

## Evaluation for the 2020 Okotok Indigenous River Camp

*\*completed October 2020 in combination by the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA), Trellis (formerly the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary's Indigenous Initiatives), and Miskanawah*

Held from August 24 – 28, 2020 at the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary's Camp Adventure site in Kananaskis, the [Okotok Indigenous River Camp](#) brings together urban-based Indigenous youth with multi-Nation Elders from across the province. This event focuses on learnings from the land with teachings centered on ceremony and protocol, traditional activities, and opportunities for one-on-one, Elder-to-youth mentoring.

Over the course of five days, youth had the extraordinary opportunity to sit in circle and learn from 23 Elders! Reg and Rose Crowshoe, Shirlee Crowshoe, Herman Many Guns, Brenda North Peigan, John Chiefmoon Sr., John Chiefmoon Jr., Monica Chiefmoon, Jackie Bromley, Doreen Healy, Kelly and Daphne Good Eagle, Clarence Wolf Leg, Violet March, Connie Santos, Linda and Darryl Brass, Wallace and Florence Alexson, Edmee Comstock, Alice Kaquitts, Kerrie Moore, and Frances Littlelight all joined us in circle.

The Okotok Indigenous River Camp included survival teachings of the traditional hunter-gatherer communities, cultural games, medicine walks, and teachings of the plants native to Treaty 7 territory. Each day included traditional meals, buffalo meat and stew, berry soup, bannock, and pemican, all informed by the teachings of the seasons and how communities would prepare and conserve food over the long winter months.

Further cultural teachings included, language teachings (Blackfoot, Stoney, Cree, and Dene), modern day survival teachings, the importance of human connection and family relationships, redefining gender roles (e.g., women as warriors, men as caregivers and pillars of support to their family and community) and establishing a healthy balance of masculine and feminine elements in one's life, the responsibility of sharing and contributing our gifts to the community, and the importance of grounding the spirit, finding the breath, and connecting with Mother Earth. By their own choice, campers had the opportunity to make an offering and receive a sacred spirit name to remember their connection to the community and to the land.

Unique to this year, there are also [online educational sessions](#) in the weeks leading up to Okotok Indigenous River Camp. The goal is to provide a culture camp experience that is accessible to everyone.

This initiative, now in its third year, is organized in collaboration with the [Alberta Recreation and Parks Association \(ARPA\)](#), Trellis (formerly the [Boys and Girls Club of Calgary's Indigenous Initiatives](#)), [Miskanawah](#), and of course, the Elders who very generously guide the way.



Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe on Day 1

## Day-by-day Outline

Day 1, Camp was opened by Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe that focused on the traditional face painting of all camp participants as well as an offering for protection from COVID from an Indigenous perspective. The remaining day featured traditional teachings with Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe, Shirlee Crowshoe, Herman Many Guns, and Brenda North Peigan. Teachings focused on an introduction to the buffalo and the meaning for traditional communities, a nature walk led by Shirlee that taught the youth about traditional plants and medicines in the area, and concluded with teachings on the importance of ceremony from a Blackfoot worldview.

Day 2, youth joined in circle with Blackfoot Elders, John Chiefmoon Snr., John Cheifmoon Jnr., Monica Chiefmoon, Jackie Bromley, and Doreen Healy. We were led in an opening ceremony with Reg and Rose Crowshoe, and then the Elders shared teachings of traditional survival skills. With reference to the old ways, the Elders led the youth in teachings of hunting and gathering, how to prepare and preserve food for the long winter months, and seasonal medicines in the event of illness. The Elders spoke of the four directions and the traditional meaning behind the stars and constellations, encouraging youth to understand themselves as important part of the universe with unique abilities and gifts to offer their communities.

Day 3, Elders Kelly and Daphne Good Eagle, Clarence Wolf Leg, Violet March, and Connie Santos led teachings on survival skills, both in traditional ways and for living today. Survival teachings for today brought forward ideas of resiliency during COVID and to begin thinking with our hearts instead of our heads, especially when nurturing human connection is at the forefront of this new reality. With the importance of family connection in mind, Connie led the youth in a family tree activity, encouraging the group to discover the naming of their family relationships in their own language. Ultimately, our most profound skillset is an awareness and knowledge of

the self; who we are and where we come from. This self-awareness and being mindful of who we hold circle with is important in for the survival of our communities.

