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VIDEO: Empowering Cape Breton grandmothers to return to traditional Mi'kmaq leadership roles

Ardelle Reynolds · Local Journalism Initiative Reporter · Posted: March 29, 2021, 5 p.m. | Updated: March 30, 2021, 8:33 a.m. | 6 Min Read



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A group of L'nu women all with different experiences and skills gathered over the weekend to share stories, learn from one another and most importantly to the event's co-ordinators, be empowered.

Thirty grandmothers from the five First Nations in Unama'ki, along with some younger women, were invited to attend the event, which included a drum-making workshop, a roundtable discussion and guest speakers that addressed Mi'kmaq women's role in leadership, reclaiming the language and mental health during COVID-19.

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Cheryl Gehue from Sipekne'ketik First Nation is on the board of the Mi'kmaq Circle of Hope, an organization that provides support to L'nu on and off-reserve and was the host of the weekend's gathering.

She said the event is a followup to last year's grandmother's gathering where they collected stories, shared knowledge and identified the need to pass down the teachings and traditions to the younger generations to take an intergenerational approach to improve the future.

“We're learning about leadership and our traditional roles as Mi'kmaq women,” Gehue said.

“We need to start taking a stand and the women are going to be the ones to lead the way ... We need to do what we can to reinvigorate our traditions and teachings and make it normalized for our young women to be leaders in our communities.”



Karen Bernard and Cheryl Gehue belong to the Mi'kmaq Circle of Hope, an organization formed last year to provide support for Indigenous people living on and off-reserve. This is the group's second gathering of Mi'kmaq grandmothers and brought together 30 women from around Unama'ki. ARDELLE REYNOLDS/CAPE BRETON POST

The organization collaborated with Brenda Chisholm-Beaton, the mayor of Port Hawkesbury, to run a Mi'kmaq leadership campaign school last year to encourage more L'nu women to enter politics.

Gehue said it encouraged a lot of women, including herself, to dip their toes into the political world. After that session, she ran for, and won, a council seat in her community.

“It's showing progress and showing women that anywhere that decisions are being made, we need to have a woman at the table and have the women's perspective in everything that we do in our communities,” she said.

The grandmothers gathering was a first for Mary Lou Isadore from Wagmatcook First Nation, who said she was enjoying learning the traditional teachings and history and hearing about shared experiences of L'nu women.

“I just love it. I feel comfortable and the people are really nice and I've learned a lot of stuff so far this weekend ... what the grandmothers went through, what our mothers went through and it's really true, it really went down like that, I remember that,” she said.



[so we miss you; In our memory you are near. Always so ...](#)



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Cheryl Knockwood is a lawyer who currently works as the governance co-ordinator for Membertou First Nation. ARDELLE REYNOLDS/CAPE BRETON POST

Cheryl Knockwood, a lawyer who currently works as the governance co-ordinator for Membertou First Nation, was the keynote speaker. She spoke about the intergenerational trauma of her family and her people but also the strength.

“Thinking about my grandmother, and my mother, and my sisters, and my wife, and my daughter, there's a lot of resilience too and as much as they've experienced trauma, they've made choices, life-changing choices, not only for them but for future generations that really make huge impacts,” she said.

Knockwood was appointed to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission in 2015 and was then appointed as the chair in 2019. She said at the time she felt nervous about taking on the role and had to really think about it.

“But then, what I found out is, for men, when they're asked to take on a leadership role they'll say, ‘Yes, I could do that,’ so I guess the message there is we need more women in leadership roles and if you have the opportunity to do that, we'll still be shy and we'll still need to respect how we make our decisions but at the end of the day if it feels right to say yes, say yes,” she said.

Karen Bernard is the director of the Jane Paul Indigenous Resource Centre, a support for off-reserve L'nu women in Sydney. She is a founding member of the Mi'kmaq Circle of Hope.

Bernard said having Friends United, a gallery and convention centre that displays and supports Indigenous artists from across Turtle Island (North America), as the backdrop for the gathering was inspirational.

“When you come here and you're surrounded by the creativity of our Indigenous people who have been impacted by so many horrific traumas, from residential schools to addiction, to misplacement and loss of culture, to Indian day schools, colonization and here we are working toward decolonizing a lot of things and it's phenomenal,” she said.



Connie Stevens of Wagmatcook First Nation shows off the teepee she made at the intergenerational gathering hosted by the Mi'kmaq Circle of Hope. Stevens said she was honoured to be invited to the weekend, and was enjoying sharing with the other women from across Unama'ki. ARDELLE REYNOLDS/CAPE BRETON POST

The Friends United facility is in Cleveland, Richmond County, near Port Hawkesbury, and has hundreds of pieces of First Nations artwork from quillwork and beading to paintings to totem poles and Inuit stone carvings.

Bernard said Rolf Bouman, the founder of Friends United, offered the space for free to the group and even gifted some of the works to the grandmothers over the weekend.

The goal of the gathering for Bernard is to have a group of empowered grandmothers, and for chiefs and councils, board of directors and other decision-making bodies to reach out and look to these women for advice, knowledge, and leadership.

“We want the grandmothers to start being recognized, to be utilized and to be valued for their knowledge,” she said.

Ardelle Reynolds is an Indigenous affairs reporter with the Cape Breton Post.

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