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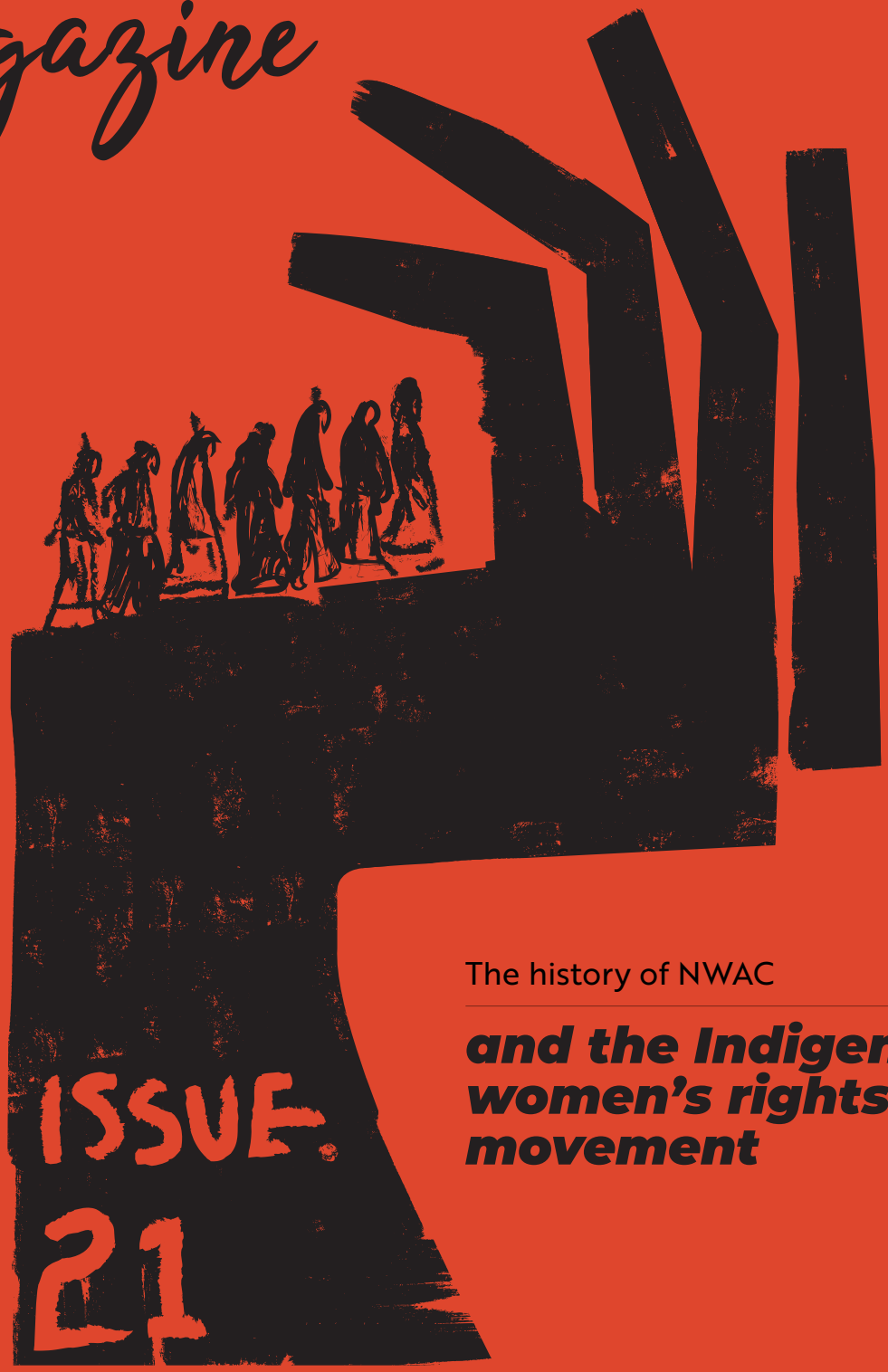
KCI-NIWESQ Magazine



The history of NWAC

and the Indigenous women's rights movement

RESTORING

what was stripped away: First Nations women's battle to regain Indian status

NWAC's birth

a half century ago: Indigenous women come together to fight for their rights

SISTERS IN SPIRIT

how grieving families started a national movement for justice

INFLUENCER

Vanessa Brousseau @ResilientInuk advocacy and art

Nova Scotia

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The history of **NWAC** and the *Indigenous women's rights* movement

The dawn of the movement for Indigenous women's rights and the birth of NWAC: A half century ago, Indigenous women across Canada rebelled against the social order that left them second-class citizens in their own lands. They stood up individually to demand equality, justice, and security, and they came together collectively under the banner of the Native Women's Association of Canada.

said.
"Once the association of Indian wom
organized on a provincial level, we can joi
committee." one delegate said The National
is as yet unformed. A conference in Sask
month is expected to establish a national o
The background of Indian women's orga

Cover art by: Kyla Elisabeth, NWAC's Art and Design Director

Design note: This month's cover takes inspiration from human rights movements' artwork and these powerful visuals of progress throughout history.

Social movement campaigns depict iconic symbols of a pivotal moment. These visually striking artworks serve as essential tools for activists, conveying the struggle for racial equality, human rights, and justice. Bold typography, vivid colours,, and poignant imagery transform these designs into a rallying cry for change.

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HUMAN
RIGHTS
FOR
INDIAN
WOMEN

Message from the CEO

Welcome to the twenty-first edition of Kci-Niwesq, the magazine of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).

In this very special edition, we take a look back at NWAC over the years, from its founding in 1974, to the revitalization of the more recent past. We reflect on some of the larger issues that have occupied NWAC's leaders, and we introduce you to some of the heroes of the movement for Indigenous women's rights in Canada.

We start with a look back to the 1960s when Indigenous women were standing up to say the injustices and the discrimination that left them second-class citizens in their own communities had to end. Much of their anger was focused on a section of the *Indian Act* that stripped First Nations women of their Indian status when they married non-Indigenous men. That, coupled with the economic disparities and what is now known as the Sixties Scoop, led to the formation of the organization known as NWAC.

We will tell you how NWAC has made a remarkable transformation over the past seven years, from fewer than 12 workers in a rented office space to

150 employees (and counting) in our magnificent new building in Gatineau, Quebec, and across the country—from having no one to answer the phones to creating sections within NWAC that are working on more than 65 programs to improve the lives of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people.

We will introduce you to Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, a past-president of NWAC. Her fight to regain her Indian status and be reinstated into her Anishinaabe community eventually pressed the government to change the sections of the *Indian Act* that discriminated against First Nations women. Jeannette is a true hero of Indigenous women's rights.

You will read about the history of the Sisters in Spirit campaign. This movement to end the violence against Indigenous women and girls began in the 1990s with families of the victims and their advocates who knew, even then, that what was taking place was a genocide. You will read about the marches that eventually led to the National Inquiry, and about the women who would not give up until the world acknowledged the horror and the scope of the crimes.

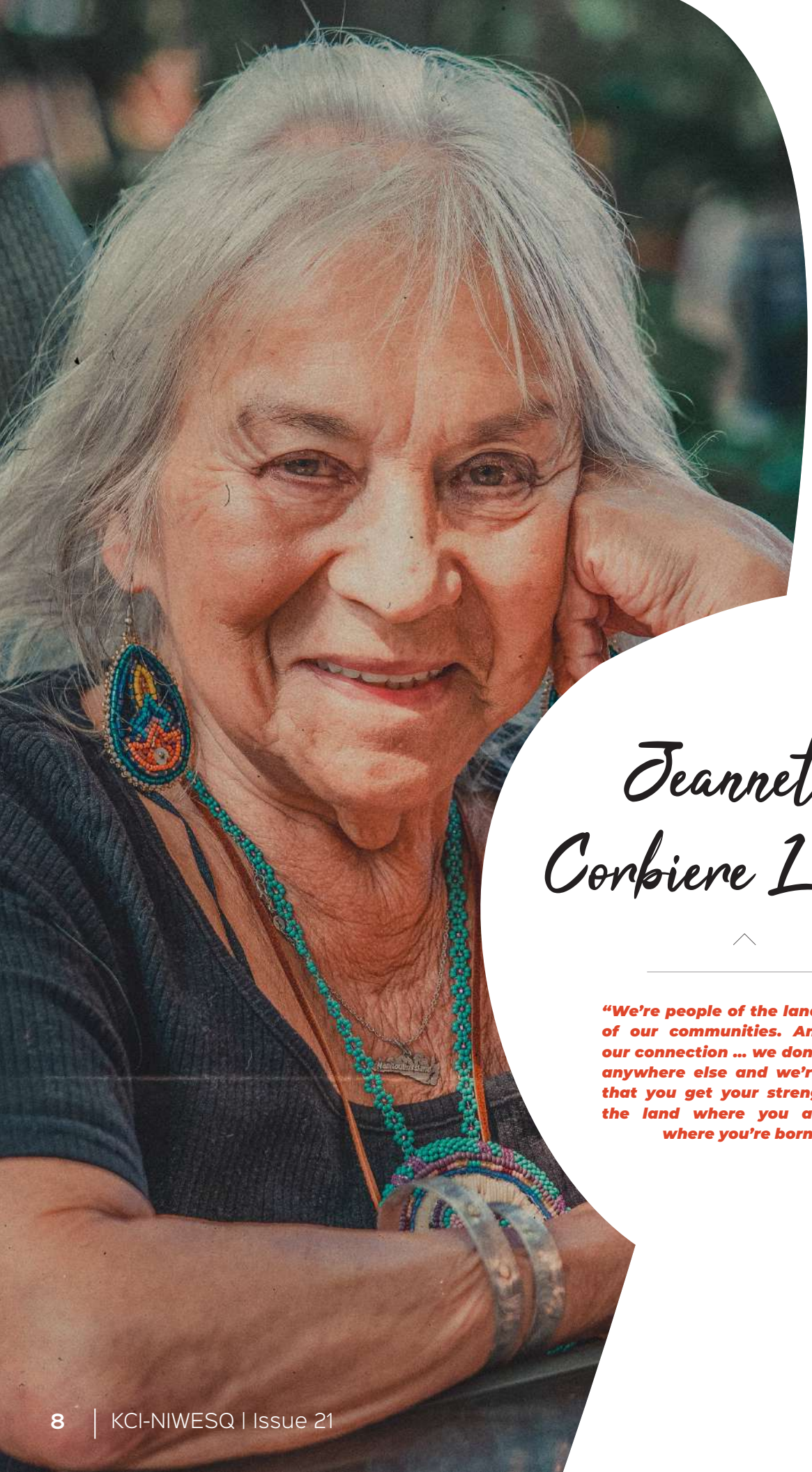
We will tell you about the long fight that NWAC has waged to be heard at the tables where decisions affecting the lives of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people are made. That started with the constitutional talks of the early 1980s, and continued with a court case in the early 1990s when NWAC was not permitted to take part in the talks leading up to the Charlottetown Accord.

We will introduce you to Bertha Clark-Jones, the courageous Métis-Cree woman and veteran of the Second World War who founded the Voice of Alberta Native Women's Society and was NWAC's first president. Ms. Clark-Jones was affectionately known as Birdie because of her fearless "twittering" against injustice.

And, finally, you will meet Vanessa Brousseau, one of NWAC's influencers who uses the handle Resilient Inuk on her social media platforms. Ms. Brousseau says she inherited her resilience from her grandfather, who was taken from his Northern community after being diagnosed with tuberculosis and held for seven years in a sanitorium in southwestern Ontario.

So, thank you once again for opening the pages that follow. Thank you for reading the twenty-first edition of *Kci-Niwesq*. Please drop us a line and let us know what you think at reception@nwac.ca.

MIIGWETCH.



Jeannette Corbiere Lavell

"We're people of the land, people of our communities. And that's our connection ... we don't belong anywhere else and we're taught that you get your strength from the land where you are from, where you're born."

Anishinabek Nation

Going Up Against Big Opposition With Big Money: The Long Fight for Status

Two weeks after Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, an Anishinabek woman, married the non-Indigenous love of her life in April 1970, a letter arrived from the federal government saying her marriage meant she was stripped of her Indian status. It was an injustice she and other First Nations women fought for nearly five decades in the both the court and the Canadian Parliament.

Two weeks after Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, an Anishinabek woman, married the non-Indigenous love of her life in April 1970, a letter arrived from the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs. It informed her she was no longer a member of the Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve, and included a cheque for $35.

Ms. Corbiere Lavell had been stripped of her Indian status, which is what the *Indian Act* dictated would happen to First Nations women who married white men. Indigenous men who married white women, on the other hand, experienced no such change in their status and, in fact, saw status granted to their non-Indigenous wives.

It was a sexist injustice that Ms. Corbiere Lavell would not accept. She embarked on a decades-long fight to rewrite the law—a mission that inspired and motivated Indigenous women across Canada who had experienced similar excommunication to demand change.

> **"Our role as women is recognized now. We're reaching that stage again where we feel good about each other and our roles within our communities."**

The Long Fight for Status

It took the federal government almost 50 years to remove nearly all of the sexism from the *Indian Act* and to restore full status to those women and their families who had lost it.

Along the way, Ms. Corbiere Lavell and a small handful of other women who dared to challenge the patriarchal system became enemies of many male First Nations leaders and their organizations, but heroes to the families and communities that were eventually reunited.

The sense of belonging that comes with status is so important "because that's who we are," Ms. Corbiere Lavell said during a recent interview in her leafy backyard on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron.

She and her daughter, Dawn Lavell Harvard, who joined in the interview, are both past presidents of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and long-time advocates for the rights of Indigenous women.

"My entire life literally from birth has been this issue—status," said Ms. Lavell Harvard, who is the director of the First People's House of Learning at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, and was one of the youngest women ever to be NWAC's president.

"Look at my daughters (who are 14 and 19). I literally just took them both down and got them their status cards two months ago … we're still waiting for the actual physical cards to come," she said. "But this has been the defining battle my entire life, like some countries fight their entire lives for independence. We're fighting to get back in, to be part of our families."

In the late 1960s, Jeannette Corbiere was working with youth at the Native Canadian Centre in downtown Toronto. She needed musicians for an event she was organizing, and a friend introduced her to David Lavell, a photography and journalism student at Ryerson University who also played guitar.

"Things just kept on going from there," she said with a smile. They were married on April 11, 1970. And, two weeks later, the letter telling her about her lost status arrived in the mail.

Ms. Corbiere Lavell said she was aware at the time of other First Nations women who had been cut off from the Indian rolls in similar fashion, but it was not something that was often discussed. "When you're young and you want to get married, you don't think about 'what's this going to do to my personal status within my community?'"

The news was devastating. Wikwemikong was "the only place that I knew. I went to school on the reserve and all my relatives were there. It was just home." Losing status meant, technically, she would be trespassing every time she returned to the reserve. It meant she was no longer entitled to lands on the First Nation or to any of the benefits that flowed to Status Indians.

Ms. Corbiere Lavell had become acquainted with human rights lawyer Clayton Ruby through his work at the native friendship centre. She told him about the letter, and he invited her and Mr. Lavell over to his place one evening to see what could be done.

A check of the documents and of the *Indian Act* told them that the following day would be the final opportunity to appeal the decision. Mr. Ruby said: 'You have to decide right now. Do you want to do something about this?' And I said: 'Definitely,'" said Ms. Corbiere Lavell.

