

**They Stole my Thunder—Warriors Who Were Behind the Walls: Experiential
Storytelling with Criminalized Indian Women**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Community and Epidemiology
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

by
Sharon Leslie Acoose
Kiishiibii-biizuu Kinew Ikwe
“Circling Eagle Woman”

Permission to Use

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professors who supervised my thesis work, or in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any materials in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or make other use of material in this thesis in whole or in part should be addressed to:

Head of Community Health & Epidemiology

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N-5E5

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the meaning of reintegration as understood through the lives of four criminalized Indian women, myself included, using life history methodology. These women's stories were told through a series of Sharing Circles, which I organized and ran. During these circles, we shared and discussed at length the factors that we felt made us end up behind bars. We then went on to construct Medicine Wheels, which are a traditional way of directing our paths towards lifelong healing. Finally, I interviewed each of the women individually and also recounted my own life story. Through sharing our stories, the women and I became remarkably stronger, and together we found peace of mind and purpose in life.

Many clear patterns emerged from this research. Each woman grew up and lived in extreme violence, suffered childhood sexual abuse, and became involved in street life at one point or another. Drugs and alcohol also became detriments to the women's physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being. The lack of positive influences or resources that could show them another way of life, whether through family, school, or friends, was equally striking.

During the research, the women were asked to answer three questions about how they understand their own reintegration. The resulting consensus is that in order for criminalized Indian women to successfully live prison-free, they must first begin by healing from the pain they have experienced throughout their lives. Only then will they be able to build happier, healthier lives for themselves.

I conclude this thesis with several policy recommendations for Correctional Services Canada (CSC). I recommend that CSC develop and consistently deliver culturally appropriate programs that not only place criminalized Indian women's experiences at their center but that also address the specific needs of these women. I also propose that Sharing Circles like the one conducted for this research be implemented behind prison walls, and that such Circles continue once women are released. Finally, I suggest that ceremony and tradition can contribute greatly to criminalized Indian women's healing and reintegration, and that further research into this area is sorely needed.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge a Creator of my understanding. With this important belief system my PhD journey was made successful. And my Creator has given me the strength to stay clean and sober for the past twenty-two years, *mikwec!*

I would like to acknowledge my brother Gerald Acoose and his wife Lynda Acoose. It is with their never-ending support that I have been able to sustain my life. They have walked with me in my moccasins. I love you both. I would like to acknowledge my nephews, my nieces, my great-nephews, and my great-nieces—this one is for you, I love you. And, I would like to acknowledge and honour my deceased brother Joey Acoose and my deceased sister Gloria Williams (Acoose). I love and miss you both.

I would like to acknowledge my daughters Starla, Jolene, and Stephanie, and my son Joseph. I would like to acknowledge my eleven grandchildren and my two great-grandchildren: you all unknowingly kept the fire in my soul burning, I love you.

I would like to acknowledge the three amazing Indian women who participated in this research: Donna Gamble, Jasmine, and Sandy. You made this research possible with your beautiful stories of healing, I love you.

I would like to acknowledge and honour Dr. Leonard Tan who was instrumental in assisting me in the doctoral application process. Because of his support I was accepted into the Department of Community Health & Epidemiology in the College of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan to do my PhD. *Mikwec!*

I would like to acknowledge Elder Danny Musqua, Elder Mary Lee, Elders Walter & Maria Linklater. I would also like to acknowledge my good friends Ron and Nancy. I am so grateful to you for showing me the importance of culture, tradition, and ceremony. I love you all very much.

I would like to acknowledge Louise McCallum (my transcriber), Miriam McNab, Tania Lafontaine, Jason Albert, and my Indian grandmother Joan Sanderson. My heart is yours, I love you.

I would like to acknowledge the Sakimay First Nation Chief and Council, as well as Wanda Sangwais who was my post-secondary counselor. Thank you for your monetary support in these last eight years. *Mikwec!*

I would like to acknowledge all my students: you all have a piece of my heart, and you have made my teaching experience exciting and rich. And remember that when you are in a bind and stressed, clean it up one room at a time. I love you.

I would like to acknowledge Darlene W, Sarah L, Debra A, Doreen L, Emma M, Bea C, and Lana F. These women have seen me at my worst and my best, and I love them for it. I know there are many more women in my life, and you are all special, trust me. I would like to acknowledge all my friends past, present, and future. Thanks for being in my life.

I would like to acknowledge my editors Suzanne Gallant and Andreas Krebs for all their wonderful advice in putting my dissertation together and for helping me make it beautiful, *mikwec!*

I would like to acknowledge my PhD committee. Special thanks to Dr. Bonnie Janzen who was my supervisor and mentor over the years. She had this undying faith in me and she gave me the drive I needed to never ever give up. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Lori Hanson, Dr. Sylvia Abonyi and Dr. Ann Leis for all their amazing support as they walked with me through my educational journey. I will forever be grateful to my committee, *mikwec*. And to my External Reviewer, Dr. J. Gary Knowles who just made my heart sing *mikwec*. Dr. Knowles made my Defense experience one that I will not be forgetting anytime soon. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Colleen Dell because without her knowledge and support, I would have not gained such strong research skills and abilities. She also gave me the strength to be a good researcher, and I gained confidence because she was always there for me. Really, I had the best possible PhD committee, Editor(s) and External Reviewer that any woman could ever ask for and I will forever be grateful, *mikwec*. I know there are many others in the academic world I might have forgotten, but you know who you are, and I thank you. *Mikwec!*

Dedication

This PhD is dedicated to my parents Joe and Olive Acoose. Every day I have walked on Mother Earth I have missed you in my heart and soul. You gave me life, and for that I am grateful. I will share this with you in spirit. You are my ceremony; you are my dreams, hopes, and aspirations to always strive for excellence. *Mikwec!*

They Stole (my) Our Thunder

*It was dark;
Their hands were cold and calloused.
Their smell and taste would be most heinous;
My child spirit would run and hide.
They Stole my Thunder.
Years of abuse, pain, and misery,
Alcohol, drugs and men,
It was all I had to comfort my body, mind, and soul.
Years in prison and life on the street took hold, they Stole my Thunder.*

*It was dark;
Death was near and looming;
The years have taken its toll but my inner strength would persevere,
I would surrender and I would rise from the ashes!
I would find my Thunder!
The dark would turn to light,
I would learn to live and love again;
My child spirit would be reborn better and stronger than ever before.
Yes, they may have Stolen my Thunder, but I would find it!
Our (my) successful reintegration would be fierce,
The Creator is with me!
Hiy! Hiy!*

by Sharon Leslie Acoose
January 18, 2012

Table of Contents

PERMISSION TO USE	I
ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
DEDICATION	V
THEY STOLE (MY) OUR THUNDER	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
LIST OF IMAGES	XI
PART ONE	1
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	2
1.1) RESEARCH GOALS AND APPROACH	5
1.2) OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS	6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1) INTRODUCTION	8
2.2) INDIAN WOMEN IN CANADA: A BRIEF HISTORY	9
<i>Colonization</i>	10
<i>The Indian Act</i>	11
<i>Residential Schools</i>	12
<i>Child Welfare</i>	14
<i>Consequences of Colonization</i>	15
<i>Indian Women as Doubly Marginalized</i>	16
2.3) CRIMINALIZATION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN CANADA	18
<i>Imprisonment of Women in Canada</i>	19
<i>The Creating Choices Report</i>	21
<i>Current Facilities and Programming</i>	22
2.4) PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN CORRECTIONS FOR WOMEN	23
<i>Assessment and Classification</i>	24
<i>Mental Health Treatment</i>	26
<i>Reintegration</i>	28
2.5) CONCLUSION	30
CHAPTER 3: MEDICINE WHEEL THEORY	33
3.1) INTRODUCTION	33
3.2) MEDICINE WHEEL: HISTORICAL CONTEXT	33
3.3) THE MEDICINE WHEEL EXPLAINED	35
<i>Working the Wheel</i>	36
<i>Four Sections, Four Directions</i>	37
3.4) BUILDING A MEDICINE WHEEL WITH CRIMINALIZED INDIAN WOMEN	40
<i>Rebuilding Lives</i>	40
<i>A Tool of Discovery</i>	41

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY—THE WALK THROUGH CEREMONY	43
4.1) INTRODUCTION	43
4.2) THE PARTICIPANTS	43
4.3) DATA COLLECTION	44
<i>Sharing Circles</i>	45
<i>Interviews</i>	48
4.4) THE LIFE HISTORY METHOD	49
<i>Research as Ceremony and Ceremony as Research</i>	50
PART TWO	53
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 5: THEY STOLE MY THUNDER—SHARON’S STORY	54
5.1) INTRODUCTION	54
<i>Circling Eagle Woman</i>	54
5.2) MY YOUTH GONE AWRY	56
<i>Rendering of a Child Spirit Through Sexual Abuse</i>	56
5.3) YEARS INTO THE ABYSS	60
<i>My Descent into a Life of Drugs, Alcohol, and Prostitution</i>	63
5.4) LIFE ON THE STREET	65
<i>My Family Affairs</i>	67
5.5) LIFE IN JAIL	71
5.6) TALES OF WOE	75
<i>On the War Path</i>	75
<i>A Drug Deal Gone Wrong</i>	77
<i>Near-Death Experience</i>	78
<i>My Baby Boy</i>	79
5.7) MY THUNDER RETURNS	81
5.8) MY REINTEGRATION INTO A BETTER WORLD	84
<i>My Conclusion and my Beginning</i>	85
CHAPTER 6: HERE AND BACK AGAIN—JASMINE’S STORY	87
6.1) INTRODUCTION	87
6.2) GROWING UP AS AN OUTSIDER	88
<i>Family Dynamics: A Life of Abuse</i>	91
<i>United States of Poverty</i>	93
<i>My Whole World Turns Misty Blue</i>	96
<i>Trailer Rape from Hell</i>	98
<i>In and Out of Foster Care</i>	99
6.3) DEATH, FAMILY SPLIT, AND MY NOMAD DAYS	100
<i>Never a Place of my Own</i>	102
6.4) THE HUMAN LIFE I WOULD TAKE	104
<i>One Fateful Drug-Induced Night</i>	104

<i>I Plead Guilty</i>	106
6.5) MY INCARCERATION	107
<i>The Fish Range</i>	108
<i>Doing my Own Time</i>	110
<i>Becoming Selfish in a Good Way</i>	115
<i>Creating Opportunities for Myself</i>	116
6.6) MY REINTEGRATION AS I UNDERSTAND IT	119
CHAPTER 7: GOOD WARRIOR WOMAN TODAY—DONNA’S STORY	122
7.1) INTRODUCTION	122
7.2) MY CHILDHOOD AS AN EMOTIONAL ESCAPE ARTIST	123
<i>When Hate Kicks In, I Kick Out!</i>	126
<i>Locked Up and Locked In with Social Services</i>	128
<i>Hitting the Streets</i>	130
7.3) DARKNESS WOULD PREVAIL	131
<i>The Rage Hits</i>	132
<i>My Fight with my Creator</i>	134
7.4) GIVEN A NEW CHANCE IN LIFE	135
<i>Making Peace with Family</i>	137
<i>My Vacation from Downtown</i>	139
<i>My Recovery from my Other Life</i>	141
<i>Speaking Our Language: Always Room to Learn</i>	145
7.5) WHO I AM TODAY IS A WARRIOR	148
CHAPTER 8: CHANGED FOREVER—SANDY’S STORY	150
8.1) INTRODUCTION	150
8.2) ABANDONED AND ABUSED	151
<i>My Biological Parents</i>	152
<i>A Dark and Vicious World</i>	153
8.3) ALL FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE	154
<i>The New Year’s Incident</i>	157
8.4) MY LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE	158
<i>Jekyll and Hyde</i>	159
<i>Who is Going to Believe Me?</i>	160
8.5) MY HEALING JOURNEY	162
PART THREE	165
CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION—WARRIORS IN OUR OWN RIGHT	166
9.1) INTRODUCTION	166
9.2) REFLECTIONS ON WHO CRIMINALIZED INDIAN WOMEN ARE	167
9.3) REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS	170
9.4) REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS	174

<i>What Did Our Stories Reveal about What It Means to Be Healthy?</i>	175
<i>What Did Our Stories Reveal about What Was Needed to Be Healthy?</i>	176
<i>What Did Our Stories Reveal about What Healthy Reintegration Means?</i>	177
9.5) CONCLUSION	178
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION OR OUR NEW BEGINNING	179
10.1) THE NEED FOR BETTER PROGRAMS	180
<i>Taking Our Sharing Circle as a Model</i>	182
10.2) FURTHER RESEARCH ON HEALTHY REINTEGRATION	183
10.3) CRIMINALIZED INDIAN WOMEN NO LONGER	184
REFERENCES	185
APPENDIX A: PHOTOS OF SEGREGATION UNIT AT THE PRISON FOR WOMEN	194
APPENDIX B: SHARING CIRCLE OUTLINE	197
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM	198
APPENDIX D: DATA RELEASE FORM FOR MEDICINE WHEELS	201

List of Images

IMAGE 5.1: SHARON'S MEDICINE WHEEL	54
IMAGE 6.1: JASMINE'S MEDICINE WHEEL	88
IMAGE 7.1: DONNA'S MEDICINE WHEEL	123
IMAGE 8.1: SANDY'S MEDICINE WHEEL	151

Part One

Chapter 1: Introduction

Real life experience at the hands of the criminal justice system (and not through academic or legal training) is the only way you can become a true expert.

—Patricia Monture-Angus

My motto is Indian women do not just wake up one morning and say, “Oh, I think I will be a prostitute, break the law, and go to prison when I grow up!” That is not the way it happens. The process is long, slow, meticulous, and vicious. Life after life is torn apart in the process. Families are broken. Children are broken. And in the end, many Indian women go to prison for a variety of crimes committed to support and feed their families. It is a way of life. It is a question of survival.

There is a long, complex history of why Indian women end up in prison. Incarceration of Indian women is a vicious cycle that has gone on for many decades. Events that took place hundreds of years ago would change the face of Indian women. These women’s lives would be disrupted, unsettled, and the very fabric of their beings torn apart thread by thread. No one back in those days actually understood what was happening. At the time when treaties were signed, many chiefs could not read or write and would instead mark an X. That alone changed the destiny of many Indians, including women. There have been bumps, potholes, and long winding roads that many Indian women have failed to get over, around, through, and under.

Indian women are incarcerated for a variety of reasons. Many of them have been in and out of institutions of one kind or another for their whole lives: Residential Schools, reformatories (i.e. young offender institutions), provincial jails, and federal prisons. Some of these women’s crimes are minor, while others are violent. Many of these women come from backgrounds that carry a multitude of social and personal difficulties and challenges. In general, women in Canada face discrimination; however, Indian women face much more severe discrimination, including

profound racism. It is not easy to live in a world that is unkind and cold. Many times life seems hopeless with each door closing, finding that you have nowhere to run or hide. I also know that living homeless with no food to eat makes life harder. Poverty is just one issue that many Indian women face on a daily basis. Indian women are also for the most part the sole providers for their children (O'Donnell and Wallace, 2011 p. 20). In addition, Indian women who live on reserve may also suffer economic hardship because they live in violence. According to the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), over 500 Indian girls and women have been murdered or reported missing from large Canadian cities over the last three decades (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2011). Other Indian women who go to prison come from reservations where life was and continues to be extremely difficult. As Lafreniere, Fontaine & Comack (2005) state,

Prison cannot remedy the problem of poverty on reserves. It cannot deal with immediate or historical memories of the genocide that Europeans worked upon our people. It cannot remedy violence, alcohol abuse, sexual assault during childhood, rape and other violence Aboriginal women experience at the hands of men. Prison cannot heal the past abuse of foster homes, or the indifference and racism of Canada's justice system in its dealings with Aboriginal people. (p. 4)

Poverty, sexism, loss of identity, the *Indian Act*, loss of culture, racism, and Residential Schools: these are the reasons why many Indian women go to prison.

This thesis holds that putting an Indian person behind bars is not the answer, but rather part of the problem. Building new prisons will not help address the issues that criminalized Indian women face and that contribute in large part to their incarceration. Money and resources should instead be invested in developing more effective and sustainable reintegration programs, both within and beyond prison walls, which will assist incarcerated Indian women to stay prison-free in the future. Unfortunately, this is far from the approach taken by governments in Canada, whether in the past or present. Recently the Canadian Government passed into law a new piece

of legislation known as the Omnibus Crime Bill, or Bill C-10. Bill C-10 was developed and implemented because the Government felt it important to get tougher on crime and on those who commit crimes (The Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2012). The Omnibus Crime Bill C-10 will have serious negative effects on Indian women, as expressed by Tracy Booth, executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba:

The bill will impact female prisoners and their offspring. The majority of women in jail are mothers, and they are usually the primary caregivers in their families [...] Elements of the new bill will result in more women being held behind bars [...] It's going to increase criminalization and marginalization, and this will certainly have a very negative impact on children [...] No one's really speaking about the impact (on) children when mom and dad are in jail, particularly for aboriginal people and for women in this province. (as cited in Giroday, 2011, p. 1)

Because Indian women live in a racist and discriminatory environment that often pushes them to lengths beyond their control, prison will not be able to heal the unhealed. Prison is a place of confinement where many of these women will likely remain lost without proper care and without adequate programming. It is sad but true that many Indian women have lost their lives while incarcerated. For those women who are able to survive their term in prison, the statistics show, unfortunately, returning to prison is a given especially if they do not have a solid support system prior to release (Bonta, Lipinski, & Martin, 1992; Fortin, 2004). However, as I will discuss in the chapters that follow, the healing journey for Indian women who have been incarcerated is difficult but not impossible. I feel very strongly that there has to be a solution. And while there are no quick remedies, there are ways to stay out of prison. As I show in this thesis, it is crucial to learn and teach that living the good life (*Mino-Pimatisiwin*) can keep Indian women from behind the walls.

