

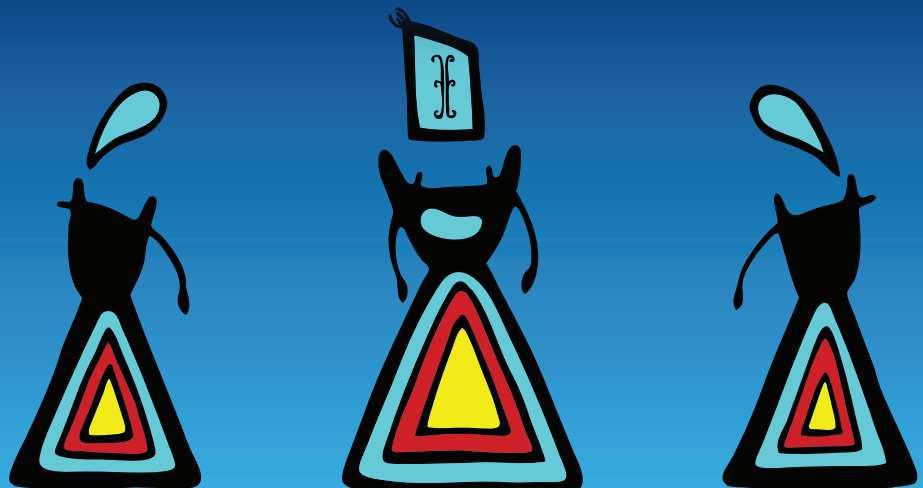
INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

Butterfly Club, Winnipeg

Gabrielle Donnelly

COADY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE & EXTENSION DEPARTMENT
ST. FRANCIS XAVIER UNIVERSITY

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Igniting Leadership

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About Indigenous Women in Community Leadership Program Logo (Front Cover Illustration)

Painting by Melissa S. Labrador, Mi'kmaw artist

This painting, named *The Teachings*, represents three generations of women standing on Mother Earth beneath the blue hues of our universe. One of the most important teachings is survival and the ability to understand connections on earth. If you were to remove the soil and look beneath it you would find that all life above ground is protected and held together by the roots of trees. Those roots intermingle to create strength in the forest community. If each of us, regardless of background, would hold hands and unite, we too could grow strong communities.

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All quotations in this case study, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from a video documentary by Catherine Martin, *Butterfly Club* (2010).

Butterfly Club, Winnipeg

Introduction

Tasha Spillet's eyes light up—her passion and commitment clearly evident as she speaks about the Butterfly Club. An initiative of Ka Ni Kanichihk in central Winnipeg, the Butterfly Club is a program for Aboriginal girls between nine and twelve years of age that Tasha coordinates. On Wednesday evenings her young charges, with mothers and grandmothers in tow, settle into the cheerfully painted room they meet in.

Situated in a part of the city that is bursting at the seams due to the steady stream of arriving newcomers, refugees, and Aboriginal people, the Butterfly Club is a warm cocoon for the girls who attend. The purpose of the program is to provide a space where they can explore their cultural and spiritual roots while navigating the realities of contemporary urban living.

Context

Winnipeg cannot easily sidestep the challenges that are facing Aboriginal people adjusting to urban environments. The Aboriginal population in Winnipeg jumped by 22% between the two most recent censuses (2001 and 2006); and based on the 2006 Census, the city currently has the largest Aboriginal population (those who define themselves as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit) among all major urban centres across Canada. The significance of this trend becomes sharply apparent once it is juxtaposed with a sluggish one-percent growth of Winnipeg's non-Aboriginal population over the same period (Statistics Canada, 2007). These statistics translate into the tough reality of Winnipeg's inner city: a tight space faced with an overflowing tide of people who are looking for places to live and work—with few options remaining.

The growth of Winnipeg's inner city into an urban reserve¹ is occurring due to a number of factors. A recent study of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit mobility in Manitoba indicates that the reasons most often given by Aboriginal people for moving to Winnipeg are family, housing, and employment (Distasio & Sylvester, 2004). Yet this mass migration has created an inner city that has reached its limits. Cultural dislocation combined with inability to find a decent place to live and work generate a host of challenges. Incomes are low and unemployment rates are high—trends that are becoming more and more pronounced. With Aboriginal people having higher levels of representation than the general population in negative social indicators (including incarcerations and detention, gang involvement, drug and alcohol use, child abuse, and youth violence) as well as negative health indicators (such as the occurrence of diabetes, heart disease, sexually transmitted infections, and cancer of all types), these added pressures are exacerbating their already precarious existence in places like Winnipeg (Sharpe & Arsenault, 2010).

