

COMMUNITY

Castlegar

Project:

Strengthening Cultural Connections— West Kootenay and Boundary Aboriginal Women’s Healing Conference**Circle of Indigenous Nations Society**

Castlegar is a small community in the West Kootenay/Boundary area of British Columbia in the southeast corner of the province, with a population of about 8000 people. The land in the West Kootenay and Boundary region has historically been “shared territory” among First Nations people, with many of the people coming from diverse First Nations, Metis and Inuit backgrounds from all over Canada.

This area of British Columbia lacks cultural services to provide Aboriginal women with a sense of cultural identity and community connections and belonging. The region does not have a band office, friendship centre, or reservation. Many Aboriginal women living in the region report the need to leave the area and move to larger Aboriginal communities or urban areas where they can access ongoing culturally specific programs and traditional healing. The community reported that women and youth were at a higher risk for abuse, addictions, mental health challenges, as well as sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

The coordinator of this project, **Kris Taks, Executive Director of the Circle of Indigenous Nations Society**, reports that:

“This has left Aboriginal people lost and disconnected from their culture. Without a sense of cultural connection, identity, and community belonging, women are at risk of leaving our community, and are more likely to be at risk for sexual exploitation and human trafficking.”

Laurie Holton, Bridges for Women Coordinator, Castlegar & District Community Services Society, is one of the project supporters. She explains that the women’s life stories are complex and involve:

“the impacts of colonization, intergenerational trauma, the effects of residential schools and subsequent violence, abuse and neglect, poverty, isolation, involvement in sex work, and coping through substance abuse...”

This community took action in 2013 to hold a three-day gathering for thirty-four Aboriginal women and youth focused on traditional healing and cultural and community connection. The participants made their own traditional hand drum, experienced ceremony and healing circles, and received teachings from Elders and other traditional knowledge keepers. The gathering included drumming, smudging, Elders’ blessings, a drum making ceremony, and talking circles. During the gathering, the participants formed connections and relationships with each other that connected them to the Aboriginal community and traditional ways of healing. **Ms. Taks** says:

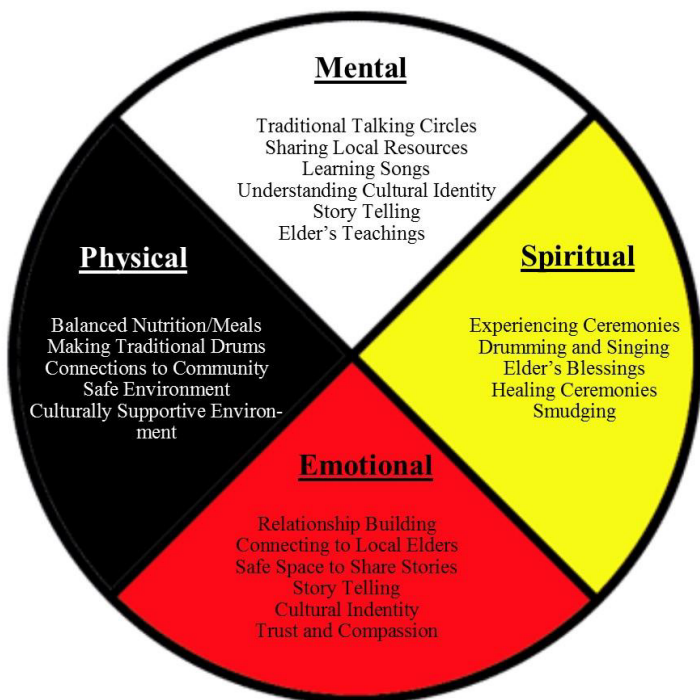
“It is our hope that by offering these connections and experiences to vulnerable Aboriginal women and youth in our region, the risk of sexual exploitation and human trafficking will decrease.”

Ms. Taks witnessed some surprising and positive changes in those who attended, including women who gained the courage to sing “out loud” for the first time—and youth who felt safe enough to express themselves by reading their own poetry to a group of peers. Other participants shared their stories of violence and exploitation in this safe space, and sought assistance from those in attendance to support efforts towards continued sobriety and wellness.

The longer-term impacts of this conference have been noted, based on an increasing number of women and youth who attended the conference now accessing various local cultural resources and gatherings such as community drum circles.

Medicine Wheel Model for “Strengthening Cultural Connections” - West Kootenay and Boundary Aboriginal Women’s Healing Conference 2014.

Developed by:
Kris Taks.MSW



Some challenges were also noted, including a lack of resources for follow-up, and the ability to offer deeper healing practices and sustained contact with cultural teachings and Elders. The community hopes to offer additional healing workshops and other ways to support these women in the future.

This model of the medicine wheel was used to create a caring and supportive environment for women to share their stories, experience culture and traditional ways of healing, to learn about their own cultural identity, and to make connections with Elders and community.