



**OFIFC**

Ontario Federation of  
Indigenous Friendship Centres

# OUR INHERITANCE

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*Reflections on Leadership in the  
Friendship Centre Movement*

February 2018





This publication would not have been possible without the significant contributions made by

**Jaynane Buring-Fields (1956-2017)**

In recognition of her influence and strong voice throughout this report, “Our Inheritance: Reflection on Leadership in the Friendship Centre Movement” has been dedicated to the memory of this devoted leader, kind friend, and strong voice for urban Indigenous people across Ontario.

She is remembered as a mother, grandmother, Clan Mother, leader, and friend. She was someone who supported her colleagues and community members with the same warmth and kindness as family members.

For more than 30 years she worked diligently to amplify the voices within our communities. Her history within the Friendship Centre Movement will continue to live on in the leadership legacy she has left behind. Her presence will be forever missed.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the historic legacy of culture-based leadership and governance within the OFIFC and Friendship Centres. Looking back at the last half century of the Friendship Centre Movement, we uncover and acknowledge the vision and voices of historical, longstanding, current, and future leaders within our communities.

In carrying out this collaborative research project, contributors reclaim an appreciation of and renewed awareness for, the pivotal role of cultural leadership and governance practices within the Friendship Centre Movement. In acknowledging that important voices have been left out of this report, our aim is not to misrepresent the Wholistic notion of leadership and governance put forth in our cultural teachings and understandings of everyday good living. Rather, this research project was carried out in order to foster a space where Friendship Centre youth, Executive Directors, Friendship Centre staff, and Elders can share their distinct practices of leadership and governance.

The findings of this report highlight that cultural notions of leadership and governance are best understood as dynamic journeys made up of a number of different experiences, challenges, and transformations. The importance of recognizing what leaders have received as part of their leadership responsibilities, wise practices for fulfilling responsibilities, and preparing these leadership roles for future generations was a common thread throughout our discussions. These findings are discussed in the context of inheritance including understanding what leaders have inherited and preparing this inheritance for future generations. As well, the role of historic trauma and its impacts on leadership responsibilities and protocols in communities are discussed from a strength-based perspective that focuses on the spirit of resilience among Friendship Centre leaders.

This project identified youth as holders of distinct knowledge embedded in and derived from their everyday lived experiences and location in the Lifecycle Wheel. Strengthening youth's ability and capacity to carry-out leadership responsibilities as well as, sharing their gifts with the Friendship Centre community were identified as important practices for supporting the leadership roles of future generations. Youth and Executive Directors self-voiced the significance of being self-reflexive in reference to one's leadership journey. In doing so, they highlight the importance of reminding ourselves where we sit in relation to our community, the Friendship Centre Movement, and those Sitting Across the Fire.

The image of Sitting Across the Fire (pg. 30) symbolizes the cultural understanding that leadership is a practice which involves reflexively looking upon ones' leadership journeys to gain renewed perspective of our relations. Executive Directors, Youth Board representatives, and OFIFC researchers understood Sitting Across the Fire as a cultural teaching that speaks to the responsibility each of us have as leaders: to share what it's like at the fire from where we sit.



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# LIFE CYCLES RESPONSIBILITY

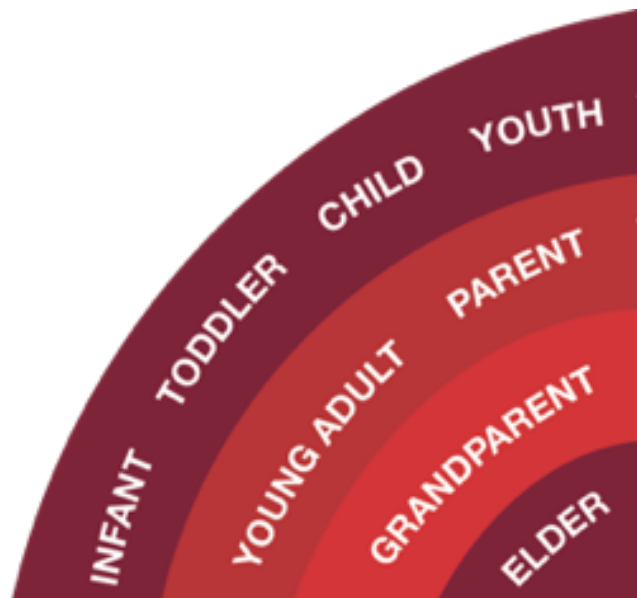
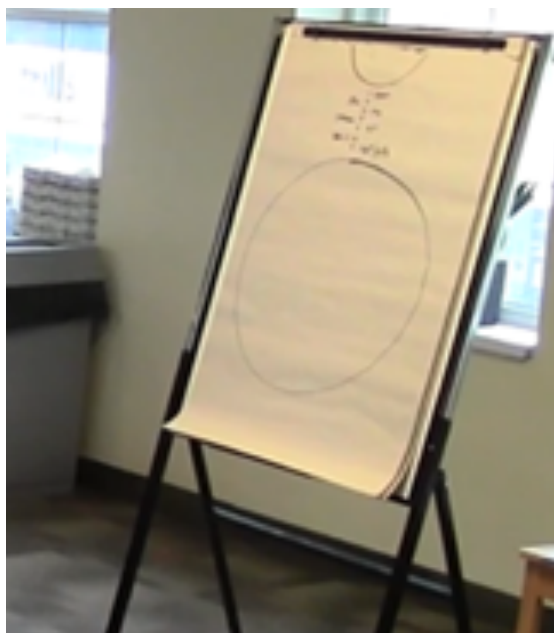
## GOOD LIFE TEACHINGS

*During the research project, several individuals spoke of the importance of teachings in their work, including teachings about living the 'good life'. The report is informed by the related notions derived from the Iroquoian teachings of "The Pathways to Peace" and the Anishinaabe teachings of "the Seven Stages of a Good Life" (Maracle, 2015).*

Within the OFIFC community, Creation stories serve as a starting point for understanding community and self. They provide help and guidance for everyday good living. Some Knowledge Keepers have stated that Creation stories offer a critical glance at traditional ways of life and social roles that have been invalidated by Christianity. It has been acknowledged that the purpose of these stories is to remind us of Creator's intentions and to bring us toward an understanding about why things came to be the way they did and how human beings are interconnected with all life. Therefore, such accounts often point to the natural rhythm demonstrated in Creation where the land is perceived as a physical manifestation of all interconnected relations. More importantly, they reflect original instructions given to different beings so that they can continue to fulfill their responsibilities and to remind us of our responsibilities as human beings (OFIFC, forthcoming).

Life Cycle Responsibilities and Good Life Teachings speak to the cultural understanding that we carry with us knowledge from the spirit world. During our journey from the spirit world to the physical realm this knowledge is forgotten. Although it is forgotten, it is not lost. It is infused within all the relations that make our lives possible (Figure 1). In our communities these teachings refer to the responsibility each of us carry with us, to piece back together the knowledge we have forgotten during our journey from the Spirit World.

**Figure 1: Visual of Teaching**





In the teachings of the Women's Nomination Belt described by Sylvia Maracle, all of our *Neha*, all that we will know and be, our basket, our language, our songs, our ceremonies, our dances, our birthing, our medicines, our teachings, they belong to the old woman. We are told that it is her who will hold our *Neha*. The *Neha*, the life, the continuance of culture, everyday good living, life cycle responsibilities, those are all with her.

