[kee/chi - nee/wesk] • *noun* THE GREAT SPIRIT OF THE FEMALE SIDE OF LIFE OF ALL THINGS

KCI-NIWESQ

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA MAGAZINE

MARCH • 2021

THE POWER OF ONE

ISABELLA KULAK

TIME TO END

FORCED STERILIZATION

GORD DOWNIE TO CANADIANS

'DO SOMETHING'

ISSUE No. 2

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WELCOME TO THE SECOND VOLUME OF KCI-NIWESQ

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA (NWAC).

We're so excited, for a second month, to be bringing you the heartwarming, empowering, and fascinating stories of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people of Canada.

In this issue, we give you an in-depth look at what happened after a teacher's aide told a little girl named Isabella Kulak that the ribbon skirt she was wearing for formal day at her school was inappropriate.

We tell you how Dr. Rose Roberts changed her focus from learning more about health care to learning more about the land after spending months on her family trapline with her mother.

We connect with the brother of Gord Downie, the Tragically Hip frontman who spent his days, after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis, raising awareness about the difficulties faced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

You will learn the way that the grandmother of Grandmother Roberta Oshkawbewisens, who is an Elder providing guidance for NWAC's new Resiliency Lodge, used strawberries to help her transition from child to woman.

And you will read about the many steps that Josephine Mandamin took in her campaign to protect the water, as well as NWAC's consideration of a new strategy to give water its own legal personality.

We hope you enjoy these tales and that you subscribe to this free magazine so you can continue to read more of them in the future.

We're also hoping that, very soon, we can fill many of these pages with tales written by Indigenous journalists about the amazing women in their own communities.

When we decided to create Kci-Niwesq, we did so knowing there are too few places in Canada where First Nations, Métis, and Inuit storytellers can have their features published. We want to provide that vehicle.

There are so many interesting things happening in our communities. There are so many incredible Indigenous women and gender-diverse people walking their own new paths across Canada and so many who are re-learning the paths taken by their ancestors.

We want to tell you about that.

So thank you again for taking this journey with us. Thank you for reading the second edition of Kci-Niwesq. Please drop us a line and let us know what you think at reception@nwac.ca.

MIIGWETCH.

LYNNE GROULX LL.L., J.D. | CEO

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

MONTHLY MAGAZINE TO TELL OUR STORIES

THE POWER OF ONE: 10-YEAR-OLD ISABELLA KULAK'S RIBBON SKIRT SHINES BRIGHT GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT ON RACIAL INTOLERANCE

THE LEADERS IN THE FIGHT FOR RECONCILIATION COME IN ALL SIZES.

Late last year, they took the shape of a petite 10-year-old Anishinaabe girl from a First Nation in eastern Saskatchewan whose heart was broken by the insensitive remark of a teacher's aide.

The fallout of what happened after Isabella Kulak was shamed for wearing her ribbon skirt on formal day in December at the Kamsack Comprehensive Institute has "gone all the way around the world," says her father, Chris Kulak.

"It's quite an event for us, and for Native women, Native men, and Métis families," says Mr. Kulak. "We're getting so much positive feedback. I wish this didn't ever happen to my girl. But I think that she's been chosen to be a representative of her culture and people. And we feel very honoured to be part of that."

Isabella's experience has prompted calls for a Ribbon Skirt Day to be held in Canada every January 4. It has elicited messages of support from Indigenous leaders across the country. It prompted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to call on Canadians to stand "with courageous young people like Isabella Kulak."

One hundred and forty years after the *Indian Act* attempted to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into European-based society by outlawing spiritual ceremonies and traditional symbols, Isabella's confrontation with intolerance has generated awareness, understanding, and an appreciation for diversity and cultural self-expression.

Isabella and her family are from the Cote First Nation, and she attends school in the nearby town of Kamsack. Although she is most comfortable in sweatpants and tee-shirts, Isabella and her older sister decided to wear their ribbon skirts on December 18 when their school said they should dress in special clothes.

The skirts had been made by their Aunt Farrah. Bella's was covered with flowers and pretty blue and green ribbons.

"She was so excited. She wanted to look perfect. She changed her shirt three times to make sure everything matched. And she went to school," Lana Kulak, her mother, said in an interview.

But the excitement did not last the day.

(Continued on page 6)

Photography Credit: Photos of Isabella Kulak and family by Tracy Keretesh

“WHEN SHE CAME HOME LATER THAT DAY, I NOTICED SHE WAS NOT WEARING HER RIBBON SKIRT ANYMORE,” SAYS LANA KULAK.

“THERE WAS A SAD LOOK ON HER FACE. SHE WAS PRETTY QUIET.”

(Continued from page 5) “When she came home later that day, I noticed she was not wearing her ribbon skirt anymore,” says Lana Kulak. “There was a sad look on her face. She was pretty quiet.”

Later that evening, Isabella snuggled in beside her mother and, with some coaching, was convinced to explain why she was upset.

“A teaching assistant had told her that her clothes didn’t match, that what she was wearing was not formal at all, and that maybe next time she should wear something like another girl in school was wearing. And she then pointed to another little girl in the classroom who was probably wearing a Walmart-store-bought dress,” says Lana. “So it was pretty sad. It broke her heart.”

The following morning, Lana Kulak told her husband what had happened. And Chris Kulak was not happy. Although it was a Saturday, he telephoned the teaching assistant who lives just down the street. The woman did not deny making the comments.

“I told her, ‘I am not trying to get you fired. I’m trying to tell you that you’re wrong, and it shouldn’t have happened, and we should talk more about this,” says Mr. Kulak.

The following day, he received a call from the deputy director of the Good Spirit School Division, which operates 28 schools in east-central Saskatchewan. Mr. Kulak can only presume that the teaching assistant had explained the situation to her principal, who had taken the matter to higher authorities.

“We had about an hour-and-a-half conversation. And she [the deputy director] was very, very aware that this was very wrong,” says Mr. Kulak. “I didn’t have to do a whole bunch of explaining. I think she had already come to the conclusion that something had gone on, and that it was a tremendous error.”

That was followed by a phone call from Quintin Robertson, the division’s director of education. He “committed right away that there needed to be some serious education done, and some more involvement with Indigenous people here, and that the school division maybe wasn’t utilizing the way they should,” says Mr. Kulak.

That could have been the end of the matter, as far as the Kulak’s were concerned. But it was just the beginning.

