



Podcast: Voices from the Field 31 – Decarceration and health Part 1 - Elder John Bigstone

Description

Decarceration and health: Breaking down bars for systemic change is a mini-series within Voices from the Field. It explores the realities and impact of community-based justice alternatives, their connection to health, and what is needed to affect and inspire change and address the current injustices reflected in the over-incarceration of First Nations people, Inuit, and Métis people across the country.

Decarceration and health: Breaking down bars for systemic change – Part 1: Elder John Bigstone. In this episode, we learn about the Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice Program on Treaties 6 and 8 in Northern Alberta. We interviewed Elder John Bigstone who has been a part of the program and the lead Elder since its inception in 1990.

Bios



Elder John Bigstone (osow kihew ᐃᓪᓴᓪ ᓱᓴᓪᓴᓪ)

John Bigstone (osow kihew ᐃᓪᓴᓪ ᓱᓴᓪᓴᓪ) is a Cree Elder who resides in Wabasca, a community situated in the North-Eastern region of Alberta. He speaks the Cree and English language fluently and is a member of the Bigstone Cree Nation. His Cree ancestry has many generations of leaders and ceremonial holders. Following the legacy of his proud heritage, John is also a traditional knowledge keeper and ceremonial holder.

John is a member and the lead Elder of the [Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice program](#). The program has been successfully running since 1990, starting out as a youth committee.

John's professional background includes a Bachelor of Social Work degree from the University of Regina, Saskatchewan. He was instrumental in the development and management of the Mental Health Program for the Bigstone Cree Nation. He was a mental health counsellor for many years and has a background in individual, family, and group counselling. He has spent many years training as a healing & wellness workshop facilitator and has extensive experience working within First Nations Communities. John is also a Reiki Master practicing the art of energy healing.

John is a Residential School Survivor. At the age of six, he entered the St. Martin Residential School where he was a resident for the next seven years. While in this institution, he was mentally, physically, and emotionally abused. Following the trauma of this experience, he led a life of self-destructive behaviour.

Thirty years ago, John went on a quest to find his Woodland Cree identity. His search led him back to his traditional Cree land teachings and ceremonies. As he began to heal his childhood emotional wounds and traumas, he learned about his place in creation and the sacredness of all life. John is passionate about his teachings and cares deeply about mother earth and all that dwells upon her. He walks his life journey based on the spiritual principles of love, kindness, compassion, respect, humility, and courage. The teachings that he shares reflect this philosophy.



Andrea Menard

I am a Métis individual associated with the Otipemisiwak Métis Government and work on Treaty 6 lands in amiskwacîwâskahikan (Edmonton). Originally, my family hailed from the now-dissolved Red River Settlement within Treaty 1 territory. Our Métis lineage bears the surnames Bruneau, Carrière, and Larocque.

I am humbled to have been recognized as one of the Top 5 Most Influential Lawyers of 2023 by CIO Times and as one of the Top 25 Most Influential Lawyers of 2022 by Canadian Lawyer Magazine. These accolades reflect my deep commitment to partnering with Indigenous nations across Treaties 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10, including collaborations with the Otipemisiwak Métis Government.

My personal journey as a Métis individual informs my ambition to reform academic and legal workplace policies through the inclusion of Indigenous laws, enriched by my PhD studies in Social Dominance Theory and Legal Pluralism at Royal Roads University in the Doctor of Social Sciences program.

As a sessional law instructor at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Law and at Osgoode Hall Law School, I develop and teach innovative courses such as "Reconciliation and Lawyers" (LAW 693) and "In Search of Reconciliation Through Dispute Resolution" (ALDR 6305). In addition, I serve as the Lead Educational Developer for Indigenizing Curricula and Pedagogies at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Alberta.



Denise Webb

Denise Webb is a Research Associate with the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. Denise holds a Master of Science in Health Services Research, with an emphasis in health policy and specialization in Indigenous health, from the Institute of Health Policy, Management, & Evaluation at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on the intersection and relation between health policy and First Nations, Inuit, Métis public health. Denise is of Irish and Scottish settler ancestry and is an aspiring ally, working toward informing the decolonization of health systems and policy research.