If historic trauma and colonial oppression had not disrupted our communities, each of us would have been raised in line with Original Instructions. As part of this, our caretakers would have made commitments and had conversations about whether they would have children, how they were going to raise them, and how these children were going to lead. They knew exactly who we were going to be, even before we arrived at this world. Our caretakers would have understood that as we embark on our journey from spirit world, they have a responsibility to prepare for our arrival. There would have been cultural ceremonies, teachings gifted, and guidance and support sought out as part of the preparation for new life.

We would have offered tobacco to each other, like in the Creation story when first women, sky women fell to the earth. It was part of prophecy that she would come. She was pregnant and we learn from this part of Creation story how it is that we got here and that in this life we carry with us roles and responsibilities. We come into this world with inherited knowledge: a name, a clan, a song, a ceremony, relationships, colours, and gifts.

We used to come here with a name. Some people refer to it as their real name, spirit name, or traditional name. You had an identity- this is the notion of name. You have a clan, a helper, a guide. It is someone who adopted and helped you. If it is not a clan, it is in some way something that helps you recall your connection. You have a song. Songs are one of the ways we are able to communicate. You have a ceremony. Ceremony is public in some respects, but it can also be private. It is the overt notion of being grateful, being able to give thanks and to want to express the feeling of gratitude. Then, you have relationships. All your relations, all your teachers, all the people who give you information are not going to be your blood relatives, but they are going to be your relations. You have to be honest and respectful of these connections, planning ahead for future generations. Colours can provide guidance and support by helping with focus, giving reflections on life, love, creativity, self-determination, and gratitude.

Our creation stories remind us that while we all have responsibilities, we also have a gift. We can be singers or dancers; a singer's gift is that they are speakers, they can motivate, make it shiny, and people would go and do that. If you are a dancer, you just went and danced it, it was done. It is the recognition that we all have a duality in our nature and that it is in our gifts.

Within the Friendship Centre Movement, the importance of relationships, cultivating kindness, and the acknowledgment of clan responsibilities and specific gifts comes from a need to create a safe space where Indigenous communities and knowledges can once again continue to thrive. The interference of our ability to carry out foundational Life Cycle and Good Life teachings is an impact of historic and intergenerational trauma brought about by colonization processes. Although our communities continue to experience difficulties carrying out these teachings, the Friendship Centre Movement has been a space of cultural resurgence where generations of urban Indigenous people continue to come together to carry out roles and responsibilities, and share their gifts in line with Original Instructions.





**“One time I said to them, “how many leaders here? Raise your hand... I want everyone to raise their hand,” and I raised my hand too. I said, “everyone is a leader in their own way...”**

**- Veronica Nicholson, 2015**

## CONTEXT

As leaders in the field of Indigenous non-governmental organizations, the OFIFC and Friendship Centres have spent many years refining culture-based practices of governance and leadership, but up to this point very little has been documented or analyzed. The “Our Inheritance: Reflections on Leadership in the Friendship Centre Movement” study, is part of the **“Where Are We?”** Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) project, which examines the extent of service delivery and the organizational infrastructure of the OFIFC and Friendship Centres who continue to support, advocate for, and build the capacity of urban Indigenous communities throughout the Province.

In 2014, the OFIFC undertook two research projects with the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) that engage with the past, present, and future of urban Indigenous communities in Ontario. This report responds to the need to better acknowledge the landscape of culture-based governance and leadership that has been developed over many years by OFIFC and Friendship Centre communities.

OFIFC researchers met with Executive Directors and Youth board representatives from several Friendship Centre communities to hear and document self-voiced reflections for service delivery, community development, youth leadership, and mentorship.

In working towards culturally-appropriate approaches for service delivery and youth leadership through community development and mentorship, it is imperative that we look



back at the last half century of the Friendship Centre Movement to understand and recognize the leadership within our communities. Thus, the focus of the report is to highlight the self-voiced reflections of urban Indigenous leaders using a culturally-appropriate approach to:

- Draw upon the experiences of key urban Indigenous leaders to understand how to enable and empower others to cultivate leadership skills among our current and future leaders;
- Document individual experiences and wise practices that have facilitated in the development of leadership opportunities, skills, and the impact of service delivery sites and organizations;
- To identify challenges and opportunities for youth in accessing leadership opportunities within their communities; and
- Identify steps for service delivery sites and organizations to enable and empower urban Indigenous people, including youth, to become the leaders of today within their communities.

OFIFC's research team conducted interviews with seven Friendship Centre Executive Directors in the Fall of 2015, documenting valuable stories and wise practices that provided insight into how longstanding individuals within the Friendship Centre Movement understand and exercise leadership from a culture-based perspective.

In Spring 2016, staff from the OFIFC along with youth board representatives participated in a series of workshops and research activities structured around historic trauma and trauma-informed practices, event planning, Indigenous leadership, as well as youth roles and responsibilities. These events functioned as important spaces for Indigenous youth to define and cultivate culture-based practices of leadership.

It is from this context that the "Our Inheritance: Reflections on Leadership in the Friendship Centre Movement" report has been created. The aim of this research study was not to generalize the diversity of leadership practices that exist in our communities, but to uncover and acknowledge the vision and voices of longstanding, current, and future leaders within the Friendship Centre Movement.





**“Everyone has the ability to create change and make things better for people in our community.”**

**- Jaynane Burning-Fields, 2015**

## **LOOKING BACK: HISTORY OF THE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE MOVEMENT**

For 65 years, Friendship Centres in Ontario have served urban Indigenous people as community-driven spaces. Emerging from a nation-wide, grass-roots movement dating back to the 1950's, Friendship Centres are community hubs where Indigenous people living in towns, cities, and urban centres can access culturally-based and culturally-appropriate programs and services every day (OFIFC, 2016). Indigenous people have led the Friendship Centre Movement; lobbying the provincial and federal governments to have Friendship Centres solidified as culturally-relevant and community-driven urban Indigenous community hubs.

The first of these centres were located in Kenora, Thunder Bay, and Toronto. Soon after, community centres were erected in London, Parry Sound, and Red Lake. Friendship Centres served their communities by identifying and providing resources that responded to the needs of community members including food, shelter and clothing for Indigenous people migrating to cities and towns in search of a better life and a safe space to practice their culture. These centres, referred to as the original six, were instrumental in the establishment of Friendship Centres across Ontario. The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) was formed in July 1971 by a group of Friendship Centres with common interests and needs. Currently, the OFIFC serves Friendship Centres in 28 urban communities across Ontario.

Today, Friendship Centres are dynamic hubs of economic and social convergence that create space for Indigenous communities to thrive. Friendship Centres are idea incubators for young Indigenous people attaining their education and employment goals, they are sites of cultural resurgence for Indigenous families who want to raise their children to be proud of who they are,



and they are safe havens for Indigenous community members requiring supports (OFIFC, 2016).

The formation of Friendship Centres has impacted generations of urban Indigenous people in Ontario. The development and expansion of programming and services continue to support the needs and priorities of local communities. In this context, the vision of the Friendship Centre Movement remains, to “improve the quality of life for Indigenous people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to and participation in Canadian society and which respect Indigenous cultural distinctiveness (OFIFC, 2016).

Throughout the Friendship Centre Movement, the purpose of the OFIFC and its Board of Directors has remained constant, to further the aims and objectives of Member Centres and to promote the development of new Centres. Each Friendship Centre in Ontario has a local Board of Directors, to ensure that the Friendship Centre identifies and produces resources to support local needs and priorities.