Mr. Ruby filed suit against the Government of Canada the next day, and the case went before the York County Court. Ms. Corbiere Lavell argued that the *Indian Act* violated the Canadian Bill of Rights because it discriminated against women.

"We lost there. Badly," said Ms. Corbiere Lavell. And the proceedings of the case highlighted the extent of the discrimination and racism within the justice system.

Justice B.W. Grossberg "said some really startling things," which are all in the court transcripts, said Ms. Corbiere Lavell. She said he told her: "I guess

Pictured: Dawn Lavell Harvard in Manitowaning, Ontario

Photo credit: Peter Baumgarten

you're not concerned about what people think about Indian women, and we all know the stereotypes of Indian women." He said: "You should be glad a white man married you." And, of her demand for Indian status while married to someone who was non-Indigenous, he said: "So you want to have your cake and eat it too."

The next step was the Federal Court of Appeal, where a three-judge panel concluded that because Ms. Corbiere Lavell faced a penalty that men in her position did not, she was being discriminated against on the basis of sex.

She won that round.

But the case drew media attention and also piqued the interest of the male-dominated Indigenous organizations, including the National Indian Brotherhood, which was the precursor to the Assembly of First Nations.

The chiefs of the National Indian Brotherhood did not want women who "married out" to have Indian status. "They were all upset, and that spread right across Canada," said Ms. Corbiere Lavell.

The federal government appealed to the Supreme Court.

And Ms. Lavell's case was amalgamated with that of Yvonne Bedard.

Ms. Bedard was a Mohawk woman who had married a white man and then, after her divorce, moved back to her family home on the Six Nations Reserve in southwest Ontario only to be told she no longer had Indian status and was not welcome.

Ms. Corbiere Lavell and Ms. Bedard were going up against big opposition with big money.

Federal bureaucrats spread much fear across First Nations saying that if the two women won their case, white men who married Indigenous women would be moving into the reserves and taking over. They were saying: "You already don't have enough to pay for houses and health services and education for the people you have. You're gonna have all these women and their kids coming back from the city," said Ms. Lavell Harvard.

There was also an issue, she said, in that many of the First Nations male chiefs and council members had married non-Indigenous women, and they were worried that their wives would lose their status if the Lavell–Bedard case was successful.

"People would call you 'just a bill C-31'. It was a derogatory term."

Jeannette Corbiere Lavell

The government, said Ms. Corbiere Lavell, provided the male-led organizations with money to send large numbers of people to the Supreme Court hearing to support its appeal.

On the other side of the court room, the roughly 20 women who showed up to sit behind Ms. Corbiere Lavell and Ms. Bedard scraped together the cost of their travel with fundraisers and bake sales.

Before and during the proceeding, the members of the National Indian Brotherhood "were singing, drumming, and they were pointing at us and shouting at us and saying go home," said Ms. Corbiere Lavell. "Then (one of them) came over and waved his banner or whatever at us and he actually threatened my life in front of people there. That's how vicious it got."

That same man, she said, wrote to her home community saying it should get rid of her, and that she was destroying the *Indian Act*. While there were some people in Wikwemikong who did not agree with her position, there were others, including the Chief whose own daughter had lost her status through marriage, who were supportive.

On August 27, 1973, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling of the Federal Court of Appeal in a split decision, determining that the *Indian Act* did not have to meet the standards of the Bill of Rights. Ms. Corbiere Lavell and Ms. Bedard had lost their case and the 'marrying-out' rule of the *Indian Act* was upheld.

But the court battle had garnered much media and public attention. And the fight did not stop, nor did the animosity.

"I got actual death threats," said Ms. Corbiere Lavell. "It was really difficult at the time. But thank goodness I had the support of my whole family. My mom and dad and all my aunts. And what they said is: 'You believe in this, we support you, and you keep on going. Don't quit."

The movement went underground and the work continued.

In 1971, Ms. Corbiere Lavell had been the founding president of the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA), which came together to empower Indigenous women and to take on issues like the sexism in the *Indian Act*.

Pictured: Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Dawn Lavell Harvard in the backyard of Ms. Corbiere Lavell's home in Manitowaning, Ontario. *Photo credit:* Peter Baumgarten

"David used to say Indian women, especially Anishinaabe women, are stubborn and determined and they won't give up," she said. "So, as women in Ontario, we just kept on going and we got stronger. Finally, we were able to get a little bit of recognition. We set up an office in Thunder Bay."

Efforts to end the sexism were starting in other provinces as well, including in Quebec under Mary Two-Axe Earley, the outspoken Mohawk woman's rights activist from Kahnawake.

"She became a close friend. She was almost like my mentor," said Ms. Corbiere Lavell. "She just said keep on going. Just keep at it. She would say you believe in this, you do it. And other women across Canada started approaching me and calling me and inviting me to speak."

In 1974, NWAC was formed through a coalition of provincial and territorial Indigenous women's groups, some of which had formed specifically to fight the discrimination in the *Indian Act*.

But Ms. Corbiere Lavell said not all of the original board members of NWAC were prepared to take up her fight. Some were vocal in their opposition to changing the *Indian Act* and argued forcefully against messing with the status quo and reinstating those women who had married out.

By the mid- to late-1970s, however, NWAC was fully on side. Its leaders took issue with the government's decision to exempt the *Indian Act* from the effects of a human rights bill tabled in 1977, labelling the move as a deliberate attempt to deny Indigenous women their basic human rights.

Also in 1977, Sandra Lovelace, a Maliseet woman who lost her status when she married an American man and was not allowed to return to her reserve after her divorce, brought her case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

The UN ruled in 1981 that, because of the sexist provisions of the *Indian Act*, Canada was in violation of the Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. It was an embarrassing moment for the country whose former prime minister was a founder of the international body.

In 1982, the new Canadian Constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect stating that "every individual is equal before and under the law" and that no one could be discriminated against on the basis of sex. The government was forced to act.

In 1985, the government passed bill C-31 allowing the women who had lost Indian status through marriage to be reinstated.

NWAC opposed the legislation because the reinstated women could not pass on their status to their descendants in the same way that First Nations men could. It created many different categories of status holders. And those like Ms. Corbiere Lavell, who regained their status in 1985, were still, in many ways, second-class citizens. "People would call you 'just a bill C-31,'" she said. "It was a derogatory term."

Sharon McIvor, a member of the Lower Nicola Band in British Columbia, also regained her status that year, as did her son, Charles Jacob Grismer. But Mr. Grismer could not pass along his status to his children. Ms. McIvor and Mr. Grismer took the federal government to court.

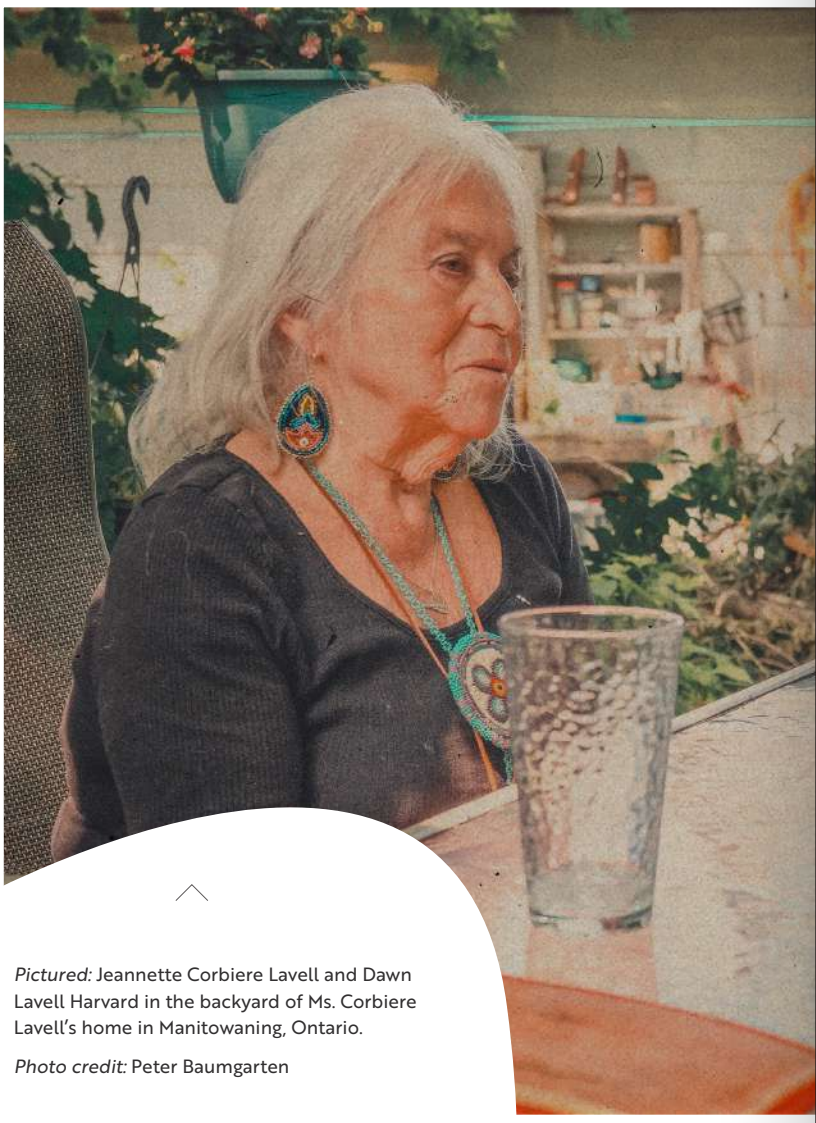
It took until 2006 for the case to be heard before the British Columbia Supreme Court, which ruled that the *Indian Act* still was discriminatory and infringed upon the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In response, the government again amended the *Indian Act* in 2009 to allow reinstated women to pass status to their children's children.

Even then, some discrimination remained.

It wasn't until December 2017, with the passage of bill S-3, that most of the sexist passages within the *Indian Act* were finally removed, including the section that specified a cut-off date of 1951, which applied to bill S-31. That meant descendants of women who had lost their status by marrying out before 1951 could apply to be reinstated.

Today, NWAC is still lobbying for some additional changes to the *Indian Act* to remove remaining bits of discrimination. But most of the

"The sense of belonging that comes with status is so important because that's who we are. We're people of the land, people of our communities. We're taught that you get your strength from the land where you are from, where you're born."



Pictured: Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Dawn Lavell Harvard in the backyard of Ms. Corbiere Lavell's home in Manitowaning, Ontario.

Photo credit: Peter Baumgarten

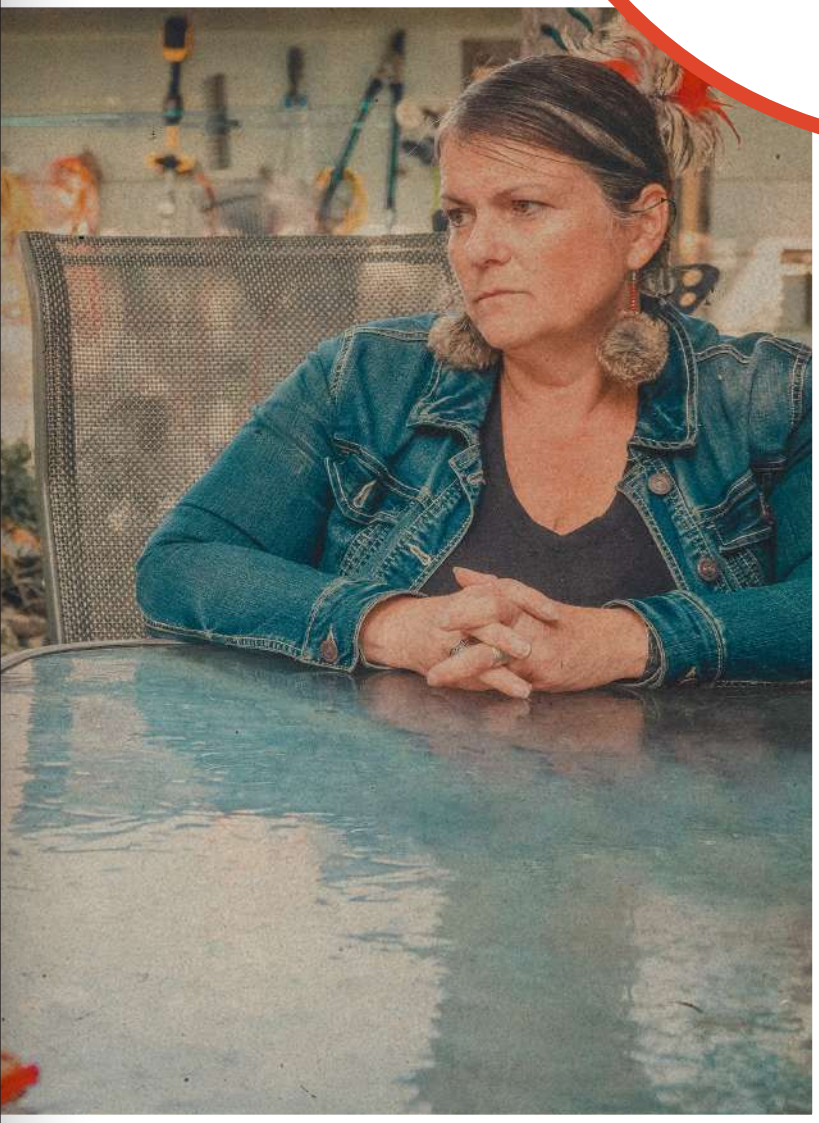
issues have been resolved and most of the women and their descendants who were stripped of their status have seen it returned.

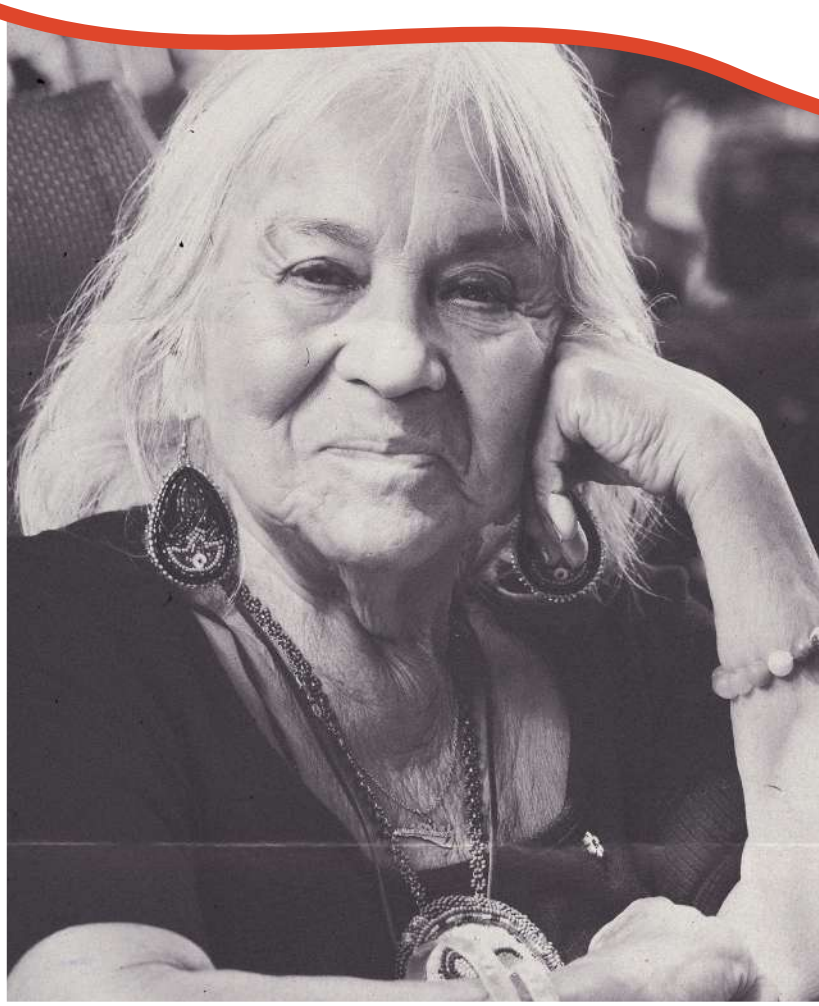
Ms. Harvard Lavell said it is not just those who lost their status who have benefited from these changes. Many First Nations reserves would have become empty over time if the *Indian Act* had not been revised, she said.

