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# FAST FACTS

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## In a Voice of Their Own: The Video

In a powerful new documentary video called *In Their Own Voices*, by award-winning Aboriginal film-maker Coleen Rajotte, Aboriginal community development workers describe the distinctive and highly effective form of Aboriginal community development that they and others like them have created in recent decades in Winnipeg's inner city. Based on interviews with some of the 26 Aboriginal community leaders interviewed for the final chapter of *In Their Own Voices: Building Urban Aboriginal Communities*, the video offers an insightful look, through their own voices, of the often difficult early lives of some of those who have become leaders in Aboriginal community development circles. These leaders describe how they overcame the barriers they faced, and the distinctive Aboriginal community development they have built in Winnipeg's inner city.

A powerful theme that emerges in the video is the damage caused by colonization. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Canadians of European descent seized Aboriginal peoples' traditional lands, forced them onto reserves, removed the basis of their economic livelihoods, subjected them to the control of the *Indian Act* and Indian Agent, made every effort to eliminate their political systems and cultural and spiritual practices, and forcibly seized their children and transported them to residential schools where most were treated cruelly and where the deliberate purpose was to separate them from

their families and communities, and thus from their Aboriginal cultures. This was a deliberate strategy. The idea, as the Department of Indian Affairs put it, was to "kill the Indian" in the child. Aboriginal people suffered immensely from this process of colonization—a process predicated upon the *false* assumption of the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures. That false assumption continues to be widely held today.

Unfortunately, many Aboriginal people have internalized that false belief in their inferiority, and the result has been, for many, a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, and a sense of worthlessness, often accompanied by despair and anger. One residential school survivor, for example, told us that:

"Two-thirds of my life has been severely affected, negatively affected, as a result of being a survivor of this system. I hated people. I hated White people, I hated churches, I hated God, I hated governments. These things I hated because they destroyed my life, brought it to a standstill... no hope, a useless existence with no future in mind and all I had was bitterness and anger".

But out of this anger and despair, and the harsh conditions of Winnipeg's inner city where poverty and racism abound, these Aboriginal leaders and others like them have built a distinctive and



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holistic form of Aboriginal community development that is rooted in an understanding of the damage caused by colonization, and of the need to de-colonize, and rooted also in the traditional Aboriginal values of sharing and community. Many of these people began their journey to becoming community leaders through exposure to some form of alternative education— Aboriginal training programs, adult education, specifically-tailored post-secondary education—where they worked with other adult Aboriginal students and developed an understanding of colonization and its impacts.

This holistic form of community development starts at the level of the individual, and the need to heal from the damage of colonization. Part of this involves rebuilding Aboriginal peoples' identity and creating pride in being Aboriginal. The process of rebuilding themselves, recreating themselves, although it happens person by person, requires a strong sense of community— one in which Aboriginal cultures flourish— and this in turn necessitates the creation of Aboriginal organizations. Just as Aboriginal people work to reclaim their identity as individuals, so do they seek to reclaim their collective organizational identity via the creation of Aboriginal organizations. This is a process that has been going on for more than thirty years in Winnipeg: the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre, the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, the Urban Circle Training Centre, the Native Women's Transition Centre, the Circle of Life Thunderbird House, the Children of the Earth High School, to name a few examples. Finally, a holistic form of Aboriginal community development involves an ideological understanding of colonization— an understanding that the problems that weigh so heavily on many Aboriginal people are not the result of individual failings, but of the process of colonization that adversely affected most Aboriginal people, and that require a process of de-colonization for their solution.

This holistic form of community development, that takes place at the individual, the community, the organizational and the ideological levels, is a process of decolonization, of Aboriginal people taking back control of their lives after many decades of colonial control. It is a powerful force for positive change, created entirely by, and out of the often harsh experiences endured by, Aboriginal people.

In the video we hear Aboriginal people describe this process in their own words. The video, and the book upon which it is based, are among the many outcomes of the work of the Manitoba Research Alliance (MRA) on Community Economic Development in the New Economy, headed by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. Aboriginal people told us, when we embarked upon this research project, that they wanted to be full, participating partners in the research, and that they wanted the MRA to give back to the community what we have learned by working together.

The documentary video, *In Their Own Voices*, is one of the many ways we are meeting our commitment to work in partnership with the Aboriginal community, and to give back what we have learned. It is an important and accessible source of knowledge about the urban Aboriginal experience, about Aboriginal creativity and innovation, and about de-colonization. The video is intended to be widely used in Winnipeg's inner city and beyond for educational purposes. Copies can be obtained from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba.

*Jim Silver is Chair of the Politics Department at the University of Winnipeg, and author of In Their Own Voices: Building Urban Aboriginal Communities (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2006).*



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