

WHAPMAGOOSTUI DELEGATION
Presentation to the Cree Justice Symposium
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This process has been long overdue and we as a nation, as communities and as individuals have the opportunity to take control of our own destiny.

In our community, we have become tired of our youth being shipped out to be processed in a foreign justice system that does not offer sustainable healing and wellness to them. To the contrary, our youth come back more confused and angry every time they come back. What they learn in prisons, detention facilities is how to become better criminals. Make no mistake; drugs are readily available in detention facilities and even in youth reception centres.

Furthermore, years of inaction have hindered our community development and ultimately our social and economic empowerment as a people, as a nation. A report recently stated that even with our so called modern day treaty, the James Bay agreement, we are no better off than most other aboriginal nations in Canada under the Indian Act.

We need to take a firmer hold of our destiny. Let's not put our children in the position of sitting down at some gathering 30 years from now to report that nothing has changed and that we who are responsible today did nothing to change it.

In our community of Whapmagoostui, we live in a community of lack. We lack many of the basic and adequate community resources, programs and services that many other communities have access to already. The community cannot provide for all its members alternatives social housing, therefore creating an even greater housing backlog.

At the root of many of our social problems is the lack of addressing basic shelter needs. There aren't enough jobs for community members partially because there aren't any economic development opportunities and in our case no regional entity dares look at Whapmagoostui as a location for its headquarters because of the high cost of living.

Whapmagoostui always gets the short end of the stick, the smallest piece of the pie because the governments fail to realize the uniqueness of our community, the remoteness of our community and the high cost of living.

Our cost of doing business can 100 times higher than that of most other communities. The cost to transfer a detainee for a bail hearing off the bat is 3000 dollars for plane tickets and the police force is left to bear the cost for that from their budget. We transfer on average 15-20 detainees a year, you do the math. This eats up the police budget and the police are left to do their basic service, that is to patrol and process criminal files.

If the community had its own local restorative justice, such as a justice of the peace and a sentencing circle in place for minor offences then we could help treat and heal our troubled community members incorporating our traditional values and beliefs. We should be given that opportunity because what exists now does not work, we all know that.

There should be no bureaucratic and political barriers in our way from preventing us to help our own people. It is only when we have true and total control over our own lives, our own destiny will we see our people living the lives they are capable of.

Now, today we have an opportunity in the Cree justice file to right the wrongs of the past 30 years, to force action in place of bureaucratic inaction, to take hold of and run with the missed opportunities of our past. We have the opportunity in this time to exercise our inalienable right to self governance, to take a firm hold of our autonomy as a Cree Nation in the realm of Cree justice. The first thing step we must undertake is to redefine Cree justice as a path to healing and not as a punitive word for law breaking.

We have the opportunity to help those in our Nation to manoeuvre their way out of their present social stresses and problems and into the clarity of taking responsibility and ownership of the future for themselves and for our future generations.

How do we go about doing this? We have to be given the opportunity to create, develop, and sustain our own holistically based healing and wellness programs and services. Let us not be blind to the fact that in order to find our way in the present and prepare for our future, we must know first where we came from.

We came from strong and powerful ancestors who against all odds, against moments of starvation, against the unrelenting harshness of the northern environment, it was and is from the land and animals that sustained our grandmothers and grandfathers, it is why we are still here today.

We have not transferred nor continued the life teachings of our nomadic forefathers. We have not fostered or adapted these life teachings to the encroachment of western contemporary society. Ultimately we have not adapted to sedentary community life and thought.

We have not taken a close look at ourselves today and where we see ourselves in present day terms.

I say this as an observer and having been of a police officer since 1995, a justice coordinator since 2007 and as a participant in a suicide prevention conference, a special needs conference and others. I say this as an observer of who is working and taking the lead at the daycares, at the schools, at MSDC's and social services sectors. The majority of the people in these positions are women. The women in our Nation are taking the lead.

The majority of the people in our Nation being charged, detained, transferred and sentenced in the current travelling court system are men. The number must be at 90% or more. We must ask ourselves why this is so. Didn't we come from a patriarchal, nomadic, traditional, holistic, spiritual Eeyou/Eenou society?

