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Western Research Centre

## ***Final Paper (Handbook)***

### ***Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre's Creation Stories: Creating Strong Families Through Our Stories***

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*UAKN Atlantic Research Centre*

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit: [www.uakn.org](http://www.uakn.org)



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Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre's

# CREATION STORIES

A photograph of a family (a man, a woman, and two children) is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The family is smiling and looking towards the camera. The woman is holding a baby, and another child is in the foreground. The text 'CREATING STRONG FAMILIES THROUGH OUR STORIES' is printed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters over the lower portion of the image.

**CREATING  
STRONG FAMILIES  
THROUGH  
OUR STORIES**

Thank you to Sharon O'Brien and the community of the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre. Without your ongoing generosity, this project would not have been possible.

We acknowledge that the land on which this project took place is located on the traditional territory of Mi'kmaq Peoples.

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# Contents

There are seven sections in this booklet that follow the Mi'kmaq's Seven Sacred Gifts of Life: Love, Honesty, Humility, Respect, Truth, Patience and Wisdom. According to the teachings of Mi'kmaq elder Dr. Murdena Marshall, each of the seven sacred teachings has been passed down to help us in our lives and empower us in our journey, as we each work on creating our own stories. Each section has three parts: a quote from a Mi'kmaq elder or knowledge holder, a quote from interviews with parents from the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre, and finally, a question to help you think about your own creation story.

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# What is a Creation Story?

“My culture and learning — a lot of that came from my dad. When he did tell me stories about the Mi'kmaq through storytelling, that was... my first taste of it. You know — Glooscap, the animals, and his stories that sort, the bedtime stories when I grew up... And I heard more stories, community stories which I feel are just modern-day stories of the old stories.”

Community Member

Storytelling is a foundational part of Aboriginal history and culture. Traditional stories can play an important role in providing direction and insight into our daily lives and help us make connections to a broader community and a wider vision. For each of us, being able to tell our own stories helps us stay grounded in our communities and families. The goal of this book is to help you ground yourself in your creation story, to take control of your story, so you can reframe your life, beliefs, and practices to create the best story for your family. There is good help and support for urban Aboriginal parents in PEI, but if you are not comfortable with your story, it will be that much harder to be open to that help. Know and embrace your story.

# Why Would I Use Creation Stories?

How might storytelling help us prepare for a better life? Creation stories are learning stories. The purpose of such stories might be to teach the young, preserve history and rituals, preserve culture and values, entertain, challenge thought, or stimulate creativity.

Creation stories can be about Aboriginal peoples, history and culture, my story and yours, the story I wish for our children, the story of our life span and relationship to each other.

Daniel Siegel, in his 2007 book *The Mindful Brain*, states that, “the mindful telling of our tale can be greatly healing of unresolved issues in our life”. *Creation Stories* is a book to read and reread, to come back to as you grow.

What is your story? Are you comfortable telling your story? Has anyone ever asked you about your story?

*Creation Stories* is an attempt to offset the legacy of colonization in Canada. In order to empower ourselves, we will have to work together and learn as we go. It is important to realize that we all have choices and that these choices have an effect on our families. As individuals and as a community, we have the knowledge and skills needed to live the lives we choose for ourselves, our families and our community.





# LOVE

Love is grounded in knowing the Creator and knowing you are an important part of life.

“Oral traditions are the foundation of our tribal consciousness. It is the feeding ground of tribal epistemology. It is the beginning and the end of Mi’kmaq life.”

Elder Dr. Murdena Marshall

“Oh yeah, she always let me help her cook and stuff, and add the flour into the pot or something like that. She (grandmother) taught me a lot about caribou. She taught me how to make a meal out of caribou, the first meal. She taught me how to cut caribou, and how to skin it, and everything... Porcupine too. We used to burn it, just to get the quills off. That’s all I remember.”

Community Member

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This grandmother has passed her respect of food down to her grandchild to show love. What stories do you use to pass on love to your children?

