

# DIAMOND WILLOW YOUTH LODGE

## — Annual Impact Report —

April 2022



**miskanawah**  
empowerment • strength • family



**United Way**  
Calgary and Area



## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the spirit of our journey to promote reconciliation, we would like to honour the truth of the shared history and acknowledge Treaty 7 territory and the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which includes the Kainai (Kai-nai), Siksika (Seeg-see-kah), Pikani (Bee-Kah-nee), Tssut'ina (Soo-tea-nah), and Stoney Nakoda nations, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations. We would also like to recognize the Metis people, and the Inuit people who have made their home here in Moh-kins-tsis, also known as Calgary.

**The content within this report is considered  
smudged information according to  
Indigenous practices.**



# DIAMOND WILLOW TREES ARE USED TO BUILD SWEAT LODGES, WHICH ARE SACRED, SAFE SPACES FOR HEALING, REFLECTION, AND CONNECTION WITH ONE ANOTHER, AS WELL AS THE EARTH.

The well-being of our community's Indigenous people continues to be impacted by factors of our nation's history. This includes the legacy of the residential school system, where seven generations of children were removed from their families, while experiencing oppressive policies and practices. Suppressed Indigenous culture and identity has resulted in significant loss of language, culture, spirituality, parenting skills, and traditional roles in Indigenous societies. With the recent and ongoing discovery of thousands of unmarked graves at former sites of Indian Residential Schools across Canada, the Indigenous community continues to feel the trauma, as survivors and family members. As a result of this suppression, intergenerational trauma has caused many Indigenous people in our community to struggle with living healthy and rewarding lives. Indigenous people today tend to have poorer health, higher suicide rates and instances of homelessness, as well as lower income compared to other Canadians. Calgary currently has the fifth largest Indigenous population in Canada.

Diamond Willow Youth Lodge was designed to support Indigenous youth in Calgary and area on their path to healing and well-being. In the development of this project, and under the guidance of Indigenous Elders, United Way partnered with Miskanawah, a local agency that offers supportive services guided by Indigenous teachings. Since opening in the fall of 2018, the Lodge offers a welcoming and inclusive gathering place for Indigenous youth to connect with peers and build positive informal relationships with Elders in a safe and non-stigmatizing setting. Youth participate in their own healing and well-being at their own pace.

Led by an Indigenous Youth Coordinator, Indigenous Youth Council, and youth participants, the Lodge provides Indigenous youth the opportunity to design their own space based on the interests and needs of the participants with diverse Indigenous backgrounds. By providing culturally appropriate healing practices and activities, as well as access to a variety of supports, the Lodge promotes self-discovery, Indigenous identity, and well-being.



# PROGRAMS

FROM JUNE 2020 TO DECEMBER 2021, DIAMOND WILLOW YOUTH LODGE HELD **351 EVENTS** AND WORKSHOPS AND SERVED **598 YOUTH** THROUGH PROGRAMMING ACTIVITIES.

Despite the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Diamond Willow Youth Lodge has strived to deliver impactful and safe programming for Indigenous youth in Calgary. All programming has remained free, open to youth aged 12-29, and easy to access on a drop-in basis. Although Diamond Willow Youth Lodge is a physical space, the pandemic has reinforced that the true power of the Lodge is in the connections that are formed. As the programming and services continue with a hybrid of virtual and in-person delivery, youth experienced uninterrupted, and continual, access to relevant supports.





## Guest Speakers (Virtual and In-Person)

Guest speakers chosen are Indigenous leaders who have had an impact on their community. Speakers share their stories on how they achieved success in their lives and talk about the challenges they experience in their personal lives and careers. Guest Speakers provide opportunities for youth to connect with Indigenous role models that have overcome struggles and are now giving back to the community.

## Virtual Elder Hours

These virtual circles have given youth the chance to talk openly about how they have been feeling mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Elders are available to listen and offer guidance and support. Having survived other pandemics, Elders share their knowledge, offering hope to youth who are struggling today.

## Virtual Workshops

Hosted virtually with local Indigenous artists and Knowledge Keepers, youth are given the opportunity to learn new skills, grow in cultural competency, develop higher self-esteem, and connect with peers. During the pandemic, youth were registered for virtual workshops, supplies were delivered to their door for low-barrier access, and the workshops were facilitated through Zoom.

