



Land & Culture-Based Healing

Developing a program model

Building a Path to Wellness

Kwanlin Dün First Nation (KDFN) has developed and delivered wellness and healing programs to a diverse community of people for many years.

Its current *Building a Path to Wellness* model is founded on the First Nation's most recent twenty years of experience, particularly with 3-5 week programs offered to men and women from 2010-12. KDFN has also learned from other Yukon First Nations and partners working in this field.

This information sheet is intended to continue that learning by sharing KDFN's current *Building a Path to Wellness* program model for land and culture-based healing.

KDFN's path to the model

- Connect with the community
- Develop vision and program
- Invest in relationships
- Build momentum and profile
- Live First Nation values
- Learn from experience
- Build the model

Connect with community

Relationships within the community are primary and various methods were used to engage the community. The process was more active during some periods of time.

There is a reconfirmed commitment to involve not only community members, elders and youth but staff of other departments and leaders.

Develop Vision and Program

KDFN worked with the community to develop the vision.

It also developed the program by doing, learning through evaluation and then doing it all better next time. There wasn't always the luxury of time or predictability so things often were developed as they went along. It required patience and persistence.



The mission of Jackson Lake is: *To provide a supportive, land-based, holistic and compassionate environment based on the integration of traditional and modern knowledge in order to create balance and self-empowerment.*

People involved also accessed spiritual guidance and support through prayer and ceremony. They tried to be bold, humble and grateful, holding the vision in their hearts rather than their egos.

Invest in relationships

Building relationship with other First Nations and other governments was essential. When KDFN needed support, its partners were there to help.

It was also important to attract and retain staff and other helpers—both First Nations and non-First Nations—that could see the vision and work together to translate it into action.

The team also cultivate relationships with land, culture, language and ancestors.

Build momentum and profile

Through its five pilot projects (2010-2012), KDFN started gaining national attention and interest. Our program evaluations were showing positive outcomes and providing information for programs across the country.

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The power of the land and the programs helps remove some of the stuff that gets in the way of the spirit shining through. The true nature of that beautiful human being can be seen by others as a result.

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As a result, when the call for multi-year funding from the federal government came out we were on their radar screen and we got the invitation to apply.

Live First Nation Values

The living of values, not just First Nation values, but human values is the foundation of how KDFN's team and partners came together to relate to one another, in honour and respect.

The team often asked if it was walking the talk, and moving the intention into action.

Learn from Experience

KDFN invested time in evaluating its programs to learn about what was working and what could be improved.

KDFN is aiming to do more culturally appropriate research in its ongoing work, to reclaim research agendas and develop knowledge that is the most useful for First Nations.

Build the model

KDFN has been strengthening the program design and approach based on lessons learned from experience. It has also been guided by its vision and trusted in the process and spirit that is carrying the work forward.

Four Program Stages

Four program stages used by KDFN are well supported by experience to date, expert advice from First Nation, cultural, land-based and clinical perspectives, and best practices.

The four stages are intended to be accessed one after the other but may also take on an iterative or spiral quality as individuals and families may need to track back to access program components again in order to find the best combination of supports.

The stages are:

1. Getting Ready (Pretreatment and Assessment)

It is necessary to provide at least two weeks of pretreatment preparation and assessment of readiness for treatment. This stage also includes using a variety of methods for describing the beginning point of the individual or family so that progress and success can be monitored and precisely supported.

2. Healing on the Land (Land-based Treatment)

The land-based component of the treatment is four weeks in length. Longer would be better but four weeks is the best balance between the length of time needed and the practical assessment of how long people can be away from their daily responsibilities.

3. Building Supportive Community (Aftercare Intensive Programming)

An intensive aftercare program with individual and group support two to three times per week, for a minimum of six weeks, will further support success in the long-term. Improved aftercare has been identified as a critical component in KDFN evaluations.

4. Living in Connection and Support (On-going Supports)

Support for rebuilding healthy individual, family and community life may continue to be required for a longer duration as individuals continue to move forward in their healing process. A return to more active phases of healing – on the land or in the community may be required to reinforce the progress or recover from relapse.

Four Integrated Program Streams

1. First Nation Therapy

This stream is led by a First Nation therapist skilled in cultural, land-based and traditional methods of offering help and support. Traditional and non-traditional methods include traditional stories and teachings; Elder talks and teachings; medicine wheel teachings; talking circles; individual support; healing circles; ceremonies (such as circle talks, sacred fire keeping, smudging, sweat lodge, rites of passage, or prayer) and other experiential methods grounded in First Nation historical and current experience.

Most of the contribution is made through work in circle, although individual talks between the therapist and a participant are also helpful.

Shared experiences on the land and in ceremony also strengthen the trust and relationships among all involved.

2. Land-based and Cultural Healing

The land is viewed as an active spiritual and energetic partner in contributing to the healing of the participants.

The land is honoured through offerings, prayers and ceremony.

The cultural foundation for the program supports all activities.

The methods include participating in traditional land-based activities such as fire making, fishing, hunting, gathering and preparation of food, medicines and hides.

We also incorporate First Nation arts and crafts such as knife making, drum and rattle making, sewing and beading, and traditional music with hand drums and singing.

Learning First Nation language, culture and history is also fundamental.

3. Clinical Therapy

This stream is offered under the leadership of a mainstream educated clinical therapist or team usually from the disciplines of psychology, social work, addictions and/or trauma.

The spiritual foundation, background, clinical and personal experience of the therapist is fundamental to their ability to work within a land-based and cultural context.

The clinical expertise is brought to circle in sharing leadership with the First Nation Therapist.

In addition, individual work may be done as opportunities or crises arise.

