



# **COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH LEADERS**

**Report  
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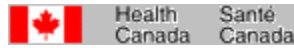
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### **About the Cover Art**

The study *Community Pathways of Aboriginal Youth Leaders* focuses upon twelve young Aboriginal men and women who have been identified as leaders and role models by their communities. There are many other Aboriginal youth, however, who also could have been selected for this research, young people who are using their talents and skills to improve their communities and the lives of those around them. The youth leaders who participated as research assistants in this study are good examples. Another such example is Kevin Lamoureux, associated with the University of Winnipeg's Bachelor of Education Program located at the Winnipeg Education Centre. In addition to his responsibilities as academic advisor for the program, Kevin is currently a graduate student pursuing a Master of Education degree from the University of New England, Armidale, Australia.

Kevin's talent for creating cover art has been successfully demonstrated elsewhere so it seemed only logical to ask him to create the cover art for this report. He prepared himself for this task by reading the report and translating his response into the design which is the focal point of the cover. When asked if he could provide some insights into his design he responded with the following comment:

The cover art, like the report itself, attempts to demonstrate the importance of strong role models within a community struggling to provide direction for its young people. Depicted are two faceless, symbolic "winged creatures" loosely modelled after traditional Plains Tribes' interpretations of the Heron, and the Australian Aborigine concept of Human Being's shared spirit with the animal world. Thus, the creatures seem to have some quality of "humanness" despite being clearly of the animal kingdom.

The figure on the left might represent a stronger, healthier spirit watching over the figure on the right, a figure that seems to be wounded both physically and spiritually, as depicted by the broken wing and hunched-over, lowly stature. This is much like the content of the report itself where unsettling statistics of Aboriginal education are contrasted with success stories of “leaders,” or role models from this same community.

In the background is a washed out vision of Winnipeg’s skyline, completed in grays, blues and greens of a more sombre, cooler hue. The city is weakly lit by a sun overcast with clouds of the same sober feel and hue. Together, foreground and background work to tell a story of traditional culture coming forth from a troubled place, vibrant in colour and potential, with the stronger leaders of the community caring for those that have not yet found their way.

**COMMUNITY PATHWAYS  
OF  
ABORIGINAL YOUTH LEADERS**

**ANNABELLE MAYS**

**COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH LEADERS**

## **Introduction**

The impetus for the research project, *Community Pathways of Aboriginal Youth Leaders*, began with Dr. Heather Hunter in the early months of 2003. In her leadership role with the Manitoba Education Research Network, Dr. Hunter looks to stimulate collaborative research projects between various provincial educational stakeholders. In one such initiative Dr. Hunter and Dr. Annabelle Mays, Dean of Education at the University of Winnipeg, brought together representatives of the Superintendents' offices of Winnipeg's six Metro School Divisions. These initial meetings explored many potential research topics which were of interest to one or more members and the discussions were far ranging. It became clear, however, that these divisional representatives shared a common interest and concern, that of investigating some aspect of the education and development of Aboriginal youth. The reasons for their interest in this topic are self-evident but also documented in reports such as the Aboriginal Task Force Group's recently published *Eagle's Eye View*, which represents an environmental scan of the Aboriginal community of Winnipeg. According to this report Winnipeg is not only "home to the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada." (p.8) but the population is growing. More importantly, however, when acknowledging the importance of education for Aboriginal youth with respect to their future opportunities and the ability to take responsibility for their own future, the report indicates that recent Statistics Canada data for Winnipeg reveal that "51% of Aboriginal youth 15-24 years of age were attending school either full-time or part-time in 2001 compared to 59.5% of non-Aboriginal youth." (p.8). Thus, the desire to focus on the education and development of Aboriginal youth stemmed not so much from the demographics of the population within the Metro Winnipeg area, but more particularly from concern with respect to the question

of what do the schools and community need to be doing differently in order to improve the performance of the schools with respect to Aboriginal youth, to encourage them to stay in school and to pursue post-secondary education.

Once agreement had been reached by this group with respect to the general focus of the research upon some aspect of Aboriginal youth it was also agreed that the project would be strengthened by a community-based approach to the research process. In order to accomplish this, the decision was taken to broaden the group to include additional community partners. Toward this end representation from Ma Mawi Chi Itata Centre (Ma Mawi), the Aboriginal Education Directorate, and the Manitoba Aboriginal Achievement Awards (MAA) were added to the group. Discussions with this expanded group resulted in the submission of a research proposal to the Winnipeg office of the Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Centred Prairie Communities. The proposal entitled *Community Pathways of Aboriginal Youth Champions* was funded with Dr. Annabelle Mays as principal investigator and Dr. Heather Hunter as project coordinator. Dr. Raymond Theberge, then Dean of Education at College universitaire St. Boniface agreed to provide research assistance. It is important to note that the original title of the project was *Community Pathways of Aboriginal Youth Champions*. In the data gathering phase of the project it became clear, however, that many of the project's participants were not comfortable with the word "champion" and that "leader" or "role model" were preferable to describe the study's Aboriginal youth. It is for this reason, in response to their concerns and the response of forum participants that the term "champion" has been replaced in this discussion with "leader" when referring to the study's subjects except in the discussion surrounding the original formulations of the project. As a result, the title of the project became *Community Pathways of Aboriginal Youth*

*Leaders* to reflect this response.

### **Project Focus**

The project was conceived as an exploratory one and took shape during the discussions of the advisory group of partners. Of particular interest to the school divisions was the desire to understand better the role and impact of the school system on the lives of Aboriginal children and youth. Given the anticipated rise in the number of Aboriginal youth who will be attending Metro schools within the next decade, and a concern for ensuring that Aboriginal youth stay in school longer, it is clear that the school divisions have no time to lose in understanding the effects of the school system, both positive and negative, upon Aboriginal young people. Based upon further discussion the scope was broadened to include a sense of the impact of families and communities as well as the school system. There was a sense among the group that one approach that had potential as a starting point to address the topic was to examine the lives of young Aboriginals who had become leaders, referred to by some as “champions.” This might, it was conjectured, provide insights into what worked and what had contributed to their emergence as role models. It was anticipated that an examination of their life stories would help to clarify the role played not only by the school system, but by the two other important aspects of their lives identified by the partners, their families and their communities, a view that is supported by the literature as well (Aboriginal Task Force Group, 2004; Bell, 2003). Thus, it was decided that the purpose of this exploratory research project would be to examine the pathways taken by young Aboriginal role models and leaders, “champions.” It was expected that each life story, or “pathway,” would be unique, but it was also anticipated that there would be some aspects of the stories which could provide some insights into how Aboriginal youth leaders emerge,



particularly with respect to family, community and educational settings. What are the various ways in which they have contributed to these young people? Another desired outcome of the study also expressed by the group was to gain some greater insight into the meaning of the concepts of “champion,” “community,” and “success” for these Aboriginal youth and as well as those who had been significant along their “pathway.” There was a sense among some members of the group that these terms might hold a different meaning for Aboriginal youth from that understood by educators and the dominant culture, at least under some circumstances.

There is a growing body of literature which is beginning to address Aboriginal youth and their development but the starting point for this exploratory study was with our own experience as educators which had led us to understand the importance of family and community as well as schools in the positive and negative development of youth. However, the study, in its later stages, was informed by the work of Bell, 2004; Aboriginal Task Force, 2004; Bowd, A, 2003; Fitznoor, 2002; Brown et al, 2002; and Smith, 1999.

## **Method**

### Research Design

There was agreement that the study would gather the stories of the pathways taken by a group of Aboriginal youth leaders, with a particular focus on their families, communities and educational settings. The study would also seek input from individuals or groups who had played a significant role in each of their pathways to leadership. A secondary focus would be to seek some clarification of the notions of “community,” “champion,” and “success” as they were understood by the youth and those who supported them. These stories would be gathered through interviews of the youth as well as through a forum which would involve both the

“champions” as well as significant individuals acknowledged by them in their “pathway” stories.

After considerable discussion and numerous iterations of the proposal the following approach was adopted for the data gathering process and it represented a continuation of the project’s commitment to the involvement of its partners in the research. The project partners were asked to nominate one or more youth champions in accordance with an agreed upon set of criteria.

Each of the Metro School Divisions was asked to nominate one each and the Manitoba Aboriginal Achievement Awards was asked to nominate six, drawn from the award winners and nominees of the last ten years. Ma Mawi was asked also for nominees from appropriate community groups such as Rossbrook House.