Transcript

Denise Webb: Welcome to *Voices from the Field*, a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. The NCCIH focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nations people, Inuit, and Métis people across Canada.

-Music-

Denise Webb: Hello and welcome to *Decarceration and Health: Breaking Down Barriers for Systemic Change*, a miniseries within *Voices from the Field*. My name is Denise Webb. I'm of Irish and Scottish settler ancestry and live as a guest on the unceded traditional territory of the Lheidli T'enneh here in northern British Columbia, and work as a research associate with the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. I'll be co-hosting this miniseries alongside Andrea Menard.

Andrea Menard: Hello, tânsi, bonjour, everyone. And thank you, Denise. I am a Métis, anticolonial legal scholar originally hailing from the Red River Settlement, where my families last names are Bruneau, Carrière, and Larocque. I am also a card-carrying member of the Otipemisiwak Métis government, or the government of the Métis Nation within Alberta, and I currently reside on the unceded lands of Treaty 6 and Métis Nation Homeland Region lands.

I have over two decades of experience working in law, government, legal non-profit, legal academia, and legal regulatory sectors, and I have built relationships across what is now known as Canada with Indigenous nations, organizations, and individuals, as well as with non-indigenous professionals and academic partners, where we collaborate on a number of decolonizing and reconciliation programs and initiatives.

Denise Webb: *Decarceration and Health: Breaking Down Barriers for Systemic Change*. Built off a report I completed that was published by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health in 2024, titled *Barred: Over-incarceration of Indigenous People, and Canada's criminal legal system, the health implications, and opportunities for decarceration*. The report was intended to help inform the public health crisis pertaining to the over-incarceration of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in Canada's criminal legal system. It also explores avenues to decarceration through community-based justice alternatives, including diversion programs, Indigenous courts, and Indigenous-lead healing lodges.

Over incarceration has both immediate and far-reaching negative health impacts, and is a determinant of health. This podcast miniseries is an opportunity to listen and learn from experts in the field and those with lived experiences working in the criminal legal system, about what changes are needed, and how indigenous laws and legal principles can be respected and upheld to support Indigenous-lead and distinct justice systems.

I am incredibly thankful to Andrea, who graciously agreed to support the NCCIH by leading and guiding this miniseries; for sharing her knowledge, legal expertise, and passion for this topic. It is an honor to have you here, Andrea.

Andrea Menard: No problem, Denise. It's a pleasure to be here co-hosting with you as we both interview some fantastic people involved in breaking down systemic barriers, and leading transformative changes within the criminal legal spheres that are not well understood or known of right now.

So, I appreciate the space that the NCCIH has given to this important podcast. My aim is to build momentum through learning what others are doing, and moving things forward in a good way.

Denise Webb: In this 50-minute session, we learn about the Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice Program on Treaties 6 and 8 in Alberta. We interview Elder John Bigstone, who has been part of the program and the lead Elder since his inception in 1990.

Andrea Menard: Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice Program is an Indigenous-lead program built by the Nation, for Bigstone Cree Nation members both on and off-reserve. It's a successful program with strong connections to community wellness workers, psychologists, and the courts, with a low recidivism rate.

Denise Webb: Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice Program is also involved with the Alberta wiyasôw iskweêw Restorative Justice Pilot Project, which we will also be talking about in this miniseries.

Andrea Menard: Let's hear from Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice Program in depth from his perspective.

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Andrea Menard: John, thank you so much for being here today and sharing your story and knowledge with us, it's a great honor to have you here. So John, you're a Knowledge Keeper at Bigstone Cree Nation. So do we call you Elder John? Or how would you like to be called today? What do people usually call you?

Elder John Bigstone: Just John, or Elder John is good. You know, since it's more formal, I guess for events like this or interviews.

Andrea Menard: John, can you please tell us about your background, and where you're from?

