



# OUR HISTORY, OUR STORIES:

PERSONAL NARRATIVES &  
URBAN ABORIGINAL HISTORY  
IN NOVA SCOTIA

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# OUR HISTORY, OUR STORIES: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND URBAN ABORIGINAL HISTORY IN NS

**BECAUSE URBAN ABORIGINAL** populations are largely invisible and poorly understood, the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network Atlantic Research Centre's (UAKN Atlantic) Executive Committee commissioned the *Our History, Our Stories* research project. The goal was to produce an accessible urban Aboriginal history for each of the Atlantic Provinces that could be readily shared with community organizations, the education system and all levels of government.

The 2016 census data determined Atlantic Canada to have an Indigenous population of 129,340. Of that population, 20,070 (15.5%) live on-reserve and 109,265 (84.5%) live off-reserve in rural and urban settings. In other words, **in Atlantic Canada five out of six persons who self-identify as Indigenous live off-reserve**. This suite of *Our History, Our Stories* for NB, NS, PEI and NL, combines personal stories with brief historical narratives. Each document also includes a discussion guide. Our hope is that our histories and stories will increase the general public's understanding, recognition and inclusion of urban Aboriginal populations in Atlantic Canada.

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# INTRODUCTION

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**THE MI'KMAQ ARE** the original inhabitants of Nova Scotia and remain the predominant Aboriginal group within the province. There are estimated to be 51,495 Aboriginal people living in Nova Scotia with 81% living off-reserve.<sup>[1]</sup> A growing proportion of Aboriginal people living off-reserve reside in Halifax.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite the fact that the vast majority of Aboriginal persons in Nova Scotia reside off-reserve and in urban areas, much of the history and information available to the general public has been focused almost exclusively on the experiences of those living on-reserve. The history of the urban and off-reserve Aboriginal community is an important part of the cultural narrative of Nova Scotia and yet, it is a story that until now has remained largely untold.

Traditionally, Aboriginal people have used stories to pass down beliefs, traditions and history to future generations. Following this tradition, our purpose in sharing the personal stories of three community members living in urban Nova Scotia—Sandy, Charlotte and Tony—is to honour their life experiences and also, importantly, to teach those in the non-Aboriginal community about the fast-growing and diverse urban Aboriginal population.

The purpose of this project is to create awareness of the growing urban Aboriginal population by offering easy-to-read and accessible resources to community members, teachers, government agencies, researchers and public organizations. The project coordinator worked collaboratively with three urban Aboriginal community members to create this document for use as an educational resource. The document features a brief historical narrative that highlights issues of importance to urban Aboriginal persons and includes the personal stories of the community members who not only shared their personal stories during in-person discussions but also offered readings, guidance and suggestions that informed the focus and content of the Aboriginal history chapters included in this document.

The history and personal stories that the average Canadian hears about are mostly from the perspective of Aboriginal people living on reserves. While some of the experiences of Aboriginal people living on-reserve may be similar to those of off-reserve people, some of their experiences can be quite different. In some cases, off-reserve and urban experiences have been shaped by divisive policies. For others, choosing to live in an urban area is a way to secure more sustainable employment or to provide greater opportunities for themselves and their children.

The urban Aboriginal population in Nova Scotia includes persons from many different tribes across Canada. Some of these persons have never lived on a reserve; however, the majority of Aboriginal persons living in urban areas in Nova Scotia are of Mi'kmaq ancestry and, similar to other parts of the region, it is highly likely that there are persons living in urban areas and off-reserve that, at some point in time, have lived on-reserve and who consider the reserve their spiritual and cultural home.<sup>[3]</sup> Therefore, a history of urban Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia would not be complete without an examination of the history of the Mi'kmaq.

In order to trace the growth of the urban and off-reserve population, we must also consider the important ways that history has impacted members of the urban Aboriginal community. To this end, this document pays careful attention to historical events that have shaped the experiences of the urban Aboriginal community, in particular: pre-colonial history, the creation of the reserve system, the Indian Act, and the development of child welfare and education policies.