The youth nominated for the study would be approached by their nominating group to determine their interest in participating in the study. If they agreed to participate then their names would be forwarded to the researchers who would contact the youth to set up interview times. Given the time constraints surrounding the project, a report was due within six months time, it was decided to try to interview at least 12 subjects but too many more than that would not be manageable.

In order to gather data relating to the roles of the community and family the research design proposed a forum which would bring together significant individuals representing family or community groups who had been identified by the youth champions in their pathway stories.

This forum would include the champions. The goal of the forum was two fold. It sought to present the research process to the participants as well as seeking the views of these significant individuals with respect to the notions of community, champions, and success and the roles they played in the lives of these young people.

The group of research partners made another important decision with respect to the research process, one which in retrospect ensured the likelihood of a successful data gathering phase. One of the research partners, Ma Mawi had recently completed a Centre of Excellence (COE) funded project, *The Aboriginal Youth Research Learning Circle*, which involved Aboriginal youth aged 16-29 years of age in a cooperative learning process. The participants in this project were involved in a learning opportunity which utilized action research methods and required them to be both participants and researchers in training. It was decided that research assistance to the principal Investigator would be provided by several of these graduates of the Ma Mawi Youth Learning Circle.

#### Aboriginal Champion Selection Criteria

Once the broad outlines of the research design had been formulated, the project partners were faced with the task of defining the notion of “youth leader” or “role model.” For guidance the group looked to the definition supplied by the Manitoba Aboriginal Achievement Awards.

Aboriginal youth leaders in that context are broadly defined as young people who are known, accepted and respected by many people. They may have, even at their young age, been a uniting force in their community. This project’s selection criteria for its Aboriginal youth leaders were as follows:

1. Aboriginal
2. Between the ages of 18-29
3. Recognized as successful youth leaders and role models by the selection groups.
4. Displayed the following attributes and personal characteristics: strong achiever, had gained the respect of others, had given to their community, e.g., volunteering, shown courage,

considered a positive role model, respectful, kind, a defender of what is good and right, positive in their professional life, work, school, and communities.

The criteria are largely self-explanatory. The age range was broad enough to capture a variety of young people who had already had the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. It also enabled the researchers to approach the selected subjects directly rather than seeking approval from parents and guardians as is the case with minors. The committee decided as well, for ease of interviewing and attendance at the forum, that the study's participants should be Winnipeg based.

### Project Implementation

Once the project had been broadly formulated by the advisory group, the specific details of a final proposal, including questionnaires and other necessary documents, became the responsibility of the principal investigator who worked closely with the project coordinator and the research assistants from Ma Mawi during this phase.

A series of letters was developed to use in the approach to the partners, the subjects, and the forum participants. An interview schedule aimed at eliciting the subjects' pathway stories was developed, along with the agenda and focus questions for the forum involving the "significant" individuals in the subjects' lives. These two sets of questions are included in Appendices A and B respectively.

The complete proposal was submitted for ethics approval at the University of Winnipeg. Once this was secured, the project was in a position to proceed with identification of the "champions" and the interviewing process. Each of the project partners was sent a letter which set out the details of the project and which asked them to identify subjects for the study. They were asked

to contact potential subjects, informing them about the project and its goals, and to ask if they were interested in participating. If the candidate agreed then the partners were asked to forward those names to the research assistants at Ma Mawi. In addition, since Ma Mawi was a partner in the project, the research assistants were responsible for identifying some subjects as well.

As the names were identified, the research assistants began the process of contacting each “champion” to reconfirm their willingness to participate in the study and to set a time for the interview. The subjects were also sent a letter which set out the details of the study and their role in it. It should be noted that prior to making these phone calls and to conducting the interviews that the research assistants and the principal investigator had discussed how to make the telephone approach. The research assistants also engaged in role playing with respect to conducting the interview.

The interviews were conducted in the month of July and a total of 12 subjects were interviewed, seven women and five men. The interview data were collected using the interview schedule which appears in Appendix A. At the outset of each interview the respondents were asked to provide their understanding or interpretation of the word “champion” and to clarify whether they, in fact, considered themselves to be a “champion.” They were also asked what “success” meant to them. The interview then proceeded from there into a recounting of each youth leader’s life story. As the interview schedule indicates, the interviewers were armed with a series of questions which they used as probes when the topics of family, community and community institutions arose.

Once the interviews were complete, the project was able to move into the second phase of the data gathering, the forum, which included the significant adults mentioned in the youth leaders’

life stories. The youth leaders were contacted by the research assistants and asked to invite one or two of the significant individuals mentioned in their life stories to the forum, scheduled for the end of August. These youth leaders represented the first point of contact with these forum participants. Once the youth leaders notified the research assistants of the names and addresses of those willing to participate in the forum, these people were formally contacted by letter by the research assistants.

Excluding the research assistants, forum facilitators and project investigators, the forum, held on August 27, 2003, was attended by 10 youth leaders and 14 of the significant persons mentioned in their life stories. When they arrived, the participants completed the necessary consent forms and received their honorariums. Upon completion of the dinner meal the forum began with a smudging ceremony followed by a welcome, introduction of the research team and a brief overview of the research process. The participants were divided then into two groups, each containing youth leaders and their significant persons. The groups were facilitated by John Lussier, at that time a Ma Mawi staff member, and the principal investigator, Annabelle Mays. Each was aided by a research assistant throughout the process who recorded the discussion on a flip chart. The discussions were also captured on audio tape.

Each group was asked to discuss three questions. The first question each group was asked to address was, "When you are thinking about Aboriginal youth champions, how would you describe or define what it means to be a champion?" Next, each group was expected to provide their responses to "What does "community" mean?" Finally, it was planned that they would examine the ways community mediating factors such as the school and the home are helpful and not helpful in the development of youth champions. Upon completion of the discussion, each

group presented to the full group the substance of their discussion.

The Forum questions are set out in Appendix B. The Forum concluded with speeches of thanks and a closing circle.

Once the penultimate draft of the report was completed, it was sent to the youth leaders for their comments. Also, they were asked to share the document with the forum participants. A further opportunity for comment on the document was provided at a dinner gathering at Ma Mawi. As a result of that gathering the document was finalized for submission to the funding agency.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of the interview and forum data was conducted by the principal investigator with assistance from the Ma Mawi research assistants and Dr. Raymond Theberge. The data were scrutinized for themes which surfaced in relation to the major variables set out in the interview schedule and the questions posed in the forum. It should be noted that the length and depth of the interview data varied considerably from one respondent to another. In addition, the use of the probe questions varied from one interview to the next, depending upon the direction in which the individual's story chose to proceed. Thus, the data, with respect to each theme, vary greatly from one interview to another. Some of the interviews, for example, when transcribed were many pages in length while others were only three or four pages long. There may be several reasons for these variations in the length and depth of the interviews. For example, as the data following indicate there was reluctance on the part of some of the interviewees to participate in the study, related most prominently to their reluctance to be labelled as a "champion." This may have led some of the interviewees to be more brief in their comments. It is possible that some of the discrepancy may have resulted from the inexperience of the youth leaders with conducting

interviews, particularly the skill of probing. Time constraints associated with the project reduced the amount of time available to practice with the youth leaders these skills associated with interviewing, particularly the technique of probing. However, despite the limited preparation and the time constraints under which they operated it is important to note they came up with some remarkable data and it seems quite likely that there are many reasons for the discrepancy in responses from one interviewee to another.

### Youth Perspectives

#### *Champion*

Two sets of data were generated through the process, those associated with the interviews and those associated with the forum. In each case the participants were asked to clarify their understanding of the word “champion” as it applied to the young people in the research project. A review of the interviews with the youth leaders reveals that the meaning these interviewees attributed to the term “champion” could all be termed as variations on the same theme. The phrases which predominated in their explanations were “role model” and “goal.” For example, one champion phrased it this way. “My definition would probably be in terms of a self-determined person who’s just very goal oriented and wanting to make something of themselves, basically. And having to play a role model in the public eye.” Several of them also included notions of helping others and generally doing good. For example, “Champion. A person that finishes goals and does good for other people and helps other people and helps out around the community.” One youth leader highlighted another important component of the term which could be inferred from many of the comments of others in the study. “Champions should not be people who are out of touch with the common people or people that are in the community . . . for



me my role models were often the people around me, my friends, my families, my elders, some teachers, just people that came along in my life and had direct influence over my decisions.” He expressed the hope that a “champion” was not someone who is “untouchable.” Rather, his understanding is that a “champion” is someone who “shakes your hand and is able to tell you on a one-on-one basis what it means to be a positive or empowered individual.”

