

NWAC President's Report

This publication highlights the various activities the President has undertaken throughout the month of December.



Native Women's
Association of Canada

L'Association des
femmes autochtones
du Canada

Lorraine Whitman

LORRAINE WHITMAN

Lorraine Whitman was elected as the President of the Native Women's Association of Canada on September 14, 2019. Prior to her presidency at NWAC, Ms. Whitman served as President of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association and has been advocating for Indigenous women's rights over the past 45 years.

December President's Report

My Dear Friends,

The winter solstice (December 21 this year) is a special time for honouring and acknowledging the rhythm of our natural world. On this day, the sun is at its lowest point in the sky, resulting in the shortest day and the longest night of the year in the Northern hemisphere. For First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, the winter solstice has traditionally been an opportunity to honour our ancestors, gather over a feast, sing and drum, follow ritual observations, and bond with family and friends.

This holiday season is unlike any we have experienced before. For nine months, we have had to deal with a pandemic that has gripped the world and impacted people of all nations, cultures, and backgrounds.

While all of us have to sacrifice this holiday season in order to prevent COVID-19 from spreading, our sacrifice will ensure that we can once again celebrate the winter solstice and the holidays in the years to come. But sacrificing the chance to be together with our family and friends doesn't mean we can't celebrate all that is good in the world and the natural beauty that winter brings.

Many Indigenous people who do not identify as Christian still decorate a tree this time of year. With the resurgence of crafting among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women, I have no doubt that the holiday trees in many homes will have an Indigenous flare. The tree in our brand-new Resiliency Lodge in Gatineau, Quebec, is adorned with traditional Indigenous decorations, thanks to Ramona Nicholas, an archeologist with NWAC. From my territory to yours, from my home to yours, I wish each of you the best during this holiday season. May you all stay safe and healthy.

Thank you, Wela'lin



President Lorraine Whitman



[@LWhitman_NWAC](https://twitter.com/LWhitman_NWAC)

My December Agenda

This month I attended weekly meetings of the MMIWG Core Committee and bi-weekly meetings of NWAC's Advisory Committee and Board of Directors. I also took part in several high-level meetings.

Ministerial Engagements on Gender-Based Violence

Violence can affect anyone, but some populations, including Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, are more at risk of experiencing violence. This is known as gender-based violence (GBV). GBV can take many forms—physical, emotional, psychological, economic; it can be overt or covert. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened an existing crisis, one that the World Health Organization is calling a silent pandemic. It's also highlighted program and policy gaps and shortfalls.

In addition to investing funds to support women and children experiencing violence, the Government of Canada has set up an Advisory Council on Gender-Based Violence under Maryam Monsef, Minister for Women and Gender Equality. This advisory council, to which the Native Women's Association of Canada has been engaged to provide input, is developing an action plan to address the root causes and systemic issues that perpetuate GBV and the factors that serve as barriers to accessing supports, services, and protections.

As a member of the Advisory Council, I participated in engagement sessions on GBV, held over the course of three days in early December by the Advisory Council. I also took part in a meeting of WAGE's Indigenous Women's Circle (WAGE is Women and Gender Equality Canada) a few days later. The goals of these meetings were to clarify expectations and the proposed work plan for the Advisory Council; provide an overview of stakeholder engagement to date; and weigh in on the vision and principles for the GBV national action plan.

At these sessions, I talked about the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous women. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the situation of violence has significantly increased for Indigenous women. A grassroots-level needs assessment and a national survey that NWAC undertook earlier in the year highlight a striking escalation of violence during the pandemic.

I stressed in my remarks that the violence that is claiming the lives of too many Indigenous women in this country is closely related to the current criminal justice system and policing approaches. In light of the federal government's inaction on addressing the 231 Calls for Justice issued by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), NWAC has responded by providing healing supports through our new Resiliency Lodge in Chelsea, Quebec. The Lodge is designed to meet the spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and social needs of our members, who are even more vulnerable and isolated as a result of the pandemic.

