

# Engaging with Elders: A Co-created Story



fotosfx.jpg- Treaty 7 Flag raising at Calgary City Hall

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## 1. Introduction

This Elder Protocol project is centered on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. As the facilitator of this project, I have been blessed to work with our Calgary based Elders, knowledge holders and partner Cultural Mediators to make this happen. I am merely the gatherer of stories, and share the wisdom and words with you in hopes of fostering the ethical space where we can make our community stronger together. – Monique Fry, Xwchíyò:m Band, Stó:lō Nations

First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge the Creator, our ancestors and those who will come after us as providing the sense of spirit and intent for this work. We also would like to acknowledge that this project is centred on the Treaty 7 First Nation territories shared by the Blackfoot Confederacy- Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai, the Tsuut'ina Nation, Stoney Nakoda and the peoples of the Metis Nation who also call Mohkintsis their home.

This document is not meant to be a prescriptive piece that will teach you how to engage with Indigenous Elders in a step-by-step format. This is meant to set the stage for community to build relationships and understand what each other's roles are in that relationship. It is a very difficult task that we have to put the wisdom and knowledge that we shared in circle together over the year into words on a paper. Given the unique and diverse makeup of our community in Calgary and our Elders, we sought to provide a perspective that highlights the universality of their spirits, knowledge and ways of living.

Over the past year we brought together a diverse group of Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Mediators in circle to prepare for this document. There was much conversation for the first few months on the initial question of "What is an Elder?". This was a humbling experiencing to witness, and the circle of Elders modelled their teachings and behaviour with each other to be humble, respectful and open to learning from one another. There was never a sense of hierarchy among the circle, and no superiority, only love, kindness and respect.

The role of Cultural Mediators, which many Indigenous people who work in predominantly non-Indigenous agencies or institutions find themselves in, is a serious role to undertake. As such in the case of this project, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the teaching from the Elders are what they want to impart to the community balanced within a document that the funder and the community thinks will be useful to them.

The Elders are grateful to have had the opportunity to come together and share. Their support for the community today and the community of the future which includes all Calgarians, has resulted in the culmination of this project. The Elders were clear that they do not believe a paper document or guidebook is sufficient for this work, and they were open to exploring other opportunities to reach community, in particular the youth. They acknowledge that this is a new digital era and some knowledge must be preserved in other forms such as video and digital storytelling. The Elders want to meet the youth where they are at. While this project did not initially call for digital record keeping we have partnered with NewScoop to video tape some of the process of this project and we hope to work with other partners to secure funds to video tape stories and general protocol teachings with our Elders to go along with this document in the next phase.

We ask that you join us in the circle- learn, share and be open to the process of relationship building. This work should assist you and your agency to not only better engage with Elders in community, but it will extend to your understanding of working with and for the Indigenous people of Calgary. It will be up to you first to understand that there is a tremendous amount of work to be done at the individual level, but we encourage you to know that there are many people in the community that are willing to support you. Simply by having a deeper understanding you will be contributing to the healing and reconciliation process.

## Introduction of our Elders



### Camille Pablo Russell, Shooting in the Air, from the Blood Tribe

My father's father is from the Aakaaskimaaks (all make fun) his mother is from the Baggy shirts off shoots of the lone fighters. My mother's father is from the 30 trees Clan and her mother is from the Choking clan or Shooting in the Air Clan. I work at Alberta Health Services, as a counselor, herbalist, ceremonialist, and in the evenings I counsel the inmates at the Calgary Remand Center. I also am called upon by the community to give lectures, workshops and prayers for their projects.

My hope for this project is that people come to understand that the roles of Elders have different facets, and hats that they wear. They have been chosen by the community, their teachers, to carry on the roles they once had. They are not self-appointed. There are also many different tribes with unique differences and some commonalities as well. Some are steeped in their culture and ceremonial rights and some are elderly with experience of life, but do not carry the rights. It is my hope that people will learn how to choose the best elder for what they are seeking.



### Doreen Spence, Paskostikwanewkiheew (Bald Eagle) Iskwew (Woman) Kanikaniw (Who Leads)

I am from the Cree Nation and the Saddle Lake reservation in Alberta. My grandparents (Nohkom & Mosom) were the late Mr. & Mrs. Sam Bull from Good Fish Lake, Alberta. I was raised from my birth by my grandparents Eliza Jane and Washington Howse. The work I do in my community is diverse which includes traditional native healing twice a week, sweat lodge ceremonies and vision quests. I often conduct lectures at Mount Royal University, University of Calgary and St. Mary's University. I host my own Traditional Native Teachings workshops, healing circles and respond to many different organizations and individuals needing our Sacred teachings. I work entirely in service for the betterment of all.

I wish people to know the importance of this project. There is virtually no local information on this topic. Our Elders are our libraries. We value them for their knowledge, wisdom, history, songs, stories and ceremonies which is a key to a balanced life.

**Florence Kelly-** My name is (Naashkiiyaaskigek, Pizhiw Ododem) and I am a member of the Ojibways of Onigaming in northwestern Ontario. I was born in 1941 at Anishinaabe Park on the shores of Lake of the Woods and grew up in the traditional Anishinaabe way: summers were spent picking berries, fishing and harvesting wild rice, and winters were spent on the trap line. I was one of three girls in a family of twelve children. My childhood memories were later marred by my experiences at St. Mary's Residential school, when I was taken from my parents, my siblings and my life that I loved. I now make my life in Calgary with my three sons and my four grandchildren. I am a retired teacher and graduate from the University of Calgary (1992). Today I work in schools and communities sharing my lived experience and traditional knowledge. This project is important for our communities to heal seek reconciliation.



