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Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers' Group of Lax kw'alaams

The Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers, Kathleen Bennett and Sandrina de Finney

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Na Gan Ts'i'stk Grandmothers' Group of Lax kw'alaams

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We would like to express our thanks to our invaluable team members: Natalie Bryant, who is our Youth Representative, as well as our cultural camp workers: Russell Mather, Sophia Beaton-Mather, Patricia Mather, Lonnie Mather and Wilfred Campbell.

[We] are here to support children and families, to work with our children and youth, to encourage them to complete their education, to take pride in who and what they are, where they come from, to teach them about their culture, who they belong to—their Nation, tribe, crest, clan, family—to help work towards and build self-care plans and safety plans so that our children feel safe—and parents as well. We're here to be mentors and role models and helpers and teachers.

(Sherrie Haldane, Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmother, "Cultural Permanency for Our Children" forum, Terrace, BC, October 2013)

Lax kw'alaams is a Tsimshian community on British Columbia's northwest coast. Since 2010, all 37 Lax kw'alaams children in care, including those who live outside the community, have been identified and supported by a group of Elders who call themselves the Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers. Among other forms of emotional support and cultural connection they offer (which the Grandmothers themselves describe in

this article), the Grandmothers have invited the children and youth to learn traditional seaweed gathering and meet their extended families in Lax kw'alaams.

The Na gantsi'i'stk Grandmothers' Group is being increasingly recognized for their culturally and community-grounded leadership. The group was a regional finalist for BC's 2010–11 Premier's Awards in the partnership category. They also received the BC's Representative for Children and Youth Award of Excellence for Cultural Heritage and Diversity in 2010. The Grandmothers "have a genuine passion and concern for the Lax kw'alaams children and are taking action to ensure their children stay connected to their community, heritage, and culture. Their efforts are helping to promote healing for families in the community and are thereby reducing the number of children being taken into care" (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2013).

In this article, we wanted to uphold the work of the Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers so that others could be inspired by their leadership and perseverance. The article brings together the vision of the Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers' Group with that of Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCS) and Siem Smun'eem: Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network (ICWRN) at the University of Victoria. All of us came together in 2013 at two forums on "Cultural Permanency for Our Children"—one in Prince Rupert, BC, and one in Terrace, BC. The sessions featured Elder, community, and youth speakers and focused on strategizing for practices and policies for cultural permanence and customary cultural adoption. ICWRN members facilitated the sessions and helped document and record the community presentations. The Lax kw'alaams Grandmothers presented several times during these forums and shared both their vision for supporting child and family wellness and a strong cultural identity, and their efforts to maintain connections with children from their community who are in foster care and the adoption system. That the Grandmothers attend so many of these events and generously share their teachings and stories is a powerful testament to their commitment to their communities and children.

This article draws on video and audio documentation from the two forums, as well as notes from other presentations, to share the voices of the Lax kw'alaams Grandmothers. The importance of their work was highlighted again as we were developing this paper, when a grandmother in Alaska was denied custody of her grandchild because she had not filed a formal adoption petition. The landmark case pitted a Grandmother from Tununak, Alaska, against a court system that denied both her inherent and legislated right to custody of her grandchild. The US-based National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) decried the decision, stating,

NICWA is disappointed by the decision of the Alaska Supreme Court in *Native Village of Tununak II v. the State of Alaska*. Cultural knowledge and recent social science research tell us that children who are raised by family members have better long-term outcomes (...) The grandmother of the child attended a court proceeding and formally testified to her desire to adopt her grandchild. This should be sufficient evidence that someone has come forward to provide a permanent home for the child. However, the court found that the grandmother in this case did not have the right to placement of the child because she did not formally file an adoption petition. This decision is not only counter to the letter and spirit of the *Indian Child Welfare Act* but also creates additional burdens for Native family members wishing to adopt. Our court systems should not be thwarting family members stepping forward to provide loving

homes. Instead, they should be doing everything in their power to support the best interest of these children and the families that deeply love them.

Did your grandmother play a significant role in raising you? How do you think she helped to shape who you are? How do you imagine she would have fared in navigating a court system and affording attorneys if she had been required to?

We need to demonstrate to those who do not understand that our children matter. Family matters. Culture matters.

(NICWA press release, October 2014, <http://www.nicwa.org/>)

Although this particular case is an American one, similar policies of systemic discrimination against Elders as caregivers, cultural knowledge keepers, and leaders in their communities continue to operate in Canada. We raise our hands to our strong, determined grandmothers and Elders, like the Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers' Group, who dedicate their lives to honouring and reconnecting with their community's children and to maintaining our kinship systems.