1.1) Research Goals and Approach

We know very little about previously incarcerated Indian women who not only survive prison, but go on to live full, healthy, and productive lives. The goal of my thesis is thus to try and understand what makes it possible for Indian women who have previously been incarcerated to now live *prison-free*. How did they survive? How did they not only survive but flourish? What have they learned on their healing journey that might help other criminalized Indian women?

Unlike much research about Indian people, I set out to conduct research that allowed for Indian women's voices to be heard—what they believe, what they suffered, what they learned, how they healed. I believe that history should always be shared. As such, this thesis shares the life histories of four previously criminalized Indian women. Because I myself am one of those four women, the life histories presented here are both biographical and autobiographical. In particular, I wanted to discover what our collective life stories could reveal about: (1) what it means to be healthy; (2) what is needed to be healthy; and (3) what healthy reintegration means. As the Western way has not always worked well for Indian people, I employed traditional methods to learn about the women's life stories, which included Sharing Circles and the creation of Medicine Wheels (Hart, 2002; Dapice, 2006; Lavallée, 2007).

The following chapters will discuss some of the patterns that emerged from my research. Each of the women who participated in the research grew up and lived in extreme violence, suffered childhood sexual abuse, and became involved in street life at one point or another. Drugs and alcohol also became detriments to the women's physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being. The lack of positive influences or resources that could show them another way of life, whether through family, school, or friends, was equally striking. What also became

clear was that in order for criminalized Indian women to successfully live prison-free, they must first begin by healing from the pain they have experienced throughout their lives.

I believe the spoken word will bring truth, and that it is important that lived experience be utilized in a way that gathers traditional-based knowledge. Patricia Monture-Angus once wrote,

I hold privilege as a Haudensaunee woman who is both free from prison (not sentenced) and no longer living in poverty. I am not an expert on prison having never been incarcerated. Such an assertion of expertise on my part would violate the tenets of the Haudesaunee knowledge system, which requires lived experience and reflection to be the basis of knowing. (Monture-Angus, 2006, p. 25)

Through offering meaningful and empowered research by storytelling from one woman to another, and through giving breadth and depth to the lives of Indian women, I hope to provide other women with the courage to move forward. I have learned that the hearts of Indian women are so amazing that even through mayhem they have persevered.

1.2) Overview of Chapters

Part One of this thesis lays the groundwork for the research and includes Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In Chapter 2, I discuss in more detail the over-representation of Indian people in the prison population and discuss the life events that so many criminalized Indian women share. I review colonization and discuss the history of abuse, Residential Schools, and the violence faced by Indian women throughout their lives. I speak to the history of Correctional Services Canada (CSC), including a discussion of the Prison for Women (P4W), formerly located in Kingston, Ontario. More specifically, I examine the controversy surrounding P4W as well as current-day problems and challenges in CSC policy and programming. In Chapter 3, I discuss the Medicine Wheel Theory, its history, as well as how it can be used as a particularly effective tool to assist formerly criminalized women in their healing journeys. I also explain how the Indian women

whose life histories I present in this thesis developed their own Medicine Wheel, and what it meant to each of them throughout the research process. In Chapter 4, I explain my methodology and discuss how I selected and engaged with my research participants. I also introduce the principal tools of my research—Sharing Circles and one-on-one interviews—and discuss at length how I managed and ran these processes. Lastly, I discuss what it means to use life history as a methodology and the importance of ceremony as research in my project.

Part Two of the thesis is comprised of Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, which tell the life histories (healing journeys) of each of the four women included in my story. Each of these chapters takes readers through the survival of the past, the accomplishments of the present, as well as what is hoped for in the future by these women. Their stories are intense, raw, and beautiful.

Part Three completes the thesis by providing an analysis of my research findings. In Chapter 9, I reflect on the patterns that emerged from the women's life histories and on the overall process from the beginning of the research to the end. I also explore what our stories revealed about what it means to be healthy, what we need to be healthy, and what healthy reintegration means to us. In Chapter 10, I conclude the thesis by discussing policy recommendations that I believe would better fit the needs of Indian women in the federal incarceration system as well as potential avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1) Introduction

This thesis aims at understanding what health and living in a healthy way mean to criminalized Indian women. But before discussing Indian women's healing journeys, I must first talk about where it all began: what happened and why do Indian women suffer? Why are Indian women over-represented in the Canadian prison population? How are women, and particularly Indian women, treated in correctional facilities, and how has this treatment changed over time? What kind of programming and policies does Correctional Services Canada (CSC) offer to incarcerated women? What are the current challenges and problems associated with the CSC's approach to women offenders? Are the experiences of formerly criminalized women themselves, specifically Indian women, taken into account in corrections policy development? In order to address these questions, I review what past and current research has been conducted into these areas, and what conclusions have been drawn.

I begin by, first, providing a brief history of Indian women in Canada. In this section of the chapter, I discuss what is known about pre-contact Indian societies and the role played by women; I then consider the process of colonization including the creation of the *Indian Act*, Residential Schools, the discriminatory policies of Child Welfare systems, the legacy of colonization and its impact on Aboriginal health, and the double marginalization of Indian women. Second, I extend my discussion of the consequences of colonization to the criminalization of Indian women in Canada and explore why and how Indian women continue to be over-represented in the prison population. Here I also discuss the controversy surrounding the infamous Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario, as well as the creation of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (TFFSW), the recommendations of the *Creating Choices*

report, and the resulting changes in programs and facilities stemming from this report. Third, I provide a critical assessment of the current facilities and programming available to criminalized women in Canada, including a discussion of the deeply flawed assessment and classification tools used by the CSC, the lack of mental health treatment resources, and the poorly conceived and underutilized reintegration programs. Finally, I conclude the chapter by identifying some of the gaps in the literature that my research addresses.

2.2) Indian Women in Canada: A Brief History

Aboriginal Elders have suggested that Aboriginal societies were generally peaceful societies with little crime before contact with the Europeans. Traditionally, Indian women played a central role within the family, including Indian governance, the education of children, taking care of the kill the hunters would bring home, and in spiritual ceremonies. Within Indian tribes or clans there was equality and autonomy between men and women. According to the Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, “both performed functions vital to the survival of Aboriginal communities. Men provided the food, shelter and clothing. Women provided the domestic sphere and were viewed as life givers and caretakers of life” (1991a, p. 2). It is said that traditional Indian society experienced very little family breakdown and that there was harmony among men and women. Each knew their roles, and there was peace and diversity. Women also figured centrally in almost all Aboriginal creation legends: “In Ojibway and Cree legends, it was a woman who came to earth through a hole in the sky to care for the earth. It was a woman, Nokomis (grandmother), who taught Original Man (Anishinabe, an Ojibway word meaning *human being*) about the medicines of the earth and about technology” (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 1991a, p. 2). Indian women were seen to have great strength and prosperity in order to live and sustain life. “The Dakota and Lakota (Sioux) people of Manitoba and the Dakotas tell

how a woman—White Buffalo Calf Woman—brought the pipe to the people. It is through the pipe that prayer is carried by its smoke upwards to the Creator in their most sacred ceremonies” (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 1996a, p. 2).

However, life would change for Indian people. Indian society would become a harsh and violent place to live, especially for Indian women. According to Emma D. LaRocque, “We can trace the diminishing status of Aboriginal women to the progression of colonialism” (1994, p. 73). Colonization eroded the lives of Indian women and took away cultural, physical, mental, and emotional ways of sustaining *pimatisiwin* or the good life. Indian women lost much of themselves, and for many a life of crime became the only way to survive.

Colonization

Colonization began with the coming of the Europeans to North America approximately five hundred years ago. LaRocque defines colonization as

[...] that process of encroachment and subsequent subjugation of Aboriginal peoples since the arrival of Europeans. From the Aboriginal perspective, it refers to loss of lands, resources, and self-direction and to the severe disturbance of cultural ways and values. Colonization has taken its toll on *all* Aboriginal peoples, but it has taken perhaps its greatest toll on women. (1994, p. 73)

Joan Sangster writes that “Colonialism often sparks the clash of two cultures and legal regimes, with unequal power relations operating within as well as between those cultures” (1999, p. 35). Michael Hart writes in *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin* that “Colonization is driven by a worldview that embraces domination, self-righteousness and greed” (2002, p. 24). Moreover, according to Jonathon Rudin, “In the early 1800s, British government policy with regard to Aboriginal people was governed by the belief that over time, they would simply be eradicated as a people due to the impact of settler migration” (2005, p. 21). In addition, Rudin writes

That Canada's express policy with respect to Aboriginal people was to hasten their disappearance was never really in question. Duncan Campbell Scott, the powerful and influential Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, said in 1920, "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question. (2005, pp. 25–26)

Thus colonization involved the desire to *civilize* and assimilate Aboriginal peoples into European ways of life. The *Indian Act*, Residential Schools, and child welfare policies were some of the tools deployed to meet this objective.

The Indian Act

The *Indian Act* was first known as the *Gradual Civilization Act* which was passed in 1857. This act sought to assimilate Indian people into Canadian settler society by encouraging enfranchisement, eventually culminating in the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* of 1869. This act was established to form the elective band council system that remains in the *Indian Act* to this day. Both the *Gradual Civilization Act* and the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* were consolidated as the *Indian Act* (Hanson, 2009). The *Indian Act* was discriminatory at many different levels. The authority instituted by the act has ranged from overarching political control—such as imposing governing structures on Aboriginal communities in the form of band councils—to control over the rights of Indians to practice their culture and traditions (Hanson, 2009, p. 1). The *Indian Act* has gone through many phases of change from its implementation. The act was and still is how Indian people are controlled, whether it is their education or health.

Indian status for women has been a lifelong battle. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples explains, the *Indian Act* would cause Indian women to lose their status:

Recognition as "Indian" in Canadian law often had nothing to do with whether a person was actually of Indian ancestry. Many anomalies and injustices occurred

over the years in this regard. For example, a woman of non-Indian ancestry would be recognized as Indian and granted Indian status upon marriage to an Indian man, but an Indian woman in section 12(1)(b) who married a man without Indian status would lose legal recognition as Indian. Moreover, for historical reasons, many persons of Indian ancestry were not recognized as being Indians in law and were, accordingly, denied Indian status. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 279)

And through this process many Indian women would be denied their heritage, lose their identity, and be rejected from their communities. Many Indian women who married outside of their own reserves were not even permitted to come back home.

The equal right of Indian women is an issue that has been under review for many decades. In 1985, the *Indian Act* was changed yet again, and Bill C-31 was passed and implemented. Bill C-31 would allow those Indian women who had married outside their reservation to apply to gain back their Indian status. However, some discrepancies still existed within the law, and some of these women's children and grandchildren would not be allowed to obtain Indian status. Recently another amendment to the *Indian Act* was passed so as to allow children who did not receive status when their mothers first applied to now apply for their Indian status.

Residential Schools

In Canada, certain sections of the *Indian Act* legally removed the rights of Aboriginal parents to their children, giving the government total control over the children's lives. For over a century, under the authority of Indian agents and enforced by the RCMP, Aboriginal children were taken from their families and incarcerated in Residential Schools. According to Rudin,

The disappearance of Aboriginal people as a people was also explicitly to be hastened by the development of the residential school system. The core belief of this system was that the future for Aboriginal children could only be assured by working hard to remove their Aboriginal self-identity. The residential school

experience, as all of Canada now knows, was a failure in almost every respect. It succeeded, however, in alienating thousands upon thousands of Aboriginal people from their communities and from their sense of themselves. (Rudin, 2005, p. 26)

Residential schooling was seen as a way to integrate Indian people into the mainstream of society. It was the hope of these schools to civilize Indians overall and to make the girls into good housekeepers and the boys into good farmers. Children were forcibly removed from their families and their traditional lifestyle. The children would be forced to assimilate into the white culture and would be stripped of their Indian heritage and forbidden to speak any Indian language they might have once known. Their hair would be cut short if it was long, and they would be put in uniforms. These children would suffer physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse.

The most difficult part of being in Residential School was being stripped of who you were as an Indian. You were made to pray day in and day out, not really understanding what prayer was because you were merely a child. You were stripped of your Indian-ness and taught to be white, which is something an Indian person could never even fully become. Residential Schools were a travesty of justice and a demoralizing process that changed Indian people's lives forever. The experience broke their spirits and the spirits of generations to come. On a daily basis many of these children were abused mentally, physically, emotionally, and sexually. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart states, "American Indian children were beaten for speaking their native languages, were removed from their families and communities, sometimes for many years. Some children never returned home and many died from disease and homesickness while in boarding school" (1995, p. 63). Many lives were lost, and many families were ripped apart by a system that did not understand Indian people. It was cultural genocide. The Residential Schools

operated for more than one hundred years with the last one closing in 1996. They left a trail of tears, wounds, and systemic abuses that will take generations to heal.

Child Welfare

Indian children have been taken away from their families since the inception of the Residential Schools and since Child Welfare systems have been in place. For example in Manitoba there has been great concern over this issue as discussed in the Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry.

Aboriginal people appearing before this Inquiry have repeatedly expressed their concern that any overhauls of the justice system in Manitoba must also include a re-examination of the child welfare system. They see the child welfare and justice systems as being interconnected and interwoven. To them, the child welfare system is but one more “outside” institution that disrupts their lives and societies. (1991b, pp. 1–2)

This intrusion has been both paternalistic and colonial in nature and has broken apart many Indian families. It has had a particularly bad impact on women because they most often play the role of primary caregivers to children. According to the Manitoba Justice Inquiry,

In most provinces, these child welfare services were never provided in any kind of meaningful or culturally appropriate way. Instead of the counseling of families, or consultation with the community about alternatives to apprehending the child, the apprehension of Aboriginal children became the standard operating procedure with child welfare authorities in most provinces. In Manitoba, the child welfare system “protected” many Aboriginal children by taking them away from their families and placing them for adoption with non-Aboriginal families. This came to be known as the “Sixties Scoop,” but it continued into the 1980s. Although the flaws in this approach would only become evident to most of society later, Aboriginal people immediately condemned the practice. As Anthony Wood of God’s River told our Inquiry: “There was no publicity for years and years about the brutalization of our families and children by the larger Canadian society. Kidnapping was called placement in foster homes. Exporting Aboriginal children to the U.S. was called preparing Indian children for the future. Parents who were heartbroken by the destruction of their families were written off as incompetent people.” (1991b, pp. 10–11)

This era was detrimental to the very fabric of Indian women's lives for years to come. I believe the impact of Child Welfare services on Indian communities put Indian women in a dark place where many of them would give up because the system was simply too hard to fight. Because many Indian people were seen as *unfit* to care for their own children by Child Welfare workers, women felt powerless because their children were ripped away from their homes without cause and placed in foster homes.

The ideal home would instill the values and lifestyles with which the child welfare workers themselves were familiar: white, middle-class homes in white, middle-class neighbourhoods. Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal parents and families were deemed to be "unfit." As a result, between 1971 and 1981 alone, over 3,400 Aboriginal children were shipped away to adoptive parents in other societies, and sometimes in other countries. (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 1991b, p. 11)

As a consequence of these policies, women would lose contact with their children for years. Many would never again see their children.

Consequences of Colonization

Leslie Brown, in her submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1994), succinctly describes how the process of colonization has resulted in such devastating consequences for Indian people.

In all cultures the worldview, the values and beliefs, underlie the development of key spiritual, social, economic, educational, communication and political institutions. All these institutions are interrelated and all have, as part of their function, the role of socializing members of the society. If a dominant society controls, overshadows or wipes out this fundamental institutional function then it also takes control of the cultural constructs that become the defining characteristics of the smaller society. As a result, the smaller culture becomes sapped of its traditions and its autonomy—in short, it loses touch with its life blood and a period of social disease ensues. This has been the partially effective strategy behind the Canadian government's relationship with Aboriginal peoples. The impact of these phenomena are numerous; most notably

Aboriginal people feel immense rage and shame that has been internalized (within the individual, the family and the community) through a long-term process of racist victimization. These feelings are apparent in the symptoms of depression, family violence, suicide and addictions that prevail in Aboriginal communities and are described as a dark period in the cultural development of Aboriginal peoples by numerous writers. (Brown, 1994, CD-ROM; emphasis added)

The legacy of colonization is clearly present in current-day statistics which document the vast social, economic, physical, and mental health inequities that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Gracey & King, 2009; O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011).