Elder John Bigstone: I am from the Bigstone Cree Nation. I just had a birthday, May 15th, and am 72 years old now, and was born in Athabasca. My parents were transient at the time. My father was always pursuing employment outside the reserve, and they were on route from Calling Lake to Athabasca and I decided to come into the world when we got to Athabasca.

So, that's where I was born, and my genealogy stretches all the way back. I have ancestors that did the same thing I'm doing, probably at a deeper level, the spiritual level. I come from a long line of Ceremonial Holders, you know, Knowledge Keepers, and what do you call shamans today. Very powerful people.

I'm trying to pick up where the residential school and the church left everything in tatters. So, I'm just trying to pick up where we left off about three generations ago. So more like two generations: my father and his father - it was starting to fade away at my grandfather. The first Chief was my grandfather. That's why it's called the Bigstone Cree Nation. My father didn't want that position, so instead we moved away and I was raised primarily out around the Athabasca area – Westlock, Richmond Park, Smith - around those little towns, and raised a lot on farmland, worked all my life.

So, my summers were spent out in the field picking rocks, picking roots, pitching bale, spike pitching, all of these things in being a hand - I guess the farm hand.

There was no pain. We were just surviving out there. Back then in the 60s, Indigenous people weren't exactly welcomed with open arms. But we managed to survive, so I know my way around mainstream, I didn't really live on a reserve that long or that much - once in a while I'd come back. But there was really nothing here, I was always out there working.

My grandfather, as mentioned before, was the first Chief of the Bigstone Cree Nation. He signed the adhesion in 1899 on August 21st, I believe it was. So, he signed the adhesion and that's when the Bigstone Cree Nation was given a name. But my grandfather acquired the Bigstone name just before the treaty signings. So, they just call it the Bigstone Cree Nation. Actually, his real name, the name he was given by his cousin, was actually Mistassini.¹

So, my background coming from the residential school for seven years, you know, I kind of had no self-esteem, I really had no identity. By the grace of the Creator I have hung on to my language, Cree, which I'm quite fluent with, as well as English. So, when I left residential school at age 12, I ended up in Athabasca and went to school there, it was very difficult time because of a lot racism, segregation, and so on. It was very difficult to fit in, and I think we were the only one of two families that were Indigenous there, but the other ones were what we call Apples. They didn't know that they were Indigenous either, so we kind of fit in.

We didn't have a cultural identity. We didn't know who we were, we didn't know our ancestry. We kind of just went over there and we were really, really confused at the time, so they were very difficult. And then eventually I went back to school. It took a lot of courage since coming out of residential school; I had no self-esteem, didn't know who I was. I really didn't know my purpose, what I'm doing here on Earth, any of that. (I was) kind of lost and confused, but why I decided to go back to school and learn.

I went back to school, and I was already 37. I went back to school as an adult. I went to AVC (Alberta Vocational College) Lac La Biche and I started school there. I started off in Grade 8, and in three years I graduated, or finished, my Grade 12. And I actually got honors for being the most outstanding student. So, after what I went through in residential school, to me, that's quite the accomplishment. And my instructors told me, "you're intelligent," and, "that he should go to university." So I piped up my little family and away I went.

I went to university, and there I was also the outstanding student there and, what do you call it? I was on The Dean's list. But then I was still dealing with a lot of my stuff. You know, a lot of pain I was holding in because of the abuses I experienced in residential schools. So, it took me a long time to have any pride in my accomplishments – I did it because it was something I needed to do. When

¹ Mistassini is Cree for Bigstone. While Bigstone was the name given to Bigstone Cree Nation, Elder John Bigstone's grandfather's Cree name was Opasikonowew.

I finished university, I came back to my Nation, started a mental health program there from scratch, and it's still running today.

Though I am very highly educated in many, many ways...I have a vast pool of information which I draw from. I've been following the traditional spiritual way for... 35 years now. So, what I learned in the Lodge is far more important than what I learned in school, because I'm in direct contact with the Spirit World. So they tell me things that'll really flip your hat... So I'm privileged, I guess in a lot of ways, because I can communicate with the Spirit World. And I ask them things, important things. It's been a 35-year journey learning about life.