**Sykes Powderface-** From the Stoney Nakoda Nation in Morley, Alberta. Attended residential school at Morley and moved to Mount Royal College where he majored in Business and Communications. Served as Treaty 7 Vice President of the Indian Association of Alberta for six years, and was also elected as Vice President of the National Indian Brotherhood (now AFN) in 1979. He has researched and studied Indigenous and Aboriginal Treaty Rights, and always works toward continued recognition of those rights. Highlights of his work include the 1988 Olympic Winter Games, lead negotiator for Chief's Constitution Committee, Alberta Child and Family Services Appeal panel, and various stunt performer roles in films from 1949-2010. He now has his own consulting services that work in the areas of treaties, constitution, policy analysis and traditional teachings. He works with many schools near his community and is a member of the Making Treaty 7 production currently touring Canada. At 83, he still trains horses, he loves to golf and above all work with Indigenous youth to assist them in discovering their identity.



**Roy Bearchief**- Oki, my Blackfoot name is Oom ka pi si (Big Coyote) as well as my childhood name, Ako kimi (Many Wives). I am from the Siksika Nation. I have been living in the City of Calgary since 1980. My parents are Walker Bear Chief and Martha Bear Chief (Black Kettle). My paternal grandparents are William Bear Chief and Minnie Bear Chief (Dog Child) as well as my maternal grandparents Joseph Black Kettle and Mary Black kettle (Little Chief). My step grandparents were Joseph Heavy Shield who later married Mary and Peter Little Light who later married Minnie.

I see my role as an Elder in the community as a mentor, educator and bridging the gap between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous world under the premise of reconciliation. I am aware of my limitations as an Elder and often seek assistance from those that have more knowledge. But I do share what I know and what I have heard from others about the Siksika (Blackfoot) language and culture. I try to incorporate my Indigenous worldview as a Siksikawa with the Non-Indigenous worldview to create an understanding and establishing relationships throughout my work within the city.

I would like people to know that this project tried to capture the diversity of Indigenous people living in the City of Calgary as well as respecting and honouring the input from the Elders that were used for this project. Defining who is considered an “Elder” is sometimes difficult to define especially in larger metropolis centers such as Calgary because of diversity. We would like people or agencies to use the book as a guide as well as a resource.



**Cindy Provost- Cultural Mediator**

Constable Cindy Provost is a 20-year veteran of the Calgary Police Service. She serves as the Indigenous Strategic Engagement Officer embarking on work that understands the impacts of residential school, intergenerational trauma and where Community intersects to provide supports for healing and wellness. Cindy’s Blackfoot name is Naatosaki “Sun Woman” a name transferred to help carry her in her life and in her work. She is originally from Piikani Nation in Southern Alberta, her grandparents are Sam and Maggie Provost and Jack and Missy Crow Shoe.

Cindy’s work involves her personal experiences and testimonies to support the hope and understanding for educators, community partners and her service members to build and re-establish relationships with Indigenous families. Cindy has won numerous awards recognizing her strong commitment to youth and to the community.

Members from our community need to begin stepping into the cultural mediator role; and they need to understand this role and know that they will be supported in their own learning journey. I helped contribute to the visionary and intended healing this collection would have to help transform positive energy into our workplaces and into our community. Our children deserve healthy living and learning spaces and it is own moral and ethical duty as adults to provide them with such.

**Barb Barclay- Cultural Mediator**

is a Metis Registered Social Worker who has been in the Human Services profession for over 35 years. She has worked throughout Region 3, Treaty 6 & 7 in Alberta, in British Columbia, and the UK; with adults, youth, children, and families involved within the many systems.

Barb is currently the Southern Regional Manager for Native Counselling Services of Alberta; she manages four offices, in Treaty 7. Barb applied for the funding of this project believing that Elders be engaged from start to finish of programming, as they are the knowledge keepers that walk between both worlds. Barb sits on many committees, which support and enhance the Indigenous community within Calgary and the province. Some of those include MRU Social Work Advisory Committee, Aboriginal Awareness Week Calgary Committee, Alberta Hate Crimes Committee, Human Rights Committees, VVC Aboriginal and Justice Constellations, Vibrant Communities Calgary Board and the Executive Board for Alberta Restorative Justice. ~ In Spirit & Friendship~



### Monique Fry- Cultural Mediator

From the Band of the Stó:lō people in S'ólh Téméxw. My Grandparents are Felix Victor of Xwchíyò:m and Juanita Silvey- descendant of Portuguese Joe Silvey and Kwatleematt from shíshálh.

Cultural mediator, liaison, support of our Elders and community groups. I am just the facilitator between two worlds, humbly serving in the best way that I can. Grateful and honoured to work with my brothers and sisters in their traditional territories here in Mòhkintsis for over 12 years. Mother, wife, sister, daughter, friend- I carry All my Relations with me forward.

## 2. Types of Cultural Roles

Sykes Powderface asked a youth once what an Elder is, they answered that an Elder is someone that they can look up to; a teacher to help us know who we are; teach spiritual values; teach how to conduct themselves and teach them to help others.