The strong belief that youth are the voice of our communities has been central to the Friendship Centre Movement. In the early 2000s, the OFIFC established the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres – Indigenous Youth Council (OFIFC-IYC) as a mechanism to foster youth involvement in local Friendship Centres across the province, advocate for the unique needs of urban Indigenous youth, create accountability towards future generations, and ensure that young people continue to be represented within the Friendship Centre Movement.

From its outset, the OFIFC-Indigenous Youth Council is designed to be non-hierarchical and inclusive of all Indigenous youth. As such, the council was formed without the conventional roles of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. In the absence of a top-down organizational structure, the OFIFC-IYC utilizes a culturally-relevant leadership model based on the teachings of OFIFC’s Foundational Planning Medicine Wheel. Although each direction of the Wheel corresponds to a specific OFIFC-IYC youth representative, the organizational structure of the Youth Council upholds dynamic relationships between and across all directions of the Wheel. In total there exist eight Youth Council positions: two co-chairs, two liaisons, and four regional representatives.

All the OFIFC understand leadership as embedded within the foundational structure of the Federation, which recognizes the local autonomy of Friendship Centers in Ontario and acknowledges the utility of working cooperatively throughout the province to best serve the urban Indigenous population.



# THE HISTORIC LEGACY OF THE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE MOVEMENT IN ONTARIO

To fully understand the positive impact of the Friendship Centre Movement, the movement also acknowledges the historic legacy of the Indian Act and its oppressive regulations that prohibited Indigenous people from gathering in groups of two or more.

From 1880-1951, The Indian Act outlawed gatherings and fundamental ceremonies that were integral to Indigenous communities. The criminal implications of gathering disrupted the self-determination of Indigenous peoples through their political and traditional institutions.

In the post-world war era, public interest in Indigenous affairs and the treatment of Indigenous people resulted in the formation of a federal joint committee in 1946 whose job was in part to propose changes to the Indian Act (Milloy, 1983). The resulting Indian Act of 1951 was rid of the language prohibiting Indigenous people from gathering and in that same year, the first official Friendship Centre was established in Toronto, Ontario called The North American Indian Club (OFIFC, 2014). Between 1951-1976, the original six communities each had an incorporated Friendship Centre.

The Friendship Centre movement came to be in response to the needs of Indigenous people migrating to cities and towns in search of a better life and a safe space to practice their culture. The impacts of intergenerational trauma induced by colonization processes have taken a devastating toll on Indigenous societies. Therefore, reactivation of Indigenous knowledge transmission, enhancing resilience and healing through access to traditional supports and services became of primary importance. The work of the OFIFC is thus grounded in values, teachings and guidance provided by many Knowledge Keepers across Turtle Island during “rekindling the fire” time, dating back roughly to the early 1970s. Those teachers and pillars of their communities relentlessly assisted Indigenous people in the transition from their home territories to the cities, and helped to carve out violence-free spaces where cultural knowledge could begin to thrive.

The keepers of the OFIFC organizational memory refer to the early history of the Friendship Centre movement as a time when different nations came together to heal and to freely express who they were as people. These first spaces of social exchange were designed not only to foster healing from the impacts of historic trauma and colonial oppression but also to celebrate the immense richness of diverse Indigenous cultures that began to flourish in the off-reserve environments. In pursuing this, urban Indigenous communities were role modeling important principles of peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity. As the need for services tailored to the needs of urban Indigenous people increased, so did the hunger for Indigenous knowledge. Thus, the process of rekindling the fire began with the search for knowledgeable individuals who were raised in line with Original Instructions, followed the principles of everyday good living and could reconnect the youth with profound intergenerational teachings and practices. A series of gatherings with



the participation of prominent Elders laid foundation for what has later become the knowledge core of the OFIFC practice. Traditional leaders from several Friendship Centres were brought together to share stories and participate in ceremonies. The initial Elders and Traditional People's gatherings, often lasting up to eighteen hours per day, made space for important teachings about life cycle responsibilities and good life stages. During that time, the community members were exposed to many foundational medicine wheels, which later informed key areas of service delivery to urban Indigenous communities. Those experiences paved the way for the future knowledge transmission protocols in the organization.



**“You’ve got to be able to incorporate everyone because everyone’s got good ideas just because they’re not in your position. You’ve got to be able to listen and bring in everyone and listen to everyone and bring in all their ideas.”**

**- Frankie Antone, 2016**



## RESEARCH DESIGN: *RESEARCH METHODOLOGY*

This report is structured around the trauma-informed, culture-based, and self-voiced articulations of Indigenous leadership and governance practices documented during Executive Director Interviews and Youth Gatherings. It summarizes key findings from two research phases occurring in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 respectively. As an extension of the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN), this research project and its corresponding report have been designed to nurture the foundational teachings of “mino-biimaadiziwin” - the good life - for urban Indigenous peoples (UAKN website).

The outset of this research project occurred in 2015 when the OFIFC researchers met with Executive Directors from seven Ontario Friendship Centres. During these one-on-one meetings research staff documented the Executive Directors’ stories and wise practices around leadership and governance in the Friendship Centre Movement. Each of these conversations occurred separately, however, the Executive Directors were presented with a list of guiding questions (Appendix One) that focused on how to understand and exercise leadership from a culture-based perspective.

Following this, OFIFC researchers hosted a number of workshops and other research activities in Spring 2016, providing OFIFC-IYC youth an opportunity to effectively role-model leadership skills and trauma-informed practices. During the course of these events, youth self-voiced understandings of leadership grounded in a culturally-appropriate and locally-relevant framework.

Taken together, the Youth and Executive Directors’ reflections, practices, and self-voiced articulations of Indigenous leadership and governance provide the beginnings of a Wholistic lens from which the Friendship Centre Movement has strived to define practices of Indigenous leadership and governance. Remaining mindful that crucial voices have been left out of this report, our aim in this project was not to misrepresent the wholistic notion of leadership and governance at the core of the Friendship Centre Movement, but rather to foster a space for Friendship Centre youth and service delivery staff to share their distinct practices of leadership and governance while being recognized for their invaluable contributions to the Friendship Centre Movement.



## IMPLEMENTING THE USAI FRAMEWORK

The report presents a strength-based perspective of leadership that operationalizes the USAI Research Framework (2016) wherein the research process and outcomes are useful, self-voiced, accessible, and inter-relational for the communities partnering on the project.

This research follows the community-driven and trauma-informed approach of the OFIFC's USAI Research Framework (2016). The OFIFC has been practicing community-driven research for most of its history. The USAI Research Framework emphasizes four principles:

**UTILITY:** Research inquiry must be practical, relevant, and directly benefit communities;

**SELF-VOICING:** Research, knowledge, and practice are authored by communities, which are fully recognized as knowledge holders and knowledge creators;

**ACCESS:** Research fully recognizes all local knowledge, practice, and experience in all their cultural manifestations, as accessible by all research authors and knowledge holders; and

**INTER-RELATIONALITY:** Research is historically-situated, geo-politically positioned, relational, and explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is generated

USAI-grounded research welcomes principled partnerships, ethical cooperation and meaningful collaboration, providing guidelines to protect the integrity of Indigenous Knowledge.

