ARCTIC INSPIRATION PRIZE
PRIX INSPIRATION ARCTIQUE

Arctic Indigenous Wellness Project

ARCTIC INDIGENOUS WELLNESS FOUNDATION

The Arctic Indigenous Wellness Project won the 2017 $1 million prize

The Arctic Inspiration Prize is the largest annual prize in Canada. It inspires, enables, and celebrates the achievements of the people of the North, recognizing diverse teams with innovative projects in the fields of education; health and wellbeing; culture, arts and language; science and traditional knowledge; climate change; food security; and the economy.

Nominator: The Honourable Glen Abernethy
Former Minister of Health and Social Services, Government of the Northwest Territories

Team: Dr. Nicole Redvers (Team Leader), Be'sha Blondin, Jean Cardinal, Edna Elias, William Greenland, Rassi Nashalik, Donald Prince, Magnolia A. R. Unka-Wool

This report was compiled and created by the **Qatalyst Research Group**, with the help of Peggy Jay, the project team, and AIP.

Arctic Indigenous Wellness Project

The Arctic Indigenous Wellness Project (AIWP) was created by the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation (AIWF) to address the root causes of homelessness by bridging land-based programs and traditional mental health services.

The foundation, in partnership with the City of Yellowknife and with the support from AIP, built the first urban, land-based healing camp to support unhoused Indigenous men, who face a disproportionately high risk of suicide and incarceration. These men are often excluded from conventional support services due to both perceived and experienced discrimination.

Soon after opening it became clear that there was a need for the camp and its programming to be accessible to everyone, regardless of gender, and all were welcome.

April 2018: The cleaning of the camp began.

April 26th, 2018: The grand opening celebration was held.

May 2nd, 2018: The camp was officially opened for healing.

The City of Yellowknife developed the first reconciliation in action lease agreement for the AIWP healing camp, allowing for traditional land usage within city boundaries without being bound by the western permitting system.

The healing site is located less than 3km from the heart of Yellowknife, off Kam Road and near the shores of Kam Lake.

Elders Leading the Way

The involvement of Elders ensured that the traditional protocols of the region were followed in the design, implementation, and oversight of the project. The camp is a sacred area and has protocols in place to preserve and protect the medicines and services that are offered; traditional counseling and healing are between the healer, patient, and the Creator.

Activities at the camp have been developed and informed with traditional wellbeing in mind. Elders provide traditional healing and wellness services in one-on-one and group sessions, and are involved in the day-to-day activities on-site.

In 2019, Elders held a traditional medicine workshop in Hay River for 25 participants.

“The cultural way is very different than the modern system – the way they look at people. The modern system doesn’t have a spirit, but the traditional way has a spirit… Before I can heal that person I need to know their story because what that story tells me is what created them to be where they’re at. I look at it as a spiritual person and healer; I make sure they have a way of healing themselves first.”

Elder Be’sha Blondin

Dene Elder Be’sha Blondin

An Urban Healing Camp Opens

From the ground up, traditional structures dot the landscape of the wellness camp. Canvas bush tents, a teepee, and an Inuit traditional tent are outfitted with tent wood stoves, cultural tools and artifacts, and local traditional foods such as fish, caribou, muktuk, moose, and local plants for tea.

The traditional structures were built with the intention of ensuring cultural representation for all Indigenous peoples of Yellowknife, and so that visitors' experience when they enter the camp provides an atmosphere that engages sights, smells, sounds, and textures.

On the land healing centre opens in Yellowknife
Click Here to Watch the Video

Traditional Healing and Cultural Program

The healing camp is a warm, comfortable place for people to drop in any time they want for as long as they need. Unlike conventional counselling, there is no need for an appointment and time is not limited to just an hour. Appointments are not necessary but may be needed for specific programs or services. In this way, the camp offers trauma-informed and culturally safe practice that supports visitors where they are, even if that just means having a quiet cup of tea next to the open fire.

