

# Building Bridges Between Academe and Community: Case Study of the Healing of the Seven Generations Project

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## **Abstract**

*The following article is an account through the eyes of a community partner and two instructors at Wilfrid Laurier University who, through a series of events, contributed to the development of a community-based aboriginal healing program. The Healing of the Seven Generations Project is an attempt to address issues of healing amongst survivors and intergenerational survivors of the residential school system living in the Waterloo Region. Given the history of academic exploitation between certain researchers and aboriginal communities, the authors submit that this particular initiative may be considered as a model for future collaboration between academic institutions and aboriginal community groups given its attention to anti-oppressive practice and community development. A more extensive version of this article has been published in other venues. The purpose of this submission is to share the journey of the actors involved in this project as well as to encourage reflection on the merits of university and community collaboration within aboriginal spheres.*

## **Introduction**

For the past twenty-four months, we have been engaged in the arduous task of conceptualizing and implementing a community healing strategy and support program for members of various aboriginal communities residing in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Geared to survivors and intergenerational survivors of the residential school system coming from the Four Directions, the Healing of the Seven Generations Project has positioned itself as a service to all aboriginal people seeking help to deconstruct and deal with the ravages of their experiences with the residential school system.

To come to a space whereby we can speak of an actual and veritable project has not been easy. Conceptualizing the project, accessing funding and building community partnerships has been the most difficult work in which we have personally engaged as community organizers and academics. Despite enormous challenges, the grand opening of the Healing of the Seven Generations project on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004 underlined the importance of developing and sustaining our commitment to social justice issues. On Friday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, six members of the Healing Project were honoured for having “graduated” from their thirty-six week healing journey within the program. On this day, we were convinced yet again of the legitimacy of the program as evidenced by the heartfelt testimonials of resilient people who attributed their healing to an aboriginal-specific community project which fostered a sense of pride and accomplishment within themselves. To be able to document the evolution of the Healing project has been an honour and a privilege.

The following is a detailed account of the personal and professional trajectories which have allowed us to journey as community organizers and academics in order to contribute to the creation of a space for healing for those who are veritable resisters in the fight against oppression.

## **II) Overview of the Healing of the Seven Generations Project:**

Herein is a brief overview of the project as conceptualized, designed and implemented by the founding members of the Healing of the Seven Generations Project:

***Mission Statement: (excerpt)***

*The Healing of the Seven Generations works with all Aboriginal people and community members that are suffering from any of the effects of the legacy of the residential school system. Aboriginal people must have the opportunity to learn about traditional and non-traditional teachings and ways of regaining and maintaining holistic well-being.*

***Goals of the Project:***

- 1. To engage Aboriginal people in a safe and nurturing, culture-based group healing process so that they can recognize, address and begin to resolve the healing issues that come from sexual and physical abuse at Residential Schools and/or the intergenerational impacts of such abuse. These impacts can include family dysfunction, addictive behaviours, family violence, abandonment, all types of abuse, low self-esteem, unhealthy relationships, grief, and other related problems.*
- 2. To provide opportunities for learning about Aboriginal traditions, culture and spirituality to Aboriginal people who are survivors of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools or its intergenerational impacts.*
- 3. To increase the capacity of service-providers to work more effectively with Aboriginal people who are survivors of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools or its intergenerational impacts.*
- 4. To provide ongoing public education on residential school impacts and sexual assault recovery information.*
- 5. To initiate community support systems to individuals impacted by sexual assault and the intergenerational effects of the residential schools.*
- 6. To coordinate and ensure active healing partnerships with individuals and agencies/organizations.*

7. *Employ the services of Elders to conduct traditional activities and professional therapists who are culturally skilled and adept at individual and family counselling*
8. *To assist individuals to overcome traumas in their personal lives in order that they stop the cycle of abuse.*

*It is expected that once members of the Aboriginal community are imbued with understanding and knowledge of the past history/legacy of residential schools, Aboriginal people will begin to show signs of reciprocal nurturing and positive connections towards their immediate and extended families as well as towards the community at large. (Proposal, AHF, 2003).*

### **III) Our Talking Circle:**

#### **Donna's Journey:**

“I am an intergenerational survivor; my dad was a residential school kid at the Mushhole in Brantford. Needless to say, our lives growing up were a mirror of the hell that my father experienced and internalized when he lived at the residential school. I'm proud to say that I managed to get on a solid path since my mid-thirties. My kids have all gone to school and are all working in different professions. I'm very proud of them. After working at a factory for many years, I went back to school and later worked as an employment counsellor in an aboriginal organization here in Kitchener.

