

***VOICES
OF OUR
ELDERS II***



Lillian Stevenson



To Our Elders

Gi'lakas'la for allowing us to speak with you and learn from your wisdom.

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PART 1: SASAMANS SOCIETY



Sasamans Society Overview

Sasamans Society's vision is to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner. In the Kwak'waka language, Sasamans means "our children"; the society's name reflects our intention to listen, acknowledge and honour the voices of the communities that we serve. Sasamans is supported and guided by the Board of Directors (BOD), comprised of 16 community representatives from our partnering communities and organizations.

Sasamans was funded through Ministry of Child & Family Development under the Indigenous Approach to co-develop creative traditional service delivery models that meets the needs of our communities.

The work undertaken by Sasamans is designed to identify the gaps in service and complement the Aboriginal Urban agencies and/or First Nations Bands.

We measure our accomplishments by the success we achieve in balancing our limited resources with the needs of the communities we serve. We do this by identifying high priority COMMON needs across our various communities.

Member Nations

- Kwakiutl Band
- Da'naxda'xw Awaetlala First Nation
- Dzawada'enuxw First Nation
- Kwikwasut'inuxw/Haxwa'mis Tribe
- Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw First Nation
- Quatsino First Nation
- We Wai Kai First Nation
- Wei Wai Kum First Nation
- K'omoks Band
- Tlatlasikwala First Nation
- Mamalilikulla-Qwe'Qwa'Sot'Em Band
- Whe-la-la-U Area Council

Urban Aboriginal Organizations

- Laichwiltach Family Life Society
- Sacred Wolf Friendship Centre
- Wachiy Friendship Centre
- Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry



OUR MISSION

In pursuit of our vision to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner, the Sasamans Society will respectfully:

- **A**ppreciate and nurture the strengths and capacities of our people.
- **C**ommunicate and engage, openly and on an ongoing basis.
- **H**onour our traditions, customs, and beliefs.
- **I**nvolve the voices of our children and the wisdom of our Elders.
- **L**earning from one another.
- **D**edicate ourselves to achieving our short- and long-term goals.

OUR VALUES

We strive to openly demonstrate Trust, Honesty, Respect, Integrity, Values, and Empathy in achieving our goals.

We believe in practicing compassion, transparency, honesty, and accountability.

We will respect and practice equality for all.

We believe that we are all one and we strive to be inclusive at all levels as we walk and talk with honour.

We embrace and nurture the strengths and abilities of our people.



PART 2: THE VOICES OF OUR ELDERERS



Elders' Gathering

The Elders' gathering held last March was an incredible event that generated rich knowledge that is guiding Sasaman's work. Following up on the success of the first gathering, Sasamans invited Elders 65 years old and up from all over the north island to come together at Thunderbird Hall in Campbell River on November 27-28, 2012. Over these two days, Elders once again generously shared their rich knowledge and wisdom about how to care for children and families in traditional ways that work. At the second gathering, Elders were asked to share their knowledge about three main themes:

1. Traditional approaches to healing families
2. Building a new relationship with the Ministry of Children and Family Development
3. Traditional approaches to keeping children out of government care

After discussing these important topics, Elders shared their insights on what next steps could look like, and articulated their commitment to supporting their families and communities to walk in these steps.

Elders sat at tables in groups of five and six to engage in vibrant discussions around these themes. These discussions were recorded, and a member of the Sasamans Society team sat at each table and took notes. This report is based on the notes taken by the Sasamans team, and the notes produced from the recordings. Out of respect for their voices, this report attempts to use the words and language used by our Elders as much as possible.

Pictures taken at the gathering, as well as images created by Colleen Stevenson through a process called graphic recording, are included in the report. Colleen, who also attended the first gathering, is a graphic artist who takes "visual" notes. While Elders spoke in groups, Colleen simultaneously drew images of what was being discussed. Participants were also invited to have conversations with Colleen to add important details to the murals.



The following section of the report includes summaries of the keynote addresses made at the gathering, a description of what Elders shared in regards to the main themes, and an overview of next steps and the commitments articulated by Elders.



Keynote Addresses

The second Elders gathering began with an opening prayer. Richard Dawson, Chair of the Sasamans Society Board of Directors, then offered a warm welcome to Elders. Richard emphasized that we can never give up the right to keep our children in our care. He believes that with Elders' knowledge, this can be done.

Pauline Janyst, Executive Director of Sasamans Society, provided an update on Sasaman's activities. Pauline noted that the Society has listened to what communities have shared throughout the consultation process, and will be launching Aboriginal Outreach Family Navigator positions in early 2013.

Sasamans is grateful to the keynote speakers who addressed the gathering. This section will outline the main messages shared by Pat Charlie, of the Sts' Ailes (Chehalis) First Nation, and Robert Joseph, hereditary Chief of the Gwa wa enuk First Nation.

Patricia Charlie

"The time has come upon us that we have the inherent right to have a voice"
– Pat Charlie

Keynote speaker Pat Charlie shared the knowledge that she has gained through working to create culturally-based services in her community. Pat explained that services and programs offered in Sts' Ailes are guided by "Snowoyelh" which she described as the law of the Creator - "the law of everything". By rooting program development and delivery in traditional law, people are being supported in culturally appropriate and safe ways.

Pat wants to make sure that culturally appropriate services and programs are offered across the Sto'lo territory. She described that in her work she has been guided by the voice of her people: *"All the time I knew the echoes of the voice of our people were very strong. That we are different from the mainstream society. And we are not treated in the appropriate manner that we deserve to be"*.