She is more than proud of Ms. Corbiere Lavell's campaign.

"I've been places where young people have come up and have called her the grandmother of our nations because, if it wasn't for her, how many of our nations would have disappeared by now? If it wasn't for her, how many of our children and grandchildren would not be in our communities?" asked Ms. Lavell Harvard.

Ms. Corbiere Lavell said she is pleased to have witnessed a significant change of attitudes within the political class and





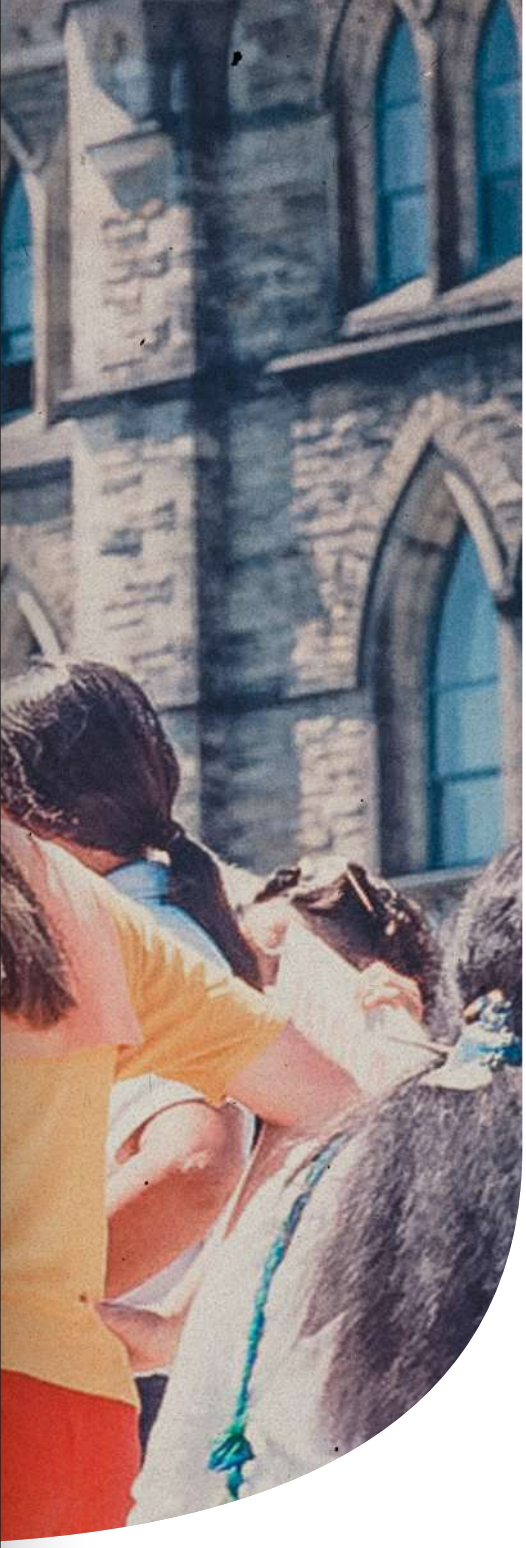
among First Nations people since she began her fight in 1970.

"Everyone now accepts the fact that our women should not lose their rights through marriage," she said. "Our role as women is recognized now. It was there prior (to European contact) but because of Christianity and government, it was taken away. And so now we're reaching that stage again where we feel good about each other and our roles within our communities."

NWAC Begins

It has been 50 years since members of organizations representing Indigenous women in all of Canada's provinces and territories met to form an association that would be their national voice. Over that half century, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has worked for social, cultural, political, and economic empowerment.

Indigenous Women Organizing, Community by Community



Pictured: Indigenous women protest on Parliament Hill in the late 1970s, from the Library of Canada collection.

Photo Credit: George Mully

It has been 50 years since members of organizations representing Indigenous women in all of Canada's provinces and territories met to form an association that would be their national voice.

Over that half century, NWAC has led the call to end the genocide against Indigenous women and girls. It has expanded to represent Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people. It has fought for human rights in Parliament, in the courts, and on the international stage. It has worked for social, cultural, political, and economic empowerment.

But its roots go back to the 1960s and the insistence by female Indigenous activists that their rights should not be ignored, as women across the Western world were demanding equality.

For many Indigenous women in Canada in the mid-1900s, the most pressing issue was Section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act*. This section said First Nations women who did not marry status Indian men must give up their Indian status, while Indigenous men who "married out" did not have to give up theirs.

Mary Two-Axe Earley, a Mohawk woman from Kahnawake in Quebec, appeared before the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1968 to say Indigenous women were being excluded from the protections of the Canadian Bill of Rights and the Canadian Human Rights Commission. It was a blatant act of discrimination, she said, that saw First Nations women being evicted from their communities, and refused a burial plot beside their fathers and mothers. "Our birthright has been taken away," said Ms. Two-Axe Earley.

A year earlier, she had helped to found an organization called Equal Rights for Equal Women, which, in 1971, became Indian Rights for Indian Women. Its main purpose was to end the discrimination in the *Indian Act*, and it continued to fight for that equality into the 1980s.

Also in 1971, Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, an Anishinabek from the Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve in Ontario, was fighting in court to regain the status that had been stripped from her when she married her non-Indigenous husband. Indigenous women in other

NWAC Begins

parts of Canada were also engaged in the same battle.

"Native women were being discriminated against," said Alma Brooks, a Maliseet woman and NWAC Elder from New Brunswick. "Not only were they losing status, their children would lose status. White women, meanwhile, were gaining status when they married a status Indian."

But status was not the only issue that prompted Indigenous women into activism.

In 1967, a group called Saskatchewan Indian Women formed to fight for better living conditions for Indigenous women and their families, and to stop the removal of Indigenous children from their homes and communities. At that time, less than four per cent of reserves in the province had running water, less than one per cent of First Nations students were graduating from high school, and 60 per cent of Indigenous Peoples were unemployed. The First Nations women in Saskatchewan argued that creating a better gender balance would lead to solutions for many of these problems.

They were not alone.

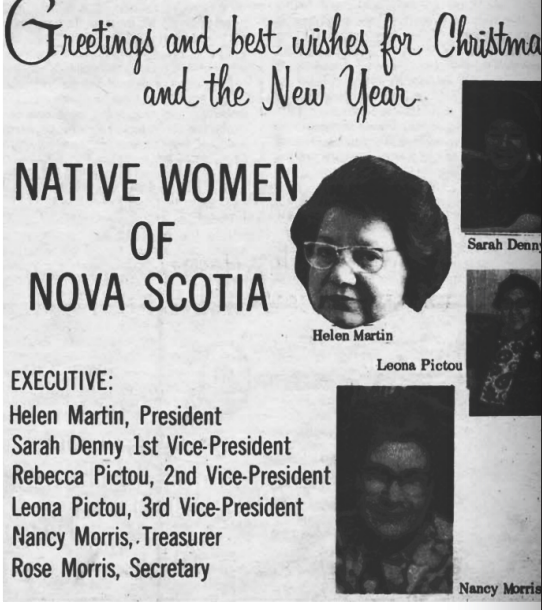
The Voice of Alberta Native Women's Society was founded in 1968 to press for better housing, more equal treatment under the law, better health care and education, and more employment opportunities.

The Ontario Native Women's Association was formed in 1971 to stop the apprehension of Indigenous children by the welfare system, to create better homes for elderly Indigenous people, and to demand better drug and alcohol counselling, among other things.

Across the country, Indigenous women were coming together at the provincial and territorial levels to make the collective case for their rights.

"At that time, the chiefs were mostly men. And they were not advocating at all for women. The women decided that something had to be done about it. So they started to organize," said Ms. Brooks. "Native women were united back then. We had a common purpose. And that was to protect our children. We tried our very best."

Ms. Brooks recalls the work done by Helen Martin, from the Membertou Mi'kmaq community in Nova Scotia,


Greetings and best wishes for Christma and the New Year

NATIVE WOMEN OF NOVA SCOTIA

Helen Martin

Sarah Denny

Leona Pictou

EXECUTIVE:
Helen Martin, President
Sarah Denny 1st Vice-President
Rebecca Pictou, 2nd Vice-President
Leona Pictou, 3rd Vice-President
Nancy Morris, Treasurer
Rose Morris, Secretary

Nancy Morris

Appointed to the National Committee for Native Women on October 28, 1971 at the Isle Royal Hotel, Sydney, N.S. Front L - R: Veronica Atwin, N.B.; Helen Martin, N.S.; Evangeline Jadis, P.E.I.; Chairman, Jean Goodwill, Sask.; Nora Thibodeau, Sask; Back - L - R: Bertha Clarke Alta.; Mary Two Axe Early, Que.; Monica Turner, Ont.; Carolyn Wisley, B.C.; and Vera Richards, Man.

National Organization For Native Women Misunderstanding And Status Issue Main Cause

A meeting was held recently in Cambridge for the women who organized a group called the National Native Women's Organization. The above photo shows the women who attended the meeting. Left to right are: Mrs. Marshall Smith, Mrs. Allan Toney, Mrs. Bernard Toney, all of Cambridge; Mrs. Rita Smith, Hants Port; Mrs. Helen Martin, Sydney; Mrs. Martha Julian, Truro; and Miss Patricia Smith, Hants Port.

Association born...

Helen Martin elected president

Mrs. Helen Martin, Membertou is now the president of the Nova Scotia Native Women's organization for Nova Scotia. Mrs. Martin has been involved from the beginning stages of the newly formed organization for Native women.

Mrs Martin's election came as a result of a three day organizational meeting held at the Isle Royale Hotel in Sydney with some 30 to 40 Indian delegates taking part representing the majority of the twelve Indian communities of this province. Considered as a historic event for Nova Scotia Indian Women, the three day conference was termed as a success.

Mrs. Sarah Denny of Eskasoni was elected vice-president, as was Mrs. Rebecca Pictou of Shubenacadie. New officers will be elected each year at an annual meeting. Also elected were: Mrs. Eddie Morris of Eskasoni as Treasurer and Mrs. Ben Morris of Shubenacadie as secretary.

Daniel Simcoff, representative of the Secretary of State's office in Ottawa, was present at a three days of the conference. Yesterday he observed that, "I have no doubt of the determination of these women to make a viable organization work." He added that while he normally worked on Indian problems in his work, he had not been in close contact with the Nova Scotia reserves. Mr. Simcoff said he had acquired a great deal of knowledge about the needs of Nova Scotia Indians at the three-day conference.

Pictured: All clippings provided by the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association

to mobilize Indigenous women throughout Atlantic Canada.

"I remember her saying she never had enough money to buy a suitcase. She would just pack her clothes in a sheet and tie it onto a stick, and she hitchhiked all over, from community to community, and organized women around the kitchen table," said Ms. Brooks. "She was fighting for her relatives and for her sisters. She was organizing the Native women because she knew that the only way we would be able to change the *Indian Act* would be to organize ourselves."

Others, like Andrea Bear Nicholas, a Maliseet woman from Nekotkok, and Veronica Atwin from Kingsclear First Nation, did the same thing in New Brunswick, said Ms. Brooks. "They went from community to community organizing women," work that led to the creation of the New Brunswick Native Women's Council.

By the early 1970s, it was decided that there should be an Indigenous women's organization in every province and territory. Once that happened, representatives of each of those organizations met in 1974 to form the Native Women's Association of Canada, which would advocate on a broad range of issues at the national level.

Native Women Successful This Time

By PAMELA BOTTOMLEY
Free Press Staff Writer

After two previous abortive attempts, the National Native Women's Association has succeeded in creating a national organization.

A draft constitution presented to 53 delegates to the conference held last weekend at the Sheraton-Carlton Motor Hotel will be taken back to provincial organizations for consideration.

The draft constitution outlines the national group's purpose as improving the living and working conditions of native women, informing native women of their legal rights and their cultural heritage and co-operating with other women's organization's with similar goals.

A resolution passed at the conference stated that the current steering committee for the National Native Women's Association would be responsible for drafting a second constitution for consideration by provincial delegates at another conference in three to six months.

At this conference the structure of the organization would be defined and an executive elected.

The association tried to form an official organization to speak for all native women — status, non-status and Metis — in Alberta in 1971 and in Saskatoon in 1972. Group differences could not be reconciled.

When the draft constitution was being considered during Saturday's session, a group of women who believed the document to be the new group's official constitution walked out but rejoined the conference later in the afternoon.

Rufus Goldstriker, who runs an all-Indian dude ranch in Alberta, spoke to the conference about the revivial of the Indian culture.

"For years", he said, in an interview "we were drugged with white culture. We were punished when we spoke our own language or danced our spiritual dances. Now our culture is being revived. Especially by the young who find that Christianity doesn't work for them.

"Indian Affairs has recently begun to teach Indian culture in Indian schools using teacher aides."

Elizabeth Locke, a conference observer on the advisory council on the status of women in Ottawa, echoed a belief in the resurgence of Indian culture.

In an interview she said "Indian culture is experiencing a renaissance. Young people are asking their elders about religion and legend. There is a tremendous revival of the spiritual Indian culture.

"Ten years ago everyone thought the Indian culture was going to die."

Ms. Locke viewed the decision to form a national native women's group as a "movement of great hope". It was encouraging, she said, that enough Indian women care sufficiently to want an organization to bring them together.

"For many of the delegates, however it was a situation of 'Let's form a national organization or let's forget it' ".

June Menzies, also on the advisory council on the status of women and a conference speaker, said in an interview that she was excited to see the various groups of native women get together to work for common goals.

"Now the advisory council on the status of women can help them and vice versa. They can stand together with other women's groups and lend their support.

"Before it was always 'Let the Indians handle their own affairs.' Now we can work together. The government must now recognize Indian women as a group as well as Indian men."

Later addressing the conference banquet, Ms. Menzies emphasized the challenge to the newly created body.

"Few have come your way before because you have a triple social handicap — poor, native and female.

"Other native women, who haven't had your experience or courage will take strength from this national organization."

Ms. Menzies suggested that the National Native Women's Association suggest to the advisory council on the status of women areas of concern in addition to making them directly to the government department responsible.