One day, after receiving a call from an employer requesting up to 40 clients to come and work at a local plant, I realized that I couldn't send even one of my clients to the job because of their personal challenges relative to drugs, alcohol and all kinds of issues. I became extremely depressed and frustrated because I felt that the nature of my job was fruitless. I grew increasingly frustrated with the dysfunction of working with unemployed Aboriginal people, sending them off to training programs and job placements, only to see them come back to me months later because of job losses, drop outs and renewed enthusiasm for drugs and alcohol. It is in the Fall of 2002, that I decided that I wanted to do something. Knowing full well that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was an option for me to create a program for healing, I approached my employer to see if it was possible to develop a program for our clients who

would come through the program before attempting to engage in a training or employment program.

My supervisor and board were less than thrilled with my idea. To this day I wonder why they didn't want to support me, but I suspect that they were afraid. I quit my job as an employment counsellor and worked full-time for almost a year on putting together my proposal for what would later be called the "Healing of the Seven Generations Project." I had never put together such a complex proposal and the process of doing so made me realize just how difficult it is for Aboriginal people to access monies for programs. I had to collect dozens of letters of support from people who believed in the project. There was not one Aboriginal organization that I felt that I could go to in order to support this project. Issues of trust or mistrust obviously made my task really difficult. I have to qualify though that individuals in the Aboriginal community supported my efforts but, as far as a native organization goes, they were unfortunately significantly absent.

Last Spring I met Ginette from the University and I think that that's where things began to shift for me. She said that she was from Northern Ontario and that she had taken her degree in Native Studies in Sudbury. She was bright and funny and easy to be with. I never felt like I had to explain to her why this project was so important. I met with her a few times to strengthen certain pieces of the project; it was different for me to be working with someone who was in a university setting. I had never worked with anyone from the University before and it was fun to come to campus and work with Ginette. She invited me as a guest speaker in a few of her classes and slowly I became integrated as a resource person for the Faculty of Social Work. I was invited by another professor in the Faculty to speak to her class on therapeutic relationships. Again, it was interesting to speak to young social workers and describe to them how much Native people distrust social workers and other so-called helping professionals. My colleague, who works in Restorative Justice, and I were also guest speakers at a conference held at the university last year. Again, I felt that there was value in what I was doing and that people seemed really supportive and interested in my project.

Getting someone to sponsor my project was really difficult. I was newly incorporated as a non-profit and the funder necessitated that the project fall under the supervision of an established organization. Ginette's

partner at the time was the Executive Director of the Social Planning Council in Cambridge and when I approached him with the project, he said that he would bring the idea of supporting the project to his board. Apparently, after much debate, the board agreed to sponsor my project. I was thrilled. I never realized, however, how difficult it would be to get the project off the ground. There were many revisions to the budget as well as the way we were to deliver the project. We finally had our grand opening in April 2004 and the project is going very well. I feel enormous responsibility for it to be successful and, as it stands now, we've almost tripled our expectations for participants. I've got a team of really dedicated volunteers and staff who are committed to our membership. We have outgrown our present location and are looking towards the future; we are now doing a needs assessment to transform the Healing project into an aboriginal community health centre. The need is in our community and we will do everything we can to help our people. They deserve it. As for my working relationship with Ginette and Lamine at the University, I don't regret it for a minute. They have been so helpful to us and the project; during one of our visioning exercises we illustrated the university as a big bear, one who stands behind us and protects us and supports us. I've been a guest speaker at the university; Ginette and Lamine have advocated for us in the community, created links and contacts for us. All around it's been a great relationship. We've become friends over the past two years and I can honestly say that our friendship is a propeller for this project. I can disagree with them, be honest with them and they with me."