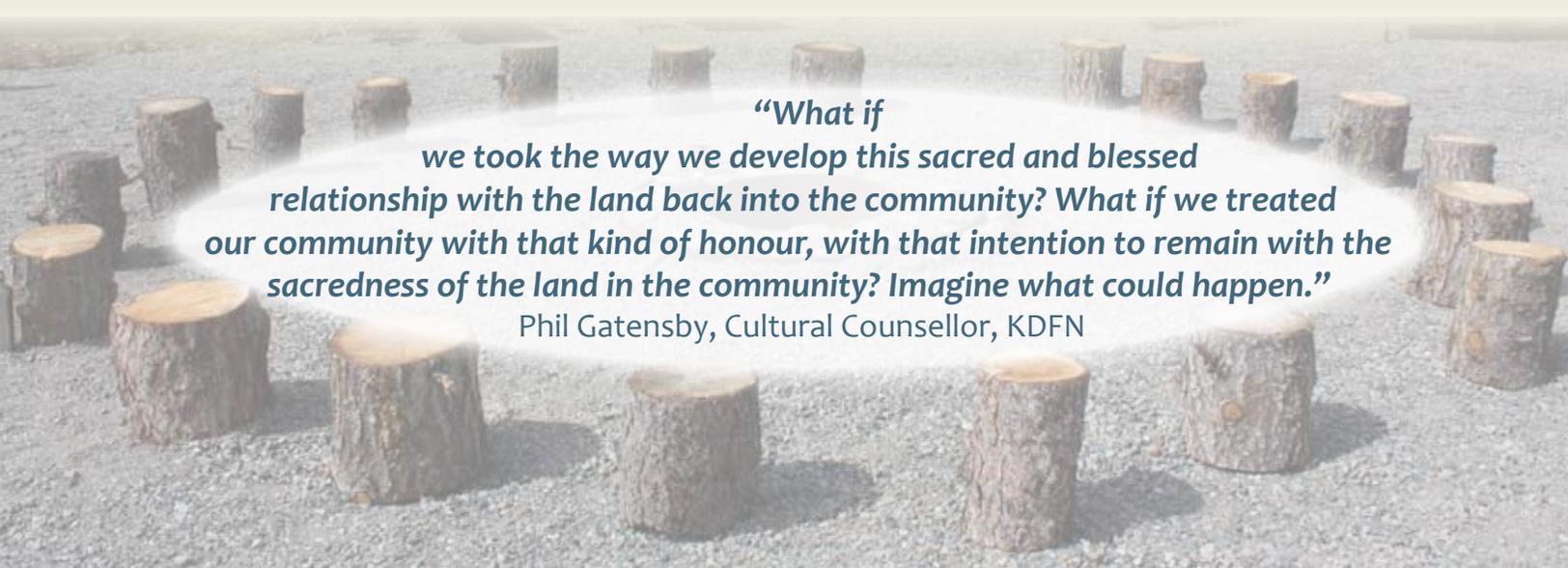
Participation by the Clinical Therapist in all aspects of community life is essential to learning, sharing, supporting and building relationships.

4. Complementary or Alternative Healing Approaches

The world of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) philosophy of whole person integrated healing and the connectedness of spiritual, emotional and physical symptoms is often aligned with First Nation thought.

These methods have been proven useful in adding to the therapeutic and stress reduction options available within the other streams.

Options that have been explored include the use of visualization, meditation and yoga. Hand drums, including djembe drums, and singing have also been successfully used as a way of helping people learn and share.



“What if we took the way we develop this sacred and blessed relationship with the land back into the community? What if we treated our community with that kind of honour, with that intention to remain with the sacredness of the land in the community? Imagine what could happen.”

Phil Gatensby, Cultural Counsellor, KDFN

Four Core Processes

In addition to the four main streams of program activity, there are four core processes that bring the structural components to life.

1. Relational Problem Solving Approach

The program provides many opportunities to work through problems that arise within the camp community.

Relational problem solving supports the development of self awareness, the identification of the needs of others, communication, support seeking, problem solving and conflict resolution skills necessary for living life. Rules are kept to a minimum and a “healthy traditional family” is used as the model for developing relationships.

2. Peer and Extended Family Support

Developing peer support within the program and the broader community is important. The use of family days each Sunday during the time on the land assists in building and, in some cases, rebuilding the relationships necessary for successful and sustained healing after the land-based stage. It may be possible to recruit community mentors that can assist with housing and support for individuals coming back to the community following the land-based component.

3. Restorative Justice, Peacemaking and Community Building

Principles and practices of restorative justice and peacemaking are used throughout the program. Family and community level healing options support progress on all levels.

4. Ceremony and Circle Work

Traditional, cultural and specifically designed ceremony is extremely important. Ceremony is used to support healing, mark transitions and celebrate success. For example, at the end of the program participants are honoured at a Coming Home Ceremony and everyone is invited to join the celebration.” Circles are used in a variety of ways throughout the program to support communication, problem solving and healing.



Where you plant your feet matters in terms of the foundation of the model that you build. KDFN’s program is rooted in the land, traditional knowledge, culture, spiritual values and ceremonial and healing practices. Mainstream clinical practices are bridged with First Nation cultural components of the program creating a balanced approach. But the foundation is in the cultural; the clinical is bridged in, not the other way around.

One of the things about decolonizing the processes is that we need to build the love in.

I know that is a radical concept, and a word we don’t use in business, but we use it all the time. We experience it and express it and try to understand what a living, breathing, forceful energy love is when it is brought into the process of healing.

Gaye Hanson,
Program Consultant, KDFN

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For more information and details on Kwanlin Dün First Nation’s work on land and culture-based healing please contact:

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