

Nigel Atkin



# Community Women Who Make *a* Difference

**T**he individuals in this article represent many women who are making a difference, relentlessly serving the interests of others and developing their ability to respond to their communities' own needs.

While many women receive recognition, many more—the vast majority—get no recognition at all. They quietly press on, serving their children, families, and communities. They, too, deserve recognition, often on a daily basis.

I recently helped the Victoria Foundation bridge communication between the foundation, four regional trust advisory committees, and many First Nations, independent Bands, Métis, and urban Aboriginal organizations strengthening the transition to Aboriginal children and family program management.

In this initiative, funded by the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development, regional community-based committees sought proposals from Aboriginal communities and disbursed some \$2 million per region at arms' length from government.

In many cases, this was the first time Aboriginal communities were asked what *they* would do to support Aboriginal children safely residing within their families and communities, then were provided funding to carry out what they proposed.

**In many cases, this was the first time Aboriginal communities were asked what *they* would do to support Aboriginal children...**

In this unique program, Grant criteria included projects that:

- provided “new” strategic and innovative approaches;
- supported culturally sensitive alternatives to caring for children and extended families;
- supported community capacity to strengthen families;
- promoted less intrusive measures;
- encouraged pro-active family issue resolution; and,
- reduced the number of Aboriginal children in care.

In this experience, many women are making a difference to children, their

families, their communities, their heritage and culture, and in many cases to British Columbia, Canada, and the wider non-Aboriginal society.

Women are enacting systemic change and making it easier for Aboriginal culture to interface with institutions. There are Aboriginal family support workers, youth liaison workers, and a host of other alternative variations—including new Aboriginal organizations where Aboriginal workers have their feet in both cultures—providing liaison between families and institutional service providers, acting in fact as “interpreters,” thereby lessening the fear and developing trust with individuals, their children, and families.

Some individuals are providing “bi-cultural” services, recognizing the value of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal paths that can be followed. In today’s world, both are recommended. Aboriginal people who can function well in both cultures not only serve themselves better, they demonstrate a useful model to emulate as the trends of globalization and tribalism accelerate on the national and international stage.

There is a long way to go to bridge institutional programs with the real needs of individual families in Aboriginal communities, but many women are quietly making a difference in their own



*Addressing a large community workshop in Westbank in August, Okanagan Nation Alliance Executive Director Pauline Terbasket discussed the importance of integrating best practices of Indigenous child welfare, supported by culture and tradition, into contemporary service organizations.*

territories. And many non-Aboriginal women are effecting a positive respect and understanding of Aboriginal culture and tradition in institutions. It isn't just Aboriginal people who need to build capacity. Capacity to handle Canada's diversity also needs to be developed in non-Aboriginal organizations.

### **Changes on the Ground**

Of many examples from more than 116 projects currently funded in the Victoria Foundation initiative in four regions to date, here are a few of them.

While progressing in the planning stage for the development, devolution, and implementation of services to Aboriginal children and families, community women are leading innovative projects. Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) Executive Director Pauline Terbasket said projects are successfully integrating cultural knowledge and best practices in indigenous child welfare into active service delivery.

For example, working in eight Okanagan communities with 78 young

people in the R'N8ive (Our Native) Voice "Seen and Be Heard" youth project, ONA's Vanessa Mitchell emphasized that "youth are now," not something that just happens in the future. Mitchell said the program connected young people with their history and culture, developed interactions with Elders, and also taught them about the effects of alcohol and drugs with a trip "into the living room of the homeless in Vancouver."

**What's being accomplished in these British Columbia organizations has the potential of rippling across Canada.**

"Self-esteem, cultural awareness and pride, and the strengthening of relationships between and among generations all helped them understand the link between choices made today and the consequences of those choices for later life," Mitchell said.

In the Lower Similkameen Indian Band, a project called "Fostering in Our Communities – Beyond Limitations" is



*Working with Okanagan youth, Vanessa Mitchell holds a staff representing youth involved at the R'N8ive Youth "Seen and Be Heard" project that involved 78 young people in eight Okanagan communities this Summer.*



*Donna Roach, Executive Director of Aboriginal Circle of Elders in Surrey, holds a bear mask recently donated for fundraising to help sustain the project, which was initially funded by the Victoria Foundation.*

being undertaken. Lisa Montgomery-Ward said, "We understand that the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* will govern our process; therefore we are making our model of fostering that is more culturally relevant to our traditional customs, which will work within the current process."

