



POSITIVE VOICE

THE CREATION AND CELEBRATION OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE BY URBAN ABORIGINAL WOMEN

BY SUMMER THORP

As a career counsellor at Nokee Kwe, a non-profit organization that provides employment and literacy and basic skills services in London, Ontario, I meet with individuals transitioning to education or employment. As a government-funded agency, we have performance targets to meet and our success is determined by the number of clients employed or enrolled in further education or training. However, we serve a multi-barriered and vulnerable population typically juggling circumstances, that, even singularly, would throw someone off track, including housing instability, food security, mental or physical disability, significant personal debt, and relationship breakdown.

Nokee Kwe was originally founded by a group of Aboriginal women, but our scope of practice has grown to include the general population, while remaining a target agency for First Nations clients from the London area and surrounding reserves. I meet with Aboriginal women seeking support after periods of absence from formal employment or education, for reasons including physical or mental illness; providing full-time care for children, grandchildren, or parents; intergenerational reliance on social assistance; or rebuilding their lives after domestic abuse. The women often share narratives of failure and blame themselves for not attaining milestones of success that systemic barriers have denied them. They also

tend to be socially isolated and lack the networks that many professionals take for granted. As we evaluate the strengths that they possess and the unrecognized skills that they have developed, it is the women who shift to a positive narrative that are more likely to move forward with their goals, and less likely to return as clients.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM IS BASED ON STRENGTHS-BASED, PARTICIPANT-CENTRED NARRATIVE PRACTICE AND PHOTO VOICE METHODOLOGY, BOTH OF WHICH RESPECT THE AUTONOMY AND INPUT OF INDIVIDUALS IN DIRECTING THEIR OWN STORY

In the fall of 2015, Nokee Kwe applied for (and received) an Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant to create a program that would address these challenges by focusing particularly on urban Aboriginal women. Beginning in February 2016, I began to develop the Positive Voice program. I connected with academics and practitioners from across the country and

researched best practices in online and academic literature. I formed an advisory group of Aboriginal women, researchers, and community practitioners and held three focus groups to determine the goals, the structure, and the focus of the program. In September 2016, we began the two inaugural sessions of the program.

The goal of our program is to support urban Aboriginal women, 18 years of age and older, in creating positive narratives and positive community connections. A member of my advisory committee, Liz Cloud, who identifies as an Aboriginal woman and who is a community practitioner, shared the following observations about the need for the program:

We need to be able to reflect that good image back on ourselves if we are to move forward. We need to feel good about ourselves and then we can move forward towards employment skills, training, finding gainful employment.

The structure of the program is based on strengths-based, participant-centred narrative practice and Photo Voice methodology, both of which respect the autonomy and input of individuals in directing their own story. As Michael Jackson (2013) observes, storytelling is a form of restorative praxis that provides an opportunity to challenge the official narrative, while connecting with others'



ALONE | Anne

Alone in a family of people who are all the same is difficult. They act the same and think they are all better than the rest. They have to dress better and try to have better things and out do the next. They compared me to themselves and made up stories about me and made me the outcast. I was marked as the black sheep when I was a child and the stigma still remains. I refuse to be like them. I live my life my way. I didn't hide my mistakes. I never hid my flaws. I showed my personality. And embraced my beauty. I stood out. And just recently did they start to accept me, and I stood my ground and stayed true to me... Smiled, spoke quietly, respectfully (out of respect for my parents) and told them I am here, but only until my dad passes, and then, I too will be gone to them, since they have made me nothing to them my whole life.

So looking at this beautiful vibrant leaf among all the common dried up leaves and grass, I see myself standing alone, tall and proud. Full of life.

experiences, reducing isolation, reclaiming identity, and providing a defence against danger and hurt.