## Outdoor Activities and Virtual Games Nights

Activities support both the physical and mental health of the youth. This year both Summer and Winter programming were offered which enabled the youth to form strong connections with the Knowledge Keepers. Youth expressed their gratitude for outdoor and in-person opportunities amidst all the virtual programs.

## Medicine Walks and Picking

During the medicine walks, Elders shared teaching on what medicines were used in ceremony and the protocols to follow. The walks were led by Elders and/or Knowledge Keepers who provide a wide variety of teachings from different communities. The youth learned to care for themselves, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually through these walks, and through the plants they encountered along with way.

## Ceremonies

When health recommendations allow, Pipe Ceremonies and Sweat Lodge Ceremonies are hosted, including Drum Awakening Ceremony, Naming Ceremony, and Rattle Making. The Elders worked hard to ensure these ceremonies were facilitated in a way that kept everyone at a safe distance and with as little physical contact as possible.

*"Thank you for bringing your stories tonight. Your stories may have been hard to hear, but they are harder to live through. It shows strength and determination. I'm always in such awe and bravery for everything you've been through."*

**Youth Participant - Elder Hours with Marion**



## **Mental Health Supports and Gratitude Group**

Staff met virtually once a week on Zoom to guide youth participant's work in their gratitude practice in journals and occasionally brought in guest speakers to talk about mental health and wellness.

## **Rap University**

Local MC Dwight Farahat collaborated with Diamond Willow Youth Lodge to provide a virtual, healthy, drug-free space for youth to come together to rap, cypher, and collaborate on artistic projects.

## **Young Buffalo Program**

The Young Buffalo Program is geared towards youth aged 12-17 who are involved in, or at risk of being involved in, the justice system. Youth learn more about themselves, their culture, and building on life skills.

## **Virtual Performing Arts Program**

Collaborating with Miskanawah's Family Resource Network, this program consisted of four segments, each focusing on a different facet of the performing arts. This program engaged a variety of local Indigenous artists around self-expression, self-confidence, and improvisation (both in life and on-stage) with a focus on Hip Hop, Acting and Directing, and Comedy.

## **Loop Project**

Loop is a research-based storytelling art project hosted in collaboration with Antyx Community Arts. This multistage summer project brings together both youth and Elders to research and learn stories, language, protocol, culture, and ceremony which will lead to the second phase in permanent sculptural installations that will be erected at the Genesis Centre.

## **White Aspen Project**

The White Aspen project is in collaboration with McMan Services Collaborative Outreach Preventing Exploitation Program. Over 8 weeks, the program facilitated workshops exploring: belonging, healthy relationships, social media, sexual exploitation, and safety.

## **Virtual Active Nights**

As the pandemic continued, the youth expressed a need to be physically active. This need was met by introducing "Boxing and Yoga Nights", with a focus on how strong mental health is linked to physical health, as well as the importance of mindfulness and the messages we tell ourselves.

# CREATING CONNECTIONS

Through Diamond Willow Youth Lodge, youth have been connected to one another, Elders, culture, and resources - including housing, addictions, and employment supports.



*"Diamond Willow Youth Lodge... Not a place but rather a spiritual experience. Educational, fun, constructive creative activities facilitated by young people who are dedicated to providing holistic experiences wherein youth may expand their whole beings, namely their mental, emotional, physical, spiritual aspects. As well as connecting to their communities, Elders are directly involved to provide spiritual and cultural guidance. I feel honoured and privileged to work alongside the amazing youth leaders."*

**Elder Blair Thomas**



*"Kitsikakomim - I am wrapping my love around you and will take a lot from this...Feeling hopeful, for the next generation and grandmother's teachings.... Beautiful, powerful circle. Ayyy, hiy-hiy for tonight and for welcoming me into our circle. Prayers to our hosts for looking after our spirits tonight."*

**Participant - Full Moon Teaching with Doreen**

# CONNECTING WITH CULTURE

## Jaime's Story of Stepping Up

Jaime has demonstrated time and time again what an immense heart they have, and they have always been eager to spread joy and love within their community. Their support of other youth throughout the pandemic, their strength of character, and their commitment to Cultural Rejuvenation led the team to nominate Jamie for the Chief David Crowchild Award this year.

