, because we don’t believe we can be good too. With a lot of our older people it’s like that, because they went to the residential schools and they were told they were the scum of the earth. In day-to-day relationships through subtle and not so subtle ways they learned that they were second class and third class. So now they are conveying that to the next generation. They were oppressed and then they oppressed their younger relations until now we’re dysfunctional…. But we can’t blame them because they didn’t know what was happening to them. So we need to heal.”
According to Tom, it is important to “make people conscious of what happened - to know that’s why they are ineffective grandmas and grandpas now, because they don’t know how to be a grandma and grandpa that shows compassion and love.”

For men, there are particular challenges. Tom points out that many fathers don’t know how to be fathers. “They only know how to make babies, but they don’t know how to nurture them. They don’t know how to show them compassion. And to make babies is great, but if you can’t feed them and you can’t give them spiritual teachings and wellbeing, then that’s criminal.” Tom emphasizes that this is learned and not intentional behaviour.

Many Native men have learned that healing can begin by going back to the original mother. As Wil Campbell says, “We come from Mother Earth. Our lives are based on Mother Earth. And sometimes we need to lay down and embrace her, and let her give us the love, her commitment to us.” This can happen in very simple ways, as Wil points out: “Take your shoes off and go stand in the park where the grass is.”

For Wil and others, we also have powerful ceremonies and traditions that help us to nurture these connections and heal. Fasting is one way “to take that time to understand Mother Earth. We need to call our spirit to us. We need to bring our spirit back home.”

Wil Campbell, Relationship

“WE NEED TO CALL OUR SPIRIT TO US. WE NEED TO BRING OUR SPIRIT BACK HOME.”

Wil Campbell
Earth's love for us,” he says. For Wil, these ceremonies are effective because “bits and pieces of spirit are scattered all over. Bits and pieces of our being are lost in these foster homes and these residential schools.” Ultimately, Wil says, “we need to call our spirit to us. We need to bring our spirit back home.”

Joseph Morrison’s story provides an example of how fasting can help Native men face the past, address fears, and begin to heal. Joseph talked about how he was initially afraid to fast. “I was afraid of being off in the bush by myself,” he says, noting that this is something a lot of Native men fear. Because Joseph was not able to move from the spot where he was fasting, he had no choice but to look at himself. This was a source of healing, for as he pointed out: “What happens is you begin to look around and say Why am I doing this?; What do I want to do?; What do I want to find out? And I guess one of the things I learned is that when you come face to face with your fears, those things that scared you the most, your life begins to change.” He noted, “I began to realize that all the things that I done in my past was something that I feared acknowledging.” Fasting helped Joseph to decide “Okay, I have to really leave things right here. Leave them, and begin a process to feel good about myself and begin to love myself.”

Because of his experience, Joseph suggested that “maybe a lot of men have to go fast to find out who they are and really search within themselves.” As he said “They are going to encounter some problems in the future if they don’t really look at themselves. If not, fears will come along.”
Rene Meshake tells a story about how counsellors and residents at Pedahbun Lodge treatment centre in Toronto helped him to face his fears and deal with his past. He had been in the treatment centre for eight months before reaching a crisis of overwhelming emotion that made him decide to leave. Rene describes how he went looking for black garbage bags to pack up his belongings and move back to the street, but there were none to be found. He found himself sitting helplessly on a couch in one of the lounges, where counsellor Terry Swan and a fellow resident found him.

After Terry observed that Rene always got angry when one of the other residents graduated, he realized that he was reliving abandonment issues from his childhood, when his mother was taken away to a tuberculosis sanatorium. “She promised us she would come back for us,” Rene said, “but that’s when my family was split up.” As Terry and his sister resident sat with him, they encouraged him to face this fear, and to find courage. For Rene, this opened up a floodgate of emotion and tears, something he had never before released:

“All of a sudden I felt something in my stomach rise up and just this huge flood coming. It went through my neck and I started to cry. That medicine wheel they were telling me about was working in my soul. I just cried… I couldn’t stop. Just let it all out and these women are on either side of me. You know, tough guy like me, street smart. You don’t cry. Big boys don’t cry, right? I’m a tough guy, I’ve done time. But that teaching flew right out the window, got flooded out. And I wasn’t ashamed to cry in front of women.”
Rene was forty years old at the time. He points out that “after the crying, that’s when the medicine started to work.”