What stands out in all of the discussion of the notion of “champion” from the interview data and, as will be seen later from the forum data as well, is the consistency with respect to the understanding of the term on the part of the participants. On the one hand a “champion” is a role model and someone to be emulated by others, on the other hand there is a very strong theme that pervades the discussion, that of internal motivation, the commitment to pursuing something that you can be passionate about. Beyond that is the notion of doing something for others, helping others. Frequently, the notion of honouring others such as family through one’s actions was highlighted by participants as well as the research assistants. By implication, displaying the characteristics attributed to “champions” honours those others who constitute family and community. It is important to note that these values mirror those associated with the “circle of courage,” the values associated with traditional Aboriginal child rearing philosophies and set out so clearly in the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern in *Reclaiming Youth At Risk: Our Hope for the Future* (1992).

### *Success*

The youth leaders were also asked to comment on their notion of “success.” Success for one champion was defined as follows. “Success means that I have a feeling of accomplishment that I set out to complete something. I reach the goals I was working for.” For another it means,

“Happy in your comfort zone. Being comfortable with where you’re at. Achieve your overall goal.” In the words of another “I would consider myself a success if once I’m old and gray and I can look back on my life that I’ve contributed something useful to the world.” One youth leader, when defining success, reiterated the words he had stated as his definition of a champion. “Again, just finishing goals in your life and having your family there to witness it. Just finishing stuff and being proud of it.” Yet another with respect to success said “Being happy with what I am and with who I am. Being happy with what I have achieved and what I want to achieve.” It would appear that for the youth leaders success is linked to notions of being happy with themselves and the accomplishment of goals. What was noticeably absent from the youth leader interviews with respect to the notion of success was any reference to the acquisition of material goods or scaling the heights of personal power within an organization, except when attributing those goals as characteristic of the dominant culture. What was mentioned, however, was the concept of “giving back” to others, to the community for example. One young leader who had received an Aboriginal Achievement Award spoke of being asked to go to a school and speak to the young students there who looked up to her. In her words, “that blew me away.” By winning the award she not only “achieved a goal,” she also had the opportunity as a role model “to give back to my community, to go back to those schools and talk to those kids. It’s just kind of my own way of saying thank you to the community.”

### *Family*

Once the interviewees had presented their understanding of the concepts of “champion” and “success” each began to outline their life story. The notion of family for these young people

was very broadly defined and inclusive. In the words of one interviewee, “Well everyone’s family is different but my family is my main support. It’s a place where people can just be themselves. Not only is it my support, but I have to return support. Whoever you have in your home life would be your family.” Still another responded by saying, that family was difficult for him to explain. It included mother, father, brother, sisters, aunts, and uncles. However, he continued by saying, “I sometimes find also that, like your closest friends, people that you hold dear too, in your heart, often I find part of my family. I guess to say it as briefly, like in a synopsis, it’s anyone that’s close to your heart, that affects you in a positive or even a negative way, perhaps.” For another subject, the notion of family is a group of people “who have been through thick and thin,” and who don’t necessarily have to be blood relatives. “A family member is somebody who is there for you, and has earned enough respect to get that title.” Another youth leader said, “Family means a lot, it means everything. I’m very close with my family.” Still another commented on what family means by describing it as “That support system that will be there no matter what.”

It was clear in their discussions that family members, however defined, played an important motivational and supportive role in the lives of these young people. One youth leader said, “My family always kept me focussed on goals. They help me be proud of who I am all the time. My mom moved out to the city to further my education because she knew I couldn’t . . . I wouldn’t be able to handle the city life by myself.”

The youth all reported that they had at least one parent, role model, or significant other who had a positive influence on them throughout their lives. Parents and guardians who provided support, adequate supervision, and an ear to listen to the struggles and worries the youth faced

on a daily basis also had a positive influence on the youth leaders' early years. They provided advice on how to deal with difficult situations when most needed and with much needed encouragement. "They've always been there for me." This youth leader extended his comment by noting that he could always depend upon them for advice or something, money perhaps, and that they supported him in whatever he did.

Other youth leaders spoke of how their family ensured regular school attendance, which they acknowledged made a contribution to their positive development. Dropping out was not considered an option for many of the youth. The words of one youth leader are indicative of many of the subjects. Speaking of her family and her mother she said, "I came from a family which really stressed education. She never ever let us miss a day, ever. Because of her consistency it kind of led to my own. It instilled those kind of values in terms of education."

The life stories of the youth leaders also made it clear that, like other young people, there were negative aspects to family life which influenced their lives significantly. Family breakup was a common theme in many of the life stories. As one respondent noted. "My mom and dad got a divorce when I was sixteen. That really tore me apart inside at first. But, I eventually got used to it, knowing that I could get over something as big as that, I could overcome whatever I have to, to get to where I want to be."

Many of the stories reported the absence of one parent for much of their lives, typically the father, as a result of family breakup or death. In some cases the youth reported a good relationship evolved with a step father while in others, the mother raised the family single-handedly. In the overall, with some exceptions, the mothers were described particularly as the central parental figure in their lives, supporting them and urging them in many cases to stay in

school or to pursue their goals and dreams. However, the life stories of these youth leaders, while acknowledging negative aspects in their lives with respect to family, focus more repeatedly upon the positive contributions of family, however defined, upon their lives and their achievements to date.

### *School*

The youth leaders' comments with respect to their education, again, reflected both positive and negative experiences. One observation which does appear to be evident in their comments is that the youth leaders had far less to say about their school experiences than they did about the role of family and others outside of the school in their lives. This in itself, is an observation which gives some cause for reflection.

One youth leader when speaking of high school said, "I didn't always feel like I belonged but there were always teachers there that helped. Anyway, I found people who encouraged me to be proud of who I was and, you know, working for better academic goals and always really in there. They made the whole school environment go easier. A lot of my teachers are very important to me and I'm glad that they were there."

This same youth leader commented on the notion of expectations, speaking favourably about a private elementary school she attended which had high expectations which put her ahead of the game when she subsequently switched to a public school. The teachers that she trusted in this school also encouraged her to be "more involved with my culture, which I really appreciated." She also highlighted her appreciation for teachers who were supportive and who went out of their way to talk to her, especially the principal, whom she recognized as being very busy but who took time for her.

The issue of being in a school where Aboriginal students were in the minority arose in discussions with this youth leader as well. She definitely perceived this as a barrier, a hardship and a challenge, indicating that she didn't feel too confident and she had a hard time with this. Perhaps, one of the aspects of schooling which stands out is the frequency with which the youth leaders reported incidents of racism directed at them. One, for example, reported a conversation with a high school teacher who pointed out to him that he was the only Aboriginal in the whole school. "All the Aboriginal children that came to school either dropped out or left. Can't you take a hint?" she asked, sending a clear message that he should be gone as well. This was one of several examples of such racism cited by the study's respondents. One student, in talking about a school she attended had this to say, "I was bullied as much as I was in other schools and I struggled a lot with the racism that went on there, but it is everywhere."

In addition to racism the champions made mention of other challenges they faced such as bullying and name calling. They particularly linked these negative experiences to a lack of supervision in the hallways of the large schools. The point was made that students resolved conflicts on their own through fighting and physical violence, applying the rules of the street which included "no ratting." Further, the point was made that because of large classes, the teachers were unable to meet the needs of all the students in the classes. Still another significant point surfaced with respect to the schools. Several of the youth leaders suffered through the death of loved or family breakup and others spoke of depression from these or other causes. What was lacking for them, they observed, was trained or experienced personnel and support systems to help them through the grieving process.

There was, however, mention made by the youth leaders of some of the positive features of the school system which helped them along their pathway. They spoke of encouraging teachers who were understanding and caring, of some who pushed them to achieve more. They also spoke of teachers who worked to create classroom interaction among all students in order to deal with inter-racial issues. Gym teachers and coaches were identified for their helpful role and several principals were mentioned for taking the time to talk to students in need and for dealing with issues fairly. Guidance counsellors were also singled out for taking the time to sit and discuss future plans of students, to help with path planning, and to assist with goal setting. It was also appreciated when counsellors facilitated a referral to appropriate counselling when needed.