# EARLY HISTORY: MI'KMAQ

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**THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS** of Nova Scotia were the Mi'kmaq, who have occupied all of the Atlantic Provinces for thousands of years. The traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq—known as Mi'kma'ki—consists of all of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick (north of the Saint John River), the Gaspé Peninsula, part of the State of Maine and part of Newfoundland. Archaeological evidence in Nova Scotia shows that 13,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, hunting-gathering people followed caribou to the base of the Cobequid Mountains and camped there. Mi'kmaq Elders maintain that these are their ancestors.<sup>[4]</sup>

There are over 800 sites of Mi'kmaq occupation throughout Nova Scotia. Mi'kmaq people lived close to waterways, using the birch bark canoe as their main method of travel. The natural environment provided the Mi'kmaq with everything they needed to survive. Their survival skills were rooted in their vast and ancient knowledge of the seasons and the natural world.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Mi'kmaq Grand Council was the traditional government of the Mi'kmaq people and was created before the arrival of the Europeans. The Council still exists today and advocates for the preservation and celebration of Mi'kmaq language, culture and spirituality. The Grand Council has members from across all of the districts of Mi'kma'ki. Perhaps one of the most famous of all Mi'kmaq Grand Chiefs, Henri Membertou, was born in 1507 and died in 1611 at the age of 104. Before becoming Grand Chief, Membertou was the district chief of the area of Kespukwitk, the traditional territory in which the French established Port Royale.<sup>[6]</sup>

Membertou was the first Aboriginal leader to be baptized into the Catholic Church, which began the relationship between Mi'kmaq spiritual beliefs and Roman Catholicism. Traditionally, the Mi'kmaq believed that all of creation was imbued with a spiritual force called *mntu*. The greatest spirit force was the sun, which the Mi'kmaq saluted at its rising and setting. Mi'kmaq people also believed in shamanism and sought the help of shamans during times of sickness.<sup>[7]</sup> However, after the arrival of

Europeans, particularly the French in the 1600's, and after Membertou's conversion in 1610, there was an intense conversion to Catholicism. While Catholicism became the predominant religion of the Mi'kmaq, there was and still remains an intermingling of Mi'kmaq custom and Catholicism in religious ceremony.<sup>[8]</sup>

Like many Aboriginal tribes, the traditional Mi'kmaq were intrinsically connected to art and music. Traditional chanting and drumming are still popular today among the Mi'kmaq. The Mi'kmaq were and still are expert quill workers, basket weavers and leather workers. Powwows are an important part of Mi'kmaq cultural celebration and take place all over Mi'kma'ki in the warmer months.<sup>[9]</sup>

Mi'kmaq oral tradition tells the story of how Kluskap—a Mi'kmaq hero who is considered the first human—was created out of three bolts of lightning. According to the Glooscap Heritage Website, the legendary Kluskap appears in many of the Mi'kmaq creation stories passed on from the earliest days until today. Kluskap legends have greatly shaped Mi'kmaq culture.



## EARLY COLONIAL HISTORY

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**IT IS ESTIMATED** that the Mi'kmaq population in Atlantic Canada was roughly 15,000 before the arrival of the Europeans.<sup>[10]</sup> Living on the Atlantic coast, the Mi'kmaq were the first of many Aboriginal groups in North America to have contact with Europeans. This would prove to be disastrous for the Mi'kmaq population. It is estimated that between 50 and 90 percent of the Mi'kmaq population was lost due to European diseases, to which the Mi'kmaq had no immunity.<sup>[11]</sup>

Though many Mi'kmaq died during the first 200 years of European contact, until the early 1800's their population likely outnumbered that of the colonists.<sup>[12]</sup> Mi'kmaq leaders exercised authority over their land and lives. Various treaties were created during the 1700's, pointing to a relationship in which power was negotiated between Aboriginal people and the colonial government. The treaties allowed full access to fishing and hunting grounds so that the Mi'kmaq could continue to live as they had traditionally. Moreover, the Mi'kmaq never formally ceded any land to the British.<sup>[13]</sup>

The arrival of a large influx of settlers by 1800 marked a significant and fateful shift in the power dynamics between Aboriginal people and colonists in the region.<sup>[14]</sup> Colonial policies began to dictate where and how Aboriginal people should live, and encroachment on traditional Mi'kmaq territory increased rapidly. European settlement caused a depletion of natural resources and increasingly limited the free access to forests and waterways that the Mi'kmaq relied on for their survival.

