



SACRED PERSPECTIVES

2024

ELDER & YOUTH GATHERING



DIRECTOR OF NATION BUILDING

SHARLA GREENLAND

The Sacred Perspectives gathering was the first event planned under my new role as the Director of Nation Building and Self-Determination. The intention of this gathering and this role is to create a collective vision, foster unity, enhance knowledge sharing along with the reclamation of Gwich'in values. Nation building involves using Gwich'in knowledge and values to solve problems and make decisions in a way that makes sense for us. The reclamation of our values and practices is integral to the strength and future governance of our Nation. The direction of work for this new position will be engaging with our communities to make space and opportunities to design and develop governance systems that allow us to take control of our futures in a way that feels right.

Our stories hold power and have the potential to strengthen our approach to Nation building. Having our Elders and Youth together created space for revival, imagination and creativity that can be used to further shape the way we govern ourselves and communities. Stories have the power to connect us, empower us and help us understand where we come from and where we are going. They shape how we think, feel and act as individuals. The Sacred Perspectives gathering will be one of many ways we will work with communities to ensure we are building systems that are grounded in our ways of knowing. Reflecting on the gathering I am most happy about the relationships and connections we have been able to establish. This is about reclaiming past practices and also envisioning a future that prepares us for success.



SACRED PERSPECTIVES GATHERING



Elders, knowledge holders and Youth participated in the Sacred Perspectives Gathering at Ingamo Hall in Inuvik on April 24th & 25th, 2024. Participants were identified and invited for the work and contributions they have made in their communities. There was a public submission of interest which identified key individuals. Discussions focused on remembering and reclaiming Gwich'in values focusing on how they can be incorporated in our day-to-day lives through the work we do at home and in our communities. The goal was to provide an opportunity for Elders, knowledge keepers and Youth to come together to share ideas, stories and experiences relating to Nation building and self-determination.





The day prior to discussions, participants gathered at the Nihtat Cultural room to enjoy dinner and take part in a sharing circle. Creating space for relationship building, introductions and open discussion on what the two-day sessions would entail was key to starting off the gathering.

Winston McLean with Iron Wolf Consulting and John Lagimodiere with Aboriginal Consulting Services were invited to deliver a workshop on the history of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada. They focused on unpacking colonial strategies which collectively damaged and changed Indigenous families, communities and governance structures. Part of this experience included a treaty exercise which allowed participants to experience the realities of negotiations and implementing treaty agreements.

Elders and Youth were broken into groups with time to plan, reflect and action a treaty agreement. The goal was to create space to consider the “spirit and intent” of treaties. Discussion focused on the realities of the past and the oppressive policies that continue to impact us today.





GWICH'IN HISTORY, VALUES & WAYS OF KNOWING

The next day focused on Gwich'in history, values and ways of knowing. Recognizing that the Gwich'in not only survived but have continued to demonstrate intergenerational strength by relying on our principles and protocols of the past. Stories were shared that solidify how values were practiced in decision making and relationships with others.

Participants were broken into seven groups representing the seven Gwich'in values. Each group had language keepers, Elders and Youth. Breakout groups shared stories, ideas and experiences of how Gwich'in values can be practiced through caring for ourselves, our families and our communities.

In order to have a healthy Nation we must have healthy people. We know that today's survival requires us to reclaim language and culture while also ensuring equity, justice, environmental change and a healthy economy for our people.



GWICH'IN VALUES

Below are stories shared that demonstrate how Gwich'in values are used when governing ourselves, families and communities. These stories were shared by individuals and also through a speaker for group discussions.

INDIVIDUAL & FAMILY

"Being a warrior is actually taking care of yourself, kind of like how you think of being a warrior against violence and moving toward healing and safety. It's also about spending time evaluating ourselves on how we can be better. The discourse on Indigenous people's rights is important in the colonial concept of government, but for governing ourselves it's our responsibility as individuals to look after our health and wellbeing. We know we want changes but change starts with ourselves. We can't put everything on our leaders, we need to have agency over our lives so we can be role models".

Peter Greenland, Nihtat, Group Spokesperson



"The government gave us income support so we don't have to work for our food. Nobody wants to make a good living. They don't work for themselves. Long ago we did everything on the land so we could live. It was a good way, our Elders taught us that. With the government giving income support people are getting lazy. Somehow, we need to get back to those teachings of the Land and living on the Land, surviving on the Land and making a life from the Land".