Lana Kulak told two of her sisters about the interaction between Isabella and the teaching assistant, and her sisters were irate. One of them told her half-sister, who told another family member, who posted the story on Facebook.

“I received a call probably less than 24 hours later, and it had gone viral,” says Lana, adding that she and her immediate family are not on Facebook or any other form of social media and were unaware of the attention that Isabella’s ribbon skirt was generating. “Our story was everywhere and there were people getting in contact with us. And it hasn’t really stopped since and it’s almost a month now.”

The Cote First Nation got involved, as did Chief George Cote. Isabella started receiving calls from leaders of national Indigenous organizations.

“Then it just became a bigger social issue. And it’s just gone all the way around the world,” says Mr. Kulak.

The Kulak family reached out to the school board to say that, despite the attention the issue was getting, they did not want to cause any harm to the teaching assistant’s career. But by then, the young woman had already resigned and could not be convinced to return to her job.

“We tried to reach out to her. I think she was very embarrassed and ashamed, and maybe overwhelmed as well—and maybe couldn’t come back for personal reasons,” says Mr. Kulak.

But Isabella was learning that it is OK to be proud of her ribbon skirt.

The next time Isabella Kulak wants to wear a ribbon skirt, she will have many from which to choose.

Ever since her story went viral, ribbon skirts have been arriving from across Canada. “They all just came in the mail, and some people came and gave them to me,” says Isabella.

Lana says the collection of skirts is “stunning.”

Isabella has also been sent ribbons so she can create her own garment. And she has been given frankincense oils, pictures, heartfelt letters, and even $100 from a retired RCMP officer who now lives in Germany.

“I think that we can see this as a teachable moment,” says Chris Kulak.

“We didn’t want blood over this,” he says. “We just wanted some awareness, we wanted reconciliation, and all these things that had been talked about for so long. And now we’re getting some movement, and it’s very positive.”

(Continued on page 8)

I RECEIVED A CALL PROBABLY LESS THAN 24 HOURS LATER, AND IT HAD GONE VIRAL

- LANA KULAK

Pictured: Isabella Kulak and her family

RIBBON SKIRTS SYMBOLIZE WOMANHOOD, TELL STORIES OF SURVIVAL

(Continued from page 6) The colourful skirts have been worn by First Nations and Métis women in Canada since the 1700s. Historically, skirts worn by Indigenous women were made from animal hide and decorated with natural paint. The silhouette of the skirt comes from a sacred place and follows the outline of the Mikiiwaap (Cree) or Tipi (Dakota). The bottom of the skirts would touch the earth's medicines; as the women walked, Mother Earth would know who it was that was making their presence felt on her back and her prayers were answered.

After the introduction of trade goods from Europe, Indigenous communities began receiving ribbons though goods exchanges with European settlers. The ribbon skirts were made of cotton calico and ribbons, and continued the historical tradition of carrying the meanings and teachings of the original skin skirts.

Ribbon skirts started becoming popular in communities around the Great Lakes, then spread across the prairies and into the northwest.

The skirts are a symbol of womanhood among Indigenous communities. They tell a story of adaptation and survival—emblematic of the ways in which Indigenous women adapted to the new reality of colonization. Sacred and spiritual, the ribbon skirt holds centuries worth of history between its seams.

Today, they are both a spiritual symbol and a political statement. They speak to the ways in which Indigenous women have survived attempts to wipe out their heritage.

Lisa Marie Bourque is a Métis woman who lives in Fort McMurray, Alberta, and runs a store called the Fort McMurray Trading Post, which sells Indigenous apparel. She says ribbon skirts are worn during ceremonies by Indigenous women of many different First Nations and Métis backgrounds.

"It's a statement of surviving a cultural genocide," says Ms. Bourque, "And a lot of women will also wear them just to feel proud of their Indigenous roots."

There have been significant awakenings among Indigenous young women in recent years about their culture and the need to embrace it, said Ms. Bourque. It wasn't that long ago that there were pressures to appear to be white, "but nowadays they're fighting over who is more Native."

NWAC held a ribbon skirt competition in 2020, which attracted over 200 submissions from Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people from across the country. A selection of ribbon skirts were purchased for NWAC's new Resiliency Lodge. They are displayed on the walls of the "medicine hallway" that leads to the medicinal bath and other healing spaces at the Lodge.

FROM SELF-DISCIPLINE TO CONNECTING TO MOTHER EARTH, STRAWBERRIES HELD MANY LIFE-LESSONS FOR ROBERTA OSHKAWBEWISENS

ROBERTA OSHKAWBEWISENS WAS TAUGHT MANY THINGS BY HER GRANDMAS AND HER GRANDPAS.

She learned how to clean ducks and geese and how to save their feathers for blankets, pillows, and coats. She learned how to grow corn and to preserve it so it could be made into delicious soups. She learned that a small piece of liver cut from a freshly skinned deer is good medicine.

But most of all she learned discipline. And she learned that from strawberries.

Ms. Oshkawbewisens, who is now in her late 60s, was born and raised on Wikwemikong Unceded Territory on Manitoulin Island at the northern tip of Georgian Bay in Lake Huron.

She is one of the elders/grandmothers who offers assistance and guidance to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women at the Resiliency Lodge created by the Native Women's Association of Canada. Counselling and guiding those who are going through dark times is something she has done for many years as a grandmother to her community.

Ms. Oshkawbewisens has also taught Native studies at every level, from grade school through to university.

She did not receive a university degree herself. When she finished high school, she wanted to go to teacher's college but the government instead placed her in an early childhood education program.

"I had no choice," she says, "so I am not certified. But I was certified by my grandmothers and my grandfathers to teach." Her lessons are based on what she learned from the elders who guided her transition from childhood to adulthood.

"We were taught the original way," she says. "We were asked to learn what we needed to do for our survival and for the survival of our culture and our traditions."

"INTUITION IS PART OF THE MOTHER–DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP AND GRANDMOTHER–GRANDDAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP. THAT'S THEIR RESPONSIBILITY, TO BE IN TUNE WITH THEIR CHILDREN. AND TO BE ABLE TO WALK THEM THROUGH WHAT THEIR GIFTS ARE."

Ms. Oshkawbewisens was raised on a farm. Even as a small child, she had responsibilities. There were beets, cucumbers, potatoes, corn, and tomatoes that needed tending.

