

## Ways forward in addictions programming in Fort Simpson Northwest Territories

### Dene Gog̱ndié Voices of the People: An Interview with Kristen Tanche

Kristen Tanche interviewed by Hayden King

*The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship is a policy and leadership development program recognizing leadership potential among young northern Canadians eager to address policy challenges facing the North. This interview is part of a series Yellowhead is publishing, featuring discussions with 2018-2019 Fellows on their fellowship policy papers.*

*Here, Hayden King, Executive Director of Yellowhead Institute speaks with Glassco Fellow Kristen Tanche on her paper, *Ways forward in addictions programming in Fort Simpson Northwest Territories Dene Gog̱ndié Voices of the People*, examines addiction programming and related services offered by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories (NWT), and provides policy recommendations based on conversations with community members.*

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**HAYDEN:** One of the things that I'm interested in thinking through is, what jurisdiction can we exercise independent of, these big processes like modern treaties and self government agreements? I think there are actually many communities that are saying to the federal government, 'you know what, we're not interested in even in working. We're just going to proceed on our own, without you'. This seems like what you're working on with health.

**KRISTEN:** Are you familiar with Dehcho K'ehodi? It is our Regional Guardian and Stewardship Program in the Dehcho region. Some years ago, there was a pause on the protected areas strategy from the government of the Northwest Territories and it spurred this movement among the region. People came together and started to ask themselves the question of, 'what does land stewardship mean from a Dene perspective?' And out of that came this amazing initiative where all the communities come together once a year. They had a pilot guardian program, Dehcho-AAROM, which is now Dehcho Guardians — people on the ground monitoring the land, our own people. People saying, 'let's just do this, this is our land. We're going to take care of it in a Dene way'. They are truly taking it upon themselves to find the funds to do so and not necessarily relying on the government to do those types of activities. It's a good example of what you're talking about.

But the Dehcho K'ehodi isn't just about environmental monitoring, it's so much more than that. It's a very holistic way of looking at things. I'm hoping that we can take health and wellness in a similar direction. Knowing my region, knowing my people and being involved

with the people, I think that there's going to be a very similar type of vision that comes out for health and wellness. A vision that really focuses on health and wellness being holistic, with your culture, language, youth and elder relationships. And of course, being on the land and really looking at Dene laws, values and principles — the founding principles of the Dehcho K'ehodi.

**I think that with health and wellness, what may come out is a very similar type of view from our people: that health and wellness is very tied to the land, language, and culture. And if we did it with the Dehcho K'ehodi, why can't we do it with health and wellness?**

**HAYDEN:** One of the things that I found really striking about your paper was how generous and sensitive you were with the collaborators that you brought in to have these discussions. You know how heavy this issue is but there is a clear desire to make change and more specifically, to control the shape of that change.

**KRISTEN:** Definitely. As I was talking to all of the people and researching, my reaction was, 'wow, we're a highly Indigenous community and I'm not seeing any Indigenous services. What is going on with this?' You go to other places, such as Edmonton where they have the Poundmaker's residential treatment facility that has a lot of "two ways of healing" in it, and then you come here and we don't have a whole lot. If we want services from our own people or reflective of our own culture, we have to leave the community, or we have to go down south, which isn't even a representation of our culture, it's another Indigenous people's culture.

**What would the future of our addiction services look like if we had more say about how they were created and the content of these services?**

I think there's been a lot of work and attempts, but it's not work that's being done by our own people. We've gone through a legacy of people coming in and saying, 'this is how we're going to help you. We're going to bring in residential schools and we're going to educate the Dene people of the North and this is going to help you.' And maybe that's the problem. Maybe we need to push the door open so that we are involved.

**HAYDEN:** In some ways the issue seems painfully straightforward and the solution is comparatively obvious: we need to have our people designing these programs and in the positions of leadership. Do you get the sense that we're now at a place where you can make that argument more effectively, or do you still have NWT bureaucrats saying, 'we're not too sure if you're competent or capable or have the resources or the capacity to do that type of work'?