Indian Women as Doubly Marginalized

Feminist scholars argue that Aboriginal women in particular have experienced more extreme adverse effects of colonization due to being *doubly marginalized* because of their race and gender, resulting in Aboriginal women not only having poorer social, mental, and economic well-being compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, but also, compared to Aboriginal men (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009). In their submission to the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, the Native Women's Association of Canada affirmed the following:

Both the Crown [...] and Aboriginal men must now take responsibility for the change in ways which was forced on Aboriginal peoples, particularly First Nations who fell under the jurisdiction and control of the *Indian Act* since contact, and disproportionately put power and control into the hands of men. Significant accompanying factors are well documented in this, such as the effects on Aboriginal society, and especially Aboriginal women, by relegation to reserve lands, the imposition of an elected band council structure, disqualification of women from holding council positions, forced removal of children from their families and communities to attend residential schools, and until 1985, women's loss of Indian status if she married a non-Indian, to name but a few. The point here is that gender became an issue for Aboriginal peoples

where it had not previously been, and many dysfunctional through outright abusive to catastrophic results have ensued. (2007b, p. 10)

Aboriginal women experience the highest rates of violent victimization in Canada. In 2009, Aboriginal women were three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report having been the victim of violence at the hands of a current or former partner in the previous year (Brennan, 2011). Further, among the women reporting spousal violence, Aboriginal women were more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report (1) exposure to more severe forms of violence (e.g. sexual assault, physical beating, choking); (2) exposure to multiple types of abuse (e.g. financial, emotional); (3) injury as result of their victimization; and (4) fearing for their lives.

Indian women engaged in sex work and/or living in poverty are especially vulnerable to violent victimization as documented in *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada*. As concluded in this report,

The social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women, along with a history of government policies that have torn apart Indigenous families and communities, have pushed a disproportionate number of Indigenous women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness and prostitution. (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 2)

Women who are the victims of violence often turn to alcohol or substance abuse as an outlet to sanity or as a means of forgetting their trauma (Chansonneuve, 2007). Alcohol and substance abuse thus become means to an end. It is easier to wash away years of pain rather than to begin to heal. As described in the following sections, the social distress resulting from the legacy of colonization and current levels of impoverishment have also resulted in an over-representation of Aboriginal peoples as offenders in the Canadian justice system.

2.3) Criminalization of Indian Women in Canada

The majority of incarcerated Canadians are men, with women in 2008–2009 comprising approximately 11% and 5% of the prisoner population in provincial and federal jails respectively (Mahony, 2011).¹ Among those Canadians in prisons, Indian people are over-represented, particularly Indian women. Although Aboriginal people make up approximately 4% of the Canadian population, 35% of the women and 23% of the men sentenced to custody in 2009–2009 were of Aboriginal origin. The disproportionate representation of Indian women in Canadian prisons relative to their numbers in the general population is most pronounced in the prairie provinces where in 2008–2009 an astounding 85% of women in custody in Saskatchewan and Manitoba were Aboriginal, despite comprising only 12% of the general population (Mahony, 2011).

Women serving time in federal correctional institutions are the most marginalized of all Canadians. Compared to the general population of Canadian women, women sentenced to federal prison terms are more likely to be poorer, less educated, less likely to be employed, and are more likely to be single mothers. Many women also have histories of sexual and physical victimization, mental health and addiction challenges. For federally sentenced Indian women, these social, economic, and health challenges are further magnified. In the Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, one Indian woman interviewee concludes:

It all starts from welfare. It starts with the welfare system [...] because I am a mother with kids and in order to do that, I had to do my crime. In order to barely live on welfare, I had to do my crime. You do get help from welfare, but it's just barely enough to live. From there, you get involved with your crime and after that then you get picked up, you go to jail and when they look at you they call you nothing but a thief or whatever you've done. Nobody's got no use for you,

¹ Canadian correctional services are managed jointly by federal, provincial and territory governments. The federal government is responsible for those who receive sentences of two or more years, and the provincial/territorial government for those serving sentences less than two years.

but like, you know, maybe that's how I was living, how I was keeping my kids together, my family, my home, whatever I had. (1991a, p. 65)

Imprisonment of Women in Canada

Historically, women convicted of federal crimes in Canada were incarcerated in a wing at the Kingston Prison for Men in Kingston Ontario. In 1934, the government built the Prison for Women (P4W), also in Kingston, which was no better than the men's prison, and perhaps even worse. Although the P4W did not officially close until 2000, appeals for its closure were voiced almost as soon as it opened (e.g. Archambault Commission, 1938) and continued for the next sixty years (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). Although the emphasis of these reports varied, the main problems identified included the geographical separation that P4W imposed between federally sentenced women and their families/communities, as well as the P4W's appalling physical environment (i.e., it was a rat-infested, unsafe, windowless building). Another of the main criticisms, which is still voiced today, was that the incarceration programming for women was simply an extension of that applied to men. In other words, the programs offered did not reflect the fact that women offenders were much more likely to suffer from social and mental health issues than men offenders (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). In addition, although women were much less likely than men to be incarcerated for violent crimes, the P4W was a maximum-security prison, and all women, regardless of the nature of their crime, were incarcerated in the same maximum security arrangement. The lack of programming available for federally sentenced Indian women was also specifically noted, whereby "Aboriginal women faced a double disadvantage; not only were they incarcerated far from their homes, but they also were denied many of their spiritual traditions and practices inherent to their culture" (MacDonald & Watson, 2001, p. 71).

Between 1988 and 1991, seven women at the P4W—six of whom were Indian—committed suicide. In 1994, an incident occurred at the P4W which received wide media exposure and resulted in a public inquiry by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour (Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996). Sierra Bacquie describes this incident as follows:

On April 26th 1994, a video camera captured grainy black and white images of an all Institutional Emergency Response Team (IERT) storming the cells of sleeping inmates at the women's prison. The men shackled the defenseless women, forced them to the floor and stripped them naked. They did this one woman at a time, stopping periodically for meal and smoke breaks. From beginning to end, the raid lasted six hours. (2004, p. 1)

The photos in Appendix A of this thesis show the segregation unit at P4W where these supposedly dangerous women were housed. It was a place not fit for bears.

In 1989, as a “consequence of immense social and political pressure on the government by reformers, feminists, Aboriginal organizations, and the media” the Solicitor General of Canada appointed the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (TFFSW) (Hannah-Moffat, 1995, p. 137). The TFFSW was unique relative to past initiatives because its members were mostly composed of women with strong feminist ideologies and with strong representation from community organizations, including a co-chair from the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies. Also important was the representation of Aboriginal women—for instance, the Native Women's Association of Canada—including two formally federally imprisoned Indian women, Fran Sugar and Lana Fox. The voices of Sugar and Fox made clear to the TFFSW not only the horrendous conditions of prison life, but also the link between colonialism and the life experience of imprisoned Indian women.

When we come to prison, we need to adjust to greater and greater violence in our lives. We adjust to increasingly deadly conditions, and come to accept them

as “natural.” We adjust to having freedoms stolen away from us, to having fewer and fewer choices, less and less voice in the decisions that affect our lives. We come to believe that making \$4.20 a day and things we can buy with it are the most important life goals. We have adjusted to deafening silence, because it is now mandatory to wear headphones. We have adjusted to the deafening noises and screams coming from segregation when our Sister has just been stripped of her clothes and maced in the face. We have adjusted to the deadening entertainment of bingo games that give out prized bags of taco chips and we hear glees of happiness at this score, because some pathetic individual hasn’t tasted taco chips since 1979 [...] We have adjusted to dreaming of our futures. We become so phucking numb from the incredible b/sh we are exposed to: trying to see case management officer to get a call to our children in a major, major event. It is no wonder that so many of us cut our throats, lacerate our bodies, hang ourselves. It is no wonder that we need to identify our pain onto our physical bodies, because our whole lives have been filled with incredible pain and traumatizing experiences—psychic pain, physical pain, spiritual pain. I entered Prison for Women as a young, poorly-educated, Native woman and [...] I will soon be released with similar characteristics—but you can add another deficiency—after seven years—I am now an [...] angry, young, poor, uneducated, Native woman. (Sparling, 1999, p. 116)

The Creating Choices Report

The work of the TFFSW culminated with the 1990 release of the seminal document *Creating Choices* (TFFSW, 1990). Recommendations of the report included closing the P4W and replacing it with five regional prisons distributed across Canada and a healing lodge for federally sentenced Aboriginal women. The report also articulated a revised vision for correctional services in Canada that was woman-centred, respectful of diversity, and cognizant of the complex social, historical, and economic factors that place some Canadian women at greater risk of becoming criminalized. Five principles were identified that were to guide the development of future correctional facilities and programming for women offenders in Canada: (1) empowerment; (2) meaningful and responsible choices; (3) respect and dignity; (4) supportive environment; and (5) shared responsibility. In addition to the development of a healing lodge, each of the regional prisons was to provide Aboriginal programming and services. As concluded

in the *Creating Choices* report, Correctional Service Canada (CSC), along with the broader community, “has the responsibility to create the environment that empowers federally sentenced women to make meaningful and responsible choices in order that they may live with dignity and respect” (TFFSW, 1990, Chapter X).

Current Facilities and Programming

Since *Creating Choices*, the CSC has over the years made a number of changes to both facilities that house federally sentenced women and the programs available to them. Based on recommendations by the TFFSW, five new federal prisons were built for women: Fraser Valley Institution (Abbotsford, BC), the Edmonton Institution for Women (Edmonton, AB), the Grand Valley Institution for Women (Kitchener, ON), the Joliette Institution (Joliette, QC), and the Nova Institution (Truro, NS). Within these facilities, women classified as minimum/medium security live in detached *houses* which include shared living spaces and household duties (i.e. cleaning and cooking). Each regional facility has a perimeter fence with a detection system, and the doors and windows of the houses have alarms. Women designated as maximum security are placed in much more secure, supervised facilities. Women with mental health or cognitive challenges reside in either Structured Living Environment Houses (minimum/medium security) or Secure Environments (maximum security). In addition to the five decentralized institutions, a healing lodge was also constructed based on significant input from Aboriginal people. Located in southern Saskatchewan, the *Okimaw Ohci* Healing Lodge is a thirty-bed facility containing both single and family residential units that allows children. Most of the staff, including the *Kikawinaw* (the director) are of Aboriginal origin. The operational philosophy is based on Aboriginal teachings and traditions, and Elders are involved in all aspects of programming.

According to CSC, programs for federally sentenced women include: (1) correctional programs (e.g. substance abuse programming, sex offender therapy, cognitive skills training, anger/emotional management); (2) mental health programs (e.g. trauma and abuse counselling, dialectical behaviour therapy, psychosocial rehabilitation); (3) education, employment, and employability programs; and (4) social programs (e.g. parenting skills, mother-child program, peer support, spirituality services, recreation services) (Fortin, 2004). In addition to these general programs, an Aboriginal program was also developed, which was supposed to incorporate culturally relevant principles developed by Aboriginal people with traditional cultural healing knowledge, including the *Circles of Change Program*, the *Family Life Improvement Program*, and the *Spirit of a Warrior Program*.

2.4) Problems and Challenges in Corrections for Women

Reviews of the changes made by CSC regarding how federally sentenced women are imprisoned since the advent of *Creating Choices* have been mixed. Some positive changes have certainly been mentioned, including improvements in the physical environment, flexibility in security ratings, and the apparently increased availability of “woman-centered” programming within facilities, such as those that target issues related to mental health, victimization, and relationships (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Expert Committee Review of the Correctional Service of Canada, 1996–2000). For Aboriginal women offenders, the *Okimaw Ohci* Healing Lodge is considered a significant accomplishment in Canadian corrections (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2012; Gondziola, 2005; Pollack, 2008) and there appears to be a greater availability of Aboriginal programming within the five other facilities (Expert Committee Review of the Correctional Service of Canada, 1996–2000).

Despite some recognized improvements in the Canadian penal system for women offenders in recent years, many significant problems remain. While CSC maintains that much has changed since the days of the P4W, many advocacy groups, such as the Native Women's Association of Canada, contend that in practice, very little has changed, especially for Aboriginal women (Gondziola, 2005). The most fundamental flaw of current Canadian corrections for women is that programs continue to be inherently sexist and racist. That is, despite CSC rhetoric to the contrary, much of the programming for federally sentenced women fails to adequately address the gendered and racialized life circumstances which bring women into conflict with the law in the first place: poverty, homelessness, violence, mental health problems, and addictions (Hannah-Moffat, 2010; Kilty, 2012; Pollack, 2008; Shantz, Kilty, & Frigon, 2009; Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Auditor General of Canada, 2003).

Assessment and Classification

An example of a sexist and racist practice within the correctional system is their continued use of assessment and classification tools originally designed for male, predominately Caucasian prisoners, despite "research showing that women inmates generally pose a lower security risk, have a much lower risk of re-offending, and have different needs than men" (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003, p. 2). For example, the Custody Rating Scale (CRS) is used to determine an offender's designation as minimum, medium, or maximum security. Although this assessment occurs at initial entry into prison, it can be reassessed at any time during one's sentence. One of the criteria used to determine whether a person is given maximum security status is the extent of supervision or control an individual might need during incarceration. The fact that women offenders are more likely than male offenders to be admitted to prison with mental health and addiction challenges (often as a means of coping with an impoverished and

abusive past) contributes to an inflated security assessment (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Kilty, 2012). For many of the same reasons which lead to their criminalization in the first place, women are also more likely than men to attempt suicide and engage in self-mutilation while imprisoned. Adding to the potential for greater distress among women is that they are more likely to be the primary caregiver of their children, and thus separation from family can further exacerbate feelings of loss and despair. CSC's use of assessment tools designed for men results in many women offenders being inappropriately designated as maximum security due to the reconstruction of social, mental, and emotional health needs as "risk factors for potential recidivism upon release and as resistant or threatening behavior (to themselves or to others) while in prison" (Kilty, 2012, p. 165). Importantly, individuals' security designation impacts access to prison rehabilitation and reintegration programming:

[...] even in Canada's new, "women-centered" prisons, "maximum-security" women are kept segregated from the rest of the prison environment and population, in newly built, highly secure concrete cell-blocks called "Secure Units." The women have little to no access to programs and facilities afforded to women with lower classification; instead they are forced to participate in an intense, behavior modification program if they hope to have their classification lowered. They are moved about the grounds only in handcuffs and shackles, under strict guard surveillance. This treatment stands in dramatic contrast to the newly-reformed prisons and their "women-centered" philosophy that allegedly governs incarceration practices for women in Canada. (Campbell, 2006, p. 3-4)

Many women classified as maximum security reach the end of their sentence without having been involved in gradual release programs, "thereby increasing the likelihood that they will find themselves in the same situation that led to their initial criminalization" (Auditor General of Canada, 2003).

Among federally sentenced women, Indian women are most likely to be over-classified as maximum security. In 2009–2010, almost half (47%) of the federally sentenced women currently housed in maximum security conditions were Indian (Correctional Services Canada, 2010b). Aboriginal women are also more likely to be placed in administrative segregation. Compared to non-Aboriginal federally sentenced women, criminalized Indian women are more likely to report a history of socioeconomic deprivation, sexual or physical violence and struggles with mental health and addictions, and within prison, are more likely to attempt suicide and engage in self-harm. Further, as stated by Campbell,

Aboriginal women and men come into conflict with the law already distrustful of a system that in many ways was put in place to continue to colonize and oppress them. They come to this system already well versed in how to subvert it, to resist it, to challenge its authority over their lives. Aboriginal women in the criminal justice system are more likely to be classified as maximum security because of the violence they experience outside the prison walls, and because of their resistance strategies inside them. (2004, p. 36)

One factor which can potentially attenuate a prisoner’s security classification is the availability of family and community supports, a criteria which further discriminates against federally sentenced Indian women “due to centuries of colonization and the accompanying destruction of Aboriginal communities and families (Campbell, 2004, p. 37). A significant consequence of the over-classification of Indian women is that maximum security designation precludes access to the *Okimaw Ohci* Healing Lodge.

Mental Health Treatment

Recent increases in the rate of incarceration among women, particularly Aboriginal women, has been linked to the consequences of neo-liberal policy changes including “cuts to social assistance, the creation of a precarious low-wage job market, reduction in publicly funded daycare, and cuts to social services, addictions treatment and mental health services” (Pollack,

2008, p. 6). A further trend has been a steep increase in the proportion of federally sentenced women who meet the criteria for a mental disorder. As recently stated very powerfully by Howard Sapers, the Correctional Investigator of Canada,

It is my experience that prison populations disproportionately include the more impoverished, poorly-educated, addicted and the mentally ill among us. A walk through a federal penitentiary in this country reveals that current criminal justice policy captures a high number of the most marginalized and distressed within our communities. (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2011, p. 54)

The social, economic, and political symptoms of distress that many women enter prison with are further exacerbated by the experience of being imprisoned (Shantz, Kilty, & Frigon 2009; Pollack, 2009) and even more so if deemed in need of maximum security.