In 1820, the first efforts to develop a reserve system in Nova Scotia were initiated by the surveyor general who recommended 1000 acres of land be set aside for Mi'kmaq use in each county.<sup>[15]</sup> Colonial officials were interested in economic progress, and land would be used in ways that would best allow them to reach this goal. And so, to encourage individual self-sufficiency and the assimilation of Aboriginal people into colonial settler society, teaching Aboriginal people the tenets of farming became the central goal of colonial officials in Nova Scotia.<sup>[16]</sup>

This attempt to settle the Mi'kmaq and have them embrace farming as a way of life was relatively unsuccessful and remained so for many years.<sup>[17]</sup> Throughout the 19th century, the Mi'kmaq resisted being tied to patches of land and, as Upton explained, the Mi'kmaq “continued to regard their homeland as a unit, and the whims of individual governments affected only a portion of their existence. They refused to give up the seasonal rhythm of their lives; they refused to stay put on reserves, and they continued to travel across the land as before.”<sup>[18]</sup> But as colonial society grew, life became more and more difficult for the Mi'kmaq. Settlers were depleting the natural resources and increasingly limiting the free access to forests and waterways that the Mi'kmaq relied on for their survival.

# SANDY'S STORY

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**SANDY IS AN** Inuk woman born in the small northern Labrador community of Rigolet where she lived until she was six years old—at which time the whole family relocated to Windsor, Nova Scotia to be closer to her father's side of the family. A few years later they moved to Dartmouth so her parents could attend Dalhousie University. Sandy says that these early years in Dartmouth were challenging and that with no sense of community or social network, she felt isolated.

When Sandy was 11 or 12, she and her mother visited the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre and Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre where they began to take part in various social programs. They were welcomed with open arms and Sandy became the child-care worker for the Wednesday night programming and continued this work right up until she was pregnant with her first child. Speaking about these first years of her involvement with the Friendship Centre, Sandy says, "I just soaked up that community feeling and that love that people surround you with that I missed from my own home town...the community leaders and community members just took me under their wing and I think that's why I'm so passionate about my job. Because I know how much community needs that, how individuals need that sense of belonging, the pride that can come with gathering and sharing in cultural teachings and traditions."

Sandy continued to be involved in Friendship Centre programming throughout her teenage years. While attending high school, her best friend tragically passed away, and Sandy took time off to grieve the loss. Upon returning to high school she failed to find the support she needed within the school system, so she quit and started taking upgrading courses at the Friendship Centre. She also got involved in the youth programming at the centre—programming that she feels was very influential and positive: "We learned about healthy living, how to smudge, how to drum, how to dance, and I went to my first powwow with them, [learned] how to pick sweet grass, native crafts. And all of these things enriched my life."

When Sandy became pregnant with her first child, she and her boyfriend at the time (now her husband) spent a month living in a shelter in Halifax until they secured a place through Tawaak Housing. She attended pre- and post-natal programming as many days as possible at the Friendship Centre to stay well and to stay connected to community. The Friendship Centre provided a place of belonging and a healthy environment during her time as a new mom. When her second child was old enough to attend day-care at the Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre, Sandy started a position as the Holistic Family Worker at the Friendship Centre.

Sandy received her GED and was then accepted by Mount Saint Vincent University to start a degree in Women's Studies. After completing two years of the degree she took a break to deal with some health issues. By this time Sandy wanted to return to work and found a position as a substitute with the St. Joseph's Children's Centre. Shortly thereafter she became full-time staff support for St. Joseph's, a position she held for a year. For the next five years she worked as staff support for the Four Plus School Readiness program at the Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre.

Sandy has worked with children her whole life and has a keen sense of what children and communities need in order to heal trauma. In discussions around the impact of intergenerational trauma seen in the community, she notes "there are more children in foster care and adoption than there were in residential schools." Sandy feels that having Aboriginal children go to non-Aboriginal families is not a bad thing but that those non-Aboriginal families need to be educated and sensitive to Aboriginal issues and need to ground and re-connect the children, in some way, to an Aboriginal community."