The school data, however, differ from the study's family data in a number of ways. While family members clearly played a preeminent role in the lives of the champions, the school's role was very mixed. In the case of some students, mention was made of very supportive teachers who held high expectations for them and pushed them to attend and complete their course work. This was counterbalanced with comments about teachers who basically expected little from them and held very low expectations. School in all cases always held some element of challenge or barrier to be overcome. One other interesting feature of the discussion surrounding schooling related to the Aboriginal high school, Children of the Earth. For some students, this school had been a positive experience while for others it had been the opposite, suggesting that it serves as an important option for many Aboriginal students but not for all. One student, in speaking highly of his experience at Children of the Earth (COTE) said, "I really loved COTE. I loved the principal. I liked our English professor and our math teacher."

He completed his comments by noting that he preferred to feel comfortable and if he didn't, then he would drop out within three hours.

Generally speaking, it would be fair to say that dropping out of school was either not considered an option by the youth leaders, or, if they did, they came to realize the importance of completing their high school years. In some cases, they did drop out for a period of time, and in several cases, they moved from one school to another. It would be fair to say that for the most part it was family members and other significant persons in their lives who encouraged and supported them to achieve this educational goal. In some cases teachers and principals played an important sustaining role but the role of the family is clearly preeminent in these stories. It is also important to note that in several cases the youth leaders moved on into post secondary education to achieve professional goals. Again, much of the impetus for this came from within the individual who was also supported by family members and other significant persons. It is probably fair to say that the youth leaders' stories with respect to their schooling are clearly marked with persistence and resilience.

### *Community*

When asked about their notion of community the youth leaders' responses, for the most part, were quite similar. One indicated that community would mean "the people around you, my school community, just wherever I am involved I think that's my community." For another community means, "Helping each other. Looking out for each other. Being nice to one another. Finding people that you can respect and will respect you. To me that's what a community is. People who work together for the better of the community." In a similar vein another commented, "Community for me means more than just culture. It's more than just



people that live in a geographical area. It's kind of like a bond, like an understanding.”

Clearly, for many of the respondents the notion of community was about relationships among people, rather than any notion of a physical location. Further, the notion of belonging to multiple communities was apparent in their responses. For one or two respondents the notion of community was largely synonymous with their family. “Community is a group of people that maybe you are distantly related to.” This same youth leader, however, also acknowledged that she is a member of several communities, one being the Aboriginal community, while another was her school community. For those respondents who discussed the notion of “giving back to the community” their responses typically talked of helping others.

One of the interesting features of the youth leaders' life pathways that is germane to the community but also has implications for schools is that in every case the respondent had been involved in at least one extra-curricular activity after school hours. Some of these activities were linked to a school but in many cases they were activities offered by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. These activities ranged from sports, to cadets, through to singing, playing a musical instrument, acting, and dancing. The sense that one gets is that these activities played a significant role in helping to build confidence, to raise self-esteem, and to contribute to the skill development of these youth.

#### *Personal Strengths/Characteristics*

The youth leaders identified a wide range of personal strengths which included such characteristics as being hard-working, persistent and very motivated. In the words of one young woman, “Right now I am extremely motivated to keep up, you know, going to the gym, working out, eating healthier, and asking for help when I need it, and having a lot of strength in

being an Aboriginal cultural performer I do a lot of singing and dancing. That's one of my strengths. It helps me feel better about myself, give people an awareness and people really enjoy it." The role of culture has been a source of strength for several of the respondents. With respect to the efforts of her mother to instill pride and identity and awareness of her culture, one champion had this to say. "It has been very important because I wouldn't be who I am if I didn't have those growing up, like going to ceremonies and being around those things. It's given me a lot of self-confidence in myself. It allowed me to know my ability and true potential."

Many of the strengths listed by the youth leaders, however, could have been those recited by any successful young person. For example, one male champion indicated that his strength came from being an "outgoing person, not afraid to take on a challenge." Still another reported that he was very independent and always self-motivated, while another attributed her success to being hard-working.

When asked about role models the youth leaders identified a broad range of individuals whom they sought to emulate or who were a source of inspiration and encouragement. As one might expect, many of these role models were relatives, parents, older siblings and extended family members. Similarly, the goals identified by the respondents represented a range of aspirations. For many it was expressed as a desire to complete a particular academic program. "Get a diploma from university and keep an open mind." For another it was to go into medicine and still another hoped to join the R.C.M. P. Woven throughout the stories, however, was the desire to return something to their communities and to honour others such as their parents.

Research Assistants' Review of the Transcripts

As part of their role in the research the Ma Mawi research assistants were asked to review the transcripts to identify both positive and negative influences upon the youth leaders. For the most part, the factors identified by them serve as a summary of the comments expressed above. The research assistants noted that the respondents had at least one parent, role model, or significant other who had a positive influence on them throughout their lives. They noted that parents or guardians who provided support, adequate supervision, and an ear to listen to the struggles and worries the youth faced on a daily basis also had a positive influence on the Youth leaders' early years. These guardians also ensured regular school attendance which made an obvious contribution to the positive development of the champions. Dropping out was not considered an option for many of the youth. These significant individuals in their lives provided appropriate advice on how to deal with difficult situations when most needed and much needed encouragement.

Positive influences clearly include family members, ranging from parents and siblings through to extended family members. Included as well are spouses, boyfriends and girlfriends.

Positive aspects associated with the school system include some teachers who were encouraging, understanding and caring, who pushed them to achieve more. Another positive feature was identified as those classrooms where interaction occurred amongst all students which helped to deal with inter-racial issues. Some gym teachers and coaches who were encouraging regardless of skill level were also singled out for their positive impact. Further, the importance of a principal who took time out from a busy schedule to talk to students in need or who dealt fairly with issues were acknowledged for their positive role. Guidance counsellors also received recognition for taking time to sit and discuss future plans of students,

to help with path planning, to assist with goal setting, and who referred students to appropriate counselling when it was needed.

Extra-curricular activities were identified as a positive influence. The research assistants noted that at least one activity aside from school and daily routines had proven to help build confidence and higher self-esteem. These activities included cadets, sports teams, singing, playing musical instruments, acting, and dancing, to name just a few.

Role models also had an important and positive impact upon the youth leaders. These role models achieved goals and made the youth believe that they could accomplish things if they tried and didn't give up when things were difficult. The role models also gave them guidance and advice at crucial turning points when the youth considered making wrong decisions and choices. The significant others also provided support and encouragement which helped build confidence in the lives of the youth. Those identified as positive role models included, not surprisingly, parents, siblings, other family members, coaches, instructors, teachers, and, in one case, a famous individual.

Negative influences and issues faced by the youth leaders also were identified by the research assistants. It is important to note that many of the negative factors are school related. In several of the interviews youth leaders revealed that they had been on the receiving end of racist behaviour in schools, both private and public. The source of the racism was both other students and teachers. Related to this was teasing and name-calling behaviour as well as bullying. It was pointed out that much of the bullying and hurtful teasing took place in large schools which lacked supervision in the hallways. The issue of size surfaced as well in connection with student teacher ratios in the classrooms. Teachers in many classes were

unable to meet the needs of all students in large classes.

Apart from the school setting the Ma Mawi research assistants identified other challenges and issues faced by the respondents. These included fighting and physical violence under conditions where the young people have to solve the conflicts on their own. In these situations street rules apply and “no ratting” is the prevailing moral code. The issue of low self-esteem also surfaced as a challenge. This was related to a number of factors which included being teased about physical attributes such as being overweight, problems at home, and low grades. Death of loved ones also was an issue for some. The lack of trained or experienced support systems available to them to help through the grieving process was particularly mentioned. Family breakups and depression resulting from numerous causes also were singled out as issues which impacted negatively upon the youth champions.

### The Forum

The first task that was presented to the forum groups was to think about how to define a “champion.” The responses from these significant adults who accompanied the youth leaders had much in common with the responses originally provided by the respondents in their individual interviews. For one participant the notion of “champion” suggests empowerment, as well as a sense of identity, an understanding of the champion’s culture and their role within that culture. When asked to elaborate upon the meaning of identity the following response was offered. “I think people who know who their relatives are, people who know what their friends are, people who have strong sense . . . of whatever their cultures that they come from. The people who know about their pasts I think are better prepared for the future.” This person continued by adding that an empowered person is not “somebody who believes that there’s only

one way to do something, there's only one choice." Rather, it would be somebody who realizes that "there are a lot of choices and that you have the skill in order to make it work."