This is where I draw on that, when I share, I feel I don't draw too much from the education, because it's somebody else's perspective. But, I do draw on that once in a while to bring it together, because a lot of Western teachings are similar to our traditional teachings, so I use both. But generally, when I talk about spirituality and drawing from the Spirit World, not from books, not from YouTube, not from anywhere else, but what I have experienced personally. Because I won't tell you anything I've not experienced myself. And it's been quite the journey, a lot of sacrifice.

Denise Webb: Thank you, John. Thank you for sharing that all with us. It's a really long journey, and accomplished journey, and there's so much in your family to look up to.

I wonder if we can talk about the mental health program that you started in Bigstone Cree Nation, and the Restorative Justice Program, and just tell us a little bit about that.

Elder John Bigstone: When I left university, I came back to my community, and I didn't notice at that time that there was a mental health program in the community at that time. There was a manager there, a cousin of mine. He was sitting in the office, and I happened to be walking through the Band Office looking for something that I don't remember what, but he saw me walking by and he called me in and he said, "What are you doing here?" And I told him, "I'm just finishing up my practicum in Child Welfare," that didn't last long because I have my own views on that. And he said, "You know what? We've been looking for somebody with your background to start the mental health program." And he asked me, "When you're done your practicum, would you be interested?... We would like to hire you to do it." I just got into the community and I said OK, you know, because I was gung ho. It wasn't anything that scared me. So I said, "OK, I'll try. I'll do the best I can."

They started researching with us and we traveled across the province researching other mental health programs, and I compiled all that info. But I just used certain parts that would make sense for my community, and I wrote it out of my own experience - What did I see in the community? There's so many issues in the community now; there's drugs, alcohol, violence, lateral violence, gangs, and our youth are dying by the busload over here. It's all due to the drugs, and the historical impacts of residential school. It's worse, 10 times worse than when they first came into the community in 1997.

So anyway, that's what I did. And I became a mental health therapist too, since I specialized in mental health when I was in university. So, you know, everything fell into place. From there I went

back to the university and then made full circle, came back to Wabasca, and I was hired on by the MD of Opportunity where I worked as a manager for about 7 years.

Then I retired, or so I thought. Somebody with the skills like mine, there's no retirement. As soon as the Nation hurts, I was at home not doing much. I retired for a whole 2 weeks, and they called me and said, "Do you want to be part of the Restorative Justice Program, as one of the Elders?" And I thought, "Oh, OK... kind of fell along the lines of what I was doing already anyway." I said "OK, I'll see how that works." So I joined them, went really well.

Soon after that, they made me Lead Elder.... I'm still there, and we help a lot of people, I mean, as Andrea knows, our program is very successful. We're probably 98% successful. And clients that come to us – we'll provide the guidance, the mentorship, and give these people that have broken the law a new perspective, a different perspective on life, to see life in a different light. As Elders, that's our role to provide that guidance.

So that's the Restorative Justice. Do you have any particular questions in regards to Restorative Justice?

Andrea Menard: Yes, John, I do: What does your work at Bigstone Restorative Justice entail, and how does the Restorative Justice process work and what is required of the participants?

Elder John Bigstone: Like I just explained our role as Elders, we're chosen from the community, and usually when you consider an Elder, you consider somebody that has knowledge. And for most of us there, we have a background in the Western perspective of social work, mental health, addictions. So, we are all specialized in one area or the other. We weren't chosen because of that, we just happened to have that knowledge. And then we have one that's more traditional, has no book learning, but is really traditional: my brother-in-law. I work with him in the Lodge doing ceremony. So it really works well. We meet twice a week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The process of how we acquire the clients is through the court system. A lot of clients that come to us are summary offenders, it's not the hardcore indictable offenses that we deal with – most of it has to do with domestic violence, B&E's, that kind of thing that the court decides if they fit that criteria as to who should come into the program. And then it's up to our Director to accept them or not. And once they do, we do an intake with them. Once we do the intake, then we set up a session with them – the first session.