The Friendship Centre has been a crucial part of Sandy's life from childhood to adulthood. It was her first connection to culture and community in an urban setting. It was where she gained invaluable employment and work experience—a place that felt like home and where she was supported as a young mother. Sandy's story is really a testament to the role places like Friendship Centres can play in creating safe urban cultural spaces and in fostering healthy individuals and communities: "[The Friendship Centre] has photo albums with pictures of me playing baseball as a teenager. I went to pre-natal with a community member and our children are now 13 and 15 together... the longevity of the community definitely gives me passion to continue my work."

# POST-CONFEDERATION AND THE INDIAN ACT

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**AS A RESULT** of the British North America Act of 1867, Aboriginal affairs became a federal responsibility. Within a century the balance of power had almost completely shifted to rest in the hands of the Canadian government. With the creation of the Indian Act in 1876, the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia officially became wards of the state. The Indian Act gave the government control over where Aboriginal people could live, hunting and fishing rights and even who was legally identified as “Indian.” After 1876, the federal government came to regulate much of reserve life.<sup>[19]</sup>

The Indian Act was designed to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into mainstream Canadian society. Over time, the Indian Act would effectively decrease the number of persons with official Indian status through the enforcing of a number of discriminatory provisions that stripped them of their registered status. An Aboriginal person would lose official Indian status if they enlisted in the army, received a post-secondary education, or became a doctor or a minister. If an Aboriginal woman married a non-Aboriginal man she lost her status and her children would not be eligible for Indian status. This particular section of the Indian Act, 12 (1)(b), would have a lasting impact on the lives of many urban Aboriginal persons.

“[Upon marriage to a non-status or non-Indian man], a woman must leave her parents’ home and reserve. She may not own property on the reserve and must dispose of any property she does hold. She may be prevented from inheriting property left to her by her parents. She cannot take further part in band business. Her children are not recognized as Indian and are therefore denied access to cultural and social amenities of the Indian community. And most punitive of all, she may be prevented from returning to live with her family on the reserve, even if she is in dire need, very ill, a widow, divorced or separated. Finally, her body may not be buried on the reserve with those of her forebears.”<sup>[20]</sup>

The creation of the Indian Act and its discriminatory provisions has directly contributed to the growth of the urban Aboriginal population. For a century, Indian Act

rules stripped Aboriginal women and their children of their status as Indian under the law. As non-status Indians, these women did not qualify for housing on-reserve and were often left with no choice but to live off-reserve and in urban areas. Indian Act policies created in 1876 subjected Aboriginal women and their children to generations of discrimination still felt today despite the fact that in 1985, the Indian Act was amended by the passage of **Bill C-31** to remove discrimination against women.

After confederation and the creation of the Indian Act, and into the early 20th century, the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia lived in small settlements throughout the province, many of which were isolated. Most of the Mi'kmaq population in Nova Scotia lived in birch bark wigwams and tar paper shacks well into the twentieth century—dwellings that could be easily dismantled and which did not require much capital. The Mi'kmaq managed to eke out a living by hunting and trapping and by operating on the fringes of the settler economy. But as the Depression hit, many wage labour positions and economic opportunities were diminished. Unemployment among the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia was high. The impact of the Depression resulted in a crisis in the living conditions of the Mi'kmaq in the province and saw the federal government’s unparalleled use of welfare money.<sup>[21]</sup>

In 1941, the federal government commissioned an investigation into reserves in Nova Scotia and their administration. This resulted in the decision to consolidate the forty-two small reserves in Nova Scotia into two large communities: Eskasoni in Cape Breton, and Indian Brook near Shubenacadie on mainland Nova Scotia. The program—known as the Centralization Policy—was meant to cut down on the cost of administering services and welfare payments to Aboriginal communities, but in the end it was deemed a failure. The government underestimated the housing needs on the reserves and many of those who were slated to move ended up moving back to their original reserves.<sup>[22]</sup>

# CHARLOTTE'S STORY

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**CHARLOTTE BERNARD WAS** born in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. She was one of six children in her family and grew up in a very strict household. Though she lived on-reserve, she was forbidden to play with other kids or practice their Mi'kmaq traditions, culture and language. Charlotte says that growing up, she never attended a powwow or learned to smudge.

