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

KCI-NIWESQ

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY • 2021

WALKING GENTLY

WITH ALMA BROOKS

HEALING THROUGH ART:
A SALVE FOR THE GENOCIDE

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
JOSEPH FIENNES

FROM ANCIENT SEEDS DO
GETE-OKOSOMIN GROW



ISSUE N° 01



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WELCOME TO THE FIRST VOLUME OF KCI-NIWESQ
THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA (NWAC).

THIS IS A NEW AND EXCITING PROJECT FOR US. We are hoping to use these pages to showcase the many innovative projects and programs we have undertaken here at NWAC as we advocate for the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people of Canada.

But we also want the magazine to be a platform for highlighting our members – their concerns as well as their accomplishments and the things that bring them joy and sorrow.

The name Kci-Niwesq is Maliseet. This word, which means the female side of all life, seemed especially appropriate in the reflecting the perspective of Indigenous women.

At NWAC, the largest national Indigenous women's organization in the country, have been representing the female side of Indigenous life for more than four decades.

This magazine is launching around the time of the Winter Solstice, when the days in the Northern hemisphere are at their darkest, and the Earth is the coldest, but there is much promise for sun and warmth in the future.

And that is how we feel about our mission and vision at NWAC.

Sometimes the days are very dark, especially as we grapple with human rights issues like that of the genocide that has been perpetrated against Indigenous women, or their forced sterilization, or racism in health care.

But we are also hopeful that our advocacy, and the determination of our members, will lead to better times ahead for Indigenous women and, indeed, all Indigenous People.

In this issue we will introduce you to Janey Michael, a Mi'Kmaq fisher of elvers whose season has been disrupted by poachers; to Shelley Charles who is helping to conserve an ancient Indigenous squash to Rose Moses who is bringing back the tradition of First Nations dollmaking; and to Alma Brooks whose spiritual journey needs to be shared.

These are stories we know you will enjoy and shed light on the lives of Indigenous women in Canada.

And, as we go forward with this project, we will be telling you about many of the other amazing, brilliant, and resilient Indigenous women with whom we share Turtle Island.

Thank you for taking the first step in this journey with us. Thank you for reading the first edition of Kci-Niwesq. Please drop us a line and let us know what you think at reception@nwac.ca.

MIIGWETCH.

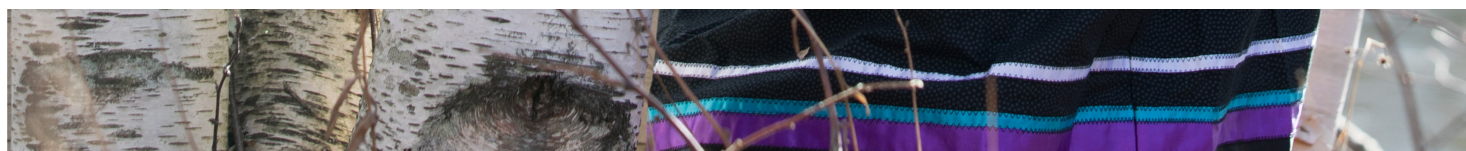
LYNNE GROULX LL.L., J.D. | CEO

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

A L M A B R O O K S



A LIFETIME OF PERSONAL DISCOVERY LEADS ALMA BROOKS
BACK TO HER ROOTS AND CONNECTION TO THE EARTH





ALMA BROOK'S ANCESTORS WALKED GENTLY on the Earth. That is what her father told her when she asked, as a child, about her mother's Maliseet heritage.

The ability to walk gently is a lesson Elder Alma still teaches today after a journey of self-discovery that helped her to see the connections between human beings and the world they inhabit.

"The big question is 'what is the purpose of life here on this planet?' And the best answer I have heard so far is that the Creator needed a place to dwell. When you look at that concept, which my people call the Great Mystery, we are the Creators," Ms. Brooks said in a recent interview.

"That's how I understand the world around me. That's how I know when I go into the woods that those trees, they communicate in their own way," says Ms. Brooks, who is one of the Elders providing counselling at the Resiliency Lodge created by the Native Women's Association of Canada in Chelsea, Que.

"And we can communicate with them," she says. "But I believe most of us have lost that connection and we have to get that back. We need to relearn how to communicate with creation again and we do that by being still. We find the answers within ourselves."

When Alma Brooks was born 77 years ago in Saint John, N.B., she was given to her biological aunt, Josephine Paul, and her aunt's non-Indigenous husband, Thomas St. John-Waterbury, to be raised as their own daughter.