“The Mi’kmaq word *Nikmatut* expresses relationships of family and community — that which is related. Many of these relationships extend to distant places. For Mi’kmaq, these relationships are not just biological, but cultural and spiritual. More than anything else, *Nikmatut* — relationships between family and friends — define Mi’kma’ki.”

From *Mikwite’lmanej Mikmaqi’k*  
(*Let Us Remember the Old Mi’kmaq*)

“... I call it practicing and when I practice with my children a lot, I feel like that’s what my family tried to do with me, was just teach patience... they did it maybe not so much telling me, in more or less in showing me with their eyes, with their gestures, with their emotions that they put out there for me to get and I feel like I did a good job at catching a lot of that.”

Community Member

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What does family mean to your story?



“There is only one thing I will not concede; that it might be meaningless to strive for a good cause.”

Kji Keptin Alex Denny

“My mom taught us right from wrong with school. Especially, like, you know that it is right to go to school; it is beneficial for us. Especially in the community where there is no support at all. She pushed us. We didn’t actually go to the school on the reserve. We went to the White school. We learned English and all of that.”

Community Member

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How do you share  
goodness with those  
you love?







# HONESTY

As you grow and learn to love,  
you learn to be honest to yourself  
and your Creator.

## The Story Needs To Be Told

*My moccasin trod on lonely trails,  
I needed to learn about life  
Where my country failed.  
I made them see I never died  
My emblems withstood the flood  
The twisted tried.  
How do I tell them?  
I'm only human  
The message of time declaring a stay  
From the strong and stubborn shadow.  
My story needs to be told  
In the learning halls of our country's great  
Then, and only then  
You will see me as I am  
My heart in the extended hand  
Offered in friendship  
Please tell them.*

Rita Joe

“She (mother) went to school on her own. There was a lot of drinking in the community going on, so that was why there was no support.”

Community Member

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**Our story is hard to tell. We need to hold each other up in order to get the best out of life. However, we do not always have that support in our life. How can you stay honest with yourself if you do not have much support?**

“‘Who am I?’ Somehow, I forgot or was it driven out of me during my early years at the residential school? Maybe, but today, I found out ‘Who am I!’”

Debbie Paul-C., Residential School Survivor

“When the kids start making fun of you, you know, asking when are you going to do a rain dance, you know, ... I just sort of stopped for a second, I wanted to cry at first and then I wanted to hit him... I'm still mad at him, I still wanted to go hit,... it just bothered me. I don't think it bothered me my whole life but I can still feel it, that little boy inside me still wants to go hit him, somewhere.”

Community Member

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**Our stories can be hard to share. How can you share these stories in a way that is honest and empowering?**



*Spirits of my ancestors,  
Hear my Mi'kmaq spirit cry,  
In hopes of healing the  
Wounds of broken dreams.  
To see not only the  
Ugliness that surrounds me,  
But also to feel the  
Beauty of life.*

Elsie Charles Basque

“Aboriginal students from that community were bussed in and it was all the non-Aboriginal students who lived in town. I lived in town with my father who was Aboriginal, so when I went to school it was difficult because I didn’t fit in with the Aboriginal people because I lived in town, and I didn’t fit in with the non-Aboriginal students because I looked Aboriginal, so nobody knew where I fit in.”

Community Member

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Our history has left some of us feeling isolated. Some of us want nothing to do with our history. But our history will always be a part of our story. How do you balance our history with your stories?







# HUMILITY

Humility is learning that there is more in  
this life than what you experience.

“And our Elders say that you are linked with your shadow, with the spirits of your ancestors, through your connection to the earth, through your feet, and through your blood, which is their blood running through your body, which transforms itself to you. So the eyes and faces and smiles of our ancestors, their movements and mannerisms and identify are in fact reflected in our bodies: we reflect our shadows, our ancestors in the Earth, as we reach up to the sun.”

Stephen Augustine

“My elementary days were lonely. That was probably one of my biggest challenges, trying to understand why people didn’t like me. Why was I different? Why was I treated differently?”