Then that's when the sessions start. We have three sessions with them. If they're going to be successful in the program, they have to meet the requirements of the program through the sanctions, whether they go to counseling, addictions counseling, personal counseling, maybe anger management – what we see fit as Elders for what they will need to be productive members of the community.

So, once they've completed those sanctions, they have to see a counselor three times. It could be addictions, mental health, and any other programs we see fit, they have to attend three times, and they have to bring confirmation letters stating that they were there. Once that's done, and they've

done their three sessions with us – a lot of them, you know, it's amazing the transformation even in three sessions.

Sometimes we want to do five with them, but I think it has more to do with budget than anything else that we don't do four sessions, which would be more beneficial for them - they would get more out of it. It's only after the second session that they start opening up with us. By the time we hit the third, well... you're done. So, we brought that to the table a lot of times, but it's gone nowhere. It's not long enough, and a lot of them say, "I wish we could come back some more." [There's] nothing stopping them, they could do it on their own. But, when you're mandated by courts to be there, it's not the same as voluntarily doing something. But in the third session, you can see the lights come on, we've given them a different perspective on life and something they can use.

We don't use punitive modalities of blaming, humiliating – we don't see them as criminals, we don't see them as bad people. They made a mistake. That's what we tell them. Let's see what we can do to remedy that, you know, so you can have a different perspective so that you don't have to continue with this behaviour. So, do you need that support, that confirmation that they are good people? They just made a mistake. And we'd help them, however, we could.

Andrea Menard: Thank you for sharing that. What are some of the impacts on health and wellness as people move through the program? What are the effects on mental health?

Elder John Bigstone: It gets a bit awkward when I'm in a community and I meet a client, and some of them are a little shy to talk to me, but some of them will just come up and shake my hand and say, "The things that I learned has a huge impact in my life, really changed my life." That makes me feel good to hear that. That's the impact, the invisible part that nobody else sees. You know, these people have changed their lives. There are people that have gone back to the workforce, and they're doing well. Their families are doing well, and you can tell that they just look, behave, and act differently... I see them a lot. That's the impact.

Community-wise, there's so much more work to do out there... It's just almost like a sliver of the changes that we're making, but that little sliver of change, it's that one person – if we can reach one person, that's huge. Because that person will impact his or her family and change the way they think, they behave, and they in turn will have children, and it grows like that. So, all these things, you know, I wish I could wave a wand and change/heal the whole community, but it doesn't work like that. It will be one person at a time, and that one person can impact hundreds in the future.

And surprisingly enough, a lot of them come to my Sweat Lodge and they really, really had a huge impact – it changed their life because that's the part of them that was missing: their disconnection to their culture, their language, and the Spirit World. And the Sweat Lodge connects them to that, it connects them to their identity, who they really are. These are the things you don't advertise. You don't see it, but you know these people and the impact they're making in the community by healing themselves. And all it takes is maybe a sentence or something that really impacts them. Years ago this fella approached me. I don't even remember his name, but he came and shook my hand and he

said, “I just wanted to thank you. What you said to me that time when we had a session.” I don't remember what session or what I said, but he said it changed his life.

Andrea Menard: John, I have a follow up question: So, for Bigstone restorative justice - if you have three Elders working, does one Elder take one client and another Elder take another client, or do you share the client? Can you share a little bit about that?

Elder John Bigstone: When the client comes in, there's about three of us here. I'm the Lead Elder, so I kind of coordinate the process. There are three other Elders that are there. All of us take turns, I coordinate that... I know how to read energy, I know how to read people. So, I know what the needs of that client right away and I try to steer the conversation around that, and the others follow suit because they just build on what I just finished saying. They always complain – once you're done talking, there's nothing more to be said. So, I don't know if that's a compliment, but I tend to talk for a while, and usually a person that is leaning forward – you know you hit the target when they sit leaning forward and nodding, you're seeing things that really stir them.

