

Connection Creating Change: Indigenous Youth Perspectives on Trauma, Storytelling & Healing

By Alexa Blyan

THREE YEARS AGO I was called to attend a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women awareness walk. The event was held at the local college and was directed by local elders. There were politicians, teachers, students, and families all gathered to honour these women. It is a powerful moment for me to look back upon; reflecting now how this point in time changed so much for me. It's astonishing that 2018 was the very first time my community confronted such a prevalent issue. Even more so, it was concerning that as an Indigenous woman, this was my first time attending any such event personally. I had been a target without ever realizing it.

AT THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND ACTIVISM

A few months later, my teacher asked if I would be interested in applying to speak for the Lloydminster Youth Council's 'Pecha Kucha 2.5.' (A Pecha Kucha event is a program where presenters show twenty slides for twenty seconds each while giving a speech about a topic of their choice). This was the second annual youth Pecha Kucha event in Lloydminster, Alberta, and the theme was 'Light'.

For my talk, I presented 'The Missing, The Murdered, and The Afraid'. This talk highlighted the alarming statistics involving violence against Indigenous women in Canada. It also showcased to the audience how this affects not only individuals but entire communities. I spoke about intergenerational trauma, the role that it plays in our society today, and the role that it plays in my life today.

It was in this speech that I was given the honour to not only tell the story of my Kokom (Cree word for grandmother) who is a residential school survivor, but to tell her story alongside my own. I was able to show my community that the injustices Indigenous people in Canada face are local realities, not something that happens somewhere else.

The preparation for the presentation took months of research. Much of that time was for me to feel confident about the statistics I was reading out loud to a crowd.

In moments like those, being accurate matters. Because if it wasn't right, I felt as though the world was waiting for a moment where they could discredit my words.

Maybe this is also a part of the violence Indigenous people face.

LAUNCHING DIGITAL VOICES

After this presentation, I attended and spoke for more events. Unfortunately they had to be cancelled due to COVID-19 lockdown measures. So I truly began to miss hearing community dialogue and other community members' stories. In 2020, I came up with Digital Voices to continue activism work through the pandemic. Social media provided me the platform to connect with others while pursuing social justice.

Digital Voices is a video series meant to destigmatize important but sometimes traumatic reflections on life. Initially, this project was meant to focus on stories related to MMIWG2S but we soon broadened the focus. Doing this enabled us to bring light to a larger spectrum of topics, therefore making our project something that everyone felt they could relate to. Moving forward we plan to cover an even more broad group of topics by providing individuals with changing themes, subjects, or general questions.

For the first series of Digital Voices I spoke to friends, and peers. Purna, for example, is a young girl who I used to see dancing behind the stage in the gym at my high school. I also spoke with Tanesha, another student I met while working with the local Indigenous rights advocacy group. I have heard many stories from and about students, all for different reasons. Whether it is because they are too shy, they are struggling to manage their mental health, they are facing discrimination and bullying, or they just don't feel comfortable.

But it felt good to talk about it. One participant reported it was therapeutic to have an outlet that allowed them to completely be raw with their feelings. Being a part of this project showed them a strength that they didn't feel like they had before. Through these stories, I was able to see how the systems that are placed within our society and upheld by governments affect everyone, though in distinct ways.

As Digital Voices gives people the chance to really talk about what they want, you never know what story you might hear.

This creates not only a diverse set of stories, but you also learn a lot. It teaches people the true effects of the issues, rather than smothering you in statistics, which can be helpful sometimes, and not at other times. Where you might learn a lot by reading articles, and memorizing stats, you miss the passion and understanding of how it affects an individual daily.

Digital Voices aims to create a platform where the focus is directly aimed towards the personal story of each individual. For many years I spent my time trying to fit into the boxes that I felt would dignify me. It is within rebellion that you find not only your true strength, but your true nature. Once I stopped conforming to the life path that was placed upon me by society, and I accepted that I will always exist in between the spaces of the boxes, I found both of those things.

CONNECTING THROUGH STORIES

Projects like Digital Voices encourage my ambition to connect and learn with people. When you are a part of such a special community you inevitably meet extraordinary people. One of these people was an old friend of my aunt; they went to college together before she moved to Halifax. He told me that if we find ourselves in a position where we fail to understand the story of another individual, life would eventually gift us both understanding and compassion. Of the many people that I have met, I can safely say that each has brought me a lesson and has helped me grow as an individual but also gain first-hand knowledge and perspectives of others. It shows me how we are all connected and the value of listening to each other.

Another lesson I learned throughout my life is that passion creates purpose. My purpose has been to support voices to those going unheard. That is exactly the power that Digital Voices, and projects like it, bring to our communities. Society has created an environment where people are too afraid to speak up, or just aren't given the chance, and I think that needs to change.

An abundance of people are longing to know that they aren't alone and that there are other people in the world going through the same turbulence that they are.

Like everyone else I have also had my fair share of struggles. Opening myself up to the world gave me the ability to create genuine connections. I could relate and connect to people that I never thought I could. Creating connections through media can have the same positive effect. What people can take away from seeing these videos is that positive change is possible, and achievable. Digital Voices and projects like it are a modern way of bringing people compassion, understanding, and strength.

This reflection was able to trigger healing of my past traumas, and experiences that launched me into a journey of self growth, as well as healing. For example, my mother inspires me to be optimistic, because she has come so far from where she started in her life, and my father inspires me to be strong, even on the days that feel dark. I understand these aspects of who my parents are because I was able to step out of my individual self, and reflect on the world around me. Activism, and digital media has given many people the opportunity to connect with unique individuals that have inspired new perspectives and understanding in our society, as well as within each other.

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