This way, she explained, the council could prod the government into action.

A total of 53 delegates, along with guests and observers, registered for the third conference of the National Native Women's Association being held in the Sheraton-Carlton Motor Hotel. Among those registering were (left to right) Rose Mary Two-Rivers, of Caughnawaga, Que., Sarah Sark, of Rocky Point, P.E.I., and Janet Bernard of Whycocomagh, N.S.

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There was no money available to the organization to carry out its advocacy in those early days. "They were begging and borrowing," said Ms. Brooks. "We had bake sales and stuff like that."

Ms. Brooks remembers attending some of the first meetings as an assistant to Lillian LaBellois, the president of the New Brunswick group, who suffered from severe asthma and needed help to get around.

"There were so many issues. The more we were involved, the deeper we got, and the more issues there were. And they were difficult issues. But we never tore each other apart. We enjoyed one another," said Ms. Brooks.

"I remember after a hard day's meeting, we would gather together in Helen Martin's room," she said. "She would sit in her armchair, and we'd all be sitting on the floor around her feet, listening

"Across the country, Indigenous women were coming together at the provincial and territorial levels to make the collective case for their rights. Native women were united back then. We had a common purpose. And that was to protect our children. We tried our very best."

Alma Brooks

to her telling us stories and a lot of the funny things she would share. She had a great sense of humour and she was one of the ones that kept our head above water."

While there were many things in the 1970s that needed to change to improve the lives of Indigenous women and their families, Ms. Brooks remembers NWAC's work coalescing around the issue of sexism in the *Indian Act*.

NWAC president Marlyn Kane, vice-president Jean Gleason who would later become president, and Donna Phillips, another future president, were some of the women who were out there "fighting tooth and nail" for equality under the Act, said Ms. Brooks.

> "They were begging and borrowing. We had bake sales and stuff like that."
>
> Alma Brooks

"The government came up with every excuse to not change the Act and to not reinstate the women," said Ms. Brooks. "They said: 'Oh it would cost so much money.' And we said: 'Well, if money is the issue, then delist all the white women that you gave status to.' And they said: 'Oh, no, we couldn't do that.'"

NWAC Begins

The National Indian Brotherhood, which later became the Assembly of First Nations, lobbied hard to prevent the Act from being changed.

"The chiefs across the country, most of them were men, and many of them were married to white women. And they didn't support us," said Ms. Brooks.

That was one reason why a separate organization was required to represent Indigenous women. But, it was also true that the women had different priorities to the men—including stopping the violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Much of the early work on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls was done by Terri Brown, NWAC President between 2000 to 2004, before Beverly Jacobs, who became NWAC president between 2004 to 2009, went forward with a lot of the background work that Terri Brown had done with families on the West Coast.

Succeeding presidents, including Michèle Audette and Dawn Lavell Harvard, who is Ms. Corbiere Lavell's daughter, took up the fight.

NWAC organized Indigenous women on a national scale "and it gave us a forum to have our voices heard. And I think NWAC has become a force to contend with," said Ms. Brooks.

There is still much to do, she said. The genocide continues, and there is vast inequality and economic disparity. Those are the priorities that will require NWAC's voice for the foreseeable future.

"There is still a long way to go until our communities are healthy and functional," said Ms. Brooks. When that happens, "we can say that we've accomplished something, that the women accomplished something."

Pictured: The new executive of the National Native Women's Steering Committee in British Columbia in 1973

Photo Credit: Library and Archives Canada

Bertha Clark-Jones

"It was a powerful time. They were regaining their rights and their voices were being amplified. My grandmother realized, as Indigenous women, we have to fight even harder to be heard, valued, and taken seriously."

Pictured: Bertha Clark-Jones in the military

Bertha Clark-Jones: The Power of One Woman's Voice

Bertha Clark-Jones knew the power of her own voice—and spent her life helping other Indigenous women find the power in theirs. Ms. Clark-Jones, a Nehiwayah (Cree)-Métis woman, was the co-founder and first elected president of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).

Bertha Clark-Jones knew the power of her own voice—and spent her life helping other Indigenous women find the power in theirs.

Ms. Clark-Jones, a Nehiwayah (Cree)-Métis woman who was born in 1922 in Clear Hills, Alberta, was the co-founder and first elected president of NWAC. She was a veteran of the Second World War who advocated for the rights of Indigenous veterans. She was also an early advocate for Indigenous women's rights with the Voice of Alberta Native Women's Society.

> "Her main drive was to uplift Indigenous woman who had been oppressed."

Known affectionately as Birdie because of her fearless "twittering" against injustice, Ms. Clark-Jones did not hold her tongue when Indigenous people—especially women and children—were subjected to discrimination and disrespect.

Bertha Clark-Jones

"She always was very vocal and didn't let anything slide even though she probably put herself at risk for speaking up as an Indigenous woman. She just had that drive in her that you couldn't silence her," says her granddaughter, Crystal Lee Clark, an educator and artist whose work has been inspired by the resilience of her ancestors and her outspoken grandmother.

Ms. Clark said in a recent interview that she was told about a time Ms. Clark-Jones attended the local Legion in the years after the war had ended. "There was this song that was going around called Squaws Along the Yukon, and the room was filled with non-Indigenous people. And she just stood up and shut the whole thing down. She was just like that. She wasn't afraid to stand up to people even if she was one of the few Indigenous people there."

Ms. Clark-Jones was one of 14 children born to Emily and Louis Houle. She spent much of her youth outdoors, which befitted her tomboy nature.

"She was always very strong and athletic," said her granddaughter. "She was not a passive and voiceless young woman." Her grandparents and parents taught her to be determined and have a strong work ethic—traits she applied to her daily life and advocacy work.

She also embraced her heritage and lived as a loud and proud Métis woman.

Ms. Clark said her grandmother is a descendant of Chief Michel Callihoo, the signatory chief of Michel (Iroquois and Cree) First Nation, northwest of Edmonton. But his daughter, Helene Calliou, was never included on the original treaty list and her descendants, including Ms. Clark-Jones, were not considered status First Nations.

As a teenager, Ms. Clark-Jones was determined to make a difference. After grade nine, she began to work at a hospital and hoped to become a nurse, but her life took a different turn. When the Second World War broke out, she enlisted.

She spent the war training recruits in Canada and said in a 2003 memoir *Our Women in Uniform*: "I never once felt any discrimination in the Air Force; it did not seem to matter that I was young, Aboriginal, or a woman ... there was no time or place for discriminatory practices."

But it was different when the war ended and Indigenous soldiers took off their uniforms. Even though they had fought alongside non-Indigenous soldiers, they continued to suffer mistreatment, lack of freedom, and injustice on their homelands.

The *Indian Act* stripped status from any First Nations member who was absent from the reserve for four years or who gained a post-secondary education. It was also stripped from First Nations women who did not marry status Indian men. Ms. Clark-Jones was denied a home on the Paddle Prairie Métis settlement. And she saw other First Nations veterans being stripped of status and being refused veterans' benefits.

"So, she advocated for Aboriginal veterans' rights on behalf of herself and all of her Indigenous veterans," said her daughter Gail Gallupe, a former president of the Fort McMurray Métis local 1935.

After the war, she married George Clark, a war veteran she had known as a teenager. They worked a small farm in Hawk Hills, Alberta. But the farmhouse burned down in the 1960s so they and their children moved to Fort McMurray where Ms. Clark-Jones's Indigenous advocacy work took off.

Pictured: The Houle Family

Photo credit: Unknown

She helped to found the Nistawoyou Indigenous Friendship Centre in that city. And she co-founded the Voice of Alberta Native Women's Society in 1968, working alongside many strong Indigenous women from across the province and country.

"It was a powerful time," said Ms. Clark. "They were regaining their rights and their voices were being amplified. My grandmother realized, as Indigenous women, we have to fight even harder to be heard, valued, and taken seriously. I think her training in the Royal Canadian Airforce Women's Division as well as the values instilled by her parents and grandparents helped elevate her feelings of not wanting to back down. And she did all this while raising a family."

In 1974, Ms. Clark-Jones helped found NWAC. The association brought together groups of Indigenous women across the country who were fighting for rights within their own provinces and territories. Ms. Clark-Jones was elected its first president.

The creation of NWAC meant Indigenous women could tackle larger national issues, like the disproportionate level of violence that was targeting them and their communities, the lack of family supports, and the lack of economic and employment training opportunities.

Among other things, under the leadership of Ms. Clark-Jones, the provincial organizations and NWAC advocated to keep Indigenous children in their homes and their communities, rather than having them adopted out to non-Indigenous families.

The women were determined to change perceptions, both at the national and provincial levels, about what it meant to be Indigenous.

Her aim always was to "find ways to uplift Indigenous women and uplift self-esteem, employment training, family wellness, and celebrate and practise cultural traditions," said Ms. Clark.

Her grandmother inspired her to get training both as an artist and an educator.

"My grandmother was always pushing me to have confidence," said Ms. Clark, who is employed as an

Bertha Clark-Jones

Indigenous education specialist and is also a practising artist. "She was very proud that I continued my path into university and post-secondary ... she had a lot of pride in me being an Indigenous woman and being able to walk in a world where we're not always accepted."

Ms. Clark recalls being asked as a young girl to do a class presentation on someone who was important to her, and she chose her grandmother. "At that time, I truly believed that my grandmother was so amazing and did so much that she was the type of woman who was never going to die. And I said that to my class. Everyone laughed at me," she said. "What I maybe meant was that her impact, what she did, will live on."

Ms. Clark-Jones died in 2014 but her fight for the rights of Indigenous veterans and Indigenous women led to lasting positive change, which was honoured during her lifetime. She was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from Indspire, the Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women's Esquao Award, the Diamond Jubilee Award, the Order of Canada, and the Queen's Golden Jubilee Award.

In 2005, she was invited to travel to France and Belgium to call home the spirits of fallen Indigenous soldiers. Accompanied by her daughter Gail, she participated in ceremonies with other Indigenous veterans who were finally being honoured for their service during the Second World War. Her photograph was pictured in the overseas papers as she planted a small Canadian flag at Juno Beach.

Ms. Clark-Jones instilled in her children the pride of being Métis, telling them often to "be proud of your heritage."

"Her main drive was to uplift Indigenous woman who had been oppressed for so long and help advocate for more representation of Indigenous women at all levels of society," said Ms. Clark. "The core idea was to say: 'Hey, this is who we really are as matriarchs. We're strong. We're knowledgeable. We love our families. We belong here. We have a lot of value. We know this land. And we are and can be leaders. We deserve respect!'"

"Her main drive was to uplift Indigenous woman who had been oppressed for so long and help advocate for more representation of Indigenous women at all levels of society. The core idea was to say: 'We're strong. We're knowledgeable. We love our families. We belong here. We have a lot of value. We know this land."

Bertha Clark-Jones

Pictured: Bertha Clark-Jones receives Order of Canada medal from former Governor General Michaëlle Jean

Photo credit: Sgt Eric Jolin, Rideau Hall © OSGG, 2008

Pictured: Sharon McIvor

Photo credit: Canada Press

NWAC and the Fight for Equal Power and Rights

Few chapters in the 49-year history of the Native Women's Association of Canada have been as bitter as NWAC's legal fight to participate in discussions around the drafting and proposed amending of the Constitution of Canada.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) was established a half century ago when Indigenous women challenged laws granting unequal power and rights to Indigenous men.

It's a struggle that continues to this day. But, few chapters in the organization's 49-year history have been as bitter as NWAC's legal fight to participate in discussions around the drafting and proposed amending of the Constitution of Canada.

In 1992, NWAC took the federal government to court demanding to be allowed into the room as Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, first ministers, and four male-led national Indigenous organizations discussed what would become the Charlottetown Accord—a set of constitutional amendments that ultimately failed in a national referendum.

At stake was a key element of human rights that could have had a profound effect on Indigenous women.

The Assembly of First Nations was arguing that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms should not apply to Aboriginal governments. It was a proposition supported by the other male-led organizations, such as the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada–Forerunner of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Métis National Council, and the Native Council of Canada, which was a forerunner of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples.

NWAC did not want Aboriginal governments to be excluded from the Charter. Its leaders feared such an exclusion would perpetuate the sexism and discrimination that Indigenous women had endured since the passage of the *Indian Act*. And NWAC's

"It was the end of the legal road. But NWAC continues to fight for the right to be heard even today."

leaders wanted to explain their concerns during the constitutional negotiations.

But when they were denied that opportunity, NWAC went to court.

NWAC's case against the Government of Canada was launched by Sharon McIvor, a member of NWAC's board whose own fight against discrimination in the *Indian Act* had led to changes in 1985, and Gail Stacey-Moore, who was NWAC's president at the time. They were defended by renowned constitutional expert and human rights advocate Mary Ebert and advised by law student Teressa Nahanee.

NWAC eventually lost when the matter landed before the Supreme Court of Canada. But the case called into focus the difficulties faced by Indigenous women as they fight to be heard by political decision-makers.

In an alternative decision written in 2006 for the Women's Court of Canada, Ms. Eberts, Ms. McIvor, and Ms. Nahanee said: "While the NWAC case was being heard at the Federal Court Trial Division and the Court of Appeal, the NWAC leadership was blocked from every constitutional meeting in 21 cities stretching from Vancouver to Charlottetown. While men in power in all these levels of government in Canada met with the men's Aboriginal national organizations, the female leadership of NWAC were protesting in the wintry cold on Parliament Hill, in the windy streets of Toronto, and under the rainy skies of Vancouver. The denials of access to participation for Aboriginal women were as harsh as the winter wind on Parliament Hill."

When looking at the origins of sexual Inequality in North American Indigenous communities, historical experts generally agree it started with colonialism.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, most Indigenous communities on this continent were egalitarian, with the input and work of both sexes valued. Many Indigenous societies were matriarchal. But the European settlers imposed their male-dominated societal structure on Indigenous Peoples, putting Indigenous men in leadership roles.

This sexism was expressed in the *Indian Act*, which said that Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men would lose their Indian status, while Indigenous men who married non-Indigenous women would keep their status and pass it along to their wives.

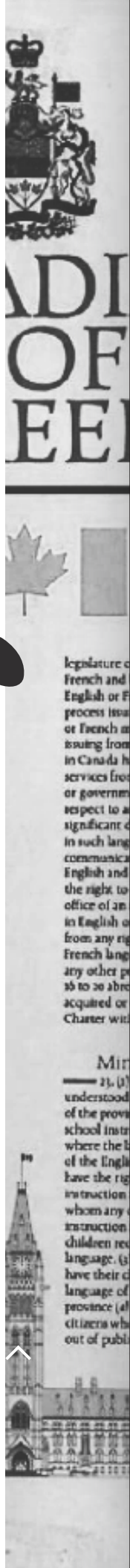
By the 1960s, Indigenous women were standing up to say that kind of gender discrimination was wrong.

But when they tried through the courts in the 1970s to bring equality to the system, the organizations led by Indigenous men fought them at every turn. For that reason, and others, the Indigenous women formed their own advocacy groups, including NWAC. They argued that the male-led groups could not be counted upon to always act in the best interests of Indigenous women, or to fight for those issues that Indigenous women believe to be priorities.