### **Ginette's Journey:**

In May 2003, I met Donna at a diversity training workshop where she was part of a panel discussing the challenges of diversity within the Region of Waterloo. Donna was the only Aboriginal person on the panel, flanked by colleagues from Iraq, Chile and Somalia. After the panel dialogue, I introduced myself to Donna and wondered aloud how she managed to find herself on a panel with New Canadians as an Aboriginal person. Her response initiated a working relationship which has since emerged into a veritable friendship. Donna's response was simple: people in Kitchener-Waterloo need to understand issues affecting aboriginal people.

Two days after our meeting, Donna came to the university with a draft proposal for a specific aboriginal healing program to be submitted to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. This was the first time that Donna had initiated the task of negotiating a project with a funder and she required some assistance. We met a few times around the nature and content of the proposal and we strategized around who could be a possible sponsor given that her project was in the process of being incorporated. I was surprised to learn that her project did not receive much support from neighbouring aboriginal services and I sensed that issues of trust around the launching of this particular project were at stake. Given the fact that my partner was then the Executive Director of the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries and, that as an African professional who has had much experience in dealing with complex community organizing issues within African and Caribbean communities, I suggested a meeting with him.

It took virtually one year to negotiate the sponsorship of the Healing of the Seven Generations project, as well as revise, on numerous occasions, the nature and content of the project. Not once in the process of negotiating the contract with the Aboriginal Healing Foundation did Donna meet a representative of this Foundation. Only after she was approved and promised funding did she meet with someone on her own initiative during a field trip to Ottawa in April of 2004. From my perspective, I thought this to be most curious given the important sum of money dedicated to the project.

The Healing of the Seven Generations project is most complex and fascinating to me. As someone whose research practice is in the area of community development, I find myself in a constant state of learning relative to this project. I have met grandmothers and elders as well as the survivors who listen so intently to their words of hope and healing. After two years of working with Donna, I have come to a place of utmost respect for the work which is being accomplished by her and her committed team of staff and volunteers. I have seen firsthand the evidence of how important it is for people to be agents of their own change and healing.

The role which I have played, and continue to play, is one which is etched in a desire to “assist,” and to be “of service” to the project when I am called upon to do so. I believe that my role as someone who works in an academic arena is, among other things, to facilitate access to information which could be helpful to the project, demystify certain

processes relative to further funding for the project and create spaces whereby Donna can share her message with others in terms of the value of having an Aboriginal specific project within our community and how important it is that service providers understand the needs of the survivors who have found a safe refuge within the context of her project. Research for this project is key as it enables Donna to show people the evidence of the incredible work in which she is involved.

Ultimately, through this project, I have come to a place where I believe that the message which ought to be shared with non-native social workers is that the best way to “assist” native service providers and community developers is to simply create spaces where our alliance-building encourages notions of self-help, self-reliance and homogenous aboriginal spaces where cultural-specific healing can take place.

After witnessing the enormous strength and pride of the survivors at the graduation ceremony, I am convinced that certain Aboriginal healing practices can be viewed as best practices for non-Aboriginal social service providers. For example, the fact that one is honoured for his or her healing work is a beautiful way to honour one’s healing journey. I don’t imagine that in many non-Aboriginal spheres this is something which is valued, honoured or even understood. We have so much to learn from Aboriginal ways of doing and yet there are few bridges between academic and Aboriginal spaces. I think the partnership that we have with Donna is remarkable and highlights the importance of mutual respect and collaboration which can exist if bridges are built between academic and community partners.