When people in Sts' Ailes stood up and said that they did not want their children going into care anymore, the concept of Te Lalem (the House) was created. Derived from collaboration with MCFD, Te Lalem was opened in 2008 and provides a house where families referred by social workers can get support as an alternative to having their children taken from them. Pat stated that one of the most important things was to ensure that their own people staffed Te Lalem. Pat emphasized, *"In our world today we've got to have balance. We have to have education, we have to have ... cultural values and the credentials that people have within themselves"*.

Pat explained that the Te Lalem program is rich in culture. Elders come in to share and pass on their knowledge to parents, and clients attend community events to learn about culture and the people. In this way, they get a sense of belonging and are connected with Elders. Pat reinforced that we need to listen to our Elders, and follow in their tracks because they were strong.



Currently, Pat is the Director of the Te Emi:melh (Children and Family) and Telmexw Awtexw (Medicine House) programs. She sees her responsibility as making sure that cultural appropriateness is threaded through all programs and emphasized that Elders are key to this. In her words, *“We need Elders strong in their beliefs knowing that when we gather to sing and to drum, it’s a prayer that comes back to strengthen us to start doing what we need to do. We want to keep moving towards a healthier, happier way”*.

Pat shared that her community was told that they couldn’t do it, but they have now reached a place where only two of their children are currently in care – and they did not have to leave the community. Pat encouraged Elders gathered in Thunderbird Hall to take a stand with MCFD for culturally appropriate services. She shared that she felt inspired to see young people at the gathering *“taking their rightful place and starting to be pillars for their Elders.”* Pat ended her speech by sharing powerful words that she heard spoken at a previous gathering:

“Take a stand ... Don’t let the drum be quiet. ... Take the time to sit with your Elders. Take time to bring your people together. The medicine is there, and it starts to heal.”



Chief Robert Joseph

“Children need to become wrapped in our noble history and our laws, and know their place in the universe. They won’t be lost like a piece of wood drifting in the water”
– Chief Robert Joseph

Speaker Chief Robert Joseph began by acknowledging the people of the land and emphasizing that *“the essence of all of us comes from that land”*. He spoke about the people who have inspired him in his life, including Chief Tom Dawson who would stand up in the Big House and say, *“But for our children, what would our purpose be?”* He explained that hearing this as a young man made him feel that he was important. Bobby Joe emphasized that nowadays our children may not be hearing how valued and important they are. Addressing the gathering he asserted, *“Elders, we need to start doing that”*.



Another hero of Bobby Joe's was his granny, who used to say to him, *"I would have no value if you weren't here"*. Bobby Joe explained that children are the center of the universe, and in the old way, every child was seen as precious, was loved and was watched over by the family. Kwak'wala words to describe and address children validated their very existence. "Gwalayu" - you are my reason for living, "dlu'gwe" - blessing, and "wadzid" - monumentally huge and important - are some of the many words that were used to articulate the essence of *"how wonderful we thought our children were"*.

Bobby Joe explained that in today's world there are obstacles to exercising traditions and ceremonies fully and completely, but this should not be a barrier to finding new and creative ways to uphold our children through ceremony. He advised that we need to make children the center of our universe again, and teach them from the cradle who their ancestors and relatives are. Bobby Joe emphasized that we have to take action to ensure that not one more child is going to be a k'e'xa - a piece of wood drifting in the water - and that we can do this by keeping children connected to land, history, culture, and language.



Chief Bobby Joe acknowledged the dark period that our people have come through brought about by colonization, residential school and the 60's scoop. He believes that Elders have the knowledge and the answers to the issues facing our communities and asserted that in coming together, talking to one another, reading literature, and sharing what we know, we can find the truth of the old ways.

"All of this leads to Sasamans - our children"



Key Messages

The Elders' gathering was an opportunity to access Elders' plentiful knowledge and wisdom in order to work towards supporting healthy children, families, and communities and create a new relationship with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. After discussing and reflecting on the important contributions made by Elders at the gathering, Sasamans Society has identified the following key messages:

Traditional Approaches to Healing Families

- Children need to be honored as “life givers”, treasures and sacred gifts from the Creator;
- Practicing the traditional value of respect is key to creating balance in families and communities;
- Elders want to be involved in decision making, to share their knowledge and serve as role models for the younger generations;
- Elders feel strongly that children, families and communities must be connected to ancestral roots, culture, heritage and language.

Traditional Approaches to Keeping Children Out of Government Care

- Traditional values are vital to strengthening families and keeping children out of government care;
- Traditional parenting practices need to be taught to the younger generations;
- Strong identities are key to fostering a sense of belonging in the world, and must be nurtured;
- Parents and families need the entire community's support to be healthy and strong.

Building a New Relationship with the Ministry of Children and Family Development

- Ministry workers must be educated on Aboriginal culture, history, and protocols and undergo cultural sensitivity training;
- Transparency, honesty, consistency, and accessibility are needed to improve communication with the Ministry;
- More Aboriginal social workers and advocates are required to support the development of this new relationship;
- Parents involved with the Ministry need adequate time, resources and support to make changes in their life.

Traditional Approaches to Healing Families

Elders believe in the power of the traditional ways to nurture wellness in their communities. When speaking about traditional approaches to healing families, many Elders shared stories about their childhoods and the practices that had sustained healthy and happy families. Elders spoke about what they have observed in their communities and families today, and expressed a strong desire to see traditional approaches come back. Many of the approaches to healing families shared by Elders are rooted in the traditional family laws and parenting practices that were discussed at the first gathering. This section will summarize the important teachings that Elders shared about traditional approaches to healing families, and will outline the ways in which Elders believe that they can be brought to life today.