John Norbert, Gwichya

GWICH'IN VALUES

COMMUNITY

"Being out on the Land is a good place to start to heal, it gives you peace and serenity so you can look within yourself. We know that trauma changes the chemistry of our brains and how we respond to situations. It takes a lot of effort to be introspective and reflect on your own behaviors and patterns in an effort to make change. You have to build a relationship with yourself, you have to love yourself and let go of the negativity. This is part of it, having these opportunities to be part of the community, to talk amongst the Elders and Youth and find a path that works. We all take different steps to heal and there is not one right way".

Marlisa Brown, Nihtat, Group Spokesperson

"When you're feeling angry the land offers peace, when you don't feel like yourself, go to the land to reconnect. That's where our people come from, that's where you come from. We all come from the Land".

Mary Effie Snowshoe, Tetlit, Group Spokesperson

"It's important that our children know where they come from, they need to know who their grandparents are, their uncles. They need to know their connections; it makes us stronger when we are connected. This starts by us telling our stories, the stories of our life and how we are related".

Agnes Mitchell, Gwichya



GWICH'IN VALUES

GOVERNANCE

"How did we govern ourselves before the treaties. I can only imagine but today when I reflect, I know I have a responsibility to practice these values and show the same respect to our leaders that we expect them to show us".

Jolene McDonald, Tetlit

"Long ago people lived together in the North. We were all one group of peoples. Here in the Delta, we lived about 10 miles apart. We never thought anything is wrong, we were all best friends, family and we worked together. It was great. We shared our rats, land was plentiful. There was no government to interfere with our relationships. We need to get back to these relationships".