“What is an Elder?” This was a topic in our circle for many meetings. There are many pre-conceived ideas and assumptions in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community as to what qualifies an Elder. It is important for this document to support a greater understanding and clarifications of what this means. Some of the problem lies with language. In using the English word Elder it is known as a title, as a noun<sup>1</sup>. For Indigenous people in our languages it is used as a verb to describe the role that they play in our community. The Elders of this project often commented that perhaps we need to change this term moving forward to avoid confusion- this term may need to be decolonized or “unpacked”.

There are many people and communities that believe that you automatically become an Elder when you turn a certain age, yet we know from working with our community that it is not about your age. It is about your experience, your knowledge, your transferred and gifted rights. We will try and compile some examples of “Elders” that will provide context in understanding roles and responsibility of community members. This is not an exhaustive list, and to be fair we are outlining them using English words to describe them and therefore cannot be exact to what their meanings are in each distinct Nation’s understanding.

There are a number of sources that we looked at in the literature review stage of this project that you can find in the appendix documents that are provincially based. They include the University of Alberta *Elder Protocol and Guidelines*, the University of Lethbridge *Blackfoot and First Nations Metis and Inuit Protocol Handbook*, Alberta Mental Health Board *Aboriginal Research Protocols*. In some cases, these resources are location specific and include policy for particular institutions to guide their work. The intention of this document is to speak specifically to the unique nature of the urban Indigenous community of Calgary.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation describes an Elder as:

Someone who is considered exceptionally wise in the ways of their culture and the teachings of the Great Spirit. They are recognized for their wisdom, their stability, their humour and their ability to know what is appropriate in a particular situation. The community looks to them for guidance and sound judgement. They are caring and are known to share the fruits of their labours and experience with others in the community (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2005, p 4).

The need for an Elder to be *recognized* as such in any community is of great importance. There are many misguided people who may self-declare themselves to be Elders in our community, however there is no clear validation of their role. We will talk a bit more on this subject in the next section on Healthy Elders. It is problematic to call someone an

<sup>1</sup> Elder Protocol and Guidelines, UofA

Elder without understanding what knowledge they have, where it came from, or who acknowledges it? A true Elder will not be offended if you humbly ask them who their ancestors are or where their knowledge comes from. In fact, most will tell you in introductory stories almost like an entertaining oral resume.

**Here are some of the examples that our circle spoke to; few have all of these gift, some have many, others may only have one.**

- Elders that gain knowledge from bundles and sacred objects or rites that have been passed down to them from other Elders who have come before them. They are often called **Ceremonialists**, and are called upon to conduct specific ceremonies if they hold the songs and understand the particular protocols for that ceremony.
- Gifted Elders from visions/dreams may have specific knowledge or gifts from their ancestors, or Creator to share with their people and community. They may be considered **Traditional Teachers** and may work with Ceremonialists or other Elders.
- **Storytellers** or **Orators** play an important role in the community to continue the transfer of knowledge and history to the community. They have special skills in public speaking and often will speak at wakes, funerals, weddings, conferences and other community celebrations. While they may not have the ability to perform ceremonies, they have a great understanding of Indigenous ways. Many Cultural Mediators are good Storytellers/Orators.
- **Herbalists** are often Women who specialize in knowledge of plants, medicines and teach the Medicine Men how to use them.
- **Philosophers** have an understanding of specific cultural knowledge such as governance, hunting, history, genealogy and they are often great Orators that share this knowledge within the community and with non-Indigenous people to highlight the parallels that exist in the validation of knowledge and worldviews.
- **Healers** or **Medicine People** have the abilities to heal all aspects of human ailing's that include the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental parts of us. They have the power of prayer, ceremonies and medicines to assist in the healing process.
- There are Elders who model living in **Good Way** and have lived experience to share with the community and people. They become role models, mentors and lead by example.
- There are even Elders and Knowledge Keepers that have become very proficient in understanding both the Academic and Spiritual realms- The **Eminent Scholars** of our contemporary times.

### 3. **Healthy Elders**

It is important for this circle to speak about the roles and responsibilities of our Elders prior to the impact of Indian Residential Schools. We are now in a time of re-discovering what this means for those that went to residential schools and for those that didn't, but were still impacted. The disruption and cycle of damage that has occurred may also lend heavily to the misguided understanding of who an Elder is, what they do and who "appoints" them.

There is a concern, that there are people in our community who may be working as an Elder and doing more harm than good as they are not themselves healthy. "What affects one of us- really does affect us all" explained Doreen Spence. However, we need to understand that this is not their fault. They are not entirely to blame. They are often genuine and want to help their community- and they are often asked to perform Elder duties and they don't know how to decline. It is the job of the healthy Elders to bring these Elders under their wing- to work with them on their healing journey. Not to shun them, ignore them and speak ill of them. Elders always have their own Elders, and so on, and so on. That is how we receive a lot of guidance and teachings in our communities- the knowledge always comes

from place, land, history and language since time immemorial. There is no shame in asking for help, in supporting one another, we are all worthy human beings.