At age 18, Charlotte was forced to leave her childhood home and was dropped off on her own in Bedford, Nova Scotia. She made her way to the Friendship Centre where, by a strange coincidence, she ran into her brother's godfather, who offered her a place to stay for a few weeks. Charlotte began working as a dishwasher, and soon after began a relationship with a man with whom she would be with for seven years. During that time, they had two children. Problems in their relationship caused Charlotte and her partner to split up, and the pressure and stress in her life at this point brought about a period of active addiction and mental health issues. After a friend agreed to care for her children, Charlotte checked into a mental hospital where she detoxed from the drugs and antidepressants she had been abusing. Charlotte says that this was the best thing that ever happened to her as it was the first time in her life she wasn't taking care of someone else. She had never realized the extent of her own issues and the need to care for herself in order to heal. After she was released from the hospital, she stayed at a shelter run by the Friendship Centre where she had access to day programs through the hospital and care and support from the Friendship Centre. A short time later, Charlotte and her girls moved to Spryfield, Nova Scotia where she has lived for the past 18 years.

Over the years, Charlotte has pursued a number of different post-secondary endeavours. She graduated as a certified nursing assistant from a community college and did a number of courses towards a nursing degree at Dalhousie University. She used this education to work in home care and then worked a few years in palliative care. Charlotte says palliative care work was rewarding

but emotionally draining and after years of this work she had to step away. She went back to university to do a degree in Women's Studies where she enrolled in a course focused on death and dying. At the time she had recently lost her father, and the culmination of the loss of her dad, her past work in palliative care and the university course triggered another period of active addiction and depression. Fortunately, Charlotte's strength and resilience eventually brought her back to a place of mental wellness.

Charlotte has taken care of her family, her friends and her community her whole life. Ten years ago, Charlotte agreed to adopt a baby girl, the grandchild of a close friend, who was born addicted to drugs. When the child was of day-care age, Charlotte enrolled her in child-care at the Friendship Centre and at the same time was offered a job there as a cook. After a few months on the job she was offered a position as a family support worker. She was worried at first that she wouldn't be able to handle the job, but she took it on and knew after her first week that it was perfect for her. Charlotte still keeps her hand in the kitchen to some extent—running programs that teach families how to shop and cook. Currently, Charlotte is the Holistic Family Worker at the Friendship Centre, where she runs pre- and post-natal classes, parent support groups, cultural programs and other community-driven projects. Charlotte's experiences with her own traumas, addiction and mental health issues make her excellent at her job. She truly understands what people are going through and knows ways to help people cope: "I am good at my job because I've been there."

Though at times Charlotte still struggles with mental health issues, she owns and enjoys her life. Last year she married the love of her life, an amazing man from a loving family. Charlotte is the matriarch of her family and finds a great deal of happiness through her work and community: "My home is the urban community, my family is the urban natives that live in this city and I have created my own family."

# EDUCATION

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**IN 1842, THE** colonial government passed an act which provided for free tuition to Aboriginal children in any Nova Scotia provincial school. After confederation in 1867, the federal government officially assumed responsibility for the education of Aboriginal children whereby the government administered a Eurocentric curriculum that ignored Mi'kmaq culture and ways of learning.<sup>[23]</sup> Beginning with a school opened at Bear River, Nova Scotia in 1872, more than a dozen Indian day schools were eventually opened in the province. After the creation of the Indian Act in 1876, education became a key component of the government's Aboriginal strategy. By 1900, most Aboriginal children in the Maritimes were within walking distance of a day school.<sup>[24]</sup> In 1920, legislation was introduced that required mandatory school attendance for Aboriginal children until the age of fifteen; however, Indian Affairs records indicate that this legislation had little impact on attendance at the day schools. These same records indicate high attendance rates for boarding schools in other provinces, which quite possibly reinforced the governments' decision to open a residential school in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia.

The residential school in Shubenacadie opened in 1929 with the goal of assimilating Mi'kmaq children in the Maritimes into mainstream society. Young Mi'kmaq children were discouraged from using their own language and from practicing their cultural traditions as they might have in their homes. They were separated from their parents and were sometimes exposed to heavy-handed discipline. Since the school's closure in 1968, there have been allegations of cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by authorities at the school.<sup>[25]</sup> Aboriginal people are still experiencing the devastating impacts of the residential school system. Knowledge of cultural traditions and language, which can play such an important part in overall wellness and healing, were lost while attending residential schools. Not only was this important part of Aboriginal identity diminished for those enrolled in residential school, it also diminished the ability of those students to pass on this knowledge to their children. The historical trauma created by the residential school system continues to impact Aboriginal people's experiences today.