The boys in her family, meanwhile, were taught to hunt deer, rabbits, and fowl. Anything they caught was shared with the extended family.

The lessons of life were imparted through stories told by elders and, more often, through the tasks they gave her. That's how it was with the berries.

At some point in in her early teens, Ms. Oshkawbewisens says the older women in her family realized she was becoming a woman.

"If they are very in tune with themselves and the teachings that they received from their grandmas and grandpas then they will know," she says. "Intuition is part of the mother–daughter relationship and grandmother–granddaughter relationship. That's their responsibility, to be in tune with their children. And to be able to walk them through what their gifts are."

Ms. Oshkawbewisens says it was her *Nookamis* (her grandmother), who took on the job of helping her transition to adulthood, lessons that lasted for four years—16 seasons.

"She walked me through, and taught me, how to be a woman," she says.

The first lesson was about self-discipline, how to listen, and how to take care of Mother Earth. It was taught with strawberries.

It began with her *Nookamis* asking her to help with some chores, which included laundry, housecleaning, chopping wood, and preparations for preserving the food that would grow over the next few months. She was also told to ask her grandfather to make a pail out of an old 10-pound lard tin.

"She didn't tell me 'I am going to put you on a berry fast.' She just said 'I need you to do this for me. Can you go and pick some strawberries? You fill this pail up, right to the top and do not eat a single berry because I don't want to run short of my strawberry jam or my strawberry pie filling or strawberry sauce," says Ms. Oshkawbewisens.

"So, I went out and I got the berries and I filled that pail up and I gave them all to her," she says. "And I didn't eat one, as much as I wanted to. I harvested all the berries that were available around our home and I gave them all to her. I helped her preserve them. If I had to do this a second time or third time, I did. And that whole summer season and fall season, I didn't eat any berries." (Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10) In doing so, she was taught to be alert to her own behaviour.

If, in picking the strawberry, she accidentally pulled up the whole plant, she was taught to gently replant it so that it would give berries the following year.

She was taught to work together with her sisters who, because of their age differences, were each capable of doing different aspects of the harvesting and preservation work.

She learned how to make jam and pie filling. She learned how to combine strawberries with other berries to make different delicious blends.

But most of all, by not being able to eat the actual fruits of her labours for a full year, she was taught the value of self-control.

"I disciplined myself throughout that berry fast. That's what grandma taught me, to discipline myself."

It's a lesson she taught to her own granddaughter, who she calls her Memegwenhs, to help her deal with peer pressure and internal struggles.

A few months into that berry fast, her granddaughter was at a birthday party and ate the cake, not realizing there were berries in it.

"She told me right away. There were tears. But she told me. And I said, 'What do you need to do now that you broke your fast?'" says Ms. Oshkawbewisens. "She thought about it. She said, 'Grandma. I'm going to start over.' So, she started over and committed herself for those four seasons not to eat any berries. She was very disciplined and did not eat any - even though she carried the berries during ceremonies."

There were times when large bowls of strawberries were being shared with all of the family members, and her granddaughter would talk about how much she wanted a berry.

"And I said: 'What you can do is you can take a berry and offer it to all the grandmas in spirit and put it in the fire. So, that's what she did," says Ms. Oshkawbewisens. "I said each time you feel that, if there's a fire, you go feed it. And if there's no fire, just put it down on Mother Earth and Mother Earth will take care of it."

At NWAC's Resiliency Lodge, Ms. Oshkawbewisens guides First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women who are in need of healing and helps take them through ceremonies.

> BUT MOST OF ALL, BY NOT BEING ABLE TO EAT THE ACTUAL FRUITS OF HER LABOURS FOR A FULL YEAR, SHE WAS TAUGHT THE VALUE OF SELF-CONTROL.
>
> "I DISCIPLINED MYSELF THROUGHOUT THAT BERRY FAST. THAT'S WHAT GRANDMA TAUGHT ME, TO DISCIPLINE MYSELF."

She shares with them the things they need to know as they progress through the stages of life, from young adulthood, to parenthood, to grandparenthood. She talks about the medicine wheel and the evolution of life.

"I talk about how they're developing in their mind the love they have for self. I share with them why they need to have their love for themselves and that they need to recognize they need to let go, and not carry something that is not theirs," says Ms. Oshkawbewisens. "And then I talk about how to move and walk in a good life."

Sometimes they ask questions she cannot answer. In those cases, she turns to other grandmothers for guidance and refers the women to someone else for help.

"Because there's not only one way," she says. "The other grandmothers can "wake the teachings and the lessons in me so I remember what I was taught and recognize what I missed in my growing up."

Sometimes she advises the women who seek her help to go on their own year-long berry fast, even though they are adults. "You can do a berry fast at any stage and you monitor your own life as you go through it with guidance from grandmothers," she says.

It's a way to pay attention to inner growth.

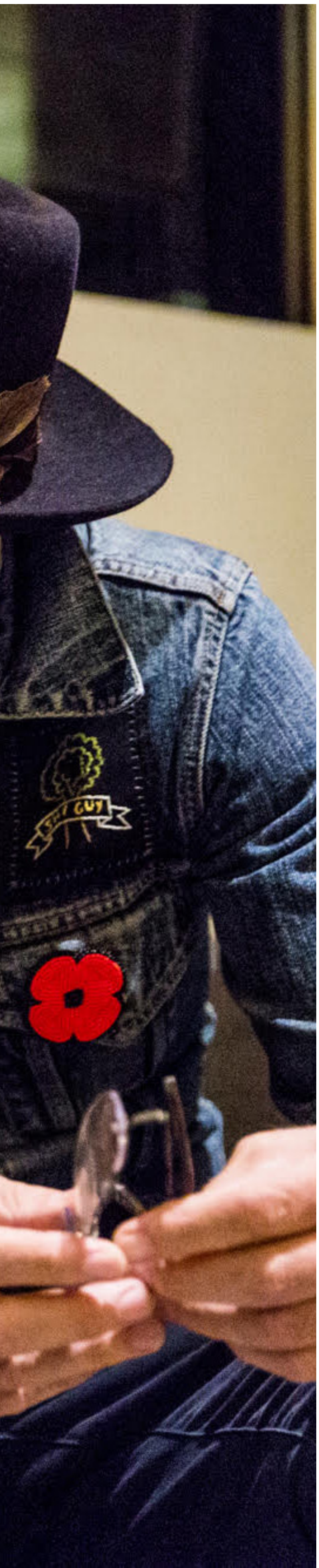
"The berry fast taught me that I had to share what I had," says Ms. Oshkawbewisens. And there were three more years of lessons to follow.