Criticisms by feminist criminologists concerning the *individualization* of risk in current classification systems also extends to more general mental health treatment available to federally sentenced women, typically in the form of cognitive-behavioural treatment (Shantz, Kilty & Frigon 2009; Kilty, 2012). As stated by Maidmont, “this treatment-based approach individualizes criminalized women and increasingly places the blame on cognitive deficiencies to account for one’s wrongdoing. Such approaches are devoid of any contextual analysis as to why certain groups of marginalized women are criminalized in the first place” (2006, p. 36). Often combined with cognitive-behavioural treatment is the prescribing of mood modifying drugs; federally sentenced women are prescribed such drugs at a much higher rate than women in the community. According to Kilty, “prescription patterns are also regionalized and racialized, with the highest rates of psychotropic medication use found in the Prairies where there is a disproportionate number of Aboriginal women in prison” (2012, p. 163).

Reintegration

CSC programs behind Canadian prison walls are intended to prepare incarcerated criminalized women for their eventual successful release into the community. To further assist in reintegration, supportive programming is also supposed to be available within the community once released. Considerable evidence, however, suggests that such CSC programming falls very short of its goals (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Auditor General Report, 2003). While still in prison, limitations to supportive programming include a lack of timely access to many prison programs and deficits in addictions programming (Pollack, 2008). For Aboriginal women not in the *Okimaw Ohci* Healing Lodge, Aboriginal-specific programming is less accessible (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2012). For all imprisoned women, there seems to be a lack of concrete and supportive pre-release planning and underuse of available mechanisms (e.g. temporary day passes) which could actually help criminalized women make important contacts within the community (employment, housing, treatment) prior to their full-time release. For Aboriginal women, a government stipulation (Section 84) that allows for release directly to one's own community is particularly underutilized. The predominance of gender-typed, employment training opportunities behind the walls (e.g. food preparation, housekeeping) fails to provide women with the skills needed to make a living wage once released.

Once released from prison, the social, economic and health challenges many criminalized women faced prior to their prison sentence are multiplied and magnified (Pollack, 2008; Shantz, Kilty, & Frigon, 2009; Maidmont, 2006). These difficulties include a limited availability of meaningful and culturally relevant addiction or mental health treatment options, affordable housing, and employment opportunities. Difficulties re-establishing relationships with families

are also common. Also now shouldered by paroled women is the stigma associated with having been in prison (Maidmont, 2006; Pollack, 2008). According to Shantz, Kilty, & Frigon (2009), female offenders' chance at successful reintegration is further limited by the "infantilizing and often debilitating experience of imprisonment" (p. 88) combined with limited community resources and the additional burden of being labelled as an ex-prisoner upon release.

Although CSC and certain social services agencies offer some support to help women transition back into the community, this support hardly makes up for the structural discrimination that criminalized women commonly experience. Upon their release from prison, women add the stigma associated with their status as ex-prisoners to a lengthy list of socio-structural locators such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, health status, mental health status, education level, and even job skills, all of which can have a negative impact on their ability to experience successful (re)integration [...] While CSC re-envisioned Canadian women's prisons as places that offer women choices and opportunities to rebuild their lives in supportive environments, instead these institutions continue to manifest the state's power—creating dependency rather than empowerment and thus limiting women's abilities to cope after their release. The vast government funding that is channelled into the prison industry and the limited support proffered to vital community resources has long been criticized for maintaining the inequitable socio-cultural and structural conditions that give rise to criminality in the first place. (Shantz, Kilty, & Frigon, 2009, p. 104)

The validity and usefulness of the term "re-integration" for criminalized women has been seriously questioned given that it "implies that women were integrated within 'mainstream' (which implicitly means white, middle class) communities" in the first place (Pollack, 2008, p. 31). Also questionable is the notion that prisons can be simultaneously punitive or controlling and supportive or empowering.

Researchers and activists have illustrated the myriad ways in which feminist discourses of empowerment and gender have been transmuted by correctional frameworks and used to further the penal agenda of regulation, punishment and control [...] A common theme underlying this work is the fact that regardless of what they are called or how correctional programming and policy is discursively framed, prisons cannot be empowering or even simply be benign; the ethos of imprisonment is deprivation and punishment, not care and support. This is one

of the reasons that many advocates for the rights of imprisoned populations have argued against tinkering with prisons to make them better at incarcerating people and have instead advocated decarceration strategies. (Pollack, 2008, p. 31)

For criminalized Indian women, imprisonment has an even more deep-seated historical meaning. According to Monture-Angus, “the prison is a total institution that relies on various forms of isolation as the essential form of control over the prisoner in the same way that reserves isolated Aboriginal peoples” (2006, p. 27).

2.5) Conclusion

We often forget that prison is only a temporary solution. And when it comes to Indian women, the statistics and research clearly show that too often, prison is also seen as the *easiest solution*. Time and time again, the justice and correctional systems have shown themselves to be largely ignorant when it comes to the treatment of Indian women who come from an array of horrific circumstances and for whom crime or violence is a means of survival. Many of these women have lost their voice and are afraid to speak out. Others simply do not know what to say. In the court system, many Indian women have experienced minimal support and as a consequence have pled guilty, which should always be a last resort rather than a first choice.

While in prison, women, particularly Indian women, experience a lack of support which disempowers them, eventually breaking down the body, mind, and soul. Over the years, many changes in facilities and programming have been enacted; however, as has been made clear in the above literature review, there is still a long way to go. Much of the research on criminalized women in Canada does not focus specifically on Indian women who, for many of the reasons explored above, would require a distinct research focus. Likewise, the lack of access to culturally appropriate programming for Indian women is a serious problem. The overall link between

spirituality or ceremony and healing is grossly under-researched, with no current or relevant literature to speak of. The one notable exception is that Fran Sugar and Lana Fox have, for instance, spoken openly and honestly about their time behind the walls and of how spirituality has played a central role in their healing journeys:

At times when I'd burn my medicine, when we had sweetgrass smuggled in to us because sometimes it was seen as contraband, the sweet smell of the earth would create a safe feeling, a feeling of being alive even though the cage represented a coffin, the prison a gravestone, and my sisters walking dead people. Those medicines were what connected me as a spirit child. One time when I was close to suicide I was told my Mista Hiya that my spirit was alive and it was housed in my physical shell. And from that hard time I learnt that my spirit was more important than my body because my body was controlled by the routine of life in prison. It was then the connectedness to being an Aboriginal Woman began. I began feeling good about myself even though I had only a few reasons to feel good. I understood there was a spirit within me that had the will to live. (Sugar and Fox, 1989/1990, p. 467)

Indian women behind the walls desperately need such hope and could benefit tremendously from hearing about the lived experiences of more women like Sugar and Fox. This is, in large part, the gap that my research attempts to address in this thesis.

In also seeking to understand what health and living in a healthy way means to criminalized Indian women, I acknowledge openly that these terms mean different things to different people, and that they may be difficult to pinpoint. For instance, many criminalized Indian women might not even have a conception of what is health or healthy living. Generally speaking, one does not go to jail or prison in a healthy state of body, mind, and soul. Perhaps it is as a result of this difficulty that I found very little research that speaks to the recovery and healing journeys of Indian women once they are released from prison. However, my research attempts to fill this gap by documenting the lives of formerly criminalized Indian women.

It is my hope that this thesis will show that it is important to listen to the stories of those Indian women. Documenting and sharing lived experience is an excellent way of finding out how criminalized Indian women feel, think, and see life in prison and out of prison, and beyond. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4, life history research gives us something that we cannot find in books because the best information about life comes from the hearts of those who have been there. Who are criminalized Indian women? They are beautiful humans who have suffered a life of pain and mayhem and yet have survived. That is who the women are, and they are women with a story to tell. The sharing of these stories, as I have learned throughout this process, can also be an important part of the healing journey.

In the following chapter, I discuss one the principal tools and frameworks used in my research with formerly criminalized Indian women: the Medicine Wheel. There I will discuss, among other things, the history of the Medicine Wheel, how it works, how it is built, and why it is a good match for uncovering the healing journeys of criminalized Indian women.

Chapter 3: Medicine Wheel Theory

3.1) Introduction

The Medicine Wheel is part of the ceremonial and cultural practices of many Indian people. I learned to use the Wheel by observation, practice, and by listening. I asked questions to confirm that I was on the right track when I was teaching and making Wheels with my students. The Wheel is circular because there is no beginning and no end: it is a continuous life process that is never-ending. All my years of research have taken me to many places, but arriving at an understanding of how to follow ceremony and feeling proud that I have been able to sustain life and live in culture has been by far the most important. Building Medicine Wheels with criminalized Indian women is a recipe for goodness, faith, hope, and for living prison-free as reintegrated human beings. Medicine Wheels are our balance.

Over the course of this research, the women and I built Medicine Wheels according to the different trials and tribulations of our lives. This chapter aims to explain the theory that is the Medicine Wheel. I begin by first providing historical context to the concept: what part the Medicine Wheel has played in traditional Indian culture, what it has been used for, and how it can be used today. I then give further details on how the Medicine Wheel is meant to work and what its process entails. I conclude this chapter by discussing why the Medicine Wheel is a particularly good tool for helping criminalized Indian women in their healing journeys.

3.2) Medicine Wheel: Historical Context

The Medicine Wheel is a very old tool that Indian people have used over the years as a means of healing from the past. There are different types of Wheels put together by a variety of Indian people such as the Cree, Saulteaux, and Sioux. And, of course there are many other tribes

throughout North America that practice the teachings of the Medicine Wheel (see Papequash 2012; Nabigon, 2006; Dapice, 2006; Knight, 2001). Throughout their lives, the Medicine Wheel helps individuals come to grips with, reflect on, and deal with the problems they face in the past, present and future. According to Michael Hart, the Medicine Wheel “has been utilized to explain and address issues, including racism, the impact of the Residential Schools, healing, education, and research” (2002, p. 39). Medicine Wheels can be conducted scientifically and through quantitative research methods, and there are really no boundaries as to how they can be used (Wilson, 2008; Walker, 2001; Crow, 2004).

Traditional practices have not always been accepted. Historically, grave changes took place that put Indian people into stifling positions; as a result, their holistic practices were altered to the detriment of their daily living. In *Education Is Our Buffalo*, the authors state

In the late 1800’s, the Government of Canada feared that Indians would organize and rise up against the new settlers in the west, as was happening in the United States. At the same time missionaries were eager to convert the First Nations people they viewed as savages to Christianity in order to, as they put it, “civilize” them. At the urging of the missionaries, the government passed laws restricting First Nations people from practicing many of their ceremony and customs. (The Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2006, p. 26)

In this era, everything that Indian people knew about tradition and ceremony had to go underground. Many Indian people would continue to practice their traditions and customs but would do so in secrecy. Ultimately, due to this long-lasting restriction, many of the traditions and customs of Indian people would be lost, including many languages. Fortunately, the Medicine Wheel and its holistic view of the universe have survived to this day. A great amount of knowledge can be uncovered using Medicine Wheels; they have been known to track not only life cycles of people, but also of animals, plants, stars/astronomy, and environmental issues.

Indian people have a rich and vibrant culture. Most Indian people live by the laws of the land, honour Mother Earth, and understand that the environment is essential to daily life. As stated in *Education is our Buffalo*, “The cultures of Aboriginal people are holistic; that is, they are totally integrated in their connection to Mother Earth” (2006, p. 26). In other words, Indian people are of the belief that all things, whether animate or inanimate, and that all have a place in the world. This significance has been vital to the sustenance of Indian people, and to how they relate to Mother Earth. As Elder Danny Musqua explained,

We have a beautiful tradition and a holistic view of the universe that makes us who we are. In our circle, we need the old and the young, the old teach the young to keep the tradition alive. Nothing really dies out in a circle, things might get old and wear out but they renew again, generation after generation. That is what the circle is about. (as cited by Knight, 2001, p. 34)

It is said that working together in a holistic manner will bring Indian people closer together. The Medicine Wheel as a holistic tool makes this possible.

3.3) The Medicine Wheel Explained

The Medicine Wheel has been used for healing purposes for generations. As Michael Hart explains, “The medicine wheel is an ancient symbol of the universe used to help people understand things or ideas which often cannot be seen physically” (2002, p. 39). The Medicine Wheel can be expressed in many ways, and there is no right or wrong. The idea behind the process is to have people work through the Wheel from birth to wherever they find themselves at the present time. The Medicine Wheel can be used to assist an individual in his or her own self-reflection. According to Hart, “traditional ceremonial leaders explain that every person has their own medicine wheel since it can reflect each person’s own life” (2002, p. 39). In this sense, the

Medicine Wheel is like a snowflake where no two are the same. It is a unique and beautiful thing.

Most Indian people will know and understand the significance of using circles/Medicine Wheels and their connectedness to the land and its people. It is also said that working with Elders within the Medicine Wheel is vital to the restoration of life. According to Joan Sanderson,

the Elders shared wise counsel, advice, and guidance about maintaining harmony and balance in families and the community. They provided a continuity of worldview; they also lent wisdom to daily life and brought order to chaos. Elders were the reminders of heritage and survival and strength. (1992, p. 19)

The Wheel is like a journey of life that you can take to explore your lineage and to access knowledge from past Indians who have lived on this Earth for many moons. Because many Elders are profoundly spiritual people, they carry the great lessons of the Medicine Wheel. As such, they are the backbone within the Wheel, and it is through them that balance can and will be reached.

Working the Wheel

Working the Medicine Wheel is done to grasp life in new ways. It is about being innovative, honest, and willing to take the good with the bad. There is no right or wrong way to work and/or develop a Medicine Wheel. A person will not work through their Wheel in an hour or two; like anything of any value in life, it is a process that will take a lifetime.

The process of healing is not easy. The past comes close to the heart and makes life hard to live; however, the Medicine Wheel might help a person see new options or possibilities for herself. By helping her put a whole new perspective on life, the Medicine Wheel assists a person in releasing stress and makes it possible for her to let go of pain and misery. As a result, it might also help people understand who they really are, and where they want to go in life. The Medicine

Wheel teaches us that it is important to know who you are, where you are going, and what you need to do in order to stay in balance.

The Wheel is merely another way to log your life from birth to becoming old. Like journal writing, poetry, or storytelling, the Wheel is a tool that can help people to see and understand their pasts so that they may grasp what went wrong and why. It is a means of exploring *mino-pimatisiwm* (living the good life) and attaining revelations. In *The Sacred Tree*, it is said that “the Medicine Wheel teaches us that the four elements, each so distinctive and powerful, are all part of the physical world. All must be respected equally for their gift of life” (Bopp et al. 2004, p. 11). If working through the Medicine Wheel is followed and done according to who you are as an individual, it has the potential to grow into powerful gifts of life.

The concept of four is significant to the Medicine Wheel. The Wheel has four sections that follow the four directions: North, East, South, and West. In those sections, for example, there are also four seasons, four animals, four colours that signify the four races of people, which are all part of the life cycle. As a rule you would start the Wheel in the North from birth, where you would have received an Indian name. Then you would continue on towards the East, South, West, and back to the North and continue the life cycle until death, and beyond. However, due to the colonial changes of our society some people might start the Wheel process somewhere past the East or closer to the North. Wherever the process begins it will continue onwards in a circular motion.

Four Sections, Four Directions

It will be important to learn and understand the four sections within the Medicine Wheel. The North is where life begins. This is where family, friends, and community nurture you. It is the place where you learn to crawl, walk, and run. It is where we are interconnected with the

environment. Here we learn the importance of right from wrong, and we learn to talk and find our way. It is where we learn to be sustainable as we grow through our lives. The North is about challenge and change; here we will also learn to combat racism, sexism, discrimination, and stigma. The first stage of awareness is opening your heart and feeling trust for others.

The East is where we become more educated. The Elders will teach us the philosophy of their teachings, and why they are important. As we mature to young adults we will of course make mistakes; however, if we listen to the teaching of the Elders, our mistakes will be easy to overcome. Barriers might present themselves, but we will learn to get through, under, over and around them. The East is a place of nourishment and learning. Here we will learn to love and be loved. If we take the wrong path then here we will learn disillusionment in life, and we could become lost.

The South is a place where we have grown from a young adult to an adult. We have learned many things at this point, and we have either used those teachings wrongly or rightly. All our decisions will be our own. We will have floundered but always picked ourselves up and forged ahead in order to prosper no matter what. At this point in time, we have already learned the importance of ceremony. If we have taken the wrong path in life, things will fall into place again when we become stable—and if we stay within the Medicine Wheel and the teaching of the Elders.