On the last weekend of May, news spread nationwide that the unmarked graves of 215 children were found at Kamloops Residential School. This finding sent ripples of hurt and grief through our Indigenous communities, especially for our Elders, many of whom are survivors themselves of the Residential School System.

The following Tuesday, Jamie gathered with a group of youth from our regularly scheduled Gratitude Group. We decided to forego any scheduled program plans, and instead opened up the circle for the youth to talk about what they had been feeling since hearing the news. Jamie showed incredible vulnerability in opening up about their feelings in our sharing circle, and they gave their peers the courage to speak their minds as well. Many of our youth expressed their anger, frustration, and sadness that came with the opening of wounds they may not have looked towards in a while.

Our Elders expressed to us that this was not a time for us to ask them to hold ceremony, but rather that we should be the ones holding ceremony for them. We talked about what that means for those of us who are young and only just beginning to learn about ceremony. We spoke about how our tears, laughter, and listening with open hearts could be a form of ceremony that we hold for our Elders.

At the end of the sharing circle, Jamie suggested that we plan something to help support our Elders. The group was enthusiastically supportive of the idea and in brainstorming together about how each of them could take action to spread awareness in the community, support our own healing, and support the healing of our Elders. Many ideas were discussed such as raising a tipi and connecting with culture, using art as a means of therapy and public messaging, and spending quality time with our Elders.

In the end we decided to invite our Elders to meet with us in person the following Tuesday to go for a therapeutic walk along the river, share in company, conversation, and laughter. The group also planned to bring orange ribbons and chalk to create a "walking mural" along the river pathways so that we left a mark to represent those children who never returned home. It was beautiful to see a youth like Jamie taking action and taking their own healing, as well as the healing of others, into their own hands. We spoke about how in times of grief it can feel like everything is out of your control, but to take one small step of action can make you feel empowered and help deal with the grief you feel. Through the Gratitude Group, our Ceremonies, and our Diamond Willow Youth Council, we have seen Jamie step up to support others and make their community better for the next generation of youth.

## Ongoing Pandemic Support

*"Gratitude Group has given me something to look forward to during the week, reminds me of all the good things that surround me in life, and allowed me to trust others with my love and trusting others' love.*

*The Group has helped me along on my path of healing. Gratitude Group has helped me with daily practices and appreciate the things that I DO have and not take them for granted. Allowing me to even like things about myself which is normally quite a struggle. It is so easy to focus on the negative in day-to-day life and the Group has given me the opportunity to let all of that go.*

*Whenever I think of Gratitude Group, it is just a wave of emotions that brings me peace and gives me a sense of calm, happiness, and appreciation. It is hard to just pick up one moment because every second makes the whole experience beautiful. Although I am particularly fond of when we all just start laughing over something silly and it feels like the whole world and its worries fade away and the only thing left is this singular moment in time where I don't have to be perfect for anyone, I can just be myself, happy."*

Youth Participant - Gratitude Group

## MOVING FORWARD

Diamond Willow Youth Lodge remains flexible and is moving forward with a hybrid model of both in-person socially distanced workshops and online programming. The Lodge continues to build momentum on a virtual platform with several new partnerships and projects in development for 2022, including:

### Collaborations

To best support youth and their families during the pandemic, Diamond Willow Youth Lodge will continue working with over 35 community organizations and local Artists with the intent to meet current needs and develop future projects.

### Youth Council

Diamond Willow Youth Lodge will focus on developmental activities on Miskanawah's four core values: Culture, Respect, Trust, and Community. Through facilitated activities, the group will look at applying these values in their own lives and look at ways to impact our broader community with a keen focus on personal values, what they mean, and how they impact the ways in which people show up in the world.



# THANK YOU!

**THANK YOU TO THE GENEROUS DONORS WHO HAVE  
SUPPORTED DIAMOND WILLOW YOUTH LODGE.  
TOGETHER, WE ARE BUILDING A BETTER TOMORROW FOR  
INDIGENOUS YOUTH IN OUR COMMUNITY.**

*Only donors who made contributions of over \$10,000 have been listed below*

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*A special thank you to Miskanawah for permission to share the vibrant photographs contained in this document.*