The OFIFC has developed two integrated research projects through the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN). The first project titled **"Where Are We?"** focuses on service delivery, the role of Executive Directors in Friendship Centres, and characteristics of urban Indigenous leadership. The OFIFC partnered with six Friendship Centre Executive Directors (from Peel, Niagara, Hamilton, Sault Ste. Marie, Fort Frances, and London) to document stories and wise practices of leadership.

The second project titled, **"Where Are We Going?"** focuses on youth leadership and youth engagement in urban Indigenous communities. The OFIFC worked with youth representing four Friendship Centre communities (Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Dryden, and Windsor). Through sharing stories and wise practices as well as attending a gathering to center youth voices, research partners who collaborated on the, "Our Inheritance: Reflections on Leadership in the Friendship Centre Movement" project were positioned as knowledge holders and experts of culture-based governance and leadership. The final report in this series examines both the Service Delivery (Where are we now) and Youth Leadership (Where are we going) projects. The report focuses on urban Indigenous leadership and examines the intersections and divergences between the insights of Executive Directors and urban Indigenous youth.

As collaborators, community leaders ensure that the research project, its process and outcomes,



continue to be useful to their communities. Moreover, these individuals ensure that the utility of community-driven, action-research is based on the promotion of cultural understanding in Friendship Centre communities as well as practical strategies to enhance cultural presence within and among communities.

The report itself is structured based on the self-voiced understandings, knowledge, reflections, stories, and strategies presented by each person. In this way, the leadership narratives presented in the report are authored by communities, who ultimately are the Knowledge Keepers in community-driven research.

The report uses a narrative approach to analysis that acknowledges the ways community members articulate and communicate local cultural knowledge. For this, the report is informed by teachings such as Living a Good Life (see pg. 5).

The report is guided by the self-reflections of community members and their inter-related experiences and understandings of the development of the Friendship Centre Movement as well as their own journeys within it. This is not to say that the report synthesizes or generalizes the experiences of leaders, but rather, we acknowledge that there are common experiences of leadership within the Friendship Centre Movement in addition to unique local experiences.

Following a USAI-grounded research framework, the next section reviews and examines cultural notions of leadership expressed by youth and executive directors in the Friendship Centre Movement.



**“[being a leader], it’s intimidating and humbling when you’re put in that position and you realize you don’t know that much... I’ve come to understand a good leader has to do two things: he has to listen and he has to lead.”**

**-Al Day, 2015**



## IN CONVERSATION WITH LEADERS IN THE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE MOVEMENT

The following section presents highlights from OFIFC-IYC youth and the seven Executive Directors partnering on the research project. In conversation with the Executive Directors, they reflected on service delivery and proposed that the research project explore specific knowledge around leadership, as part of service delivery. In working with the youth, an understanding of leadership rooted in individual and collective obligations to community emerged as an orientation toward Indigenous leadership. Moreover, the OFIFC-IYC youth emphasized the importance of recognizing the specific gifts and distinct knowledge youth bring to their communities.

The report acknowledges that the leaders in this project presented various notions of leadership and positioned them based on the subjectivity of their understanding including; experience, age, culture, traditional responsibilities, and history in the Friendship Centre Movement.

A common thread throughout the stories shared by Executive Directors was the importance of acknowledging what leaders have received as part of their leadership responsibilities, wise practices for fulfilling responsibilities, and preparing these leadership roles for future generations. These notions were discussed in the context of inheritance including understanding what leaders have inherited, preparing this inheritance for future generations, as well as how historic trauma has impacted leadership responsibilities and protocols in communities.

Across the youth discussions, participants described the importance of recognizing that young people are holders of distinct knowledge embedded in and derived from their everyday lived experiences and location within The Lifecycle Wheel. Strengthening youth's ability and capacity to carry out leadership responsibilities and roles as well as, to share their gifts with the Friendship Centre community was identified as being of utmost importance for OFIFC-IYC youth research collaborators.



**“It’s about following your heart and you have to believe in what you’re doing - to have that belief and to be able to dream and see your dreams into fruition but doing things in a good way.”**

**- Susan Barberstock, 2015**



## COMMON TRENDS

Upon review of stories and reflections shared by Executive Directors, seven key themes emerged:

Tangible strategies to encourage youth to engage in Friendship Centres and the Indigenous community

Intersections between organizational management approaches and traditional leadership practices

Community partnership building strategies to increase Indigenous peoples' economic, social, and cultural contributions to their communities and beyond

Key characteristic of Indigenous leadership

Challenges within Friendship Centres and among leaders

Wise practices for leadership in the Friendship Centre Movement

Culturally-relevant and community-based leadership development

Upon review of stories and reflections shared by Youth, four key themes emerged:

The history of inconsistent and unpredictable youth cultural-programming and service-delivery in the Friendship Centre Movement

The impact of government interference on the relationship of trust between Indigenous youth and adults

A notion of Indigenous leadership rooted in individual and collective obligations to community

The importance of recognizing the specific gifts and distinct knowledge youth bring to their communities



## WHEN WE COME INTO THIS WORLD: BEGINNINGS IN THE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE MOVEMENT

In the following section, the narratives of both youth and Executive Directors are examined and informed by the quoted, self-voiced understandings presented. Throughout the following sections, the report highlights wise practices, community visions, and strategies that support leadership development within the Friendship Centre Movement and associated findings related to community leadership and governance.

In acknowledgement of the magnitude and weight of their responsibilities, Friendship Centre Youth and Executive Directors reflected upon the experiences that primed them to enter their role as community leaders. Notably, the journey to becoming a leader within the Friendship Centre Movement begins from a young age and while skills and experiences develop over many years, the path to leadership is not linear.

Many of the Executive Directors partnering on the research project have held the position of Executive Director between 5-10 years. At Friendship Centres, the Executive Director is a highly regarded leadership position within the community. An Executive Director is responsible for ensuring that the functions and duties of the Friendship Centre are fulfilled and meet community needs. In addition to these administrative responsibilities, Executive Directors are responsible for representing the Friendship Centre community's priorities and interests to the broader community.

Several Executive Directors positioned their leadership in the context of how they became involved in the Friendship Centre Movement. Some leaders began working in the Friendship Centre Movement in their adolescence where they got involved through student positions and volunteerism.

***"When I was in College, I did my placement at the Friendship Centre here in Toronto when I went to George Brown. I think becoming involved in a Friendship Centre, growing up in a smaller, rural community adjacent to my home First Nation, but not being involved in the First Nation, so not really having that connection and then coming to Toronto for school and being involved in the Friendship Centre, I think that is certainly where my being able to identify with those that were at the Friendship Centre."***

**(SB, 2015)**

***"I had been involved volunteering at the Friendship Centre in Nanaimo for 2-3 years during the summers and it was interesting, it kept my interest, but I didn't want to work, just volunteered. I gained new skills."***

**(VN, 2015)**

***"I worked for a First Nation Aboriginal umbrella organization and then coming over to the Federation, so getting that perspective of on-reserve, off-reserve."***

**(SB, 2015)**



“

***I was actually a youth when I first started in the Friendship Centre Movement. We didn't have specific programs in the Friendship Centre at that time. I was sixteen years old, I was hired for a summer program and what we did was, for the summer months, we took First Nations kids that surrounded our community, we had ten First Nations and urban youth. We took them canoeing and camping from Monday to Friday. That was my first encounter with the Friendship Centre. [...] I became more involved after I went to school, in college, when I was a young mum [...] A month after graduation, there was a literacy job at the local Friendship Centre, I applied, and I started there. That was in 1988. So. I've been there for 28 years now.***

