

HONOURING OUR GIFTS: Celebrating the Contributions of

Aboriginal Women in Manitoba

THE SEVEN TEACHINGS

We have chosen to honour seven women, inspired by the Seven Sacred Teachings. We celebrate their gifts and their contributions as teachers, healers, leaders, helpers, storytellers and truth-seekers.

Also known as the Seven Grandfather Teachings, the Turtle Teachings or Seven Living Principles, these gifts of wisdom were given to people so that they could live in harmony with creation. They are rooted in traditions of many indigenous peoples of North America. Though details and the order of the teachings may differ, the principles are said to be universal to most First Nation peoples. They are the strongest link tying First Nation, Inuit and Metis communities together. The teachings show the good way of life through a strong spiritual foundation in balance with the natural laws. They focus on general harmony, instead of individual wants or needs.

People from many different cultural, spiritual or religious backgrounds benefit from the wisdom in the Seven Teachings. They say we are sacred and have a place in this world. The Seven Teachings provide a guide to living in balance and maintaining a strong, meaningful connection to the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual aspects of self.

Each teaching honours one of the basic virtues for a full and healthy life in connection with the ancestors, the land and our future. Each lesson is represented by an animal to ensure respect for the connection humans have to other creatures. Each animal offers a special gift, to teach respect for all life, ensuring abundance of what is needed to live in harmony on Mother Earth.



Wisdom – Beaver
Love – Eagle
Respect – Buffalo
Bravery (Courage) – Bear
Honesty – Sasquatch
Humility – Wolf
Truth - Turtle



Welcome to Honouring Our Gifts: Celebrating the Contributions of Aboriginal Women in Manitoba. Since 1992, Women's History Month has been an opportunity to recognize the accomplishments, voices

and experiences of women. These celebrations remind us that we have much to learn from each other. As women, we have a wealth of role models who give greater insight into our collective potential and offer inspiration to help women transcend barriers of every kind.

It is especially important that we honour the many accomplishments of Aboriginal women in Manitoba. In Aboriginal culture, women are the keepers of language and traditions. They are respected as the givers of life. Their identities are connected to relationships with others – their children, other women, men, their families and their communities. Women gain strength and inspiration as they learn from and about each other, share their stories and wisdom and honour their roles in others' lives.

The women featured in this publication are role models and visionaries. All have worked tirelessly to promote positive change and connect with their traditions and culture. They inspire women and girls to develop personal pride and cultivate a clear vision for their futures. They encourage women of all ages to discover their own sense of self worth, identity, community and limitless possibilities for future generations. The stories of our honourees span generations, from the late Gladys Cook, a distinguished elder, to Vanessa Kozak, a young woman who exemplifies success, achievement and potential.

Please join me as we honour and celebrate these strong, vibrant Aboriginal women.

Jennifer Howard
Minister responsible for the Status of Women



IN MEMORY OF GLADYS COOK, O.M.

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE AND LEADER (AUGUST 1929 – MAY 2009)

We are honoured to pay tribute to the life of Gladys Evelyn Taylor Cook who exemplified the Seven Teachings. Gladys is remembered as an elder and valued leader in the areas of justice, healing and recovery. Her life's work is an inspiration to others and has prepared the way for many Aboriginal women leaders to follow.

Throughout her life, she was always willing to use and share her gifts to the fullest extent possible. Gladys was a member of the Sioux Valley Dakota First Nation (west of Brandon) and a survivor of the Indian residential school system. As an adult, she was a strong, supportive pillar in the community of Portage la Prairie and surrounding areas. She became a well-respected elder whose opinion and guidance was regularly sought. As recently documented in *Topahdewin: The Gladys Cook Story*, her life has become an inspiring symbol of hope.

Following her journey to sobriety and healing, Gladys established an agency that would later become the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (NNADAP) in Portage la Prairie. For many years, she volunteered with justice committees, Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon groups in her community. Gladys worked at facilities such as the Portage Women's Correctional Centre and Agassiz Youth Centre. The youth centre has since named its school after her.

She was especially proud to be part of the three-person independent committee to choose the new location for the women's jail in the province. Gladys was a valued member of the Manitoba Women's Advisory Council from 1992 to 1996. She was actively involved with the National Association of Friendship Centres, and the Council of Elders for Manitoba Corrections. She also served on the Anglican Church's Working Group for Healing on Residential Schools.