Her adoptive parents had moved to a farm on Grand Lake, which Ms. Brooks calls a little piece of heaven, between Moncton and Fredericton. (Continued on page 6)



(Continued from page 5) They had spent the early years of their marriage travelling the Saint John River by canoe, selling homemade baskets and living off the land. “They picked their medicines and they made baskets made of sweetgrass,” says Ms. Brooks.

“I remember my dad telling me that my mother used to get my brother to go up in a tree and see a nest, or maybe on the marsh to look for goose eggs. She could take an egg and listen to it by shaking it a little by her ear, and she could tell if there was a bird in it or not. And, if it was fresh, that would be their lunch.”

When Ms. Waterbury died of what may have been lupus, Mr. Thomas St. John-Waterbury worried that his then five-and-a-half-year-old daughter would lose her Indigenous heritage.

“My dad always brought me to visit my mom’s family and community. He always wanted to make sure that I kept that connection,” she says.

He could not speak to her in her mother’s tongue, so he regularly took his young daughter across the lake to the home of an older Maliseet woman, in the hope of immersing her in the language and culture.

“I still remember the language she taught me. But it was baby talk. It was like you would talk to a child,” says Ms. Brooks. “And, by the time I was 10, the old lady shook her head sadly and told my father, ‘she is starting to lose her language.’”

Like other Indigenous children, Alma was also being assimilated in a classroom where her brown skin stood out in the rows of white faces.

“I remember going home crying and wondering why my hair wasn’t blonde and my eyes weren’t blue like everybody else,” says Ms. Brooks.

Her father, she says, “got down on the ground on his knees, and he let me cry on his shoulder, and then he said to me ‘don’t you ever be ashamed of who you are.’ He said ‘you come from a people who were the Earth’s gentlemen. They knew how to walk gently on this Earth. You have a wonderful history.’”

But that is not what was written in the history book at school. It said her people were blood-thirsty heathens.

“My father used to read my schoolbooks and he would get so angry. And I remember telling him ‘well, if I don’t say what’s in the book on my exam, I’m going to get a zero.’ I was

caught in that dilemma where you had to repeat the lies.”

She struggled to resolve the conflicts created by those teachings until, as an adult and a mother, she began to go in search of her heritage.

A talk given by Noel Knockwood, a spiritual leader from the Sipekne’katik First Nation, helped to turn on the lights.

“He had found out that our people had a deep spiritual connection to the Earth,” says Ms. Brooks. “We worshipped the land we walked on, and our land gave us full and plenty. All we had to do was say thank you. The Earth gave us all that we needed, the entire bundle that we needed, in order to live a good and happy life on this planet.”

It was an echo of what her father had told her when she was a child.

“So I said ‘Oh my God, these are the things I have been looking for, these are the questions I had all my life.’”

As part of her journey, she started to relearn Maliseet. “Fifty per cent of who you are, and your past, and the way our ancestors understood the world, and how they had a relationship with the world, is embedded in the language,” says Ms. Brooks.


She also fasted, went to sweat lodges, and attended shake ceremonies. And she and a friend organized spiritual gatherings at which Elders were invited to speak.

Through it all, she says, she learned that the centre of spirituality is not a god in the sky; it is here all around us.

The Christian churches demonized Indigenous medicine people and spiritual leaders because they were afraid of their power, says Ms. Brooks. They also changed the role of women in Maliseet society and in other Indigenous cultures, many of which were matriarchies.

In Maliseet culture, “Kci- Manitou is the male side of life. And Kci-Nwesq is the female side of life,” she says. “There are two sides to everything. Daylight and darkness. East and west. North and south. Male and female.”

Women are the life givers and the caregivers, and it is the job of men to protect them. Women are responsible for caring and speaking for the water and cedar, while the men are responsible for the fire and tobacco. That is the representation of that balance, says Ms. Brooks. (Continued on page 8)



I REMEMBER MY DAD TELLING ME THAT MY MOTHER USED TO GET MY BROTHER TO GO UP IN A TREE AND SEE A NEST, OR MAYBE ON THE MARSH TO LOOK FOR GOOSE EGGS. SHE COULD TAKE AN EGG AND LISTEN TO IT BY SHAKING IT A LITTLE BY HER EAR, AND SHE COULD TELL IF THERE WAS A BIRD IN IT OR NOT. AND, IF IT WAS FRESH, THAT WOULD BE THEIR LUNCH.

“THERE IS SOMETHING THAT DRAWS US BACK TO OUR OWN TRADITIONS,” SHE SAYS. “I THINK OUR PEOPLE STILL HAVE THAT SPIRITUAL CONNECTION, WHETHER THEY KNOW IT OR NOT. YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING THAT’S AT A VERY DEEP LEVEL. IT’S RIGHT DOWN TO THE CORE OF YOUR EXISTENCE.”