Community Member

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Everyone struggles with identity. How can connecting with the stories of our Elders help connect your story to our culture?

“Remember brothers and sisters: The greater part of our spirituality is embedded in our language. That is why it was attacked with such vigor.”

Bernie Francis

“They were teaching me conversation and how to hold a native conversation and Mi’kmaq. I wish I would of learned more and I wish I would of taken the time to really sit down and listen to them because I can’t get those memories back and I can’t get those days back. Now when I’m older I wish I would of taken the time to ask more questions, I think that’s really what I would of done because I was really good at listening and I wasn’t very good at asking questions but I could sit there and I could listen.”

Community Member

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Language connects us to our community and shapes the way we perceive the world. What is the role of language in your life? How does it support connections in your life?



“It is only through understanding Mi’kmaw wisdom that family unity can continue to be an empowering experience.”

Dr. Marie Battiste

“Everything that happened to me in my past, all of the negative, I had a lot of stuff happen to me, but it all just made me who I am today.”

Community Member

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How do you use  
your life experience  
to connect and help  
others in your life?







# RESPECT

As you grow and learn humility you learn respect for your elders and the world and that everything is equal.

## You Are The Teacher

*I wrote in verse what bothered me  
The lies recorded in history  
And beautiful words became my tool  
Showing our life, a golden rule  
And if our children today respond as much  
You my people are their teacher,  
Sharing,  
They in turn will, your word  
And future generations they touch*

Rita Joe

“Mom was a big fan of culture; she was always trying to teach me because it was what she knew the best. It was what she was good at. She didn’t know English and didn’t know any of that stuff. All she knew was her language. She would go out and get tape recordings and try to teach the language.”

Community Member

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## How do you maintain respect for your story?

“All of the creatures on Mother Earth were made by the Great Spirit whose presence is felt in every object, in every person, and in every place”.

Noel Knockwood

“Honestly, I graduated with honors but mostly just waking up and going to school everyday was a challenge. I had trouble with my math, oh and my science, grade 10 science I failed twice, but the second time I failed they gave me a general credit for it.”

Community Member

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## How can our stories help us through life's hard times?



“So this is what we truly believe. This is what reinforces our spiritualities: that no being is greater than the next, that we are part and parcel, we are equal, and that each one of us has a responsibility to the balance of the system.”

Albert Marshall

“I did hear some of the stories. They (grandparents) went to residential school. I felt like that kinda hindered my educational experiences... as a Native student, it's not that I carried their burdens with me but it was heavily on my mind... My parents pulled me out that school... Ten times better (the new school). There was more diversity... I was not the only Native (kid)... I wasn't the only one. That was probably one of my biggest challenges (with school) trying to understand why people didn't like me. Why was I different? Why was I treated differently?”

Community Member

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How can you use your culture to live a respectful life when those around you are unable or unwilling to do the same?





# TRUTH

As you grow and learn, you begin to see what is true in your life and what is true in love, honesty, humility and respect.

*We will, as Elders to our children and their children  
be able to sit around the fire light.*

*Telling stories and legends of the past in the cool  
Stillness of the night.*

Elsie Charles Basque

“When you tell a story and it gets passed around, that’s such  
a stepping-stone in the Mi’kmaq people here in PEI.”

Community Member

“I didn’t go to Shubenacadie. My parents sent me to school in  
Boston. I would see my friends during the summer and we would  
compare our experiences. While they were being abused, repressed,  
and oppressed because of their identity, I was getting A’s and B’s  
on the compositions I wrote in my English class about where I  
came from. My identity was looked upon as something unique  
and something to be proud of. My friends were told, ‘Don’t  
speak that language. You’re a no-good dirty Indian.’ For them  
it was No! No! No! You can’t, won’t, and never will be. In my  
situation, I could do anything — You can. You are. You will be.”