# CHILD WELFARE

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**DURING THE 1960'S** and 70's, when many residential schools were closing, the provincial and federal governments were increasing Aboriginal child welfare efforts in Canada. One such program created during this time is known as the Sixties Scoop—a practice that saw many Aboriginal children taken from their homes and placed into non-Aboriginal foster care. Like the residential school system, taking children out of Aboriginal communities caused a loss of language and culture, and would prevent many of those children from passing on language and cultural traditions to future children. The Sixties Scoop also impacted the growth of the urban Aboriginal population, as many of these children would not find their way back to Aboriginal communities. In the 1980's, First Nations communities in Nova Scotia expressed public dissatisfaction with the child welfare system and as a result, the Mi'kmaq Family and Children's Services was created to administer Aboriginal child welfare services and programs. However, services through this department are only available to those on-reserve, leaving Aboriginal children in urban areas of Nova Scotia with no access to culturally relevant child welfare services.<sup>[26]</sup>

# TONY'S STORY

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**TONY THOMAS WAS** born in Selkirk, Manitoba to a Métis mother and Cree father and has five siblings. Unfortunately, Tony says, like many families on his reserve, addiction issues and violence were prevalent in the household and his childhood was marked by severe trauma. At age seven or eight, he witnessed a violent, alcohol-fueled assault between his mother and father during which, in self-defense, his mother killed his father with a knife. Tony was forced to testify against his mother. She was convicted and spent three years in prison. The family was completely torn apart, with the children shipped off to various non-Aboriginal foster homes in Winnipeg.

Throughout the remainder of his childhood and teenage years, Tony was shuffled between group homes and non-Aboriginal foster homes. He encountered severe racism and bullying at the schools he attended. Between group homes and foster homes, Tony was sometimes homeless and hungry and he eventually ended up in a Manitoba youth centre for petty property crimes. At age 18, Tony reconnected with his mother and started working with her and his step-father driving a milk truck. During this time in his early twenties Tony was into the party scene, so when a friend suggested that Tony sell his car for two plane tickets to Nova Scotia, he did it. After partying in Nova Scotia for two weeks he was stranded. His buddy was already on his way back to Winnipeg so Tony decided to hitchhike back home.

Just before he was going to start hitchhiking, Tony stopped into a coffee shop beside the highway. There he met a man named Bill who offered him a job and a place to stay. Within a few months working with Bill, Tony met Lee—the woman he would marry. Tony credits his wife with helping him get through everything in his life—a constant support for the almost 30 years they've been married. He says, "Lee has changed my life."

Tony has been in Nova Scotia since 1984 and has been part of the Friendship Centre Movement since that time. Over the years, he has served as President of the Friendship Centre and has served on the Board of Directors. He has taken advantage of various counseling services to deal with the trauma he has faced in his life and has been involved in Friendship Centre employment programs. Tony attended a construction course at NSCC and worked in construction for a number of years until he went back to school at age 35. He received a degree and worked in child protection for three years but realized that wasn't what he wanted to do for a living. Shortly after leaving his job in child protection, he was visiting the library and happened to run into a friend who offered him a job as a correctional officer. For the past seven years he has been working in the Halifax area in the Federal criminal justice system as a correctional officer, program officer, parole officer, Aboriginal liaison officer and with social programs and other parole work.

Currently, Tony is working on a program that will match offenders close to release with an Aboriginal Liaison Officer for cultural teachings and guidance. He has also consulted on an initiative to construct a sweat lodge at the new Jamieson Community Correctional Centre in Halifax for the benefit of inmates. Tony follows a traditional lifestyle and is often asked to perform smudging ceremonies and to act as a cultural ambassador.

Both Tony and his wife Lee work on the front-lines, advocating and supporting Aboriginal people and their families (Lee works with the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre). In addition to this work, they continue to advocate for and support their own three boys—boys who are now happy and well established in their adult lives. Tony's story is a testament to the importance of the Friendship Centre, the grounding influence of traditional and cultural practices, and the power of a supportive family.