Honouring Children

When asked to speak on healing families, one Elder powerfully stated, *“the most important thing is the love that we show our children”*. As Chief Robert Joseph mentioned at the beginning of the gathering, in the old way, children were treasured as sacred gifts from the Creator. Many Elders believe that seeing children in this way is key to healthy families. One Elder explained that he had been raised to understand that adults did not see themselves as big people; *“we see ourselves as lower than the child”*.

Another Elder remembered being taught about the sacredness of children while she herself was still a child. When she was only seven years old, her grandmother explained to her,

“One day you’re going to have a baby ... and you remember when you have that baby its not yours after its born, its only yours when its inside of you. ... You don’t own it. It has its own life force - its own light”.

Another Elder shared that children were seen as *“life givers”*. This participant emphasized the importance of acknowledging and recognizing the generational connections that run through the family. These connections link the old people with the children, and so children need to be taught about their roots and the land that they come from.

Elders agreed that children are a priority. According to one Elder, their needs must be cared for first. Another Elder explained how important it is to be watchful, and to always pay really good attention to the kids. Elders want safe environments for their children. One adult remembered feeling safe as a child because, *“we knew the adults were watching over us from morning ‘til dusk”*.

*Keeping children at the centre
we cannot help but make good decisions*

Love

Several Elders mentioned love as being incredibly important to healing families. “*Love, you teach them love,*” said one Elder. Love was described as something that originates from within yourself. One Elder explained,

When you don't love yourself that is when you have low self-esteem and you can't show love to others. This carries on when you're older, too! It starts with you! Love is not external, it starts with you.



Another Elder shared that she teaches her grandchild to love himself. Her belief is that when you love yourself you do good things. It is when you don't love yourself that you have problems with people.

Living Traditional Values

Elders discussed the traditional place of respect and discipline, and emphasized the importance of respect. Many people shared stories of being taught to respect everyone and everything.

Respect was described as coming about in relationship with yourself and others. One Elder articulated, “*Respect people and you get respect back*”. Someone else emphasized, “*Teach them how to respect themselves, and then they ... respect others*”. Another Elder explained that in showing people respect, you are truly respecting yourself “*because you are representing your family and how you treat other people*”.

Respect was described as central to living in balance within your family and community. One Elder shared a teaching passed down by their father:

You always have to do the best you can, and learn how to apologize and respect property, and other people in the house. ... When they do bad, it affects the family. ... It was your responsibility to mend it, to make things right, to maintain healing in family and community. I remember my father saying, “We all have to live together. By doing that we have to respect one another.”



Elders reflected on how children had been disciplined traditionally. One Elder recalled how the old ones used to discipline children in Kwak'wa'la. They would say, gwala sampa, which meant, "So I'm trying to tell you not to swear". This Elder wishes that his grandchildren knew how to speak the language so that he could use these words with them. According to another Elder, when kids misbehaved, their father would sit them down at the table with everyone who lived in the house:

... and that child had to explain why he or she is misbehaving, angry, upset or doing whatever it was. They had to explain it, and then the Elders would take turns telling us to look at the different situations that made you upset. We were always told we had to be in a circle. We were never allowed to be mad in the house, or carrying on and not talking to each other... it disrupts the whole family.

One Elder believes that it is very important to be able to disagree with people if and when their actions have been inappropriate, but to not condemn them. This Elder explained that "When being called to the family, some people are worried about being talked down to" and so it is important to be able to speak to people with respect.

The Role of Elders and Grandparents

Many participants mentioned that in the old way, the whole community was involved in raising a child. "Children were raised by everyone; children were safe from one end of community to the other end," remembered one person. Elders played a vital role, and were sought out for their advice. One participant described that when a child did something wrong, they were put in a circle with their Elders. She shared that her father had taught her not to speak in the circle and recalled him saying, "Don't answer. Don't answer. ... just listen to them".

Many Elders talked about how things are different today. Traditionally, Elders would not hesitate to offer advice or correct the behavior of a child. However, one Elder explained that nowadays if you gently discipline someone else's child, the parents might get upset. "So the teaching is gone now and sacredness of the value" said this Elder. Another Elder emphasized, "We need to bring that back, but it's a long process".



Many Elders also recalled how grandparents were involved in parenting. As one Elder explained, "Grandparents would teach kids and when they got older, they'd remember the teachings". People shared stories of growing up with their grandparents, learning from them, and being looked after. As one Elder explained, "Grandparents would take anybody in, didn't have to be a child. Anybody who had a problem." Another Elder recalled that when a child was in trouble, he or she would be sent to grandfather to stay for a while so the grandfather could talk with them.

Elders emphasized that they want to share their knowledge with the younger generations and serve as role models for children “because they are watching”. One Elder believes it is important to teach children about history and the “origin stories of where we come from”. Another Elder stressed how important it is to share knowledge and not keep it to yourself.

Language, Culture and Spirituality

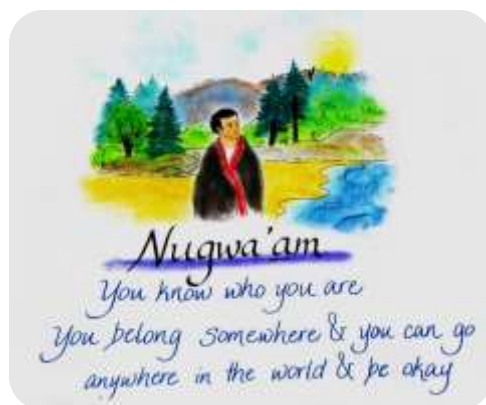
Elders feel strongly that children, families and communities must be connected to our ancestral roots, culture, heritage and language. Several Elders talked about the importance of traditional names. One Elder remembered the meaning that was attached to their traditional names. He explained that children asked what their names meant, and then followed the steps that the name gave them. He shared, “I never let go of the name that I was named when I was born”. Another Elder believes that it is important for people to know everyone’s traditional name.

