



## Community Engagement Initiative – Healing Circles at *Maison Waseskun*, by *Shaista Asmi*, *Social Connectedness* Fellow 2019

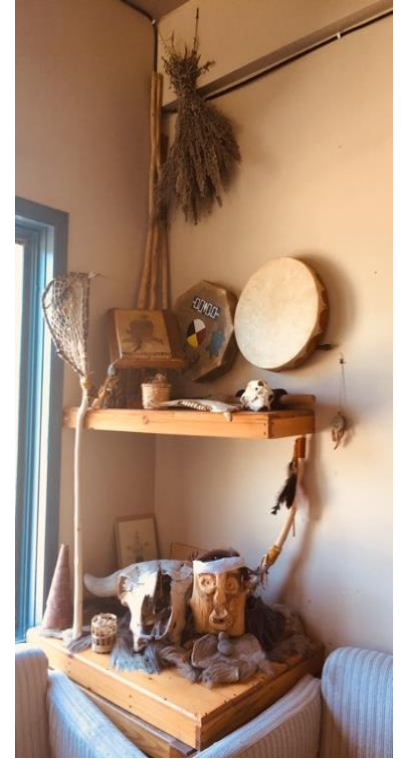
An intimate healing circle was held with Indigenous men residing at *Maison Waseskun*, a Native healing centre in Quebec, Canada. Working with *Correctional Services Canada*, the centre provides Indigenous healing and teachings-based reintegration programs for Indigenous men on parole. The goal of the community engagement initiative was to create a safe space for these men to share issues they faced in their youth as well as their experience with the Criminal Justice System.

It was critical to foster an environment of trust and comfort where sensitive personal matters could be discussed. The session was held in the same room the residents have their weekly healing circles, and counsellors specialized in Indigenous knowledge were present.

The result was a 2-hour long session of adult men firstly opening up about youth issues ranging from substance abuse, psychological struggles, loss of cultural identity, family conflict, mental, and physical abuse. Then many shared details of racism and their relationship with law enforcement within the *Criminal Justice System* by discussing their prison experiences and limited access to Native healers. Finally, we collectively discussed what has helped in their reintegration and given their experience, what they believe is crucial to help the younger Indigenous generation from facing the *Criminal Justice System* or in their reintegration process.

Each resident spoke emphatically about their childhood and what led them to fall into troubled behaviour. This provided important insights about early intervention programs for Indigenous youth, such as provision of mental, physical and social support individualized to the needs of specific Indigenous communities and regions. The residents were eager to meet again and thus I participated in a second healing circle on August 26 where more men came and shared their thoughts after reflecting on the discussion in the first circle.

Around 30 men attended the healing session over our two visits and the final session ended with a BBQ where everyone at the centre, from residents to staff, enjoyed a wonderful lunch prepared by some of the residents themselves. The highlight was hearing how much recovery and reintegration meant to these men and the sincere effort they were putting into rebuilding their lives and relationships. “I hope to become a drugs and alcohol counsellor for Native youth. After having gone through all of that when I was younger and recovering, I think I could help them. I want to,” said one of the residents. Many expressed sentiments similar to Billy, another resident, who said “I’m glad we’re talking about the youth and how to help them, it means a lot. It has to get better for them, hopefully it will.”



A part of the room where the healing circles take place at *Maison Waseskun*