Youth leaders were also characterized by one participant as someone who "overcame certain obstacles or barriers and felt in themselves that they were successful and were happy that they knew that they have worked as hard as they could and got where they could by their own success." Still another spoke of an Aboriginal champion as "Probably someone that's really resilient" because they have to overcome societal stereotypes.

The themes that run through the forum data with respect to the notion of "champion" are similar to those expressed by the youth leaders themselves. For some, a champion is someone who has found something about which to be very passionate such as art, music, crafts, something that drives them. It includes finding something that you do for yourself, not for the rest of the world. For others it is someone who is true to themselves, somebody "who is doing what they want to do or is working toward that goal. And despite all obstacles and what not that there may be out there continues to believe in themselves and continues to find that inner strength to keep going and to reach their goals and their dreams." For another, an "Aboriginal youth champion is a young person who discovers what their strength or their gift is and then they're able to move on and then create a balance between their gift and their gift of being Aboriginal." In other words "if you can develop yourself in terms of your gift the gifts that you are born with and then discover your identity as an Aboriginal person and carry those two with you for the rest of your life with pride I really believe that's what an Aboriginal youth champion is."

Another participant had this to say, "I guess to be an Aboriginal youth champion they would have to be in tune with their culture and know where they came from and know where they're

going.” The notion of champion as it was described in the forum could be understood to be both a simple and a very complicated idea. It includes aspects of balance and self esteem. Small victories can make people champions as well as big things that are full of drive and passion. It appears, as well, that the notion of being an Aboriginal youth champion is very much bound up in an understanding of culture and roots.

On the one hand a champion is a role model and someone to be emulated by others, on the other hand there is a very strong theme that pervades the discussion of internal motivation, the commitment to pursuing something that you can be passionate about. Beyond that is the notion of doing something for others, helping others. Frequently, what was mentioned in the forum and in discussions with the research assistants, was the concept of “honouring” others such as family, through one’s actions. By implication, displaying the characteristics attributed to champions’ honours those others who constitute family and community.

It is important to note that in one of the forum groups the discomfort felt by some of the youth leaders as well as other forum participants with the notion of champion was very clearly expressed. The difficulty of reconciling the idea of being labelled a champion was at odds with the expectation of humility. For one participant the term champion has to encompass more of a community perspective and the role played by the community in the individual’s achievements. For others, the notion of champion had inherent within it a large responsibility. Still another noted that in Ojibway philosophy “one of the things we learned from our elders is each talent is a gift and each person has something, each person has to be recognized for their special gift.” He continued by noting that this doesn’t mean that one person means more than the next person. Instead, it means that people were made equal. He concluded by saying, “I think that’s where the

conflict is, not being comfortable with the label. You are taught to be humble a lot.”

It was during the forum, as well, that several of the research assistants, revealed that when asked to participate in the study as research assistants their first inclination was to refuse. They, too, were uncomfortable with the label of “champion” for the study’s subjects. However, this considerable reluctance was offset by their desire to participate in the research study which they believed to have merit. Further, the opportunity to develop their own skills was evident to them. For these reasons they agreed to participate as research assistants for the study. The admission of some of the research assistants concerning this reluctance to participate led to the revelation of some of the respondents themselves that they had also felt reluctant to participate but for reasons similar to those of the assistants agreed to be interviewed. It is also important to note that some of the young people originally identified as subjects for the study would not agree to participate. Clearly, their reasons still remain with them but it is possible that some, at least, had the same concerns about the notion of a champion as was expressed by those who did participate in the study.

The discussion around the notion of a champion in one group seemed to suggest that the word “leader” or phrase “role model” are more acceptable. This same group also deliberated at some length about the appropriateness of thinking of people as champions. It was suggested that more appropriately the research should try to come to a truer understanding of how everybody’s gifts are developed or enhanced so that in that sense “everybody is a champion.”

The concept of “success” in the forum groups was similar to that expressed by the youth leaders. One participant phrased it this way. “When I thought of champion, right away I thought of success. Success isn’t something that one person can define. It’s something that an individual



defines for themselves and I mean that ultimately success is happiness. If you're doing what you love to do and you're doing it to the best of your ability and you're working hard and you're determined and you have goals and dreams, I think that's success." It was put even more succinctly by another forum participant. "I think that success has a richer meaning for First Nations people and I think that success in the academic sense is usually every high mark, getting scholarships, completing a university degree and ending up with lots of money and lots of possessions . . . for a First Nations person success might mean being comfortable with yourself, it might mean being happy with your children. Success, I think, is just that it is up to the person to define what success means to them."

When asked to reflect upon their understanding of "community" the responses bore a striking similarity and were not dissimilar to what the youth leaders themselves had said. In the words of one respondent, "I think community has a lot to do with family. The Aboriginal community has a certain world view as compared to the rest of society and a lot of times I've found that Aboriginal world view conflicted with the mainstream of society, like the values, the norms are very different." This individual continued by saying, "I guess the bottom line of community is I identify strongly with the Aboriginal community because it's where I most feel at home and where I can really be myself. Whereas, when I go into mainstream communities, I have to behave in a certain way that's expected of me so I guess it's more I can be who I am and within my own community and I'll be accepted regardless and so basically that's what community means to me."

Another expressed it in terms of relationships and levels of comfort. "The first thing that comes to mind is home, a place of warmth, a place of encouragement, people you love, people

that surround you, guide you and help you. Community is where you feel you belong.” Still another respondent spoke of community in this way. “My definition and understanding of community is that there is no physical representation of the term community. It’s not defined by a jurisdiction. There’s no boundaries, it’s like an unspoken bond between all these people.”

As the discussion of the notion of community progressed it became clear that the definitional issue of community was confounded by the meanings attributed to the word by those who are not of the Aboriginal communities. In the larger society frequent use is made of the word community to refer to a geographical or location, or an arbitrary area such as a school catchment area or a community club area. In the words of one forum participant, “In effect, there’s a whole different set of relationships that may be much more significant in terms of young people and their growth and their development.” In other words, there’s confusion when people talk about community.

The third task the forum groups tackled was to discuss mediating factors which were either helpful or non-helpful in the development of Aboriginal champions. The schools were perceived to have both positive and negative features. For the most part the school system is viewed as not supportive of Aboriginal culture. In the words of one participant “I thought, I guess, the school system I grew up in here in Winnipeg was not supportive of Aboriginal culture. I wasn’t able to identify with the teachers or anything they taught me.” The general view of the groups was that the schools lack adequate support for the Aboriginal students, although it was recognized that some teachers are supportive. The view was also expressed that there is the need for more Aboriginal culture to be taught in the schools. The same notion of isolation, of the challenge of “being the only one” surfaced in these groups as well. It was noted that as the numbers of

Aboriginal students increased within a school so did the comfort level of the students. Other comments addressed themselves to the issue of the curriculum which rarely reflected the Aboriginal culture, and, as one participant noted, the references when made were frequently negative. "I don't think there is enough focus on the positive aspects of Aboriginal culture. April Raintree was a great book; it just wasn't very positive and it doesn't give the Aboriginal students confidence in themselves and in their abilities." Further, this participant continued by saying, "Nor does it give the non-Aboriginal community confidence in what Aboriginal people can do." One of the more senior participants in the forum made a very poignant and telling observation about his schooling experience. He began school in a small Metis community but upon moving to the city he went to an elementary school where there were no other Aboriginal children. One of the observations he remembers to this day, in addition to the culture shock he felt, was which kids were confident and positive about being in school. "It was the ones whose parents were involved in the school and my parents never set foot in the school." Although he lived right across the street from the school, his parents never went there and no one ever really knew them.