Photo Voice seeks to empower individuals directly impacted by an issue; the photographs and accompanying narratives are exhibited publicly to engage the community and facilitate positive social change (North Bay Regional Health Centre, 2015). It is an appropriate methodology to use with Aboriginal women — a traditionally marginalized and misrepresented population — because it balances power; builds capacity; creates a sense of ownership; fosters trust; provides opportunities to reconnect with nature, religious practices, culture and families, which encouraging input on the sharing of content with the community and providing copies of the content (Castleden, Garvin, & Nation, 2008; George, 2012).

Similar programs have been implemented by the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence related to First Nation women's health, in the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation related to intimate partner violence, and in the Huu-ay-aht First Nation in British Columbia to address ongoing community issues related to safety and the environment.

The Positive Voice curriculum is semi-structured to allow for adaption to the individual needs and interests of the

participants. Our program typically runs for seven weeks, with projects and guest speakers centred around a main theme each week, including strengths-based storytelling, social media, digital content creation, and photography. It takes place Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 10-2pm to accommodate child care obligations and travel time, and to ensure that programming is not missed due to PD days or holidays that fall on Monday or Friday. The women share a healthy lunch of salad and wraps, and fresh fruit for snacks, because it is difficult to learn and create when they are hungry (a majority are receiving social assistance). The main program that we use to create digital content, Canva, is available for free online, which ensures that the women can access the platform after the program is finished. Our participants receive a digital camera, SD card, and SD card reader to use and to keep after the program. They are also given postcards of their work, which have been shared internationally, and a photo book that includes a selection of the content created during their session of the program.

The program provides opportunities for the women to connect with guest speakers so that they can develop networking and self-advocacy skills. They share their concerns with local, provincial, and national politicians and invitations for follow up or commitments to conduct research

regarding specific issues are often made by these guests. Art that the women create is used for postcards that are sent to politicians to advocate for policy change. Aboriginal artists, photographers, and advocates, who engage in social media as a tool to support each other and to promote Aboriginal issues, share their experiences in person and through social media chats. Researchers have attended the program to share their work and to listen to input from the women as part of a focus group. The women are given the opportunity to promote the program and the content that they have created through community events, public speaking opportunities, and media interviews, in addition to sharing through their own social media accounts. We also maintain a Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook account to share the content. The goal is that the women will be part of disrupting the negative narratives that exist in the traditional and social media regarding urban Aboriginal women, while continuing to develop their own positive narratives.

An unanticipated result of the program is the lasting bonds that the participants have created with each other and their commitment to building a Positive Voice community. A past participant said: "I am glad that I was able to be with other Native women, sharing our experiences and ourselves in a safe environment. This was the first time that I've had this opportunity

and greatly appreciate this.” Another program participant stated: “I formed a bond with more women in one place than I have in my 42 years....I have seen many programs for Aboriginal women, but this is a program where I have seen Aboriginal women stand in front of me and praise one another.”

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Participants from our first and second sessions of Positive Voice have created their own support network and a drumming group, which meets in person and connects through a Facebook group they

started. The women are connecting with more recent participants to welcome them to the community, and one past participant now serves on the advisory committee. Participants have assisted with organizing and setting up a two-month long exhibit of their work at the Museum of Ontario Archaeology. A PhD student from Western University is interviewing participants for a PhD dissertation about the program.

Why this level of commitment to this fledgling community? I have learned from these women that identifying as Aboriginal does not mean that they have a network as part of that identity. Positive Voice is a safe space where they can connect with other Aboriginal women and teach each other about parenting, their culture, community resources, coping strategies, and traditional crafts. My role as Program Coordinator is to be a resource and a support, while adapting the program to meet their goals and literacy level.