While widely recognized with numerous awards of distinction, Gladys was always humble. She was a lifetime honorary chief of the Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council (DOTC) and has twice been recognized with a sacred pipe.

Gladys spent many years transforming hardship and pain into a heartfelt message of acceptance and faith. Having reconciled her Christian beliefs with native spiritual traditions, she noted honesty and forgiveness as especially important to her healing.

"I see happiness in the people. I see them walk straighter, like I had to when I was going through my healing. I can see changes in their faces. And I'm not any taller, but sometimes I feel like I'm 10 feet tall. And I've found a place in the world for myself and I'm very proud of myself...I am proud."
(Gladys Cook, accepting the Manitoba Medical Association's Health or Safety Promotion Award, 2003)



STELLA BLACKBIRD

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

For Stella Blackbird, discovering and embracing traditional teachings and culture were vital to her healing journey. Her life's work became sharing this teaching and knowledge with others.

Stella started her own healing over 30 years ago at New Directions Training, a personal development and healing program at Alkali Lake, B.C. She, and a handful of others, brought the model to Manitoba to establish similar opportunities for people in this province.

"I started encouraging people to help themselves and work past these fears, these wrong teachings that were instilled in us," she says.

After participating in ceremonies, she came to understand her connection to all of creation.

"One morning I woke up and realized I was part of this; the creation," says Stella. "I am related to the grass, the trees, the sky, the water. This was my awakening . . . and, that's when things began to change."

Making spaces that encourage cultural and spiritual learning is one of Stella's legacies. She is a former member of the Ka Ni Kanichik Council and is involved with the Place of Hope in Winnipeg. As Elder in Residence, she has worked with Urban Circle Training Centre in Winnipeg for almost 20 years. Stella is credited with the vision behind the proposed Makoonsag Child Care and Intergenerational Learning Centre, which offers child care, teaching from Elders and room for families to meet while students attend classes.

As a teacher and valued mentor, she cherishes her spirituality and her way of life today. She knows that everyone and everywhere is sacred.

"I can resolve problems by picking medicines, humming a song or seeing, in the trees or the plants and all around, a way of life," she says. "If I'm overwhelmed, I give it to nature."

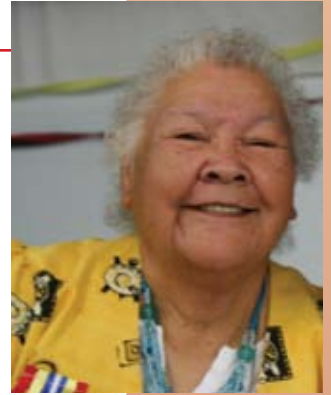
Working with traditional medicines and over 100 plants, Stella welcomes the opportunity to share her cultural wisdom with others, which she often does at the Medicine Eagle Healing and Retreat Place in her home community of Keeseekoowenin, near Elphinstone, Manitoba. She has also taught Aboriginal awareness to members of the armed forces and survival skills to members of the 3rd Canadian Ranger Patrol Group. Three years ago, Stella received a medal from the Canadian military upon her retirement as an Elder and Chief Warrant Officer, positions she has held since 2001.

When asked what has inspired her achievements, she notes the importance of being open to learning as a process, and to know that understanding does not always come right away.

"Because of the kindness of the Elders who have come into my life, I have learned that it doesn't have to be complicated," she says. "I used to worry. I didn't want to insult the Creator. A teacher said the Creator will accept you as you learn. There are always people on our path to teach me."

Looking towards the future, she says intergenerational learning can bring Aboriginal people together so they can become whole again.

"Our skills to bring up our family were taken away from us with residential school," says Stella. "Before, we were always a family unit and always together. When residential school came, we were torn apart. When we came home, we were strangers to our parents. We had that love there, but didn't know how to show it. We raised our children without telling them how we felt. We need to change that through healing and by being together."





BARBARA BRUCE

BUSINESS

Leading by example, Barbara Bruce's life's work reflects a careful collaboration of community, tradition and business to promote personal and professional success.

"People thought I should be in business. It wasn't only my education; it was the way I was," says Barbara, who credits her hardworking parents for the inspiration and motivation to succeed. "I was steered and directed, innately, and by circumstances. People thought I had the confidence, though really I was scared inside. I wanted to be independent and make my own decisions. But it's never like that and you shouldn't try to do it alone."