There are currently five traditional counsellors and one cultural support worker providing healing services. Staff members also help to connect clients to services outside the the camp, such as accessing addictions treatment services, support for transitional housing, or training programs. Community sweat lodges are hosted every two weeks, with 10-18 attendees including women, men, children, and youth. The camp has also hosted 2-4 day fasts for community members who wanted to do healing work for themselves.

Services and activities held at the camp include ceremonies, traditional medicine teachings, language learning, and healing circles.

“Although it’s on the edge of the city, each step down the path leaves the city behind: the sounds of traffic are replaced with the sounds of birds, the crunching of the grey gravel beneath my feet. My spirit feels lighter as I approach the camp. There is a feeling of peacefulness here. A place where you can feel the warmth of the fire on your face. The popping, crackling, and smell of the fire brings a calmness, a feeling of openness; you are safe here, you can talk here, you can listen here.”

AIWF Camp Visitor

The Philanthropist Journal

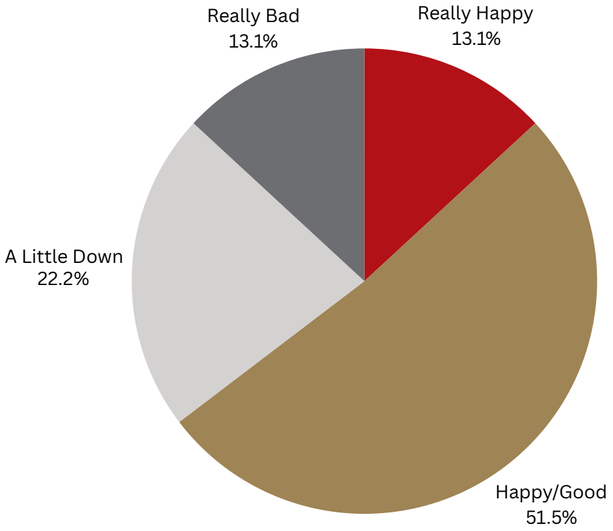
"A place of healing"
North Slavey language.

Impact of the Camp on Drop-in Clients

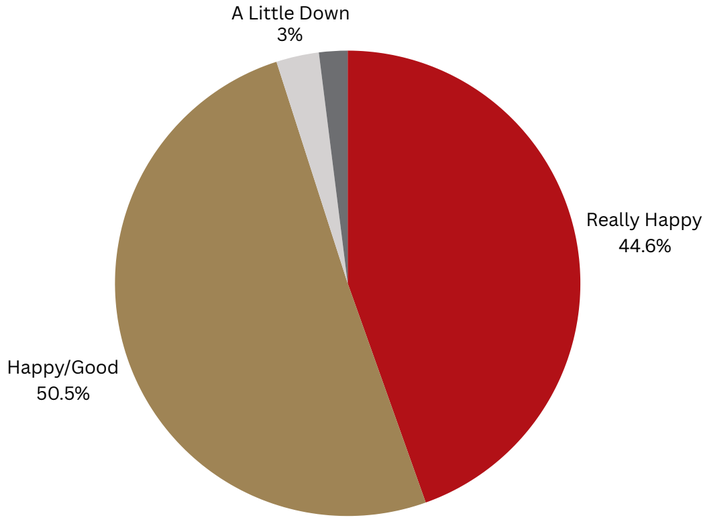
Research conducted by the AIWP lead, Dr. Nicole Redvers, in 2019 shows that clients come from many NWT regions and are seeking help on their own or have been told about the camp by friends or family or others in the community.

Clients feel much happier after spending time at the camp.

Arrival to Camp



Leaving Camp



Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Referral Type

Self-referral	28%
Friends or family	13%
Local school or college	13%
Community organization	8%
Hospital	5%
Non-response	33%

Home Community/Region

North Slave	33%
Inuvik Region	14%
Sahtu Region	7%
South Slave Region	5%
Nunavut	4%
Dehcho Region	2%
Other	8%
Non-response	27%

Reimagining Healing for Unhoused Relatives

George Koe was an unhoused man who had struggled with alcohol addiction for most of his life when he was invited to the AIWP camp by one of its counsellors. He returned each day and was encouraged to attend a six-week trauma course for men in British Columbia. After completing the course, he returned to Yellowknife and spent his days participating at the camp's activities and maintaining his sobriety.