In another example of making a difference, Big Sisters of the BC Lower Mainland received a Grant for

a First Nations Big Sisters Mentoring Program and Education Initiative. Shannon Newman-Bennett reported that accomplished First Nation women role

**This training has removed fear, educated our women, and empowered our people to become involved...**

models have been sharing their knowledge and inspiration with newer leaders and that Aboriginal Big Sisters are being matched with Little Sisters in culturally sensitive relationships.

In the Interior, another innovative Grant to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kamloops helped fund an Aboriginal In-School Mentoring Program in which 17 Aboriginal relationships were established in the past school year. What's being accomplished in these British Columbia organizations has the potential of rippling across Canada.

Stopping the transfer of guardianship to the state is an underlying goal of many trust fund initiatives. Donna Roach of the Aboriginal Council of Elders in the Fraser Region tells a story of when an Elder—a guardian of three grandchildren—passed away, community organizations were able to stop the apprehension of the children through mediation and consultation. With the Elders' support, they were able to place the children with the birth father, who is being assisted by the father's sisters in the raising of these children. Donna said this is the Aboriginal way and that the child must live, belong, and grow within the environment of human relationships rooted in their extended families, their clan, and community.

In another community, a small Grant to create the Squiala First Nation



*Developing self-esteem through culture and tradition, young Métis dancers in the Mooshum Bob's Métis Cultural Camp in the Fraser region perform in front of area social workers who are becoming more aware of the importance of Aboriginal culture in the services they provide.*

Community Care Committee resulted in a committee of six women working in conjunction with organizations to provide parenting workshops, advisory, and problem-solving services. Thanks to the efforts of the care committee, in one case children whose parents were killed or severely injured in a traffic accident will not have to go into a foster home but will stay permanently with family members.

As one woman recounted, community members have learned that “we do have the capacity within the community” to be involved in decisions made by government agencies. “This training has removed fear and has educated our women and empowered our people to become involved rather than sit back in apathy,” Donna said.

In the North, women are effecting systemic change to colleges and universities to make relevant, culturally sensitive changes to institutions. The Skidegate Band Council received a \$60,000 Grant for “Early Childhood Learning with A Social Context” program. Northwest Community College took up the challenge and provided another \$100,000 to provide community early childhood education that will provide cohesion to the services available to children and parents within the village. Haida Education Director Vonnie Hutchingson said the on-site accredited program is open to anyone on Haida Gwaii who is interested in working with young children and who meets the ECE program admission requirements.

In Prince George, Carrier Sekani Family Services—funded and supported through the Victoria Foundation, the Law Foundation, and the University of Northern British Columbia—is offering family dispute resolution and mediation training. Policy and program development officer Travis Holyk said some 22 individuals, the majority of them women from different communities in the territory, have enrolled and the project has “ignited interest in community-based mediation practices and justice in general.”

Building programs such as these, with the culture and tradition of the communities woven into family service,

works for everyone in society. Ana Trottier of the Métis Child and Family Services said that the culturally sensitive case plans that support children to remain with the families are efficient. She said an economic cost-benefit analysis of the “Families are Forever” program in Kamloops demonstrates a reduction of overall service costs and complements the other obvious benefits to children.

Communication remains vital to effecting healthy children and families.

Bernice Saunders reports that the community in the Bonaparte Indian Band is coming together through their project called “Grief in a Gentle Way.” She said the hard work of the chief and council and the social development team made this successful—“we learned that the community is strong once we come together.” In another community, the Carrier Chilcotin Tribal Council received a Grant to hold awareness workshops on family support, parenting, self-respect, and keeping families together. This community is going to continue this initiative with volunteers and will resume its community workshops.

Communication within communities and between communities from this project is also continuing. In St. Mary’s Indian Band, located in the Kootenays, a Grant funded the development of the *Raising Our Children* guidebook. Irena Whitehead said the project helps empower parents. Community family leaders and Elders were involved in the guidebook’s development. While touching on some culturally specific areas, the guidebook covers universal information regarding raising children. The guidebook is being shared widely in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to communicate some clear information that will help others make a difference.

There are many other stories to tell—stories of building capacity, of systemic change, and of communities returning to intelligent long-term cost-saving alternatives that are culturally sensitive and effective. ▲

**Nigel Atkin, BSJ, MA, is a communication consultant and instructor.**

Voice: 250 889-3349  
nigel@pinc.com