Day 4, Elders Linda and Darryl Brass, Edmee Comstock, Wallace Alexson and Florence Alexson led teachings from a Cree, Metis and the Midiwiwin Lodge. Elders Linda and Darryl were the focus and hosted a ceremony from a Midiwiwin perspective. Teachings surrounded the role of tobacco, feeding the spirits, and creation stories. The Elders encouraged the youth to participate in the ceremony as oskâpêwis (Cree word for helpers). A large part of the day was dedicated to given spiritual names to participants in the camp and teachings focused on cultural pride and the power of knowing your spirit. Discussions also touched on gender roles as well as the role in community for those who are two-spirited. The day closed with a Midiwiwin talking circle for the youth and Elders as well as a Cree prayer song by Elders Wallace and Florence.

Day 5, Elders Alice Kaquitts, Kerrie Moore, and Frances Littlelight led us on the closing day with grandmother's teachings including moss bag teachings, stories of coming-of-age ceremonies for young men and women, the role of males in childrearing – "*warrior fathers*" and education as a key survival skill for young people. Education, in particular, acts as a survival mechanism encouraging youth to explore both the Indigenous ways of knowing and Westerns values, that create opportunities in a variety of fields where Indigenous voices need to be heard. To have greater involvement in Western systems is essential to building an understanding and addressing the needs of our Indigenous communities. The Elders are turning to the younger generations and encouraging greater involvement in the health care system, justice and legal systems, education, and so on. This is what it means to be a good relative to one another and to Mother Earth. In light of COVID-19, human connection and connection to the land are playing an essential role in community wellness. This rounds us back to the importance of finding one's breath, calming the spirit and building connection during these uncertain times.



Playing a Blackfoot game led by Elder Monica Chiefmoon

## **Youth Feedback:**

### ***Positives:***

- Kids really enjoyed the different teachings on smudge from different tribes
- Kids really appreciated the opportunity to spend time with the elders and get to know them more
- They liked the naming's from different tribes
- They liked the teachings and experience of having their faces painted
- Resounding I love the food from all the kids
- They liked the opportunity to get to know other kids from other programs and build relationships they said it made them feel like they had a community and whole new group of friends
- The kids commented on how they felt like no matter how bad their day was coming to camp made them feel happy because the energy there was so happy
- The kids liked the diversity in the teachings gave them the opportunity to learn more about new tribes
- Kids liked the frogs and asked if they can have some scheduled time to go catch them
- The food again came up a lot
- Liked that the youth got to help with the protocol so we got a chance to learn it and be a part of our culture
- Liked to be outside of the city and back in nature
- Liked at the end we had a round dance so maybe next year if we can spend a morning learning about powwow and dance and getting someone to teach us some moves would be fun

### ***For the future:***

- The kids really didn't like the benches said they were very uncomfortable
- The kids really didn't like the constant sitting and suggested giving them 5-10 minute breaks to get up and move around maybe play a game!
- Very sad they didn't get to sleep over but are excited for next year
- Could the girls and the boys be split up for a morning or afternoon to have a sharing circle would be nice. I think an opportunity to ask questions to a woman Elder with all women would make me feel safe in some of the questions I need to ask about home life, relationships, family, and woman business etc

## **Elders' Feedback**

### ***Positives (numbers indicate repeated comment)***

#### **Elders teaching and connecting with other Elders**

**20-** Camp specifically for Elder Capacity Building will help those searching to enhance their knowledge

**5-**Re-connecting with other Elders they haven't seen due to COVID-19

-Would have loved to have spent time with the other Elders but couldn't because of COVID restrictions

- Elders reinforcing teachings taught by the other Elders
- Elders together more so can learn from each other
- Would have liked to have been part of the opening and closing as well but COVID prevented it
- The implementation of cultural Elders teaching were realistic