It's an argument that NWAC makes even now as it demands to be included at tables where governments and national Indigenous organizations make decisions that will profoundly affect Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people in Canada.

The issue of whether the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms should apply to Indigenous governments became a point of tension between NWAC and the male-led organizations in 1982 as the Constitution was being drafted.

At that time, Dave Ahenakew, who was the President of the Assembly of First Nations, wrote to Warren Allmand, the Minister of Indian Affairs, to say there was no logic to giving NWAC a seat on the newly created Sub-Committee on Indian Self-Government. Mr. Allmand took Chief Ahenakew's



advice and NWAC was denied the right to participate.

In a subsequent newsletter to NWAC's members, then president Jane Gottfriedson called Mr. Ahenakew's letter to Mr. Allmand a "betrayal." Chief Ahenakew, she wrote, had previously assured NWAC a seat on the committee. But the two organizations clashed on a key point of discussion.

"We are worried about the outcome of the sub-committee because Chief Ahenakew, in his address to the Subcommittee on Indian Women and the *Indian Act*, said the Charter of Rights should not apply to Indian governments," wrote Ms. Gottfriedson. If that were to happen, "the discrimination we now suffer under the federal government will simply be transferred to the band level."

When the Constitution became law, Indigenous governments were not exempted from the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But then came 1992 and the Charlottetown Accord.

The Accord contained a section that would have recognized Indigenous governments as a third level of government in Canada, akin to the provinces and the federal government. That, of course, raised questions about whether the autonomous Indigenous governments would fall under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

NWAC wrote in February 1992 to Joe Clark, who was then the Minister for Constitutional Affairs, asking to participate in the discussions leading up to the Accord. Its leaders also argued their organization should receive funding for its participation similar to that provided to the male-led national Indigenous groups, which had been given a combined $10 million.

Mr. Clark denied NWAC's request, saying the other four organizations adequately represented both Indigenous men and Indigenous women. He urged NWAC's leaders to work with the male-led organizations to have their views brought forward. And he said he did not believe NWAC's concerns would be rectified by adding another seat at the table.

As for funding, the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Council of Canada had each paid NWAC $130,000 from the millions of dollars they were given for their participation in the constitutional negotiations. And NWAC was paid another $300,000 directly by the government to fund a study of the Charter. In total, it was given 5 per cent of the money set aside for Indigenous consultation around the Charlottetown Accord, and the government would give no more.

In the end, the Supreme Court agreed that was appropriate. It said there was no evidence that the male-led Indigenous groups were less representative than NWAC when it came to the views of Indigenous women regarding the Charter. It also found there was no requirement, on the part of the government, to extend an invitation to NWAC to take part in the constitutional discussions or to offer funding to the organization.

It was the end of the legal road. But NWAC did not give up insisting that it provides an important perspective, and an alternative voice, at national decision-making tables. NWAC continues to fight for the right to be heard even today.

In their 2006 brief to the Women's Court of Canada, Ms. Eberts, Ms. McIvor, and Ms. Nahanee wrote: "The government takes the position that Aboriginal women should work within the four preferred organizations to advance their points of view. This ignores, in the case of the AFN, the structural oppression of women present in the *Indian Act* since its inception, which has created a Eurocentric political and social environment that does not permit Aboriginal women an equal voice in the *Indian Act* communities comprising the AFN. As the (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples) has pointed out, Aboriginal women's concerns need to be advanced by a women's representative organization, and we believe that the NWAC is such an organization."

"While men in power in all these levels of government in Canada met with the men's Aboriginal national organizations, the female leadership of NWAC were protesting in the wintry cold on Parliament Hill, in the windy streets of Toronto, and under the rainy skies of Vancouver."

Teressa Nahanee

The Sisters in Spirit Movement

Walking with the spirits of the missing and the murdered

When the Native Women's Association of Canada released a graphic book in June, 2023 about the genocide that targets Indigenous women and girls, it was following the groundwork laid by the Sisters in Spirit campaign, a fight for justice and safety that began more than three decades ago with survivors and families of victims.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) invited reporters to its national headquarters in June to release a graphic book about the genocide that has, for decades, been targeting Indigenous women and girls.

The event marked an important—though certainly not final—step on a long journey to justice and safety that began more than three decades ago with survivors and families of victims.

It is a journey that made it possible to utter the word 'genocide' in relation to the awful reality of the crimes being committed against Indigenous women in Canada.

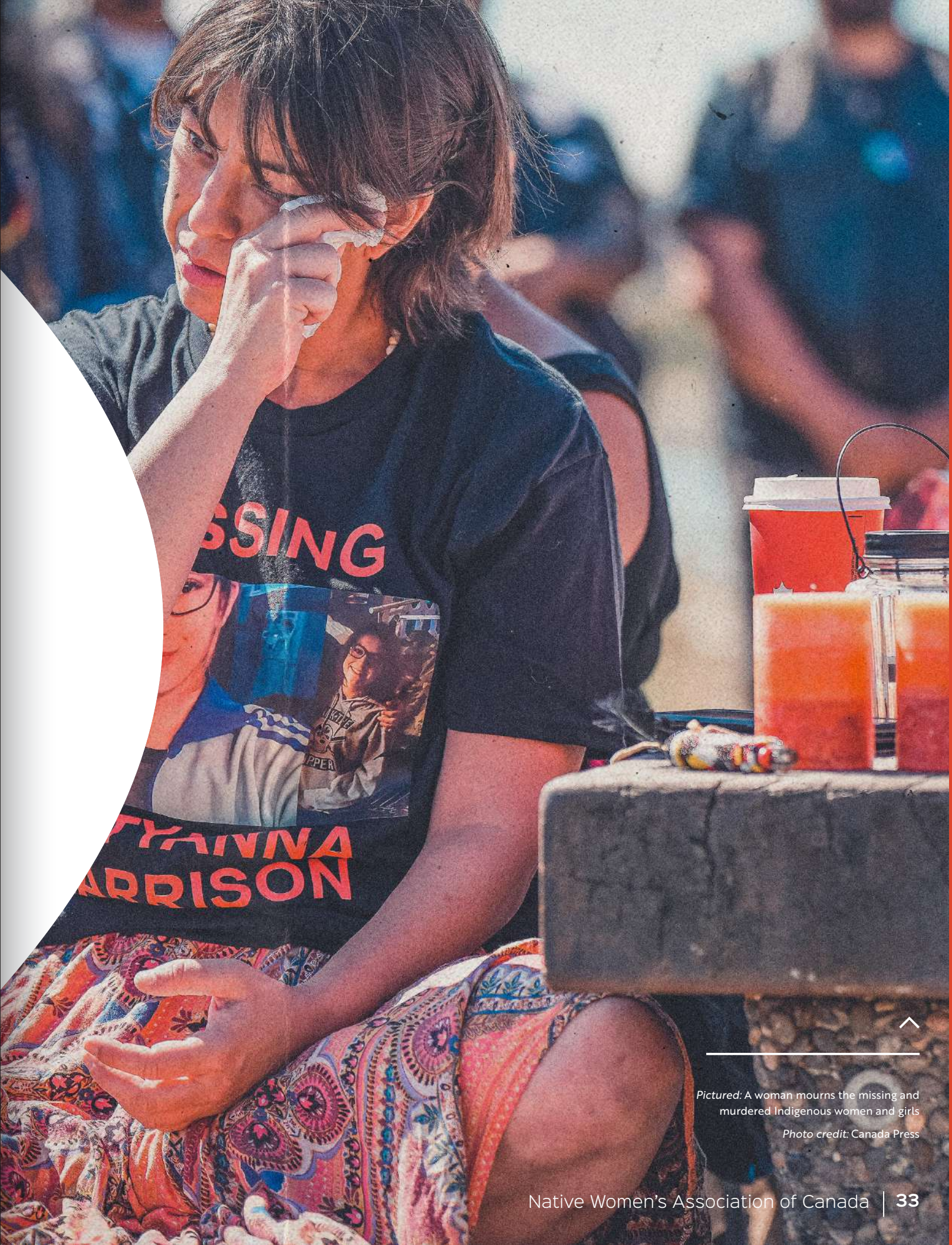
NWAC has been the long-standing advocate and champion of victims, fighting government lethargy and, at times, Ottawa's active resistance to campaigns intended to raise awareness of the threat and the increasing death count.

The determination of Indigenous women has been the driving force that led to a national inquiry and, ultimately, to the acknowledgment that a genocide is happening in Canada.

One of those determined women is Gladys Radek, a Gitxsan/Wet'suwet'en First Nations woman from Moricetown in British Columbia. Ms. Radek, who is writing a book about her experiences, was fighting for an end to the killings long before the disappearance of her niece Tamara Chipman.

She remembers attending an NWAC meeting after moving to Vancouver in the early 1990s and hearing about the missing

> "Sisters in Spirit is the name that came about after those family gatherings happened because that's truly what we were, sisters in spirit. We were people from right across the nation who knew we were all connected."
>
> Gladys Radek



Pictured: A woman mourns the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls

Photo credit: Canada Press

"A lot of our family members felt the spirits of those women while we were walking because we knew where so many went missing up here."

Gladys Radek

and murdered women issue. Until that time, Ms. Radek said in a recent interview, the violence was not being discussed on a national scale because "everybody was still in their little silos. Everybody thought they were alone."

The expansion of the internet, which finally connected bereaved families, "was really what got the movement rockin' and rollin'," said Ms. Radek. Families and friends of those who had been murdered or gone missing started to reach out to each other and to demand justice and improved safety.

In British Columbia, Indigenous women had been disappearing since at least the 1970s from the 700-kilometre stretch of Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert—what is now known as the Highway of Tears. But that was not the only West-Coast hotspot for the gender-and race-based violence.

Ms. Radek and her friend Bernie Williams were part of a group looking out for women on the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver when Robert Pickton was kidnapping and killing what he ultimately claimed to be 49 victims.

"When families gave us their pictures (of missing loved ones), we'd look through all the bars and the back alleys," said Ms. Radek. "We'd walk where the devils tread."

Meanwhile, families elsewhere in the province were also standing up and saying: 'No more.' In 1994, after 16-year-old Ramona Wilson was slain in Smithers, BC, her family organized an annual walk to demand justice. Other communities started doing the same.

"Sisters in Spirit is the name that came about after those family gatherings happened because that's truly what we were, sisters in spirit," said Ms. Radek. "We were people from right across the nation who knew we were all connected."

Ten years after Ramona's murder, the RCMP established its Project E-Pana to investigate nine of the deaths and disappearances along Highway 16. But the violence continued.

By 2005, the leaders of NWAC, including president Beverly Jacobs, were demanding real action to end the killings. NWAC began holding workshops in communities across Canada where participants could voice their concerns. And the organization's officials went to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York in May of that year to say something very wrong was happening in Canada.

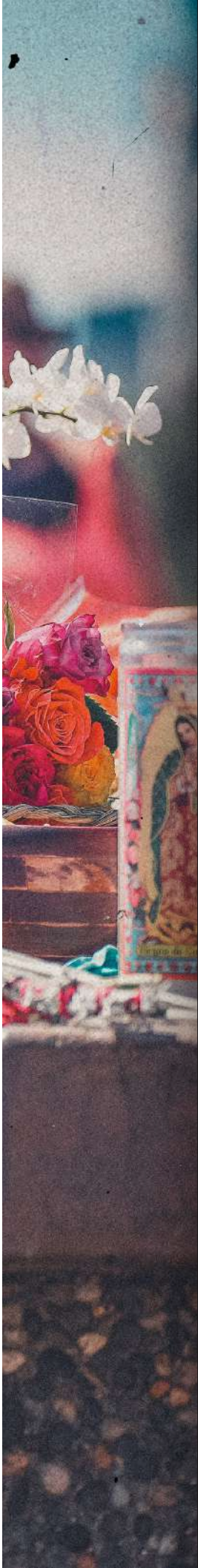
Sherry Lewis, a former NWAC executive director, told APTN she was approached at that event by Fred Caron, the assistant deputy minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, who promised that the then Liberal government of Paul Martin would offer $5 million over five years to pay for a Sisters in Spirit project in exchange for NWAC taking part in a news conference with Canadian government officials.

With that funding, NWAC was to raise awareness of the disproportionate rates of violence against Indigenous women, as well as investigate the root causes, trends, and circumstances. It took a while for the money to flow. But, when it did, NWAC began compiling a database of missing and murdered women and girls.

Still, the deaths continued.

In September 2005, 22-year-old Tamara Chipman vanished near Prince Rupert. She was Ms. Radek's niece.

"Our beautiful cousin Florence Naziel really, really took it hard ... as we all did," said Ms. Radek. "She wanted to do something to raise awareness and to honour Tamara, and that's when it came out that she knew of at least four other girls in our community that were already missing."



Five months after Tamara's disappearance, the body of 14-year-old Aielah Saric-Auger was found in a ditch by Highway 16 near Tabor Mountain. That was the last straw for Carrier Sekani Family Services, which decided to organize a Highway of Tears Symposium in Prince George at the end of March 2006.

Ms. Naziel was organizing a walk from Prince Rupert to honour Tamara at about the same time, and Ms. Radek suggested that it end at the symposium in Prince George. She flew up from Vancouver to take part.

"A lot of our family members felt the spirits of those women while we were walking because we knew where so many went missing up here," said Ms. Radek.

At Prince George, the group that completed the three-week, 710-kilometre walk through the Rockies was drummed into the Carrier Sekani symposium. When the meeting ended, Ms. Radek returned to Vancouver and told Ms. Williams she was determined to do something about the violence.

"I said: 'All these family members I've been talking to, they all want a national public inquiry,'" said Ms. Radek. "I said: 'I don't know how we're going to do this, but we need to raise awareness because we're getting a common message here.' And Bernie said to me: 'Gladdie, let's not talk about it, let's do it.' And that's all it took."

Ms. Williams insisted that Ms. Radek begin by writing a mission statement. "In that first mission statement, I called the violence a genocide."

That made some people queasy. At least one of the churches that had previously been supportive would not sign on to Ms. Radek's campaign because of that word.

"And I said: "You know what? This is the truth. This is how I'm feeling. This is how our families feel," she said, "I said 90 per cent of the families I talk to feel this is a genocide."

On October 4, 2005, NWAC organized its first Sisters in Spirit Vigil in 11 communities across Canada. It attracted hundreds of participants and was the start of an annual event that today draws thousands.

And in June 2008, Ms. Radek and her group organized a walk from Vancouver to Ottawa where they presented the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper with a hardcopy of a petition with 3,500 signatures calling for a national inquiry. They had gathered another 20,000 signatures online. And they had resolutions from the Chiefs of large national Indigenous organizations, including the Assembly of First Nations, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, all demanding that an inquiry be started.

NWAC helped the walkers when they arrived in Ottawa. The organization was taking heat from the Harper government, which was trying to claw back the $1 million annually that had been committed by the Liberals. NWAC officials told APTN that the government was demanding thick binders of material every year to document every media interview, meeting, article, and presentation it had done about the Sisters in Spirit campaign.

But NWAC steadily went about its work.

In 2008 and again in 2009, it released a document called V*oices of Our Sisters in Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities*, which recounted the stories of Indigenous female victims of violence. By March 31, 2009, NWAC's database recorded 520 cases of Indigenous women and girls who had been murdered or gone missing since the 1980s—a number that grew to 580 by 2010.