The West is a place where we are now grown adults. At this time, we have learned how to live, good or bad. This is a place of great wisdom as long as we have followed whatever our traditions might be. We have become educated and are now teachers, social workers, medical doctors, chiefs, and Elders, or we have become lost and are lawbreakers, street people. But once we have admitted our wrongs, the path will become straight again. We have also learned that we

do not know everything about life, and that once we step into our healing journeys, we will be there until death or beyond. We have learned how important it is to live the circle of life and that no matter how many mistakes we make, we will never be judged.

Using the Wheel takes creativity, strength, and calm. According to Dr. Gregory Cajete (1994), there are four cardinal directions of indigenous creativity: North (warrior/hunter), South (philosopher/teacher), East (Artist/Poet), and West (Shaman/priest). There are also eight stages of developmental learning:

The process begins with a deep and abiding respect for the spirit of each child from before the moment of birth. The first stage of Indigenous education revolves around learning within the family, learning the first aspects of culture and learning how to integrate one's unique personality in a family context. Education in the second stage revolves around social learning: being introduced to Tribal society, and learning how to live in the natural environment. The third stage revolves around melding individual needs with group needs through the processes of: initiation, learning guiding myths, and participating in ritual and ceremony. The fourth stage is a midpoint in which the individual achieves a high level of integration with the culture and attains a degree of peace of mind. The fifth stage is a period of searching for a life vision, a time of pronounced individuation and the development of mythical thinking. The sixth stage ushers in a period of major transformation characterized by deep learning about the unconsciousness. In the seventh stage deep healing occurs in which the self mutualizes with body, mind, and spirit. In this stage, deep understanding, enlightenment, and wisdom are gained. This stage ends with the attainment of a high level of spiritual understanding (1994, p. 209).

The four aspects of the Medicine Wheel are the parts of us as human beings that need to be balanced when the healing journey begins. They are what will assist us in guiding and building the Wheel. They also represent "the four aspects of the earth, [which are the] emotional, physical, mental and spiritual" (Sanderson, 1992, p. 45). When all these aspects are in balance, a person's life can be a wonderful place to be and live in.

3.4) Building a Medicine Wheel with Criminalized Indian Women

Criminalized Indian women have suffered much indignation throughout their lives. They have experienced physical and cultural destructions that have left them helpless and lost. They exist in a world that is lonely and empty, and they lack the opportunities that non-Indians are given. Many Indian women suffer trauma, which leads to despair. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation argues that

For Aboriginal women, European economic and cultural expansion was especially destructive. Their value as equal partners in Tribal society was undermined completely. The Aboriginal inmates in Kingston Prison for Women described the result this way: “The critical difference is racism. We are born to it and spend our lives facing it. Racism lies at the root of our life experiences. The effects are violence, violence against us, and in turn our own violence.” (2001, p. 6)

Whether they are in or out of prison, criminalized Indian women have shown remarkable abilities of survival. The significance of the Medicine Wheel for criminalized Indian women is that it can become an important part of their healing journeys because it is a great outlet for them to explore who they are, how they can heal, and where they are going. It is a simple tool that can assist them to empower their shattered lives.

Rebuilding Lives

With the breakdown and disorganization of communities, Indian women have been impacted through their loss of role, loss of pride, and loss of dignity. Living life in the Wheel can help them restore and rebuild their lives. While the healing journey is not easy, it represents an essential part of how any criminalized Indian women will stay prison-free. The building of the Medicine Wheel as such is not difficult; the hard part comes with having to rehash and remember the hurts of the past. The Medicine Wheel brings wholeness, restitution, and serenity to the

disorder of living in an unkind society. It gives breadth to our lives and fills the holes and the suffering that have led to the criminalization of so many Indian women. Through both the teachings and the knowledge transition that the Medicine Wheel brings, Indian women will not only build common ground, but they will prosper and grow.

As we know, the Wheel is a sacred tool used in the healing journey. It nourishes body, mind, and soul. It is used to bring back balance, hope, and reciprocity. And it is used to show how Indian people have made their way since being colonized and being put into Residential Schools. The Medicine Wheel can help us see things that we might have difficulty seeing for ourselves. Because all people have the ability and capacity to grow, learning about the Medicine Wheel can help a person find the connection that her life has or had, and where and why she might have gone astray.

A Tool of Discovery

Because we are all part of a larger universe, the Medicine Wheel is also a tool of discovery.

According to Sun Bear, Wabun Wind, & Crysalis Mulligan

The Medicine Wheel can help you to know you have many possibilities within yourself. However, you have to place yourself in various experiences to realize what is possible. It is experiencing strength that we can let our own weaknesses fall away from us. Sometimes strength will come from learning about human nature. Other times it will come from the elements, the plants, and the animals. If you live in a way that is open to all the lessons the universe has to teach you, you can be sure that the right lesson will always come to you at the proper time, no matter who the teacher is or what the tool for teaching might be. People who live in this way find that life is beautiful and the earth is a magical place that constantly presents new marvels to them. It is possible for anyone to live like this if he so chooses. The Medicine Wheel is a tool to help you do this. (1991, pp. 72–73)

The Medicine Wheel is a circle that has great significance to our lives as Indian people. Teaching Indian women the importance of the circle and how, by using it as a daily tool, they

will be able to live the good life, is a fundamentally simple task that can help bring balance to their lives. The Medicine Wheel can provide them with foundational knowledge that will help them create their own Wheel according to their own healing journeys. And when practiced consistently, the Wheel can bring peace to the traumatic events that mark the lives of many federally sentenced Indian women living in and out of prison.

If for some reason an individual is not able to find balance through the Medicine Wheel, it simply means that she may not be ready to walk her healing journey. A person has to *want* to change; she has to want to live sober and free of drugs. For this we all need faith, hope, and the courage to make a positive change, to make a difference in our own lives. To know freedom is to live freedom.

In the next chapter, I discuss the concept of the Sharing Circle, which is another principle tool used in my research. I also detail how I selected and engaged with participants, and the process surrounding the one-on-one interviews that I conducted with each of the women. I then explore what it means to use life history as a methodology and the importance of ceremony as research in my project.

Chapter 4: Methodology—The Walk Through Ceremony

4.1) Introduction

This chapter discusses the route taken in my research on women and healing. I searched for, and found, three Indian women who had been in prison at one point in their lives to participate in my research. During our time together, these women and I discussed what healthy reintegration meant to them, as well as how they have been able to stay out of prison since their release. In the previous chapter, I explained the Medicine Wheel as the key framework of my research. In this chapter, I build on that discussion by introducing another important tool of my research: Sharing Circles. I also detail the process of how I first found, and communicated with, my participants, as well as how I conducted one-on-one interviews with them. Lastly, I discuss what it means to use life history as a methodology and the importance of ceremony as research in my project. I chose to call this chapter “The Walk Through Ceremony” because each of the Sharing Circles that make up the research was itself a ceremony.

4.2) The Participants

As is appropriate to a medicine wheel framework, there were four participants in this study; I was one of the four, and I recruited three others. It was important to me that this research be conducted with women I already knew. Given the nature of my research, I believed that working with women I have known in the past and *did time with* would enable them to feel comfortable and safe. I looked for Indian women who had been out of prison and/or jail for at least five years or longer. I believed that in order to be well into the healing journey, this amount of time was necessary. I also looked for Indian women over thirty years of age. This is not to say that the young are unimportant; however, I thought it important to target slightly older women because

they would have had more experience going in and out of prison—and with life in general—than, for instance, eighteen or twenty year olds. My criteria also required that the women have at minimum of one year's sobriety. I know from experience that the first year in recovery is the most important. It is during this year that you learn to gain confidence in yourself. It is where you find yourself, and where you begin to deal with the demons of the past, working through all of the negative aspects of addiction and abuse. The first year of sobriety is a time when individuals become empowered and learn to live, let go, and move forward.

The three women I asked to participate in my research were more than happy to accept. Initially, I contacted each one of them by telephone and/or Facebook and asked them if they would be interested in meeting with me individually to talk about the possibility of participating in my study. I subsequently met with one of the women who lives near Saskatoon and explained what I wanted to do, and why I wanted her to be part of the research. With the other two women, this initial conversation took place over Facebook correspondence, email, phone, and texting. When we all met together at the two first Sharing Circles, I also explained the whole process once more, and all appropriate consent forms were signed. Thus I was in constant contact with the women over the time we decided to do this together. The protocol detailed in the pages that follow was approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

4.3) Data Collection

We shared our stories collectively, through Sharing Circles, and individually, through interviews and my own autobiographical narrative. Data collection took place over a period of six weeks. The Sharing Circles and interviews took place at the First Nations University of Canada. The

Circles were held in the Spiritual Room where Elder Musqua teaches traditional courses, while the interviews were held in my office at the university.

Sharing Circles

There were a total of four Sharing Circles. Before each Circle, we first enjoyed a meal together. At each Circle, during our meal, we discussed and reached consensus on how the Circle would proceed. The meals would set the pace for the Circles, and whatever emotions and/or topics that came up during the meal determined how we would proceed during the Circle. As the host of each Circle, I would open with a Smudging Ceremony. Each woman was given a turn to express her thoughts, feelings, and stories during all of the Circles. I used an eagle feather as a talking device so that when one of the women held the feather, she would be the only one allowed to speak, and no one would be permitted to interrupt her until she was done. If any of the women were menstruating, they were not allowed to hold the eagle feather due to the fact that this is when a woman is at her most powerful, and we do not wish to disrespect the feather. Although no time limit for the Sharing Circles was set, each lasted approximately two and a half to three hours.

Because these women had agreed to set aside some time in their busy schedules in order to share their lives with me, I wanted to give something in return. Within the first and second Sharing Circles, I thus offered the women tobacco as this is the appropriate cultural protocol when asking an Indian to be part of something, whether it is ceremony or research. An offering of tobacco is a show of respect, dignity, and honour. I did not need to offer cloth because I deemed the tobacco offering to be sufficient. I also paid for the food, as well as for the gas mileage or bus tickets of the women who were required to travel.

Since we did not have an Elder present, I took it upon myself to do the prayer. I asked some Elders to join us in the Sharing Circles; however, those I asked were unable to come. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to search for other potential Elders, and this was further complicated by the fact that we required a female Elder as opposed to a male Elder due to the nature of the research. In the second Sharing Circle, I opened up the Circle and asked each of the women how they felt about not having an Elder present and whether this posed any issues. Two of the women had not had any previous dealings with Elders, except for when they were incarcerated. Because it was technically not their way, they were fine with not having an Elder present but were still willing to learn about culture, Sharing Circles, and Medicine Wheels. The third woman worked with Elders and also felt okay with not having one present in the Circle. This woman also noted that because she practices the Sundance regularly, attends other ceremonies as well as AA and NA meetings, she knew that she had people she could reach out to if she encountered any issues with the Circle. The other two women also explained that they too had other resources they could count on if needed. I selected these women for the study because I knew they were strong and balanced in their lives, and I knew they would not require as much assistance as a woman who was just coming out of prison.

The Sharing Circles were not recorded. I had initially planned on recording the Circles but decided against it after discussing the possibility with the women. Because the Circles are ceremonies, we all agreed that we did not need to use a voice recorder. As a rule, ceremonies are not usually recorded in any fashion unless permission is obtained from Elders, and as previously mentioned, no Elders were present. I did, however, note by hand some of what was said in the Sharing Circles. On the whole, it did not amount to much notetaking because I found it difficult to focus and/or write when a woman was opening her heart and soul to us in the Circle. I mostly

took notes for fear that we would subsequently miss something, but the Circles and interviews went so well on their own that I did not end up making use of these notes. I did not ask the women to review my notes, but they were aware that I was notetaking. However, the Circles were so intense that I ended up writing more notes after each Circle was over when I was alone in my office. I did not feel it was important to share these notes. Because so many raw emotions were shared in the Circles, this round of notetaking took the form of a journal where I would write down my own feelings as I reflected back on the women's stories.

At the first Sharing Circle I discussed my study, and why I was looking at reintegration. I shared my own personal healing journey, and how I have been able to sustain healthy reintegration. Although these women already knew me, sharing my own story cut the ice, got things rolling, and made the women feel more comfortable. One woman in particular initially felt a little intimidated, but after the first Circle she could hardly wait for the next one.

During the second and third Circles, participants shared their own healing journeys and began developing their own Medicine Wheels. First, we talked about the meaning and process of constructing a Medicine Wheel. After detailed explanation, the women took their Wheels home to work on them further. One of the women emailed her Wheel back to me, and I helped her fill it in as she could not make it back to Saskatoon. The second woman sent her Wheel to me via the post. The third woman came to my office, and we completed hers together.

The fourth Circle was the closing Sharing Circle where we shared our Medicine Wheels with each other. With the women's permission, which I obtained through signed consent forms, I took pictures of each of the Wheels. We wanted to create one Medicine Wheel for all of us, but time was a factor, and we did not get the chance. However, the women all felt okay with this.

These Sharing Circles were powerful beyond my imagination. I had no idea where this research would take me, and I had no idea how the Sharing Circles would turn out—if at all. I felt deeply honoured to sit in the Circles with these women. The experience was fierce. I have learned so much in the Indian world since my sobriety, and this research process has given me the ability to be confident and to fear nothing.

In the last Sharing Circle, one of the women broke down in tears and said that she did not want this process to end. That is when our new Sharing Circle was born. Since the closing of the Sharing Circles and the end of the interviews we have held two additional Sharing Circles. One woman, however, could not attend due to lack of funding for travel. Our goal now is to obtain an Indian name and/or spirit name for our Sharing Circle. In the near future, we will be taking tobacco and cloth to a Sweat Lodge in order to request our name and receive blessings from the Elders at the Lodge. We intend to invite other Indian women who have just been released from prison and/or women who have already been reintegrated back into society.

Interviews

In between Sharing Circles, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the participants. During the interviews, I requested that the women speak to each of the parts of the Medicine Wheel and that they take notes as this would make it easier for them to put their own Wheel together. In addition, the purpose of the individual interviews was to provide participants with an opportunity, if they so desired, to share any part of their story they may not have felt comfortable sharing during the Circles. The individual interview also allowed a participant more time than in group session to share any individual stories. During the interviews, I asked the women one main question: Would you please share your life with me? After this first question was asked, I would ask the next three questions: (1) What is your view of being healthy; (2) What do you need to be

healthy; (3) What does healthy reintegration mean to you? The interview process was a wonderful experience.

With the women's consent, I used a voice recorder throughout the interviews. The interviews were transcribed with the help of my administrative assistant and friend. Once the transcribing was done and everything was in order, I gave a copy back to each of the women. I gave them approximately two weeks to go through what they had said and to either take out or add in whatever they saw fit. I felt it was important to allow the women to make some final decisions on the transcripts and to determine whether they might have missed something while being interviewed. The women made their own revisions and took certain things out of the transcript that might have enabled others to recognize their identities. Two of the women wished to stay anonymous and use pseudonyms, but one woman used her own name because she stated that she had nothing to hide from or fear. One of the women came to my office, and we sat together for approximately one hour, going through her transcript paragraph by paragraph. As for the other two women, we emailed back and forth in order to finalize the transcript revisions.

4.4) The Life History Method

I utilized a method known as *life history* as part of my research methodology. Life history is a means of capturing a single life (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). It is a form of research that is like a biography, autobiography, narrative, storytelling, or ethnography of a person's life and/or lived experience. In my research, therefore, life history is the cycle of an individual's life as told by the Indian women whom I interviewed. Currently the life history method is increasingly used as a means to explore research paradigms. On this point Rubby Dhunpath writes,

Autobiography, biography and other forms of life history, each dedicated to the significance of individual experience, have become increasingly important

implications for teaching educational inquiry. As a theory of cognition, narrative has important implications for teaching and learning at all levels of education. (2000, p. 544)

As Shawn Wilson has noted, it is imperative that Indigenous peoples articulate their own research designs in keeping with codes of conducts that honour their knowledge systems (2008). In other words, research for Indigenous peoples must be conducted by, for, and with Indigenous peoples themselves. As I have been thinking about life history throughout the course of my research, I have been struck by how similar it is to oral storytelling. Like oral storytelling, life history emphasizes the importance of gathering, interpreting, and reporting biographical information (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). The meaning of life, and how to express it, can come in many favourable ways, but according to the ways of my culture, the spoken word has truth. Using life history as a method thus allows me to acknowledge my own people, our rich culture, and our way of life, while also providing me with a useful tool for interviewing my participants.

Because at its core life history is about shining a light on individual people's whole life stories, as opposed to fragments of their lives, it was a good match for the healing journeys of the Indian women whom I interviewed, and the medicine wheel framework through which these journeys were articulated. Since life history allows the full context and complexity of one's life to surface, I could rest assured that these women's life choices—good or bad—would be recognized in the research as valid and important. I believe this recognition to be very important, especially in this sort of research where human life is at the forefront. For enabling me to bring these stories out through my research, life history as method is a definite win.