One Elder emphasized that the language itself contained a way of life:

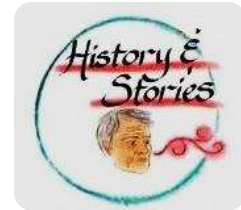
Our words are much different from Maml ak’ala ... We used to pick up those words and we lived that way - what was given us ... Our people walked the stories – that’s where the stories came. I used to sit and listen to the Elders when I was little. Speaking about the past, or what they went through in their lives.

Several Elders shared that they feel they have a role in teaching the language. Part of this includes speaking the language more often in front of children so that they can hear the words and become familiar with them. One Elder emphasized that it is important not to laugh at people who are learning, because that makes people scared to speak.

Elders also discussed the healing power of culture. One Elder shared a story about how putting on her regalia and dancing made her feel ten feet tall and got her to stop drinking. Another Elder stated that some people may not know a lot about culture, and so it is important to get the people together and teach everyone.



Spirituality was also discussed as important to healing. One Elder described the spiritual practice of gratitude, and would like to see this taught today. This person remembers being taught to be grateful for everything they received. If you got a taste of salmon berries, you never just threw them in your mouth. You thanked the Creator for providing them. This Elder believes, *“We need to teach our children about spirituality. Not religion, but spirit. We don’t teach that anymore”*.



Spending Time With One Another

Elders highlighted the value of spending time with one another, and all of the important learning that takes place when people are together.

Remembering all that she was taught while fishing with her father, one Elder stated that she would like to go back to hands on learning. Another Elder recalled spending time with aunties and uncles, observing them in motion and turning out to be the way they were.

One Elder shared that every evening, everyone in the house would have tea, chat, and laugh before bed. Another Elder remembered a lot of closeness when she was a child. People used to sit around the table listen to her father tell stories. Today, she does the same with her grandchildren and will lay down with them and tell them a story at night. This Elder observed, *“That’s one of the things that we miss now is the one to one with children. Especially little children. You need that one to one time with them. Just sit with them”*.



People Stepping In to Help

Elders offered vivid descriptions of the traditional lifestyle that they remember from their childhoods. One Elder explained, *“Our traditional way was that we helped each other without having to be asked”*. Another Elder recalled stories passed down by their parents about how everyone used to work together in the Big House. This Elder said that if someone didn’t have a boat, people with bigger boats would come and take them where they needed to go.

One Elder remembered, *“Our uncles and our aunties in a way knew the stress and things that our mum went through, so they took over. They knew how to take over”*. Many Elders explained that family members stepped in and took care of children temporarily and permanently with no expectation of funds. One Elder’s mother used to taken children in all the time. *“She just fed them as they came. I never heard my father complain about an extra mouth to feed,”* recalled this Elder. Another participant noted that there was no such thing as apprehending children when she was a child.

Elders shared memories of families adopting children the traditional way. The process was thorough to ensure the well-being of children. *“There were promises to take great care with these children”*, explained one Elder. Another participant offered a rich description of the adoption process:

They had this circle and they talked it out amongst each other. I remember my grandmother asking, “Why do you want to take this child? What are your values? How are you going to be teaching this child or raise this child? First and foremost will you raise this child as your own?” ... They talked on this in the circle until it came to a point that they agreed... The responsibility of adopting a child is to love that child, to teach that child right from wrong, to telling the child also that they are representing that family.

Participants believe that more support is needed to heal families today. According to one Elder, in the same way that it takes a community to raise a child, it takes a community to support people that need help. One participant suggested that Elders could be available to sit with people. This Elder stated powerfully, *“All it takes is 15 minutes to love and nurture a person. ... Silence is the biggest teacher. You don’t have to say anything - you just go over there and you sit”*.

Elders shared their wisdom about how to make people feel cared for. One Elder explained, *“Forget about the personalities, the egos and just go into the heart ... How do you join the heart? Give them your eyes. Souls and spirits are joined. We don’t listen with our ears we listen with your eyes”*.



Renewing Traditional Ways

Elders articulated several challenges to renewing the traditional ways in today’s world. Several participants mentioned that people might be fearful of traditional practices as a result of colonization, residential school and the suppression of culture and ceremony by the government for many years. One Elder hopefully encouraged, *“ ... we can get through that fear to be able to take control of who we are and become proud of that and be proud of the heritage”*. Echoing this, another Elder asserted that this would require that everyone pulls together and holds strong.

Elders spoke about technology as both an obstacle to bringing back traditional approaches, and as a tool that could be used to teach about culture. One Elder pointed out that with technology like cell phones and iPads, you can be in the same room as your relatives but not be connected to them at all. Several Elders mentioned that they try to limit cell phone use at family gatherings, but they also believe that technology can be a useful way to teach language and culture. As one participant stated, *“It’s amazing to me how our people have adapted to the things they learned ... As Elders, we need to look at how we can use those so that it will benefit our children”*.



Traditional Approaches to Keeping Children Out Of Care

Elders want children to stay in the care of their parents, relatives and communities. One Elder stated that Ministry apprehension of children is a repeat of the residential school system. When speaking about how to strengthen families and keep children out of care, several Elders voiced concern about the age at which young people become parents today. Elders also shared their frustrations about the way the system currently works. For example, Elders once again strongly expressed that a child's entire family needs to be gathered and informed before that child is taken into care. "*Children need to go through the family, not the courts,*" stated one Elder.



At both gatherings, Elders communicated that their communities know how to support healthy families, and keep children out of government care. Elders at the second gathering generously shared their knowledge about the traditional ways that keep families together. This section will attempt to highlight their wisdom and knowledge about traditional approaches to keeping children out of care.

