



Caring for the Circle Within

Jackson Lake Land-based Healing Camps 2010



Healing on the Land

“I have learned how to change,” said one woman. She was holding a feather and speaking at the final circle of the women’s *Caring for the Circle Within* pilot program. She and 11 other women took turns, sharing what they had learned and how they had changed after participating in five weeks of an intensive land-based healing program at Kwanlin Dün’s Jackson Lake Healing Centre.

The women’s camp, which took place in July and August, was one of two held this year at the healing centre as part of a pilot project. A group of men spent three weeks in September at the centre.

Participants in both groups lived full-time at the centre. They slept in wall tents, ate in a common dining room, and showered in a new trailer at the centre. They were away from cell phones, radios, TVs, computers and other distractions.

The camps integrated traditional and contemporary approaches to healing. Each morning started with a circle and a smudging ceremony. People shared how they were feeling. They talked about what they might be struggling with or dreaming of becoming. And they listened to each other.

“Healing happens when one person speaks and another listens,” explained one of the counsellors. It was a philosophy that was integrated into each day of the camp.

As the weeks passed, individual participants learned to work as a group, to look to each other for support. “I have learned to be a friend again,” another woman said at the final circle. “I have learned to have trust in others.”

The land-based part of the camp was a central part of the healing process. It increased pride in local culture and history and helped to calm, ground and heal the participants. It also brought them together as a community as they learned and shared new skills. The participation of Elders and other community members was very important to the success of the program.



Finding Balance:

The mission of the *Caring for the Circle Within Program* 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.

For many months, a steering committee of 13 Kwanlin Dün community members and staff met to help develop a program ideas that would achieve the mission of the pilot program.

The program was carefully designed to address the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical needs of participants dealing with issues stemming from substance abuse; the effects of the Indian Residential School; grief and loss; violence; and/or trauma.

The pilot program, funded by KDFN, Northern Strategy, the Government of Yukon and Health Canada, was open to all Yukon people, First Nation and non-First Nation. People applied directly or were referred

At the camps, people participated in activities like sewing and beading, drum making, singing, knife making, harvesting traditional medicines, cooking gopher, stick gambling, hunting and fishing, and butchering and drying meat.

Learning traditional skills and ways helped increase people's confidence and their feelings of self worth. Also, when people worked together making crafts or butchering a moose, they learned social skills. They laughed and helped each other out. Participants got a taste of some healthy activities they could do to avoid drinking and other hurtful habits. Additionally, they often had something physical they could take home to remind them of their new skills and their hopes for a different future.

Stepping into the Circle Within

Many different exercises were used at the camps to help people learn how to heal.

In one, women looked through a window to help them dream of a different future. In the first week, if they chose to take the risk and take a first step on the healing path, they passed through the door into the Circle Within. Each week there was a different focus for the exercise.

The exercise created the opportunity for participants to experience the emotion of hope in their bodies, spirit and hearts. The rest of the week was about turning this hope into thoughtful and mindful action.



Traditional & Modern

by counselors and other support people.

Only people who really wanted to make a change in their lives were accepted into the program.

People also needed to be sober and drug-free for at least a week before they started the camps. And they needed to be open to learning more about First Nation traditional ways of healing.

Being on the land

The land-based component of the program was a core part of its design. "The land heals," said one counselor. "Everything is moving, alive and healing. It knows what we need."

Participants slept in wall tents and often met in a circle outside around a fire. They went to the lake to fish or canoe. They picked medicines and learned about how their ancestors used plants. A regular walking group started at the women's camp and the men made a spirit pond which many used daily as a cleansing ritual. Both groups also participated in sweats.

At both camps, participants left the site for a few days. The women went to Helen's fish camp on Lake Laberge to set fish nets, cook for themselves, and do artwork. The men went on a successful hunting trip. For everyone, it was a chance to get away from the healing centre and just be on the land, in nature.

Building Connections

"Healing is something we do with others," one counselor shared. "Wounding is about isolating."

As part of the camps, people learned to work together, to solve their problems collectively rather than getting direction from the staff.

Even struggles over day-to-day issues like chores and conserving water were used as opportunities for people to learn how to resolve conflict rather than fighting or leaving.

Over the weeks, they learned new patterns for communicating and working together.

The time spent on the land built confidence and pride. For example, the men went on a hunting trip for two nights and successfully harvested one moose and two sheep. They butchered the meat and distributed it to family on visiting day.

Building connections within the group was an important aspect of the camps. In addition to learning about relationship building, it helped to build an ongoing support network for after the camp was over.



What I have learned

Comments from closing circle at the Women's Camp.

I have felt more open speaking out, finding my voice. I am healthier and feel strong for myself and to be out there.

Before I came here, I was working on being sober. But I am more confident about staying sober - I feel like it is not going to be a problem.

I am more self-aware....I count more on spirituality than anything else.... I am not jumping at being angry or upset for too long. I am more in control and I don't rely on pills any more.

I shared the biggest secret here that I couldn't even tell my parents or siblings. I've changed my thinking.

I've realized how important tears are on my healing path, and how destructive anger is....Even the hard times we have had here have been an opportunity to look at myself and how I behave.

I am more alert and more patient. I feel really hopeful. I am walking away happy.

I have learned how to be more part of the community and I am going to be more involved when I get back....I have grown a lot.

I am thinking about my future. I used to just live moment to moment. Now I have goals.

I have learned to have faith in people and in myself. I have learned how to be a friend again, to have trust in others.

I have more faith in myself. When negativity comes, I don't get all upset. I brush it off. I have learned how to change.



Every other week, time was set aside to visit with family at the camp.

Other visitors, including Senator Dan Lang, also dropped by during the week to the healing camps to support the participants and learn about the activities at the Healing Centre.



Moving forward on the healing path

The camps provided a safe place for participants to get away from their daily lives and focus on their healing journey. The camps were a place to learn new ways of communicating, and doing things differently.

During the camps, people were often asked if they wanted to hear how others saw them changing. The comments they received reinforced their positive behaviours and emotions. They also gave people a chance to practice giving positive feedback and expressing gratitude towards each other.

New friendships were formed that have continued to help participants as they moved back into their communities. Counselors have seen participants together after the camp and some women went back to stay for a couple of days at the healing centre to be together, be in nature and get away from what they have learned to recognize as negative influences.

During the program, participants worked on detailed healing plans to guide them on their ongoing healing journey. The plans were based on the medicine wheel. Participants identified things they would do to support their ongoing emotional, physical, spiritual and mental well-being.

At the women's camp, many said they wanted the opportunity to get together regularly, to continue to learn new skills, practice crafts and, most importantly, to talk with and support each other. In response, Kwanlin Dün First Nation has been holding weekly sessions for the women to come together. Participants are also encouraged to call on the counselors they worked with at the camp if they need support.

As these camps were a pilot project, an intensive evaluation process was set up to help everyone learn about what worked well and what could be improved. During the women's camp, participants were interviewed weekly to gather information on the difference the program was making in their lives. Additionally, there are ongoing follow-up interviews being done in the months after the program to help evaluate the longer-term impact of the camps.

The input of the participants and of the staff will help Kwanlin Dün identify ways to improve programming at Jackson Lake. The First Nation's goal is to offer programs year round at the healing centre.

At the closing circle for the women's camp participants shared three words they would use to help them on their healing journey. The size of the words reflects how often it was mentioned by different people.



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