Those figures captured the attention of the mainstream media. And the Conservative government was not impressed.

When it came time to renew the Sisters in Spirit funding, Ottawa agreed NWAC would get $1.89 million over three years, but the project could no longer be called Sisters in Spirit, and the organization could do no

“If the violence is a form of genocide, in 20 years they won’t be talking about your daughter, they’ll be talking about the fact findings, and why, and here is the proof. Here is our truth.”

Michèle Audette

Pictured: Gladys Radek in her car at the release of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and Girls

Photo credit: Canada Press


#EnseignerLeGénoci
Native Women's Association of Canada
L'Association des femmes autochtones du Canada

The Annual Sisters in Spirit Vigil

more research into the Indigenous missing and murdered women.

"I think what was happening was NWAC was getting too close to the truth and giving our statements for everybody to see, and the government didn't like that," said Ms. Radek.

In 2012, Michèle Audette, an Innu woman who was past president of Femmes autochtones du Québec and a passionate advocate for Indigenous women's rights, was elected NWAC's president.

Ms. Audette, who is now a Canadian Senator, says she had long been aware that the violence against Indigenous women and girls in this country had reached crisis proportions. "Some of us (at that time) were already mentioning genocide or why there's status quo and silence coming from the rest of the world," she said in an interview.

When she became NWAC president, Ms. Audette had two goals—increase awareness of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), and create more economic opportunities for Indigenous women. With Statistics Canada reporting a murder rate for Indigenous women that was seven times higher than that of non-Indigenous women, the campaign to reduce the number of deaths ended up taking most of her time.

Ms. Audette's first shock came when the RCMP publicly disputed the numbers NWAC was reporting from its database. The force said it had records of just a few dozen cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls . NWAC was certain that its research was correct. So, Ms. Audette invited the RCMP to come to her offices "for a cup of tea." She spoke a couple of times with Superintendent Tyler Bates who headed the force's Aboriginal police unit. Superintendent Bates committed to contacting every police force in Canada to ask them for their MMIWG case numbers.

That research provided the evidence of violence that eventually prompted government action.

In 2014, the RCMP released a report saying there were 1,181 police-recorded cases of murdered and missing aboriginal women across all jurisdictions in Canada from 1980 to 2012. That broke down to include 164 missing and 1,017 homicide victims.

"Where I was surprised in a good way, to be honest, was in the fact that the RCMP fulfilled their commitment," said Ms. Audette. "We were now talking about a thousand-plus loved ones who were missing or murdered."

But Ms. Audette had little time to address the RCMP findings on the day the report was made public because her own teenage cousin had gone missing. "We were panicking because we had lost our little Marie Therese."

Police found her two days later in Québec City where she had been taken by human traffickers. During the awful time that Marie Therese was missing, the family relied heavily on the support and advice from other Indigenous families who had been through the same ordeal.

Pictured: NWAC CEO Lynne Groulx at the release of NWAC's graphic booklet explaining the genocide

"They were the ones helping me with protocol," said Ms. Audette. "I didn't know what to do, even though I was a strong advocate. My god, they were so keen to support me. They were saying: 'Make sure you do this. Make sure you don't accept that.'"

The fact that the abduction had happened, on such a critical day, to a family member of the president of NWAC was jarring proof of the reach of the violence within Indigenous communities.

But, despite the numbers, the Conservative government could not be pushed to act. It rejected calls for a national inquiry.

Bernard Valcourt, who was then the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, said a national inquiry was not necessary because everyone knew that the people who were killing Indigenous women were Indigenous men. "Obviously, there's a lack of respect for women and girls on reserves," he said. "So you know, if the guys grow up believing that women have no rights, that is how they are treated."

It was a statement the RCMP refused to endorse. Their numbers showed that 30 per cent of the killers of Indigenous women were not Indigenous or that their race was unknown.

So NWAC continued to lobby for a national inquiry. And, when the Liberals won power in 2015, they fulfilled a campaign promise to hold one.

Ms. Audette remembers getting the call asking her if she would be one of the commissioners. She was at a restaurant with her children and burst into tears of happiness.

The following three years of testimony from survivors, family members, and friends of victims, experts, and others who cared deeply about the violence were difficult, she said.

"When it was happening, it brought back my own ghosts, my own trauma or experience, and it was very (emotionally) hard to receive the truth from families everywhere I went."

Ms. Audette said she is grateful to all of the people with lived experience who walked with her and helped to lift her up as the inquiry held its hearings. "Many times I cried, I was on my knees, or I was so mad, or I wanted to yell … it was very, very tough. And, at the same time, I had to remind myself, if they're there, it's because there is a thin trust or a big trust, and I have to make sure that I receive that in a good way."

For Ms. Radek, the calling of the inquiry capped more than a decade of struggle, though it did not fully meet expectations.

First, she said, the commissioners did not get the time they needed to do the job. "It created a lot of animosity amongst our people because there was so many of them that didn't have a voice … That's because the government stopped the inquiry."

And second, Ms. Radek said she does not believe police forces across Canada were held to account for refusing to take the deaths and disappearances seriously from the outset. Instead, she said, the police were allowed to send in public relations people to testify to the commissioners about the outreach they were now doing in Indigenous communities.

"So, what are you doing about the investigations? Are you searching those waters for our bodies?" she asked.

Still, Ms. Radek drove to Gatineau, Quebec, from British Columbia to attend the release of the inquiry's final report on June 3, 2019. She was in a car decorated with the faces of 113 of the victims.

And she was elated to hear the inquiry's finding that the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people in Canada constitute a genocide.

"What it told all those family members is that we—they—were right. We proved it by sharing our stories with those commissioners and the rest of the world. The word 'genocide' was meant to be in my original mission statement. And I'm glad I never changed it."

When the ceremony to mark the handover of the report from the commissioners to the federal government ended, Ms. Radek asked Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to come out to see her car. "He said he didn't have time."

Since then, governments have been slow to implement the inquiry's 231

Pictured: Marion Buller, Brian Eyolfson, Qajaq Robinson, and Michèle Audette, the Commissioners of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, at the ceremony to mark the release of their final report
Photo credit: Canada Press

Calls to Justice, even though those calls are legal imperatives. The violence against Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people continues.

"The inquiry wasn't meant to stop the violence. The inquiry was meant to gather the people together who can work on ending the violence," said Ms. Radek.

The important thing, she said, is that "the truth is out there. Our voices are being heard, and Canadian society is appalled. Even when you think about that landfill (in Winnipeg where the bodies of three murdered Indigenous women are believed to be buried) right now and how many people support a search. And that's because the awareness is out there. The truth is out there, and there are people that really, really, really regret the history."

As for Ms. Audette, she said she cried every day for three years after the inquiry ended "because it was so powerful and so very hard."

Her own father had warned her not to put the word genocide in the report.

"He said" 'Michèle, don't go there. It's a powerful word. You will be discredited. You worked so hard to get where you're at.' And I was crying. I said: 'Come on, Dad. I'm not there to please people. It's a one shot. And if they're mad at me, it belongs to them. I'm the one who got all the tears, the anger, the attacks. I said: 'I have a responsibility for the rest of my life. And, if the violence is a form of genocide, in 20 years they won't be talking about your daughter, they'll be talking about the fact findings, and why, and here is the proof.'"

As a result of the Inquiry, said Ms. Audette, the whole world knows that each death or disappearance of an Indigenous women or girl is not an isolated incident. The finding of genocide, she said, is another tool in the backpack of those who will continue the fight for justice and safety.

The report, and the 231 Calls for Justice, are helping NWAC press its demands for action. It was the basis for the booklet about the genocide that was released in June.

The commission's findings, said Ms. Audette, say: 'Now, in your own colonial words or system or legislation that put in place that inquiry ... here is our truth."

NWAC:

A Symbol of Growth and Resiliency, Like the People It Serves

The Native Women's Association of Canada—created nearly 50 years ago to empower Indigenous women—is itself a symbol of the resiliency of the people it serves. That strength is evidenced by the organization's dramatic revitalization over the past seven years.

Pictured: Elder Alma Brooks at the Wabanaki Resiliency Centre in New Brunswick

Photo credit: Morgan Cratney

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is itself a symbol of the resiliency of the people it serves.

That strength is evidenced by the organization's dramatic revitalization over the past seven years.

In 2016, after a series of funding cuts by the federal government, NWAC was running annual deficits in the amount of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The number of paid staff had drifted to below 12. And its limited operations were being run out of small, rented offices in downtown Ottawa.

Seven years later, NWAC's national headquarters has moved to a gleaming, five-storey, glass-walled structure overlooking the Ottawa River that is the property of the organization. NWAC also owns two new resiliency healing lodges—one in Quebec and one in New Brunswick—and there are plans to build them in every province and territory of Canada.

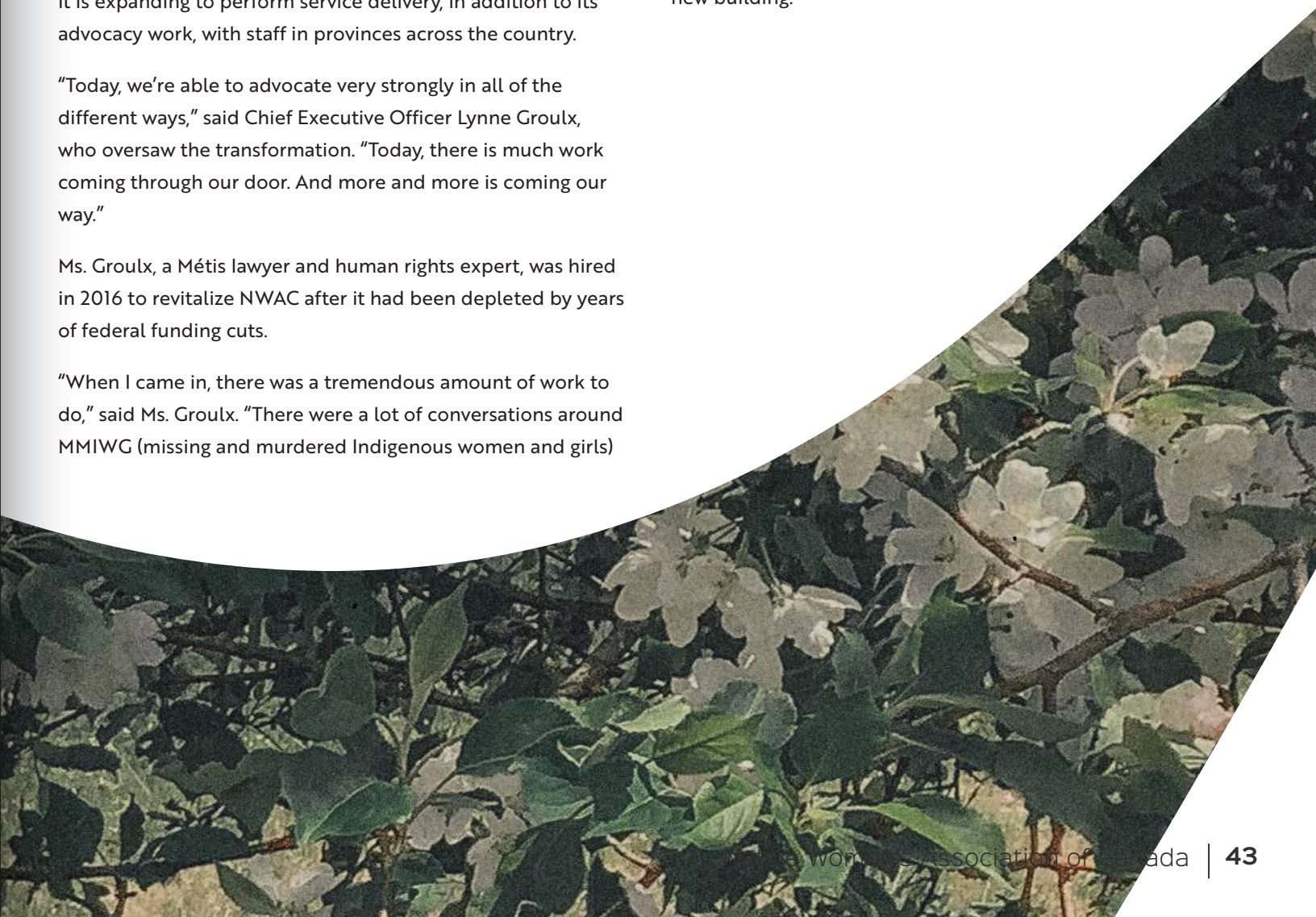
Its annual revenues have grown by more than 500 per cent. There are nearly 150 full-time and contract employees. And it is expanding to perform service delivery, in addition to its advocacy work, with staff in provinces across the country.

"Today, we're able to advocate very strongly in all of the different ways," said Chief Executive Officer Lynne Groulx, who oversaw the transformation. "Today, there is much work coming through our door. And more and more is coming our way."

Ms. Groulx, a Métis lawyer and human rights expert, was hired in 2016 to revitalize NWAC after it had been depleted by years of federal funding cuts.

"When I came in, there was a tremendous amount of work to do," said Ms. Groulx. "There were a lot of conversations around MMIWG (missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls) and economic development issues. There were demands in every single area and not enough resources to deal with them. It was crushing the organization. The phone would ring and there was nobody to answer it."

At her first meeting with NWAC's board of directors, the board members told Ms. Groulx she had to find ways to bring in more revenue. They wanted her to eliminate the deficits the organization had been carrying for years. And they wanted a new building.



"Our voice is much stronger than it ever was."

Lynne Groulx

"They wanted to have a home, a place, where we could receive community members and government, a place that we could call our own because we were in a rented space and that was quite costly," said Ms. Groulx. "So, I was tasked right away with balancing the books, increasing the revenue, increasing the staff levels, and getting a building for NWAC. That was a pretty tall order. There were very high needs for everything in the organization."

Despite the financial crunch, she started immediately on the work of building a new headquarters.

Although NWAC was short of operating funds in 2016, there was a half million dollars left over from the sale, 10 years prior, of a building it had owned in Ottawa. The board of directors had locked that money down in the hope that it would be used to purchase another headquarters at some point in the future.

That was a start. But much more cash would be needed.

"I had no lines of credit and no access to bank credit or anything like that. But I had half a million dollars in my hand. So, I went around to the banks. I got a 'no' right away from the Royal Bank," said Ms. Groulx. "A gentleman from the RBC came in and he pulled out this stack of papers and he put it in front of me and said: 'So these are all your audited statements. You guys don't know how to run your business and you won't get a mortgage.'"

Ms. Groulx said she asked him what she could do to create more favourable conditions for obtaining the loan because "the board had asked me to do this, and I needed to do this." The RBC official told her she had to eliminate the deficits and then, possibly, the bank would take another look.

"I had to say: 'Okay, how am I going to balance the books?'" said Ms. Groulx.

Cuts were made to the already small staff. But cuts were not going to help the organization meet its mandate. So, the next job was to find more money.