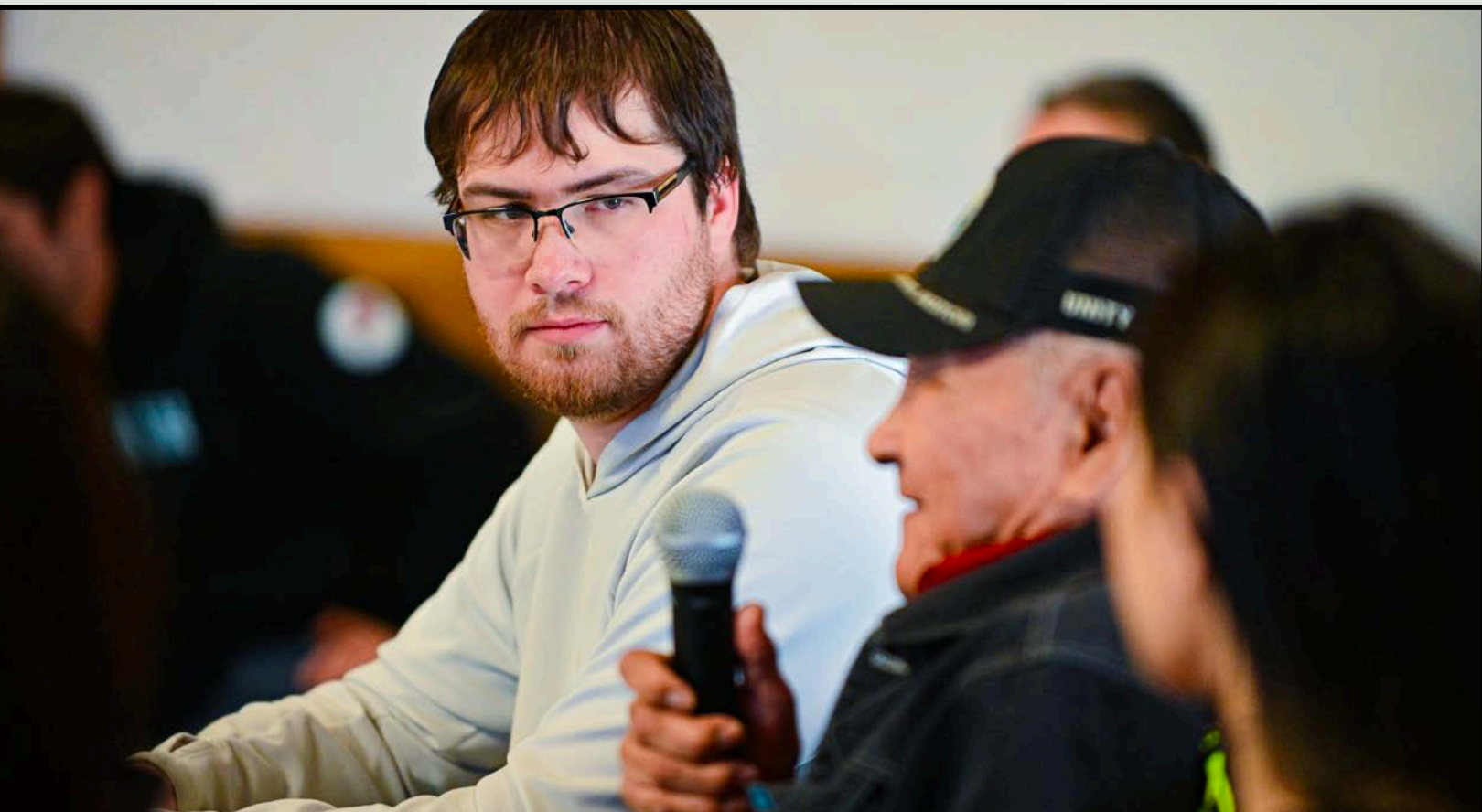
John Norbert, Gwichya



"We want to know what our traditional Gwich'in governance structures were like so we can see what resonates and makes sense for today. We know things have changed but if our values are at the core of what we are doing it will strengthen our leadership".

Jessie Pascal, Ehdiitat, Group Spokesperson

GWICH'IN VALUES



"I want to tell you a story about my brother Julius and how the Elders would deal with a troubled person long ago. My brother was a troubled man. I liked him, he was always kind to me. My parents had a hard time with him because he wasn't listening to them. Hyacinthe Andre was the headman at that time and Liza was his wife. They told my parents that they will start working with him to change him around. They met with 5 or 6 Elders and he started to live with them.

He stayed with these Elders for about two years. He stayed out in the bush. He turned out to be the best hunter, best trapper and best everything. That's how they worked with people in the old days, the Elders did that and they helped each other. He was close with those Elders. He was the best moose hunter too. One year he killed 22 moose".

John Norbert, Gwichya

Throughout the two days, stories and ideas were shared supporting the interconnectedness of Gwich'in values. Stories of respect were told that shared teachings of caring and sharing. All discussions made space for laughter which brought hope and lightness to the group. Making time and space to visit with Elders was clearly communicated and expressed as a way to learn, pass on teachings and heal. Taking time to get to know the Land was also an important theme.

This was an opportunity to learn individual and family histories, continue building a relationship with the Land and imagine future activities. Breakout sessions explored how traditional teachings have a place in decision making and the need to discuss how to apply Gwich'in values in day-to-day practices.

We know that our Gwich'in values should structure the processes and protocols we use as a Nation. This allows for our policies, programs and informed decisions to be guided, developed and made using Gwich'in values.

GWICH'IN VALUES

YIINJINIHLĚTR'ICHIL'EH (Respect)

CHIGWIJU'EE TR'IGWINDAII (Honesty)

NAKHWIGWANDAK (Our Stories)

YIINJITR'ICHIL'EH (Honour)

TR'EEDLAA (Laughter)

ZHUH GHAT T'IGWIDICH'UU (Kindness)

NIHK'ATR'INAATII (Sharing & Caring)

The next section includes stories that were shared by individuals and through group discussions. These demonstrate intergenerational strength, past reflections and innovative ideas.



GWICH'IN VALUES

"The concept of respect goes both ways. We all need respect, but we also have to respect our leadership. Yesterday during our sharing circle an Elder spoke about the respect that we had for a past chief and the support and love that surrounded him. This is something that is lacking today in the Gwich'in Nation and it makes it hard for leaders to lead in a good way and it takes a toll on them. I often reflect on my dad and how he was the chief for much of my childhood and back then people would call him even before they called the police. He was called on to assist with tragedies and he was called on to celebrate good things too. He was there and he was called on because he was respected. People respected him until they didn't. He didn't finish his last term because of conflict, so when I think about these values, I also think about how they have to come from us too and how we need to carry ourselves and support those that are leading us".

Jolene McDonald, Tetlit

"Always respect leadership even if you don't agree with what is happening"

"Those that are disrespectful are full of hurt, they need to heal"

"Always greet your Elders in your language, never refuse a cup of tea or plate of food"

YIINJINIHŁETR'ICHIL'EH

"It's important to respect what other people have to say you're not always going to agree with everybody you don't have to agree with everything that leadership does but it's important to show them the respect that is well deserved".