### **Lamine’s Journey:**

When Ginette asked me if I would meet with Donna, I have to say that I hesitated for a moment. Given the fact that I was very new to my position as the E.D. of the Social Planning Council, I was unsure of how my board would react to a request to sponsor an Aboriginal project. As an African, I felt, and still do, feel a sense of solidarity with Donna’s project. Both Africans and Aboriginal people have a shared history of colonization and the ravages that it has had, and continues to have, within our communities. I agreed to meet with her, and after our first meeting was committed to helping her. I argued successfully to our Board that the SPC should sponsor the project as it was part of our mandate as a planning

council. Linda Terry, who is now the E.D. of the SPC and, at the time was president of the Board, was instrumental in convincing the board that this was an important project for the SPC and the community.

Now that I am teaching at Wilfrid Laurier, I have continued my association with the project as I am now on the board of directors of the Healing of the Seven Generations. I am the only African on the board and I feel most comfortable and welcome amongst my colleagues. Admittedly I find many similarities between my volunteer work here and within the African community in Kitchener-Waterloo. There are important issues of trust and experience which at often times impede our ability to move forward in certain areas.

Another challenge is attempting to navigate between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal “ways of doing”. Given the fact that this is a new project, there has been an enormous learning curve for the staff and volunteers with regards to the roles and responsibilities of board members as well as the importance of having by-laws and committees to enhance the work being done within the project.

I believe that the success of this project is primarily due to Donna’s vision and personal investment within the project. I believe that it has been mutually beneficial for Donna, Ginette and myself to engage in this working relationship as academics and community organizers given the fact that our symbiotic relationship allows us to grow and learn within our respective work environments. Our students benefit from Donna’s lectures and, as researchers, we are learning much with regards to community-based healing and organizing.

#### **IV) University and community collaboration:**

The literature is quite clear on how Aboriginal people have suffered and survived the effects of colonization and subsequent cultural atrophy through the residential school system (Graham, E. 1997, Chrisjohn, R., 1992, Richardson, B., 1993, R., 1988, Grant, A. 1999, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Where there are gaps in the literature is in the area of how universities can be viable and equitable partners working with culturally determined groups and how these groups define and demystify the communities in which they operate. The Healing of the Seven Generations project is one which is designed to reach out to

Aboriginal people in order to address painful issues relative to the effects of the residential school system. It appears to us that the nature of the project is most interesting given that it is operating from a standpoint of “community” where in fact the notion of “community” has long been challenged. For example, what is meant by “community” for urban Aboriginals living in Kitchener-Waterloo? How can the project re-create “community” when many of its participants have never experienced the safety and nurturing of a healthy “community?” Is it possible to re-create community and redefine the notion of community for aboriginal people seeking respite and assistance? And finally, can an academic institution assist in this process of redefinition of community in collaboration with a community-based project? We believe that we have elements of answers with respect to these questions. Additionally, as teachers, we believe that university/community collaboration should be inherent in the way that we shape our students. We believe that our students stand to gain much in demystifying the community in which they find themselves studying and eventually being a part of as future social workers and administrators in various social and non-profit arenas.

In an article on academic collaboration, authors Gronski and Pigg (2000) argue that universities preparing human service providers should embrace a type of experiential learning for prospective human service providers. The authors also quote Schon (1995) who states quite clearly that in the “swampy lowlands of practice, problems are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution”.

The authors argue that collaboration between universities and community is key to being able to enhance one’s capacity to serve marginalized members of society:

*“The multiple and often messy needs of families and communities require a renewed collaboration among business, government, nonprofit services and local groups”. (Walsh, 1997 as quoted in Gronski and Pigg).*

As collaborators within the Healing of the Seven Generations Project, we believe that the symbiotic relationship which has emerged between the project and Wilfrid Laurier University has served to create an energy which has been mutually satisfying both from an intellectual and practical standpoint. It has not been without some challenges given

the fact that working for a year on the development and implementation of such a project has perhaps invited queries from our colleagues in terms of the legitimacy of engaging in such a labour intensive endeavour with very little money. As new academics, we are constantly being reminded that we are to publish and engage in intellectual work which is meaningful and important. We would argue that this is precisely what we have done by facilitating this project, documenting for over two years the trials and tribulations of getting such a project off the ground and witnessing its progression. Boyer (1999) speaks to this notion of what we would qualify as “academic repositioning” but what he qualifies as “scholarship of engagement,” whereby universities are inevitably reshaped as they enter into partnerships with various actors within the community.