# CURRENT URBAN ABORIGINAL SUPPORTS

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**WHILE MANY ABORIGINAL** people who have settled in urban areas and off-reserve are living well, many others are facing unique challenges, especially in the cities. And no matter how successful and integrated the urban Aboriginal community, Aboriginal people still live in a system that privileges whiteness. In a discussion with CBC regarding the disproportionate number of Black and Aboriginal youth in the criminal justice system in Nova Scotia, activist and educator El Jones traces the problem back to a lack of jobs, educational opportunities, and proper housing, and insufficient supports for those who are attempting to leave the criminal justice system. Aboriginal youth are in particular need of interventions and supports when it comes to criminal justice. In 2014-2015, 12% of youth sentenced to a youth correction facility serving Halifax were Indigenous, yet Indigenous people represent only 2% of the province's population.<sup>[27]</sup>

The number of Aboriginal persons making the transition from the reserve to the city has been growing steadily since the 1950's<sup>[28]</sup>. Migration off-reserve continued to increase throughout the 1970's. The growth of the urban Aboriginal community is not just the result of discriminatory legislation in the Indian Act. As previously discussed, both the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop alienated Aboriginal people from their homes and cultures, and many of those impacted by these systems eventually settled off-reserve and in urban areas. The growth of the urban Aboriginal population can also be attributed to the desire for greater access to education and employment, and to provide greater opportunities for children.

In the 1950's, Native Friendship Centres responded to the wave of urban migration and began opening centres all across the country to address the needs of Inuit, Innu, First Nations and Métis peoples. The Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre in Halifax became a place for Aboriginal peoples to connect with their culture, with their communities and a place to access essential services. Other organizations, such as the Native Councils, were created to act as political advocates on behalf of these individuals—the Native Council of Nova Scotia was one of these. Still other urban Aboriginal organizations were created to provide more specific services such as housing corporations and Aboriginal women's organizations.

# CONCLUSION

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**STUDIES ACROSS THE** country show that housing shortages, increasing populations, and the lack of on-reserve employment are the most common reasons why Aboriginal persons migrate to urban areas, especially when they are young. And, in spite of the sometimes challenging conditions on reserves in Nova Scotia, there are many living in urban areas who still consider the reserve as their spiritual and physical home and return there regularly. For them, the reserve is a place where traditions and cultures are most visible in their lives. But for many others, those who are not band members, who have never lived on a reserve or do not have strong ties to a Nova Scotia reserve, the need for a supportive cultural community is just as real and important.

Urban Aboriginal well-being and success is related to many factors but for some urban Aboriginal people—especially those who may have never lived on a reserve—urban Aboriginal organizations can play a key role in fostering a sense of belonging within the Aboriginal community. Here is where we see the important role of urban Aboriginal organizations; they are safe spaces where cultures, languages and traditions are fostered and celebrated. Not only do they offer the off-reserve community culturally-relevant programs and services, they offer urban Aboriginal people a sense of belonging, a place to be themselves, and a place to call home.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

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1. Thinking about your own community, what urban Aboriginal organizations are you aware of and how can we increase their visibility and better support the work that they are doing?
2. Given the high percentage of Indigenous persons in our province who live off-reserve (81.8%, Census 2016), what are some ways that we can ensure their voices are represented in our communities, our health and education systems, and at all levels of government?
3. Research demonstrates that an urban Indigenous community's identity, cultural needs and well-being are best served when they can access health and social services through a Family Resource Centre or a Friendship Centre. What is it about the way that these organizations provide programs and services that makes them so effective?
4. Thinking about the long history of colonization in this country, from the early settlement of the land by Europeans, to the Indian Act and residential school system, and even including the current child welfare system, in what ways does this history of colonization continue to impact urban Indigenous populations in Nova Scotia today?
5. How can the general population, the education system and all levels of government use this *Our History, Our Stories* document to establish and maintain respectful relationships with urban Indigenous populations in Nova Scotia?
6. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission says "*reconciliation offers a new way of living together.*" How does better understanding the history of off-reserve Aboriginal people impact your perception of urban Aboriginal people in Canada?