Research as Ceremony and Ceremony as Research

In the course of this thesis, I have also come to the realization that research can be designed as a ceremony that brings us together. This is a difficult point to speak to as there is virtually nothing

written on ceremony as part of research. Part of the reason for this is that when it comes to Indian people, not everything is written. The other reason is that unless one has lived ceremony, it can be a hard thing to understand. It is a bit like the adage, “Until you have walked in my moccasins, you will never understand how I have lived.” Along these same lines, James A. Muchmore writes,

For example, in writing this paper, I am transforming my lived experience into a work of fiction. It is fiction because no matter how completely I tell it and no matter how you (the reader) read it, you can never experience it in the same way that I did—nor, for that matter, will I ever be able to re-experience it in exactly the same way that I did when it originally occurred. Instead, acting together, we are jointly constructing a unique version of my lived experience. (1999, p. 5 & 6)

Since 2002, I have spoken with many Elders who, in their own way, have stated that research can be a kind of ceremony. In both their teachings and at public conferences, Elders Campbell Papequash and Danny Musqua have gone as far as to say that when doing research with Indian people, ceremony *should* be part of that research (see Papequash, 2012; Knight (as told by Musqua), 2001).

I believe in my heart that my research is not only ceremony but that, in this case, ceremony was research. The four sharing circles were ceremonies – in which we researched our healing journeys through the medicine wheel – and as ceremonies we were transformed. Even though the Sharing Circles were one of the most difficult tasks I have ever taken on, they made me a stronger, wiser, and better Indian woman. As you read the women’s stories in the chapters to come, you will get a glimpse of the essence of what ceremony can do for one’s life. In writing about what research means to him, Wilson concludes “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right” (2008, p. 135).

* * *

Part Two of this thesis, beginning in the next chapter, presents the life stories of four Indian women, my own included. Please note that I have not changed any of the wording. I ask that you read with an open mind and heart, and that you withhold your judgment until you have reached the end of your reading. You will be awed.

Part Two

Chapter 5: They Stole my Thunder—Sharon’s Story

5.1) Introduction

The story I tell in this chapter is based on the facts of my life. I will discuss what I used to be like, what happened in my life, and where I am today. I have followed some simple rules, guidelines, and teachings from Indian Elders. I learned everything by trial and error. I came, I saw, and I conquered. I rose from the ashes to where I am at this moment. I lived through extreme pain and suffering. I never thought I would live to see twenty years of age, but here I am fifty-eight, soon to be fifty-nine years old. Like so many other alcoholics and drug addicts who have come out the other end triumphant, my life story is a miracle. We have learned to serve a God of our understanding. I have come to believe, in a power higher than myself for once in my life. This is my healing journey from nowhere land.

Kiishiibii-biizuu Kinew Ikwe (Circling Eagle Woman)

Anin sikwa, I am Circling Eagle Woman—this is my Indian name. My Christian name is Sharon Leslie Acoose. I was born May 3rd, 1953—good year, ’53. I am going to be sharing bits, pieces, and parts of my healing journey and life story with you. I am going to do storytelling with you, which in the Indian way is a form of sharing one’s own life. It can also be called oral storytelling. I have learned that it is not just our Elders who do oral storytelling—anyone who has lived and has something of significance to share, whether an individual or a group, can do oral storytelling. Mine is a story of pain, misery, and agony. It seems like I started my PhD eons ago, and it has brought me to this point. I have interviewed three other Indian women who have been incarcerated in the federal and/or provincial justice systems at some point in their lives.

They were also in girls' reform institutions—institutions where kids are locked up for *being bad* so to speak. So initially our trudge through the system began in prisons for kids. We are criminalized Indian women, and the term tells you who we were. But it is a label that we have all successfully abolished for ourselves. We have all successfully reintegrated into this society known as the human race. We are warriors. Here is my story.

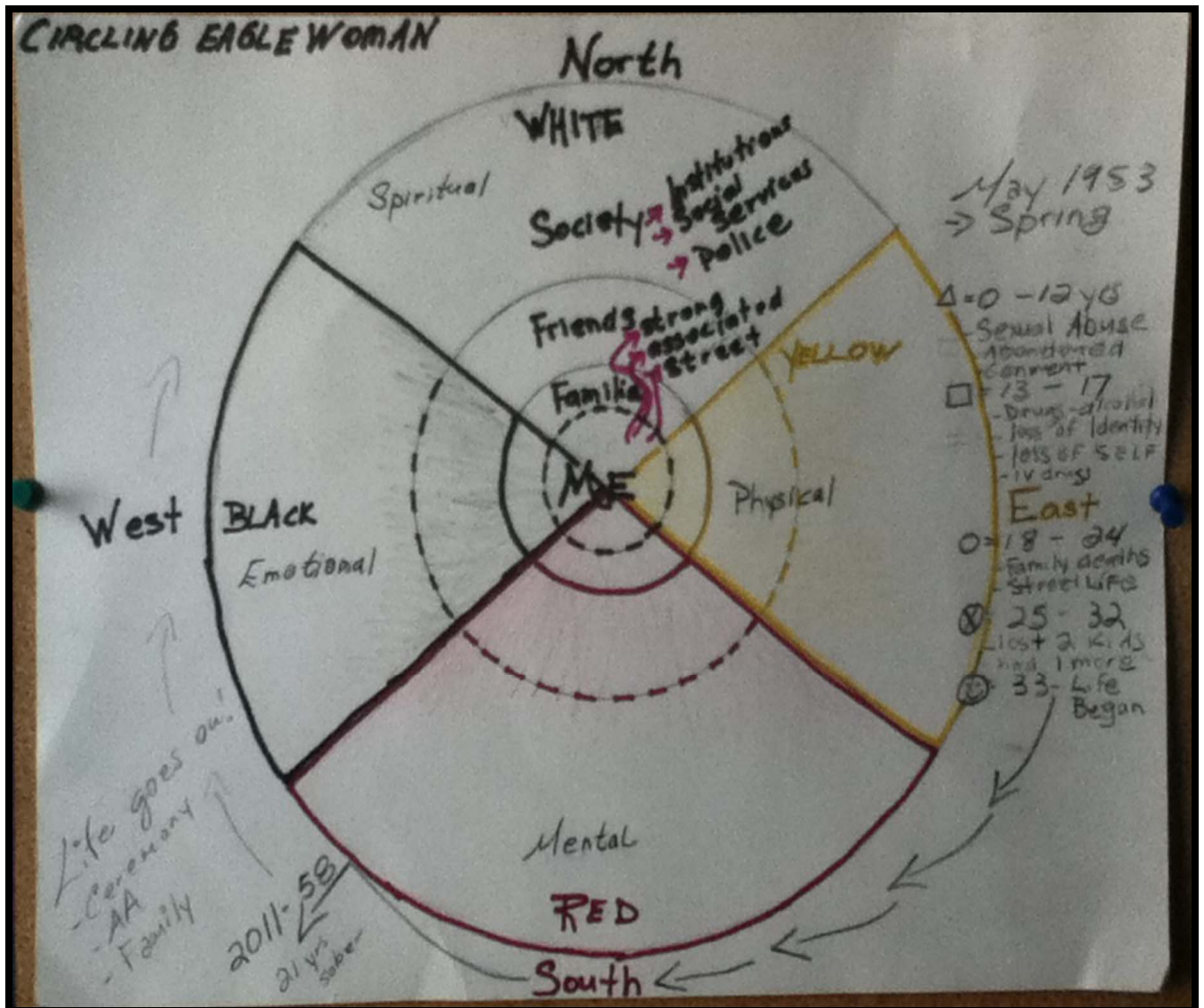


Image 5.1: Sharon's Medicine Wheel

5.2) My Youth Gone Awry

I have so many memories and so little time, but I will do the best I can to go through what I need to talk about in short order. It's been a long life so bear with me. I lived in Regina during most of my youth. My family moved off the Sakimay Indian Reservation back in the early 1950s. I would be born into a world that would not be kind to me. It would be dark as my life would become. This life I have lived is mine, and like many other addicts I do not hold anyone responsible except myself. I did the things I did to *survive*. It is the only way I knew how to exist. There were those who would steal my thunder, and you will meet them as you read on.

Rendering of a Child Spirit Through Sexual Abuse

My earliest recollection of sexual abuse was at the age of three. I remember lying on the floor in a bedroom on a mattress. I am not sure if I had bloomers on or a diaper, but I remember my uncle lay down beside me and stuck his hand in my bloomers or diaper. I remember feeling so afraid, and because of that fear, I never said anything. I am not even sure I would have had enough words at three years of age to express my pain and fear in that moment. I know I didn't like how his hand felt, and I attempted to move, but he held me firm, and then my memories are gone just like that. My next memories come from when I was around five years of age.

Later on in my sobriety my memories came back tenfold, and I remembered the sexual abuse starting at the age of five and running through until I was around eleven years old. Those would be the years that would make me the woman I turned out to be. The sexual abuse took hold and it destroyed my very being. My life would become scrambled like six eggs. It was three of my uncles who would pollute my soul, and my child spirit would be damaged. I could almost see her leaving, and she would run away and hide for years to come. The sexual abuse beginning

at the age of five and lasting to approximately the age of eight is what I remember the most. It was a horrible thing for a small child to have to go through, but I firmly believe it made me who I am today.

I don't remember the very first time, but I do remember the many times. My uncle would have me sitting on his knee, pretending to be the doting uncle, and meanwhile he had his shriveled up old dick (penis) out of his pants rubbing it against my skin or on my vagina as he would push my panties over, the sick fuck. It doesn't matter how many times I talk or write about this, it still puts a big lump in my throat. You know he was supposed to love me like a niece, but instead he treated me like a whore. He was really violent and would be extremely aggressive. He took chances too, and even if there were people around he always had his gross disgusting smelly fucking hands on me. One time he had me in his room with my pants to the ground, and he was lying on top of me rubbing my vagina, and I would feel something warm and sticky run down my ass. It was fucked up. I remember he would be rubbing me, and I would get these warm feelings that actually in all honesty felt good, but when it was over I felt fucking dirty. I just wanted to die. I guess you would call them orgasms if you were a woman, but I was a mere child.

I just wanted to fall into a hole and stay there. I tried to stay away from him, but the money he gave me kept me at his disposal. I loved candy—I was a kid, and what kid doesn't like candy? The darkness crept in like a thief in the night. My soul would close itself to the world, and I would lay in that darkness and wish for death. Now you tell me what the fuck a five-year-old kid knows about death. Time and time again the abuse went on and on and on. I remember at one point I would go to him because he had by this time conditioned me. I had money coming in, and those little orgasms were kind of cool for a second or two. I would go to him and sit close or

on his knee, and he would do his business. I do remember trying to stop it, but he told me if I told anyone he would hurt my family or someone in my family. It was like living in a perpetual fucking nightmare that just went on forever.

There was a shed outside my *kokum's* (grandmother's) house in the back by the outhouse. And it was dark, damp, and smelled of mould. You know for years I was afraid of the dark and could never understand why until I remembered my life, and when that happened it all came to light, it all made sense. Anyway, he would take me to this shed or I would go meet him there, and we would do our business in the dark of that cold little shed. The windows were all blacked out so it was the perfect haven for a fucked-up old child molester. I remember every feeling, every moment of remorse that he bestowed on my soul, and it was absolutely gruesome. What he did to me would be devastating; he took away my child's spirit and my breath. I was his whore to have and to hold. As long as that money kept coming, so did I, so to speak.

I was a little girl without a soul. Little girls should be playing in the mud. Little girls should be playing with dolls and should be just enjoying life. Little girls should be running free and living safe. Little girls should be playing in the snow making angels. Little girls should feel safe wearing cute little dresses. Little girls should be trying out their mommy's makeup and playing dress-up. Me, well, I was feeling penises. I was touching them, and I would feel them on my ass or near my vagina. I would know what a penis tasted like, what the fuck was he thinking? Where had his life gone so wrong that he had to fuck so deliberately with mine? Had he been abused as a kid or what? I have no idea, all I know is I would allow him to sexually abuse me for years, what seemed like fucking bazillions of years. Every day for years I would be victimized, raped, and abused—morally, emotionally, physically, mentally, and verbally. I was a train wreck

going nowhere fast. I grew to care very little about men except my dad and my brothers. They would be the only men I ever truly loved without remorse or regret.

My *kokum's* house would be my coffin. I was unhappy, I was lost, but no one saw it, they all had their own issues to contend with. I know in my heart there is no way that I could have been the only kid this old fuck was abusing, no way in hell. I remember there were lots of kids around, so he must have had a smorgasbord of kids to fondle and abuse. I remember living in fear all the time. I hated going to my *kokum's* house, but the money, it was all about the money, and it kept me there in his reach. I loved candy more than I could love myself; I was a little bit crazy that way even at five years of age.

Another uncle who lived in the States would be the next perpetrator. Thankfully it would not last too long, but it was just as fucked up as the first one or the second one. You know these men were my family, my uncles, but they took a part of me that would go into hiding for years and years. This uncle abused me in the state of Montana in a couple of different places. I remember feeling the same way; all messed up and bent out of shape—but let's not forget it was money in the hand. We were living on a farm in a trailer, and there was another farm close by. I remember being sent over to that farm where I would be sexually molested by the old dude that lived there; it was fucked up, seriously fucked up, and I never felt so alone in all my little life. I really don't know why these memories are so vivid, you know, they are so *there*, but really it has helped me not to go crazy. I cannot recollect how many times this uncle abused me, but it was a few, and of course there was money. One time he had me in the back of the trailer and had my pants to the floor and was trying to ride me from behind. I was crying, and he hit me and told me to shut the fuck up. It was fucking horrible the things I had to succumb to, but I did. I remember those feelings too, those orgasms, and realistically I enjoyed them for the time they lasted. I was

like eight or nine when this abuse would occur, so being a little older made the feelings even stronger.

I remember looking at my uncles and wanting to kill them. I just wanted to cut off their stinky gross dicks and shove them up their assholes. Why they did these things to me I will never understand, and I will never forget, but I also refuse to hate myself anymore or blame myself because it had nothing to do with me. It was their sick fucking demented old minds. From there my hatred of men would fester. When I got older I would fuck relentlessly with every man that ever tried to fuck with me, and they would pay for what my uncles did to me as a child. I would do exactly this; I would never have a normal love relationship. I would be married, but it was a farce, a joke. I have to say that I did love my husband, but I only realized this after he died. He only filled a void in my life, and at the time I thought I was in love—whatever love was. I think I was in love with the idea of being in love, as one of my friends said to me once. But my uncles, they made me the monster I would turn out to be. They took from me something that was supposed to be spiritual and loving. They stole my spirit. They stole my *thunder!*

5.3) Years into the Abyss

Okay, so there is much more to this but since I have limited time I am going to only discuss the things that are relevant to my PhD and save the other stuff for my book. My life was in and out of darkness. My dark passenger would stay with me for years. Speaking with my grandchildren recently made me realize that I do not remember any Christmases or Easters or All Hallows' Eves or Valentine's Days or any of those special little holidays that they love so much. I do not remember getting presents or candy or stuffed animals, but I surely remember being violated and raped. I remember one Christmas I think I was thirteen or so and there was this big-ass gift under the tree, and I was beside myself because it had my name on it. I remember my (now) deceased

brother bugging me, and I was mad because he said he knew what it was and was not going to tell me. I remember I slept in front of that tree and waited all night. To make a long story short, Christmas Day I tore that box to shreds to get to my juicy little whatever it was in that box, and I was shocked.

I sat there and I looked at it with utter disgust, but I did not show it of course because it was from my (now) deceased mommy. It was the ugliest red corduroy coat with a fake fur collar that you could ever imagine, and my brother was rolling around on the floor laughing like the fool he was, and I was heartbroken. But I sucked it up and told my mom that it was the most beautiful thing in the world—and in the end I think I wore it twice. If she would ask me why I was not wearing it, I would make up some lame-ass excuse, and being the gem she was, she believed me. That coat would stay on the hanger and look new forever. I do remember a few Christmases where I would buy my brothers the same thing every year—Brut cologne—and I think they just acted surprised to make me feel good. Yup, every year they got the same thing. There were some good times amongst the mayhem. Most of the times I remember for special holidays was around twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and it was All Hallows' Eve. Because the last time I went out was the age of fourteen, but no memories of any special days, just the mayhem and abuse is remembered.

So once I hit thirteen I was pretty much messed up and no one knew, or I do not think anyone knew. I am not even sure if my mom knew what I was; my niece figures she did, but I have no idea. I started smoking cigarettes, smoking dope, and drinking with my friends who were all white. I was the only little Indian girl in my class, and for that matter there were maybe six of us in the whole school back in the day. You have to remember that we were colonized, but that is a story for other research. I am just telling you like it was. My white friends' parents did

not like me, but my mom, well she accepted them all into our home, so my house would become a little hang out where we would smoke and try to be kids. We would all hang out in the kitchen in the morning before school to smoke, but my mom would kick us out because you could not see through the haze. It was funny; you had to be there to experience the moment. I remember once my mom let me have a party for my fifteenth birthday. I invited my buddies and some jackass brought some whiskey and spiked the punch. To make a long story short we all got loaded, and one of my amigos went flying backwards right through the living room picture window. Crash, bang, down she went, and needless to say the party was over. And my beautiful mom didn't even stay mad at me for very long. I got a good scolding and was grounded, but that was it. She was an angel in disguise.