Many of our Elders encourage us to find the healing in forgiveness. Dominique Rankin remembers that he did not trust men after being sexually abused in residential school. But the healing began when his father encouraged him to let go, and acknowledge that the men who had abused him were sick. Ray teaches, “Avoid having grudges. Avoid having too much hate. You’re angry, you can get angry, but let it go. Otherwise it becomes a sickness, you know.” For Wil Campbell, “If we can forgive ourselves, then we can have a normal life.”

Like a stone thrown into a pond, healing has a ripple effect. Men have a chance to do this by becoming magnificent fathers, no matter what their past. Joseph Morrisson taught that “If the father can change before the child becomes an adult, then that child is going to be able to say, ‘oh yes, I remember all the things that used to happen to me. I used to get a licking and then my father changed.’ He’s not giving violent discipline. He’s giving more caring, respectful discipline.” Joseph stressed that “Then the child is going to learn. He’s going to see the differences. He’s going to choose how to discipline his own children. He’s going to think about and maybe what it made him feel to be disciplined.”

The potential is tremendous. As Jim Albert says, “When you walk in a good way, you have medicine to share. You become the good medicine. And it’s the same thing as they were saying. But the men have to become good medicine for everyone around them, including the women.”
Ultimately, we must remember that we carry the strength of our ancestors, in spite of our often traumatic histories. As Tom Porter has said, our leaders of the past resisted against great odds:

“If you add it up and you use logical thinking, all the Native leaders of North America and South America should not be here. They should be extinct. But they have defied – which means to our young now that – hey you belong to a pretty classy race of people. I mean, you’re tough guys, so you better be deserving of it, because we got big shoes to walk to make dignity again. Can’t be foolish and drunk and stupid on marijuana and cocaine and whiskey and wine because that only makes fools out of great people. And the streets are already full of those. So we don’t need any more."

Wil Campbell talks about how we are now at the point of “sincerely learning how to live.” He explains “We’ve only been surviving; okay, so what is living? What is living all about? What is a family? Most of us don’t know, we’ve never had one. All we’ve seen is dysfunction.”

Once we begin to move from this place, everything will change. As Tom Porter says, “The first thing, we have to heal our own self, and then after we’re done, we’ve got to begin healing the world.” This is strength.
SECTION III

MOVING FORWARD

As the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, we have the capacity to move into a future of healthy, well-balanced communities, and the strength of our boys and men is critical to that future. We are fortunate to have the power of our cultures to build on, and a recent history of knowing what it means to demonstrate respect for life in all its forms.

We are also fortunate to come from cultures where roles and identities were flexible, so there is no need to be prescriptive about who a person should be. As Albert McLeod points out, at this point in our history “cultural reclamation is not about imposing these colonial, Christian based views of what gender should look like or what family structures should look like.” Albert uses the example that queer/two-spirit children should not have to try to assimilate into a family that is based on a colonial, heteropatriarchal structure. Ultimately, in Albert’s words, building a healthy future is about allowing children to “contribute what they were meant to contribute” as they did in the past.
Rebuilding the circle will involve celebrating boys and youth – if not for catching their first fish then perhaps in other ways. We can gather our voices to think about how to recognize our children’s gifts and to honour their purpose. Inter-generational connections and a sense of community is critical for this work, as is a connection with creation.

Connecting to creation may take new forms. Albert McLeod notes that, “in terms of urban centres, where a lot of Aboriginal people are concentrated, there is no sacred, spiritual place to be an Indigenous male. After the dispossession from the land, Aboriginal youth didn’t have a place. There wasn’t a place in our society for Aboriginal men, because of the historical relationship to the land. So now they are building prisons, to be those places.” Albert makes the point, however, that our ancestors have always been adaptable and creative, and we can continue in their footsteps:

“We have to realize that when it comes to the landmass that Winnipeg is built on [for example], there were ceremonies there. There were these power places there! Men probably had their own sweat houses and they had their own relationship to the land that is underneath the concrete. What I see is that those men’s sweathouses need to come back so that Aboriginal men can gather to be that identity that is connected to the land, to their history and to their roles.”

Jim Albert also sees a need “to provide the opportunities for the men to come together,” if only to talk and support one another. Like Albert McLeod, he notes that “a lot of men get sent to shelters, treatment centres, prisons – those are (currently) your options.” What might new options look like?

Power by Rene Meshake
As a start, Jim points out that “We all had responsibilities in ceremonies and a lot of those responsibilities still exist. If we can get the men to participate in ceremonies and learn those, and understand them, and be with them, then I think it will bring back a whole lot of who we are as men individually and collectively in our communities.”