Barbara's passion is building strong, independent Aboriginal communities. Her contributions to Aboriginal business development are significant. She has owned several businesses and is now founder and vice-president of AMR Planning and Consulting. She was the first executive director of the Manitoba Chapter of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. For several years, she was on the board and took the position of chair for the Communities Economic Development Fund for the Province of Manitoba. She is a past board member of the Top 40 Under 40, the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board in 2004 and the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business and current board member of the Manitoba Gaming Control Commission. In addition, she served as vice-president of operations and marketing at Tribal Councils Investment Group and president and executive director of its charitable foundation.

Barbara says modern day business principles are well aligned with Aboriginal culture and traditional values. "The principles of how successful businesses are run – integrity, creativity, respect, value for clients and customers, value for colleagues, associates and staff and treating them accordingly – are very traditional," says Barbara.

Extending her work for strong communities across the globe, she especially values an opportunity she had in 1984. She served as an election observer and peace monitor during the first democratic election in South Africa, noting it was a profound and life-changing experience. Drawing on her traditional knowledge, she surfaced as a leader for an international team of observers, working with them to resolve internal conflict that was emerging, allowing the group to attend to the assignment as a unified and cohesive team.

After more than 30 years in business, many experiences and successful ventures, Barbara continues to value her principles and integrity.

"My siblings and I were taught to be generous and have compassion. So, that's the way I walk my life," she says. "I carry that respect for myself, first of all, or I can't have respect for others. I have passion for the work that I do. Honesty is critical. I've learned to be courageous in my life. I carry those values in my life, with my family, and colleagues and business partners."

Barbara encourages caution and reminds people not to always accept what they are told. She talks about the importance of healing and standing in the centre of yourself first, so you can reach out and learn more. "Be yourself, be strong and ask questions, even if only to yourself," she says. "Is this going to give me life force or is this going to be destructive? If it's the latter, try not to go there."

Her aspirations for the future involve collaborative efforts to improve the lives of women and children.

"I think we have to do more for children . . . If I could only ignite the private sector, foundations and government to do more for children, youth and Aboriginal women," says Barbara.

MYRA LARAMEE

EDUCATION, YOUTH AND RECREATION

Myra's decision to become a teacher was born out of wanting to make a difference for urban Aboriginal children. For Myra, education is a vital task.

"Education is about how you are prepared to move your energy through the children, given that children are our sacred beings," says Myra.

Growing up in the city brought many positive opportunities with it, but she also experienced racism and hostility. She says she experienced "all of the abuses a woman could possibly go through."

Buoyed by her parents, who were good advocates and positive role models, Myra attributes her life's work to the path her parents chose, as they offered "the footprints I could step in (and out of) when I needed to."

Ultimately, her experiences shaped her role as a teacher. She learned to work with parents from where they are. "I learned you can be an educator and an abuse survivor."

Through 35 years in the profession, Myra taught at many schools and spent 13 years as principal of Niji Mahkwa School. Her legacy remains in this unique school, that incorporates traditional, cultural teachings in a supportive learning environment. Her most cherished memory is of the young people she taught bringing their children to her.

"They knew I could be trusted with them," says Myra. "Later, one of the children's grandparents brought a pipe to me for my school. It was such an honour. It stays in the school, and it still leads and goes on after me."

Myra is currently director of education reform at the First Nations Education Resource Centre and an Elder in Residence at the Aboriginal Student Centre (University of Manitoba). She is also working on an indigenous teacher education model with the University of Winnipeg, a degree integrating teaching practice and principles with appropriate history and knowledge of indigenous people. Myra holds a Bachelor of Education, a Masters of Education and expects to complete her PhD in 2012.

Myra's advice to teachers and activists is to persevere.

"I try to be the voice of reason, sometimes asking the questions that no one wants to hear," she says. "And, yet, I try to be vocal in a way that doesn't marginalize people."

Myra tries to encourage people to be patient and not fight themselves.

"Get out of your own way," she says. "You can't always think about what you are doing or you'll get overwhelmed and sucked into the mire. Things like colonialism and marginalization are alive and well. Sometimes, you have to step around them."

Myra sees her legacy and her aspirations for the future reflected in her children, grandchildren and especially, her great grandchildren.

"It is my most cherished gift to have been able to move through abuse, addictions, denigration and be able to hold my grandchildren with pride and show them how to pray," she says.

Myra believes in the power and ability of women and hopes to support those traits in others.

"As women, if we pray together, no matter where we are, we can move mountains," she says. "You must believe in what you do. That's the bottom line. Young women will see it. If you don't believe in it, they'll also see that too; they'll know."