By the time I was fifteen years old I was using intravenous drugs, and by the time I was seventeen years old I would be a full-fledged alcoholic with a severe drug problem. I had no idea what I was doing, and my mom just did the best she could with what she had. Her life was miserable, something I did not understand until I grew up, went through hell, and sobered up. Once my memories kicked in I knew she had a rough life, but she is gone now, and it's not my story to tell—just know that she suffered, and suffered hard. I do love her, and I have missed her every day of my sad fucked up life; she was my gold and she was taken away from me when she was way too young.

So anyway, my life goes awry. I stumble, I fall, and sometimes I do not get up because I am beat. I wanted to die and I would attempt to take my own life a few times, but I think I was actually looking for pity rather than death. I was so lost.

My Descent into a Life of Drugs, Alcohol, and Prostitution

I turned my first trick at eighteen years old. You see, prior to that I was a very good thief, and I could steal anything that you wanted. As long as it was not nailed down I would get it. That was my job: I would steal for the older hookers that were on the street, some of them were family and friends of the family. We all fit into the same mould and had the same lives. I was the girl and grew to believe that I was indeed important. I would take orders for clothing, and away I would go. And I must say it was a might bit lucrative. I made good money back then, but I started to get sloppy. Oh, and I would charge up drugs and stuff—my money from boosting would pay for that—but I started doing more drugs and owing more money. I could not always foot the bill so one of the older girls took me to the side and said that I better pay my bills or else. So at eighteen years old I would turn that first trick and it would rival those years of abuse in being so disgusting and degrading. And so my life of prostitution would be born.

After that first one the drug addiction kicked in and kicked in hard because I could not stand what I was doing. All the memories I had locked in my head about the sexual abuse my uncles bestowed upon me came flooding out, and it was like a fucking tornado attacked me. The drugs took away the pain and the memories. So I became a working girl, a child of the night. I was a stalker of men's money to keep me supplied in drugs and alcohol. Yes, a vixen. I would doll up accordingly, put on a pound of makeup, wear six inch stilettos, short skirts, and I would roam the streets like a vampire looking for blood. I would sell my wears in Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Manitoba. It was a lucrative business if you were not a hardcore drug addict, and if a person was smart they could save, but I was not that person. I spent it as fast as I made it. I never really had a pimp; I mean, I had men I would give money to because I loved them—NOT. The men I had, well, they were nothing. Just a piece of ass that I would give money

to because that was what a hooker was supposed to do: she was supposed to love and support her man.

I was introduced to Sista' Heroin, and oh my God I thought I struck fucking gold. The shit was that good. I remember the first time I did it was in Calgary with my aunt and uncle. I think I was nineteen or twenty years of age. I went there with my dad; I think it was after my brother was shot by his wife—we will talk about that later. My uncle was a drug dealer, and in those days he dealt some of the best heroin money could buy. It was pure gold. I remember watching him prepare a fix for me. He opened up a little cap of stuff that looked like salt and pepper. He put it in a spoon, added water, heated it up, and sucked it back up into a syringe. I was feeling very afraid and not sure what to do, but I just watched with great anticipation. He put a tie around the top of my arm and made me pump it, and my virgin veins popped like a bride's cherry on her wedding night. He tapped my vein and stuck in the needle, and drew it back. The blood seeped into the syringe, then he slid the plunger in, and that is all I remember.

I do vaguely remember feeling like I was floating and that my head felt so strange. It was like I had an out-of-body experience. Fuck I was so stoned. I woke up in a bathtub full of cold water. My uncle and aunt were kneeling down and talking to me, but it was all foggy. My dad was asking why his baby was in the bathtub with all her clothes on, but I cannot remember what my uncle said. All I know was that I was experiencing the highest high I would ever have in my entire life. I felt like I was on fire. I felt like I could walk on fucking water, that is how stoned I was. Apparently, my uncle gave me the whole cap when I should have only had half of it, and damn I was fried. I remember that next I was standing up, and I was on the nod against the wall. I was trying really hard to wake up, but I did not really want to. I wanted to feel what I was feeling right there and never wanted to wake up. I could have just stayed like that forever. It was

fucking awesome. I could hear my uncle talking, but it was like he was talking in a tunnel. He told my aunt that I'd better go for a walk so I would not go under again.

So he sent me to the store that was, oh, maybe a block away from his house. I remember walking, but it was like in slow motion. And when I waved my hand it was like it was following, you know like a bunch of hands slowly going after the first one. I felt like I was a hologram. I could not believe how stoned I was and how great I felt all at the same time. Fuck, I was in heaven: heroin would become my friend and my lover. I walked to the store, and it took me at least an hour or so just to go there and back. I would come to, and I would be on the nod standing up or leaning against a wall or a fence. I am not sure what happened after, but I know I would do more heroin, this most voluptuous drug, with my uncle. But I would not do as much. My thunder lay in every cap of heroin, or any other drug or alcohol I would consume in my life. My thunder would stay stuck in a world where I would never be satisfied. There is more to come.

5.4) Life on the Street

So where do I go from here? There is so much to share and talk about to give you a really good understanding of exactly why my research is so important. Let's just talk. Okay so I hit the street and was introduced to prostitution at the age of eighteen years old. Now remember, by this time, I am pretty much fucked from the years of sexual abuse. I hung around in skid row bars in Regina, Calgary, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and even in little old Prince Albert. Yeah, that was the life—nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. One day was the same as the next. There were a few times where I would actually have a little job in skid row bars in Regina when I was pretending to be normal, whatever that was. I was underage too, so don't ask me how I worked, but I did. My pay was under the table, so I never did or paid my taxes. In a couple of the bars I also had a trick room so when one of my regulars came in, I could take a coffee break, go make a few

bucks, and hit the floor selling beer after I was done. For you laymen, a trick room is a room specifically for having quick sex for money, and a trick is the man who pays for the sexual services of his liking.

So yeah, I thought I had it all: I was the girl, I was invincible, and no one could hold a candle to my ass. I was perfect. Men—and even some women—wanted me, but I never did a woman. I just could not do that since it was against my morals—yeah, like I had any. I was a class act. I had sex for money, how classy was that? But I did not know any better; it was just life. You remember, I was on this mission to pay back all the men in my life—well, prostitution was a perfect place to be and do just that. Payback was a bitch. I could be as violent and kinky as I wanted to be. I could beat men, piss on them, shit on them, and they paid me good money. Yep, it was the life. Like I said, the odd time I would have a man whom I would give money to, but it was all just for show. I mean, I did secretly want someone to love me for who I was, even though I was very little at the time. I had seen lots of relationships where women appeared happy, and that is what I wanted; I did not know they too were dying in silence as we all lived our lives in hell. You know, if you cannot love yourself who the hell else are you going to love?

I fought myself every step of the way. I climbed up the ladder of success in the criminal world, and I would become important, but not to myself. I thought I was pretty hot shit and that I was very bad. If I saw a man I wanted, and he already had a woman, I would take him even if it meant breaking up a family. If the guy was stupid enough to follow me, so be it; I would use him, and he would use me, fair was fair. I even had men tell me they loved me. I was desirable. I was wanted but never needed. Even my husband had belonged to another. His woman was my friend, and we had a fight that led me to be so angry that I just took her man—and married him. If I saw anything I wanted, I just took it, that is how I rolled. Men were a dime a dozen, and even

if it was some other bitch's sloppy seconds, so be it, I would make it mine. However, somewhere in the insanity I did fall in love with my husband before he would die of an overdose, but he would never know.

My Family Affairs

You know we had moments of clarity where my husband and I would both not be high and talk about the future; it was so sad. Or we would just smoke dope and be mellow there, and we would love and talk about life. I remember one time he was in the hospital in Regina, and he was sick. He got yellow jaundice. I came to town from Prince Albert and found out he was there so I went to visit him. He was so handsome. I can see him, I can almost feel him and it saddens me that I lost him. I wanted to be a good wife, but I didn't know how, and our marriage would fall apart like everything else in my life. That day I was with him in the hospital would be the last time I saw him alive. I crawled into his bed with him, and we just lay there in each other's arms. It was nice for the moment. I do not know what we talked about, but I remember the moment. It was easy to be there and be with him. And I knew I fell in love with him, but like I said he would never know the truth. He died of a drug overdose in 1983. That ends that.

My family was my life. Each of them would perish from one thing or another. My mom died when I was eighteen, my brother was shot when I was nineteen or twenty, my sister died when I was twenty-three or twenty-four, my dad would die when I was thirty, and my husband would die that same year. The loss of all these people who were so important to me would leave me to the vultures. I would float through life one day at a time just biding my time until I took my own life for real or until someone killed me. It was like living in a vacuum, always being sucked up and thrown around. My days were always the same, never changing. My brother, who was five years older than me, was shot and murdered by his wife. I remember this like it

happened yesterday. Do not get me wrong, my siblings all have my love equally; however, this brother was closer to my age, and we had a good relationship. I hung around him more and we would cohabit. I won't go into a big long story, but I want to speak to his death and the impact it had on my life. I had this bogus job at a place known as Native Youth. We were all street people trying to make life different for ourselves, but in essence we just had legal jobs where we could get high and party in the building after hours. This one day I was at work, and I got a phone call. The person on the other end told me that my brother had just been shot and was in the hospital.

I felt that darkness come over me again. I felt all the years of sexual abuse coming forth and pounding me to the ground. I felt my dark passenger creep into my soul. I could feel my thunder leaving my soul. I got to the General Hospital in Regina, and I think every street person in Regina was there. I remember seeing my dad, my uncles, my cousins, my enemies, his girlfriends of past and present. The police were there too, it was a regular gong show. People were holding each other and crying. I remember feeling like I was in a bubble. I didn't know what to think. All I could hear was that he was shot, my brother was shot in the head. I thought, "What the fuck, no way I need to see him!" but they were not letting anyone in except my dad I think—it was very blurry. Police were taking statements of those people he was in the bar with that day. Apparently, she walked in the back door with a gun, past the bar, past the people, and just shot him in the head. I mean that kind of thing is only supposed to happen in the movies.

The chaos that surrounded my life at that moment was sheer insanity. My brother Joey lived an insane life. I remember he would try helping me with my math and get so mad because I couldn't get it. But he never gave up, he just kept on helping me. I remember so many good things about him that I forget the bad. I know what he did was wrong, but when you love so deeply it's hard to see the wrong. He was abusive to this woman and would beat her ass. She

worked the street for him, but you know killing him was not the answer. I grant you he should have not been violent, but that is his story to tell, and he is not here, so I won't go into this big long thing about him. All I know for sure is that he loved the children he had with this woman, but he would never get to know them.

I remember being in his hospital room, and he had tubes all over the place. I felt numb. I was talking to him and telling him to come back. I told him I would give up my life and look after him forever. I begged him not to leave, and I think I was even praying. Well, it was more of a bargain with God, you know, "Take me not him" kind of thing. He had already passed away, but I didn't know that, I just stood by his side. I remember the bandages on his head, and one side of his face was so swollen he was almost unrecognizable. I can feel that moment. I can feel the ache that I had in my heart so many years ago standing in that hospital room. I stood there and looked at him from head to toe. I noticed that his feet to his knees were cold, so I called for a nurse and requested blankets. The nurse knew he was dead but humoured me and brought blankets. I covered his legs and I leaned over and held onto him like it was my life, he was my life. Oh my God this is hard even now, years later; I can feel my pain for his loss. I will never forget how this makes me feel. I will hold it close. I will teach that this is what violence, alcohol, drugs, and street life will do to you if you do not get out. It took my brother from me. They just kept stealing my thunder life after life. He died! The others who passed on before me are also sadly missed. I pray to my mom, my dad, my sister, my husband, and to Junior because I loved them all so dearly. It is through them that I find the strength to carry on and live a good life. He would die at the tender young age of twenty-four.

Junior, the love of my life, was another man I truly loved. This one was a forbidden love, and I am talking about it because, really, who is it going to hurt? We never had a life together

other than what there was, and it was true. We loved each other from afar because he believed our family ties were too strong to break, and he had great respect for our family. I did too, but my love for him was stronger, and I would push him, and like a man he would falter and we would love each other nonetheless. But he would die too, and again my thunder would be pushed back into the dark. We had lots of great times together that I will hold in my heart forever. I just want to acknowledge the men who were important and who would not feel my wrath due to childhood sexual abuse.

In these years I would have two children that I would lose to family and the social welfare system. I was far too screwed up to have kids, but I never took any preventative measures for childbirth, and these children would be born into my insane life. I would try to parent them, but it didn't work for me. I had no idea how to care for them, or even how to love them. In order to love others you need to love yourself, and I surely did not. In fact I literally hated who I was and what I had become, but I had no idea how to get out, so my life slipped deeper and deeper into the abyss. My children would suffer, and I would suffer. I had another child when I was thirty, but this one I would hold onto with my life. I was still using, getting older but no wiser. To make a long story short, I would not lose her to anyone or anywhere. She would also suffer the way the other two did, but I hung on. I know I was a bad parent, and I have come to terms with that. I was not prepared to be a mother, yet I would bring three children into my fucked up existence. I had so many things wrong in my life, and my poor children would meet my wrath. It is their stories to share if they wish. I just need to affirm that I indeed have three children whom I love dearly. That is a given.

5.5) Life in Jail

From the time I was eighteen or nineteen, until I was thirty years of age, I was in and out of jail. I would think I was such hot shit because, you know, on the street if you went to jail that just meant you had made your mark. It was graduation time. I remember the first time I ever went to Pine Grove. I was eighteen or nineteen, and I got caught for stealing. I remember my stealing days well; I would get too high, go and try to steal, and I would get caught—which is another reason the prostitution kicked in. So anyway, I am in the RCMP cells waiting for transport to the Grove, and I was afraid. I had received a six month sentence, and off I went to see the wizard. I was on this little plane with, oh maybe, thirty other inmates, mostly Indians and maybe a sprinkle of white folk for balance. The plane was hot and stinky because some of these men had not showered for days; it was ripe.

I remember we were on that plane all freaking day. They herded us off in shackles and handcuffs. I felt like such a villain. It was great really, I thought I was someone—but I was also afraid. So there I am in jail sitting in an office being interrogated then taken to be cleaned, debugged, checked for VD, and taken to a cell that was maybe six feet by six feet with one window, a bed nailed to the floor, a cupboard, and a sink that was attached to a toilet. I remember acting tough, but when they closed that cell door it was a whole other ball game for sure. I cried like a baby, but no one would see. After that first sentence, and because I knew so many of the women inside, it got easier. You know I would have to say that going to jail actually saved my sorry ass because it would give me time to get my shit together and clean up. But as soon as I would get out I would run straight to the dealer man, and maybe get laid. It all depended on how messed up I would get, but drugs always came first.

I mean there were drugs inside, and I did them, but they were not as plentiful as on the street. I ended up overdosing one time in the Grove, and my sistas were afraid to say anything. So they just left me in my cell, keeping an eye on me. Damn, I could have croaked right there, but I would live to see another day in the Grove. We were all cut from the same cloth, these women and me, it was eerie. I met women I wanted to be like, who were my heroes. I wanted to be a feared and tough bitch. I wanted to be noticed. I wanted people to cross the street when they saw me coming. Eventually I would believe I was all of these things, and with each time I ended up in jail my skin got tougher and I got wiser as far as street life was concerned. I would go to jail with my family members, and I would make some really awesome friends among the other Indian women, and even among the white girls. I met this one white girl, she was alright, she would have to make her mark too. We were two peas in a pod. Every once in a while we would pick on the white girls, but it was all fun and games. Going to jail was like a rite of passage where you graduate from one sick place to the next. Thank god I never ended up in a Federal Institution. As sure as there is ink on these pages I would have never made it out; I would have died.

It was lonely. The darkness would creep in your cell at night and take hold. I would lay there in my cell thinking, “What the fuck am I doing here in jail?” I felt hopeless and lost, but as soon as that cell door opened at 7:00 A.M. that tough bitch Sharon had to wake up. I had to look good no matter what. I did my time. My first time in the Grove I think there were seventeen or eighteen of us, and sixteen or seventeen of those would be Indian or Métis women. We all had a story. I think in all the time I spent behind those walls I had one visitor. I went to socials, I worked, and I was a model inmate. I even got my GED 10 behind those bars. I will never forget the loneliness that kicks in, it’s like losing someone. You have lots of time to think—and that

was the problem. On the street you didn't have time to think, you were always busy doing this or that, but in jail it's static with nowhere to go and nothing to do. It is all dead time. I spent time in jail because I had no idea of any other way to live. I would fuck up and try to hide, but the police always get their man or woman. You can run, but you can't hide.