The need to address these challenges is acute. Social services have significant limitations when it comes to working with issues related to cultural dislocation. As Tasha remarks, "We know that

¹ According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2005), 19.2% of Winnipeg's inner city residents are of Aboriginal descent.

what's been done for our people in the past hasn't worked. [The] systems that have been put in place to help our people, to service our people . . . completely fail us because [they don't] acknowledge who we are as Indigenous people."

Clearly the challenges facing Aboriginal people can only be tackled by Aboriginal people themselves, and the charity named Ka Ni Kanichihk, which means "those who lead" in Cree, is a case in point. This organization provides culturally-grounded education, training, and employment programs that include leadership and community development as well as healing and wellness initiatives. These programs primarily focus on the empowerment of Aboriginal people, but are also open to newcomers and refugees living in the neighbourhood (Ka Ni Kanichihk, 2010).

The idea for the Butterfly Club was sparked by feedback from the community that Ka Ni Kanichihk needed a special program for young girls. Women were receiving support as mothers and adults but "the little ones were being left out" (G. Donnelly, personal communication, March 5, 2011). The organization's leadership team was quick to respond by providing staff time for studying the already established program models and looking into funding possibilities. Around the same time, the Canadian Women's Foundation was earmarking funding for proactive, empowerment-oriented initiatives aimed at young girls. In 2009, the newly formed Butterfly Club received three-year funding along with 22 other programs for young girls across Canada. Tasha describes the Canadian Women's Foundation as "committed to the girls . . . [who] are not just numbers. . . . They want to hear from the girls about their experiences. [The girls'] experience is valued" (G. Donnelly, personal communication, March 5, 2011).

The Butterfly Club is designed as a program "which helps girls from Aboriginal and other communities develop self-confidence and belonging in the world through academic, cultural and leadership activities. Girls participate in a wide array of activities they would normally not have the opportunity to try, like sports nights, cultural teaching and sharing circles, community service and wilderness survival" (Ka Ni Kanichihk, 2010). In this way, the girls who attend the program are being provided with a space to explore what it means to be an Aboriginal woman—an opportunity rarely found within the mainstream culture of today's Canada. It is an opportunity that has the potential to transform not only their individual lives but also their communities.

Themes

The following account illustrates the assets that the Butterfly Club draws upon and the areas it intends to influence. It begins by highlighting the importance of holistic Indigenous perspectives, and proceeds to discuss identity, the need for an intergenerational space, leadership, and the role of community.

A Holistic Perspective

Bearing in mind both the limitations of the current social services and the unique needs of Aboriginal people, Ka Ni Kanichihk provides support in a holistic way. They centre their work on Indigenous ways of knowing and emphasize the importance of culture, history, and fostering connectedness to traditional customs and rites. As Tasha says, "It is our people who have an understanding of our history, of the beauty of our spirituality. . . . [W]e have developed programs that honour who we are."

This holistic perspective is the cornerstone of the Butterfly Club’s program, and the young girls who attend it are blessed to gain intimate awareness of their roots, which might otherwise have been absent from their lives. They come to understand who they are and where they come from. This understanding, steeped in tradition, can serve as an “inner compass” helping them navigate their current reality and future options.

Identity

In the Butterfly Club, the holistic Indigenous view of life serves as the basis for the process of identity formation. As such, the Club’s primary purpose is to assist Aboriginal girls in cultivating their identities—with the treasure trove of their people’s history, culture, and spirituality made available to them. Together they explore what it means to be a young Aboriginal woman in today’s urban environment.

Speaking about her own experiences growing up, Tasha recalls that the educational institutions she attended had no people who looked like her, “not even [among] the custodial staff.” She sees the Butterfly Club as being able to provide a much needed correction of this “aberration”:

If I could give students an opportunity to have somebody that looks like them, to be learning from somebody . . . who is a mirror. . . . [W]e’re giving them an opportunity to see somebody that reflects them . . . their families and communities. I love to give them the opportunity that I didn’t get.

By making it possible for Aboriginal girls to discover their identity within the context of an Indigenous worldview—an opportunity which did not exist for their mothers’ generation—the Butterfly Club helps them reclaim their cultural roots. This, in turn, empowers them to more fully realize the shape their culture is in today—and hopefully to create pathways for its future revival.

Faced with the pervasiveness of popular cultural images influencing young Aboriginal women—devoid of any Indigenous identity (Gauntlett, 2008)—the Butterfly Club is an opening to shift this balance “one girl at a time.” It is a way to restore the inner identity that has been systematically plundered. This restoration is a precursor to success in other areas of life. If a girl feels more assured in her own sense of self, she will do better in school. And, as will be discussed next, this healing has the capacity to ripple out into the girls’ communities and influence possibilities for the future.