One forum participant had two suggestions to make with respect to the schools. He indicated that there were two important things that should have been taught in school when he was there which were not and he believes are still not. Native studies should be made compulsory for every student regardless of their background. Secondly, sexuality and sexual health should be taught. "I don't think that is something that is stressed enough at any time in any school." He argued that it is very important young people, ten, eleven and twelve, to know about these things. The forum participants identified community activities as an important aspect of the

development of the Aboriginal youth leaders. “Community groups are important in life. I can’t stress enough how important it is for children to be put in groups. It teaches respect, it teaches discipline, it teaches teamwork.” Another participant spoke at length about the role of sports and activities. “You gain a certain level of confidence from being involved with sports teams . . . It’s the whole teamwork and developing a skill. We all have our own gifts. They’re also skills that we can develop as individuals. When you are little, it’s because of the support of your families that enables you to develop skills. So again, your involvement in community groups stems from the kind of family you have, and their sort of values and what their priorities are.” The importance of the role played by the Aboriginal Youth Awards as something to strive for was stressed by another participant. Noting that the communities he grew up in did not have many leaders and so those young people and their achievements who were honoured at the ceremonies had a deep impact upon him. It is interesting to note that cadets played a significant role in the lives of several of the youth leaders. The participants, have distinguished between those community groups such as cadets, which included primarily non-Aboriginal members, and those which were Aboriginal activities. One participant who attended several different retreats and cultural gatherings while growing up realized that they were the highlight of that developmental stage. “I think that they’re really important. I think they have a positive impact about what I felt I was as an Aboriginal person.”

### Summary

This pilot project set out to explore the community pathways of young Aboriginal persons identified by a variety of community sources as “champions.” Framed another way, the study sought to discover what were the factors, both positive and negative which they experienced

along their life's pathway to this point in time. With only twelve subjects, the study is clearly very limited in both scope and the extent to which it can make any great claims or recommendations. Nonetheless, it represents a starting point for further investigations. Despite its limited nature, however, the study is important for several reasons. It is a first step toward understanding what factors contribute to, or work against, the positive development of young Aboriginal leaders and role models. Related to that is the step the study takes toward clarifying those factors which may be inherent within the Aboriginal experience and which, if any, are held in common with other teenagers and young adults, regardless of ethnicity. The study is also important because of the involvement of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre and its youth leaders as research assistants. Their participation in the study provided an important Aboriginal perspective and credibility to the work. It is highly unlikely that without their participation and the guidance provided by John Lussier, that the study could have been accomplished. For example, there is no doubt that many of the participants did so because of the study's association with Ma Mawi. The concern expressed by some of the youth leaders with respect to their original reluctance to participate in the study, supported by the comments of some of the forum participants regarding research about Aboriginal people and the issue of voice, reinforced the importance of the role played by the research assistants.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the research, however, lies in its focus upon the pathways of individual Aboriginal youth, their stories, and the meanings they attributed to the notions of "champion," "community," and "success." What did they perceive as barriers and supports which hindered and aided their journey? In other words, the strength of this exploratory research is derived from the fact that it focuses primarily upon the perspectives of youth rather

than the perspectives of the adults who surround them in family, school and community settings, perhaps a more common approach to understanding youth.

Despite the limitations of this pilot project it is possible to identify a number of themes which surfaced in the stories of the youth leaders and were reinforced by the forum data. One of the factors which appears evident is the apparent distinction which is made between the conventional societal notions of “community,” “family,” “champions,” and “success,” and the understandings attributed to these notions by the respondents and the forum participants. Of these four terms the two which may be the most problematic for the youth leaders are the latter two. While the concepts of community and family could be understood from the words of the study’s participants to be differently or more broadly defined than those of the larger society, the differences did not appear to be problematic. Quite the contrary, more broadly defined notions of community and family were portrayed as positive, supportive agencies in the lives of these young people.

The situation with respect to “champion” and “success,” however, came across differently. It was clearly expressed that the notion of champion conflicted with the value system of many of the participants in its lack of consistency with the value of “humility” inherent with their culture. It also has a competitive shade of meaning which is not consistent with the notion of honouring someone or perceiving them as a leader or role model, terms which much more appropriately express the value of humility, honouring one’s parents, and doing what one can to give back to one’s community and family. What this implies is that in the case of future research involving Aboriginal youth, the notions of leader and role model are the more appropriate terms to be used. The notion of success presents an interesting and somewhat problematic concept. In the larger

society success is a term frequently tied to the performance of children, youth, and adults. For children and youth it generally is understood to mean “doing well” in the various arenas of life, such as school, sports, and other community activities. “Doing well” typically means achieving academically or being named to a team or other group activity. For adults, it means getting an education and ultimately a job. Inherent within the notion of success is the issue of competition. “Doing well,” not always, but frequently, means doing “better” than someone else. It is clear from the words of several of the Aboriginal youth and forum participants that there is a distinction made between this societal notion of success and the Aboriginal values of building upon one’s gifts, honouring others, giving back to the community, and a balanced approach to life. It was also clear from the words of the participants that this distinction was well understood by them. In most cases the young people were working toward achieving traditional success within a framework that incorporated their Aboriginal values along with the larger societal views, at least with respect to the issue of education. What appears to be one of the important by-products of this blend of values, is that the youth in this study appeared to be very internally motivated. This does raise the question for educators of the extent to which the usual definitions of “success” expressed within classrooms, and decontextualized from Aboriginal values, are problematic for those Aboriginal students who are immersed in their traditional values outside of the classroom. Further, for many of these children, the motivators typically associated with classrooms may not always be the ones which are most appropriate for those whose values differ from those of the dominant culture.

Apart from the definitional issues which surfaced in the stories of the youth leaders there were clearly other themes which emerged were related to their Aboriginal background.

The most dominant theme to pervade all of the stories was the importance of family in the lives of the young people. Families were typically very broadly defined and, while not without their problems, were seen by all as supportive and the reason why they did much of what they did. No matter how long or short the interviews were the theme of family ran throughout them all. In many cases it was family, and most frequently, mothers, who were the motivating and driving force behind the young person, particularly with respect to staying in school and completing their education. In many cases, great value was placed upon getting an education. It was perceived as the road to follow. What needs to be juxtaposed against this factor, however, is the telling comment of one forum participant who spoke of the absence of his parents from his school life, even though they lived across the street from the school. Clearly, the role of the family in the lives of these young people, particularly with respect to the issue of education, has some major implications for the schools. It is well known by educators that there is a need for closer links between the school and the home than is often found. What the words of these young Aboriginal leaders suggest is that it is absolutely imperative that children's families be involved in their schooling. While this, in itself, is not different from what is understood to be the case with all children, it may be that, the manner in which this is accomplished requires a different approach.

The issue of racism was evident in many of the stories, most prominently in the recounting of their educational experiences. Further, this racism was not confined solely to their student peers. Teachers, as well, had subjected the youth to racism. It would appear, that unhappy school experiences greatly outnumbered positive ones. Not only was racism an issue, related to it was the challenge of being the only Aboriginal student in a class or even the school. This isolation



was the experience of several of the youth, particularly in rural areas.

It was also clear from the stories that the Aboriginal culture was an important aspect in the lives of most of the youth. Involvement in cultural activities and the strength that came from a greater understanding of their roots and traditional ways were evident. Many expressed the view that they wished that their education had included greater access to their culture and past. Those who did experience an educational setting which included a cultural focus valued it highly. They also appreciated when this cultural component was experienced by other students who were not Aboriginal.

There is one other interesting theme which emerges in the stories, that of the role played by extra-curricular activities delivered in the community. Every one of the twelve youth champions had been involved in their teen years in some extra-curricular activity, either in a group or on an individual basis. Prominent among these activities was cadets. Still others engaged in individual pursuits, particularly cultural ones such as dance or music. The importance of family and participation in extra-curricular activities were two themes common to all of the stories. These stories strongly suggest that “connection,” both to family and community groups are key factors in the development of Aboriginal youth leaders.

### **Recommendations**

One of the purposes for gathering these stories of Aboriginal youth champions was to begin the process of identifying what factors contributed to, or stood in the way of, the positive development of young Aboriginal role models and leaders with the expectation that this process could lead to a series of recommendations for community and school groups. While this is only a very preliminary study, limited in scope, with the stories no doubt incomplete with respect to

the holistic world view of Aboriginal people, these twelve stories represent a small beginning toward identifying what may contribute to the positive development of Aboriginal youth. The following recommendations for school and community groups are suggested by the stories of these Aboriginal youth. It is important to note that, for the most part these recommendations differ little from those already contained within other reports. It is important to restate, however, that these recommendations flow from the stories of the youth themselves, thereby serving to reinforce the words of others who have gone before them but also suggesting that there is still much to be done to support the positive development of more Aboriginal youth who are emerging as community leaders.

### School

#### **1. Strong working partnerships need to be developed between schools and the families of Aboriginal students.**

The importance of family and its place in lives of the students was firmly established in their stories. The notion of family needs to be broadly understood by educators who must work toward establishing partnerships and the development of trust between the schools and the Aboriginal families. The stories suggest that the role of mothers in the educational progress is significant and schools must work to involve them more closely in the process of their children's schooling.