Tom Porter and Ray Peter shared with us that men had ceremonial and other leadership responsibilities that included knowledge grounded in and expressed by ceremonies, songs, dances, oratory, kinship obligations and relationships with the land. These roles, responsibilities and voices are ours to reclaim, and there are others that may come out of new places where young Native men are carving out positive expressions of their masculinities.

In closing, we hope is that this document provides a place to start gathering voices toward the health and well-being of Native men and boys, for that is the intent of our project, Bidwewidam Indigenous Masculinities.

Bidwewidam means “to sound it out” or “to come speaking” in Anishinabemowin. As the distant voices come closer and get stronger, we hope to hear much more, as through this multiplicity of voices and identities our communities will become strong again.

Land by Rene Meshake
ELDER BIOGRAPHIES

Jim Albert

The teachings that Jim Albert carries come mostly from the Algonquin and Ojibwe peoples. Jim’s spirit name is Misheeke’n, which means turtle in Ojibwe. Being recognized as an Elder by the Indigenous community of Ottawa for the last twelve years, he provides sweat lodge and fasting ceremonies for its members, while also maintaining his professional career.

Now retired, Jim enjoyed working with and for Indigenous peoples in numerous professional capacities. Most notably, he was a professor for the School of Social work (BSW) at Carleton University for several years. In his final years with Carleton University, Jim delivered the BSW program in person to several Indigenous communities. But like most of our Elders, retirement has not slowed down Jim. He has continued to work with the First Nations Technical Institute in its delivery of the BSW program, while working on Indigenous health initiatives with several other organizations.

Asked about his motivation in being part of this project, Jim said, “I think it is very important that we share our understandings of men’s role and challenges in our communities.” Jim shares his life with his three children and grandchildren.

Wil Campbell

Wil Campbell is Metis from the Big River area in Northern Saskatchewan. Using the teachings of the Lakota, Cree, Anishinaabe and Ojibway Wil is looked upon as a cultural and spiritual advisor for many of the projects that he is involved with. In addition to being the pipe keeper of Healing our Spirit Worldwide, Wil also sits on the World Council of Elders and consults with the provincial and federal governments in areas of health programming in prisons and communities.

After spending 39 years in the television industry, Wil continues to use his skill set to support the efforts of Indigenous communities on a national and international level. For example, Wil has helped communities set up ceremonial and cultural radio programs, while also exploring ways of improving communications to support their efforts to develop a cultural community.

Over the last few years, Wil has been employed as a counselor with the Native Counseling Services of Alberta. A majority of the time, you can find Wil working at the Stan Daniels Healing Center in Edmonton, Alberta. Using cultural and ceremonial teachings, the center supports Aboriginal inmates who are transitioning back into the community.
Reggie David

Reggie is from the Tla-o-qui-aht, which are part of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples. Reggie was born in Kildownen and is the son of the late Hyacinth David and Winifred David. Although Reggie has no children of his own, he played an active role in raising five step-children with his late wife, Amelia David.

Now 82, Reggie shares his life experiences in the logging industry and the challenges of growing up in a changing world where “the all mighty dollar” reigned supreme. Reggie was logging at fourteen years of age and spent the next forty-seven and a half years in the industry, retiring in 1993. Reggie currently resides in Port Alberni, BC.

Ray John Skyhawk

Ray John Skyhawk is from the Oneida People, which loosely translates into Standing stone person. The Oneida recognize that they are from “The Great Tree People”, which carries specific roles and responsibilities governing their relationship with the natural environment. Ray carries the teachings from both his mother and father’s family’s and is a fluent language speaker. His father was mostly a trapper and hunter, while his mother was a planter. Ray stresses the importance of being a language speaker saying, “That makes it easier knowing a person understands where we are coming from.” But language provides a much deeper experience than simply understanding as Skyhawk brings to our attention saying, “You can feel how the different nations look at things.” Ray stresses that it is the role and responsibility of family members to ensure that these understandings and feelings get passed on to future generations, something that Ray John Skyhawk and his family take seriously.

Ray John Skyhawk spends a great deal of time sharing the teachings he carries with his grandchildren. Ray says, “Each day I speak to my grand children and share what life we lived.” He adds, “I’m glad they still voluntarily research their family.” Ray believes that it is important to ensure his grandchildren are exposed to the teachings of their people, as they do not receive this type of instruction in public schools. Ray’s wife is a language teacher, while his son facilitates culturally based life style workshops for the larger community. Together, Ray and his family do their best to ensure that the teachings they carry are lived and shared with the people.