**(SM, 2015)**

”

***"I got involved in the Friendship Centre when I moved from the reserve in Grade 7. [...] My friends were like do you want to go hangout down at this place, they're going to take us to the fair and so that's how I started getting involved. [...] Very shortly after volunteer opportunities started coming up."***

**(FA, 2016)**

***"I started at the provincial level doing a contract for the Federation (OFIFC). I think the Federation was smart enough, in my mind, to recognize that if they teach people that they could potentially grow people. I think the Federation did grow me. I started out on a six month contract and worked my way through various levels of the Federation, to become a manager at the Federation. But, I think it was because the leadership was able to happen at the Federation. I wasn't necessarily educated or that wasn't my area of expertise, but they provided a lot of support for me to make that jump to the next level. They give a lot of coaching and supports. That's how I got to be there for my six months that turned into 16 years."***

**(JBF, 2015)**

Youth collaborators describe their leadership journeys as consisting of a number of different processes, experiences, and challenges rather than, as single moments or opportunities. This notion of leadership—as an experience that is accessed and practiced on an involvement continuum—was echoed by the Executive Directors who spoke of their leadership journeys as being comprised of a number of dynamic relationships, events, and experiences occurring throughout the course of their lives.

All youth research partners held positions on the OFIFC-IYC during the data collection phase. Within these roles they acted as a voice for young people in their local Friendship Centre



Communities, as well as for Indigenous youth throughout the province. This involvement was described as instrumental in providing the mentorship and cultural guidance that they self-voiced as necessary for assuming leadership roles and responsibilities within the community.

As OFIFC-IYC board members, youth partners were responsible for increasing youth involvement in their local Friendship Centres and acting as spokespeople for urban Indigenous youth throughout Ontario. Moreover, OFIFC-IYC youth were required to attend and be engaged at all board meetings, where they would support, advocate for, and build the capacity of urban Indigenous young people.

Many of the youth interviewed for this project noted the central role of a benevolent adult in the beginnings of their leadership journeys. One young person spoke about how her relationship with a family member involved in the Friendship Centre Movement provided her an opportunity to get involved with the OFIFC - Indigenous Youth Council. For other youth, the specifics of a benevolent adult varied; one young woman stated that talking to her cousins and seeing them overcome their addictions and finish school provided her the inspiration she needed to take up a leadership role in her community.

The youth's desire to connect with Elders on an everyday basis was, notably, one of the themes that emerged consistently throughout the interviews. The youth board representatives responded to the question of what some of the key challenges youth are facing related to leadership, by voicing that youth in their communities needed contact with a consistent Elder. This was particularly disconcerting to them when they reflected on the lack of trust between adults and young people within Friendship Centre communities. The factors that the youth named as contributing to the lack of trust were the failure of some adults to recognize the specific gifts and distinct knowledge young people bring to their communities, and the history of inconsistent cultural-programming and service-delivery for youth and children resulting from unstable funding.



**“All my Elders tell me to be patient, to be a good listener of a good mind, be respectful, be humble.... it all comes back to culture either way. ”**

**- Desiree, 2016**



## IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE ON SERVICE DELIVERY: INFRASTRUCTURE AND SAFE SPACES FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH



**“As part of my leadership roles, I really go out into the community and I listen to what the youth want in their communities and what’s already there as well and just how we can make those strengths even greater.”**

**- Cassandra Giba White, 2016**

The value of and need for culture-based spaces and programming for Indigenous young people has been well documented within the OFIFC literature. However, healthy and culturally-appropriate recreational services for children and youth have too often relied on unstable provincial and federal funding and resources. The logic and justification used by governments to assess youth cultural programming and services and by extension the decision-making processes around whether or not to support these programs continues to fail Indigenous people. As a result, cultural spaces for children and youth have been underfunded or all together eradicated. This is particularly troubling when we consider the vital role this programming has in enabling Indigenous children and youth to nurture community leadership and other valuable life skills, as well as, the demonstrated positive impact such programming has on families and the community at large.

In 1995, funding for the Li'l Beavers Program was cut and Friendship Centre communities expressed concern around the need to develop a program that would continue to create culturally-appropriate and locally-relevant safe spaces for children and youth.

The OFIFC responded to this challenge by designing a unique program to meet these needs. In addressing the distinct requirements of Indigenous children and youth, an individualized approach to service-delivery was understood as crucial and the value added feature of one-to-one support was envisioned to strengthen the outcomes sought by Friendship Centre communities.

<sup>1</sup> The OFIFC's Li'l Beavers Program was a successful pilot project that began in 1976 and existed in Friendship Centres until 1995 when funding was abruptly cut. The program created safe and culturally grounded spaces for Indigenous children and youth. Many Li'l Beavers alumni went on to become notable leaders and activists in their communities.



Thus, the Akwe:go Program was established in 2006, as a client-focused program to address the needs of at-risk and high-risk children between the ages of 7-12 years. However, it should be noted that the Li'l Beavers Program was favorable as it did not target or label children who were at-risk or high-risk (OFIFC, 2015).

Youth participants self-voiced that the lack of consistency in program funding contributed to the erosion of community relationships. One of the youth leaders recounted how program funding in Windsor kept coming and going so recurrently that in order to carry out her responsibilities as a leader she had to first work to rebuild trust between young people and adults in her community.

*"In my community in Windsor, they're really untrustworthy of the Friendship Centre. I don't know why that connection is. [...] if they hear the word Can-Am they don't come out to programs [...] I have to gain that trust between the Friendship Centre and them again [...] I think it's from all the funding that keeps coming and going and the programming [...] It's not consistent. They just don't see the reason to go for so long and just get thrown away again."*  
(DH, 2016)

*"Youth don't really have much. They only have the Wasa-Nabin Program and the Mental Health Program [...]. We lost our CCAY program which was fun, it was kind of like a Li'l Beavers Program for youth. [...] We used to do all this fun stuff but now that we got our funding cut the youth don't get to do all that. We have to fundraise for our own [programs]."*

(DH, 2016)

Other notable examples of culture-based programming and recreational infrastructure administered by Friendship Centres' that had undergone funding cuts or been altogether discontinued include: Canadian Heritage's former Urban Multipurpose, Aboriginal Youth Centre Initiative (UMAYC) and Cultural Connection for Aboriginal Youth (CCAY).



## GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY: INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Leadership in Indigenous communities is not exclusively attributed to Friendship Centres. Several leaders involved in the project spoke of the intersections between organizational leadership and traditional leadership practices.

**Leadership roles and responsibilities in Indigenous communities are diverse.** This sometimes means a leader straddles more than one leadership role at the same time. Some Executive Directors employed by Friendship Centres hold traditional leadership roles in addition to their professional leadership roles. Similarly, youth collaborators simultaneously held positions at their local Friendship Centres, on the OFIFC-IYC, and carried out traditional leadership responsibilities within their home communities.

Several Executive Directors reflected on holding traditional leadership roles and how these contributed to subsequent leadership, including later employment as Executive Directors. For those who engage the Friendship Centre and traditional leadership responsibilities, skills and experiences are understood to inform all forms of leadership that they engage.