# NOTES

- [1] Statistics Canada. 2018. *Nova Scotia [Province] (table). Aboriginal Population Profile. 2016 Census.* Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-510-X2016001. Ottawa. Released July 18, 2018. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed February 4, 2019).
- [2] Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) Indian Registry System (IRS), "Indian Register Population affiliated with First Nations by Gender and Residency", December 31, 2014. Varying levels of Aboriginal self-identification over time and within different regions have created some challenges in determining exact population numbers. For this reason, exact population figures for "off-reserve" Nova Scotia are sometimes contested by service providers and community members.
- [3] Data determining the number of people currently living off-reserve/in urban areas who have also lived for a period of time on reserve are non-existent. None of the interviewees for this project have lived on-reserve though the author assumes there is a significant portion of the urban community that have lived on-reserve at some point during their lifetime.
- [4] "Mi'kmaq", Nova Scotia Archives Online, Government of Nova Scotia, last accessed September 5, 2017, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/genealogy/mikmaq>
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] J.M. Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples.* (Canada: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- [7] Harald E. Prins, *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation and Cultural Survival,* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 71.
- [8] "Mi'kmaq", Canadian Encyclopedia Online, last accessed August 26, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/micmac-mikmaq/>
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Prins, 27.
- [11] Jesse Francis and A.J.B Johnston, *Ni'n na L'Nu,* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2013), 48.
- [12] John Reid, *Nova Scotia: A Pocket History* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2009), 20-25.
- [13] Prins, 140-145.
- [14] Reid, 24, 25.
- [15] L.F.S Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists: Indian White Relations in the Maritimes, 1713-1867* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1979), 87.
- [16] Department of Indian Affairs, Annual Report to the Secretary of State for the Year 1868, p. 38, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/item/?id=1868-IAAR-RAAI&op=pdf&app=indianaffairs> (accessed September 6, 2017)
- [17] Throughout the 19th century, reports indicate much concern over the farming activities (or lack thereof) of the Mi'kmaq in the region. For example, see Department of Indian Affairs, Annual Report Of The Department Of The Interior for the Year 1868, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/item/?id=1868-IAAR-RAAI&op=pdf&app=indianaffairs>
- [18] Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists*, 27.
- [19] Department of Indian Affairs, The Indian Act, April 12, 1876, Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100010252/1100100010254> (accessed September 6, 2017).
- [20] Mary Two-Axe Early and Philomena Ross, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Issue No. 53, May 25, 1956), 12, 23, in Jamieson, *Indian Women and the Law*, 1.
- [21] Fred Wien, *Rebuilding the Economic Base of Indian Communities: The Micmac in Nova Scotia* (Montreal: The Institute for Research and Public Policy, 1986) and *Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Micmac in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Institute of Public Affairs, Dalhousie University, 1983), 27-29.
- [22] Ibid., 31-36.
- [23] Marie Battiste, "Micmac Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation," in *Indian Education in Canada: The Legacy*, ed. Jean Barman, Yvonne Hebert and Don McCaskill (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 33.
- [24] W.D. Hamilton, *The Federal Indian Day Schools of the Maritimes* (Fredericton: the Micmac-Maliseet Institute, University of New Brunswick, 1986), 13-25.
- [25] For a first-hand account of experiences at Shubenacadie Residential School, see Isabelle Knockwood, *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaq Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* (Lockeport: Roseway Press, 1992). For secondary analyses of experiences and the impacts of Shubenacadie Residential School, see Marilyn Elaine O'Hearn, "Canadian Native Education Policy: A Case Study of the Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia" (Master's Thesis, Saint Mary's University, 1989); Marilyn Millward, "Clean Behind the Ears? Micmac Parents, Micmac Children and the Shubenacadie Residential School," *New Maritimes* 10 (March-April, 1992): 6-15.
- [26] "First Nations Child Welfare in Nova Scotia (2011)", Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, Anna Kozłowski, Vadna Sinha, Joan Gloade, Nancy MacDonald, <http://cwrp.ca/infosheets/first-nations-child-welfare-nova-scotia> (last accessed September 6th, 2017).
- [27] "Black and Indigenous Prisoners over-represented in Nova Scotia Jails," CBC News Online, May 20, 2016, (last accessed September 6th, 2017)
- [28] <https://nafc.ca/en/who-we-are/history/>