(Continued from page 6) But the male-dominated church took away that balance and put men on top, she says.

Christianity severed the head from the heart, says Ms. Brooks. Europeans “could not have exploited the Earth the way they have without believing in the Christian ideology. They have placed God up above everything else.”

Today, many Indigenous people are starting to reconnect to what they have lost, says Ms. Brooks.

“There is something that draws us back to our own traditions,” she says. “I think our people still have that spiritual connection, whether they know it or not. You’re talking about something that’s at a very deep level. It’s right down to the core of your existence.”

It is a lesson she has tried to teach her own six children, one of whom was murdered 15 years ago.

“I don’t know whether they completely understand or not,” she says. “I don’t force my children into anything. They believe in our culture and our traditions. But they’re not practising that much.”

She says she hopes that they will fully embrace their traditional spirituality one day.

Her own journey of discovery drove her to take Native studies courses at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, where she now lives, and she recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree.

She has also contributed to a book about talking circles between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people called *“The Gatherings”: Reimagining Indigenous-Settler Relations*, which will be published by the University of Toronto Press in March.

In the meantime, Ms. Brooks has a warning for all of those who are sharing this planet: Walk gently.

“Sixty percent of the species that were put here on this Earth are gone. That’s a scientific fact. And 60 percent of the species that are left are at risk because of human activity,” she says.

“All of life is connected. It’s like a spider’s web. And one day we are going to break the wrong strand, and life will begin to unravel. We don’t know whether or not that has already happened. But once that starts, it will unravel faster and faster and faster. At that time, it will be too late.”



THREATS OF VIOLENCE HALT FISHING,
BUT DOESN'T STOP JANEY MICHAEL

J A N E Y M I C H A E L



JANEY MICHAEL SPENDS THE SPRING STANDING HIP DEEP IN THE brackish water where Cape Breton rivers meet the Atlantic Ocean, hauling in nets of squirming, transparent, baby eels.

Ms. Michael is one of two women leading crews from the We'koqma'q First Nation who fish for the precious creatures. Known as elvers, these have sold for as much as \$4,500 a kilogram.

At 56, she is much older than the Mi'Kmaq men she leads.

She and her team catch the elvers, clean them, and then store them under tightly controlled conditions to ensure they are still alive when they reach buyers in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea.

It is a job she does from dusk until dawn, seven days a week, from March to June, while the elvers are running from the spawning grounds off the coast of the Bahamas to the freshwater rivers of the Northern United States and Canada.

The We'koqma'q First Nation holds one of nine commercial elver-fishing licences issued by the federal department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). The money earned by Ms. Michael and her crew goes into community coffers to keep Mi'Kmaq people housed and employed.

But not this year.

The rich price of the baby eels has drawn scores of unlicensed and black-market fishers—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—into the waters of Nova Scotia and southern New Brunswick, raising tempers and tensions and putting elver populations at risk from over-fishing.

In April, when the conflicts between commercial fishers and non-commercial elver fishers escalated to threats of violence, the DFO shut the fishery down.

Ms. Michael is not happy about it.

"It's hard work, don't get me wrong," she says. "But I wouldn't change employment whatsoever. I love the idea of how peaceful it is."

Or, at least, how peaceful it used to be.

There has been much conflict in Indigenous fisheries across Canada's east coast in 2020. In September and October, non-Indigenous lobster fishers clashed with members of the Sipekne'katik First Nation who were exercising their constitutional right to make a modest livelihood by fishing, unlicensed, before the official lobster season opened. Janey Michael travelled twice to docks where the clashes took place to support the Indigenous lobster fishers.

Although Ms. Michael says conservation is her top priority—both for elvers and for lobsters—she says the number of traps set by the Indigenous fishers is so small they will have no effect on the overall lobster population. As the conflict played out, she was frustrated with the lack of intervention on the part of federal fisheries officials and the police.

"I am concerned about the safety of our Indigenous people," she says. "I am concerned how much injustice DFO and RCMP have provided to our Indigenous people. I am concerned for the mothers of these fishermen, and the wives. The majority of Indigenous fishers are men. That's somebody's son, that's somebody's husband, that's somebody's grandfather who is out there."

The news footage of those confrontations showed angry men yelling at other angry men.

But Indigenous women are also fishers.

In many Indigenous cultures, women are the peacekeepers and the water keepers who are responsible for keeping lakes and rivers clean. In all Indigenous cultures, women play an important role in providing food for their communities. So, in Cape Breton, women fish.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has created a Fish and Fish Habitat Platform to promote awareness among Indigenous women of the federal laws and regulations around fishing and conservation.