**KRISTEN:** The beauty of being involved with the Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship (and getting the skills through the work that we did and all the gatherings) was that I brought with me, my region, and my culture and the things I have learned from my people. At the same time, I was also learning so much more about how Ottawa works, getting a glimpse into the politics of how policy is made and how that affects all of our programs on the ground.

I'm better prepared to understand the system that we're trying to work with, maybe work against, maybe go hand in hand with. I feel that I did my work in a way that really honoured the voices of my people and the people I spoke to, but also in a way that is also relevant for those looking for evidence-based research. I think society as a whole is becoming more open to hearing our ways of being and doing.

**It's the voice of our ancestors, but also a bit of our own people learning how to walk the two ways, as the Tilcho say, "strong like two people".**

We're bringing our Indigenous voices and our values, but we're also doing it in a way that we can communicate that effectively to people who might not completely understand it. That being said, it is important to note that feeling like you always have to give voice to your culture or to your people in places that aren't always Indigenous friendly takes a lot of strength and can be a lot of work.

**HAYDEN:** When you were speaking with the community did you get the sense that this was the first time folks were asked their opinions on addiction services?

**KRISTEN:** I got a sense that was one of the first times people had these conversations in this format. I put a lot of thought and planning into the process. I talked to people in the health field before I decided on doing one-on-one conversations. I didn't want people who might be too shy to attend larger meetings to not have a safe space to share their ideas.

**When it comes to the topic of addictions / health and wellness, these aren't topics often discussed. Things come up that can be tough and hard to face, and it's a topic people don't often ask their community members about.**

Most of the people I talked to knew me and I knew them, so the interviews were really community member to community member, not some outsider coming in and asking intrusive questions. I was speaking with people I knew and have known forever. I think that was a good way of doing it, as opposed to having an outsider asking those questions. They knew that it wasn't part of my job to ask the questions. It wasn't a paycheck to me. It's a subject that I care about and think is really important for our community in our region.

**HAYDEN:** I think often there's a tendency to treat people who use substances or maybe have addictions as sort of just victims - passive receivers of government policies or services. What I appreciated about your paper is that you highlighted so prominently the perspectives of these individuals throughout the paper and in meaningful ways.

**KRISTEN:** Another thing that kind of surprised me was that people really saw the stigma of the word addict. They really want to see people to be more empowered. Everybody is human, including people that have addictions, they're no less than any other person, they just have some things they need to work on. But the people I talked to, really, really, emphasized how we need to start fighting that stigma, those words and those labels and how we speak about addictions and people who have addictions, in the north but also just in general

**HAYDEN:** You mentioned that when talking to all these folks, they all had solutions. And some of those made their way into the final section of your paper. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about some of your policy recommendations?

**KRISTEN:** Yeah, for sure. After talking to all of the people I had the interviews transcribed and then I went through them over and over, pulled out some keywords, and pulled up some key things of everything that people were saying, including some of the solutions that they talked about. Out of that I put the recommendations together, essentially based on what people continuously were saying. One of the recommendations is to have a pilot program through on the land programming. A short-term one and a long-term one that would provide a place for both ways of healing to happen.

**That's something that people were saying, that both ways of healing is the best way. One way isn't going to work for everybody. You need to have an option of both and that would be a really good solution.**

And what better way to do that than being on the land — that was something that people talked about often— that the land is healing. We need to go back to the land. Some people said that if they were to participate in a program it would have to be accessible to them.

For example, after 5:00p.m. because they have to work during the day, or on weekends. Then other people were saying we need longer term programming, we need to be in the bush for a month (or three).

Another recommendation is to have more Indigenous culturally relevant northern counsellors, through the local band office or through more local organizations. Finally, another recommendation was to have a regional health gathering to take a deeper look at these recommendations and the future of health, wellness and addictions programming in the region. And, to ensure that further programming is led by community members and for community members.

Something that I said in the paper was, you need to plan and create programming with community members not for community members. I think that community-led programming is much more powerful because there's community buy in and people are passionate about it.

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