Jules Lavalle

Jules is Metis, born in St. Laurent Manitoba and raised in St. Laurent and Wheatland, north west of Brandon. He has always worked in education, and is currently an instructor at the University of Manitoba and an Elder at Red River College. Jules also has a background as a trainer and coordinator in the field of addictions, and was trained through the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood.
In 1994, Jules started the Red Willow Lodge, which was based on a vision he had in 1979; that there would be a place of healing available to all nations. Today, Jules says, “People who come regularly to Red Willow Lodge refer to themselves as the Red Willow family, and our community is worldwide. It has been nothing for us to get a call from someone from Japan asking if there was a sweat on Sunday, and when I say ‘yes’ they respond, ‘I’ll be there.’”

Jules was raised in a family where men asked the women who raised them what needed to be done. He fondly remembers his grandmother, who lived to be 106 years old: “She told me if you want a long life, eat lots of potatoes!” Jules now works closely with his wife, Elder Margaret Lavallee, and says “The driving force between me and my wife is our spirituality and culture.” Their 27 grandchildren keep him going, and at 71, he stays young because “I work for the Creator!”

Albert McLeod

Albert McLeod is a descendent of the Cree and Scottish families who worked in the Hudson Bay Company fur trade. He is a Status Indian with ancestry from Nisichawayshk Cree Nation and the community of Norway House in northern Manitoba. He was a founder of the Manitoba Aboriginal AIDS Task Force where he was employed as the Program Manager from 1991-2001. Albert has over twenty years of experience as a human rights activist and is one of the directors of the Two-Spirited People of Manitoba in Winnipeg. www.twospiritedmanitoba.ca He is currently a free-lance educator specializing in Aboriginal cultural reclamation, textile art, and community development.

Rene Meshake

Rene Meshake is an Ojibwe visual and performing artist, author, storyteller, new media artist, and a Recipient of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee Medal and he is based in Guelph, Ontario. By seamlessly fusing Ojibwe and English words into his stories, poetry and spoken word performances, Rene communicates his Ojibwe spiritual heritage to the contemporary world. He was born in the railway town of Nakina in Northwestern Ontario and was raised by his Okomissan grandmother. His education includes: Anishinaabe oral tradition, language, arts and culture. Rene has a diploma in Graphic Design from Sheridan College and a certificate in Creative Writing from the Humber School for Writers. Rene's body of artwork and his personal life experiences create a strong, expressive, and entertaining presentation for an ever-increasing audience.
Joseph Morrison

Joseph Morrison had a strong foundation to build upon being raised by his parents at the Anishinaabe community of Naongashing. Working hard to make a living in his younger years, Joseph continued to develop this trait as he progressed through life holding numerous jobs and community service roles.

His family shares memories of Joseph being a guide and laborer in his early years and later went on to be in the Canadian military. From 1959 – 62, at the young age of 17, Joseph was enlisted in the Canadian Army and served with the Queen's Own Rifles. After his military service, he went on to work for numerous organizations that supported Indigenous peoples. For example, he was a Native Street Patrol Supervisor, Metis housing coordinator, and the Executive Director of two Friendship Centres within Ontario. Joseph enjoyed his time with the Friendship Centre movement as he worked with the organization at a local, provincial and national level for over four decades, but Joseph did not limit his focus to Indigenous politics. He also served as an Ontario Justice of the Peace.

In his later years, Joseph continued to work on behalf of Indigenous peoples, but in more of a leadership capacity as he sat on numerous boards and committees involved with corrections, housing and the Northern Ontario School of Medicine Elder's council.

Finally, Joseph Morrison was a long time resident of Kenora, Ontario. His family reports that he was a strong believer in Anishinaabe culture and committed much of his energy to its revival out of his deep respect for the worldview. Joseph’s wife, Mary Alice Smith, and his nine children saw him off on his journey to the other side in late March of 2012.

Tom Porter

Situated near Fonda, New York, the Mohawk community of Kanatsiohareke is the home of Tom Porter. Within his community and afar he is recognized as Sakokwenionkwas, which loosely translates into The One Who Wins. Tom has numerous important roles and responsibilities within his community ranging from politics to spiritual development, which are expected traits of members in leadership positions within a Mohawk worldview. His base of support comes from Choctaw member and wife, Alice Joe Porter and his six children.

Since the early 1960s, Tom Porter has been committed to finding creative ways of not only preserving Indigenous cultures, but more importantly living them. Tom believes that Mohawk language and culture are important components of any successful
educational and trades based program, and has worked hard to ensure that the projects he is involved in reflect this philosophy. For example, he taught Mohawk teachings, history and language at Akwesasne Freedom School and Kahnawake Survival School. In addition, Tom founded the “White Roots of Peace”, which was a creative endeavor that contributed to wider efforts of Indigenous peoples in cultural regeneration. Finally, he has authored numerous publications on Mohawk spirituality and worldview that are available in his community and throughout several universities in Canada and the United States.