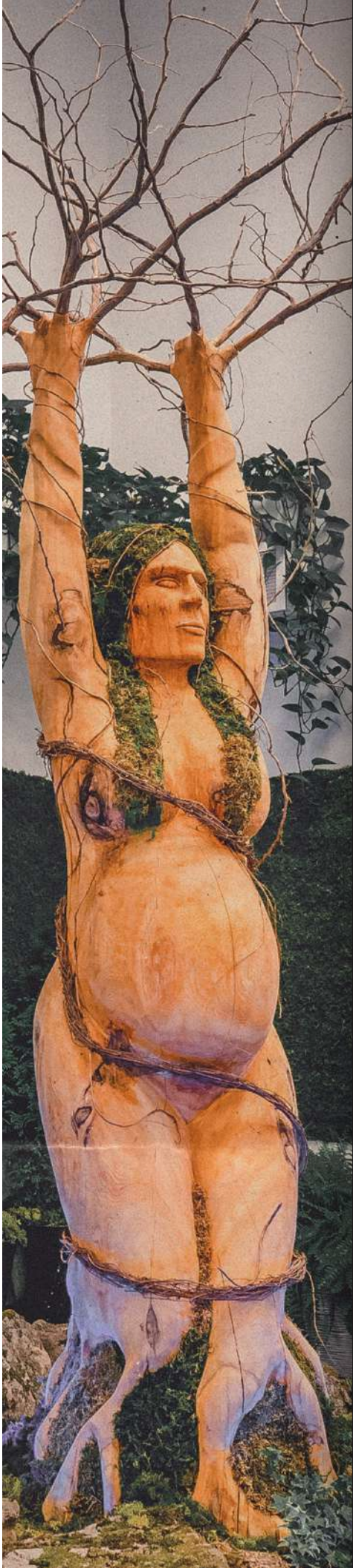
At the time, NWAC was relying mostly on two federal departments—Employment and Social Development Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations—for grants and contributions to help fund what was then $4.6 million in annual revenue.

Ms. Groulx said she tasked "a brilliant young woman" named Alyssa Matheson who was, and still is, a member of NWAC's staff, to write funding proposals. Ms. Matheson eagerly took on the challenge.

"Off we went, writing many, many different proposals in all different areas that were relevant to the work we were doing," said Ms. Groulx. "We started to have some success in those proposals. So, we were able to hire a few more staff. Then we were approved again, and so on and so on."

The number of federal departments that partnered with NWAC greatly expanded, as did the type of projects being funded. And, the number of people on the payroll started to grow.

The books were being balanced, and Ms. Groulx went back to the Royal Bank. She



was again denied a mortgage. So, she turned to other banks. And the Bank of Montreal said yes.

She found a former bank building on a main street in Gatineau. It was next to the giant towers that hold the federal departments of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, and Indigenous Services Canada, and across the river from the Parliament Buildings. It was in a perfect location, but it was too small and needed much work.

"I went to different departments to get some funding to help do all the renovations of this building," said Ms. Groulx. Several agreed, including the departments of Employment and Social Development, Heritage, and Agriculture.

NWAC's new social, cultural political and economic innovation centre was constructed during the COVID-19 pandemic and opened in the spring of 2022.

There is a mortgage of $5 million on the property, but the resale value has been estimated at $10 million. So, the project created equity, in addition to providing beautiful new offices and meeting spaces in which NWAC is now working. And the many Indigenous-themed meeting rooms are available to be rented by outside parties, which heavily offsets the cost of the overhead.

In 2019, as the Innovation Centre was being envisioned, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released its final report.

NWAC was determined to step up its efforts to stop what the commission acknowledged to be a genocide. The organization created its own, fully costed, 65-point action plan for addressing the Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice.

"One of the Elders who was strongest in the movement was recorded on the books in the 1980s talking about healing centres" that would provide places of respite and recovery for women who had been traumatized by the violence, said Ms. Groulx. "She approached me and said, we really have to do this."

The board members agreed. And, at an annual general assembly, they passed a motion saying resiliency healing lodges should be built across the country. They would be a central focus of NWAC's action plan. "So, we started looking for available funding," said Ms. Groulx.

The federal government had, by that time, allotted some money to reduce the violence and help victims. But it was more interested in building shelters than investing in the culturally relevant and safe healing spaces being envisioned by NWAC's board.

Ms. Groulx again approached the Bank of Montreal for a loan and, coupled with about $250,000 that was surplus from donations and other revenue streams, NWAC was able to purchase a home in Chelsea and renovate it into a resiliency healing lodge. There is a mortgage of about $500,000 owing on that property, but the lodge is now worth close to $3 million. So, again, equity has been created for the organization.

The resiliency lodge in Chelsea is a magnificent space designed to honour Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people, and to provide them with a sanctuary from the ongoing violence.

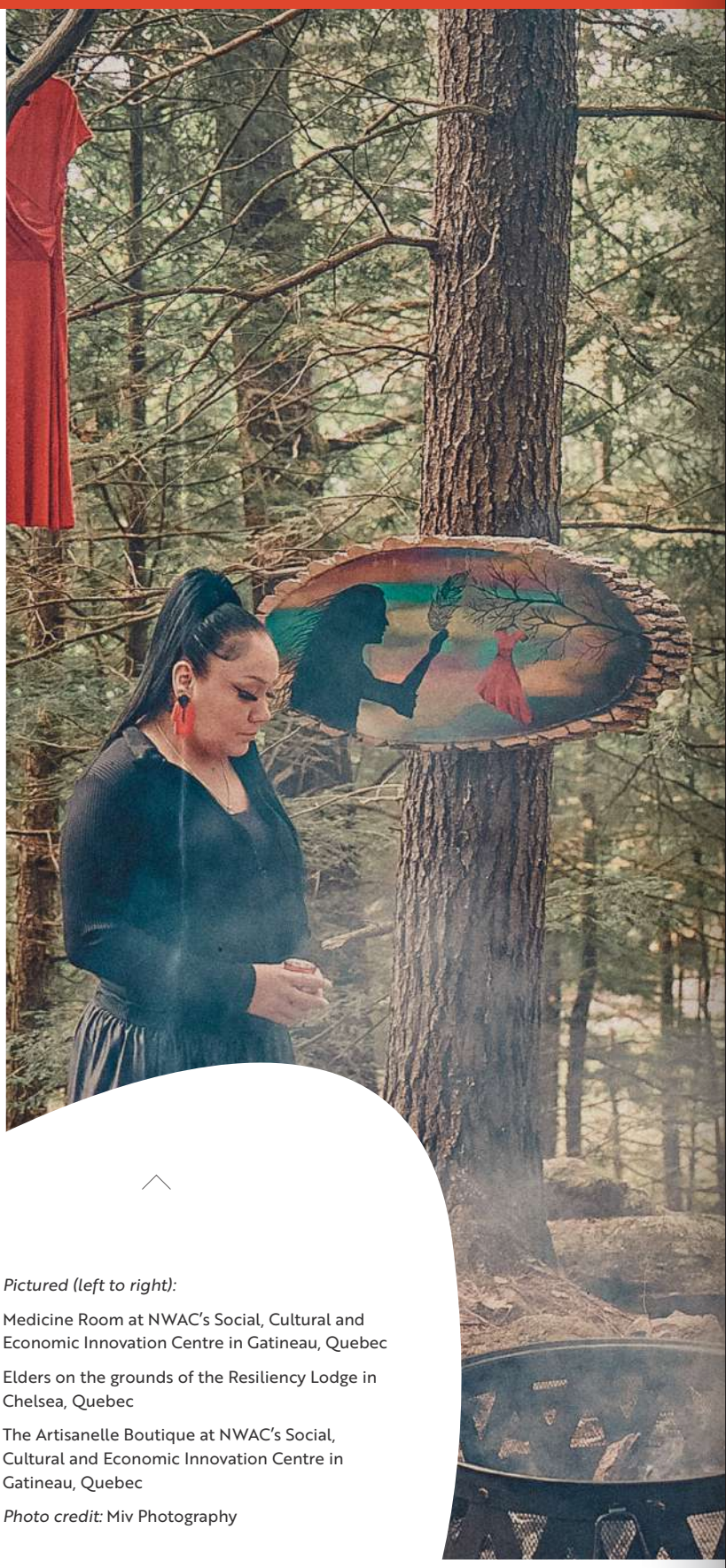
The challenge was to Indigenize the building, said Ms. Groulx. It was work that was done in constant consultation with Elders. There are rooms for overnight stays but also large open areas for gatherings and a workshop for crafting classes. There is a pool and places for spiritual revitalization, as well as a walking trail with art installations that honour the murdered and the missing.

"I can't tell you exactly how many people have come through" since the space opened in late 2021, said Ms. Groulx, "but they absolutely love it. It's brought some of the women to tears."

"When I came in, there was a tremendous amount of work to do. There were demands in every single area and not enough resources to deal with them. It was crushing the organization. The phone would ring and there was nobody to answer it."

Lynne Groulx

Pictured: Mother Earth statue by Algonquin Sculptor Jeremy Demond at NWAC's Social, Cultural and Economic Innovation Centre in Gatineau, Quebec



Pictured (left to right):

Medicine Room at NWAC's Social, Cultural and Economic Innovation Centre in Gatineau, Quebec

Elders on the grounds of the Resiliency Lodge in Chelsea, Quebec

The Artisanelle Boutique at NWAC's Social, Cultural and Economic Innovation Centre in Gatineau, Quebec

Photo credit: Miv Photography

NWAC: *A Symbol of Growth and Resiliency*

NWAC: *A Symbol of Growth and Resiliency*

Meanwhile, NWAC has purchased a farm in New Brunswick and is expected to open a new resiliency healing lodge in that province before the end of 2023.

Hiring at NWAC is also accelerating. "We built the team," said Ms. Groulx. "Some strong people came in from the beginning and did a lot of very significant work very quickly. They're very experienced professionals."

When she started at the job in 2016, no one was doing the work of communications. Today, the communications department has 12 employees, and Ms. Groulx said it could use 20.

That has significantly increased the ability to do advocacy work she said, because "our voice is now huge."

NWAC produces two regular publications—*Shining the Spotlight*, a newsletter that provides updates on the work being done by the organization, and this magazine, *Kci-Niwesq*.

"Through those publications, through our graphics and all those communications, our voice is much stronger than it ever was. Our social media is very strong," said Ms. Groulx. "We're able to talk to politicians directly in Ottawa because we have an actual office base here. And we're able to advocate at an international level because we have staff for that now. We have travelled to the United Nations, and to the Organization of American States, to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and to the United Nations in Geneva."

NWAC now has more than 65 active programs in a wide range of areas, including health, the law, and the environment. "We're able to move policy dialogue, cutting into different areas like forced sterilization, human trafficking, different health issues. We're doing work on women in prisons," said Ms. Groulx.

Along the way, NWAC's advocacy work has become stronger and stronger. The legal team now includes a dozen lawyers.

There are people working directly for NWAC in different parts of Canada. And the organization is helping its provincial and territorial member associations build capacity in finance, communications, philanthropy, and political lobbying.

"It is satisfying, after all of the difficulties of the lean years, to be making real progress, to see Indigenous women beginning to share in the prosperity of Canada, and to be helping them build economic resilience and economic equality."

Economic development is also a critical part of the work.

NWAC is running a National Apprenticeship Program, in collaboration with Indigenous Services Canada, that connects Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people with apprenticeship opportunities in the trades.

It is overseeing the hugely successful Indigenous Skills and Employment training program, with the assistance of Employment and Social Development Canada, which provides financial supports and resources to those learning new job skills.

It has entered into a partnership with the Organization of American States and the Trust for the Americas to bring the POETA DigiSpark program to Canada for the first time, offering hundreds of Indigenous people the knowledge needed for employment in the tech industry.

And its #BeTheDrum program has provided resources, mentorship, and workshops to thousands of Indigenous entrepreneurs, helping them to successfully start, run, and grow their operations.

NWAC has also created programs to help Indigenous artisans build businesses in their own homes. It has opened marketplaces for their wares both online and in person. The art covering the walls of the Innovation Centre in Gatineau has been purchased from Indigenous artists for resale to the public.

"We're buying products from Indigenous women and helping to enhance their businesses as well," said Ms. Groulx. "We're elevating women and their families. We've become social innovators. We have a leadership role in that area."

NWAC's annual revenues have increased from $4.5 million in 2016 to $24 million in 2023. And all of the organization's units are building capacity, said Ms. Groulx, including those that are helping to create alternative sources of funding.

With the Artisanelle boutique and the Café Bouleau operating on the main floor of the Innovation Centre, as well as the meeting room rentals, NWAC is raising its own revenues. Any profits will convert to dividends that will be paid back to NWAC to support its programming.

As for the future, said Ms. Groulx, the aim is to expand NWAC's self-determination and independence. "It means having Indigenous women design and run our own programming."

Going forward, NWAC will be calling for even greater government alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It will be demanding real progress from governments on ending the genocide, she said.

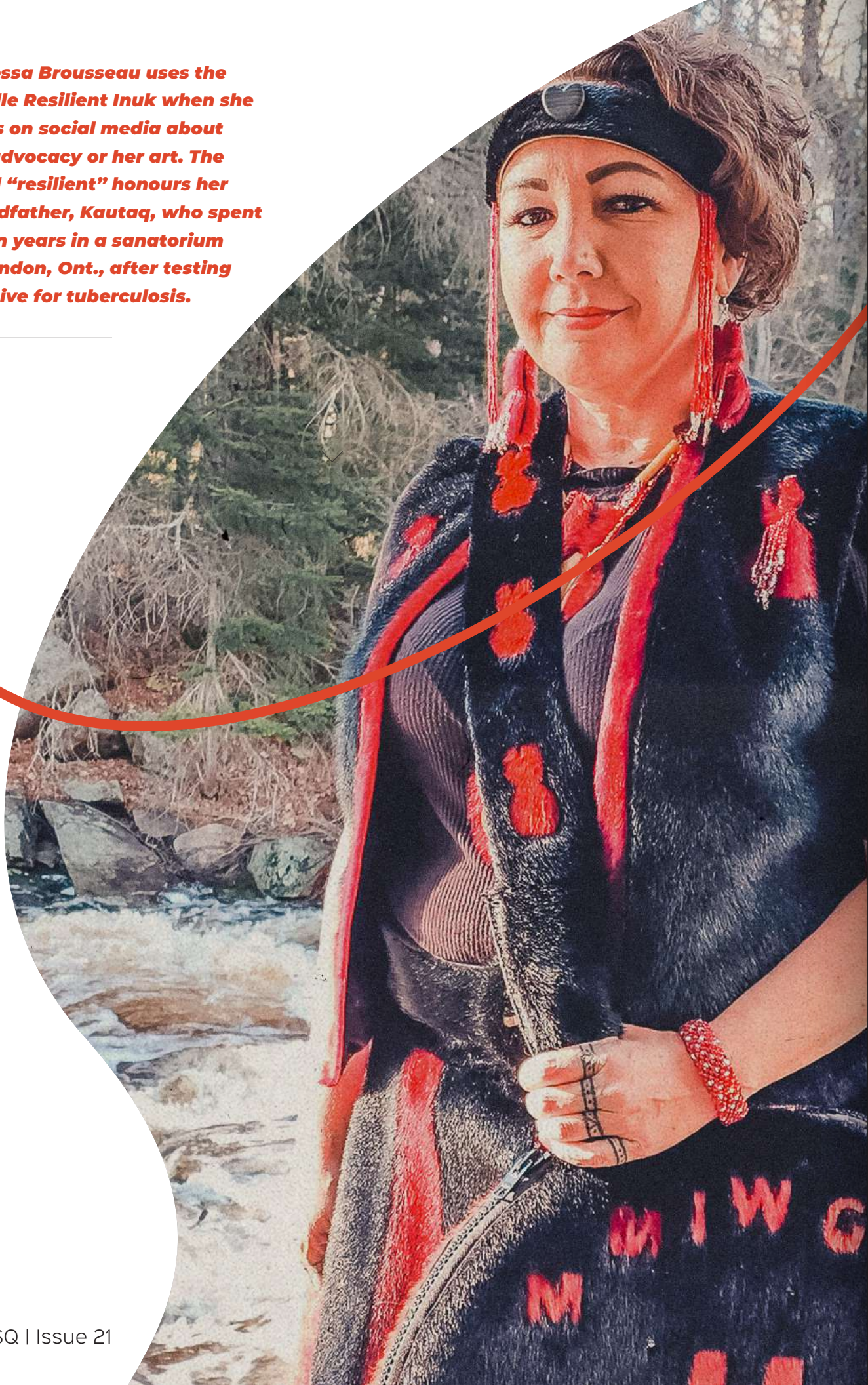
There are plans to go global and "to join forces and to make alliances with our sisters around the Americas, and around the world, to further raise awareness of the issue of Indigenous Peoples," said Ms. Groulx.