Jessie Pascal, Ehditit, Group Spokesperson

YIINJINIHŁETR'ICHIL'EH

"Elders feel energy, especially bad energy, listen to our Elders. They have a lot to teach us. Being aware of your energy is a powerful skill and respectful of those around you"

"Respect everything, people, the Land, air, water. We take things for granted without one we would not survive"

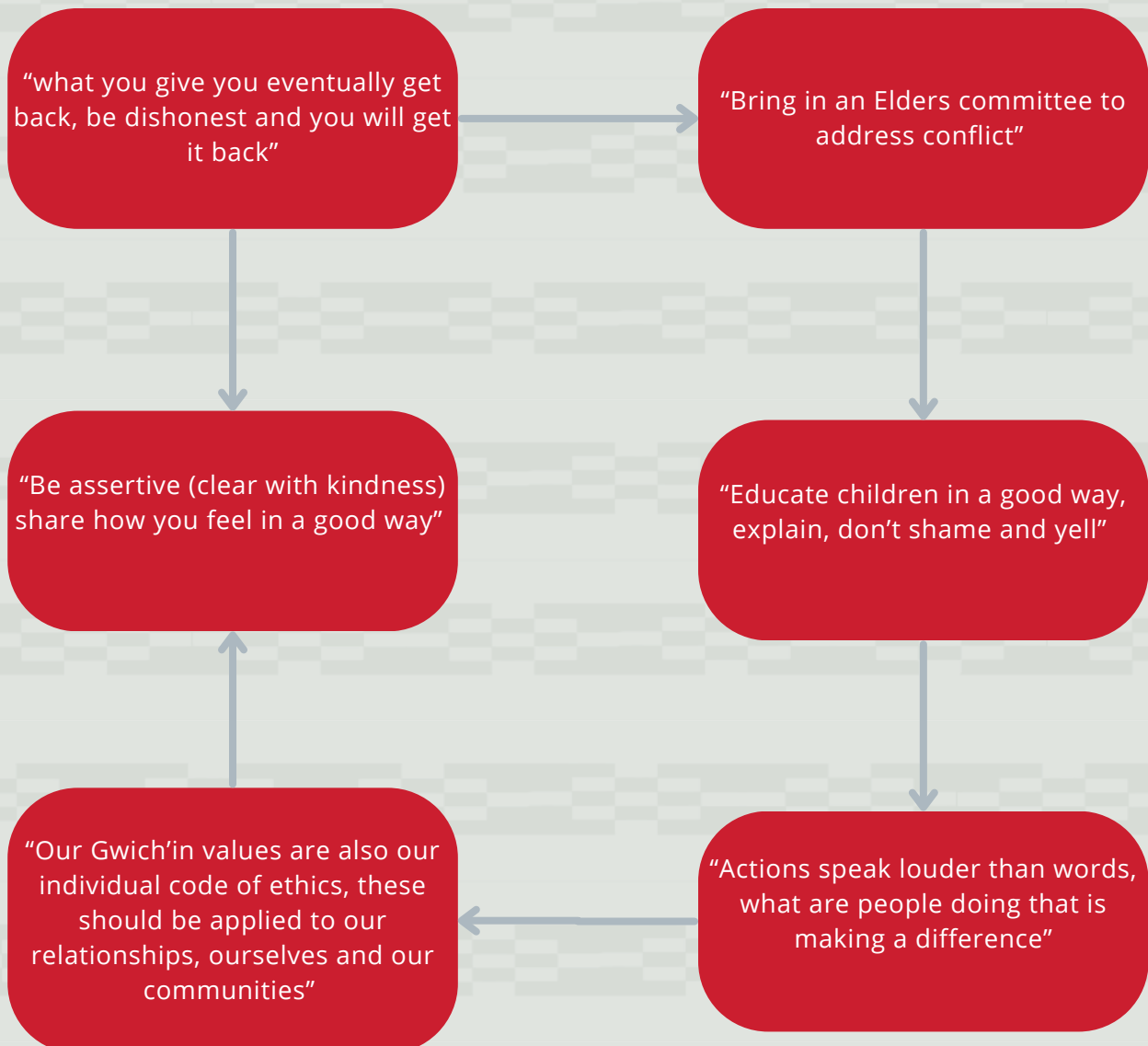
"Respect what the land has to offer. When you are feeling angry, the land can offer calmness and connect us to our ancestral ways"

GWICH'IN VALUES

CHIGWIJU'EE TR'IGWINDAI

"We are taught through our actions which usually included having a cup of tea and a visit. It wasn't about shame; it was an experience. You made a mistake, we talked about it and figured out how we could correct this mistake. It's about doing things the honest way and having a learning process that was respectful and dignified".

Esther Dobbs, Tetlit



GWICH'IN VALUES

NAKHWIGWANDAK

"You see how small I am I still had a dog team, 6 or 7 dogs, it was nothing, I enjoyed working with my parents. My Dad was a good teacher, he was an orphan. He had a hard time learning but he looked after himself and learned and was able to pass things down to me. He didn't want me to go to school he taught me how to do land skills. I could do everything, fish, trap, set net, search for wood, how to survive.