### **Youth Engagement**

- 4**-Liked when the youth and Elders were both involved in Talking Circles
- 2**-Playing games is always fun! More games and chances for interactive learning
- Enjoyed it when the youth had opportunities to be active like being involved in ceremony and giving away the tobacco
- More hands on learning opportunities
- Lots of one-on-one chats with the youth after so they showed great interest in learning more
- Ran into some youth after camp so was able to build on those relationships

### **General Wellbeing**

- 5**-Did a good job with social distancing and COVID-related protocols
- 4**-Was happy that we also did Indigenous safety protocols like face painting, smudging, the pemmican, and the offering
- I feel re-energized in my body, heart, and spirit.
- Elders commit a lot of themselves to the community and to others so they need to spend healing themselves as well
- An important event for the health and wellbeing of the Elder's family

### **Pride**

- Enjoyed sharing knowledge and history of their people
- Making and sharing the berry soup with everyone as it's an important part of Blackfoot ceremony
- Connecting youth back to their culture can be a change agent
- Liked having the buffalo there. Have already rendered the fat for face painting
- Liked doing women and men's teachings as it gives the youth a chance to see how they can fit into ceremony and how that then affects their lives back home

### **Location outside in nature**

- 3**-Liked that the camp was outside, in the bush, close with nature
- Loved being outside and in the bush. There is a spiritual aspect of being with nature

### **Multi-nation learning opportunities**

- 3**-Enjoyed learning from Elders from other nations
- Liked having the Blackfoot Elders together so I could learn more about my culture myself!

### **Length due to COVID**

- It was great! But short, due to COVID-19 but safety comes to first

## ***For the future***

- We need the students or the youth to write down why they want to go to the camp and what do they want to learn or to practice within their culture. Then the elders will have a good idea in what part of our culture to share so the youth will understand.
- Teaching them how to pray and more about the Blackfoot worldview
- More time doing gender teachings
- It felt rushed at times so more structured time for Elders to share and do their teachings
- More traditional foods like bannock and stew for the meals
- Playing games is always fun! More games and chances for interactive learning
- Maybe a Grandmothers Circle
- More hands on teaching opportunities
- More games and physical opportunities to learn



Protocol given to the Elders at the Okotok Indigenous River Camp

## **Quotes from participants**

- “I’m really getting to know my culture. I have moved to different places across Alberta most of my life and in recent events, I’ve been brought into Children’s Services. Their focus and definition of ‘success’ is far different from my own. With COVID, I have been working hard to connect with people and with my culture. Instead of people pushing me into what they think is best – according to Western values – COVID has actually encouraged my relationship with the Earth and with my culture.”
- “I really enjoyed meeting with the Elders onsite before heading to the sessions. I loved the connections and we have had so few lately due to COVID!”
- “I feel re-energized in my body, heart, and spirit.”

- “I don’t have too much to say. I just really liked the Elders’ stories. I feel connected to them.”
- “For the past few years, these culture camps have been an important event for the health and wellbeing of my family.”
- “I think being outside in Nature was more natural for the Elders to share their stories with us. I am not sure if we would hear some of their stories in the city in other organizations you know?”
- “I really like this camp because it’s helping me learn more of my language. As a kid, my grandfather spoke Blackfoot fluently but these camps are helping me re-learn my language.”
- “Coming to camp has aligned me with the Elders and the teachings. Being in foster care since I was very young, I have never had an opportunity like this one before. Five days with so many Elders – hearing the traditional stories and language. I needed this.”
- “I am one with nature. The nature is my culture and I’m not so much a hippy, as much as a person from this land.”
- “I was surprised at how little the youth know about their own cultures. So awareness will become a huge change agent.”
- “This experience with our Elders and with so many Elders – the stories although old, seem new and carry different and important messages. I’m really struck by this. There is a message, a symbol, a meaning uniquely here for everyone – welcoming to everyone.”
- “The youth were well behaved and the Elders sharing was excellent.”
- “I am sure the students and staff all enjoyed the teachings and wisdom taught by all the elders from each nation. I truly enjoyed myself. As well as sharing my knowledge and the history of my people. Thank you, for allowing me to be a part of an amazing camp.”
- “I’m so grateful for this opportunity. When I was younger, I didn’t have this connection to culture and it so rewarding to learn among other young people who are in a similar situation. To see this spark and love the culture has changed my life.”
- “Loved being outside and in the bush. There is a spiritual aspect of being with nature.”
- “I think it is so important that the young people continue to learn the traditional ways and pass this onto the future generations. This creates resiliency.”
- “*kinana'skomitin*, for the patience of the Elders and the learning of the youth.”