It has been a rapid progression from rented offices and a handful of employees in 2016 to the success that NWAC is enjoying today.

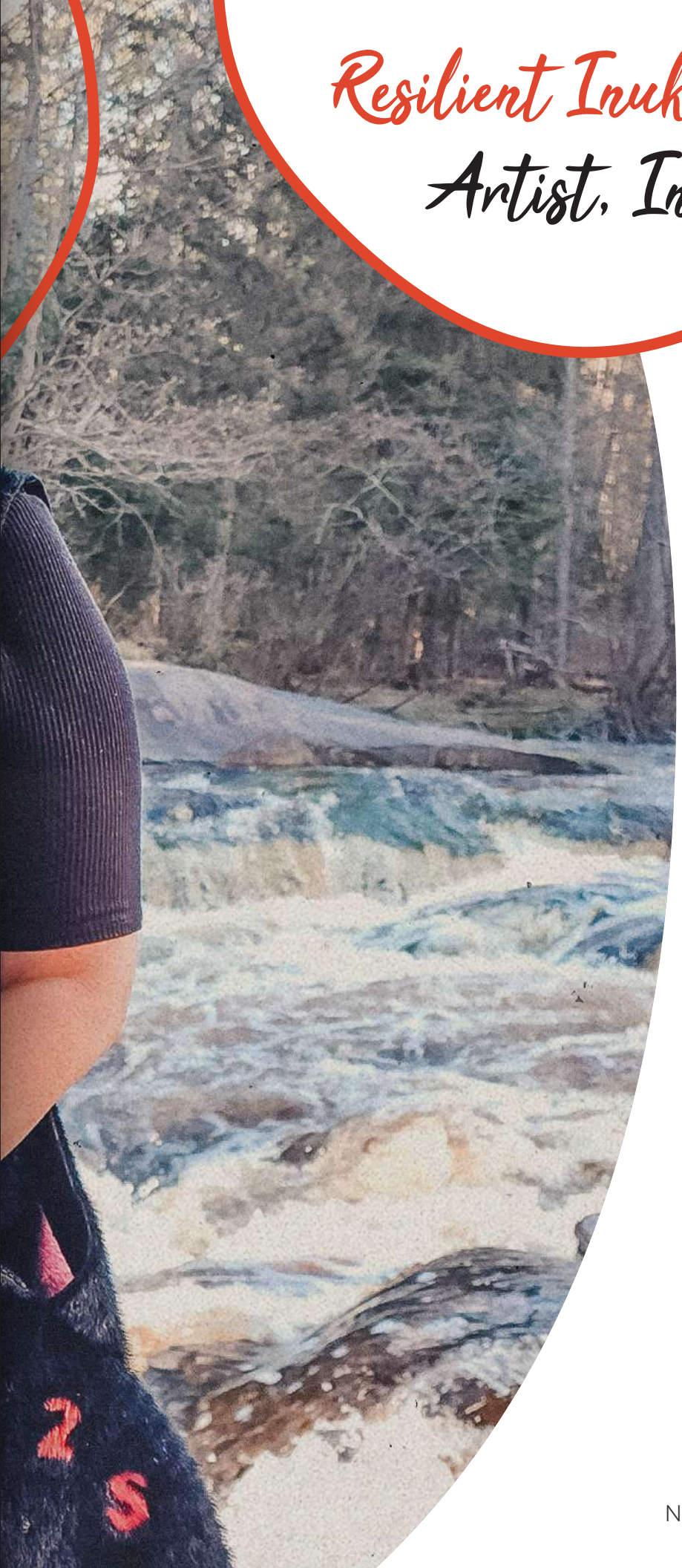
But it is satisfying, after all of the difficulties of the lean years, "to be making real progress," said Ms. Groulx, "to see Indigenous women beginning to share in the prosperity of Canada, and to be helping them build economic resilience and economic equality ... to be closing the gaps."

Pictured: NWAC's new Social, Cultural and Economic Innovation Centre in Gatineau, Quebec

Vanessa Brousseau uses the handle Resilient Inuk when she posts on social media about her advocacy or her art. The word "resilient" honours her grandfather, Kautaq, who spent seven years in a sanatorium in London, Ont., after testing positive for tuberculosis.



Resilient Inuk: Advocate, Artist, Influencer



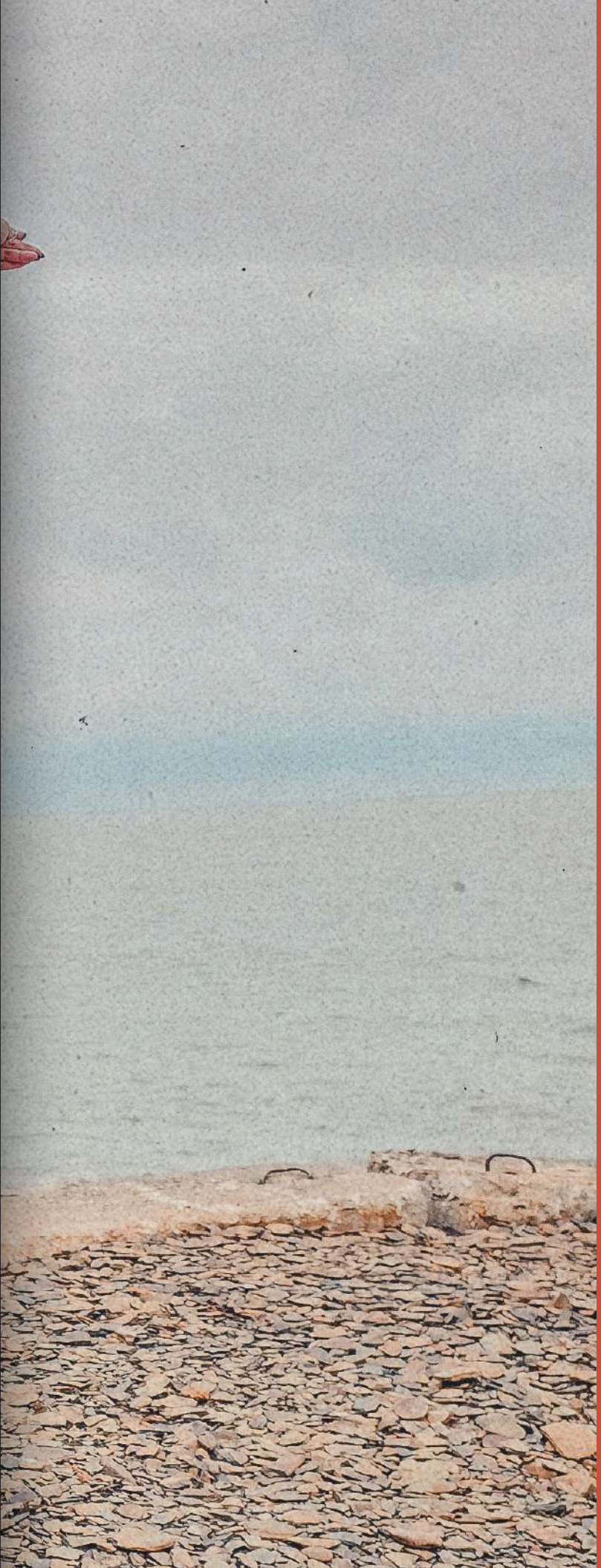
Vanessa Brousseau uses the handle Resilient Inuk when she posts on social media about her advocacy or her art.

The word "resilient" honours her grandfather, Kautaq (Joseph Kowtook, according to government records,) who spent seven years in a sanatorium in London, Ontario, far away from his home and his family in Sanikiluaq on an island in Hudson Bay. He was brought to the institution at the age of 19 after testing positive for tuberculosis.

"They experimented on him. They took his lung. They made it so he wasn't able to live independently anymore," Ms. Brousseau said in an interview. "So my grandfather begged and begged to go to the Moose Factory hospital (on the coast of James Bay)."

The medical authorities eventually relented. He was transferred, where "he became the X-ray technician there for 30 years," said Ms. Brousseau. "He had zero education, he just learned from hands-on. His resiliency is the reason I'm here today."

Ms. Brousseau is one of the influencers of NWAC, as well as an artist and an Indigenous rights advocate. She is the Indigenous Language Lead Project Officer for the Translation Bureau of



Pictured: Vanessa Brousseau

Canada, where she also co-chairs the Indigenous circle of employees. In addition, she is a volunteer board member with Tungasuvvingat Inuit, which provides Inuit services in urban Canada.

Ms. Brousseau spoke about her grandfather in a video she recorded for NWAC's History Month Campaign.

In the 1950s, a third of the Inuit population of Canada was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and many, like Kautaq, were shipped to medical facilities in the south for treatment. Because of his transfer to Moose Factory, his story ended more happily than the stories of many others.

"My mum was born in Moose Factory, and we used to go up there and visit my grandfather and he would come down to Timmins and visit us," said Ms. Brousseau.

He died in his sixties when Ms. Brousseau was about 10 years old. As part of her healing journey, she visited the medical institution in London where he spent so many years as a young adult.

"I walked the lands all over the sanatorium—the backyard where the basketball nets were," she said. "It was right on a river. There's lots of big, big trees, and I hugged the trees and I thought, I bet my grandpa hugged these trees because he'd never seen trees before."

Resilient Inuk

Despite the heavy emotions attached to the sanatorium, Ms. Brousseau said the experience of seeing the place of her grandfather's confinement was therapeutic.

Today, she said, "everything I do in regard to my culture is because of him."

Ms. Brousseau, herself, is a survivor of abuse. She has lodged human rights complaints against the Timmins police and the Children's Aid Society related to her experiences as a child in foster care. "White men physically and sexually abused me with no punishment or justice, and no support for me either," she said.

"I watched my mom in a domestic violence relationship," said Ms. Brousseau. And her sister, Pamela Holopainen, disappeared 20 years ago at the age of 22 after leaving a house party in Timmins.

Ms. Holopainen and all of the other Indigenous women and girls who have been murdered or gone missing are the inspiration for Ms. Brousseau's art. She creates a wide range of jewellery—earrings, necklaces, and pins—and other accessories with the motif of the red dress, which she selected for its beauty. Her aim is to increase awareness of the ongoing violence.

"That's the symbol I choose to use to honour and remember, not just my sister but all the sisters who are continuously being stolen from us," she said. "I want (Pamela) to be remembered in a beautiful way. I also use sealskin because of my sisters who are Inuk. I want to make sure that they're remembered. Oftentimes, Inuit are forgotten because there's so few of us."

Ms. Brousseau bolsters her resiliency by understanding her own story and the stories of her ancestors. Because government officials badly garbled Inuit names, the genealogy was difficult, so she asked the Montreal-based Avataq Cultural Institute to research her family tree. She has obtained her grandfather's medical records from the sanatorium in London. And she has a book from the Moose Factory hospital that contains photographs of her grandfather.

In addition, she said, "I still talk to family in Sanikiluaq. And I still have my Uncle Joe—that's my grandfather's son. He's in Moose Factory. I'm the question asker. But that's how you find the truth."

There is power in that, said Ms. Brousseau. "Our truth is power. I feel like my identity is so strong right now. There's nothing you could do to take that from me. I know who I am. I know where I come from. I know my people. Even though I've never even been to Sanikiluaq because of what the government did, I still know my family and I've gotten that back. If I didn't put in that effort, I wouldn't have that."

Positive change is happening for Indigenous Peoples—though it has been a slow process, said Ms. Brousseau.

"I am 44 years old now and I've seen it come from one end to the other," she said. "Even within the government, there's still going to be those bad apples. They're everywhere. But I really think that change is coming, and we just have to keep pushing and keep being loud about it."

Pictured: Art by Vanessa Brousseau

The history of NWAC and the Indigenous women's rights movement

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is a monthly magazine of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). Its objective is to highlight the work of the organization and to tell the stories of the Indigenous women of Canada.

NWAC, which was founded in 1974, is a national Indigenous organization representing First Nations (on and off reserve, with status and without), Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse people in Canada. Its goal is to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Indigenous women within their respective communities and Canadian society.

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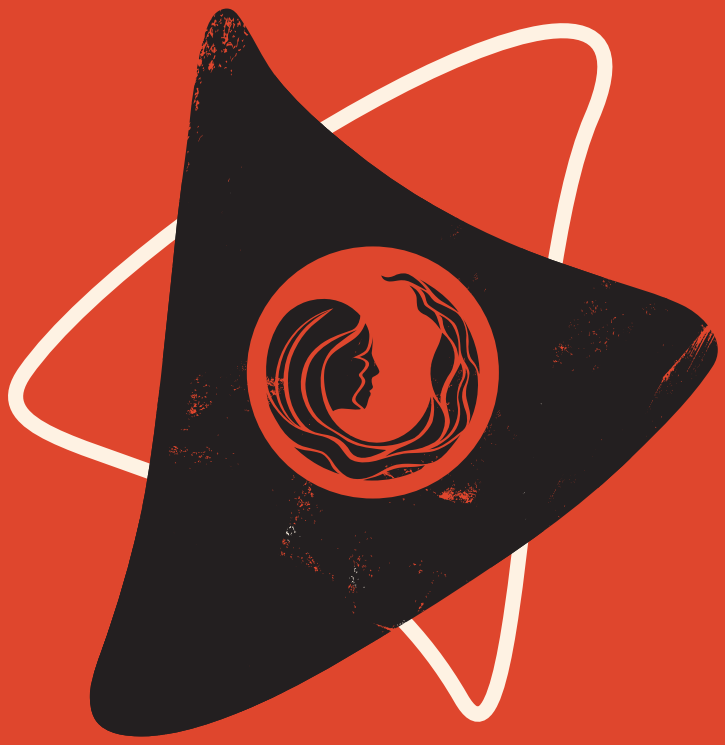

[kee/chi - nee/wesk] • *noun*

THE GREAT SPIRIT OF THE FEMALE SIDE OF LIFE OF ALL THINGS

KCI-NIWESQ

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