I survived on a big storm on a Mountain. I was 18 years old when I got lost in the storm through the mountains. I'm just going to tell you the story. The month of February it was very cold and short days. My Dad taught me everything on how to survive in a storm. I couldn't see anything; dogs couldn't see anything. I was able to build a teepee for myself in the mountains and in the snow. All I could hear is wind and I know there are lots of wolves around. I survived and made it home and my dad was so proud of me".

Mary Effie Snowshoe, Tetlit



"It used to be survival on the land and today it's like survival of our culture and our language"

Jolene McDonald Tetlit, Group Spokesperson

NAKHWIGWANDAK

"We talked about survival in the past and we know that it's a new world we live in with different conflicts and struggles. We need to make sure we balance our common interests as a people but also prepare ourselves to live in a world as active participants. These Gwich'in values are great to think about but we need to focus on the practical ways we can build them into our everyday thoughts. We have to live and breathe these values".

Velma Illasiak, Ehdiitat, Group Spokesperson

"Everything has spirit, everything has a meaning and medicine attached to it. Even when we think of our organizations like the GTC it has spirit and we have to treat it with intentions and with kindness. If we do our work with good intentions and kindness, we create good medicine. The GTC is therefore powerful medicine and so it is more important to make sure we are revitalizing and reclaiming our values because we have the power to make good change when we work in good ways".

Peter Greenland, Nihtat, Group Spokesperson

"Knowing your own story is important, it's a way to keep those stories of those that came before you alive. We are here because of them"

"Tell the stories of how we respect animals, how we handle and prepare our food. This is about giving back and reciprocity"

"We need to tell our survival stories out on the land and show how it relates to the survival stories of today"

"Share stories and show how our values align with them – Our experiences matter"

"Part of building strong relationships is listening to people's stories"

"We need to tell stories of what it means to be a good Elder"

GWICH'IN VALUES

YIINJITR'ICHIL'EH

"Chief Julius went hunting on the Yukon side after the signing of Treaty 11 and was told by some Yukon officials that he could no longer hunt on that side because of Treaty 11 and I guess from different stories it sounds like he was a loud man that spoke with dignity and direction and replied "you're not going to tell us where we can and can't hunt" he scared those Yukon officials because they let him keep hunting. Afterwards he invited them to eat with him. He wasn't mean, he spoke with authority and did not let others dictate their lives".

Peter Greenland, Nihtat, Group Spokesperson

"I got a lot of my teachings from my Grandma Rosie but she has passed on for more than 10 years now. It is my responsibility to make sure I get the teachings that I need so I have adopted Elders like Richard Ross and Harry Carmichael. They have provided me teachings especially around harvesting and shooting caribou. My Dad is teaching me about the water and how to always watch it for change. I am trying to take all of these teachings and apply it to my lifestyle".

Jessie Pascal, Ehdiiat

YIINJITR'ICHIL'EH

"We need to hear our stories about how Gwich'in demonstrate being honourable"

"Our leaders need support they are in scary times, drugs, government corruption, climate change and things are happening fast. We can't tear them down we have to build them up. We are stronger together"

"Our families are sacred. Let's remember the roles that we took pride in. Let's recognize our unique contributions as family, our kinship systems and our connection to different places"

"Our relationship to food has changed, we use to work hard for our food. The honor of that was demonstrated through giving and sharing and also using everything available"