Intergenerational Space

Historically, commitment to children and future generations was a critical part of Indigenous culture, perceived as a core element of sustaining strong and healthy communities. It has, however, been pushed aside by the host of challenges currently facing Aboriginal people. The Butterfly Club’s focus on young girls is a revival of this commitment. The girls who attend the Club will be better prepared to navigate what it means to be an Aboriginal woman in today’s world. Not only will this experience shape the lives of their future children, but it is already shaping the lives of their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and the wider community.

While the Club’s program is offered to girls between nine and twelve years of age, women of all generations are showing up to take part. In a very basic, day-to-day way, the Club provides them an opportunity to bond with the young women sharing the same cultural roots. For many of them,

participating in the Club's activities is also a chance to learn what they did not have the opportunity to learn in their youth, to be a part of the journey they did not have the opportunity to make—yet.

These women are a “lost generation,” a group that was encouraged to forgo their language and culture—their “Native-ness.” Many of them do not possess knowledge of ancestral heritage they could pass on to their children, yet they see the necessity of having this heritage preserved. As one of the grandmothers has observed, “I didn't really get taught myself so I can't really teach my daughter or granddaughter . . . so I'm learning at the same time my granddaughter is learning.” In this way, the learning can span generations.

The Club also provides an avenue for those women in the community who were fortunate to have partaken of Aboriginal wisdom to share it. All of them, Tasha maintains, have been invited to the Butterfly Club in order to keep the traditional ways of knowing alive.

Leadership

Tasha herself was blessed to have experienced a nurturing environment in her early years, which has enabled her to step into a leadership role. She talks about visiting her “Gran in the north” in the summers as an important part of this experience. Even though she grew up in the city, “the north” is woven into her sense of identity:

The thing about ‘the north’ is that if it's in your blood, then it's just there. You have a kinship to the north and anyone who has a northern family or connection to the north shares that kinship. It's a feeling that you have about the beauty of the land . . . the lakes . . . the beauty that is the north. Even though I haven't lived there it is still in who I am.

For her, this connection to place is inextricably linked with Aboriginal history and culture. It is as though the land is a great teacher, a never-ending source of wisdom that provides a sense of belonging.

Tasha also provides an example of how one's identity is never stagnant and shifts throughout life. She reveals that she was not always comfortable with herself and that her present identity is something she has grown into through her own experiences.

Another of Tasha's traits that shapes the Butterfly Club's program is her belief that “everything good is a team effort.” In Indigenous cultures, leadership is shared and Tasha does this well. She has identified strong women in her community who can offer something unique to the girls. Like the lead bird in a migrating flock, Tasha knows when to move aside so that others could step into the space of leadership. The Butterfly Club is not a place for hierarchical learning, but a space in which “everyone learns from each other.”

Community

Located in the heart of a city notorious for its transitory population, the Butterfly Club is creating a durable gathering space not only for the girls and women who attend its programs, but for the wider community as well.

For those who participate directly, the Butterfly Club is cultivating a sense of belonging that comes with understanding one's roots and ancestral culture. The camaraderie of being together enables each girl to uniquely blossom within the context of the whole. In addition, the Club's

curriculum is designed to support the girls in discovering how they can be of service to their communities. In a very direct way, the Club is already supporting the wider community by creating opportunities for celebration and coming together. As Tasha puts it, “The whole community is involved. Everybody comes out. The community gets together when anything happens. They are really supportive of the Butterfly Club.”

In this way the Butterfly Club is building the fabric of the community and strengthening social connectedness. Aside from that, the emphasis on educating young girls has particular bearing on the overall well-being of the community. Research shows that when girls are educated both formally and informally, whole communities become enlightened as well (Levine, Lloyd, Greene, & Grown, 2008). Tasha shares this view wholeheartedly: “The beauty of our community lives on in them. They are going to carry us into many generations of the future in a strong and powerful way.”

Conclusion

The butterfly has long been a metaphor for transformation. In cultures all over the world, it symbolizes balance, grace, and the capacity to change. The girls who attend the Butterfly Club have found a space in which they can engage in a transformation—however quiet or grand. While at first glance the Club’s activity may look like just another recreational-educational program, in essence it is a radical undertaking. The Butterfly Club is providing a foundation for Aboriginal girls to grow up into women who will transform their communities. For it is in women that the future of a culture lives. Tasha offers a Cheyenne saying that captures this: “A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is finished, no matter how brave its warriors or how strong their weapons.”

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Additional Resources

Girls' programs funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation 2009-2012. <http://cdnwomen.org/PDFs/EN/CWF-Grants-GF-2009.pdf>



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