In that time, she says "I learned all other responsibilities that I was to carry out in my own life. Those four seasons lasted me for a lifetime and I'm still learning."

Pictured: Elder Roberta Oshkawbewisens

CANADIAN LEGEND GORD DOWNIE HAD 'DO SOMETHING' TO HELP CREATE A PATHWAY

ONE MESSAGE FOR CANADIANS:
TOWARD RECONCILIATION



GORD DOWNIE, THE TRAGICALLY HIP FRONTMAN WHOSE LYRICS CHRONICLED THE EXPERIENCES OF CANADIANS OF HIS GENERATION, SPENT HIS FINAL MONTHS URGING CANADIANS TO ADDRESS THE HARDSHIPS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.

Mr. Downie died of complications from brain cancer in October 2017 at the age of 53. From the time of his diagnosis, he turned his attention to the Indigenous cause.

Secret Path, Mr. Downie's second-last album, told the story of Chanie Wenjack, a 12-year-old Anishinaabe boy from Ogoki Post in Northern Ontario who died of hunger and exposure while running away from a residential school near Kenora. He was headed to his home, nearly 1,000 kilometres away.

Mr. Downie travelled to Ogoki Post in September 2016 to meet with Chanie Wenjack's family and to obtain his permission for his work on *Secret Path*.

The Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund was established to make change, uphold Chanie Wenjack's and Gord Downie's legacies, create a pathway on the journey toward reconciliation, and call Canadians to learning and action in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples.

In collaboration with the Wenjack family, the goal of the fund is to continue the conversation that began with Chanie Wenjack's residential school story and to support the reconciliation process through a combination of awareness, education, and action.

Through its Legacy School and Legacy Space programs, and annual *Secret Path Week* campaign, the Fund's goal is to answer Mr. Downie's call to "Do Something."

Mr. Downie's brother Mike answered questions posed by Kci-Niwesq about Gord's extraordinary efforts on behalf of Indigenous Peoples.

How did Gord develop his interest in, and empathy for, the problems of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada?

I think Gord had a certain level of awareness about the struggles and challenges facing Indigenous Peoples, but it was the story of 12-year-old Chanie Wenjack, desperately trying to make his way home to his family after running away from residential school, that inspired him to create *Secret Path* and ask all Canadians to look closer at the brutal reality of being Indigenous in Canada. The *Maclean's* magazine story by Ian Adams, published February 6, 1967, was the flashpoint that inspired him to write those songs for Chanie and his family.

Did he ever talk about what it meant to him to visit with Chanie Wenjack's family and, if so, what did he say?

Gord, our brother Patrick, and I had the chance to visit with the Wenjack sisters, Pearl, Daisy, Annie, and Evelyn, in Ogoki Post before *Secret Path* was completed. It was an incredible experience of bonding and healing, and it changed our lives. After we got home, Gord and I took a long walk through Withrow Park, in Toronto's east end, and I told Gord my idea to create a foundation, along with the Wenjack family, that would inspire non-Indigenous Canadians to connect with Indigenous Peoples and, in doing so, build a more unified and equitable Canada. Gord loved the idea and we launched The Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund a month later.

Is the work of the foundation continuing? What has it done/is it doing to support Indigenous Peoples?

Today, The Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund is running several unique programs designed to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together like never before. One of our most exciting and popular programs to date is DWF Legacy Schools. DWF is working directly with over 2,000 schools, sending educators resources and guidance on how to best bring Indigenous teachings, culture, and world view into the classroom. We want to inspire an entire generation of young Canadians to imagine a country that someday all Indigenous Peoples can feel proud to be a part of.

NWAC EMPOWERS INDIGENOUS WOMEN TO TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR SEXUAL HEALTH IN BID TO END FORCED STERILIZATIONS

MY BODY, MY CHOICE

SHE WAS ALONE IN A HOSPITAL BED, IN LABOUR, WHEN THE PHYSICIAN WALKED INTO THE ROOM TO HAVE A CHAT.

It was time for her to stop getting pregnant, he said. Poor Indigenous people should not have so many babies, he explained, because they do not have enough money to give their children a good life.

It would be best if she agreed to have her tubes tied immediately after the delivery, the doctor told her.

He did not talk about other forms of birth control. He did not suggest that her husband could have a vasectomy. He held out sterilization as the only responsible choice.

The woman, whose name is not being shared to protect her privacy, had always wanted a family larger than the one she and her husband already had. And she was not at all certain that she was ready to give up that dream.

But the man was a doctor, she reasoned. He must know best. So, while still in the throes of labour, she agreed to be sterilized.

At in-person workshops in Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia organized last year by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), woman after woman like the one above explained that they had been coerced or forced into having tubal ligations.

Class-action lawsuits are being proposed in a number of different provinces on behalf of Indigenous women who say they were subjected to these types of operations. More than 100 women have stepped forward to be plaintiffs in those cases.

But the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Women and Girls explained how traumatizing any interaction with Canada's criminal justice system and legal system can be for Indigenous women. And there is a fear that many women are not bringing their cases of forced or coerced sterilization forward.

CLASS-ACTION LAWSUITS ARE BEING PROPOSED IN A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT PROVINCES ON BEHALF OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN WHO SAY THEY WERE SUBJECTED TO THESE TYPES OF OPERATIONS. MORE THAN 100 WOMEN HAVE STEPPED FORWARD TO BE PLAINTIFFS IN THOSE CASES.

Pictured: Rachel Radyk

For that reason, NWAC has created a toolkit called Knowing Your Rights, which explains the options available to control reproduction, as well as rights around consent.

The advocacy group is also holding free Zoom workshops, through its new Resiliency Lodge virtual information sessions, to inform and empower First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women and gender-diverse people about their rights within the health care system.

The workshops are conducted in two parts. The first, which is led by artist Jessica Somers, takes participants through a self-meditation and expressive art activity. The second, which is led by Rachel Radyk, a First Nations nurse, aims to raise awareness about issues like forced sterilization.

The message is that Indigenous women, and not health professionals, have the final say in decisions about what happens to Indigenous women's bodies.