Yeah. So that client comes in, and all of us talk to that client. It's not separate. It's not like different rooms, [there's just] one conference room. And that's the process.

Denise Webb: So we also want to know a little bit about the overall impacts of the program. I know you've talked about participants gaining a new perspective on life, but if there's any other impacts that you see for those moving through the program, or impacts on the wider community on Bigstone Cree Nation with this program?

Elder John Bigstone: I think that I mentioned before, the ones that complete the program, they're continuing their healing. It's not a one-time shot where you go to counseling, you're done the sessions with us. We encourage them to keep going to counselling, keep talking to people, to keep up with their mental health and well-being. A lot of them do that. Not all, but majority of them do. They continue their healing process, and they attend round dances, ceremonies and that kind of thing, and we tell them we're always open, pop in, sit down with us. That we'll be happy to have you.

So the impact on the community, you know, it's not like it's not visible, let me put it that way. Just like a person's mental health is not visible until something happens, and a lot of times – like you see them at the store or whatever, I mean some event, and a lot of people that attend round dances, a lot of them, probably 75% have been our clients. We can tell by their attendance that they are continuing their healing. Because I share a lot of that at traditional spiritual teachings, and they're hungry for that. Do you want to learn more? Because nobody talks about it, it's almost like a “hush hush.” We're still in that mindset of prohibition, where you can go to jail if you even mention anything spiritual. So we're still plagued by that, our own people are afraid of their own ways.

There's maybe about 20 people that come to my lodge. That's a small number, but I couldn't take anymore anyway, the lodge can only handle 15 to maybe 20 people in a single time. So, it's a good thing I don't have 50 people coming every time, you know? It wouldn't be ideal, so there's a purpose for everything. Only the ones that want to come, want to be there will be there.

Like I said, there's going to be about five to six that came to the lodge and started the healing that continued their healing process, and that had a huge impact on their life. A lot of them have gone back to school, took training, they have some kind of a trade to continue. And a lot of them went back to school. They finished the program. And because now they don't have to worry about clearing the record. Especially for a counselling, social worker kind of thing, to have a criminal record, you won't be able to proceed. So that's a huge impact for them. So they're happy.

Amazingly enough, we have a lot of women that come to the program. Domestic violence, and usually it relates to intergenerational childhood trauma. There's a lot of anger. And then they meet somebody and they hook up, and that person also has gone through a lot in their young life and experienced a lot of childhood trauma. What do you expect, there to be a lot of violence? Then they end up in court and they end up here on our table. And these are the ones that we love working with, because we can reach them. We've experienced a lot of that growing up in our own families, and I have a lot of sympathy for them.

That's the impact. A lot of them go back to school. They've gone back to their ways, the traditional spiritual ways. They reconnected to the land, they reconnected to their families. They've reconnected in a lot of places where they've disconnected. When you disconnect, that's where the problems start. So connection is very, very important in our culture.

Denise Webb: So I have a follow up as well to that. I know we haven't gone over this before, but I'm just wondering, when you talk about people coming into the Restorative Justice Program to go through the process, are the victims also included, and if so, what's their experience like in the program? Victims of the offense that would have brought them to the program, I mean.

Elder John Bigstone: We don't handle the indictable offenses, like sexual assault, murder. We don't handle those. We haven't reached that stage, we're not organized to deal with that quite yet. Maybe in the future we're working on it.

The only time we bring the offender and the defendant together is when it is domestic and we feel that this couple needs to come together to talk this out. With those instances where we've done that, the couples are still together, they work it out, they iron it out with our help. So that's the extent of what we do, where we bring the people together. But we don't take on – we're not organized enough to do that yet.

Denise Webb: So that kind of ties into our next question, and I know that you spoken a little bit on this as well, but what would be other areas of the program that could be improved or built upon? But I know you've spoken about more sessions, more counseling for participants, perhaps more funding. Is there anything else that you can think of maybe?