Group photo on Day 3 at the Okotok Indigenous Culture Camp 2020

- “I didn’t know I was Indigenous until Grade 7, when I had to fill out some forms for school and my parents would make sure I checked-off a certain box. The culture didn’t ‘click’ for me until my I realized my sister and I were trying to smudge with the candles on my birthday cake! It’s funny to think about that now, but the culture itself was ingrained in us from a young age although we clued into this later as adolescents. The more I learn about the different stories and meanings, I’m all the more grateful to be here and connect the dots in my own life. This is an important journey to be on.”
- “I’m learning that the real power comes from the Earth. Our youth have many problems following the Western ways. Things don’t quite fit or belong – there’s a strangeness and I think it’s because we’re people of the Earth and of the smudge. This is the way we inherently know to follow – that we can light the smudge, slow down, and ground ourselves. I believe the smudge allows us to remember who we are and where we come from, and because we come from the Earth, connection to nature is absolutely crucial to our healing and wellbeing.”
- “I’m feeling very connected, very grounded, and very grateful. Times have not been easy and if anything, have shown us the importance of coming together, human-to-human on the land.”
- “I feel really good. I smell my ancestors and my late-Kokum’s house. I’m very impacted by today – especially the family teachings, and what it means to be a healthy family, taking care of one another.”
- “I really appreciate the teachings of the parallels in education. We can honour both the Indigenous and the Western. Also, I’m very grateful to be here. I’ve been feeling disconnected from my home in the Yukon and not being able to see my family.”



- “I love the holistic approach to education, both Western and Indigenous – the importance of both in our lives. We can pursue a Western education if we choose and not lose sight of who we are. I hold this sacred way of life so close to my heart.”
- “I’ve been involved with many many camps over the years – with Miskanawah, with Boys & Girls Club, and the last two years with ARPA – and every time I’m here, it is such an honour. Everyone I’ve met here has a special place in my heart, along with everything I have learned. All the people here feel like my family – my aunties, cousins, grandmas, grandpas. To get away from the city and connect with nature keeps my heart beating. And every time I’m part of an opportunity like this, the most incredible part is to see the lives transform through the connection to land and connection to ceremony.”
- “I’m so grateful for all the teachings I’ve learned. I’ve only been here the past two days but it feels like my heart is full of new wisdom. I can return home happy.”
- “I’m so so grateful for this week! I’m so thankful this experience has cleared some of the sadness I’ve been carrying with me. My spirit, heart, and mind all feel clear of it now. I can return to my day-to-day life in a good way.”
- “Thank you for being here to teach us.”
- “I’m so thankful for all the teachings from this week and all the different stories from the Elders.”
- “I love this feeling of coming back to my roots. Being out here, connecting with the Elders and to the land has felt like defeating a barrier in my life.”
- “It has been so difficult this summer with COVID and it being Powwow season. I’m really missing the connection I usually feel this time of year. But I do feel really great right now. This week has been a lot of fun and listening to the different stories, especially about how our people used to live, has been so interesting! This is the most fun I’ve had all year.”
- “I appreciate the Elders spending the time to share stories and passing these teachings onto us. I really hope we all meet again very soon and sit in circle together. This was such a special week – I’ll never forget it.”
- Alice, “Thank you to the organizers and everyone involved to make this possible. In my culture, when we move from camp to camp, we always call our spirit home.” Alice ended the week with a beautiful song, to call our spirits home and send the youth home safely.

Partners:



Project funders:



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