"My presentation is about an hour of health teaching and I go over pretty much what's in the toolkit, such as sterilization, defining what consent is, explaining why the toolkit was created, and bringing individuals through how to file a complaint. I really take some time with that, and go through informed choice," says Ms. Radyk.

"Then we go over the sexual health aspect," she says. "I show them how they could reference the contraceptives toolkit to choose what would be the best form of contraceptives for them, based on their health care and sexual health goals for the future and what aligns with their values."

The stories of forced sterilization echo the horrific eugenics policies of the early 20th century, which were based on the belief that

(Continued on page 16)

(Continued from page 15) the human species can be improved by encouraging the reproduction of those with desirable traits and discouraging the reproduction of the "unfit."

In 2018, the United Nations Committee Against Torture took note of what was happening in Canada and made a number of recommendations to the federal government about how to respond.

That led to a decision by Health Canada to provide funds to NWAC and other organizations that serve Indigenous women to pay for the creation of information about informed consent.

Before NWAC began that work, it conducted the consultations in Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia – two provinces where NWAC's provincial associations indicated there were women who were interested in participating.

Although they had expected to hear some tragic stories, the NWAC researchers were shocked to discover the extent of the problem. In every small group of women they surveyed, several would stand up to say forced or coerced sterilization had happened to them.

Some talked about being pressured into sterilization after an abortion. Some were assured by the doctors that the tubal ligations were entirely reversible. Some were asked to sign papers at times when their nerves were frayed. Some said they were made to feel guilty after they refused to give consent, and that nurses would return over and over again in an effort to get them to co-operate.

The women expressed suspicions that the sterilizations were part of a larger political or economic government agenda to stop the Indigenous population from growing.

Through those sessions, it became clear that Indigenous women need more information about what it means to give informed consent to have medical procedures done to their bodies.

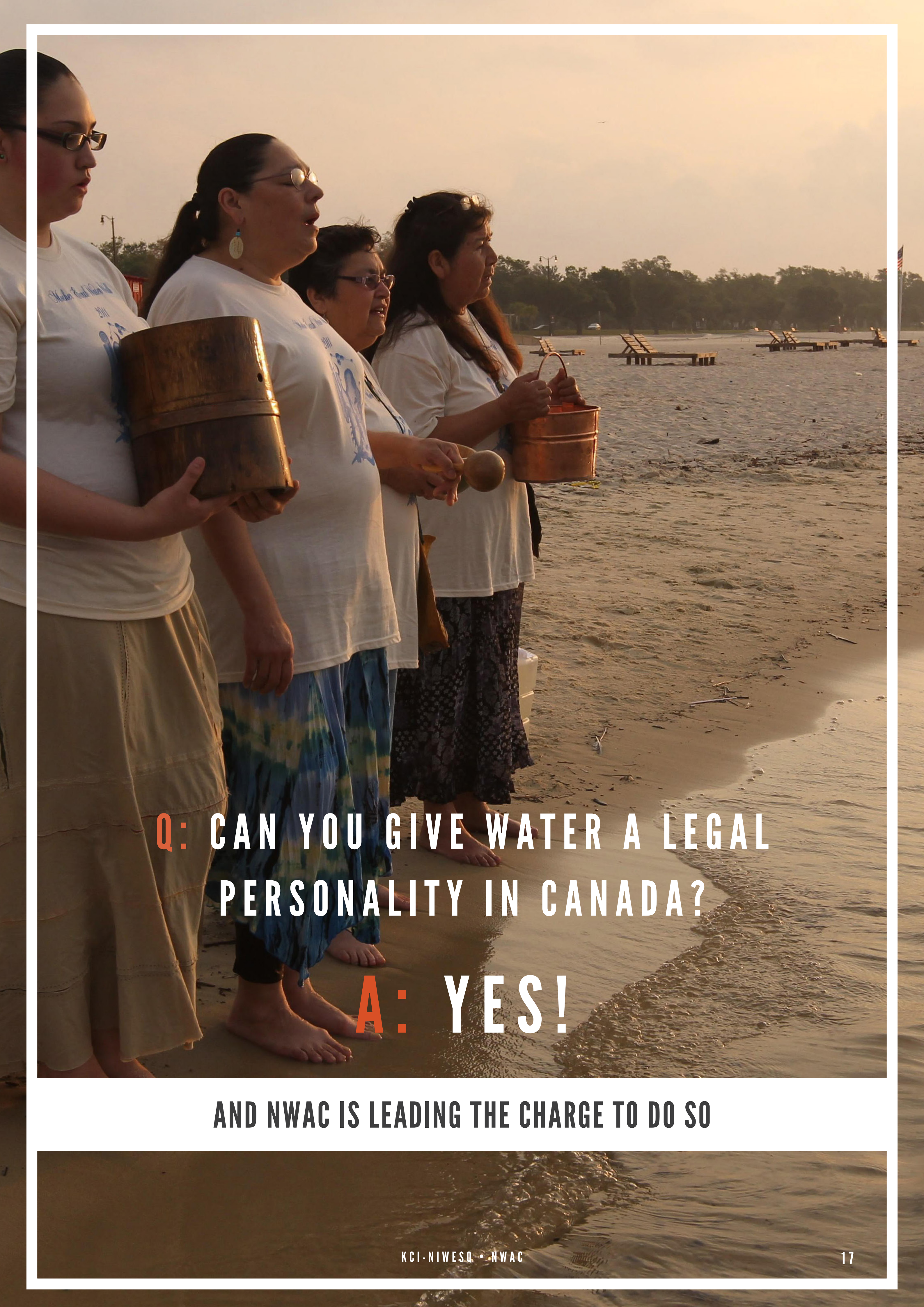
That led to the new Zoom workshops, which are currently being held twice a month throughout the winter.

Ms. Radyk says the first few sessions have attracted Indigenous women of all ages, as well as some health care professionals who want to learn more about sexual health issues in Indigenous communities. Participants can remain anonymous during the workshops and there are opportunities for questions and answers.

"Our big message is that there must be informed choice in sexual health and that the patient has the biggest choice in health care, and what's delivered to them. It's not the doctor who dictates what's best," says Ms. Radyk.

"We're empowering Indigenous women to be able to make that choice, to be able to have more of a discussion with their doctor," she says, "and opening up a way for them to ask more about those other options that they may be more interested in."