KATHY MALLETT

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

Kathy's career in community development emerged out of her desire "to be part of something bigger." Building community was always important to her. It was inspired by her mother who cultivated a sense of community with others "and taught me about having a connection to it."

After being exposed to community organization and politics at university, Kathy's journey brought her to the Community Economic Development Association (CEDA) where she worked on a number of projects. She has now come full circle in her career, serving as co-director of that same agency since 2009.

Kathy's leadership in community development helped establish many other Aboriginal service organizations and community economic development (CED) projects in Winnipeg, including the Payuk Inter-Tribal Housing Co-op, Neechi Foods Community Store and the Nee Gawn Ah Kai Day Care.

Kathy served on the Aboriginal Centre Board during the renovation of its historical building. She was also the director of Aboriginal Ganootomage Justice Services, an alternative justice program based on traditional culture and spirituality. Kathy was executive director of the Original Women's Network for 10 years and also served as a Winnipeg School Division trustee.

As co-ordinator of the Urban Native Child Welfare Coalition, Kathy worked with an advocacy group hoping to make important changes in the child welfare system. This coalition of organizations eventually formed Ma Mawi Chi Itata Centre which has provided services to the community for over 25 years.

The organization had humble beginnings and the plan was intended to be short-term.

"In the day, we had this notion that once we developed the service, after working with the families, getting them stronger," she says. "that maybe we would work ourselves out of a job."

She attributes her success in community development to good working relationships.

"If you don't have strong relationships with the people you're working with, you can't get things done," says Kathy. "If you have strong relationships, you carry them through the years and see and meet many people. I try to follow through – that's important – and work on building that trust."

Her advice to other activists and organizers is to know, and care for, yourself.

"I've seen so many people wanting a pat on the back," says Kathy. "Dealing with issues helps you be there for the right reasons. That's how you stay humble. It can be very frustrating, especially when you're working with bureaucracy."

Kathy's spirituality has become especially important to her now, because there was not a lot of time available when raising her family. Nor were there many local Elders to consult and learn from.

"I had my spirit name given to me over 30 years ago, but I didn't take time to attend the ceremonies and learn the traditions when I was younger and raising my children," says Kathy. "We often forget to pray and thank the Creator. I'm very thankful for my grandchildren. I'm lucky they're doing well."

As Kathy continues her leadership in community development, she offers inspiration for others walking her path.

"Find some inner peace," she says. "If we can't find peace in ourselves, how can we help others and guide people?"

BEATRICE (CULLETON) MOSIONIER

ARTS

Beatrice's accomplished writing career is a testament to using tragedies in a positive way. Her stories have moved the hearts and minds of young people for generations, making a significant contribution to Aboriginal literature and the arts.

Beatrice's first novel *In Search of April Raintree* was published in 1983. Read by students across the country every year, it remains one of Canada's most popular and well-known works of Aboriginal literature. The book was republished and is in its 25th year. April Raintree's character remains a timeless expression of hope. In 2008, On the Same Page: Manitoba Reads! organizers unanimously chose *In Search of April Raintree* to launch the province's very first mass reading project.

Less than a year after submitting the book's manuscript in 1981, Beatrice became publisher at Pemmican Publications for the next five years. Since writing her first novel, Beatrice has been involved in several other projects including writer tours and writing several children's books. *Come Walk With Me, A Memoir* is a posthumous chronicle of her mother's life and the experience of growing up in foster care.

"I had no clue I would write such a book when I started. The fact that I got it done is quite amazing," says Beatrice. "It was not anything I was prepared for; it wasn't a plan. I had no inclination I could write in that way. It was probably the best thing I've done."

By example, she shows that claiming opportunity when it arises is key to growth.

"When you have an opportunity like that you have to take it. If you let it go, you never know what it could have been," she says. "It's the same thing as hope. As long as we're alive, we need to have hope."

Beatrice encourages people to write if they are having problems or have questions to work through.

"It's not the first words that come; they are not going to give you the answers," she says. "It's like talking things out, the ideas come to you when you're talking with someone else."

She also says it is important to be exposed to ideas through the arts, "perhaps by film, books and speakers, not only specific to women, but things that affect us all...documentaries, things about the food industry and politics."

Pivotal experiences of her book's main character paralleled events in Beatrice's life. Similar to the title character, the death of Beatrice's sister Kathy in 1980 initiated a journey of self-discovery for Beatrice. This was not the first tragedy, as she had also lost another sister to suicide in 1964.