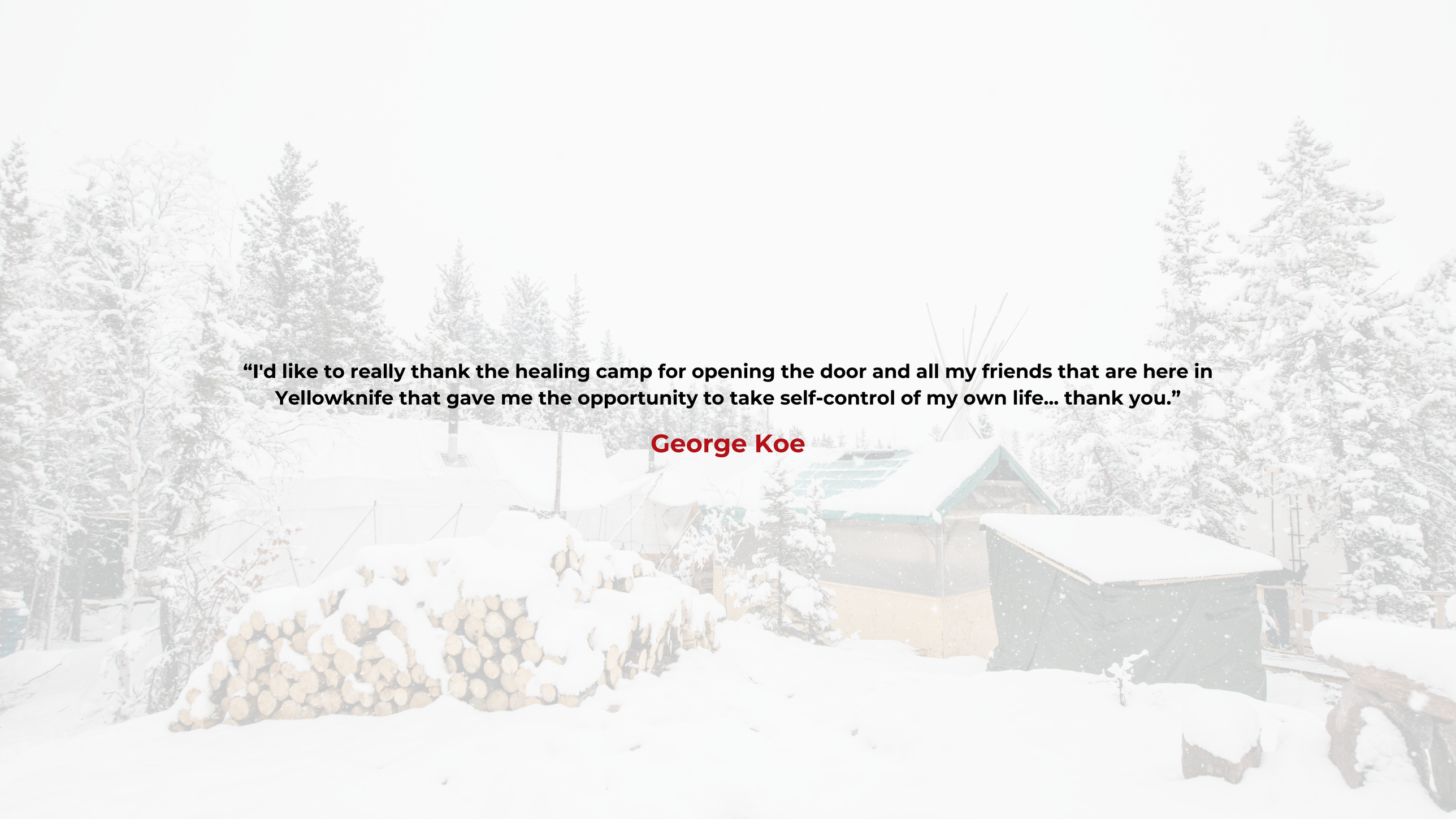
Because the camp was very accessible, it was easy for George to reach out to camp healers and receive the support that he needed and couldn't access elsewhere. When he thought about drinking, he would call a camp healer. Before going out, he would call camp healers who supported him in making decisions that prioritized his health and wellbeing. After three months, he was hired as the camp maintenance person.