**Our circle recognized the following attributes that an Elder should embody based on the old ways:**

- In the old days they would all come together with their unique gifts to help the whole person
- They encouraged one another and would acknowledge the work of all our traditional people- there was never a sense of competition
- There was never a sense of discouragement when they let you know that they were not the right Elder for you and they could refer you on to the appropriate individual
- They were working for Creator; they did not believe that they were Creator and would take ownership of themselves as a tool for Creator
- Elders were secure in their identity- clear in their understanding and honesty; they know where they came from
- They knew how to be authentic and live how they speak
- They should be able to take ownership of their knowledge and abilities and will only do what they are able to do
- Elders sometimes need to ask their Elders for guidance and permission to act accordingly, this is true humility

#### 4. **Life Long Learning**

This circle of Elders and Cultural Mediators acknowledge that this project is presenting itself at an important juncture in time. The social, political and cultural factors are all aligned to provide space for Calgarians to learn about reconciliation, relationship, reciprocity, and respect. The recent Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>2</sup>, and the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>3</sup> are two great resources to guide all of us in the right direction. While these hold National and International importance, in Calgary we also have the 2015-2017 White Goose Flying Report<sup>4</sup> acknowledged by the City Council to support the work at the local level.

The Elders tell us that we are always learning and sometimes we have to simply remember. Remember to listen, remember who we are, where we come from, and where we are. The power of identity- knowing yourself and your role in the world is rooted in place. Our collective identity as Calgarians/Southern Alberta may not be clearly understood by all if we do not know the history of this place. There is much pride in remembering. There is so much potential in remembering. The ability to self-govern and peacemaking with ourselves and others could be actualized.

As we get older, the knowledge that was shared with us when we were younger comes to life in our minds- “aha” moments. The young people have to take advantage of the knowledge...like a sponge, extract the knowledge that is saturated in the Elder.  
– Roy Bearchief

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Documents/CAUAC/White-Goose-Flying-Calls-to-Action-CAUAC.pdf>

You can learn a lot from listening and taking constructive criticism, then change and awareness will come. If we are too concerned with trying to defend ourselves when receiving criticism or direction, then we are not truly listening. For those of our non-Indigenous allies who are trying to learn it is important to acknowledge white fragility and/or white guilt that can keep you from growing and learning. Our circle noted that anti-racism training needs to occur with Indigenization for true change to happen.

Some key principles that all of our Elders wish that we spent more time understanding include love, kindness and respect. When is the last time we reflected and acted in kindness? Among our diverse representation of nations, we all could agree on the fundamental similarities that exist because of our understandings of interconnectedness.

**Universal Principles:**

Unconditional Love  
Trust  
Kindness  
Respect  
Reciprocity  
Humility  
Honesty  
Courage  
Wisdom  
Truth

There are many new perspectives that can be gained in working with Indigenous Elders that can be useful to all peoples. We are fortunate in Calgary to have a diverse Indigenous population from all over Canada, each with their distinct languages, cultures, and protocols. It is impossible for us to outline all the differences between us, which is why this project focuses on the universal truths, laws and principles that bind us together as Indigenous people.

It is important to know where knowledge comes from, be able to acknowledge it and understand it's equality. There is no hierarchy of knowledges, and we respect the ways in which other nations conduct business, do ceremony etc. It is not appropriate to look at Indigenous protocols in a pan-Indigenous way, or assume that all peoples do it a particular way. It is appropriate to ask questions- to share what you know. It also very important to sit, hear and learn. Often we do not take the time to observe, and this is how we traditionally learned new skills and knowledge- first by observing, then by modelling and doing. We are in the middle of relationship building, and as previously mentioned, now is the time to be thoughtful and intentional. Experiential learning is key, and will only strengthen the learning for us all.

We must advise that using one Elder for programs or for guidance is not enough. Based on the roles and responsibilities that many Elders embody, you may need multiple Elders who have diverse view points and to share the load of responsibility. In particular, in the urban setting, a diverse group of Elders that are representative of the community is integral to authenticity. We also do not want to put an Elder in a position where they are being asked to do things that are not appropriate, sacred, or bound by certain protocols. Here again we see the important role that Cultural Mediators can play in assisting and mentoring agencies in their path of understanding.

There is never one person who can do it all in the community...there is too much judging today on what people are doing wrong and not (enough focus) on the skills that they have to share.  
– Camille Russell

**5. Relationship Building**

Here we would like to acknowledge you the reader. Thank you for taking up this work. Thank you for not being afraid to ask questions and discover what it is that you do not know in this area. Relationship building is first and foremost about creating those safe spaces for relationships to flourish. It is no secret that the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have been tenuous in the past. We acknowledge that there are risks on both of our sides in coming together in this way. This is a process where we have to learn to trust each other. We are all here for a common purpose in wellness- for the security of mind, body and spirit. We are all treaty people, and we are all capable of learning from each other.



As we come together in the act of repairing, rebuilding relations we must remember that this is a co-created process. Elder Herman Yellow Old Woman describes the collaborative effort as “Sharing our progressive spirits”, which is simply profound when we can understand this at the foundational core of our relationship.

It is important to employ Indigenous Cultural Mediators to assist you in the relationship building. Here mentorship and role modelling can occur, allowing you to know and do at the same time. Experiencing it yourself first by observation and then with support, doing it on your own.

With the inclusion of Cultural Mediators there is also a sense of protection for the Elders. Whether it is in terms of the types of requests they are being asked, if they are being over-burdened or abused. Elders should be able to bring these young people along-side them, as they often support many facets of the Elders work. The Cultural Mediators are also being mentored by the Elders to succeed them in the work when they are no longer on this earth. Many Elders will pay part of their honoraria to these helpers to assist their costs for mileage, parking etc.- so they would appreciate it if their helpers were compensated for their roles as well.