Will Basque

“When she was in high school she said she become pregnant with  
me and that, I don’t know if she was really asked to or if it was  
just sort of pushed upon her in the early ’80s to drop out of school  
and I never really wanted to ask her about it, it was her story  
and I’m sure she can tell it a lot better than I could but that also  
played on me too, I didn’t have high school graduates to look up  
to and I didn’t have those people that went to college right after  
high school and said this is how we need to do it. I don’t think  
that hurt or helped me but it definitely weighed on my mind.”

Community Member

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When it comes to connecting with  
your community and culture, what is  
your story?

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As we get older, we begin to better  
understand our story in ways that  
were impossible when we were  
younger. How do you bring these  
new truths into your story?



“The Native knows who he is; it’s the pressure from a non-Indian society that confuses this awareness.”

Lottie Marshall

“It was hard at first, because I didn’t get a whole lot of teachings. They basically said I was terminally retarded back then, they thought I was mentally challenged because I didn’t know my ABCs and my 123s. They would say, they said, ‘Write your name down, and decorate’ and I didn’t understand. What I started doing, I started copying off the person beside me, every little detail of what she’s doing. They said, ‘What are you doing?’ and I said, ‘I don’t know.’”

Community Member

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How do you stay true to yourself and your story when outside forces are telling you you're wrong?





# PATIENCE

Before wisdom comes patience,  
and to have patience, you need a  
clear mind and true spirit.



“All Canadians expect us to work together to find alternatives to confrontation and violence. In the 1990s the frustration and anger of Aboriginal peoples can no longer be contained, deferred, or managed. It is time we stopped staring past each other over barricades whether they are made of logs or law books.”

Viola Robinson

“Well, Dad was removed from his family as infant and sold to a White family. He grew up believing he was White, like, a very, very dark White man [laughs]. He didn’t even know his last name until he was, like, 21 years old. He thought he was this other person altogether. So, he went through a lot of racism but didn’t quite understand it. You know, this is my dad and mom, and I am just darker than them. So, I think a lot of that had to do with it, and I can almost guarantee there are some learning disabilities in there. With my mom, it was the fact that she couldn’t deal with the structure of school, growing up in a huge family there wasn’t that kind of structure, they looked after each other, when they were at school there was too much. Do this, do this, and do this, and I don’t think she could handle it. Now, that is not coming out of their mouths. They never said that to us, but that is how I interpret it.”

Community Member

“I am First Nations... no longer burdened with weakness, from grief and pain of humiliation. I now stand with dignity and strength within my Native spirit for I am free.”

Shirley Kiju Kawi

“Just feeling, like, shy sometimes and... know what I mean? Yeah, because in my school I think I was — well, besides my sister — I don’t know if there was anybody, any other Native kids, in our school. Not that I recall, yeah... you know what I mean? You know, being around all these pretty white girls that were popular and just, like, feeling like you don’t fit in.”

Community Member

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With our history, how do you keep  
your mind and spirit still?

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How do you keep your mind and  
spirit clear when you feel alone?

“For me, the most important Mi’kmaw promise made by our ancestors was to live in peace and friendship with our non-Aboriginal brothers and sisters.”