But the level of violence seen in 2020 was not part of the thinking when that platform was created. (Continued on page 11)

"IT'S HARD WORK, DON'T GET ME WRONG," SHE SAYS. "BUT I WOULDN'T CHANGE EMPLOYMENT WHATSOEVER. I LOVE THE IDEA OF HOW PEACEFUL IT IS."



(Continued from page 10) "We are here to support our women and to recognize their contribution as fishers, whether it be lobstering, digging calms, or eel gathering," says Lorraine Whitman, President of NWAC.

"Our fisherwomen have been pulled into these disputes. Women are the matriarchs, the water carriers, stewards of the water. This is our livelihood, our fishing. It gives us food on our table. This is what makes us who we are. It is in our culture, our tradition."

Ms. Michael says women make better elver fishers than men.

"Women have more patience, they provide better direction," she says, "and we are more equipped to be night workers because we raise children. Women have their priorities, and, spiritually, I find them stronger."

Every season, before she sets her first net, Ms. Michael offers tobacco to the spirits during the full-moon cycle, harnessing the energy of Mother Earth.

"And I give gratitude because our catches will provide housing renovation dollars or employment to our communities," she says. "It creates revenue for our First Nation."

Elvering has always been a perilous occupation. It is done when wildlife is just coming out of hibernation.

"You see bears because they are in the river. They want fish. You see coyotes. You are in a big-boulders area. A tide could suck you right into the undercurrent if you're not careful. You are driving home when you are extremely tired," says Ms. Michael.

Those are the dangers she expected when she first started elver fishing in 1983.

The confrontations with the other elver fishers were not. And there have been many.

"One night we heard gun shots. They tried to intimidate us. I kept yelling at them 'you missed, make sure you hit me next time,' she says. 'The intimidation never worked with me. This is our community's revenue.'"

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But some of her crew have been traumatized by the encounters. And efforts to get the police to intervene went nowhere, says Ms. Michael.

The DFO did not react immediately when told about the threats, she says, but then the fishery was shut down.

Not only had the violence escalated, Ms. Michael says the markets dried up when the COVID-19 pandemic caused lockdowns worldwide.

But that didn't stop some of the unlicensed elver fishers from trying to cash in. "I have seen videos of these newcomers dipping their nets, and fishing them, and they couldn't sell them, not even to the black market. And they were dumping dead elvers back into the river," she says.

"When I dip my net, I know the eels that I catch are going live to somewhere else and be raised to be food security for that country. But those elvers didn't leave here. They went back into the river dead."

Now Ms. Michael is hoping for a better year in 2021.

She wants to return to her nets and wants the money raised by the sale of her catch to again help the people in her community.

Elvers may be worth more than gold, but they have not made Ms. Michael rich. She gets a payment from the First Nation while she is fishing, and Employment Insurance the rest of the year.

"I live paycheque to paycheque, and from EI to EI. I live in a trailer that's poorly insulated. My utility costs are high. I have a used car. I have a pay-as-you-go phone. Plus, I have a household of four adults. But it beats welfare," she says.

"My poor children, every year they tell me 'mom don't go out fishing. Mom don't do it.' They're scared for my safety," says Ms. Michael.

But she loves the life, and she would like to train more Indigenous women to be elver fishers.

"I know the Indigenous women will provide the revenue and the resources from elver fishing to their children, to their grandchildren, to their aunties, to their spouses," she says. "They will put food on their plates. And they will keep them alive."



JOSEPH FIENNES

SHOCKED AT VIOLENCE AGAINST CANADA'S INDIGENOUS WOMEN, JOSEPH FIENNES WANTS TO TELL THEIR STORIES

JOSEPH FIENNES, THE BRITISH ACTOR WHO IS BEST known for starring as William Shakespeare in the award-winning *Shakespeare In Love* and as the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*, reached out to the Native Women's Association of Canada in November to express his concern over the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). Mr. Fiennes is contemplating possible ways to express the tragedy through film. We asked him some questions about his interest in this issue.

1. WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN THE CAUSE OF CANADA'S MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN?

I read an article in 2016 surrounding MMIWG. I had just started *The Handmaids Tale* (which was filmed in and around Toronto) and was shocked that the violence and brutality of the (Margaret) Atwood story could not match the appalling silent genocide that's obviously been going on for decades here in Canada. I was also shocked I'd never heard or read these accounts before. I've been haunted ever since.

2. WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES YOU HAVE FOUND IN DELVING INTO THIS SUBJECT AS SOMEONE WHO IS NOT INDIGENOUS OR FROM CANADA?