As a result of his work, Tom has been recognized by members of his community, outside organizations and institutions through a lengthy list of awards and appointments. In 2009, he received an Honorary Doctorate in Law from Trent University. A theme in that runs throughout the career of Dr. Tom Porter is the value and importance of education, but more importantly, the necessity of ensuring that educational programs provide an opportunity to live the culture of the peoples it is meant to serve.

Ray Peters

Ray Peters is an Elder from the Quw’ut sun People, which means “warming your back in the sun,” within the territories of the Coast Salish. His parents are Jones Peter from Quw’ut sun and Lizzy Morris from Tsartalip. Ray and his wife, Florence, have been married for 30 plus years and have raised fourteen children together with two of those children being adopted into the Peters family. Ray and his family currently reside in the community of Qua michen #2, which is located a few minutes east of Duncan, BC.

At 74 years of age, Ray continues to be a strong advocate of teaching, sharing and living his culture with the numerous communities he is part of. He leads a young dance group from his community that performs at special events and at events of cultural importance. In addition, Ray is employed by Vancouver Island University as a permanent Elder-in-residence. A theme in Ray’s work is he is always willing to sit down with you and share a good story with a few good laughs.

Ted Quinney

Ted Quinney is a member of the Frog Lake First Nation community in Alberta. After completing a Bachelor of Education degree with a double major in Canadian history and Art from the University of Saskatchewan, Ted moved back to Frog Lake for eight years filling numerous roles in the community. At that time it was his dream not only to give back to his community, but to help his community to progress within today’s society on all fronts. In relation to one of Ted’s job positions, his responsibility was to do educational research and curriculum development by researching and writing about the 1885 Frog Lake Massacre.
Over the last few years, Ted has worked extensively with First Nations peoples and organizations. He is currently employed as a Job Placement/Retention counselor with Stan Daniels Healing Centre under Native Counseling Services of Alberta.

Dominique Rankin

Currently, Dominique Rankin and his wife, Marie-Josee reside in the community of Val Des Lacs, north of Montreal in the Laurentian Mountains, but Dominique lineage goes back to the Indigenous communities of Pikogan and Abitibiwinni.

As a newborn, Dominique’s mother named him Kapiteotak, which loosely translates into “the one we can hear crying from far” and this name stems out of a very powerful and special story. Marie-Josee shares the experience saying, “… to make it short, T8aminik (Dominique) found himself in a plane crash in the forest when he was a baby. They found him dead, but his father kept him all night long next to a big sacred fire. We never knew what his father did, but at sunrise the baby came back to life. When his father came back to the camp with the baby, his mother heard him from afar and said,’Aja Kapiteotak jijish takoshin’ [which translates into] ‘Here comes the baby crying from far.’ That’s how he got his spiritual name.”

Making the most of the gift of life, Dominique has lived to serve the people. Since the early 1970s, Dominique has accepted numerous roles and responsibilities ranging from front line work as an addictions counselor in 1974 at OPTAT, too being the Elder for the Indigenous inmates at La Macaza Prison in 2011. His roles and responsibilities have contributed to Dominique being recognized as a gifted speaker and leader, and thus in 2006, he was recognized as one of the forty-nine Elders and medicine men within Canada.

While Dominique has experienced several challenges in life, including the appalling residential school experience, Marie-Josee says, “He is a vibrant and very touching example of forgiveness, acceptance and healing.”
The Bidwewidam Indigenous Masculinities & Bimaadiziwin Research Project is a collaborative initiative between the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, community members and researchers at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Saskatchewan. We are exploring various perspectives on Indigenous masculinities and identities and will be developing resources to encourage healthy living as well as policy and program recommendations to contribute to mino-bimaadiziwin or “the good life” for Indigenous men living in Canada.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) is a provincial Aboriginal organization representing the collective interests of twenty-nine member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout the province of Ontario. The OFIFC administers a number of programs which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as health, justice, family support, and employment and training.

The Kizhaay Anishnaabe Niin (“I am a kind man”) Program is an OFIFC initiative that encourages and challenges men and boys to actively speak out against all forms of violence against women and to foster healthy relationships. The Kizhaay program currently has almost one hundred facilitators who host community-based workshops and other activities aimed at building community engagement to end violence against women.

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) is an organization by and for Indigenous youth that works within the full spectrum of sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice across the United States and Canada.