The role of Cultural Mediators to mentor the agencies and organizations cannot be overstated. Their role includes advocating for support and ongoing training both internally and externally to ensure consistent work is being done to maintain knowledge and relationships. We can learn from them the importance of visiting with Elders- not just when we need something from them, but to strengthen the bond, and to take care of those Elders. In those visits we can learn to listen, to be patient, and come to understand the ways in which Elders share their knowledge with us. We can also learn the expectations of how we take care of our Elders, and not take for granted their important role in our community and lives.

It is a concern for the Elders that there be time for them to teach the younger generation properly. This is a form of Indigenous professional development that should be developed. This would require sacred spaces for that to occur but also sacred time to enable an authentic transfer of knowledge. Florence Kelly remembers fondly that she learned by watching her mother and grandmother be good role models. “Everyone had jobs on the trap line. I liked to cut wood. No one had time to be bored; for hours I would cut wood and I would be so proud of my wood pile! It was a source of pride and you were acknowledged for working hard. You learned to be helpful.” Experiential learning models have existed with Indigenous people for generations.

We know that this will all take time, and there are people in the community that are able and willing to step up if you ask them. When you have those authentic connections- you will be able to speak to your role as an Ally in the Indigenous community and we will know by your actions.

A note on Storytelling:

- Give the Elder time for storytelling.
- Storytelling is often there for the purpose of helping you, it is not frivolous.
- It is up to you to extract the tools that you need from that story, to help you make a decision and provide a sense of direction.
- There is reciprocity in story, it is not one sided and you must be prepared to understand that you are not going walk out with a prescription or a business plan. You will walk away with the understanding that you have a part to play in this- that is the sacredness that you gain with listening to Elders.
- Structured agendas are colonial constructs, and many Elders do not like this. They often would rather like to know what the “shared purpose” of the meeting is.

“There should be an expectation to ask for a creation story or a morality story to share as a way to show that they are accountable and knowledgeable”

## 6. Discussion on Protocols

**What are protocols?** Protocols keeps us in line- they are a part of our natural laws and keep things respectful of the process. They are ways to acknowledge the roles and responsibilities that each of us has to play when interacting with each other and Creator.

Protocols are also a process of respect. There is the fundamental understanding that protocol takes the time to acknowledge and utilize spirit. This is not about organized religion but a way of life for Indigenous people.

**Why are protocols necessary?** Camille Russell stated that “it is about transformation from one state of mind to another- to keep you on the straight and arrow”. This sets the tone and boundaries for the relationship, request and follow through.

“Protocols emulate the values- love, honesty, kindness etc. to have the courage to approach, and humbleness”- Doreen Spence.

“Sometimes there are challenging concerns, what saves us is protocol- it is equalling, no favoritism- there is nothing that cannot be fixed.”- Sykes Powderface

**Why do Indigenous people pray?** Prayers will connect us; they open our minds and hearts for the work to be done in a good way. Your spirit has to be connected and charged up in the morning, you do this with prayer. Elders will use prayer along with gifted medicines to send our requests to the Creator.

**What are medicines that Indigenous people use/or gift to Elders and why are they given?** Gifting of tobacco and/or other medicines is like a contract for service. They are bound by what they agreed to do by accepting the tobacco from you. Each nation will have their own origin stories for how these medicines have been gifted to them from Creator and what they are used for. A commonality lies in the sacredness and acknowledgment of the role they play in protocol and ceremony.

Some medicines that are used most often for the purposes of gifting and smudging include:

- **Ceremonial tobacco**- there are places that you can order organically grown and ceremonial harvested tobacco<sup>5</sup>. This is preferred over store bought that has many toxins and additives. Tobacco is often offered to Creator in the ground, bundled into tobacco ties with cloth, smoked in ceremonial pipes, used in smudge and is the most common form of request to an Elder or ceremonialist.
- **Sweetgrass**- often braided to replicate the braids of Mother Earth, this medicine is often used for cleansing and healing purposes of the spirit, the mind and sometimes even physical spaces.
- **Sage**- the burning of sage and its smoke is also thought of as a healing or purifying medicine. When used in a smudge it can bring balance of emotions, body, mind and spirit together in harmony. Some nations believe that Sage is the women’s medicine and therefore not used by some ceremonial men.
- **Cedar**- often referred as the “Tree of Life” it sustained the mind, body and soul as virtually every part of the tree was used in some aspect of life - longhouses, canoes, totem poles, baskets, clothing, ropes, cooking utensils, medicines, spiritual ceremonies, ceremonial masks, hats and capes.<sup>6</sup>

While it is typical to trade tobacco for money (to buy it) it is most common to trade one medicine for another depending on what you need. Sometimes tobacco is used to trade for a bundle of Sage or Sweetgrass braid for example. These are just four of the many medicines that Indigenous people find in their natural environment to support well-being, spiritual and physical health. These are the most commonly used in every day ceremonies such as

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<sup>5</sup> Recommended ordering online from <http://motherearthtobacco.com>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/sacred-cedar>

smudging that all human beings are gifted with the rites to do. Many other medicines are only to be used by those that have special rites to them and they are not to be played with.