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*“My clan mother had asked me if I would be interested in taking responsibilities to be chief in traditional council and so I agreed to that. Subsequent to that discussion, she said she was on the Board of Directors at (the Friendship Centre) and indicated that there was a vacancy and asked if I was interested. I said I had retired 8-9 years ago and I said, yes, I guess I could do that.”*

*(AD, 2015)*

”

As we heard the Youth's stories, it became clear that the experience of leadership was deeply embedded in a tension between individual and collective obligations to community. In other words, Youth spoke of leadership as a practice in which one must actively reconcile their own perspectives with that of the community. One youth collaborator explicitly noted this by saying that “being open minded...the teaching about the little ones, the toddlers and how you follow them around and you look at...you try to look at other people's perspectives not just yourself... that's what makes a good leader”. Importantly then, the act of negotiating between individual and collective obligations to community enabled youth to engage a Wholistic leadership practice that reflected the culture-based leadership and governance at the heart of the Friendship Centre Movement.



*"I heard wolves do that too when they travel in their packs, the leaders will stay behind and the older wolves and the sick wolves will be in the front, and the healthy wolves will be in the middle because the leader has to stay in the back and make sure the rest of the community is moving forward and moving well."*

(CGW, 2016)

Several leaders reference cultural and Indigenous approaches in conjunction with their leadership roles including: wholistic, the Friendship Centre Movement, the importance of stories, and Living The Good Life. While some leaders understand their leadership roles from a traditional perspective, others acknowledge that there are multiple understandings of leadership and not all are traditional. For instance, many Executive Directors spoke about the importance of parenthood to leadership both in the context of traditional practices and mainstream concepts of mentorship. **Parenthood has a direct connection to leadership.** Several leaders describe the important role of their parents in preparing them to take on leadership roles.

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*"The story that I want to share about that and my mother is that my mother was older, she had our home and she came to me one day, I was renting a home on the reserve, and she goes, "give me a dollar and I'm selling you my house." She wasn't frail, she was still in good health, she still drove around. And I said, "well, why?" and she goes, "everybody knows that I am giving you my house", I'm the youngest, the sucky baby, right. So I say, "oh, okay." So I give her the dollar and she says, "'cause this is my plan. I'm good enough to live in an apartment building. Probably in three months I'm moving out of that house and moving into an apartment building for two reasons." She goes, "One, so that you can move into that house so that when I pass away, there is absolutely no question that it's your house." She says, "I don't expect to pass away this year, so it will give them time to be used to that it's your house." And the other thing she said was, "when I pass, I'm passing away in an apartment. You will have to go in there, and you will take my things out and do what you have to do, but you'll never have to go back to that house where I passed away. That memory will never be attached to the house that you are living in[...]"*

*[...] I'm thinking, you are even taking care of us or thinking about us as your children and planning for when you die. I think that was the big 'ah ha' moment for me about, I need to think way ahead of things just like she did because she thought about everything about after she passed away and how things were going to be. I guess the best for us because she's right, so we went and took her stuff out of the apartment and we never had to go back in there so there is no place that is attached to her dying.*

*[...] I need to figure out how to think like that and how to plan like that. I think even that applies to work at Friendship Centres [...] You need to be prepared and you need to know what you are going to do when I retire from this place. [...] I think any sort of that forward thinking about leaving and, whether it is passing away or leaving a job, sort of puts people in a panic."*

(JBF, 2015)

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*"It is a huge commitment that I have made to my community because I understand what I was missing growing up in this region and I understand say, what my son who is an adult now, missed growing up in this region and my daughter now is benefiting from all of that by seeing that. I see it in the families that come here every day, the benefit of having services and I wouldn't know those things if I wasn't involved."*

*(KN, 2015)*

As well, several leaders describe that becoming a parent had a valuable, positive impact on their leadership and the responsibilities they adopt. Many leaders connect their roles and responsibilities as leaders in Friendship Centres with the roles and responsibilities of being a parent. Some go so far as to say that parenthood helped them develop the skills and values that are needed to be a good leader in the community. Some leaders describe the Friendship Centre as their 'second home'.

In this way the role of parenthood is twofold including: the value leaders place on their parents and how they nurtured their leadership as well as how being a parent entails nurturing others, and in doing so, growing your capacities as a leader.



**"[The Friendship Centre] is like a second home for me, and for my family. I think that's also part of being a great leader, for me... I involve myself in what's going on."**

**- Kris Noakes, 2015  
Board of Directors**



## LEADERSHIP ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: PERSONAL CHALLENGES AND HISTORIC TRAUMAS

While Executive Directors and youth recognize the value of family-nurtured leadership, they also acknowledge the positive impacts of reliance in the face of personal challenges and historic traumas. As part of resiliency, the Executive Directors spoke about how **historic trauma impacts leadership** and continues to impact Indigenous people. As members of the Indigenous community, Executive Directors reflect on adversity from experiences of trauma including substance use and abuse. One resulting impact of historic trauma is a lack of engagement in community that could otherwise foster leadership skills.

*"Everybody has their ups and downs and bumps along the way..."*

*(CS, 2015)*

*"We've allowed outside society to dictate to us and as a result, if you are easily intimidated or you are scared to take that first step toward leadership than you won't. I think that described me in a lot of ways in my formative years. When I first went to high school, I didn't have any cultural identity, I didn't have any confidence or self-esteem. I had as I understood it, academic talent, but I allowed that to be submerged and it wasn't until probably in my thirties where I finally started to turn and speak for myself. Unfortunately, I don't think this happens enough for our communities."*

*(AD, 2015)*

The impacts of historic trauma on leadership were reflected in the self-voiced narratives of youth collaborators who stated that leadership meant starting a healing journey in response to the intergenerational trauma brought about by the ongoing dispossession of colonization across Turtle Island. One youth described their healing journey as an important first step needed for "... helping youth recognize the risks and violence and how to stop it in their communities."

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*I got taken away from my mom when I was 15...When I was 17 I got given back but um well like I was really bad when I was with CAS. I would drink every day. I was partying I was one of those real bad kids. I was running away. It was because I wasn't home. I didn't feel at home I didn't want to stay where they left me. Once I got home [...] my sister had her baby and after that [...] I started my healing journey. I just dropped everything. I didn't want to do it anymore. I started my healing path.*

*(DH, 2016)*

”

Executive Directors noted that sometimes they felt as though they were placed on a pedestal by outside perceptions and expectations. However, the self-reflections of Executive Directors speak to the importance of looking back at their journey and to where they are today. In doing so,



the leaders acknowledge that they came into the world of the Friendship Centre Movement as **leaders-in-development**, as Indigenous community members looking to serve their community, and as adolescence on journeys of healing and growing, through culture and community support.

*"I had the opportunity to sit on the Kanawayhitowin Youth Advisory Committee and through that I got to learn about how to end violence within Aboriginal communities against women and girls. [...] For me that really touched home because growing up there was a lot of violence especially against the women in my family, so I felt like I could really relate to it. I knew it was a huge issue and not just in my community but communities all across Ontario and Canada. So I was really gung-ho for that initiative. [...] I have done a few trainings in the past year in different communities just to spread the word."*

*(CGB, 2016)*

*"Everybody is a leader in a sense. That they need, they should find their niche of what they want to be a leader and that everyone has the ability to create change and make things better for people in our community. That they should try and do that, they should try and be the leader whether it is good in sports, whether it is good in the culture, whether it is public speaking, whether it is social issues. That, whatever they are passionate about, that they should become leaders in that field. So that other community members can see the good of what we are."*

*(JBF, 2015)*

From the early life stories and experiences shared by Executive Directors and youth, leadership is understood as a series of skills, responsibilities, and values that are nurtured in Indigenous communities, especially through an individual's involvement in the Friendship Centre Movement.