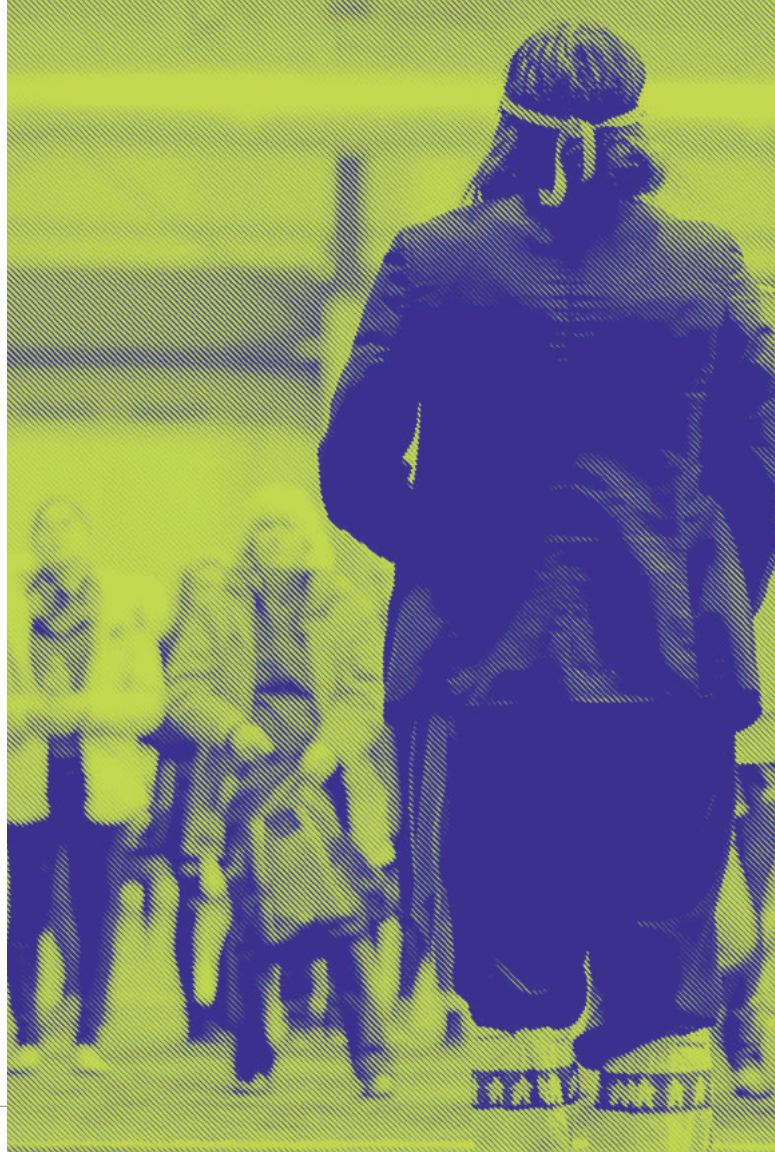
Dan Christmas

“Like, I see some people today and they sit down with their children and have a full conversation in Mi’kmaq and tell the child to do something and the child just gets up and does it, and I’m like, ‘Wow, that’s great’ because not only are they... you know, I find today’s kids they can do that, that’s so awesome, but they know English just as well. A lot of the people I grew up with, it’s one or the other and that’s too bad.”

Community Member

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Two-Eyed Seeing, the ability to keep traditional and western perspectives in harmony, can help you with your story. How do you, or how could you, use Two-Eyed Seeing in your story?





# WISDOM

Wisdom is the natural end point when you have succeeded with the first six teachings.



## On Being Original

*I like living close to nature  
My ancestors did.  
And being closer to the stars at night  
And reading dreams  
On interpretation, on what is right  
I like living close to nature  
My parents did.  
Meeting the sunrise at dawn  
Upon seeing the sign of warmth  
The sun song.  
I like living close to nature:  
I still do today.  
Even improvising birch bark for a pot  
To cook my meal.  
The essence of my being original,  
In my instincts.*

Rita Joe

“I didn’t really learn about my culture in school or growing up. I didn’t grow up in an Aboriginal home so I didn’t have anything until I was in my early 20s.”

Community Member

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No matter your  
experience growing  
up, you are Aboriginal.  
However, it is hard  
to always feel that as  
a truth. How do you  
maintain confidence in  
your story?

*But when I no longer exist, one thing  
sure is for certain,  
My spirit is my own and this you will  
Never take from me.*

Elsie Charles Basque

“Well, I didn’t even know I was really, like, Native or Aboriginal until I moved to PEI and I started meeting my family that was Aboriginal, which — I was like 12 then, it was 2005, I think — so, I mean, I’m pretty sure I probably knew but it didn’t, like, click in my head that I was.”

Community Member

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How can you use  
your story to better  
understand yourself?