There is also the need for unconditional giving and loving to Elders that is not about requesting a “service” from them. In this type of gifting you have to keep in mind the question to why you are gifting them? Are you giving with conditions and expecting something in return or are you doing it unconditionally? A small gift of jewellery, a blanket or something else meaningful to the Elder you are working with is most appropriate at the end of an event or ceremony to say thanks.

**How do you approach Elders?** First and foremost it is important to ensure that communication is clear. Do you know what you are requesting of them and is it an appropriate ask? Here is where utilizing the assistance of the Cultural Mediators is vital. They can assist you in getting to the matter at hand. The Elders need to know that you are clear in your request and that the spirit and intent of your request(s) are authentic and true.

Knowing how an Elder may like to be approached is also important. Do not be afraid to ask the Elder how they would like to be involved in the work, or how they would like to contribute.

Set the tone of respect. Many believe that you have to carefully honour and baby the Elders. This means taking care of them when you are the one who has invited them. Do they need to be picked up and drove to your location? Make sure there is food and refreshments available for them. Sit with them, or have someone assigned to sit with them and ensure they know where the washrooms are etc. They are your honoured guests, eminent scholars and should be treated like royalty.

**How do you handle Honoraria and gifts for Elders?** Above all things, there is a transfer of knowledge, service, prayers or guidance that you are requesting from them and this entails a symbol of reciprocity. Our circle of Elders said that they don't put a price on what they are offering as gifts to the community. They acknowledge that there is a fundamental difference in how the western world views money transactions. They fear the exploitation of our culture for money, but do recognize that money transactions symbolize traditional and cultural exchanges of the past, pre-colonial times.

There is a process for identifying what you may offer to an Elder that involves more complex notions than a mere mathematical formula. You have to take in to consideration the value of what they are offering balanced with what you can afford. In the past, gifts included blankets, food, wood, ceremonial objects, medicines, horses and many other things that would be useful to the Elder. To keep some form of tradition in the protocol of gifting, a special blanket is often a high end gift that is given for special occasions/ceremonies.

Many Elders hold a lifetime of knowledge that often surpass those of our western PhD holders. Some have been learning since they were children. Our Elder Camille Russell has been learning about plants, herbs and medicines for over 18 years- that level of expertise and understanding was transferred to him from many other Elders. He also had to provide gifts, offerings and honorarium to those that taught him. The circle of reciprocity must continue and it is put into practice with honorarium.

Elders themselves will not typically discuss details of honorariums, and it is not polite to ask them what they would accept. If they accept your tobacco and request at the outset. They are trusting that you will use your best judgement to honour the request. Utilising the support and guidance from a Cultural Mediator who knows about the value of the request can be helpful as a guide for you to consider.

We will not put a guideline to how much you should offer, as it is dependent on too many factors to outline them all. It is important to note that their knowledge and expertise should be highly valued. It is also important to note that there are some requests that they cannot fulfill yet they will often know who you can ask instead. When you build up a relationship with knowledge keepers, your circle of support will widen.

Camille Russell remembered in the olden days you would always help the Elders by getting them water or chopping their wood. “They would invite us for tea and bannock, pray for you, paint your face and tell you stories, (this was) the payment for helping them. At the time you didn’t know how it will impact them and you in the future.”

**What type of requests are appropriate?** It is imperative to note that prior to any ceremonial requests of an Elder, you should have a relationship built up with them. Doreen Spence provides vision quests and sweat lodge ceremonies in community, however there is a protocol of learning in stages that one must go through first. You don’t start at vision quests- you first take her Traditional Native Teachings workshop that lays the ground work of understanding.

The circle of Elders was very clear that it is inappropriate to have an Elder come as a token of Indigeneity. Having them there for the sole purpose of opening and closing in prayer is not sufficient. Roy Bearchief noted that the Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action have raised the bar for many. Sticking with the status quo is not enough- the Elders need and want to be more involved in the communities well-being.

Once a relationship has been formed, and the Elder is clear on the shared purpose they can be asked to host sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies if they hold these transferred rites. Most Elders and knowledge keepers can lead a smudge and sharing circles, though not all can conduct healing circles, so it is important to know what the Elder is able to conduct for you.

As a cultural mediator it is important for you to know the gifts and rites of the Elder that you support. Make yourself knowledgeable, connect them to the right people, work with them so that can be most useful. “The person in the middle has an important role to make sure each side understands; they are the main person, that is a very important role that needs to be there.... the bridge for both sides; they hold integrity” Camille Russell

**How come time does not seem to be as important to Indigenous people?** Camille Russell says that time is always a factor; we have programmed ourselves to be bound up tight with it. When working with Elders and Indigenous people you are moving between ways of being and doing. There is a constant need to reprogram ourselves to the time structures that we all work in.

“Understand the expectation of that transformational change to allow your Elders as eminent scholars that time to transition their spirits to that space. Afford those Elders time for their own transformation- mentally, physically, emotionally, to do the work for Creator.”- Cindy Provost

## 7. In Closing

We have hopes for our youth and our next generations. They just want to be listened to and someone to be there for them and talk it out. – Florence Kelly

This is a living document and to ensure that the words do not sleep or lose their power we have taken this document into the sweat lodge with our Elders and Tsuut’ina Lodge Keeper Hal Eagletail. The process of using ceremony throughout the project is a methodology that we do not take for granted. Using prayer, song and ceremony validates this work on another level.