When asked about advice for others facing adversity, she says we need look outside of ourselves.

"It's important to concentrate on the good things in your life, things you like and people who make you laugh...anything you feel connected to, go with it and use the energy," says Beatrice. "A lot of people dwell on their own problems. You have to think of humanity as a whole."

Beatrice's writings will continue to enhance our collective insight into social dynamics and humanity for generations to come.





SOPHIA RABLIAUSKAS, O.M.

ENVIRONMENTAL: FOOD, LAND PRESERVATION AND WATER STEWARDSHIP

Sophia strongly believes we have a responsibility “to help preserve our way of life and our future.” She knows the future is intimately connected with the land, “which is alive and intertwined with knowledge.”

It was only when Sophia left her home community for university in Winnipeg that she became more aware of plans for land development in the traditional territory. After completing her degree in Human Ecology (Family Studies) and returning to Poplar River, Sophia was hired as community health director. Her resolve strengthened when she became band councillor for two years and started discussion about ways of securing the future for the children. She became stronger in her belief that the community has a responsibility to help preserve the traditional way of life.

“I realized this was something so sacred and something I had to protect,” says Sophia. “I had a lot of healing and learning from the teachings of the Elders. It is a lifelong learning about the importance of speaking for the land. We’ve lost so much, and can never let that happen again.”

When community members recognized this as part of the healing process, they took a stand, as a community, for their children.

“The land is alive,” she says. “It is intertwined with healing and we needed to have our youth feel that connection. So, we began to heal and take young people back to the land.”

Her passion has translated the community’s spirit into action. With Sophia as spokesperson for the Pimachiowin Aki World Heritage Project, the process of formally designating a large part of boreal forest in their traditional land as a United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site began in 1998. The area currently has interim status and the proposal will be finalized by 2011. Sophia and the community have been recognized internationally for their efforts, earning a prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2007.

Sophia’s commitment to land preservation is firmly rooted in her understanding of the connection between the health of the land and the community.

“I understand the spirit of the land. I see what’s happening around us – so much suffering – and people have a choice about what they want to do,” says Sophia. “It’s not just our community, but we must also contribute our best for the sake of the planet and all of humanity.”

She firmly believes the role of Anishinabe Ikwe (Ojibway women) is to have environmental responsibility for the children, “to give them a safe, healthy place to call home and a community with healthy people.”

Sophia says she is proud of the youth who are reclaiming land and culture in her community.

“We didn’t have dancing and drumming around when I was growing up,” she says. “Now, we have girls as fancy shawl dancers. Our youth come out and do the dancing for the Elders and the young men are learning to drum. They have a sense of pride in who they are. We see success and a positive transformation. It is a proud moment for the community.”

DORIS YOUNG

SOCIAL JUSTICE: HUMAN RIGHTS, HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES



Doris Young's work has always been about justice for Aboriginal people. Throughout her career, Doris has used her work in the post secondary education system, as well as community development principles, to improve the rights of Indigenous peoples, address women's issues and foster northern development.

She taught at the universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba and was director of Aboriginal initiatives at Keewatin Community College. Currently advisor to the president on Aboriginal affairs at University College of the North (UCN) in The Pas, Doris helped develop the Kenanow Bachelor of Education Program with the Council of Elders at UCN. Based on traditional learning methods, Kenanow focuses on the connection between western and Aboriginal education perspectives and lifelong learning.

Doris served on many boards and committees, including Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimananak (MKO) Women's Advisory Council, Manitoba Women's Advisory Council and the Child Review Committee on Deaths of Aboriginal Children in Care. She was chair of the Health Sciences Centre Aboriginal Services Committee for seven years. Doris was a member of the Indian Residential School Survivor Committee for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and an appointed Elder for the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) Implementation Commission. In 2010, Doris was appointed to co-chair the Premier's Advisory Council on Education, Poverty and Citizenship.

Doris says it is important to return to the land to find justice for indigeneous people. She is proud of her decision to return to her home community on the Opaskwayak Cree Nation near The Pas.

"It is an important world my mother, grandmother and sisters started and my daughters and I have picked up. I'm glad that I had the courage," she says. "I felt my children needed to know the land; where their ancestors were buried; relatives, aunts, cousins; and, this place, the rivers, the roads and what we call them; Turtle Rock, where we put our offerings; our walking path.