George passed away after having a stroke, with his medical care delayed due to issues with health system bias against those with past alcohol use.

This once again highlighted the importance of cultural safety and safe spaces for Indigenous care. George's experience and his story helped to shape how the AIWP moved forward in their programming and support services for unhoused relatives, how they adjusted their outreach to them, and helped raised awareness among other unhoused people. To honour George, the camp's cook tent is named after him: George's Place. To hear more about George's story, listen to **this podcast**.

"George created ... more safe spaces for many of those on the street." - Dr. Nicole Redvers

George's Place



“I'd like to really thank the healing camp for opening the door and all my friends that are here in Yellowknife that gave me the opportunity to take self-control of my own life... thank you.”

George Koe

Traditional Teachings & Skill-Building

Wellness comes from learning new skills, or connecting or re-connecting with traditional crafts.

Some workshops provide participants with the opportunity to learn skills such as beadworking, quilling, processing hides, sewing, dream-catcher making, traditional hunting and fishing, among others.

Sessions are are held to directly help individuals develop the skills necessary to process trauma, intergenerational issues, identity loss, and cultural loss. These workshops tackle themes such as death and dying, recognizing the strength, spirit, and resilience of youth, gender identity affirmation, and Pathways to Resilience. Currently, four separate programs provide unique support for different groups: youth, women, men, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

Inuk Elder Rassi Nashalik

Holding Space for Community

The camp is open to those of all genders and ages, families, and groups - no one is turned away. Individuals and families have traveled from across Canada to visit the camp, coming from Nunavut, the Yukon, British Columbia, and throughout the NWT. Social evenings, feasts, and healing workshops often have 75 or more attendees. They share food, spend time drumming, singing, playing instruments and games, share stories, and hold contests.

The AIWP team has worked on deepening the understanding of government and non-governmental organizations of Indigenous healing practices that focus on wholistic wellness, cultural safety, and mutual understanding. Some of these visitors to the camp have included nursing students from Aurora College, 25 federal Supreme Court judges, physicians, Child and Family Health Services parents, and various non-Indigenous professionals who sought insights and support. Local patients from Stanton Hospital have also visited the camp, taking part in traditional healing services.

In addition to those they help in Yellowknife, the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation has also done outreach around the Northwest Territories to help other communities start similar programming.

As of 2019, over 2,000 people attended the camp.

Transformative Healing

The Arctic Indigenous Wellness camp has helped individuals access treatment, reconnect with culture, return to their home communities, attend college, and achieve and maintain sobriety. It is a safe space for individuals to start their healing journeys, learn, build skills, and make positive choices that impact themselves, their families, and their communities.

In August 2020, Naagąįį Tsul's life changed when she had to leave her job due to illness. Despite visits to health services in both the NWT and Alberta, medical experts could not determine the reason she was feeling so ill. She was given daily medication, but her condition worsened — losing three pounds every week, struggling to eat, and even finding it difficult to drink water.

When she arrived at the Arctic Indigenous Wellness camp in April 2022, she weighed 93 pounds. It was there, on the land and with the traditional knowledge of Elder Be'sha Blondin, that her healing began. Through traditional medicines, teachings, and the support of the camp, Naagąįį Tsul regained her health. Today, she is proud of her healthy weight and can once again enjoy the foods she loves.

The camp is a place of belonging, connection, and renewal. To this day, Naagąįį Tsul continues to return, taking part in drum dances and other gatherings, where she finds happiness not only for herself but in the culture, traditions, and people who helped her heal.

