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## Elders share laughter and tears

### Earn respect at Gathering Place

By Alex Frazer-harrison, For Neighbours July 23, 2009

Elders are people who give their knowledge, life skills and wisdom to younger generations.

In Canadian aboriginal cultures, they play a particularly vital role, giving stories, family histories and advice to their children and grandchildren, helping keep such cultures alive.

It's not always appreciated as much as it should be, says Shirley Dufour, a home health-aide worker with the aboriginal seniors program at Ghost River Rediscovery, who describes herself as a "young elder."

"Sometimes, I do see a lot of respect and sometimes I don't," she says.

"Our aboriginal seniors are not always treated, I believe, the way they should be -- the kind of treatment they deserve because of their lifestyle and the wisdom they carry with them.

"They've been through that whole cycle of life, but I don't feel they get the respect that they should be getting and the honour."

The Aboriginal Seniors Gathering Place, hosted by Ghost River Rediscovery, was established to help change this situation, giving local elders a place to meet, share stories, reminisce and educate the younger generation.

Elders in their 70s and 80s come from across the city to the northeast Calgary site.

"By coming here to this centre, they have a sense of belonging, where they can respect one another and talk to each other in their own language and relate back and forth," says Dufour.

Elder Janet Grace Clearsky has been coming to the Gathering Place since moving to Calgary in 2005 from Kamloops, B. C., where she had lived with her daughter and grandchildren.

"In Kamloops, they have a high respect there for the elders," she says. "If you're coming, you hear: 'Make way, an elder is going to walk by.' They aren't saying that to be funny or anything. They mean what they say."

At the Gathering Place, Clearsky says elders "get together and share. We're all from different places and reserves, and we know where everyone is from, so we'll share news back and forth."

Dufour says if you want to bust a stereotype, pay a visit to the Gathering Place.

"They say aboriginal people are quiet--but not here," she says, laughing.

"Sometimes they'll bring their grandchildren with them because some of our seniors are caregivers. It's one big happy family."

A serious aspect of the Gathering Place is that it also helps local elders share their experiences of the residential schools system -- a controversial government policy that existed for decades, resulting in an unprecedented apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper last year.

Founded in the 19th century, the system forced aboriginal people to learn English and assimilate into European Canadian society, with the last school closing in 1996.

Made to live on school property and separated from their families for months and years at a

time, children were not only punished for practicing their own languages and beliefs, they were often physically or sexually abused.

They often came back to their homes having lost much of the ties to their own cultures and traditions, making it difficult for them to relate to their families.

"This is a place to come and visit and share fellowship with each other, and interact in their own language," says Dufour about the Gathering Place.

"Some of us have been in the Indian residential schools. We're picking up some of our own language at the same time. The older elders are teaching the younger elders."

The residential school experience is a shared one, says Dufour. "The majority of the seniors who come here have been to the residential schools, so we understand one another --and we start to talk about it and some might cry," she says.

"It's like a talking circle. You're talking and sharing and you can get out your feelings without being embarrassed, because your own people can relate to what you're feeling.

"We work on our healing to help us through this. We are aboriginal seniors survivors."

Clearsky, who is originally from Manitoba and speaks Saulteaux (as does Dufour, who is from Saskatchewan), says she remembers fighting to hold on to her language when she went through the system.

"This is my first language and other people told us we were forbidden to speak our language when we went to residential school," she says.

"I was telling the other children, 'Why were we given something and not allowed to use it?' So I said, 'I'm going to keep speaking in my language' --and I still do."

Although there are numerous programs and services in Calgary aimed at supporting First Nations, the Gathering Place is the only location of its kind aimed at elders, says Dufour. It was originally located in Calgary's Forest Lawn community in the southeast, but relocated to the northeast when it came under the wing of Ghost River Rediscovery-- which offers training, community development and youth leadership programs.

Dufour says youth groups connected to Ghost River often come to work with the elders, which gives young people a chance to learn about what it means to be an elder.

"It's teaching them respect -- to honour your elders," says Dufour.

The Gathering Place is currently working on raising funds to pay for outings for its members, says Clearsky.

Both Clearsky and Dufour say they hope to one day see a seniors lodge residence for aboriginal elders established in Calgary.

"That's what the elders, the ones who are gone now, hoped for -- to be able to come out of their rooms and see another aboriginal and talk their language," says Clearsky. "They're gone now, but we can still hope it will happen for the next generation when they get older."

Adds Dufour: "For the seniors and those in their 50s, the baby boomers, we'd like to eventually see an aboriginal seniors lodge.

"My mother was in one of the other lodges and she was so lonely. When she came out of her room, she had no one to talk to in her own language.

"A lot of our seniors live with their sons and daughters, but it's about needing the proper care to live longer. Some people can stay in their own homes with home care, but some had such a bad experience in the residential schools, they don't want home care coming in," says Dufour.

Respecting one's elders should be a universal concept, says Clearsky.

"They lived a long time and they have learned a lot of things along the way," she says.

"Maybe some of them have kept up what they were taught when they were little from their parents and elders. Isn't that how it is in your culture?"

For more information on Ghost River Rediscovery and the Aboriginal Seniors Gathering Place, call 403-270-9351 or visit [www.ghostriverrediscovery.com](http://www.ghostriverrediscovery.com).

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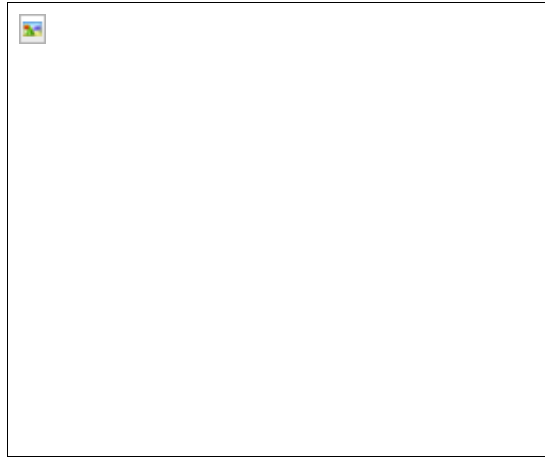
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