(Kathleen Bennett, Executive Director, NIFCS, and Sandrina de Finney, Research Advisor, Siem Smun'eem Indigenous Child Well-being Network)



(left to right) Sharon Bryant (NIFCS Executive Asst), Helen Johnson, Gloria Russell, Frances Wells, Kathleen Bennett (NIFCS ED), Sherrie Haldane, Victoria Reece, Myrtle Ryan. The black and white vests are adorned with traditional crests and mean "nuum na waalt: you belong to us." We gift each child in care who works with us with one of these vests to remind them where they belong and that they will never be forgotten.

encourage them to complete their education, to take pride in who and what they are and where they come from, to teach them about their culture, who they belong to—their Nation, tribe, crest, clan, family—to help work towards and build self-care plans and safety plans so that our children—and parents as well—feel safe. We are here to be mentors, role models, helpers, and teachers.

Na Gan Ts'i'stk Grandmothers' Group of Lax kw'alaams

Who We Are

We, the Na gan ts'i'stk Grandmothers, are majority matriarchs of the nine tribes of Lax kw'alaams on the northwest coast of British Columbia. We are a Tsimshian nation of a matrilineal nature. Women are the caretakers of the family, and children are taught the ways of their culture by observation and oral teachings by grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

The Lax kw'alaams Grandmothers are here to support children and families, to work with our children and youth, to

The goal of the Grandmothers' Group is to look at supports available for our grandchildren and their families—especially when supports are needed to ensure the safety and well-being of the child and family. Systems, such as the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), NIFCS, schools, social programs, recreational health and economic programs, must all work together to provide a holistic service to our children and families. By pulling in everyone and working collaboratively together, just imagine how healthy our children and families can be.

How We Got Started

We got started because we were adamant: “No. We will not allow our children to be adopted out.” That is how we truly began.

When the term “grandmothers” came up, we were just meeting as a group and talking about child welfare stuff. The next thing you know, we were asking, “What shall we call ourselves?” One of us, Barbara Henry, was at a meeting a week before that with NIFCS. Tahltan [First Nation] were talking about what they were doing in their community, and they had a grandmothers' group:

“I said, ‘Oh wow.’ So I took that and planted that in my head, and when we went to our meeting to talk about child welfare and we were talking about what should we call ourselves, and I said, ‘Well, Tahltan has a grandmothers' group.’ So hey, yeah, everybody jumped on that one. So thank you, Tahltan, for planting that idea. That’s how the grandmothers' group got started.”

One thing led to another, and the next thing you know we were talking about homecoming for our children—all of our children in care. After we had the homecoming, three of us—and there was some others from the community that came in to talk about our culture and our children and how this group was going to unfold for our children. So we came up with a theme of how the group was going to be and went from there. Then we talked about formalizing as a society or a legal group where we can actually go out and get our own monies to run our own programs. A lot of funds are available, but you have to be a registered society. Well, the *Society Act* of BC had a problem with that idea. They wanted a more English term for the name. So we kind of ran against a wall there and we said, “Ah, let’s just leave it.”

Helen [Johnson], the group’s founder, wrote a paper in university and she wrote it on a treatment model for child welfare. She had a dream and she shared it with everybody. Ultimately we grasped onto it. We have shared that dream with many of our colleagues and our community, of where we want to go. Helen said in her paper that the goal is to see the child remain in the home. A family caregiver would go into the home if a family was having problems or an issue. They would go in to care for the children while the parents received the treatment they needed to resume care of the child. So while the parents, or whoever their primary caregiver is, are away doing their treatment or rehab, the children’s environment is not disturbed. That just touched our hearts. From there we said, “We’ve got to get out there. We’ve got to do more stuff.” So we started calling in our youth (our youth being the closest to the small child) to lend their thoughts, to lend their ideas.

At the time we were doing a lot of collaboration with MCFD and NIFCS and they started running with their own ideas of pulling the Grandmothers in and moving forward, and it was going at a fast pace. The next thing you know we were in Vancouver receiving an award. We have been out there since. With no money.



Grandmother Rita Hayward, Rachel Hewer (NIFCS staff), Kathleen Bennett (NIFCS ED), and Grandmother Gloria Russell at Lax Kw'alaams Nuum Na Waalt cultural seaweed picking camp for children and youth in care.