Further validation will take shape in the hosting of a community presentation and celebration of this work. At that time, we will discuss the importance of the process, the outcome of this work, and recommendations for future work. We will utilize the digital video that was made with support from NewScoop and have the Elders speak to the importance of the project in their own words.

We have allowed the space for contemplation and for questions to be asked. The Elders have made it known that this is a piece of a larger puzzle. This is not mean to be a prescriptive guide, and all knowledge must build upon the previous evolution. The co-creation process in this model is the system that we operate in our home communities and one that we want to use more freely in the urban Indigenous community.

We didn't just arrive here with knowledge and awareness; it is a journey. Sometimes we take for granted those that came before us and allowed us this opportunity today; that DNA runs in our blood.

**Recommendations-** There were many recommendations that our circle of Elders had for future work, or things that will support the appropriate use of Elders and traditional ways of living and doing in Calgary. Here are a few that stood out:

- Workshops that bring diverse Elders together; both for sharing between them and for multiple vantage points to look for solutions etc.
- Connect with other Elders groups that exist in the city and pool knowledge, resources, supports to avoid working in silos
- We need to build up the community of Elders in the urban centre- we also need to make a distinction between the traditional and the modern- what roles do they have that are the same and different
- Physical space for Elders to gather regularly for their growth and the growth of the community
- Survey of the “working” Elders, cultural advisors/knowledge keepers to see where the expertise lies in the community and who has rites to perform what
- Sharing of stories with other Elders; learning about diverse protocols between Elders
- Sharing of hunting and other cultural practices between Elders and community groups
- Protocol in place so that an Elder always has a cultural mediator that they are mentoring, who also should receive honorarium, paid parking as they are often driving the Elders
- Ground all work, programs and projects in some sort of ceremony with guidance from Elders
- Have Elders to assist in shifting the paradigms and mind-sets of non-Indigenous people that hope to work with us as allies
- Healing and debriefing with Elders as an ongoing task in line with Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action
- Time for the work to be done in the right way

Above all acknowledge “our way of living and way of being- our ability to make treaty under natural law, with sage, with the animals, with people and everything in our environment”. – Camille Russell

## 8. Appendixes

- I. Community Survey- At the onset of this project we used Survey Monkey to receive community feedback for the design of this project. We received 150 responses to this survey. The summary of this survey is 37 pages in length and we are working on providing a link to the summary online along with a digital link to this document.
- II. Power in Story- sharing of some specific moments from the Elders Circle Meetings over the length of the project. They are in no particular order, and I have taken the liberty to include those that spoke to us all in circle, and while all of the stories that were shared over the course of the project informed this document- there were so many beautiful stories that were shared.
- III. References and Sources that we looked at or used in this document.

## Power in Story

How do people use stories, storytelling, the learnings and teachings that are embedded in them? The old people are so happy when they tell their stories and gather together. The way that it used to be back in the day. The traditional elder has acquired the knowledge from a variety of grandparents in the community.

Roy Bearchief - Humbled to be here and included in this project; definitions of Elders are different in individual communities and Calgary is a community in the City too; we have to look at the diversity of Indigenous people of the city; how do we certify people as Elders? It is a big responsibility, connection to the impact of our youth to go in the right direction; Elders have a responsibility to the youth; you have to stay away from drinking and ask them not to...trust is big, and respect; What did you learn as a child growing up? In the city for over 36 years; I have seen the growth of the city, the ups and downs of organizations, different mayors and leadership; this should be about building the capacity of the youth.

Sykes Powderface - (he's 83- and defines himself as an apprenticing Elder!) we are so diverse with different perspectives and worldviews; the influence of the modern world confuses us to what a real Elder is; What do we understand about an Elder? Who can the young people look up to as a role model? Practice what you preach...some people are confused on respecting Elders due to their experiences either in residential school or life- you learned violence to survive in schools; wisdom; how do we categorize?

We have to be careful with homogenizing our traditions, the commercialized Elders...they are bringing curses on young people if you are using knowledge incorrectly, for example fake pipe holders; putting work of elders out of context; you know who is an Elder when you ask them to do something...they don't ask for money up front, they are given a gift; Elders don't negotiate the terms; real Elders have references too...people in the community who watch them and can authorize; you can't use the medicine if you are not of the right mind; the ones that are not real...you have to correct them that is your role to respect them too...only the Elders can correct them.

Doreen Spence - who an Elder is, is defined by the Nation, by the people themselves; they lead by example; they know songs, stories about the teachings; walking the talk; emulating the good; not about tokenism; it is a way of being to be an Elder; your home is there for the people; you are not coming from a place of ego, you are a caretaker of the people and future generations; you are of service to the people 24/7; you have to learn to love yourself and learn to love everyone else even with their pain, sorrow and grief; be of assistance when you learn to rise above from the pain, you will never escape that but learn to rise above and learn to deal with it to help others to heal; connecting with the earth, culture and traditions is the only way; visions and dreams can carry us here, they brought me here; it can be painful to be here as an outsider but we have to heal our communities; the grandmother's role is so important and we need to ensure that young women are upheld; we have to be careful about the terminology itself with Elder...when we define it ensure that it is about traditional knowledge that is back to the land itself, the wisdom.