One of the biggest challenges is getting through the literature of events and trying not to cry at the pain and loss continually inflicted upon Indigenous women. Added to that is ultimately coming to realize that this violence is systemic and its roots are easily traced back to the age of colonization. As a white, middle-class, European male having zero connection culturally here, I still have to ask myself, have I unwittingly benefited from colonisation?

Beyond feeling the horror and empathy, why be interested? I had to ask myself, could my privileges well be connected to the pain and horror of others. That might sound extreme, but growing up in London, you don't have to look far to see a city built on the backs of black men. Sugar, for instance, has an insidious past. (Next time anyone visits the Tate Gallery have a think! Tate and Lyle is a sugar company going back over 160 years.)

I had to ask myself, was having empathy enough? The challenge is to listen, learn, and ask, how do I translate that empathetic response—which is ultimately passive—into action and in the most appropriate way? The first step was to connect with the MMIWG program.

3. WHAT KINDS OF PROJECTS ARE YOU CONSIDERING RELATED TO THE MISSING AND MURDERED WOMEN AND WHAT, IF ANYTHING, WOULD YOU HOPE RESULTS?

The wonderful producers who worked on *Handmaids* are in contact with BIPOC (the Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour Project). I'd want to encourage them to either mentor and get Indigenous women on our crew in any department possible. Obviously given the subject of our show, empowering women in the workspace is a critical aim. I'd push that aim to absolutely include Indigenous women, to have their voice and needs heard equally.

Running parallel to that, I'd very much like to participate in bringing my knowledge and experience in film/TV, by doing a project that can tackle the subject of MMIWG and by having a predominantly Indigenous crew whose voices are upfront and centre. And with that I would like to authentically keep the spotlight and awareness firmly on this tragedy and prevent further violence through education and constant dialogue.



G E T E - O K O S O M I N

SEEDS OF ANCESTORS ARE REVIVED AMID
MAGICAL STORIES OF PRESERVATION



THE STORIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE GETE-OKOSOMIN SQUASH ARE MAGICAL.

As one expert says, they are a bit like the tendrils of the squash vine itself, twisting their way through oral history.

What is certain is that the Gete-Okosomin has been grown by the Indigenous People of North America for millennia, and its seeds are now being shared to ensure that the ancient orange vegetable will continue to be planted and harvested for years to come.

Some of these seeds were shared with community members at a seed gathering exchange in Minnesota by way of gardeners from Bass Lake, Ont., to Elder Shelley Charles, who is an agriculture expert for the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).

The people of the Miami Nations "have been hand-pollinating and really looking after these seeds for centuries," says Ms. Charles. "By having them in our work in the restoration of Indigenous plants in the Great Lakes region, in our gardening and agricultural initiatives, in harvesting and then also sharing the seeds, we're engaging and activating the Indigenous philosophy of thinking about seven generations into the future."

The Gete-Okosomin seeds came to her with a story.

Legend had it that seeds were discovered in an 800-year-old clay pot during an archeological dig in Wisconsin and then successfully germinated into squash by Indigenous People to produce the seeds that are now being shared.

Another tale suggests they may have been inside a clay ball that was used as a rattle by a baby who lived long before the Europeans arrived in North America.

Yet another says they were found hidden away in a cave in Kentucky or Tennessee.

The miracle of life sprouting from centuries-old seeds prompted skeptics to research the stories. And alternative explanations for how they came to be circulated in modern times have been shared through the media and on the Internet.



The most widely accepted tale suggests that David Wrone, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, was given the seeds in 1995 by Elder gardeners from the Miami Nation of Indiana who had been growing them for 5,000 years, and that Prof Wrone subsequently gave them to the Menominee Nation before they landed at White Earth.

But Kenton Lobe, a professor of international development studies at the Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg who received some of the seeds a decade ago, says the truth of their origin is not important.

One of the Indigenous commenters to the other media stories pointed out that the seeds are sacred gift items and the stories that come with them are also sacred, says Prof. Lobe.

"Rather than talk about the truth of the story, we should talk about the mingling of these stories. It is a bit like a squash vine. It grabs little tendrils here and there and can hold on in different places," he says. (Continued on page 16)



“THIS WHOLE PROJECT IS HELPING TO RESTORE
INDIGENOUS AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES, RESTORE
THAT CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE OF HOW IT'S INTER-
GENERATIONAL, WORKING TOGETHER AS A FAMILY.”

“It seems to me that the tradition of tending plants and keeping seeds, all of that diversity, all of that cultural work that comes with seeds, all of the sacred work is what is important,” says Prof. Lobe. “And I think that is a really rich story to tell.”

Ms. Charles has been working with NWAC to promote the work of Indigenous women in agriculture. As part of that project, a year-round greenhouse and community garden is being constructed atop the new Social and Cultural Innovation Centre that NWAC is creating in downtown Gatineau, Que.