The success of training programs is typically measured through the number of participants or the number that go on to further education or employment. We have past participants who are pursuing literacy and basic skills, high school credits, and post-secondary education. Others are running small businesses, seeking employment, and working as

volunteer advocates. Although these metrics are important, the true success of the Positive Voice program is measured in different ways and in small moments. Women yelling with excitement when they see the delivery person arrive with postcards of their artwork, after waiting all day for the package, which they will send to friends and family around the world, and local, provincial, and national politicians to advocate for policy change. Mothers requesting large printouts of their creations so that their children can display the images on their walls to encourage and inspire them. Hearing “I didn’t think I could do that!” from a participant who has just completed an infographic on Canva.com. A grandmother, who is raising her grandchildren, proudly showing off her art to those children, that is celebrated during a standing room only opening reception for an public exhibit. The cheers that resonate through the classroom as a mother announces that she has been accepted to a post-secondary program or that she is writing her GED. Tears falling as women share their stories of trauma, resilience, and accomplishment with a Member of Parliament in a space where they feel safe and acknowledged. The pride as participants stand in a university classroom and share their experiences with social work students who may be their next caseworkers. Hearing from a

HAVING FAITH IN MY FUTURE | Yolanda

Having faith in mine and my children’s future are my life’s goals. Knowing that God moves in our lives to support and fulfill our goals is what moves and encourages me to keep my focus moving forward. Enjoying life along the way as a single parent with four children, the joy supports and strengthens me to keep my focus on a bright future. After my two older girls reached school age, I attempted to get an education by taking a one year university program. I successfully completed the program, receiving a certificate in Native Journalism from Western University. Unknowingly, to me, my older two girls were watching my every step as I was learning to cope with city life, studying, and child care...etc. Which later encouraged their walk through the education system. My youngest two were born 13 years later and with the passing of my husband, I then embarked on the same journey, leaving my business for more concrete goals. I had to re-establish my long term goals. I was once again attending college, for nursing. While raising my two youngest, I was travelling hours to and from college. Rushing to make day care hours. Holding a second job bus driving. Plus, assisting two single moms with two children of their own. We all managed to successfully get through college and graduate. One mom is now a nurse, the other a marine engineer. My two youngest, now in late teens, are finishing high school and keeping jobs. Once again my children are encouraged by the determination of their mom.





SOLITUDE | Coleen

I took this photo because the sun was shining bright down on me. I felt the warmth as I walked on my path. Notice the single path the leads up to the paths taken by others. It reminds me of the many times I have felt alone as I did when I was a single mother. I overcame many things in my own time of reflection. I find strength in looking at where I am as to where I was in life.

In the depths of despair crying till I couldn't cry no more- I would look at you while you slept and remember that I needed to be strong for you. Many nights I would sit in the silent still of the darkness worrying about how I could make it on my own and be everything you needed. It was in those moments of shedding a tear where I broke out of that hell and realized my strength because failure was not an option. Reflecting in the quiet became the time I needed.

Solitude was what I feared and also where I found my reflection. When I feel like things are tough and I need a break I just go off by myself and regain all of me. Solitude is where I find my sense.

THE KETTLES | Heather

The kettles of The Kettle and Stony Point First Nations have a fascinating history. Scientists believe these sphere like kettles are actually prehistoric dinosaur eggs. It is estimated that they are over 350 million years old. The Elders say they are the eggs of the Thunderbird. The Thunderbird eggs still exist and live on vast shale beds under water. When a kettle is removed from the water it will begin to break and disintegrate. In earlier years, they dominated the Lake Huron shorelines but sadly they have been taken by tourists or broken. Each year, students of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nations are encouraged to walk and visit these sacred, unique fossils. It is our desire for the students to become their guardians as the kettles are the essence of our community.



past participant that she is now being commissioned to take photos based on the high quality of her work and her love for photography that was ignited during the program.

Establishing the need for a program like Positive Voice inevitably requires a string of statistics that outline the systemic gaps in our social services that leave urban Aboriginal women at a perpetual disadvantage. At the same time, the media paints Aboriginal women in Canada with a persistently negative narrative of violence, addiction, victimhood, and reliance on the system. But where are the narratives of resilience and persistence? Where are the narratives of dreams and accomplishment? I am grateful that I have been trusted by these women to share in their journey as we create a program that provides those narratives that challenge the status quo. I stand on sacred ground every day that I am

with them and I am honoured to witness their courage. ●

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