What We Do

To support our children and families, we collaborate with NIFCS in a number of ways. We invite children and their NIFCS social workers and caregivers to visit the communities, we send personal cards and gifts to each child and youth in care who lives away from their home territories, and we speak to the children and youth as a group by Skype. In collaboration with NIFCS, we visit with children and youth at MCFD offices and agencies along the coast. We know that children and youth in care are disconnected from their roots, and we know the importance of having

a strong cultural identity. Our communities have a lot to offer about Indigenous knowledge and ways of being, and we know that honouring these children and youth in these very practical ways shows respect for who they are and builds their sense of cultural identity and pride.

The Grandmothers' Group has journeyed down many other avenues. In November 2005, for the first time in Lax kw'alaams history, we welcomed 29 children home to meet their extended families who lived in the village. The event was called *Nuum Na Waalt* (You Belong To Us). To show the children how they belonged to us, we clothed them with a traditional vest with the four crests to remind them where they belong and that they would never be forgotten. We claimed other children who came along with our members (siblings, half brothers and sisters) and gave them a vest also. Tears were shed at this moment, as we believe it instilled that true sense of belonging.

In 2010 in Prince Rupert, we contributed to the possible changes to AOPSI (Aboriginal Operational Practice Standards and Indicators for MCFD) at a meeting with other communities. The Grandmothers came up with a list that could incorporate the necessary changes within the policy for First Nations.

As a result of attending the Touchstones of Hope¹ workshop, the Grandmothers came up with our very own "pathways" model to describe who we are. This model has been presented at our community forum, sponsored by the Lax kw'alaams Band, NIFCS, and the Coast Tsimshian Academy.

¹ "Touchstones of Hope is a set of principles to guide a reconciliation process for those involved in Indigenous child welfare activities. The movement fosters relationship building. Opportunities that provide a space and place to have respectful and truthful conversations about child welfare are provided in order to create a new reality for Indigenous children. This includes concrete next steps for moving forward together so that all Indigenous children are healthy and living with dignity and respect." See <http://www.fncaringsociety.com/touchstones-hope>

We have been invited to various communities, such as Prince George, Prince Rupert, Terrace, Fort St. James, Vanderhoof, and Metlakatla, to present who we are.

Storytelling is an essential part of our work. Through storytelling, we are able to connect with each other. We have what we call an *adaawx*, which means “truth telling,” and by truth telling we share and describe our traditional ways and our traditional culture. By practising our culture in a positive way, which includes singing, dancing, drumming, and wearing our regalia, we show where we come from and who we belong to, and we share our traditional songs and dance, and that connects us to one another. As you listen to the drum beat, it is like a heart beat, and it is like a heart beat of your Nation. Some day we will be walking together as one, but right now we are not there yet, because we still have a lot of challenges that we are faced with.

Customary Caretaking and Custom Adoption

We strongly believe that it takes a community to raise a child. Community means all those who are related to the child by family, extended family, clan, and tribe. Not just parents and grandparents. For in our worldview, parents also include aunts and uncles from the matrilineal side of the family. As for our grandparents, there are more than two sets of grandparents for our children. There are also our Elders in our clan and tribes.

We are all connected to a child in some way or another. It is our responsibility to make sure that every child is well taken care of. That their basic necessities are met, that they are on the right path.

The Lax kw'alaams band council, after some discussion with members of the Grandmothers' Group, made a decision to not allow any of our children to be adopted out to non-Native families. This was due to various stories of where our adopted children end up. Council was adamant that none of our children will be adopted out. Prior to that, there was one child who really made our wheels spin who “wanted to be adopted out.” Great-grandmother stood her ground and said, “No grandchild of mine will be adopted out.” This was upsetting to the child and the potential adopted parents. Even though we knew this is what the child wanted, the eldest in the family said no. That child is now in the early 20s and has lived a life knowing that its extended family needed him/her² to belong to them.

At the Terrace and Prince Rupert forums, we were invited to talk about customary ways of caretaking and custom adoption. Custom adoption as it is defined to us as Lax kw'alaams people is when a clan member from the same group or tribe or a family member who belongs to the tribe takes another child into their home. A family member who takes the child can be a family member, aunt, or uncle of the child. They can be related maternally or from the father's side. The child is taken in for various reasons.

At the Terrace forum, our eldest member, Marion Musgrave, described her personal experience with custom adoption and the teachings she learned from her grandmother:

2 We do not want the family identified and offer this example of how strong grandmothers are and how we are able to take lead roles in matters of our children.