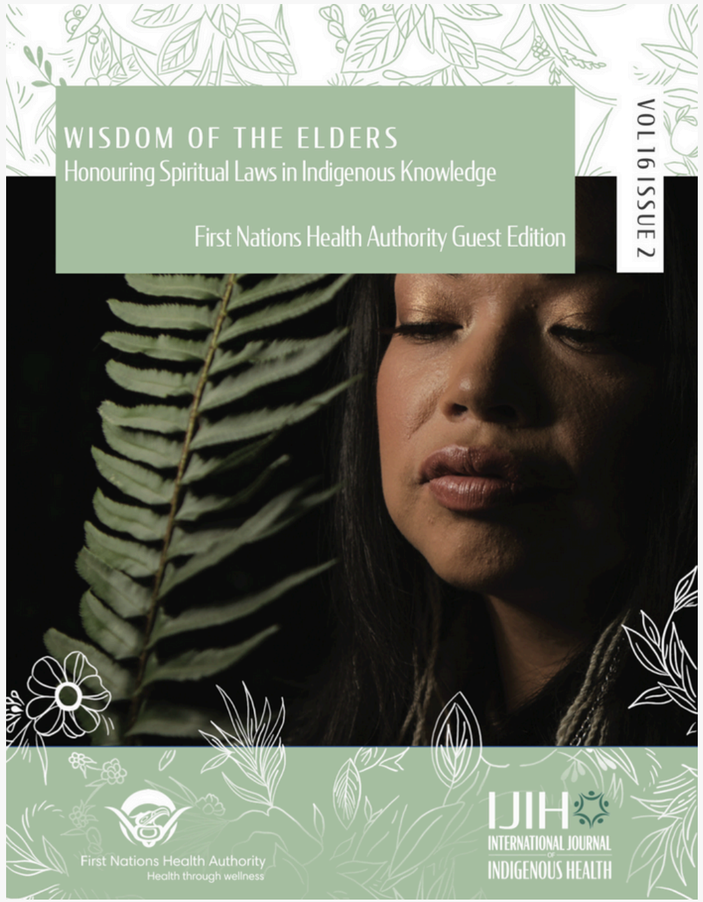
Sharing Wisdom

Publications such as *Urban Land-based Healing: A Northern Intervention Strategy* and *Traditional Indigenous Medicine in North America: A Scoping Review* provide a base of evidence for the efficacy of urban land-based healing that incorporates Indigenous medicines, traditional healing, cultural practice, and spirituality to support most vulnerable community members.

Evaluating these types of programs and sharing the information helps to highlight the importance of Indigenous traditional knowledge and the need for wholistic healing practices.

Additionally, by sharing the positive impact and wise practices, the Arctic Indigenous Wellness camp can serve as a potential model for other similar urban setting and programming.

"This northern effort affords us ample opportunity for expanding the existing knowledge base for land-based healing applied to an urban Indigenous high-risk setting." - *Urban Land-based Healing: A Northern Intervention Strategy*