Traditional Values

Traditional values were named as being vital to keeping children out of care. One Elder explained that these values are deeply rooted in language: "*It's hard to put the traditional values into the Mama la language – the power is lost*".

One Elder would like to see respect taught to all children so that they know "*the sacredness of their lives and all of creation*". Another Elder wants to see children taught how to love and care for one another.

Elders emphasized the importance of culture and language. One participant explained that cultural teachings about what you're supposed to know and do are especially important. The beauty of culture is "*you're giving that child an opportunity to have a sense of belonging - that there is family there,*" shared one participant. Elders also believe that children need to be given treasures in naming and dancing. That way they will have treasures to pass on to their children and will be thinking of the next generation.

In the traditional way, there was a sense of togetherness, and people always had family to turn to when there was a problem. Elders would like to see this practiced.

A photograph of a handwritten note on a piece of paper with a pink ribbon. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Honoring our children every day. They will grow up knowing the whole family, the whole community, the whole Nation cares for them."

Teaching Traditional Parenting Skills

Elders also spoke about the value of traditional parenting, and touched upon some of the practices that were highlighted at the first gathering such as role modeling, discipline, and teaching responsibility. One Elder explained that this means leading by example, talking to children, not yelling at them, and listening. It also means telling them when they do well, and building their self-esteem.

Several Elders believe that parents need to set boundaries, and must teach children about responsibility. In the words of one Elder, “*Get them to make their beds, clean their rooms ...This starts a work ethic*”. Like in the past, children today could benefit from being included in daily activities like chores, and the gathering and preparation of food.



Elders spoke about the way that families came together to raise children. It was a time when the whole family was involved and everyone took on different responsibilities in raising a child. Several Elders discussed the traditional practice of taking children in without question. “*It was always clear – kids never left the community,*” said one Elder. However one Elder pointed out that the reality of today’s world is different, stating, “*That’s not how it is now – we have to be realistic*”. This Elder emphasized that families who foster or adopt children need to be compensated financially. Another participant shared a story about a relative who has taken in children and now looks after ten kids. The family got together, had a meeting, and all agreed to help her out. She now receives clothes, food and money from various members of the family.

Strong Identities

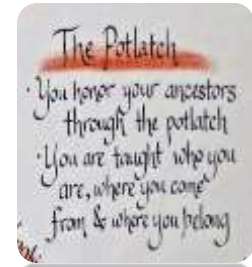
Elders shared that a sense of belonging nurtures strong identities. Elders remembered how their sense of belonging was strengthened through day-to-day practices in the community. One Elder recalled that when she was little, the first thing the old people would say when they saw her was *angwaxtlas* – they asked who your parents are. Another Elder recalled that when you were introduced to someone for the first time, the person introducing you would say something about you.

Strong identities are so important because “*a child’s identity is the root of all of its life. And once it knows where it comes from, it can blossom, it can grow into a strong person*” said one Elder. According to another participant, a sense of belonging means feeling like you belong to this earth and have a right to live. Several Elders explained that a strong sense of belonging can be nurtured by talking to children, teaching them about history, and passing on the teachings and the language.



One Elder recalled that the old people used to say ‘Numans bagwanam, which means “we’re one – we come from the same origin story that connects us”. This Elder shared:

If we teach our children our connection to each other, whether they’re from the Thunderbird, or the wolf, or from the whale, then they would get that sense of pride of who they are ... they’d want to learn to speak the language In the Big house we are taught that whoever is a descendant of the sun, we are family together ... then you have that sense of belonging ... give them their history of where they come from. Show them who their family is.



Strong Families

In the previous section on traditional approaches to healing families, Elders offered a wealth of knowledge about how families were traditionally supported. Elders emphasized that strong families are key to keeping children out of care. “That is where we lose our children is when the family breaks down” said one Elder. Another participant stated, “We have to find out the reasons why children end up in care. What is behind it all? ... They are in pain or have had trauma in their lives. This has to be dealt with”. Elders voiced loudly, “We are responsible for our children” and communicated that they are ready to fight for the safety and well-being of their children.

Participants mentioned a number of ways that community and family members can provide children and parents with support. One Elder believes that family circles need to be promoted. Another Elder shared a story about how their family holds a family night where they do an activity together so that they keep communication open and close. This Elder strongly believes that parents need to have quality one on one time with each child. Another Elder highlighted that single parents need a lot of support, and believes there should be a resource worker whose job it is to reach out to single parents in the community to share information about resources.



Participants also mentioned that it is important for families to keep busy. However, several Elders emphasized that for some families, poverty prevents them and their children from keeping active. One Elder explained that when a parent is unable to afford something that they want to offer their child, they can sink into a depression and develop low self-esteem. Another Elder suggested that communities apply for more funding so all kids can get into sports.



Many Elders spoke about the togetherness they had experienced in their families. One Elder remembered her mother keeping the whole family close like a mother hen and expressed, “We fall short sometimes in taking charge of that role of being an overseer of our children and our great grandchildren”.

Education

Elders agreed that education is extremely important; not only for children, but for everyone. Several Elders feel strongly that young people need sexual education, and one participant stated that youth should be taught how to be responsible for themselves and their sexuality. This would involve people sitting down with youth, and taking the time to explain things – not just saying “*don’t do this*”. One Elder emphasized that boys need sexual education as much as girls, and believes that it would be fantastic if more male role models got involved.