*"I am a Mi'kmaw is finally a full realization of who I really am. In today's society, me and my kind are still such outcasts, that I have to keep praying to the Creator for strength that I may no longer doubt or deny my heritage."*

Katherine Sorbey

*"She would tell me fake stories — like legends — like old stories, things that never happen. Like when you tell an old story that never happens. She would do that all the time before I would go to sleep, she would tell me really old stories. I loved that."*

Community Member

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How will you use  
your story to make a  
positive change to the  
story of your family?







# Final Thoughts

Storytelling is a foundational part of Aboriginal history and culture. Traditional stories can play an important role in providing direction and insight into our daily lives and help us make connections to a broader community and a wider vision. For each of us, being able to tell our own stories helps us to stay grounded in our communities and families. All Aboriginals in Canada are faced with the ramifications of our country's efforts to colonize our community. Connecting to our stories is a way empower us in the journey to undo all the wrong that has been done against us. Then, as we move through the generations, we can raise our children and grandchildren to know and feel more. Know your story. Celebrate your families' stories. Always share your story.



# The Story Behind Creation Stories

In June of 2010, I was hired as Education Director for Lennox Island First Nation on Prince Edward Island, Canada. Just before I took the job, I read a book by Paul Tough called *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*. The book introduced me to the concept of Baby College, an idea created by Paul Canada designed to introduce parents to his charter school, The Harlem Kid Zone. In order to gain parental buy in, and help lay the foundation for the success of every child attending his charter school, Canada started having regular parent information and support nights to make sure children between the ages of zero and three were given every opportunity to succeed and be eligible to attend his school. Preparation included teaching parents “promising practices”, such as exposing young children to as much conversation and many books as possible.

Working on a First Nation reserve, I saw first-hand, the education gap between children in our First Nation communities and other Canadian populations. I understood our community's parents needed support and thought a Baby College model would be of benefit. As I was only in charge of overseeing kindergarten to grade 12 students, I quickly learned that Baby College was outside my purview, and that any attempts to broaden my scope of practice resulted in stepping on toes. Simply put, it was not my job.



I kept the Baby College idea in my back pocket until 2013, when I was invited to an Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network ‘meet and greet’. After hearing an introductory talk given by Verl  Harrop, I quickly realized that the Baby College idea could be turned into an academic research project focused on how to better support urban Aboriginal parents. At that same meeting, I connected with Katelyn Young of Holland College. During a roundtable exercise, Katelyn indicated that Holland College would be interested in partnering on such a project. That meeting led to my partnership with Dr. Greg McKenna, who has supported me over the four years it’s taken to complete the project.

The reason this project took so long is because we did it twice. As per our original proposal, the team created an entire early year’s intervention curriculum. The problem was that it was just like every other education curriculum and ended up being a curriculum for everyone, not for our target audience. When Greg and I saw the final product, we realized we were unhappy with our work and instantly knew we needed to do it again.

Our best idea came when we realized that urban Aboriginal parents didn’t need another curriculum or program, rather, they needed the time and support to think about their story within the context of colonization in Canada, and how that has impacted their perspective on early years education. We realized that

urban Aboriginal families already have wonderful supports and programs but are not often asked questions that challenge their perspective on their personal life stories. *Creation Stories* developed into a modest booklet designed to facilitate asking those questions in a culturally-safe, positive environment. The purpose of the tool is to help parents and guardians realize they have the innate ability and skill to give their child everything they need to succeed in life.

As our ideas around the project evolved, so did the research team. Greg and I had the good fortune to work with Sharon O’Brien, Executive Director of the Mi’kmaq Family Resource Centre, which services Charlottetown’s urban Aboriginal population. The Family Resource Centre has a number of programs servicing expectant and new parents. One day I hope *Creation Stories* can be used and be useful to these families.

It has been a long four years, but I could not be happier with our final product and the team of people who’ve created a tool with powerful, life-changing potential.

Neil Forbes

# CREATION STORIES

Creating Strong Families Through Our Stories

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