In addition to putting this model in place in communities across Canada, I stressed the need for more shelters; for safe and affordable housing; and for a National Action Plan. I pointed out that the plan released recently by the Yukon government is a step in the right direction and can be viewed as an inspirational measure for other provincial/territorial governments to emulate.

Meeting of the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Responsible for Justice and Public Safety & National Indigenous Organizations

Policing in Indigenous communities; countering bias and racism in the justice system; and an update on a National Action Plan in response to the MMIWG issue—these were the three topics up for discussion at this day-long meeting held mid-December. All provinces and territories were represented at this virtual meeting, which was convened by Minister of Public Safety Bill Blair and Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada David Lametti.

On the topic of policing, I opened my remarks with the statement that the relationship between Indigenous women and the Canadian police needs work. I spoke of the tragic deaths of Chantel Moore in Edmundston, New Brunswick, and seven Indigenous students in Thunder Bay, Ontario, to illustrate that when it comes to the Indigenous community, the police force fails to act appropriately or act at all. From the officer who shot Chantel and is still on the job, to the findings of systemic racism in the police force in Thunder Bay two years ago, to the Commissioner of the RCMP stating recently that she struggled to come up with a definition for systemic racism, it's not surprising that the confidence of Indigenous people in the police has eroded over the decades. "There is no question that systemic racism exists and that it has played a very large role in shaping the relationship between the police and Indigenous people," I said. While the federal government's recent announcement to introduce legislation to make policing in Indigenous communities an essential service is good news, I called on the ministers to root out systemic racism in their police agencies and to hold those who perpetuate it accountable. I also urged the creation of a task force with NWAC to rewrite the relationship between police and Indigenous women.

On the topic of bias and racism, I pointed out that the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system is a symptom of broader societal failures in the quality of education, in the lack of economic opportunities, in disparities in child welfare funding, and in inequities in the courts and justice system. After pointing out that "violence is a rarity for non-Indigenous Canadians but a fact of life for too many Indigenous women," I pressed the point that despite all efforts to create opportunities for alternative sentencing—citing the Gladue principle—too many Indigenous women end up in jail and receive harsher punishments. "The problems in the justice system, the racism, and the inequities are ripping apart our communities and our families." I called on the FPT ministers to develop a framework, in collaboration with Indigenous-led organizations, to address the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system.

Meeting with MP Pablo Rodriguez, Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Quebec Lieutenant

Minister Rodriguez is known for his work to support the fight against climate change, protect and promote culture, and promote official languages and minority rights. As a political representative who has stated there is “no more important relationship to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples,” Mr. Rodriguez has directed every federal minister to help “accelerate and build on the progress we have made with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.”

This virtual meeting was a ‘meet-and-greet’ and discussion regarding the Resiliency Lodge.

Greetings with Claudette Commanda

I was honoured to hold a meet-and-greet session virtually with Elder Claudette Commanda, who is an Algonquin Anishinabe from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation. She has dedicated her career to promoting First Nations rights, history, and culture. Elder Commanda graduated from the University of Ottawa’s Faculty of Arts (1993) and Faculty of Law, Common Law Section, and was inducted into the Common Law Honour Society in 2009. She has taught at the university’s Institute of Women’s Studies, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Education, and the Aboriginal Studies Program. She is the Executive Director of the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres and has previously served on the Board of Governors for the First Nations University of Canada.

Holiday Messages & Well Wishes

I was so pleased to relay my holiday and New Year’s well wishes in video format, which can be seen here.