Authors Marullo and Edwards (2000) support this idea:

*“...the engaged scholar weaves together local or regional constituencies... they must also play the role of organizer among their university colleagues so that networks of interested faculty, administrators, and staff can collaborate with enduring community-based constituencies and develop innovative “win-win” projects for all parties”.*

Part of what makes our collaboration with the Healing of the Seven Generations a win-win situation is the free flow of information, expertise and learning that has occurred in the past year. Certainly our students have benefited from Donna Dubie’s presence within the University and we anticipate that in the future Donna’s program may well benefit from the presence of progressive and dynamic placement students within her program. As academics, we have certainly learned a great deal with respect to challenging the most basic assumptions of community organizing that we have held for a long time. For example, the issue of intercommunity violence and notions of trust are prevalent themes which we have discussed at great length with members of the Healing project. As academics we are forced to consider the enormous complexities of community organizing and development within a community which does not have a long tradition of trust or collaboration. This makes for difficult outreach when attempting to initiate a healing project. Although we would qualify that now, two years into the project, the Healing of the Seven Generations has managed to rally various Aboriginal organizations around a common vision of healing for aboriginal people and that slowly, issues

of mistrust are being replaced with feelings of admiration and respect for the leadership of the Healing project.

As mentioned earlier, we have learned immeasurably through our work with the Healing project; for example we have witnessed the enormous personal investment and networks which Donna has brought to the project which currently appears to be heavily solicited by many Aboriginal people in the community. There is certainly much room for reflection and research in terms of how to address and redress the conceptualization and delivery of community projects which are mutually nurturing and supportive within Aboriginal spheres. This brings us to what motivates us to engage in such process in the first place. As academics who are coming from social locations which are quite different (African and Franco-Ontarian) we come from a space which not only understands the notion of oppression and marginalization but, through our work in the community and research, wish to encourage marginalized communities to feel secure in their attempts to be agents of their own transformative community and social work.

#### **V) Anti-oppressive Practice and Community Partnering:**

As we have mentioned earlier, our relationship as academics with the Healing of the Seven Generations project is etched in an anti-oppressive framework. As such, our work is guided by the values of empowerment and self-help. We believe that what has made our collaboration noteworthy and relatively successful is our understanding and commitment to encouraging a culturally-specific Aboriginal project. We believe that an anti-oppressive framework is one which is most important when attempting to understand issues of power and privilege within a predominantly non-aboriginal space.

It is important to define oppression before discussing the virtues of an “anti-oppressive” practice. Mullaly (2001) alludes to the individual belonging to a certain group or category of people which may define his or her lived experience of oppression:

*“Oppression occurs when a person is blocked from opportunities to self-development or is excluded from full participation in society or is assigned a second class citizenship, not because of individual talent, merit or failure, but because*

*of her or his membership in a particular group, category of people". (Mullaly, 2001).*

Bishop (1994) argues that ideological power creates a space for privileged white members of society to perpetuate the myth of scarcity, stereotyping, blaming the victim, and might is right. Authors Wilson and Beresford (2000) illustrate that anti-oppressive practice in English Canada has become central to many discussions on social work theory and practice. Its theoretical underpinnings draw inspiration from feminist, anti-racist and structural theories. (Dominelli; 1997).

Mullaly (2001) argues that anti-oppressive practice is a moral imperative for progressive social work because of its understanding of the challenges of systemic situations that are reproduced in everyday social processes. Valtonen (2001) states that those who are marginalized can become instruments and initiators of their own anti-oppression interventions. Gramsci (1988) illustrates that ideological power is an insidious type of oppression given the fact that it can permeate much in the way that we learn and integrate knowledge.