The medicines, herbs, and vegetables grown in the greenhouse will be used in the NWAC café, which will also be housed in the building. And the knowledge and techniques that are developed through the program will empower Indigenous communities across Canada to create their own gardens and greenhouses.

Very early on in the project, says Ms. Charles, it became obvious that NWAC would have to find Indigenous-sourced seeds and heirloom seeds for growing and sharing; there were none available as everything was sold out. And then she remembered that she had been given some of the Gete-Okosomin.

A farming collective near her community of the Chippewas of Georgina First Nation on Lake Simcoe in central Ontario gave up a corner of their fields so she could experiment with Indigenous gardening practices and see how the seeds grow. And the results were miraculous, with over 300 pounds of squash harvested.

The Gete-Okosomin squash are very large and can be stacked like cordwood, says Ms. Charles. And they are delicious. “It is like the grandmother of the squash,” she says.

Through planting and harvesting, NWAC now has several thousand of the seeds, which will be distributed to Indigenous women in packages of seven.

That is partly to signify that the seeds will provide food for seven generations into the future. And it reflects the Seven Grandfathers Teachings, which are common to many North American Indigenous cultures, says Ms. Charles.

“This whole project is helping to restore Indigenous agricultural practices, restore that cultural knowledge of how it's intergenerational, working together as a family,” says Ms. Charles.

“For urban Indigenous people who have small parcels of land or maybe even a backyard, they can learn about container growing, companion planting, permaculture, all of those things that were specific to indigenous ways of growing, nurturing, and harvesting edible plants and vegetables. And it also helps to reconnect us with the environment.”

The sharing of the seeds is about food security and food sovereignty, says Ms. Charles. And it is about the circle of life, she says, reconnecting Indigenous People with the land and the water and then producing food that goes back to their families.

“What is very clear,” she says, “is that these Gete-Okosomin are ancient seeds that have been kept, have been nurtured, have been looked after by Indigenous People for thousands of years, and now we are restoring them.”

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KENTON LOBE

A PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
AT THE CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY IN WINNIPEG

“EVENTUALLY (NWAC) WILL HAVE THE MOST ROBUST COLLECTION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S CRAFTS IN THE WORLD, PER
GUARANTEE AUTHENTICITY, HAVE BEAUTIFUL PACKAGING, PROMOTE INDIGENOUS WOMEN ARTISTS, OFFER A FAIR-TRADE



PERIOD ... WE'RE GOING TO GUARANTEE OUR QUALITY,
MADE PRICE FOR THEIR WORK, ALL OF THAT.” LYNNE GROULX



NWAC GIVES INDIGENOUS WOMEN TOOLS TO LEARN TRADITIONAL ARTISTRY, AND A MEANS TO RISE OUT OF POVERTY



R O S E M O S E S

THERE WAS A TIME, LONG AGO, THAT THE ART OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN was traded with other communities or exchanged for goods brought by European settlers.