I only have my own experience to speak of. There are different types of ways that children have been given over to another member of the family. My parents had to move away to Prince Rupert because where we lived it was only a fishing village at the time. There was no work, no school, there was no cannery at the time, so there was no other place of employment. So, having seven children, my mother and father decided they must move to Prince Rupert, so they did.

What often happens is we will choose one of the children if we have grandmothers and we feel that they would be left alone after living with us as a big family.... So to prevent that, from the time before even contact, at the time—I'll go off the rail a little bit here. At that time, before contact, we had no such things as—I don't know what you call them—houses where you house children with no parents, houses where you put your Elders, old people's homes, I guess they call them. We had no such thing. We had no such thing in our minds. We were brought up from the time we existed that we look after our own. We care for our own.

Usually they choose a child—like in my case, I didn't go to any residential school. My husband did, so I know what it's all about. Because, like I said, my parents figured they had to move away for their income. They chose me to stay behind with my grandmother, at the time I was just walking until I was nine years old when she died. My sister, she was a baby, so they had to take her. The older kids above me, there was seven of us, they were going to school, so they had to be in town for schooling. Our school in Port Simpson only goes to Grade 10. So they had to move to school, so all the rest of the brothers and sisters moved in with them.

Now I'll go into what I wanted to say. I was the lucky one. I felt so loved, so safe, so comfortable. My mother and father would come back and they would take groceries back. You know how it was in the old days—you prepared for the wintertime. You had everything in cases and cans. There was no freezers at the time. They bought new clothes for us and made sure we were comfortable, my grandmother and I.

My sister and I therefore experienced different styles of life as we were growing up. I'll call mine the cultural way. I'll call hers the big city way. She's never been lucky enough to live in the village. She came to visit me one time and she said, "When do we go back?" I said, "You can go back right now." No, I'm kidding. Anyway, I considered myself the lucky one because I was privileged, like someone mentioned here earlier.... Kids keep their ears open and as we were being brought up we were taught proper manners, proper ways, respect, love. Respect for others. Before yourself then others around you and everything around you, your surroundings. That was big for us. We did things without question. We were told to do something, we did it. We didn't ask questions. We just did it without question.

I was lucky I was brought up in the old ways, our cultural ways. I learned our culture. I hear our language, I hear our stories because Elders come and visit each other and they have tea. I had my own little table and chairs. I was always told by my grandmother ... "Little child, when I have a visitor," she said, "you have two choices depending on the weather and depending on how you feel. You sit at your table, you colour, you read a book or play with your dolls, but you don't speak and you don't ask questions. If we're having tea at the table and your table is here you don't come to that table and say, "Oh, that cake looks good." You don't do that. That's not exhibiting manners. If it's a nice day go out and play. You never repeat anything.... You don't say or talk about anything you hear. That is not right. In our language, a person that does that is a gossip.

We shared our children because we loved them and we loved the person we were doing it for. It's never changed. You can look around the room here and it's—you can see the grandmothers, they're still doing the same thing. It's without question. We never had any money given to us. We never had any help. We just did it because that's who we are.



The Grandmothers at the Child Youth Representative Award for Culture and Diversity, October 2010, Vancouver, BC.

Historically our children were taught at a very young age to learn our Tsimshian language, our traditional ways to gather food, our traditional values and beliefs, how to walk in and show respect, how to live. All of this was removed from our children when they were taken into care of the government agents, who sent them off to residential school. The gap is wide. But we are now reclaiming what was ours once more. We are taking up our roles as grandmothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, clans, and tribes.

Every grandmother is a role model. Her children watch and learn from her. She is the heart of the family. She holds the family together. She makes sure that her children are safe and her grandchildren are safe. If she knows that her child or grandchildren are not safe, she steps in to make sure they are. She is an advocator: she speaks up for her children and grandchildren. She is the holder of knowledge: she knows the traditional teachings that have been passed down to her from her parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, clan, and tribe. She passes this information down to her children and grandchildren. Every story she tells has meaning, has value, has a belief, and especially has the meaning of what respect is and how it should be shown. When her children do something that is not good in her eyes, she does not criticize, but shows tough love. She speaks when she knows it is right, and she teaches when she knows it is right, too. Her unconditional love is shown throughout each day to her family, especially to her precious gifts, her grandchildren.

We are waking up this sleeping giant, who is our Tsimshian communities, and we are teaching our children their roles and responsibilities for life, a healthy life. It is slow, and there are many more future generations we must work with, but we will get there.

We are Tsimshian. We are a sleeping giant. But we are waking up this sleeping giant, this Tsimshian Nation. We are coming alive once more.

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