**"Perseverance is essential to stay in the game of service. It is important to recall the Seven Grandfather Teachings to resolve conflict and persevere. "**

**- Cathy Syrette, 2015**



## CULTURE-BASED NOTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

The image of Sitting Across the Fire (pg. 30) shows both the Executive Director and Youth self-voiced understandings of cultural leadership practices. The Executive Directors are placed in the western direction to reflect their position within the Life Cycle Responsibility teachings. The West holds distinct notions of culture-based leadership guided by both the Executive Director's personal and professional journeys. Moreover, the Youth sitting across the fire share their unique perspectives on embodying leadership from a culture-based standpoint. The fire represents shared cultural notions of leadership that acknowledge learning, growing, and mentorship as a collective responsibility. Each of these unique practices and perspectives come together in the center and speak to the understanding of leadership within the Friendship Centre Movement as an ongoing journey of inheritance.

Based on their self-reflections and expressions of their personal journeys, Executive Directors and youth identified key characteristics of Indigenous leadership. Importantly, Executive Directors positioned these as inclusive characteristics that are expressed throughout the Friendship Centre Movement and within the Indigenous community. Youth described these attributes in relation to the specific gifts and distinct knowledge they brought to their communities.

**A leader is someone who positions serving their community above themselves- this includes motivating others to do the same.** Many leaders positioned their roles and responsibilities as 'serving the community'.

As leaders in the Friendship Centre Movement, this includes motivating staff members to go above and beyond to serve the community. For many leaders this means long hours and volunteering beyond workable hours. As a leader, several recognize that knowing how to best serve the community comes from experience, culture, and education.

*"They come for the cultural teachings, they want to learn about their culture, that they feel disconnected from it and that seems to be the biggest demand that they have [...] Culture is still really important to them and that is what they want from Friendship Centres."*

*(JBF, 2015)*

*"I went to a south west region meeting and I got asked if I wanted to sit on the board of directors at the OFIFC and at the time I didn't know what I was getting myself into [...] so I went, I ran for it and I got elected in. At first it was kind of scary. It's all these adults and I was just a little youth there but it was after I got used to it, it was pretty good. And then I asked questions like what my role was on the board of directors and they told me what I can do like what I can talk about and then I just started talking to the youth and [I] asked them what they wanted and at first they didn't believe me that I could change things, that my voice was heard up there so they were like whatever. Then after a while they were like can you do this or do that and I said I could ask. Some of it happened, some of it didn't. It's just patience."*

*(DH, 2016)*



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*Every Wednesday, we have a social drop-in from 10-2pm and it is also bread day because there is so much food insecurity. That is what came out of conversations before the end of September, with our youth. Sometimes I will just go have a coffee and chit chat with them and they said, 'oh Veronica, we heard that the Friendship Centre is going to be closed for two weeks over Christmas.' And I said, 'does that concern you?' They said, 'ya, it does.' [...] I went to the drop-in the following week and I got to talk to another group of people, concerned about the Friendship Centre being closed for two weeks. I thought, this is our job so the community is up there first. When you think of the youth, the youth took that leadership role, just to initiate that conversation with me and then I heard from another group of people who come with always the hope of getting back into the good life again. [...] So, I wrote a letter/email to the Board saying in my 12 years here I've never done this, but I am going to do this and I would just like to propose that we open, stay open on December 21, 22, 23, and [...] re-open again the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. [...] I was really proud of the staff, how they took initiative and we have a big enough staff where they only have to work one day. I don't think of it as accommodating our community, it's the right thing to do. It's always the right thing to do.*

(VN, 2015)

”

**Leadership encompasses several values and principles.** Leaders in Friendship Centre communities describe good leadership as serving based on the following values and principles: empathy, understanding, compassion, being strong but kind, ability to speak your mind, patience, to listen, driven, preparedness, approachable, relationship-builder, kindness, respect, role-modelling good behaviours, accessible to community, passionate about change, commitment to community, and confidence. Youth weighed in on the discussion by describing good leaders as possessing the following values: commitment to being nonjudgmental, humbleness, respectful, balanced, reflexive, supportive of other youth, and pride in your identity as an Indigenous person.

**Leadership involves technical skills that are nurtured and create a strong foundation for leading others.** Leaders in Friendship Centre communities describe good leadership as serving based on the following skills that can be nurtured over time: common logic, common sense, listening skills, non-partial (to community, staff, and Board), relationship-building, knowing when to say no to stakeholders, thick skin, preparedness, communication, works well with others, and problem-solving skills. Youth collaborators added: being able to keep an open-mind, ability to look at other perspectives, ability to balance both your own and other's perspectives, possessing the desire and skills to repair the broken trust between Friendship Centre's and youth, and an understanding of contemporary barriers facing Indigenous young people.

Several leaders speak to the importance of **education as part of their skills-building**, such as finance or business credentials. Several leaders also mention the OFIFC as an organization that supported their leadership development and is an integral resource for skills-building. Similarly, several leaders began working in the Friendship Centre movement prior to being Executive Directors and these opportunities were integral to their leadership.

**Leadership is a series of skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and principles that can be nurtured in all individuals and that each individual person's leadership thrives in diverse ways.** Some leader describe leadership as something that comes natural to some people while others describe that everyone can be a leader. Generally, it is understood that people have the capacity to be good leaders, and that this is adopted quickly for some. However, every person thrives differently and this also applies to leadership.



**build  
trust**

**leadership  
notions**

**open  
minded**

**empathy &  
compassion**

**good  
listening  
skills**

**speaking  
your mind**

**patience**

**common  
sense**

**approachable**

**problem-solving  
skills**

**WEST  
Executive Directors**

**listen  
and lead**





# **EAST Youth**

**reflexive**

**pride in your  
identity**

**being  
humble**

**being true  
to yourself**

**participating in  
drumming and  
ceremony**

**aware of  
challenges  
and barriers  
youth face**

**being a  
voice for  
youth in your  
community**

**thick  
skin**

**passionate  
about  
change**





“

*I went back to post-secondary education after I raised my family. You know, I always say our kids grew up and we left home because virtually that is what we did and. [...] I always wanted to go back to school but I knew if I would have stayed in the community I would not be able to just go back for just school. I would have been wanting to work and do the same old thing. So, we moved [...] I hung in there because that is what I wanted to do. I started with business, business management. Then, in my second year of business management, we were offered a combined diploma course with Aboriginal community economic development and I have to say the first time that I ever took the introduction to community economic development, I knew exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my days. Up until then I did not know what I wanted to do and I was just marveled by the facilitator and she eventually became my mentor. The longer I stayed with my education, the more opportunity presented itself."*

(VN, 2015)

”

## MOVING FORWARD: LEARNINGS FROM OUR INHERITANCE

Together the stories, reflections, knowledge, and experiences shared by Executive Directors and Youth shed light on how to understand service delivery and leadership from a cultural perspective.

**Leadership is an experience that community members access on a spectrum** including: being involved, getting involved, and opportunities to get involved. Across Friendship Centres, community members have experienced and continue to experience leadership along the involvement spectrum, with Executive Directors and Youth generally focusing on visions of community engagement in the Friendship Centre as leaders.