> "OUR BIG MESSAGE IS THAT THERE MUST BE INFORMED CHOICE IN SEXUAL HEALTH AND THAT THE PATIENT HAS THE BIGGEST CHOICE IN HEALTH CARE, AND WHAT'S DELIVERED TO THEM. IT'S NOT THE DOCTOR WHO DICTATES WHAT'S BEST," SAYS MS. RADYK.



Q: CAN YOU GIVE WATER A LEGAL PERSONALITY IN CANADA?

A: YES!

AND NWAC IS LEADING THE CHARGE TO DO SO

LAWYER STEVEN PINK, WHO IS NWAC'S GENERAL COUNSEL, SAYS OBJECTS LIKE WATER GENERALLY CANNOT HAVE THE RIGHTS GRANTED TO PEOPLE UNDER CANADIAN LAW.

JOSEPHINE MANDAMIN SPOKE OF WATER AS A LIVING ENTITY. SHE LISTENED TO IT. SHE KNEW WHEN IT WAS SICK. SHE PROMISED TO PROTECT IT.

The environmental protector from the Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island, who died two years ago at the age of 77, spent much of her life raising awareness about the harm done to the lakes and rivers of North America.

She co-founded the Mother Earth Water Walkers and, with a pail of water in hand, she walked around all of the Great Lakes—a distance of more than 17,000 kilometres over her lifetime.

Ms. Mandamin's mission was to remind people that water is life.

"She would talk about its personality. It's really strong. It can cut through rock, wear rock down. If you think about it, that's amazing," says Joanne Robertson, a fellow protector who helped with the walks and is now among those who are carrying on Ms. Mandamin's legacy.

"Something that we've lost in our busy, busy world, something she used to talk about, is that we don't know how to sit still in silence anymore and listen," says Ms. Robertson. "She could listen to the water and hear water. That's only happened to me once where I was still enough to hear voices in the water. But she did it regularly."

The notion that water has personality is also something that is being explored, in a legal sense, by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).

The organization, which represents First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, has asked for a legal opinion about whether it would be possible—and worthwhile—to give water a legal personality in this country, as has happened in a handful of other places in the world.

The conclusion was 'yes.'

Richelle Martin, a law student at the University of Ottawa who was asked by NWAC to explore the issue of granting legal personality to water bodies, says at the end of her report: "Legal personality can act as a powerful tool for protecting nature and can help shift mindsets from viewing nature as a combination of objects to a web of subjects of which we are a part."

New Zealand, Equador, and Columbia have all recognized the legal personality of water as they moved to protect some of their most important to endangered waterways.

Lawyer Steven Pink, who is NWAC's General Counsel, says objects like water generally cannot have the rights granted to people under Canadian law.

"So this is really, really, really new stuff when we talk about waterways and waters and mountains and so on. But the advantage is, if a waterbody has person rights, then the body of water can sue a polluter for damages."

As it stands, only the people who are harmed by the pollution in water can sue. For instance, if a company dumps mercury into a river and people downstream subsequently develop mental impairments, to claim compensation the people must convince a judge that the harms they are suffering are directly attributable to the pollution.

But, if the river had its own legal personality, the company could be sued on behalf of the river, and all that would need to be proved is that the river contained the pollutant dumped by the company for the suit to be successful. (Continued on page 19)

Pictured: Josephine Mandamin

“SO THIS IS REALLY, REALLY, REALLY NEW STUFF WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WATERWAYS AND WATERS AND MOUNTAINS AND SO ON. BUT THE ADVANTAGE IS, IF A WATERBODY HAS PERSON RIGHTS, THEN THE BODY OF WATER CAN SUE A POLLUTER FOR DAMAGES.”

(Continued from page 18) “It’s not a cut-and-dried thing, because how do you set damages and what do damages look like for a waterway?” says Mr. Pink.

It also may be challenging to convince the government to write the legislation required to change the law or to convince a judge to decide that water has legal personality, says Mr. Pink. Those are the two ways that water could gain a legal personality in Canada.

“Right now, the courts, I don’t think, would have any appetite to do that,” he says, “But if a judge decided one day that, yes, water does have person rights based upon precedent in other countries, then that would be law.”

And if that happened, he says, “it could make future companies more cautious about polluting.”

Josephine Mandamin is not able to offer her opinions about giving water a legal personality. But she certainly believed it had rights.

“Everything she did was for the water. That was her yardstick for life. She would ask ‘Is this going to affect the waters; what I am doing here?’” says Ms. Robertson.

“I remember staying in a hotel room with her in Toronto once and when she got up in the morning, she got a little bit of water and poured it on the window to thank the water before she did anything else in the day.”

Many First Nations cultures refer to women as the water carriers or the protectors of water for their communities.

Josephine Mandamin took that role seriously.

Her walks are still going on, thanks to the other Indigenous women who helped her organize them—though last year’s events were cancelled or severely curtailed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The walks were not easy for Ms. Mandamin, says Ms. Robertson.

It meant “leaving her family, leaving her two cats which she adored, leaving her husband for months at a time, living out of a couple bags, just trusting that everything would be provided,” she says. But “she always said that water is the one thing that will bring us all together.”

Often, at the end of many hours of walking with a full pail, Ms. Mandamin and her fellow walkers would soak their feet in the closest body of water. One day, after they had walked beside a Great Lake in Southern Ontario, says Ms. Robertson, Ms. Mandamin said her pail felt exceptionally heavy and she told the other walkers they should not put their feet in the nearby lake because it was sick.

“She called it ‘heavy water’ because it was heavy,” says Ms. Robertson. A year later, she says, Ms. Mandamin learned from newspaper articles that she had drawn her pail close to a nuclear plant. Heavy water is chemically-altered water used in some nuclear power generators.

In 2011, when the walkers scooped up pails from the ocean, Ms. Mandamin told the others they were orphaning the water, says Ms. Robertson. “And she promised those oceans that she would take care of that water when they carried it.”

All living things—the trees, birds, everyone—need water,” says Ms. Robertson.

“You hear it all the time. But it’s true. So, we need to protect it,” she says. “And if there’s something that we can learn from the water walkers, it’s that those water vessels carry life. Those pails of water, they carried life.”