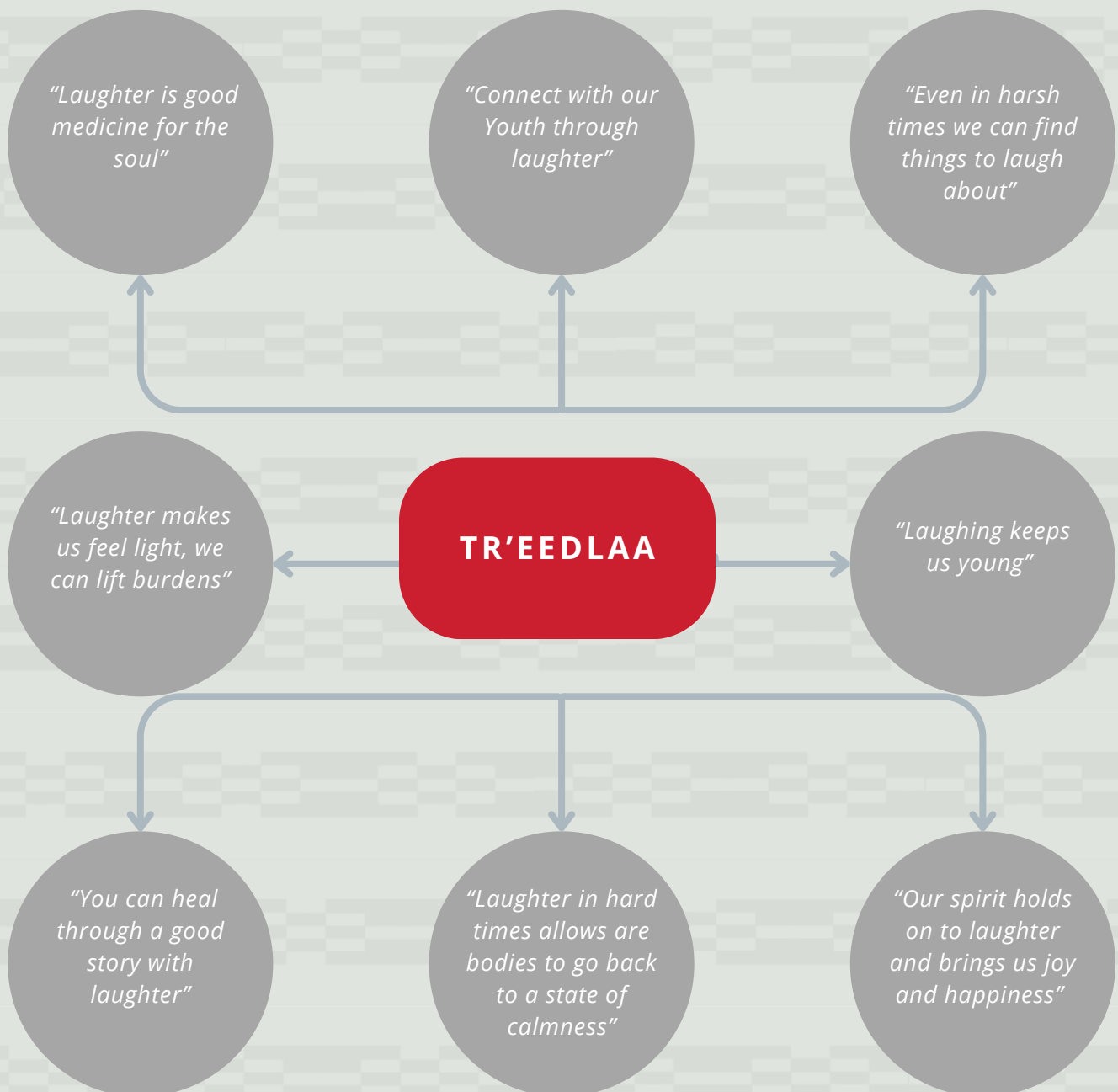
"When hunters return with meat, Elders and widows need to get meat and we should be having a community celebration with feast"

GWICH'IN VALUES

TR'EEDLAA

"We weave laughter through everything we do. We shared the story yesterday about using laughter with situation of grief. When we laugh it lightens the weight we hold, we also know that Elders coming together to support has a big difference in those day-to-day hardships. Laughter also helps us grow as individuals and connect in ways we might not have".