"My children are so special; they are my biggest accomplishments. I had hope that we would all become mediwiwin (living in harmony with traditional life) and I am most proud of that."

Doris says that ceremonies strengthened her and her identity and that traditions, customs and language are important. She says young women need to find their identity in whatever way possible. She advises young women to build relationships with others to carry them through.

"Women have always been a big part of my life...role models," says Doris. "I would advise any young woman to have mentors and to choose them very carefully, because their mentors teach them.

"I didn't do this journey by myself. The women I met, when we were trying to make a better life for our children, have all offered respect, love, caring and support. We have made good lives. It's not always about material things; it's relationships, trust and choosing good roads."

TOWARDS THE FUTURE: ABORIGINAL YOUTH

This publication was written to celebrate, honour and inspire Aboriginal women. Though we hope the stories encourage young women, we know the young also have many gifts to offer, including compassion, enthusiasm and kindness. They remind us of our roles as creators of life and caretakers of the spirit, so they motivate us to choose a good path. By recognizing young Aboriginal women, we hope to set the tone for the future, since children and youth are always in the place where the future begins.



VANESSA KOZAK



Vanessa's perseverance, enthusiasm and ambition set the stage for a future of important contributions. At 22 years old, she has almost finished her studies at University of Winnipeg and will pursue a law career.

She left school at age 16 and had no idea where to begin again. She was discouraged and earned only three of the 28 credits she needed to graduate from Grade 12. When she entered Argyle Alternative High School, things began to change.

Vanessa credits some of her school experiences at Argyle for developing the trait of tenacity that has attributed to her success. Before Argyle, she didn't know that much about her culture, the Seven Teachings or other stories from the Elders.

"The first year is based on art and I started my first painting," says Vanessa. "I learned the medicine wheel and made my first dream catcher on the mural. I worked hours and hours on that mural.

Our teacher linked us with the Urban Shaman Gallery and we had a show of our work with students from other schools. Then, I made a drum. Ever since I made my drum, I knew I had to do more with my life. My teacher said I couldn't take it home until I graduated."

Seeing Vanessa's potential, the guidance counsellor at Argyle spoke to her about the possibility of going to university as a mature student. Vanessa eventually won an entrance scholarship to the University of Winnipeg. Her interest in a law comes from her current studies in Aboriginal governance, learning about government and treaties with Aboriginal people.

Vanessa has made her mark in many ways. She served on the MB4Youth Advisory Council and attended the Global Young Leaders' Conference and the United Nations World Youth Summit. She has been a volunteer for Siloam Mission, the Aboriginal program at Argyle School and a mentor and tutor for students at the University of Winnipeg Aboriginal Student Services Centre. She was a youth representative on the board of the Urban Shaman Gallery and remains involved as a volunteer.



Vanessa says she wants to leave something behind for future generations.

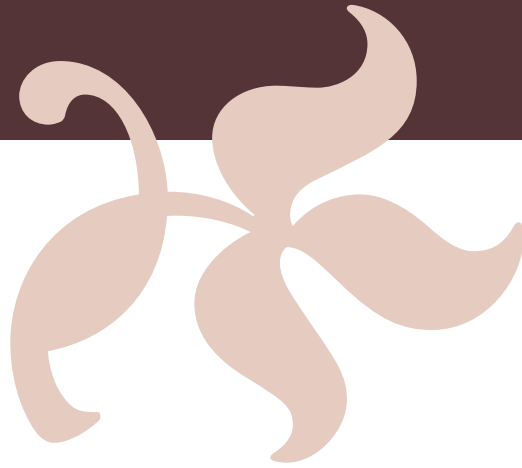
“That’s what the Elders taught me, and I try to use those lessons daily,” she says. “My main purpose is knowing that I’ve helped in some positive way and have left nothing harmful.”

Vanessa says it is important to maintain one’s physical health which, in turn, benefits the mind and spirit. She says we can support young women and girls by giving them a safe place to learn, where they can go to be with others and receive encouragement. Community involvement and volunteering are essential to Vanessa’s vision of positive change for the future.

“We can make the time to volunteer, anywhere,” she says. “I think younger people are so caught up in what they want, so consumed by consumerism, and having all of this or that. We are not as grateful as we should be.”

Her advice for young women and girls is heartfelt.

“It sounds kind of corny, but I think it’s important to follow your dreams and don’t give up, no matter what,” says Vanessa. “There will be setbacks and people telling you that your ideas won’t happen. It just makes me want to pursue them even more.”



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