As men we must ask ourselves the difficult questions. What is my role now in the family? How do I help my partner and children so that their day to day lives can be less stressful and happier? Where do I gather and grow my sense of importance, usefulness, confidence and strength as a man whether I am working or not?

This is a call to all men to find your purpose in your life, your family and your community. Free your hands from that bottle, free yourself from the clutches of drugs and give your significant other (wife/girlfriend), your children, your friends and your loved ones a helping hand, a leg up and become a role model to yourself, your family and community. Find your way out of the justice system and learn to empower yourself, only you are the maker of your destiny.

Where do we go from here? Our elders have to teach us about our history; about the way things were back then, those things that teach love and respect for everything. We have an opportunity to do this in the formation of sustainable healing and wellness camps in the bush setting where counselling and healing is readily available.

Our youth must not be left to their own devices in creating false senses of identity that they find in non-native society. They must be taught their language and where did the language come from? It came from the land; the elders say you will find everything that you need out on the land.

Do most people know what the elders really mean when they say that? If you look hard enough, you will find your true Cree identity, respect for all things, your purpose in life and ultimately to become a productive member of your family, your community, your Cree Nation.

We have met our elders and in their infinite wisdom, the elders expressed their dire anticipation that one day soon they can contribute to the wellness of our people. Our community has already in the past built facilities out on the land to help people with the struggles in their lives.

They have done this by offering traditional counselling through wisdom of the values and beliefs our people believed in before the arrival of outside influences. These values and beliefs still exist today just as we sit here and exist today.

We have the facilities, we have the human resources, what was missing in the past in order to sustain these programs and services is the external program dollars that need to be redirected towards these healing and wellness programs being offered out on the land.

We need to give our youth the life skills to manoeuvre in the non-aboriginal world. For that to be achieved, we need easier access to treatment, education/training and jobs. Our people have to do at least one of those three things. And if you do all three things in succession, then you become a productive member of your community, your Nation. But it is unacceptable to do none of those things.

We as Cree people have to heal from within, to heal our spirits and we have to provide an avenue for an individual to do so in a swift and timely manner, let us not wait another 30 years. We need to work together from the governments to the Cree Nation, from one community to another, from one organization to another, from family to extended family, from individual to friend.

The sooner we realize we are all connected in one way or another, the sooner we will start to discuss solutions to our problems and not just to identify our problems and let bureaucracy run its snail's course.

Do we need crime prevention programs, fully functioning youth centres, sports complexes, etc... Yes we need all of these good things that the southern world can offer us, any community is entitled to these things.

But let's not kid of ourselves, we must prioritize in getting to the roots of our social problems. This entails providing a continuous means to heal one's spirit. In order for this healing to be successful we must provide our people with the basic needs any human being requires such as food, shelter and water.

Aren't we failing our people by not providing adequate access to shelter that most Canadians take for granted? We must get away from becoming a dependent people, a dependent Nation and move towards a Nation full of strong, confident, independent and productive people, we must become totally self reliant.

This should be the vision for all our people. The access to housing, education and jobs must be easier to access and not harder. Only then will we dare to have bigger dreams, to make improbabilities into sustainable opportunities and create a life of purpose without limitations.

Leadership in all its forms has to adopt the attitude to leave no elder, no child, no man and no woman behind, everyone in our Nation has the ability to become a productive member of society in general.

We must not only leave education in the hands of the CSB, we must not only leave our social problems just in the hands of the CHB, we must not only leave our wrong doings just in the hands of the Police and a punitive justice system and we must not only leave our band councils to be responsible for providing and doing everything for us.

All of these things are my responsibility, your responsibility, our responsibility. In order for this to work, all of us have to be on the same page, we have to agree on a common purpose and work towards a common goal, that is to heal our people one person and family at a time.

We can do this by developing Inter-agency groups as we have done in our community where we have explored and started offering “wrap-around” services to individuals and their families on a case by case basis. The time has come for each community, for each entity, for each family and for each individual to take responsibility and ownership of their problems and to find ways to heal their spirits.

It is important to think outside the box, to work together as organizations in the most effective manner. We must be careful not to easily and readily adopt mechanisms that are marginally successful in western society and think that they will work for us. We must go further than that, to look into our past to find our strength in our identity and to create our own programs and services for healing our people.

In closing, I would like to thank the GCCQ/CRA for giving our community to present our vision for Cree justice.