Another participant thinks that young people need to learn to survive during hardships. One Elder shared a story about picking “a’ant” with young ones. While they were picking, they ran out of food. The young ones began to get worried because they had no “packed” food left. The Elder laughed and said, “*we will never run out of food, we have food all around us. Hunting, seafood gathering, harvesting from the wilderness. That is how I was taught how to survive.*” This Elder taught the youth how to provide for themselves while they were out in the woods. The youth were very grateful to have these skills and are happy that they can teach them to their children.

Building a New Relationship With MCFD

Elders clearly and strongly stated that they would like a new relationship with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Many Elders have personal experience with the Ministry, either as former foster children, as foster parents, or as loving relatives of children in care. These personal experiences form a wealth of knowledge about what needs to change. The following paragraphs attempt to summarize the strength and wisdom shared by Elders on how to build a new relationship with MCFD. But first, some of the frustrations with the current system voiced by Elders will be summarized.

Overwhelmingly, one of the strongest messages delivered by Elders at this gathering was that they do not feel that the Ministry listens to them. People shared stories of not having their calls returned and not being taken seriously when they shared concerns about the safety of their relatives in care. Elders described how government care remains unsafe for many children, and they want to be listened to when they advocate for their relatives.



Elders also articulated very clearly that the rules are set by the Ministry’s standards, and “*it’s their way not our way*”. Many people also highlighted that inconsistency is a problem. One Elder shared that the Ministry sometimes intervenes when it is not needed, and this participant has also seen them fail to help someone who clearly needed it. Someone else asserted that too many services are money-dependent, and just when the positive results of a program are starting to show, it seems like the funding is cut.

Finally, several Elders shared stories of the ways in which unjust Ministry policies and practices cause pain. Separating grandparents from their grandchildren, not offering accurate information on where children are placed, and apprehending children from their school have led to frustration and mistrust.

One Elder would like to see her community reach a place where the Ministry disappears from their lives all together. Another Elder emphasized that the Ministry needs to understand “*you’re dealing with a family and a treasure*”.

One Elder emphasized that for this new relationship to be more open and honest, families also have to be more honest. And one participant believes that that to teach the Ministry respect, “*You show them by respecting them*”. Another Elder emphasized that all parties are equally responsible – parents, families and the Ministry. The below paragraphs summarize the important ideas shared by Elders about what is needed to build a new, healthier relationship with MDFD.

The Ministry Has to Understand and Respect Our Culture

First and foremost, Elders want the Ministry to understand First Nation cultures and values. One Elder stated powerfully, “*We have to make them aware of who we are. They have to see us as a people with a rich culture, and not a poor nation who can’t do anything for themselves or for the community*”. Participants were clear that understanding and respecting culture involves following protocol in First Nation communities, getting educated on First Nations histories and cultures, and understanding the important connection to family.

Participants spoke of the injustice caused by dealing with a foster care system that does not understand First Nations’ cultural values. One Elder described that when it comes to caring for someone else’s children, the concept of confidentiality did not exist traditionally, and can cause more harm than good in Aboriginal communities. This Elder shared,

I think the biggest barrier in a relationship is confidentiality. In our villages we know what our neighbors are doing, we know what our families are doing. ... But as a ministry foster parent, I’m not allowed to talk about any of the children in my care. And yet there are relatives in here to some of them. ... So that doesn’t enable me to be an important component of that child’s life. ... I can’t be trying to help and interceding with the family, “Come and see your grandson ... come and see him he needs some of your love ... you come cause your tie has to be forever ... your love has to last his lifetime”

This Elder asserted that according to traditional cultural values, life is supposed to be open. And that is why traditionally, people had Digita. This was a ceremony in the Big House that stood people up when something went wrong. Families used to gather together and say, “*Lets deal with this*”. This Elder believes, “*Confidentiality takes us away from our cultural beliefs*”.

Participants gave examples of culturally safe practices that they have seen work in their communities. Elders agreed that bringing families together and meeting with them before children are taken into care needs to become common practice. One Elder shared a story about a fantastic social worker from her community who worked within the cultural traditions of the people. If a family was experiencing problems, this social worker got the whole family together to decide what was going to be done. In one instance, she put two workers in the home with the mother to support her and show her how to parent.

Several Elders suggested inviting the Ministry to community and family events so that the workers can get to know who we are as a people. One Elder shared that after the Ministry attended a homecoming event in their community, they have “*learned how to walk with us*”. Another participant shared that the Aboriginal component of the Ministry’s foster parent training manual also needs to be updated. The section is too short, and does not include all the issues that need to be addressed when families foster Aboriginal children. For example, it should be made very clear that children need to remain connected to their culture and communities.



We Want Better Communication with the Ministry

Elders expressed that they want and need better communication with the Ministry. According to Elders, several characteristics were discussed as central to improved communication. These were: honesty, transparency, consistency, and accessibility. One Elder summarized several of these points clearly:



I would like the Ministry to be transparent and real and [provide] honest communication on what they are doing with our families. What are their expectations? What do they need or want from parents, grandparents?

Elders said that there is always something held back by the Ministry “*and it always makes it so that somebody’s going to be hurting ... It makes it really difficult to communicate*”. Someone else stated that Ministry people are too “*strapped to policies*” and this can prevent them from engaging in open communication.

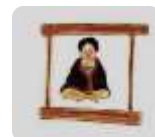
Elders also believe that consistency is extremely important. Elders spoke about consistency in relation to Ministry intervention, placement decisions, the administration of children, funding and also in terms of staff. One Elder who is advocating on behalf of a child in her family recounted that she is working with the eighth social worker in five months. Incoming social workers do not always read the files, and this Elder feels like “*we step two steps ahead, and we go back four*”.