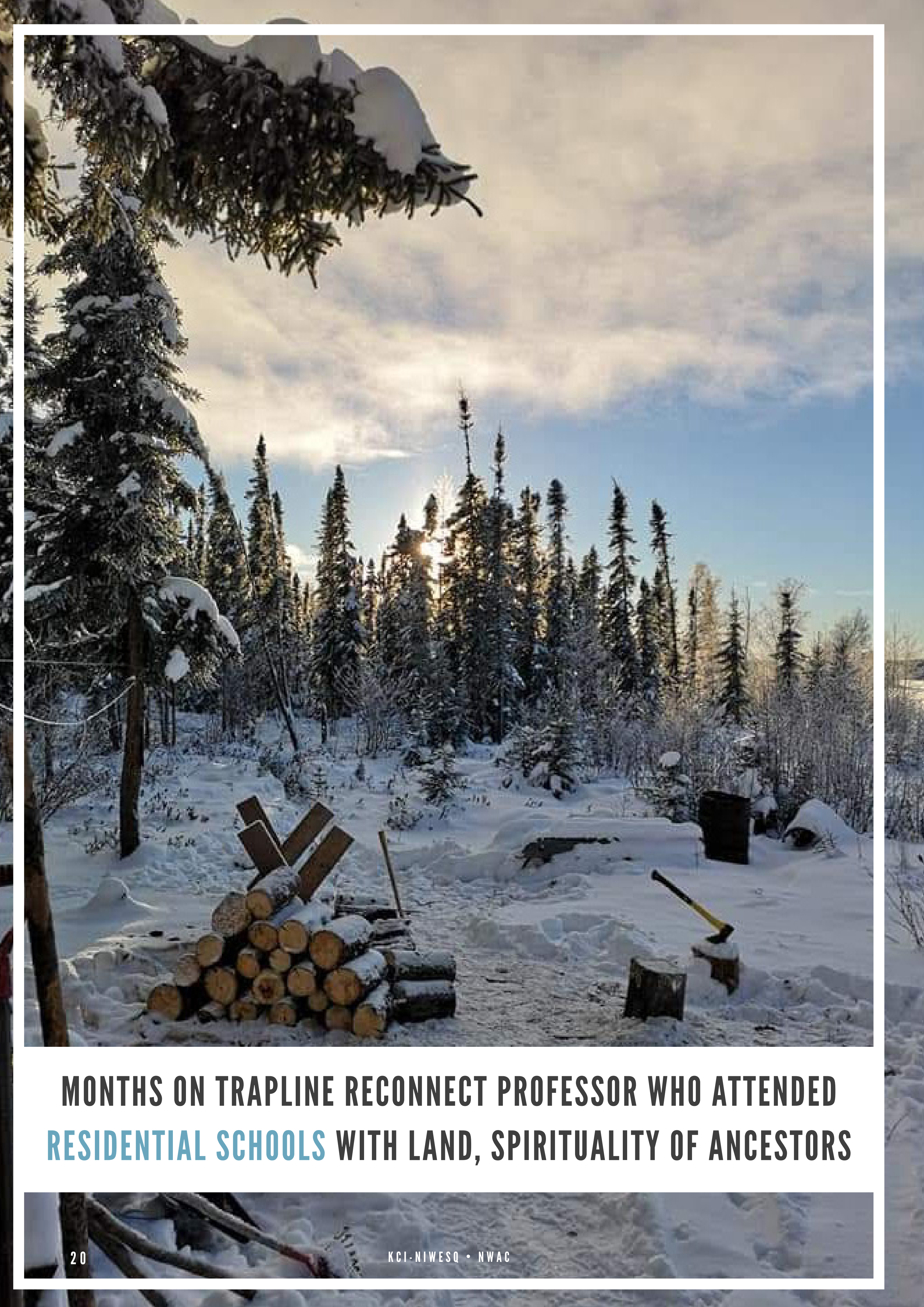
NWAC CURRENTLY HAS A NUMBER OF WATER-RELATED PROJECTS UNDER WAY.

It’s studying the experiences of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in marine safety and the protection of oceans and major waterways as part of a project funded by Transport Canada.

It’s also helping Transport Canada incorporate the Traditional Knowledge of Indigenous women into the *Canadian Navigable Waters Act*. The review process involving NWAC is seen by government as a step towards reconciliation by engaging with and involving Indigenous Peoples before projects are approved.

And it’s providing input into the creation of the Canadian Water Agency to ensure that Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQQIA people have a voice in water conservation.

NWAC’s involvement in the CNWA signals the importance of Indigenous women taking a leadership role as protectors of water.



MONTHS ON TRAPLINE RECONNECT PROFESSOR WHO ATTENDED RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS WITH LAND, SPIRITUALITY OF ANCESTORS

ROSE ROBERTS HAS A DOCTORATE IN COMMUNITY HEALTH AND EPIDEMIOLOGY. BUT, SINCE VISITING HER FAMILY'S TRAPLINE FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE SHE WAS A VERY YOUNG CHILD, HER ENERGIES HAVE BEEN SPENT RE-LEARNING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND RECONNECTING WITH THE LAND.

Dr. Roberts, a nihithow (Woodland Cree) who is an education development specialist at the University of Saskatchewan, says it is the "sacred responsibility" of Indigenous women to pass along their knowledge of the environment to their children and to the rest of their community.

"It goes back to the teaching that comes from the east, that says we are responsible for the seven generations behind us and the seven generations ahead of us. And we need to fight to make sure that there is land for the next seven generations ahead of us," she says.

Dr. Roberts, who is 56, was in her early 40s when she rediscovered her passion for the land and her need to be on it.

When she was a child, her mother's family trapped and lived on La Ronge Lake in north-central Saskatchewan and her father had a trapline in the Hickson-Maribelli lakes district, which is called Omasinasowih-Sakahikan in Cree. It means "lake so calm it is like a mirror."

Her father was also a guide for a fishing camp on Otter Lake so the family spent summers living in a tent on its shores.

At the age of six, she was sent off to a residential school. She spoke no English when she arrived. But gradually, her Cree heritage became part of her past.

"I have very few childhood memories," says Dr. Roberts, who has been diagnosed with PTSD that stems from the years she spent at the schools , which have been widely documented as places of abuse. "So I don't know what happened, except that it has affected my adult life course."

Throughout her teens and young adult life, Dr. Roberts spent little time in the wilderness. She went on to complete her education and eventually became a nursing instructor at the university.

But things changed when she received her common-experience payment under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. She wanted to spend the money on something that would be spiritually significant.

"I'd done the healing. I'd gone to the sweats. I'd done my fasting. But I wanted this money to mean something," she says. She heard about Inuit who were using their payments from the settlement to go back on the land. "And it was like, 'oh, that's a great idea!' because I had never been to the trapline for freeze-up.'"

