

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Well-being

The Power of Powwow

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■



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THE POWER OF POWWOW: Talking Circle

Author Dianne Meili, from Edmonton, Alberta, interviewed powwow dancers from Alberta about what the powwow means to them. The passage that follows is a summary of their conversations on “What is the significance of powwow dancing today?”

Stan Isadore: I’ll start off this circle with a few words to make people think. To me, dancing is not a talent. I’ve come to realize it really is more of a gift from the Creator.

Adrian LaChance: It’s a gift, all right. It turned my life around. I was doing drugs — cocaine, heroin, you name it. Skid row kind of stuff. Well, it was in my whole family . . . I was raised with it. In 1997 I was just out of the Edmonton Max [penitentiary] and I was on parole. I was a singer, so I decided to go to a powwow in Kamloops. So there I am, sitting on the bus with my big drum and some drum sticks. I just went. When I got there, this dancer friend of a girl I used to get high with gave me tobacco and asked me to dance for him. I said, “Sure, sure.” I was so nervous. Man, I was stiff, I didn’t want to ruffle any feathers out there, literally [laughs]. But then I felt good. It was the best feeling in the world. I was getting looks from the girls. Then I began to cry. I was so emotional. This Elder dancer said to me, “What’s your name?” and he encouraged me. I began to get my regalia together. Eagle plumes. Eagle talons. Eagle head. Now, I guess you could say it’s my path. You have to walk in a good way. I take care of myself. I don’t even eat sugar, if I can help it.

Shirley Hill: Dancing is my life. I love dancing. It strengthens me . . . I’m fit and flexible . . . and I’ve always had a spiritual connection with it. I started when I was five. Then my parents split up and I didn’t dance for many years. I knew part of my culture was missing. It was a tough time. Then my mom took me to a powwow at Blackfoot Crossing when I was eighteen and I just knew I would make a dress. Now, I make dance regalia for other people, too. I learned to bead at the Calgary Indian Friendship Centre. Elders like Louise Big Plume, Maggie Black Kettle, and the late Brigitte Crow Chief, they taught me how to sew properly. Oh, and Myna Lefthand. What a sweetheart she is! She always encouraged me and kept me going. I teach Fancy Shawl dancing with Wandering Spirit Native Awareness in Calgary. A student of mine from there went to the World Hoop Dance Championships in Arizona and was complimented on her fancy footwork. She came to me and said, “I want to thank you, Shirley.” That made me so happy and proud! She had the perseverance, effort, and willingness to dance. When you dance, you have to love yourself and stay motivated to keep going. It brings you so much.

Warren Bird: I used to abuse alcohol and the powwow trail changed my life. It got me off the reserve and hanging out with other dancers, and more into ceremonies and prayer. I was nervous at first. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. But people gave me a chance. They made me feel comfortable. After a year, I was going to the big powwows in Kamloops, down in the States at Rocky Boy, and in Saddle Lake, and over to Saskatchewan. My baby, Wyatt Bird, is gonna be dancing soon. He'll be a chicken dancer, like Kevin.

Kevin Buffalo: I know what you mean, Shirley, about being a little kid and having a spiritual connection to dancing. When I was nine, I was riding my bike and I heard that thumping sound grouse make in the springtime. I stopped and went over to this little plateau, and there they were! The males were doing their mating dance and the female was on the sideline, watching. The males had their eyes closed while they were dancing. You'll notice some chicken dancers shield their eyes; it relates to that. Or they wear sunglasses. When I was ten, I asked my grandfather to get me some dance regalia, but he said "Nôsim, you won't dance until you have bells on your knees." I didn't know what he meant because no dancers were wearing bells like that. Then I saw the chicken dance — the dancers had a band of bells around their knees. The chicken dance was being revived and I knew I could do it. Then it all kind of came together for me. There is a ceremony of healing related to the chicken dance. I once danced for a sick girl in a wheelchair. She had a newborn baby. She gave me tobacco to dance. I did, and then it started to rain. It was a sad time. I was pretty emotional. And then, later, I saw the sister of the woman I danced for, and she said, "There's my sister's favourite dancer." Man, that felt good.

Jackie Soppit: I grew up in a non-Native family and struggled with my sense of cultural identity during my younger years. My life changed when I started seeking out my culture and began dancing when I was sixteen. I went from being the most incredibly shy person to today being the director of my own company. I now teach cultural programs to youth and families with similar backgrounds to my own. I've been a jingle dancer for twelve years and believe the jingle dress dance still holds the healing power it once did.

Felix Lewis: I guess I'd just like to add how dancing is such a physical challenge. Especially men's fancy dance. In the championship, it's easy to get on top. The hard thing is staying on top. There's always someone trying to take your place. It keeps you sharp. I like the "iron man" event. I danced twenty-seven songs straight. That's about fifty-six minutes of fast dancing.

Stan Isadore: You guys have reminded me of something that happened when I was a little kid. I must have been four or five. I was watching the men's traditional on the sidelines — sitting with my aunts and uncles. I remember distinctly how the bells on the dancers were so loud and the dancers looked so huge. One dancer came so close to me, my aunt pulled me back. When he came towards me, he dropped down on one knee and our eyes met. I saw his feathers, his face paint . . . I never forgot that. My aunt, Rosalie Ward, started a dance group when I was ten and took me across Alberta to perform. Now, I'm a fancy dancer and it's taken me all over the world. I received a lot of encouragement and support from people from my reserve and my mother. She helped me recognize the importance of dancing and how meaningful it is to people. Dance has

really helped me. The drum does something to you. Long ago it was a way of praying, a way of communication, a way of prayer. It helps us as people. It tells us where we're from and where we're going.