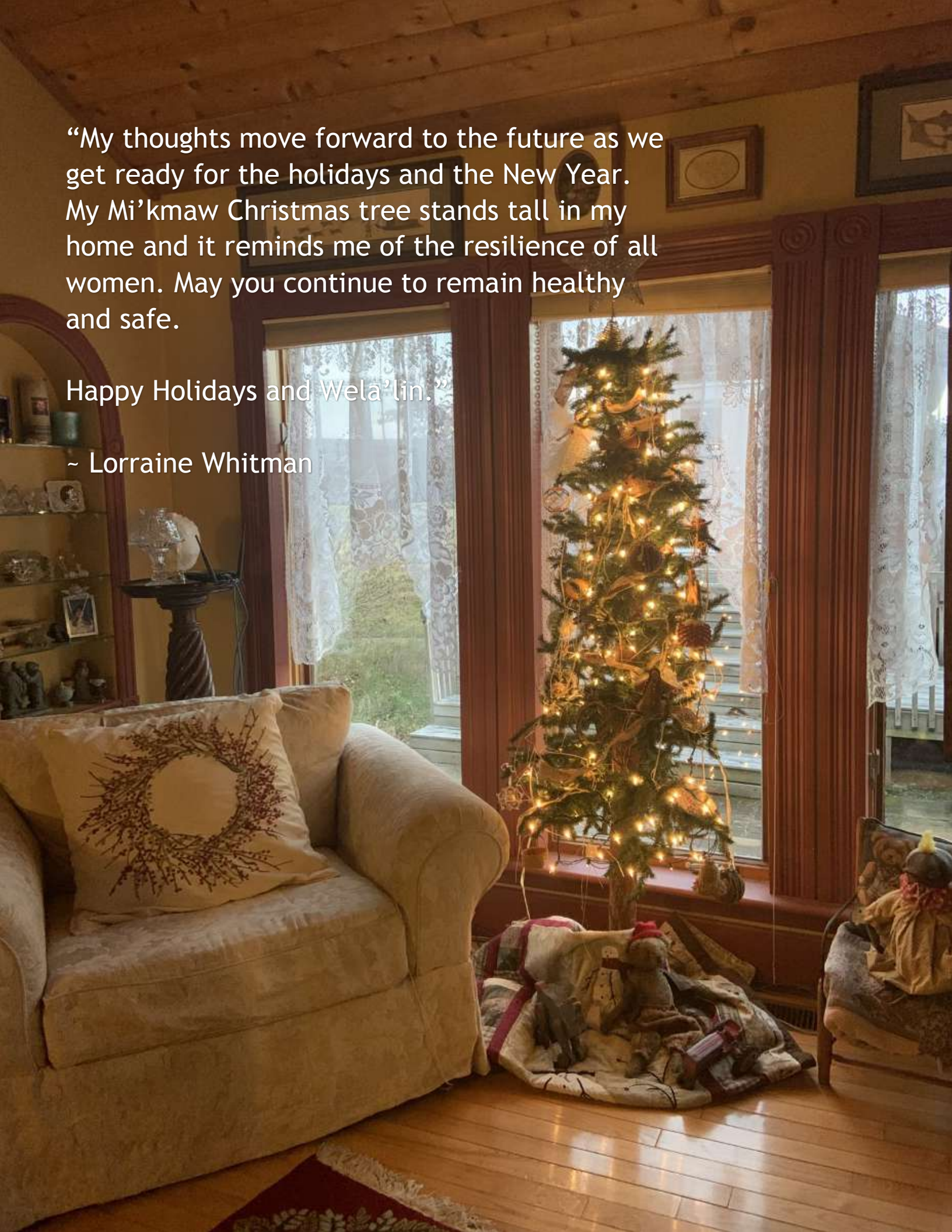


*Christmas is a time for giving. Here, Councillor Tessa Kennedy and I are shown holding the Stations of the Cross on Dec 22nd, a gift I have donated to St. Bernadette’s Chapel in memory of late Elder, Keptin Gerald Christopher Tony Sr. *The Christmas Memory Tree (left) is in memory of all community members who have passed into the spirit world.*

“My thoughts move forward to the future as we get ready for the holidays and the New Year. My Mi’kmaw Christmas tree stands tall in my home and it reminds me of the resilience of all women. May you continue to remain healthy and safe.

Happy Holidays and Wela’lin.”

~ Lorraine Whitman





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