The partnership with Aboriginal families, and by extrapolation, Aboriginal communities, should ensure their inclusion in all aspects of the school environment. One step toward developing this partnership is to develop a school climate which radiates respect for families and demonstrates a willingness to engage with the family and community in the development of a supportive school climate, a school climate which is a mutual learning situation for educators and

family/community members. The issue of trust is paramount in the development of a positive school climate.

**2. Aboriginal knowledge and culture need to be infused throughout the school curriculum from K-12.**

That the stories highlighted the importance of their culture for the Aboriginal youth leaders with respect to their own development was not unexpected. What was also important to these young people however, was having non-Aboriginal students also learn about their culture. Related to this point is that schools should not lose sight of what others, in fact, do learn about Aboriginal cultures, making every effort to focus upon positive contributions and knowledge. This has implications for the development of teaching materials for all grades. While there may be a general paucity of available teaching materials which address Aboriginal culture and the contributions of Aboriginals to the larger society, the scarcity is perhaps most acute at the level of senior years instruction, particularly in the areas of literature and social studies.

**3. A significantly greater presence of Aboriginal educators, teachers, principals, educational assistants, and other support staff is needed throughout the school system.**

The importance of role models was stressed throughout the stories of the Aboriginal youth. This, coupled with the stresses identified by the youth which came from frequently being the “only” one in educational and recreational contexts, highlights the need for a greater presence in the schools of Aboriginal adults. Further, this presence needs to be effected in all schools, not just those which have a high proportion of Aboriginal students where the need is perhaps more obvious.

**4. Teachers must be warm, but demanding, and aware of the differences between home and**

**school cultures which may exist for Aboriginal students.**

The stories frequently highlighted the importance in the lives of these youth of teachers who supported them, who obviously cared but who also had high expectations for them. Given the importance in the students' lives of their families and their culture, the need for teachers to be aware of cultural differences which may relate to notions of success, achievement and motivation and their relationship with Aboriginal values such as "honouring" and "sharing" are paramount. Schools need to work toward reducing cultural incongruence, between the school and home environments. Ideally, if teachers could be more involved in the community activities of their Aboriginal students, this could foster greater links between Aboriginal families, communities and the schools. It is important to note, that while some of the Aboriginal youth had welcomed the opportunity to attend an Aboriginal school such as Children of the Earth, others had preferred to attend other high schools.

**5. School climates must be positive and supportive of Aboriginal students.**

Many of the stories depicted incidents of racism and bullying. Further, some champions spoke of feeling isolated in their school as the result of being the only Aboriginal student or one of very few. Racism and bullying are frequently features of schools, which are "hidden." They occur in spaces and places, washrooms, hallways, and playgrounds where there may be no adults near enough to observe or hear. Many schools already have programs in place to address issues of bullying and racism through conflict resolution and multicultural education but more needs to be done. Isolation may also be difficult to detect but teachers, particularly, have the best opportunity of identifying a student who may be feeling alienated from the school and other students. Teachers can make a connection with such a student as well as facilitating a mentoring

relationship between a potentially isolated student and one or two other students.

Another way in which schools can provide a more supportive environment for the Aboriginal students is through the provision of adequate counselling, particularly grief counselling. The lives of some of the youth champions were marked by tragedy and loss and their needs for counselling were unaddressed.

**6. Schools need to work more closely with community groups which provide activities for young people as well as endeavouring to provide more activities themselves which engage Aboriginal young people.**

The lives of the Aboriginal youth champions were very diverse but one of the things they all had in common was their involvement in extra-curricular activities, both school and community based. The participation of these young Aboriginal leaders in these activities only serves to reinforce the importance of “connection” to peers and community groups. These activities provide another arena in which students can acquire new skills and demonstrate their own unique gifts. More opportunities are needed for Aboriginal youth to develop their talents and to interact with role models.

**7. Professional development workshops need to be made available to in-service teachers and other educators to enhance their understanding of Aboriginal culture and learning styles.**

This last recommendation constitutes one approach to addressing some of the recommendations outlined above.

Community Groups

**1. Both Aboriginal and other community groups need to expand their range of activities and programming in order to engage as many young people as possible in extra-curricular activities.**

The importance of extra-curricular activities has already been noted. Funding from appropriate

municipal, provincial, and other sources should be made available to community groups to enable this to happen. Greater cooperation between the schools and community groups with respect to the development of these programs and use of facilities should be encouraged.

Programs need to be accessible to children and youth, which means that children should not be precluded from participation due to the lack of financial resources or the ability to be able to get to and from an activity. Further, develop schools and community activities which build on the gifts and talents of the parents.

### Faculties of Education

The recommendations set out above flowed from the stories of the Aboriginal youth leaders. However, if the recommendations directed at the schools are to be addressed, then there is a role to be played by the Faculties of Education in addition to that of the schools and school divisions. For the most part, the following recommendations are not new, but they bear repeating. The rationales supporting these recommendations are largely self-evident and have already been mentioned earlier.

- 1. Pre-service teacher education programs must include preparation in Aboriginal culture and learning styles.**
- 2. Programs for school administrators should include preparation in Aboriginal culture and learning styles as well as in the understanding of how to create a positive school climate characterized by trust and effective relationships among home, school and community.**
- 3. Faculties of Education must increase the representation of Aboriginals within their faculty and student body.**
- 4. Faculties of Education must work with other educational stakeholders and Aboriginal groups to develop workshops and educational experiences for in-service teachers to achieve recommendations contained elsewhere in this document.**

**5. Faculties of Education should be encouraged through targeted funding to direct more research effort into understanding the issues surrounding all aspects of Aboriginal education. Further, where possible, these research projects should involve Aboriginal partners and include Aboriginal young people in the research process.**

In addition to a group of partners representing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups this project also involved five Aboriginal youth leaders as research assistants. Their participation in the project was crucial to its completion. They played a critical role in contacting the youth champions, conducting the interviews and assisting with the forum. There is no doubt that while the involvement of partners and the youth leaders in the project increased its administrative complexity, this was far outweighed by the insights and broader perspective that was achieved through the involvement of the other groups and young people.

## **Conclusion**

### A Cautionary Note

The recommendations set out in this document were derived either directly or through a process of extrapolation from the interview and forum data. It is interesting to note that many of the recommendations, particularly those related to the schools and educators, are consistent with those which appear elsewhere in research reports addressing the issue of Aboriginal education. One such report, *Sharing Our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling*, reports the findings from a study by David Bell which sought to identify factors associated with ten successful Aboriginal schools in Western and Northern Canada. The recommendations which resulted from Bell's study were directed at policy makers and schools and many of them parallel closely those which flow from this study of Aboriginal youth leaders. This is important to note because it provides some validation for the results of this project.

One of the interesting discussions which occurs in Bell's report, published more than a year after the data gathering phase of the *Community Pathways of Aboriginal Youth Leaders* project, focussed on the nature of success within the context of Aboriginal education and achievement. The complex nature of the word success was also recognized in Bell's report. As the author notes, the notion of Aboriginal achievement requires a broader perspective than "quantifiable knowledge, measurable skills and years of schooling." While not denying the importance of these factors in the process of preparing Aboriginal students to reap the economic rewards of participation in the Canadian economy, Bell and his colleagues noted that for Aboriginal students "their success also lies in more holistic ways of knowing and participating within a rich cultural context (p. 30)." In other words, success for these students is a complex construct and linked to the need to develop their gifts and talents as a participant in multiple worlds.

It was also interesting to note that extensive extra-curricular activities were characteristic of these highly effective schools in Bell's study. For example, Manitoba's own Chief Peguis School reported that not only does it support culture and heritage through special events throughout the year, it also reported a total of 45 extra-curricular committees within the school. Staff are expected to volunteer for these committees and activities (p.212).

Princess Alexandra Community School is more akin to the schools of Winnipeg. Located in the inner city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, "numerous extra-curricular activities are organized by community members and the staff throughout the year" (p.236).

