

Talking Stick is an anonymous chat platform that connects First Nations individuals to culture-based peer support and confidential conversations.

Highlights from this edition

- Talking Stick Model Entering the Canadian Veteran Space
- Update – Year 2 of Talking Stick Internship Program at SIIT and FNUC
- Spirit Bear Inspires Dreams for First Nations Children and Families

Talking Stick Reimagined to Support Canadian Veterans



Canadian Armed Forces veteran Major (retired) Bob Crane, Siksika First Nation

Like Indigenous people, veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP are often hesitant to reach out for help. Many have sustained operational stress injuries such as PTSD as a result of their service, and most choose to suffer in silence, often out of fear of being judged, anger, shame, isolation, or a lack of hope that things can get better.

The pain extends to the veteran’s family and those they hold close. Further, veterans from Indigenous and minority communities are doubly impacted due to the discrimination that they have faced in their lives, as well as trauma inflicted by residential schools, the 1990’s “Purge” of 2SLGBTQI+ members from public service, and racism.

The Burns Way will create a new, anonymous service layer for veterans and their families based on what we have built in Talking Stick. It will offer the opportunity for veterans and their families to connect with a veteran peer advocate whenever the need arises, 24/7/365.

When launched in 2024, The Burns Way will hire and train up to 250 veteran peer advocates from a broad range of service experiences, allowing guests to micro-target the peer with whom they wish to connect by regiment, language, conflict, sexual orientation, etc.

The Burns Way is named in honour of Sergeant (retired) Earl Burns Sr., a veteran and a resident of James Smith Cree Nation who died protecting his family and community on September 4, 2022.

Talking Stick Internship Program Enters Its Second Year

Social Services students from SIIT (Saskatoon, Regina, and Yorkton campuses) and FNUC are continuing to receive the opportunity to learn and practice their skills in the Talking Stick Student Internship Program.



Students in the 2023 class of the Talking Stick Internship Program

These dedicated learners are enrolled in the Mental Health and Wellness Program and the Indigenous Social Work Program in their schools. In its first year, the Internship Program saw 22 students succeed in completing their practicum hours using Talking Stick, and demand for the unique experience remains very high.

The curriculum was developed by Talking Stick staff and included mental health professionals and those with expertise in Indigenous culture. The team also engaged with Indigenous elders and teachers to ensure that learning objectives are being met from cultural and academic perspectives.

In these times of virtual engagement, the traditional face-to-face relationships between counselors and clients have had to be rethought. This is especially true in Saskatchewan, where virtual meetings have actually improved access to services for people living in remote communities. The use of video and telephones to provide support means that clinicians have to rely on a set of subtle skills, as body language is often not evident. For the Internship Program participants, shifting to an anonymous interaction using text to communicate adds another layer of skill requirement. In fact, it can be regarded as a “new language” where students are taught to translate, often decode, interpret, understand, and respond to guests in a novel and different way to build trust and understanding without being able to see or hear them. These

are skills that are only achievable through the Talking Stick experience!

For the fall term, there will be ten “graduates” of the Internship Program, and there is a waiting list for spots in the winter term!

While Talking Stick was created to improve access to support for Indigenous people in Saskatchewan, its value has also been realized in building the capacity of the next generation of Indigenous mental health and social services leaders through the Internship Program to ensure that Every Voice Matters into the future!

Spirit Bear – A Berrister for First Nations Children

The first thing that strikes you when you meet Spirit Bear is that he loves children. In spite of his broad recognition and a growing list of accolades, he has remained focused squarely on advocating for equity for First Nations children, youth, and families.



Spirit Bear with his teammates at FNCFCSS - Cindy, Jennifer, and Jess

Spirit Bear, Cindy Blackstock, and their team at the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (“the Caring Society”) have been working tirelessly to uphold the rights of First Nations children and their families. In their travels, Cindy and Spirit Bear have met thousands of people of all backgrounds. Spirit Bear has been hugged, cuddled, and celebrated by children and Elders across many territories. This contact makes him sacred. There is and will always be but ONE Spirit Bear.