Elders believe that for there to be good communication, the Ministry needs to start talking with them – not for them. One Elder asserted that this begins with small things like answering the phone and passing on messages. Elders all agree that Ministry workers need to be more accessible. One participant suggested that Ministry workers come and talk to the people. As one Elder put it, “*Watch, learn and listen*”.

We Need Strong Advocates

Elders expressed that advocates are needed to facilitate a new relationship with the Ministry. As one Elder explained, because of the legacy of harmful policies and practices, an advocate is needed to help Aboriginal people and the government build this new relationship:

They need someone as a mediator between them and the Aboriginal people because they have gone down the wrong path for years and years and years. When they started taking those kids away from those homes and taking them miles and miles away that was the wrong move, but see that was their policy.



One Elder shared that some people do not understand the law and require an advocate to be there to sit and explain things. This Elder asserted that when parents don’t understand what is going on, there can be anger and a breakdown in communication. It is important for someone to step in to these situations and speak to the party that is in trouble and ask the question “*Ok, why do you feel this happened?*”

Elders suggested that they could be involved in advocating for children and families. One participant proposed that a group of knowledgeable Elders be brought together to be there to offer support and guidance for any complaint that goes through the Ministry. Another Elder emphasized that advocates or liaison people need to be culturally aware, healthy, respected in the community, and committed to serving the children.

We Want More Aboriginal Workers

Elders once again articulated the need for more Aboriginal social workers. Many Elders described the difference it made to work with a social worker from their own community, or an Aboriginal worker who understood the context and issues experienced by families.

People outlined various ways that the government and MCFD can support this. Several Elders suggested lobbying the Ministry to offer scholarships to Aboriginal students interested in working in this field. “*If a person on reserve is genuinely interested and has great prospects, they should be given a scholarship, and not just a grant. There should be a place at the table for us in all heads of government*” affirmed one Elder.

Cultural Safety Inside Myself, My Home & Society

Afford People the Time and Resources to Heal

Participants stated that in a new relationship, they would like to see the Ministry's focus shift from apprehension to helping children return to their families. Elders would like to see more resources dedicated to supporting families whose children have been taken into care. Several Elders explained that this requires that the Ministry change the way that they think about addiction and their timelines for healing.

Several Elders emphasized that the time-frames within which parents are expected to heal are completely unrealistic. One Elder shared that it took eight years to become sober. Another Elder would like to see addiction treated as an illness, and many other participants shared that parents need to be able to access help as soon as they are ready. Elders shared stories of parents waiting to get into treatment because the standards and rules for accessing help are also unrealistic. In the words of one Elder, *"That's how we lose our people"*. Another participant urged communities to, *"Ensure there are counselors there to help - that all the resource people are there. Help people to find themselves. Once they find out who they are they will be on their path"*.



Fairness and Equality

One Elder pointed out that the Ministry has more power than the RCMP. *"The RCMP can't come into your home and look in your cupboards anytime they want"* stated this Elder. Several people spoke about the imbalance of power between Aboriginal communities and the Ministry as being a major obstacle to building a new relationship. One Elder asserted, *"the imbalance of power defeats our people before they even go in to talk because they know they're powerless"*. This participant would like to see a relationship on equal footing, based upon mutual respect.

Several Elders also highlighted the different processes and funding models established for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal foster families. One Elder explained, *"There is a set of rules for the white people and a set of rules for First Nations people. The Policies and Procedures need to be more uniformed for all people"*.



Next Steps

On the last day of the gathering, Elders were asked to discuss “next steps”. The powerful statements made by Elders about the future were rooted in traditional ways of taking responsibility for our children, as well as creativity, and a desire to take ownership. As one person exclaimed, “*Our Elders have spoken!*” The below paragraphs summarize the main steps outlined by Elders on where to go from here.

Get Organized

Elders expressed a desire to organize themselves and their communities to take ownership over the future of their communities. Suggestions on how to do this included:

- Create a core of people who will be a voice for our families and communities;
- Organize an Elders' committee with clout;
- Coordinate family meetings by clan;
- Get families together to create family plans: share history, ways of living, and stories;
- Create an Aboriginal Ombudsman Council that will stand up for our families and our way of life.

Make Our Voices Heard

Many Elders spoke about the importance of speaking up in the name of strong families and communities, even if people disagree with you. Suggestions on how to do this included:

- Develop a communication plan that is on-going, accurate, informative and clear for all stake holders;
- Bring someone with you to use your voice, such as a Sasamans Family Navigator.

Involve the Band and Elders

Elders emphasized the importance of getting the commitment of Chief and Council to support the process. Participants also believe that Elders need to be involved every step of the way. Suggestions on how to do this included:

- Find internal resources and put Elders and teachers back into role modeling positions where they can share their knowledge;
- Ministry workers and other people in government should meet with Elders and ask them what is needed;
- Elders and community members need to have a say in developing criteria for selecting foster parents.

Take Action

Elders believe that it is time for positive action. As one group of Elders declared, “*We are the voices of our children*” and the Ministry needs to know that the Elders are here for their children and families. Suggestions on how to do this include:

- Get involved in lobbying for change (protesting);
- Share what has come out of this Elder’s Conference with the Ministry.

Heal

Elders voiced that they have all been through something, and believe that their villages would benefit from counseling. Elders emphasized that confidentiality must be respected in counseling situations.

Cultural Awareness

As outlined above, Elders want a new relationship with MCFD. A group of Elders emphasized that this works both ways: “*We have to work with them too*”. In order to begin building this new relationship, Elders want the Ministry of Children and Family Development to become more culturally aware. Suggestions on how to facilitate this included:

- Launch ongoing cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity workshops with MCFD;
- Teach the Ministry who we are as First Nations people
- Teach the Ministry to stop labeling people and families. (If someone with the same last name is involved with the Ministry, do not immediately label them.)