As academics who have both, in our respective ways, felt the effects of a type of "pedagogical oppression" (as a Franco-Ontarian feminist and as an African male) while attending university, we are committed to engaging in work with the community which attempts to turn the academic table. We are guided by an anti-oppressive framework because it is one which makes sense to us as individuals who have experienced marginalization but have also been empowered by such marginalization. Working with Donna has allowed us to see the evidence of the importance of having a culturally-specific Aboriginal project run by and for Aboriginal people. We have no illusions as to how difficult this can be, but we have seen evidence that, while it is difficult to conceptualize and sustain such a program, it is possible. The collaboration between our academic space and Donna's community space has allowed us to reflect on what has made our collaboration effective.

The following is what we would qualify as determining factors which have positively enhanced our collaboration:

1. Our initial collaboration grew out of a common denominator of social justice and solidarity;

2. What brought us together was individuals not institutions;
3. There was a strong common denominator with oppression and marginalization as experienced between someone who is African and Aboriginal;
4. Relationships were forged over a long period of time which permitted us to get to know one another and as a result an emerging friendship ensued;
5. Partners, collectively had much community development experience;
6. Partners were very clear about mutual expectations;
7. Academic partners had for the most part very supportive academic work environments which encouraged such community-based work;
8. Leadership of project is in the hands of someone who has journeyed on a healing path and is informed by strong feminine values of caring and nurturing;
9. Notions of what constitutes an “academic” and “alternative ways of knowing” nourish our reflections as collaborators but also serve to challenge our colleagues both in academia and in the community on what actually constitutes “knowledge” and how this knowledge is etched in patriarchy or white euro-centric discourses; and
10. As collaborators we feel that we have gained by working together; our working relationship has been good for our students, the university, the project and the community at large.

## **VI) Conclusion:**

The collaboration between Wilfrid Laurier University and the Healing of the Seven Generations Project is a journey in progress. Given that the collaboration is still relatively new, and that the actual project has been operational for less than six months, evidently there is room to re-visit the nature and depth of the collaboration over the next few years. What is noteworthy is the fact that we believe that this particular collaboration works because of the determining factors listed above. They are elements of answers to questions relative to how universities should engage in equitable and sane working relationships with community-based organizations. Of particular importance is the attention which we, as a collective, have purposefully attributed to anti-oppressive frameworks.

Additionally, we have learned that our basic assumptions, which we have as academics and community organizers, are challenged on many fundamental levels given the cultural specificity of this particular project. Issues of trust and alliance-building are certainly elements which challenge us in our work. What is encouraging, however, is that the collaboration has generated sufficient interest to support and even surpass our expectations in terms of the number of people who were expected to use the services of the H7G project. Initially it was thought that there would have been between 15-20 people involved with the project; at the present time we are already over 100 people who are consistently involved in all aspects and functions of the program. This would suggest that the Healing of the Seven Generations Project has fulfilled a need with regards to gaps in services for Aboriginal residents living within the Region of Waterloo.

The impact of the project on consumers of the program, as well as the evolving relationship between Wilfrid Laurier and the project, will be objects of future research. Attempts at defining the notion of “community” within the context of this particular project will also be studied. As illustrated earlier, there are several questions which need to be examined relative to notions of community within Aboriginal spaces. It is hoped that in the future we will also have a clearer, more well-defined illustration of the dynamics of each and every one of the determining factors which have shaped our collaboration thus far. What is important to us as partners in this collaboration is to continue in our commitment to creating spaces whereby academe and community can work together in order to enhance the lives of members within various Aboriginal communities within the Region of Waterloo.

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# **NATIVE SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL**

***Resistance and Resiliency:  
Addressing Historical Trauma of Aboriginal Peoples***

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*The Native Social Work Journal is registered with the Canadian  
Association of Learned Journals*

Volume 6, Number 1, March 2007

© 2007 Native Social Work Journal

Published by the Native Social Work Journal  
Laurentian University  
Sudbury, Ontario

Printed by the Laurentian University Press  
Sudbury, Ontario

Cover Artwork by Leland Bell

ISSN 1206-5323  
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