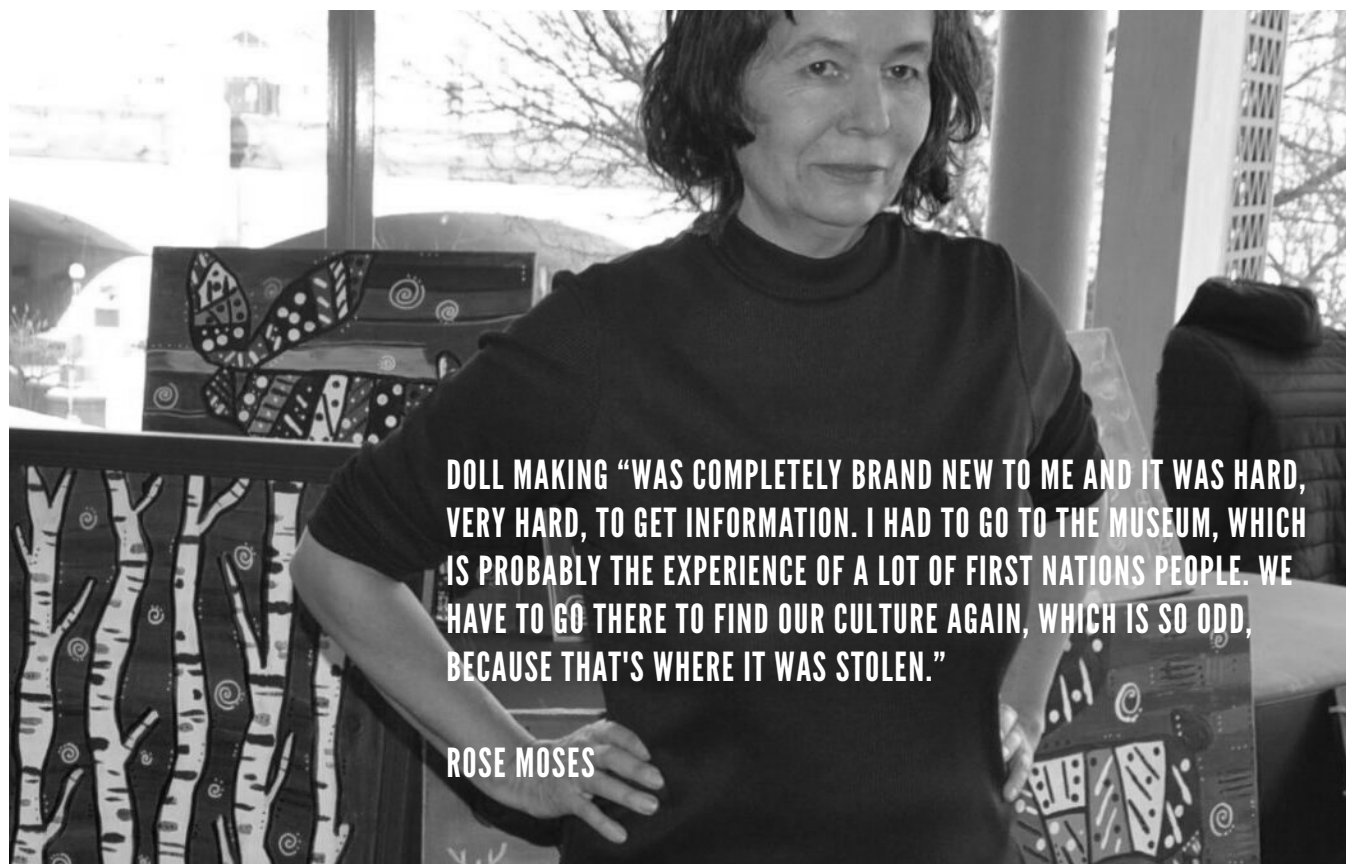
Today this art is sold on powwow trails, and through internet sites like Facebook and Etsy. And soon it will be available at an online store run by the Native Women's Association Canada (NWAC) and at the organization's modern boutique in Gatineau, Que.

The act of creating art is healing. It is a salve for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women who are targeted by what the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Women has determined to be a genocide.

But, says Lynne Groulx, NWAC's chief executive officer, it can also be a route out of poverty and beyond the social and economic marginalization that the Inquiry said perpetuates the violence.

“Yes, we want something to keep people's hands busy, and we also want to help revive culture and tradition,” says Ms. Groulx. “But, most importantly, we want to see if there's a way to get these products that we are making, these baskets and this beautiful jewellery, on the market?”

NWAC is providing Indigenous women with the tools and the skills they need to start their own microbusinesses in making traditional crafts. That is being done virtually, and eventually physically, through a Maker's Space that is part of NWAC's new Resiliency Lodge project. (Continued on page 20)



(Continued from page 19) And it will have the boutique, Artisanelle, for selling those crafts, and many others from across Canada and around the world, which will go online early this year.

Artisanelle “eventually will have the most robust collection of Indigenous women’s fine arts and crafts in the world, period,” says Ms. Groulx. “We already have a huge selection of Indigenous handmade dolls and jewellery. We’re going to guarantee our quality, guarantee authenticity, have beautiful packaging, promote Indigenous women artists, offer a fair-trade price for their work, all of that.”

The store will feature work like that of Rose Moses, an Ojibwe artist from the Henvey Inlet First Nation, south of Sudbury, Ont., who makes dolls along with a wide range of other crafts.

Ms. Moses says she remembers making beaded necklaces for pocket money until she was in Grade 8.

“But, after that, there was nothing,” she says. “I was in and out of foster homes, I was changing schools, I was going back to try to live at home. Too much turmoil.”

It wasn’t until she was in her 30s that she came back to her craftwork. She had wandered into a gift shop in Saskatchewan and saw a small First Nations puppet made of polyester with a painted face.

“It was hideous-looking,” she says with a laugh. “But it was the

first Native thing I had ever seen in a store ... So, when I saw that puppet, I guess my inner child just wanted to have it. And I brought it home with me, and I stared at it for a long time. And I thought to myself, I wonder if I could make a better puppet.”

She tore it apart, piece by piece, and then put it back together again. Then she started making her own puppets. And, as she sold those puppets in Ottawa, people started asking for dolls.