Since joining the Caring Society in 2008, Spirit Bear has donned items that have been presented to him on his travels. He has also accumulated an impressive list of academic credentials, including a “Berrister” degree from Osgoode Hall Law School, and he was subsequently admitted to the “Bear” of the Indigenous Bar Association!

As for Cindy, her path to her current place has been one of persistence and many revelations that have fueled her passion for making sure First Nation children and youth can grow up safely at home, be healthy, get a good education, and be proud of who they are. She has also adopted a commitment to lifelong learning and has completed all of her post-secondary education, including graduate degrees, working full-time. She has always been drawn to matters of justice, equity, and self-determination. Even as a 4-year-old, she had a paid job picking up pinecones to contribute to reforestation in her home community in rural Northern British Columbia.

“The work gave me agency and pride,” she explains.

Over her early career, Cindy worked as a group home staff person and a front-line social worker on and off reserve in British Columbia. Her curiosity and determination led her to question and challenge the status quo and made her impatient when her work experiences left inequities starkly exposed. She recognized the need for skills and resources for families that were not available in most social workers’ tool belts and advocated unabashedly for them to be taught before asking new hires to address issues such as mental health and substance use.

Cindy says that discrimination against First Nations people has been normalized by society, and her mission has been to unrelentingly challenge attitudes and practices that perpetuate the wrongs. She is not simply a critic but rather comes with solutions and alternatives that, when implemented, will make things better for kids.

In 1998, leaders in First Nations child and family services across Canada recognized the need to have a national body to provide research, policy, professional development, and networking to support First Nations child and family service agencies in caring for First Nations children, youth, and families. Out of that vision, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society was formed.

At one point early in her career, Cindy said to herself, “Somebody has to do something about this, but not me.” She felt that there must be someone smarter or better equipped to do the work. So, she waited and soon realized that she was not alone in this perception. Everyone was thinking the same thing and waiting for someone else to step forward to do the work. With this realization, Cindy took a leap and joined the Caring Society as its Executive Director in 2002. During her two decades in that role, she has helped to stimulate a movement that has inspired others to leap with her, creating new energy and new tools.

When building her team, Cindy states that she “hires for character and trains for skills.” This formula has proven effective as she has surrounded herself with people who are focused on the vision of “ensuring First Nations children and their families have culturally based and equitable opportunities.”

Recent landmark accomplishments in the life of the Caring Society include:

- Jordan’s Principle, “a gift from Jordan and his family,” was passed in 2007 with unanimous support in the House of Commons.
- Party to a historic human rights case for First Nations children that has yielded \$25 billion in direct services to over 200,000 First Nations children and youth across Canada.
- Compensation of 23.4B to over 300,000 First Nations children, youth, and families for discrimination by Canada.
- Over two million supports for First Nations children via Jordan’s Principle due to the human rights case.

These milestones were realized after decades of research, policy discussions, and negotiations with Canada, and finally, litigation, testimony, legal wrangling, and often disappointment. Only through impassioned determination and relentless leadership were they achieved.

Through it all, Spirit Bear sat quietly and confidently in the courtrooms, tribunals, chambers, assemblies, and wherever else he and Cindy were needed. He was never discouraged, and with his presence, he kept the best interests of children front and centre.

Now, Cindy and Spirit Bear are looking ahead and will continue promoting needs-based funding approaches when addressing the needs of First Nations children and families. They will also be watching to ensure that the conditions of the 2016 Human Rights Tribunal decision are fully implemented.

Spirit Bear cannot be everywhere, so he and Cindy have written books for children that tell important stories through his eyes. He is also featured in films and podcasts and has his own social media following!

While there have been gains, Spirit Bear and his colleagues at the Caring Society know that there is much remaining to be done. He will continue to put one paw after another until First Nations children and their families are able to live their dreams to the fullest.

Need to chat? You Talk. We Listen.

- First Nations Peer Advocates are available now.
- Always Anonymous.
- Confidential. Safe. Secure.
- 1 on 1 private conversations.



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my.talkingstick.app

Thank you to our partners

Talking Stick was created in partnership with Saskatchewan’s Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN), Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), and TryCycle Data Systems.

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