Elder John Bigstone: I think to be accepted in a community like the Restorative Justice Program is kind of like an unknown program until you get in trouble with the law. Then we're front and center, right? So it's kind of like, to be accepted by leadership as a viable program that's making changes in

the community, one person at a time. Those are what we struggle with. Things we're trying to work out.

And Elders – you'd think [since] there's been a huge community that love us that we'd be brimming over with Elders and Knowledge Keepers. It's not the case. That's what we thought, “there's got to be hundreds out there, that we can utilize. They'll be happy to come and help.” A lot of them don't have what it takes to do what we do like the Elders that we have. Because you have to be able to talk, right? You got to have a background, understand human behavior, to be able to have an impact on that person. A lot of these Elders are not educated in the Western or Indigenous perspective. So, that's a big struggle. As we get older, who's going to replace us?

You know, a lot of them don't know how to talk to people, because first and foremost, you gotta be able to communicate with the person that's in front of you. You gotta learn how to read behaviour, body language. These are specialized skills that are needed. Or that clients are very smart. They'll tell you the things you want to hear, and if you buy into it and you don't confront them, they'll run you over. So you have to have those skills. And there's not many people out there like that in the community, and a lot of them don't have the confidence, they don't have the self-esteem to do this kind of thing. So you'd think we'd be just run over by the numbers. No, that doesn't work that way. The ones that we have are the only ones that we've come up with so far. That's four [Elders].

Yeah, those are issues that come to mind. Money, funding is the other one. Always running short of money because nobody values the program until they get into trouble. But we work well with the Community Wellness and the psychologist. We work well with the judges, crown prosecutors, they really appreciate the program. They know we're making a difference. But it's not a well-publicized program.

Andrea Menard: Does Bigstone Restorative Justice still have an office in the City of Edmonton? Are you still running that program in the city?

Elder John Bigstone: Yes, we do. Matter of fact, I was there last week to see three clients. I'm kind of like the guy who's all over the place, because since I'm the Lead Elder, I'm almost required to be there when I can. And also, we go to Edmonton. We go to the CI (Continental Inn & Suites) Hotel, we have a room there that we see clients. And there's about three elders that we work with that live in Edmonton.

Andrea Menard: Oh, OK, cool. Thanks so much, John, I appreciate that. In addition to the Bigstone Restorative Justice Program, can you please tell us about the other roles you have in the community and the work that you do?

Elder John Bigstone: Well, first and foremost I am the Ceremonial Holder at Sweat Lodges. I'm a pipe holder. [You'd] be surprised how far I've been called to go do a pipe or teachings: Edmonton, Grand Prairie, Slave Lake. So, it seems like it's just picking up, where I get calls to go lift the pipe for them, go share some teachings. Matter of fact, I was asked by the Treaty 8 Polytechnic organization

to be one of the Treaty 8 Elders to go share teachings and do Sweat Lodges with them. So, I haven't done that yet, but I'm sure I'll be going over there more often. And yeah, that's what I do.

I'm a facilitator as well. I do wellness workshops, conferences. I'm asked to go talk at workshops. I do workshops at home. At home, me and my wife do spiritual counseling, guidance. We don't charge anything, and they come to our home and you can share with us what their issue is, and we speak to them, we provide the guidance for them, so they'll have an understanding of what's really going on. Both of us are trained counselors.

I'm a drummer, round dance drummer. We have a group in Wabasca which I'm part of and a senior member. So yeah, we do round dances and that kind of thing, and we are really the only action in town. So whenever there's something happening, we'll call upon a gold drum. So yeah, that's the other thing I do.

Well, I'm also asked to go to Sweat Lodges in other communities, which I don't really subscribe to. You know, I don't like to go into somebody else's territory and start doing a lot. It's not something I really like doing because you're intruding on somebody else's land, and I understand that spirits live on that land. I'm not very happy if I go in there and start doing the pipe ceremony on somebody else's traditional territory. I have to ask permission from the spirit so they don't get offended.