“So that began a journey of researching doll making,” says Ms. Moses. “It was completely brand new to me and it was hard, very hard, to get information. I had to go to the museum, which is probably the experience of a lot of First Nations people. We have to go there to find our culture again, which is so odd, because that’s where it was stolen.”

She also started experimenting with painting, beading, papier-mâché, and quilt making, teaching herself the techniques as she went along. And her work, especially the dolls, began to sell.

“That was a big surprise to me, as I am sure it is to a lot of First Nations artists,” says Ms. Moses. “You are just doing things because you are called to them and then other people see them, and they want them, and then they ask if they can buy them and you’re like ‘wow!’”

The market exists.

But many Indigenous women don’t have the tools and resources they need to begin crafting. Ms. Groulx says NWAC has received

emails from women who want to start creating their own art, but have no money for supplies. So NWAC has purchased a thousand bead sets and is sending them out to the aspiring artisans who request them.

It has also equipped its Maker's Space, a large and airy room over the garage at the Resiliency Lodge, with the supplies and machinery required for a wide range of crafts, including weaving, sewing, basket making, leather work, woodworking, ceramics, and jewellery.

And online workshops are being held to teach the women the crafts of their grandmothers that were lost through the decades marked by the residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the intergenerational traumas that are the aftermath of those tragic episodes of Canadian history.

Jessica Somers, the manager of arts at the Resiliency Lodge, leads many of the virtual craft sessions. Others are taught by women who specialize in work of the First Nations or the Métis or the Inuit, or those who have a particular skill in a certain type of craft.

They appeal to a wide variety of women, says Ms. Somers, from doctors, to stay-at-home moms, to grandmothers.

"We've had Two-Spirit people, gender-diverse individuals as well," she says. "Every workshop is different."

"You'll have more of the mindfulness when you're painting. And then you'll have more of the social interaction when you're doing the beading," she says. "It leads to conversations about how can I do this on my own? How can I do this within my community? How do I make money? And that's where I direct them to NWAC's programs for Indigenous women entrepreneurs."

Many of those women will find success in microbusinesses, like artisan crafting, that they can do from their own homes even in times of the pandemic, says Ms. Groulx.

Artisan crafting is a form of meditation, a form of healing, a form of art, and an expression of culture, she says.

"But it's also something you can sell. So, attached to the idea of that Maker's Space was always the plan that this would be a form of revenue for some of the women and would help them to become part of the Canadian economy," says Ms. Groulx. "In some cases, we will purchase the art for our store."

The store was the logical next step in NWAC's long-term efforts to help Indigenous women artisan crafters network and get products on the market.

"I REALLY BELIEVE THAT THE ANCESTORS COME AND SIT WITH ME WHEN I BEGIN IN A GOOD WAY. WHEN I'M DOING MY ART IN A GOOD WAY, I TRULY BELIEVE YOU'RE HOLDING HANDS WITH THE CREATOR. AND THAT IS WHERE THE JOY AND THE HAPPINESS LIES."

ROSE MOSES

"It is a big concept, a multi-million-dollar deal, really, if we're going to do it in a big way," says Ms. Groulx. "There is a carefully-thought-out, 10-year, business plan on the road to self-sufficiency for Indigenous women. Step one is we will put an online platform in Canada to put these products on the market."

An initial callout for artisan crafts made by Indigenous women in Canada was so successful that NWAC is looking for extra warehouse space to house it all. And there is a buyer in South America to help source what is called the Sisters in Spirit, the Americas Collection, that includes the art of Indigenous female entrepreneurs of other countries.

The organization is also looking at expanding Maker's Spaces across Canada to give more Indigenous women access to the tools they need to begin creating their own work.

"In any community, you could actually just take that Makers' Space concept, which cost us \$100,000 to set up, and put it in a physical space," says Ms. Groulx. "Because there's a demand for the products, the economic benefits are enormous."

So is the potential for healing.

As a result of the residential schools, Indigenous women "have suffered a lot of losses—loss of family, community ... even our hair and our name," says Ms. Moses. "The biggest thing is that we had lost play. And with that play came laughter and joy."

Crafting, she says, means reclaiming the permission to play, reclaiming childhoods, reclaiming connection to the Indigenous circle, and reclaiming being balanced again.

"When I'm doing my art, it gives me a voice. When I feel like I have a voice, I can control the narrative. For a long time, Indigenous women couldn't control their narrative," says Ms. Moses.

"It gives me purpose and structure each day. And when I combine it with a ritual, it becomes like a prayer or a meditation," she says. "And I really believe that the ancestors come and sit with me when I begin in a good way. When I'm doing my art in a good way, I truly believe you're holding hands with the Creator. And that is where the joy and the happiness lies."

KCI-NIWESQ

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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