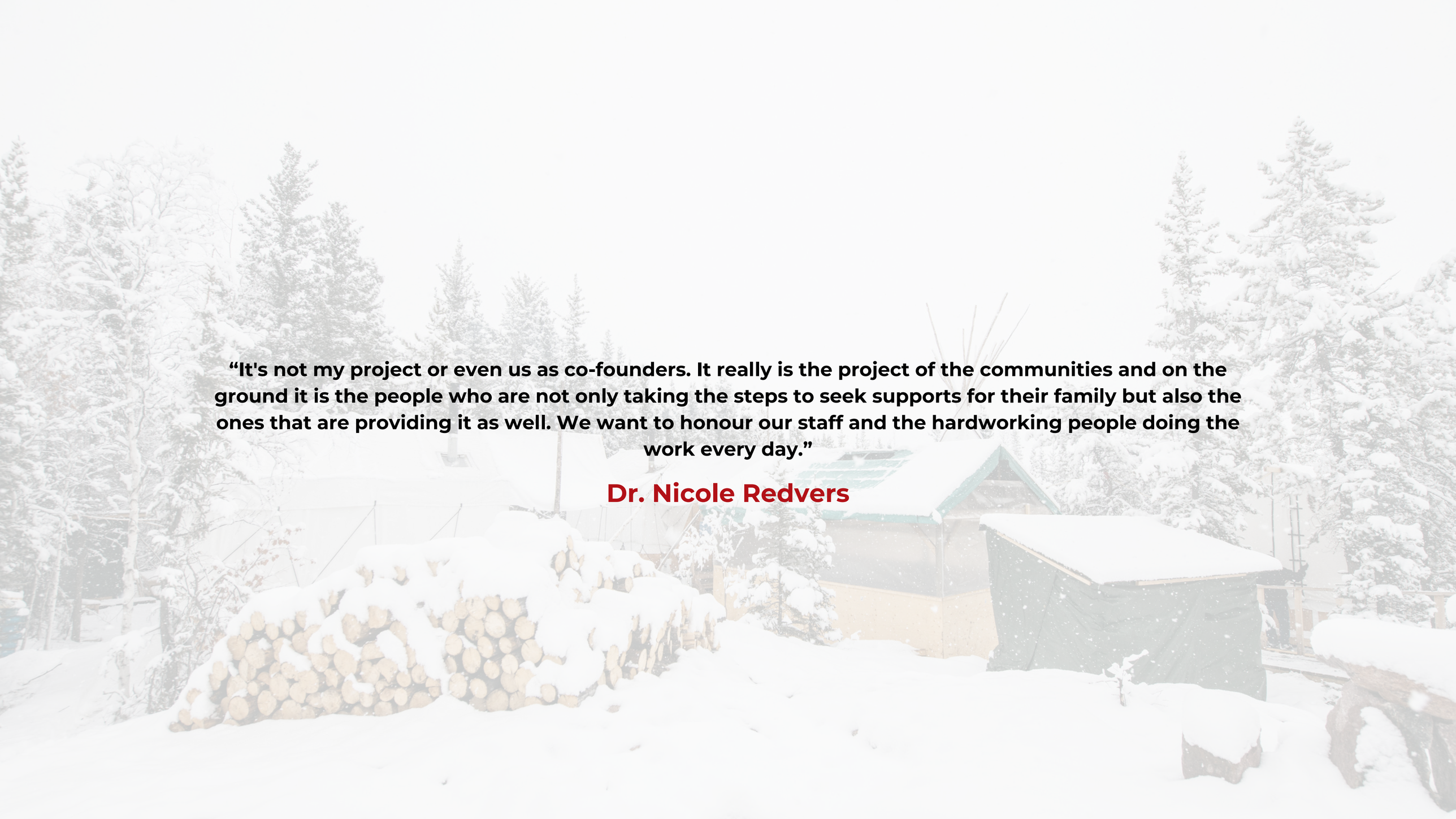
Urban Land-based Healing: A Northern Intervention Strategy was published in *Wisdom of the Elders: Honouring Spiritual Laws in Indigenous Knowledge*, issue 2, and can be found **here**.

Dene Elder Ruth Mercredi

Hopes for the Future

From the beginning, the AIWP team wanted to create a permanent structure in Yellowknife while also retaining their outdoor healing space. Given the cold weather in Yellowknife, having a permanent structure would provide a comfortable and warm space for patients and Elders who may not be able to participate in healing and wellness activities that are held on-the-land.

The foundation recognize the need to help Elders pass on the knowledge about traditional healing and wellness practices to future generation. They hope to focus more on increasing awareness and training to help others take on these roles in the future.



“It's not my project or even us as co-founders. It really is the project of the communities and on the ground it is the people who are not only taking the steps to seek supports for their family but also the ones that are providing it as well. We want to honour our staff and the hardworking people doing the work every day.”

Dr. Nicole Redvers

Institutional Funders and Collaborators

ichr Institute for Circumpolar Health Research

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Northwest Territories Health and Social Services

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