By that time, her father had passed away, but her mother was still living.

"So I went to talk to her and asked if she would go to the trapline with me for six months," says Dr. Roberts. "And she said 'absolutely.'"

When her dean suggested that she take education leave to make the trip, and the university agreed, she says, "My spiritual belief kicked in. I said 'this is meant to be. I am meant to do this.'"

Dr. Roberts, her mother, and two nieces – one 18 years old and the other 14 years old – headed to Omasinasowih-Sakahikan in September 2008.

Her mother was the knowledge keeper. She taught Dr. Roberts and the girls how to trap, how to prepare furs, and how to survive in the wilderness.

Dr. Roberts would get up before the first light of dawn, get the fire going in the small cabin, and make a pot of coffee. She would have her coffee by the light of a kerosene lamp and write her daily journal.

After the others rose and they all had breakfast, they would check the rabbit snare lines close to camp. Then they would set out on longer hikes to check their other traps, treks that could take several hours.

Afternoons back at the cabin were spent beading or the girls would do homework. And there were the tasks of gathering wood and water, which had to be performed before dark.

It was an emotional reawakening.

"I needed to be on that land. I needed to reconnect with who I was and with my ancestors, because that has been our trapline for a couple hundred years," says Dr. Roberts. "And every place we went, mom had stories of the

(Continued on page 22)

> "IT GOES BACK TO THE TEACHING THAT COMES FROM THE EAST, THAT SAYS WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SEVEN GENERATIONS BEHIND US AND THE SEVEN GENERATIONS AHEAD OF US. AND WE NEED TO FIGHT TO MAKE SURE THAT THERE IS LAND FOR THE NEXT SEVEN GENERATIONS AHEAD OF US,"
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“I NEEDED TO BE ON THAT LAND. I NEEDED TO RECONNECT WITH WHO I WAS AND WITH MY ANCESTORS, BECAUSE THAT HAS BEEN OUR TRAPLINE FOR A COUPLE HUNDRED YEARS,” SAYS DR. ROBERTS. “AND EVERY PLACE WE WENT, MOM HAD STORIES OF THE LAND AND OF WHAT HAPPENED HERE AND WHAT HAPPENED THERE.”

(Continued from page 21) land and of what happened here and what happened there.”

At the end of the 10 weeks, no one wanted to return to their old lives. But it was time. Their families missed them. So they packed up and took the five-hour trip by snowmobile back to civilization.

They stopped overnight in Stanley Mission, where her mom lived, a small community of about 1,200 residents.

“Both my niece Mikaela and I were looking around and saying ‘it’s so bright, it's so noisy,’” says Dr. Roberts. “Because, after 10 weeks of just the absolute quiet of the forest and only the light of kerosene lamps, it was a totally strange environment.”

The term for feeling that way is ‘bushed,’ and it takes a while to get reintegrated into civilization.

When she travelled through Prince Albert on her way back to Saskatoon, she tried to get a coffee at a Tim Hortons but there were three people in line so she turned around and left. She couldn’t handle the crowd.

Gradually, of course, she readjusted to the city. But things were not the same.

“My life changed,” says Dr. Roberts. “My PhD was in the experiences of cancer among Indigenous people. But my focus shifted to the importance of the land.”

She became a registered trapper and she is, even today, the secretary/treasurer of the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association. “We’re an advocacy group for trapping and maintaining connection to the land and making sure that youth don’t forget how important the land is to us as nihithawak (Woodland Cree),” says Dr. Roberts.

The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), which represents First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women from coast to coast to coast, also recognizes the connection of its members to the land and the importance of having their voices heard in discussions about the environment.

The group is currently working with the federal government to collect the perspectives of Indigenous women on topics like the regulation of navigable waters and the promotion of biodiversity.

NWAC has staff focused on the issue of climate change, which is affecting the ability of Indigenous women in northern and remote communities to harvest traditional foods and medicines. Dr. Roberts says Indigenous Peoples recognize that women have equal roles to men when families are out on the lands. “It is women who carry the languages and pass it on to their children and grandchildren,” says Dr. Roberts. “I have read that you connect to the land through language. And we need to bring that back. When I’m talking to my family, I always use the Cree word for where we come from.”

“The traditional Indigenous names and landmarks for the land are so important,” she says. “It was our ancestors who first named these places. It wasn’t the westerners who decided to honour First World War and Second World War veterans by giving their names to our lakes. They took that away from us when they replaced our place names with western names, English names.”

Dr. Roberts has returned to the trapline for the fall freeze-up about every two years since 2008, taking younger nieces and nephews with her each time. In 2019, she had several unrelated Indigenous girls join her, something made possible through a land-based school program at the Stanley Mission high school.

Out in the bush, she says, there is a routine.

“Everybody knows what is expected of them. And I think that’s one of the things that makes it so (Continued on page 23)

Pictured: Jackie Roberts, Mikaela Kilcup, and Elizabeth Roberts

(Continued from page 22) profound for the youth. My nieces and nephews began to appreciate the structure," says Dr. Roberts. The routine is also good for those, like her, who have attended residential schools, she says, "because those of us who went, either completely regiment everything in our lives, or else we go to the other end of the spectrum and have absolutely no routine because we hated it so much."

Last year, during the pandemic of 2020, she returned again to the trapline. Dr. Roberts said she was prepared to go by herself because she had run out of nieces and nephews. But her mother, who is 82, warned her she would go crazy from loneliness.

So the two of them went together. And they stayed for a shorter span of time, which meant they could fly out instead of doing the long drive overland by snowmobile.

Now Dr. Roberts is thinking about heading back for spring thaw, as she has never been there during that time of the year.

There is no money left in trapping. If she goes, it will be for the spiritual reconnection to the place of her ancestors.

"This is something that I need to do as part of my healing from my PTSD," says Dr. Roberts. "I know how important the land is to my healing."

Pictured: Elizabeth and Rose Roberts pull a moosehide inside their cabin

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is a monthly magazine of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). Its objective is to highlight the work of the organization and to tell the stories of the Indigenous women of Canada.

NWAC, which was founded in 1974, is a national Indigenous organization representing First Nations (on and off reserve, with status and without), Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and gender diverse people in Canada. Its goal is to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of Indigenous women within their respective communities and Canadian society.

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