Velma Illasiak, Ehdiitat, Group Spokesperson



GWICH'IN VALUES

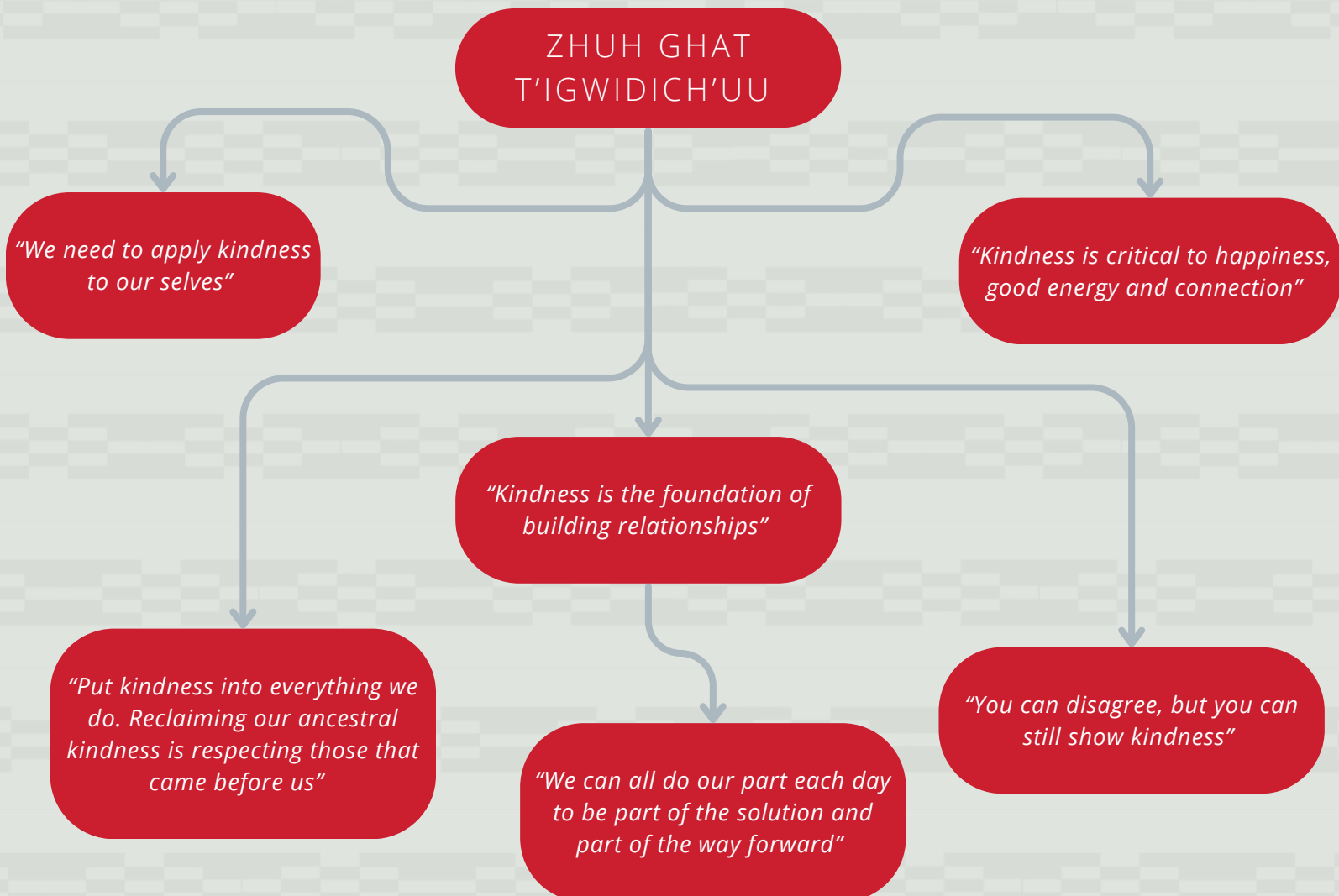
ZHUH GHAT T'IGWIDICH'UU

"Using our voices with kindness is powerful. People think that not speaking up is keeping the peace" but that is not the case. We hold on to those feelings and it creates resentment and it comes out in other ways that are not healthy. We need to use our voices and speak with good intention".

Peter Greenland, Nihtat, Group Spokesperson

"We need to praise our young people for the good work they are doing, the more we praise them the more the seed is planted and the growth continue. We want healthy communities and that requires healing and caring for our young people".

Velma Illasiak, Ehdiiat, Group Spokesperson



GWICH'IN VALUES

NIHK'ATR'INAATII

"I am an active harvester; I fish and I share what I catch. I watched. I watched my grandmothers' close friends Rennie Stewart and Irene Alexie always share with my Grandma Rosie. This is how I was taught and I have an obligation to do the same and it feels like the right thing to do".

Jessie Pascal, Ehdiitat



NIHK'ATR'INAATII



"Survival required us to share what we had and care for our relatives"



"When we share with others, they feel connected to you. We need connection to survive. Our way of life required us to always share what we had. We cannot survive alone. We always know that it comes back to us in some form"



"When people have addiction we care, we let them know we are here. We don't tell them what to do. Just be good to them"



"We had to share and care for the Land too. When we needed something that is where we got it from. There were times we left food for animals because we knew it was a hard time"