The similarities between the findings of Bell's more comprehensive study and those of the exceedingly modest start made in this investigation of the pathways of young Aboriginal leaders and role models are interesting. Some of this may be due to the approach taken by both studies,



that is, they both began with a question which sought to determine “what is working,” one with respect to schools, the other with respect to individual young people. On the surface it can be argued that these similarities provide some confirmation of the results of this study; that this study, as far as it goes, has made a contribution to the understanding of the development of Aboriginal youth leaders. However, it is clear that considerably more research into the topic of the development of Aboriginal youth as role models and leaders and their relationship to family, community and school, needs to be undertaken. It is also clear, however, that the process engaged in by this study highlights some difficulties that need to be addressed in future work. At the outset, those initiating the study recognized that qualitative research is both interpretative and contextual and therefore, has inherent within it the need to account for this at all phases of the research. Differences in world view, for example, can result in differences in understanding of terminology and ways of learning, and ultimately, in the analysis of the data. In recognition of this, the study included five Aboriginal youth leaders as research assistants who participated in the development of the questionnaire, the forum questions, the data collection phase, and review of the interviews. Their help was invaluable and there is no doubt that the research could not have been completed without their assistance. However, it is the view of those closely associated with the study that research which investigates the Aboriginal experience must go even further than that undertaken by this study, and include even greater involvement, particularly in the analysis phase, of the Aboriginal perspective. Toward that end, the study has another recommendation which builds on an earlier one related to the role of Faculties of Education. In order to bring more Aboriginal understanding and voice to the research experience it is recommended that there be **more involvement of Aboriginal youth, elders and**

**community leaders in the various stages of research studies engaged in understanding the Aboriginal experience.** Further, it is recommended that **analysis of these studies be undertaken within the context of Aboriginal history, experience and world view.** Fulfilment of these recommendations would also have the effect of building greater research capacity within the Aboriginal communities with respect to investigating their own questions. It would also contribute to broadening the understanding of non-Aboriginal researchers with respect to understanding alternative world views.

#### Further Research

It was noted above that the data from this study were confirmed in many ways by the work of Bell and his colleagues and this sets the stage for further research. One thing which needs to be done now is to begin to place the data from this study within the context of other literature in order to begin to understand the extent to which the stories of these Aboriginal youth reflect the unique nature of their Aboriginal experience or to what extent their experiences are representative of young people regardless of race or ethnicity.

This was a pilot study which focussed on the insights of individual youth leaders into their own experience. One next step in the research process could be to move this work from an understanding of individuals and their development to greater insights into the collective understanding of the Aboriginal youth with respect to their developmental experiences, particularly with schools and the community. Extrapolating from this need for understanding of the collective experience is the need for research which investigates the broader systemic issues and the need for change at the school and larger societal level.

The bottom line is that there is still much to be learned about the family, community and

educational pathways which contribute to the development of Aboriginal youth leaders and role models.

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## Appendix A

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### COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHAMPIONS

#### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- A.** Orientation to study and completion of informed consent form.
- B.** We would like to begin this interview by asking you to share your life story. There is no pre-determined format, however you may find it helpful to think of dividing your life in terms of early years, middle years and later years. You are free to share and provide as much detail as you want. We are particularly interested in hearing from you what events, experiences, people or factors in your life story contributed to the success you have achieved and what has led to your being recognized for your achievements by your Community. We may ask for more detail where necessary and you are free to further elaborate if you feel comfortable or able to do so.

Are you agreeing to participate in this taped interview?

---Yes

---No

Thank you.

- C.** Before you begin to share your life story, we would like to know what is your understanding/interpretation of the word **Champion**? What does it mean to you?

Do you consider yourself a Champion?

If so, how long have you considered yourself to be a Champion?

Were there any turning points in your life when you started to see yourself as a Champion?

- D.** What does **success** mean to you? Are there specific areas that you feel demonstrate this the most? (E.g. Personal achievements, Sports, Academic, etc).

## COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHAMPIONS

### POSSIBLE PROBE QUESTIONS FOR LIFE STORY INTERVIEWS

#### 1.0 FAMILY

If/when Family is mentioned, probe for further detail:

You mentioned family . . .

- 1.1. What does family mean to you? Who do you include as part of your understanding of family? Describe whom you consider to be part of family (immediate, extended, other)?
- 1.2. How exactly has your family helped (not helped) you on your journey to success as a whole? Are there any particular individual family members to note? Why?
- 1.3. Can you describe any family factors (values, characteristics, circumstances, experiences, events, etc.) that were important contributors?

#### 2.0 COMMUNITY

You mentioned community...

What does community mean to you?

- 2.1. What community factors, experiences, events or characteristics can you identify that were helpful? Not helpful?
- 2.2. You have been 'recognized' by your community? What does this mean to you? How have you been in relationship with community?

If mentioned,

- 2.3. What does the concept of 'giving back to your community' mean to you?

#### 3.0 INSTITUTIONS

## Appendix A

### COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHAMPIONS

If institutions or resources are mentioned, check which kind(s) and probe further:

#### 3.1. Checklist:

- ✓ Schools (educational systems)
- ✓ Aboriginal Community agencies, e.g., Ma Mawi, etc.
- ✓ Non-aboriginal organizations
- ✓ Recreational resources or community centres
- ✓ Religious/spiritual resources
- ✓ Government (CFS, Welfare, etc.)
- ✓ Self help (circle of friends, etc.)

#### 3.2. What was helpful? Not helpful? Why?

\* For education: If they completed high school, what specifically helped to ensure their success? If they did not complete high school, why not? Identify any relationships (role models?), barriers, challenges, hardships?

### 4.0 PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS/CHARACTERISTICS

4.1. What personal strengths do you feel you possess that helped make a difference in your life?

4.2. Where do you draw your strength from?

4.3. What has been the hardest thing you have had to do? To face?

4.4. Can you identify any significant turning points? Crises? Or personal decisions that have played a part in determining your success?

4.5. Has there been a significant role model in your life? Please expand on this relationship.

4.6. What is one thing that you feel is your most important contribution to your Community?

Probe for *4 aspects of self* only when mentioned:

## **Appendix A**

### **COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHAMPIONS**

#### **5.0 SOCIAL/RECREATIONAL**

- 5.1. Were sports or athletics important in your development as a Champion?
- 5.2. Did your peers influence you?

#### **6.0 EMOTIONAL/INTELLECTUAL**

- 6.1. Any academic strengths a factor?
- 6.2. Any life long interests or pursuits?

#### **7.0 SPIRITUAL/RELIGIOUS**

- 7.1. If beliefs are mentioned, probe to identify which ones?
- 7.2. If values are mentioned, probe to identify which ones they have lived by?
- 7.3. If traditions are mentioned, probe to identify which ones?
- 7.4. If ceremonies or practices are mentioned, probe to identify which ones?

#### **8.0 POLITICAL**

- 8.1. Any influence from political groups or individuals identified?

If person self identifies, note which grouping:

- ✓ Metis
- ✓ Inuit
- ✓ First Nations – treaty
- ✓ Non-status

#### **9.0 SOME CONCLUDING QUESTIONS**

## Appendix A

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### COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHAMPIONS

- 9.1. Do you normally set goals and plans for yourself? Since when?
- 9.2. How have these been realized? Not realized?
- 9.3. Have you made any commitments / set any future goals for yourself that you have yet to reach?
- 9.4. Based on your successful pathway and experiences as a young Aboriginal person what advice would give to adults who have a role and responsibility to play in helping to shape future programs and services to promote successful pathways and develop future Champions in the Aboriginal Community or in general?
  - Role of Educators (courses, curricula, working philosophy, attitudes/culture, funding and intellectual supports)?
  - Role of Family and Community supports/agencies?
  - Government and policy makers?
- 9.5. Any final comments that you wish to make or anything that you would like to add to what you have shared before we end this interview?



**Appendix B**  
COMMUNITY PATHWAYS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHAMPIONS

**Focus Group Forum Discussion Questions**  
**August 27, 2003**

1. When you are thinking about Aboriginal youth champions how would you describe or define what it means to be a champion?
2. When you think about the community pathways of Aboriginal youth champions how would you describe or define what “community” means?
3. The project has begun to identify a number of personal characteristics and community mediating factors which appear to be related to the pathways of Aboriginal Youth Champions. From your perspective as a significant person and community member involved in the development of a youth champion, how helpful or not helpful do you think each of these factors is generally, in the development of youth champions.
  1. Personal Strengths
  2. Convictions
  3. Defined Interests
  4. Relationships
  5. School
  6. Family
  7. Community Resources
  8. Community Groups
  9. Significant person
  10. Other