**Leadership is founded in serving the community through the development of relations** that benefit community ideas, priorities and needs. Leaders often speak about serving the community and elaborate on this notion in several ways including: relations with youth in community, other community members, local leaders outside the Friendship Centre, the OFIFC, and broader community. In doing so, leaders aim to advance their Friendship Centre visions through collaboration methods that are voiced by the community they serve.

**Leaders differ in their visions of their local Friendship Centre, but share in a vision toward continually expanding locally-relevant community services that support the Indigenous community-** Firstly, Friendship Centres are diverse across Ontario in that they were developed at various stages in time, ranging from just over a year to several decades ago. Leaders from long-established Friendship Centres generally describe themselves as community hubs while leaders from newer Friendship Centres describe that they are becoming a community hub. This suggests that it takes time for leaders to build local relationships, policy, and strategies and that these are pillars to developing a Friendship Centre. The key component of this finding is expansion—most leaders identify that they must constantly challenge the status quo and find ways to expand physical space, funding, services offered, and partnerships with community stakeholders to better support community members in culturally-sensitive and locally-relevant ways. Regardless of how



long the Friendship Centre has existed- leaders generally are aspiring for new opportunities, relationships, and space to provide services and support.

**A leader is someone who positions serving their community above themselves- this includes motivating others to do the same.** Many leaders positioned their roles and responsibilities as 'serving the community' or 'balancing more than one perspective'. For Executive Directors in the Friendship Centre movement, this includes motivating staff members to go above and beyond to serve the community. For many leaders this means long hours and volunteering beyond workable hours. As a leader, several recognize that knowing how to best serve the community comes from experience, culture, and education. Over time, this leadership is developed through values, principles, and skills-building.

The youth's notion of 'balancing more than one perspective' revealed the tension between individual and collective community obligations deeply embedded in culture-based leadership practices. The orientation toward leadership as a practice where youth must actively reconcile their own perspectives with that of their community aligns with Executive Director's insistence that culture-based leadership entails 'serving the community'.

**Leadership entails standing up to initiate change.** Leadership roles, and the responsibilities it entails are not easy to fulfill. It is often up to leaders to develop and implement strategies for change including: Friendship Centre policy and procedural changes, funding and investment, increasing cultural practices and Friendship Centre visibility in broader community, addressing crises among members, and negotiating community partnerships. Leaders are continually working toward greater functionality with the goal of better serving the community. However, the responsibilities of these leaders are constantly expanding and becoming more complicated, which impacts function. In short, the leadership equation often becomes a balancing act between initiating change and addressing conflict.

**Knowing your community is integral to knowing where you are going.** Part of a leader's role is knowing characteristics about your community including: demographics, cultural identities, etc. There is an emphasis on constantly looking forward to the future and preparing Friendship Centres for future generations. This is particularly relevant to leaders who had experienced the challenges of high turn-over and lack of institutional memory within Friendship Centres.

In response to the challenge of inconsistent and unstable government funding for culture-based spaces and programming aimed at children and youth, youth leaders framed their leadership roles as entailing a responsibility to mend relationships. For youth research partners the notion of preparing Friendship Centre's for future generations became about repairing the intergenerational fracture between adults and young people resulting from federal and provincial funding cuts to child and youth cultural programming.

**Mentorship is an integral feature of leadership.** Leaders continuously brought up the importance of mentorship. For several leaders, mentorship was lacking when they first entered their role as Executive Director. However, these leaders simultaneously describe the positive impact that mentorship opportunities have had on youth leadership in the community. Where mentorship opportunities may not have existed in their time, leaders see the value of mentorship for the growth of leaders.

Many youth leaders reflected on the role of a benevolent adult when they first became involved with the Friendship Centre community. For youth, a benevolent adult was someone who provided opportunities to get involved, mentored them within their leadership roles, and provided encouragement and inspiration take up these responsibilities.



## CONCLUSION



**“We have to define what our community is. We have to look at our community as a whole. Is it just the Friendship Centre and its clients? I don’t think it is. We are in the process right now of defining what our community really is and where we fit.”**

**- Sheila McMahon, 2015**

In reflecting on the OFIFC and Friendship Centres’ historical legacy of culture-based leadership and governance Youth, Executive Directors, and Board members collectively reference the vital role of relationships, cultivating kindness, and a recognition of clan responsibilities and specific gifts. As mentioned at the beginning of this report, such values are inherently rooted in our cultural understanding of Good Life Teachings and Life Cycle Roles and Responsibilities.

In looking back at the last half century of the Friendship Centre Movement, we recognize the diversity of leadership practices that exist within our communities and understand culture-based leadership and governance through the self-voiced reflections of urban Indigenous leaders, whose voices have made this report and the valuable insights throughout possible to begin with.

In carrying out this collaborative research project, contributors actively reclaimed an appreciation of and a renewed awareness for, the pivotal role culture-based practices of leadership and governance play in empowering generations of urban Indigenous people. For our communities, this sense of empowerment is felt most strongly when community-controlled spaces where we can once again carry out roles and responsibilities, and share our gifts in-line with Original Instructions continue to be invested in. Friendship Centres as dynamic hubs of economic and social convergence continue to function as such spaces for Indigenous people.

Leadership in the context of this report has been defined as a journey that consists of a number of different processes, experiences, and challenges. This orientation towards leadership departs



from dominant Euro-centric definitions that have depicted leadership as an experience that is contained within single moments or finite opportunities. Both Youth and Executive Directors' reflections speak to the importance of looking back at one's leadership journey to gain perspective of where we sit in relation to our community, the Friendship Centre Movement, and those sitting across the fire.

The notion of Sitting Across the Fire speaks to the cultural understanding shared among Executive Directors, Youth Board Representatives, and OFIFC Research Staff that each of us carry with us a responsibility to share what it's like at the fire from where we sit.

*"One time we had, when we had the CCAY proposal, and it was a very competitive proposal, and my role was to involve the youth and how to involve them was I explained to them what our proposal was and what the purpose of it was. I said, "you don't want this old lady telling you what to do." I said, "you tell me what you want to do." Then, we had focus groups for them to provide their input. Once again they said, Veronica, we didn't know it worked this way, nobody ever asked us before what we think." And I said, "well, it is important. I need you to tell me what it is like at the fire from where you sit. That is how change comes about. Change comes about by people being active, involved, and passionate about a cause." I am always curious from where people sit, from where they are."*

*(V.N., 2015)*



## **APPENDIX ONE: GUIDING QUESTIONS PRESENTED TO EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS AND YOUTH**

1. How did you become involved with the Friendship Centres/service delivery site?
2. What are some key characteristics of a good leader in Indigenous communities?
3. Is it easy or hard for you and your peers to become leaders in your community?  
Why or why not?
4. What would you say to a youth to inspire her/him to become a community leader?
5. What are you observing about the youth in your community?
6. What inspires you about the youth in your community?
7. What do you think are some key challenges youth are facing (as related to leadership)?
8. Are there enough youth leaders in your community? Anyone in particular that stands out to you?
9. Are there any pivotal/defining moments that you recall, that changed your life?
10. Is there a particular achievement that you are proud of that you'd like to share?
11. What is your vision for the youth in your community?
12. What have been some challenges in providing services in this FC community?
13. What are some key highlights or innovative approaches to service delivery that you have observed?
14. Do you have a vision for your FC as a community hub, and if so, can you please explain your vision/thoughts?



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