The communities I've gone to, I usually go to open their round dances with the pipe ceremony. What impact that has in the community, I can't tell you because I'm not part of the community, but there's always so many people that attend these ceremonies... It's kind of like an introduction to Indigenous Country; the pipe ceremony, round dances. Any kind of ceremony because they're hungry, they want what was left to them by their ancestors, they want to understand. I do a fair bit of land teachings as well.

And also, a lot of women gravitate towards us more so than men. [This has] always has been because the women are the nurturers, they're the ones that raise their children. They're the ones that take care of the home, so they're the ones that usually gravitate to these ceremonies. There's always men too, but not as many as women. And they wear all these real beautiful ribbon skirts, you know, real decked out. They're really taking it seriously. And I'm talking to a lot of people that come to those pipe ceremonies. That tells me that they want it, they're hungry for it. They want to know more. So, I'm just blessed to be there to provide that for them. So Calling Lake, they invited us to go sing at round dances, and they go to ceremony over there quite a bit too.

That's the impact that I see as well. As far as global impact, or the whole Wabasca and all the other hamlets, that's the impact. There's no statistics to say that, "yes, we're making a huge difference." There's no record of it. Well, just what I've observed.

Andrea Menard: John, I want to say something: you said healing is about layers in some of our conversations in the past, and intergenerational trauma does affect a lot of people. Do you have anything to say about layers and everyday unpacking, and how you deal with that? Do you have hope that you can give us? Any guidance?

Elder John Bigstone: It's all about that we're all products of our environment. We've all been impacted by the environment we grew up in - our teachers, our caregivers, our mentors. We come into this world with a blank slate like a hard drive, there's no info on it. There is the operating system in the hard drive, but there's no programming. Now, the family you're born into, they're going to download the software into your hard drive, and if it's not good information, if it's not conducive to Wellness, well-being, they're going to download things that probably 6-5% of everything that's been downloaded into our little hard drive from the time we're born till seven years old - is negative. And it will take us years to reprogram. It's about not so much what we need to learn, it is what we need to unlearn if we want to be healthy, productive human beings.

So this is what we deal with, and we have to start with the bottom layer of childhood. What happened to them? What happened to me, all the trauma I experienced as a child from time I was born until I left residential school, that goes into my DNA, it goes into my being. Now it's up to me to heal that. With the help of the spirits, they help with that, So, layers – it's taken me all these years. They're like peeling an onion. They say, "You peel one off and then you realize, oh, another one, and then you deal with that." It's very few and far in between, that someone will get to the core. When you get to the core, you become a master, [you] don't have to come back to Earth. But until then, we'll keep coming back, keep working on our stuff.

So, just start peeling back the trauma is what we do at Restorative Justice – the first layer. From there, they have to seek out where they can get more help to start peeling back more layers of trauma, childhood experiences. They're not conducive to health and well-being, mental health especially. So, this is what we do, this is what I've been working on for 72 years - well, not 72, maybe 50 years, but you get what I mean? All of us are in the same boat, we're all in the same spaceship called Mother Earth, and we're here to experience life and to learn about us. Who are we really? To reconnect to our origins – where did we come from? What are we here to do? Where are we going after we die? That itself is a workshop. I teach those things as well, but that's a topic for another time.

Denise Webb: Yeah, thank you. I just want to take the time to say thank you for sharing and taking time today to talk to us about this topic, and just sharing your journey and the lessons that you learned along the way, and the impact that the Restorative Justice program is having broadly across Alberta. So, thank you.

Andrea Menard: John, every time I spend time with you, I grow as a person and I feel deeply connected to you. So, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your energy today. And I hope you have a really amazing rest of your day, and that the sun starts to shine over there.

Elder John Bigstone: You're very, very welcome. You know, I'm glad to share what I can. Whereas I share, I'm also learning from you, that's how it works. If it doesn't go one way... and it's just an honor to be sharing these with people that want to learn. I wish more people in my community thought that way, but one person at a time.

-Music-

Andrea Menard: To learn more about the Bigstone Cree Nation Restorative Justice Program, head to www.bigstone.ca/restorative-justice

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