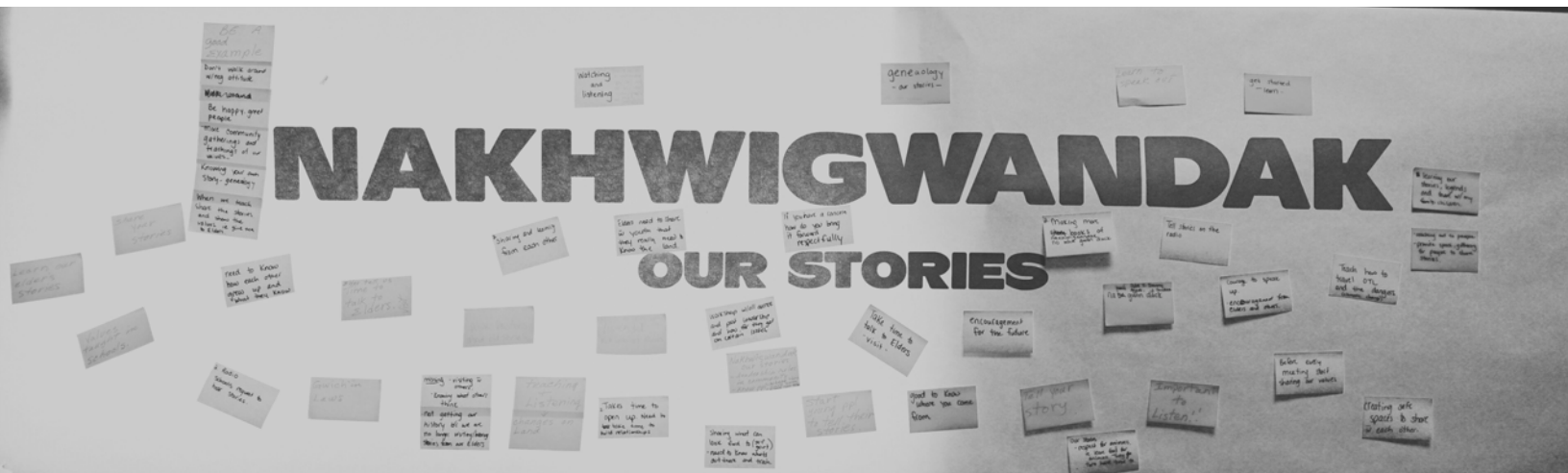
"Sometimes caring is just listening, you don't have to say or do anything. Just actively listen and hear people"

SACRED PERSPECTIVES MOVING FORWARD



The Sacred Perspectives Gathering provided an opportunity for Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Youth to start the first of many discussions. The stories shared over the two-day gathering solidify this direction, our values are integral to the strength and future governance of our Nation.

An evaluation was sent out to gather feedback. Participants shared that the gathering was a positive, proactive and empowering approach. Youth are the future and Elders carry our knowledge, bringing them together ensures a unique, engaging, values-based approach.





“All of us Elders here today, we learned from an Elder. That’s our way and that’s what we do. We need to make more time to sit and visit with Elders”.

Mary Effie Snowshoe, Tetlit, Group Spokesperson



SACRED PERSPECTIVES MOVING FORWARD

ZHUH GHAT 'IGWIDICH'UU

KINDNESS

There is a need and desire to continue these discussions. A common understanding of how Gwich'in values can enhance our systems is vital for success. Our intent is to create tools, resources and mechanisms to support our processes and protocols with the aim of enhancing our relationships and communication process. Drawing on our Gwich'in values also creates space for our distinct identities to be recognized within larger national and international frameworks.

The Sacred Perspectives initiative will improve our relationships, define roles, strengthen Gwich'in practices while recognising the work and accomplishments of our knowledge holders and Elders.

Ashley Ens has joined our Nation Building team to support this work. Ashley is Nihtat Gwich'in born and raised in Inuvik NT. She currently resides in Lethbridge, Alberta with her family (Hannah, Zakery, Rosie & JR) and is completing her PhD studies at the University of Alberta. Her background includes 15 years of public service experience which ranges from program development, evaluation, community engagement, employee training and course development. She is a sessional instructor at the University of Lethbridge, teaching Indigenous Governance and is passionate about expanding her work in community driven research practices.



SACRED PERSPECTIVES MOVING FORWARD

Next steps include travelling to communities in late June 2024 to hold community information sessions, follow up presentations and interviews with interested participants. The integration, support and collaboration of this initiative is essential to the success of building a strong foundation.

We are in the planning stage of our first annual canoe trip in August. Gwich'in lifestyle is closely connected to the river and this opportunity will bring Elders and knowledge holders together to reconnect, transfer knowledge, enhance skills, share stories and wise practices. Our land-based practices are critical to our Gwich'in identity. This opportunity provides space to tell our stories of Gwich'in political and cultural existence.

Our longer-term goals include creating a Youth council and Elders councils that is community driven, designed and developed. These councils will work together wisely by advising and supporting GTC initiatives. The councils will work collaboratively with Gwich'in Tribal Council departments and organizations.

The Sacred Perspectives gathering would not have been possible without the commitment and work of the Gwich'in Tribal Council team. We would also like to acknowledge and express gratitude to the participants, for their commitment and willingness to share stories, experiences and ideas - Hai'!