Education

Elders discussed education on various levels. First, participants expressed that they hope to see more Aboriginal people take on policy positions. They want more resources in place so that young people can access education and work towards change. They also mentioned that sexual education, parent education, and rights education are very important. Suggestions on how to offer different types of education included:

- Mentor younger people;
- Make educational institutions safe for our children so they can succeed:
Curriculum has to meet the needs of our people;
- Provide education on sexual abuse;
- Offer more sexual education to teenagers - boys as much as girls;
- Teach about healthy boundaries;
- Educate parents - starts with the family;
- Teach people their rights.

Sasamans Response to Our Elders' Recommendations

Sasamans is extremely grateful for the generosity and wisdom of our Elders. The observations, experiences and knowledge shared by Elders at the two gatherings, and through the community consultation process, have played an invaluable role in determining Sasamans' program and service priorities. Elders know what needs to get done. And Elders have clearly communicated to us that they want to take on important roles in their communities and continue to be involved in informing the work of Sasamans Society.

We are committed to creating programs with cultural integrity, and services that are culturally safe for our communities. We recognize that in order for this to happen, we need to weave the knowledge and wisdom of our Elders into all of the work that we do. We will find ways to align Elders with individual programs and will support their ongoing training and participation. Since the gathering last November, a training on restorative justice was held at Tsa' Kwe' Luten Lodge for Elders who are interested in being part of an Elders Council that will guide restorative justice work with our youth. In March 2013, Sasamans hosted a self-care workshop to provide Elders with an opportunity to build on personal skills that will support and prepare them for the Restorative Justice Council and other committees that we will be creating. In March, we hosted a two-day Elders gathering looking at how to support the Ministry in improving Aboriginal Services on the north island and what role Elders can play in the planning and development of service changes. The idea is to create north & south Elders' committee that will continue to influence the nature of MCFDs work in our communities. The follow-up meeting is scheduled for May, 2013.

Based on important conversations with our Elders, and the community engagement process that we have facilitated over the past two years, several new service positions will be piloted in order to meet the needs that our communities have identified. First, the Aboriginal Outreach Family Navigator project in partnership with Laichwiltach Family Life Society will be finalized by June 30th, 2013. The Navigator position was established in order to provide culturally safe services to families involved with MCFD, or families seeking preventative support. The evaluation of this pilot will lead to the creation of two more Navigator positions in Port Hardy and Courtenay.

In addition to the Aboriginal Outreach Family Navigators, the Society is creating three additional positions, each serving a new program for Sasamans and our communities. A Community Development Worker will focus on capacity building internally and externally. An Aboriginal Restorative Youth Justice program will begin work in the Campbell River area. The goal is to work with the First Nations Bands and agencies to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in the youth justice system. The final program has been organized in partnership with Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations, and will pilot an Aboriginal Child & Family Counselor position. In addition to this, beginning in 2013, the long-running and successful ROOTS program will transfer to Sasamans called "Cultural Connections". We look forward to 2013 being a very busy and exciting year for Sasamans Society and our communities!

Conclusion

The second Elders gathering was an opportunity for Elders to share their vision for the future, and the knowledge they possess about how to get there. Throughout the two days that our Elders gathered in Thunderbird Hall, they generously shared stories about their lives, their wisdom and a wealth of traditional knowledge about how to care for our children. It is clear that Elders envision an important role for themselves at the heart of future programs that will protect and strengthen families and communities. Our Elders and communities have spoken, and we have listened. We are proud to be working together to build strong, healthy communities for generations to come.



Appendices



SASAMANS SOCIETY

OFFICE: 680 HEAD START CRESCENT | CAMPBELL RIVER, BC | V9H 1P9

We are pleased to announce the follow-up to the **“Voices of Elders”** gathering. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your attendance and your valuable input. Following the direction from our first gathering we would like to invite you to Part 2 of the “Voices of our Elders” gathering to help us develop a traditional approach to keeping children out of government care. Your voices are important.

Voices of Our Elders Part 11 Follow-up Gathering

This year’s Theme

**To Develop a Traditional Approach to keeping
Children out of government care**

Held in **Campbell River** at the **Thunderbird Hall** on
November 27th & 28th from **8:30 - 4:30**

Meals, accommodations, travel expenses are provided.

Some of the recommendations that came out of the gathering were the need for advocacy for families and the need for initiative from leadership in our communities. Sasamans is pleased to announce that we are implementing 2 **“Aboriginal Outreach Family Navigator”** positions that will advocate for our families and Elders. For this year we will operate as a pilot and focus 1 position in Port Hardy and the other in Campbell River.

Gi’lakas’la,

Pauline Janyst, Executive Director



VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

Develop a traditional approach to keeping Children out of government care

Agenda for November 27th & 28th

Day 1 November 27

9:00 – 4:30

Opening Prayer

Sophie Hansen

Welcome to Territory

CRIB Rep

Opening Remarks

Board Chair

Overview & Purpose

Pauline Janyst

Keynote Speaker

Pat Charlie

Short Break

Dialogue – Traditional approaches to healing families

Lunch Provided

Keynote Speaker

Lorraine Naziel

Dialogue – Traditional approach to child care

4:30 Entertainment

5:00 Dinner & Door Prizes

Day 2 November 28

9:00 – 4:30

Opening Prayer

Sophie Hansen

Keynote Speaker

Robert Joseph

Next steps

Snack Break

Lunch

Dialogue

Next steps part 2

Evaluations and Suggestions

Closing prayer and door

prizes

This report was compiled in collaboration with Sasamans Society



SASAMANS SOCIETY

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The community work was funded by Ministry of Children & Families