For the first time we have some legally binding instruments to support us: The Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Florence Kelly - I was raised on the land traditionally my father was a trapper; Ojibway from Ontario Lake of the woods, we travelled in canoes and dog sleds; we always go back to the land and we knew about the land, we were never afraid of the bears...we would know to be careful; not afraid of wild animals, hauling water etc. Mother was a great teacher- singing while skinning animals, grandparents where there too...in a small cabin 12 family members; always getting along; grandparents would take turns telling stories every night for entertainment with lessons that were repeated over and over; now I tell them to my grandkids; my son prompted me to speak up and tell the stories, that it is my duty he said; in my Seniors group some Elders do not want to talk about residential school; I was raised traditionally and in the spiritual way... then Christianised; I kept my language though; I often speak to my brothers

who are spiritual elders for knowledge; when you are an elder you can learn from other elders too; My brothers shared with me that being called an Elder is a big responsibility; live a clean life; I witnessed ceremony as a young child before residential school and the stories were very important- Elders would sit in the centre of a circle in ceremonies in the winter when feasting; now people live differently; I ensure that my children and grandchildren go home to the reserve and know how to do the traditional activities of the community; It is important to just be humble.

Cindy Provost - we all come from our ancestors; we have to acknowledge them; you will always remember your atmosphere, your environment; your intrinsic memory will remember that safe place with your grandmother etc.; the expectation that this is a relationship, a relational investment when you are looking for healing etc. it can't be one sided; the Elder is giving a lot too; we need to be there for our healers and elders too; with humility and gratitude...when you walk away, you pray for health, happiness and unity for that elder and their loved ones; the exchange is mutual; we often get what we need from elders and we go; and too often we only go when we want something....sometimes Elders need debriefing too; we should give back to them too; we have to acknowledge our elder abuse in the communities.

The story that the statistics tells is a sad story today for us; we need to find a way to understand the traditional knowledge, the uses and benefits it has in our lives; there is a reason why we Indigenous peoples are surviving; in order to extract the tools for our young people based on our traditional world views, we need to ensure that we have a safe place for this to occur; there is an opportunity here; cultural safety, food, treated with respect; we need to work towards that for our community; it is a shared investment; in a perfect world we have a peaceful environment; could we preload others with the information on how to ask for help, so they are not shy and intimidated; and both sides walk away from an experience that is a positive one?

Roy Bearchief - when we speak about language, those that are products of the IRS, when we become parents it is incumbent on us to pass the language and culture to our children; something that makes us accountable as Elders in the end is important for this project.

Camille Russell - how are you going to pay back what the community/reserve has done for you- a home, taking care of you and your children- the payment is sharing your knowledge when you are an old person, your stories etc; to get everyone on the same page, same road so that everyone is present and they are in the mood to get the job done; we have different cultures in Calgary, different backgrounds of Elders from other Nations; that diversity needs to be expressed especially for the kids so that it does not melt us all together; we forget about sign language the way that we all used to use to communicate between tribes; need to incorporate the technology; not everyone is set out to be keepers of the culture; there are certain children that are gifted to be keepers of the culture, they are born to be like that, those are the ones that will benefit from this work; we need to give them the opportunity to figure out their purpose...for young people it would be nice to have that in place for them to find themselves; to have the time is hard to find to do all these things; this work is important and needs to be aware of it.

Florence Kelly - An Elder has to ask you and you have to be taught by them if you accept. Whether or not it is ceremony or medicines; you don't just say you want to learn it and do it...it is a long process.

People used to know what everyone's roles were in the community; they knew who they were. Storytellers, medicine people, drummers, hunters etc.

Sykes Powderface - Elders are like a library, and in a group session of sharing you can take what you need; our oral history is fast disappearing and knowledge is going with them who pass on; we are trying to protect that information to maintain it; we are at the stage to use modern technology to maintain it; in classrooms we are using social media, electronics so that students can connect with it; training young people the art of oral traditions and language.

Camille Russell - It's really important to preserve stories; there are 2 kinds- holy stories that teach us the origin of ceremony, then there are the other ones that have a moral to it of some sort; when you hear the story, it is a nice

story but with a message; it could be about a principle or value; these are the things that shape us to be wise; you grow up hearing the stories, later in life those stories come back and you hear them in a different way than when you were a child and the meaning comes to you more clearly; a reflection of your awareness and how you conduct yourself. Today kids are so smart- they are so aware at a very young age- they get the moral and the meaning of the story at 6 years old already...it took us awhile. The older people that never had a good upbringing or traditional teachings, they may be on the streets or incarcerated...they don't have the ability- and they need these stories, and the outcome will be maturity, awareness and coping, independence.

You have to teach people patience and self-reliance; in boarding school you missed your mom and dad; then when you have kids, you spoil your kids and enable them because of that trauma; you have to keep telling them; we have to be the uncle, aunty, the grandparents; we live in the city we don't live around our family; we live far from our relatives and that is missing.

When you come to an elder and you visit them; they say "how did you get here?" he is asking a story of your journey and there is a whole story of getting to their place...then there is a story in all that we do- then you talk about other stuff...that is how you start the interaction- that is how we used to visit; need to recreate that feeling again.

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<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/sacred-cedar>

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United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

Calgary Urban Affairs Committee- White Goose Flying Calls to Action

<http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Documents/CAUAC/White-Goose-Flying-Calls-to-Action-CAUAC.pdf>