I remember I used to write poetry in my cell, and this one guard, she kept all my stuff. They were pretty decent, the guards—or matrons is what we used to call them—and then every once in a while a bitch would come in and think her uniform actually meant something and the fight was on. I hated those guards, they caused nothing but shit. I ended up in the hole for ten days because this bitch guard was fucking with me, and she knew I couldn't do nothing. Not really sure what happened, but I know I called her out. I think it was the one or two o'clock count, and we had to go to our cell doors to be counted. She was telling me, "Okay Acoose, move it, it's time for count." And I was standing in the hallway talking to one of my sisters, and I said, "Yeah, yeah, I'm going." And I've got to tell you I just hated when they called me Acoose. I think it was the way they said it with such authority, and I defied authority, no one told me what to do. To further the mayhem, apparently I didn't move fast enough, and she gave me a nudge. Well, the fucking fight was on, and I went in guns a blazing. I remember feeling the anger right from the tip of my toes to the top of my head, it was surreal. We are yelling, and I am acting like a banshee out of hell. The director came and calmed shit down, but I ended up with a ten day stint in the hole. Fuck I was mad. You know, guards can really be assholes, let that be known as the truth.

I remember one time I was so angry, and I got locked up in my room. But at least I didn't go to seg (segregation), the hole, you know, *me time*. I am not sure what happened but it was another guard trying to be someone and prove she was tough. I would get ten days in my cell,

and I was livid. I could feel the fury rise right up into my throat. Once my cell door closed I flipped out and trashed everything in my cell and sat there on the floor crying. I mean really, who was I hurting? Certainly not them, but I sure did a number on myself. I remember thinking, “Fuck it, I am done.” I ripped up my sheet, made a noose, and tied it around my neck and around the bar in the closet. I proceeded to hang my ass, and I sat ever so slowly to the ground. I could feel the sheet getting tighter, and I was seeing stars and could not breathe. Then suddenly there was a loud crash and there I was on the floor laughing and crying all at the same time—the bar couldn’t sustain my weight, and it had broken in half. I could not even kill myself properly, but the way I look at it now is that the Creator did not want me, he had a plan for me that I did not know about until now.

So it was my rite of passage to go to jail. It was there that I would build my name and where I would earn respect, I would be somebody—or so I thought. Sometimes I would be thrown in segregation. I felt like an animal. Not all the guards were horrible, but as I progressed and got older many of the good guards would move on, but I kept going back. I remember when it was time to be released, and you were up in the front waiting for your ride, the guards would say, “Well Acoose, see ya next time.” I would laugh it off, but they were right, I would be back in. With the knowledge I have now I know that they should not have not affirmed this but should have been more positive and uplifting. There were very few programs in there too. I mean, you could work in the kitchen, in the yard, in the laundry, and go to school or AA, but that was it. I never heard about reintegration or about how I could possibly stay out of jail. The shrink or social worker or therapist, whatever he was, would talk to us, but it was just talk. No one told me about trying to stay sober or staying out of jail. There is more to this story, but we will save it for another time and place.

5.6) Tales of Woe

I have a few stories to share just to show you the insanity of alcohol, drugs, and the mayhem they can bring on. This one time, at Band Camp.... Just kidding—need to keep the humour alive! This one time I was attacked and beaten by six of the biggest black men in the entire world. I might have been about eighteen because my deceased brother Joey was still alive. Back in the day these black men would come up from the Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and wreak havoc. There was a war going on, and there would be few survivors. The street women would go party with them, me being one of them, and damn they were fine. There was this one dude named Doc Richards, and lordy lordy he was fine. He actually asked me to marry him, but of course my fool ass would say no. I spent lots of time with him when he came to Regina, and I was in such lust it was crazy. Part of me wanted to go with him, but something in my mind stopped me—after all I was only eighteen years old.

On the War Path

There was this one woman who I was at war with, and we had it out in front of the Kings Hotel in Regina. I kicked her ass, and I felt so powerful because I had an audience. I was calling her names—like I had any right—but my pea-brain was not working so well back then, and I was calling her a *nigger lover*. It was at a time when I thought I was invincible, and I was a racist. Anyway someone stopped the fight, and I remember yelling at her, “this ain’t over yet bitch, you mine!” You know because she gave me a run for my money and nearly got me, but I was better, or so I thought.

I remember being in the lounge—I wasn’t even old enough, but I always got in nonetheless. I was sitting on one of my deceased brother’s friend’s knees, and he was

encouraging me and petting my ego. He was telling me I was a far out little broad, and that any sister of Joey Acoose's was a friend of his, and he pulled out a pocket full of every colour of pill you could imagine and gave me a few handfuls. Oh yeah, I was at the height of my addiction, and people would aid and abet my behaviour. I was so stoned and so young and so lost, but I didn't know it. I remember dancing with my brother and feeling like I could fly; I was at my peak, and I loved every moment of it even as bizarre as it was and would become.

Later that evening I was at a party and was bragging about the battle I had won earlier that evening. We were all getting high—like I could get even get any higher, but I always tried. I think it was about 6:00 in the morning and the door came flying open. I was stoned on acid (LSD), and six of the biggest black men in the entire world came in with that little Indian broad I had battled the night before. She pointed at me and said, “There she is, that fucking bitch!” My spidey senses kicked in, and I jumped, ready to rumble. I thought, “Oh fuck, I'm dead,” but I would not go down without a fight, ever. I am not sure what happened, but I could hear things crashing and screaming, blood curdling screams, and I realized they were coming from me. I remember yelling and telling her, “Bitch, if I don't die today you are fucking dead! This is never going to end and I will kill you!” I mean at least I had balls, right?

Someone finally stopped it, and I ran to the bathroom. Remember now, I was stoned on acid so my wounds looked extreme. I was trying to clean up my face—it was hideous. I happened to look at the door, and one of those gigantic black men was standing at the door pointing a gun at me, and I thought, “What the fuck?” I looked at him, and he fired the gun. I fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes, and they all ran out the door because they figured he had killed me. I remember laying on the floor in the fetal position. When I realized I wasn't dead, I jumped up and looked for a bullet hole, but there was only a scratch on my leg. I have no idea

where that fucking bullet went, but it wasn't my day to die. I remember leaving and still being so high. I was ducking and diving into bushes. All I knew is that I had to get downtown to find my brother. I found him in the Hamilton Hotel and dropped to the floor by the table. It was crazy after that. I remember telling him what happened, and I remember him carrying me upstairs to a room where he put me to bed and left me with a gun. I am not sure what he did, and that is the end of this story. I lived to tell another.

A Drug Deal Gone Wrong

The next story is about a crew of us trying to kill a drug dealer that was supposed to be a rat (a rat was a person who informed on other criminals to the police). We devised an insane plan. Another woman and I were supposed to go to his door and knock on it like we were there to pick up dope. We were then supposed to jump in the bushes, and the others would open fire and shoot his ass right there at his front door. Ahhh, the insanity! Well, the door opened but it was not him who answered but his mother. We stood there not moving and wondering, "What the fuck we gonna do now?" Well that is what I was thinking; I am not sure about my home girl. Then the supposed rat appeared and stepped in front of his mother. All I heard was, "Sharon get the fuck out of the way," and I hit the dirt. I heard gunfire and people running or driving away. It was mayhem at its absolute worst.

We ended up at a party, and I was in the washroom. My acid trip was turning bad because of the shit that just transpired. I was sitting in the washroom thinking, "What the fuck, what the fuck?" I was so high, and my head was pounding. I must have started my period because I saw blood in the toilet. I let out a blood-curdling scream. Later I saw a jar of beets somewhere (I know it's crazy, but it's the mind of someone on acid), and I screamed even louder because I thought I got shot in my pussy (vagina) and that someone had put it in a jar. Yup, I was pretty

much fucked right there. It was never-ending, but for me it was normal. I was a street person, and that is just the way we lived: one moment at a time, never knowing when we would live or die.

Near-Death Experience

Another time one of my *sista* friends and I were shooting up (intravenously using) speed. We loved speed—it was awesome. Not sure how much speed we did, but she ended up overdosing, and we walked—yes that’s right—we *walked* to the General Hospital. She asked me to come with her, so I did. I remember it was like I was watching it all through a really thick magnifying glass, and I saw her drop to the floor. I could hear the nurses, and it sounded like they were talking into a horn or a tunnel, and someone said, “Her heart stopped.” I just sat there numb. There were nurses and doctors running amok and a crash cart was taken into where she was. It was all so surreal to me. They did get her going again, and then it was my turn to go down for the count—I ODeD (overdosed) right there in the hospital immediately after she did.

I woke up and was in a ward with my *amigo* in the next bed. Not sure what happened next but she left. They kept me in the hospital for a week, but I got tired and left. I went downtown looking for my *sista*, found her, and we went to buy more speed and rigs (needles) and then went to my place to get high. I was living with my now-deceased brother—who, by the way, had come to the hospital to see me and give me shit. Anyway, we were fixing speed when he came home. He walked into the living room, turned around and walked out to his bedroom. We just kept on. The next thing we knew, he was pointing a gun at us. He said, “If you want to fucking die I can kill ya,” and he proceeded to shoot the record player, the television, and put a few holes here and there in the room. He told us to get the fuck out, so we went scrambling for our dope and away we went. That was a day for sure. He would eventually cool off and let me back in, but not even that would stop me. I would have guns pointed at me and even that didn’t

fizz on me, it was normal. I would quit when I wanted to and not because someone was trying to kill me or scare me. Hell no, it was my life. I did what I wanted, when I wanted. I had no fear.

My Baby Boy

Here is my last story for now. I have many, but I wanted to share a few just so you would see what alcohol and drugs did for me. I was living in Vancouver BC when my sister back in Regina died. I had a son back home who must have been around eight or nine months old at the time. When I came back for my sister's funeral, I arranged to have a visit with him in my motel room. I was trying to be a mother, and that didn't really work well for me. He would be taken away from me, but I tried to get him back. I decided I wanted to go out to party and left him sleeping in the room. I did make sure he ate and was changed, and I waited until he was fully asleep. Then away I went, off to see the wizard.

I ended up in the drunk tank, and I was worried about my son—I know it sounds crazy, but I really was worried. I didn't tell the cops my son was alone because I knew I would be let out as soon as I sobered up, which was at about two in the morning. I went back to the motel and realized I had lost my keys. I stood by the door and couldn't hear him so I thought he must be okay, but I did hear a party happening on the next floor so away I went. I partied all night and when I woke up, there was a pile of I don't know what beside me. I slithered out of the room and snuck downstairs. I found a cleaning lady, and she gave me a key to get into my room. I will never forget what I saw!

I opened the door, and my baby boy was standing up. He must have been crying for a long time. His little face was red and swollen. He was wet from head to toe, but you know what, as soon as he saw me he started to smile and cry all at the same time. Fuck, my heart broke, and I just fell to the floor holding him tight in my arms, and we were both crying. Fuck this is damn

hard—I don't know how long I sat on that floor, but we both cried. I was kissing him and holding him as close as I could. I finally got my shit together, and we had a bath. I lay back in the water after I had a fix of some drug I had. and I just watched as he played in the water. I remember thinking, "What the fuck am I doing?" I remember telling him how sorry I was, and he just loved me without any conditions at all. I believe this was one of those moments when I almost gave up the drugs—you know, surrendered to my addiction—but I didn't know where to go for help. I cried for what seemed like hours on end. This was one of those dark times when I just wished for death, and I even thought of killing him and myself. I remember telling him I would find some help, and I think I was praying. I told him I loved him, but in reality I didn't love him enough, not right then at least. We sat in the tub for a long time, and for a moment, life was normal. I cleaned him up, dressed him up, and took him out to eat. That was the last time I would see him because he was taken away from me. True stories!

I lived a long life on the street doing what street people do. I ran around with any man that would have me, and I spent about nine years in and out of jail. I lived in extreme mayhem and never knew what would happen from one day to the next. That was my life, and that is what I did. I remember waking up in my hotel room, and before my feet even hit the floor I would have a needle in my arm and a shot of Southern Comfort for breakfast. That was how my day began, and that's how it would end. That is all I did. There was nothing more, and I was not ever expected to be successful or to live a full life. I thought I would be dead by the time I was twenty years old. My life was worthless. I had no ambition, no drive. I watched as my mother died, my father died, my sister died, my brother died, and my husband died. They left me alone in this insane world to fend for myself. How the fuck was I going to do this? The only things that were important to me were drugs and alcohol, money and men. That was the order of my life. I was

tough. I could take a beating, and I could give one. I stood down to no man or woman. I was afraid of absolutely nothing. If you fucked with me I would simply get you back somehow, some way. Alcohol and drugs did not leave me to go gently off into the night. Time and time again I would be stripped of my dignity and emotions. I would learn to be hard from a young tender age. I would lose both of my children. I would walk away from them and not look back. I would sign papers that deemed me an unfit mother. End of story!

5.7) My Thunder Returns

I interviewed a young woman a few years ago who was cut from the same cloth as me. She made this statement, so I am going to borrow it from her: I hung up my stilettos. I made a decision. I looked at my life and at what I was doing. I was getting too old to be a prostitute anymore, and I needed something new. So the stilettos were put to rest. I was spent like an old Hollywood harlot. I had no more in me: it was time to move onward and upward.

So let's move into my change and what happened. I am not even sure where the change occurred, but it happened after I left Prince Albert. I just got tired of it there so I rented a U-Haul, filled it up, and hauled ass back to Regina—where, of course, the mayhem would continue. It took a few more years of insanity to get my shit together. My third child, a little girl, was two years old when I went home. All my people were gone already, but I still had my eldest brother and my sister-in-law who have both been instrumental in my sobriety. In all honesty I am not even sure they know how much they impacted my life, but they did, and I am forever grateful to the both of them.

I continued to drink and do drugs. I was not turning too many tricks because for the most part men just do not want older women. I mean, there are massage parlours that old broads put together, but it just was not my gig. Tricks are your husbands, your brothers, your uncles, your

grandfathers, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, chiefs, and they want stuff done that their wives do not do in the bedroom. Trust me, there are some very freaky men in this world who will pay top dollar for sex in all directions, let that be known. I lived on welfare until I regained my Indian status, and I started university in 1989. I will not go into more street life detail here, but I think it is important to give a little detail so that people understand the lives of criminalized Indian women.

So the lights came on and someone was actually home. It was like I struggled with a key trying to get into the door, and finally it opened just like that. My daughter was maybe five years old when I surrendered to myself and said, “Okay, it’s enough, I need something different in my life.” I sobered through AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and it would change my life forever. It’s not that I am promoting AA, but I am just saying it’s where I would eventually find Sharon and her spirit. I did not know about culture, but that too was coming—I just had to be patient. So it took me two years to get my first real solid year of sobriety, and sobriety has been good. I started as a mature student at the University of Regina. I worked hard. I hated reading, and I could not put a sentence together for the life of me, but I never gave up. I never missed a single day of class. I never handed in assignments late; I just did what I was supposed to do. I felt so inferior though with all these white students in these huge ass classrooms. Damn they were big: one class had five hundred people in it, I kid you not.

But I did not falter, and I worked like the devil was chasing me. I was also with SIFC, now the First Nations University of Canada, and that is where I discovered what being an Indian was about. I fell in love with it, and I wanted more. I talked to the Elders, I joined the Student Association, and I joined in to become part of something. I never stopped talking. It was like this voice inside me just erupted, and man it was awesome. I volunteered for all the convocations,

and I must tell you they were brilliant. Indians in full regalia, drummers singing the Honour and Victory song, and being marched in to get your degree. I used to stand at the back of the room feeling so proud to be an Indian and watching my people getting their degrees—I wanted that, I had to have it. .

I never thought it possible, but in 1993 I convocated with a Bachelor of Arts in Human Justice. It was the best thing since fry bread. My family was there with me to watch me get my degree. I was now one of those students I had yearned to be years before. I made it. Then I thought, “Hmm, I wonder if I can do a Master’s degree?” and so the journey began. I applied to do a Master’s of Social Work, and let me tell you this was a bit tense to say the least, but I never gave up and worked my ass off to get that degree. I would learn so much about how far I could push myself, and it was pretty far, if I do say so myself. I would run into lots of controversy. I do not want to put down the Faculty, it’s just that they did not know how to treat or be around Indians, that is all so it is all forgiven. I have let go.

I never thought it would be possible, but in 1995 I convocated with a Master’s of Social Work. Yes, it was a miracle, and all because I surrendered to myself, faced my addictions, and went to AA meetings 24/7, and talked and talked and talked. It was how I survived the mayhem of my life. In the time between these two degrees, I would also be hired as a corrections officer, and I would receive a Certificate in Corrections. I would say life was going okay. I will not go into a big long story about my jobs and such, but it is important to note that once my healing journey began, and I stayed clean, nothing was impossible for me. I pushed myself to the point where I thought I was going to lose it, but I did not. I rose from the ashes and every move I made was meant to show my children what life could be like without alcohol and drugs. I did things I never thought possible. Like I said, I thought I would be dead by twenty, and I was okay with

that. I did not see. I could not imagine life other than the street, but there has always been something in my spirit that allowed me to hold on. I knew that once I began my healing journey, life would change. The lights would come on full force, and I would stand at attention. I had come out of the wilderness so to speak and left my dark passenger behind. My thunder would be revealed.

5.8) My Reintegration into a Better World

This research is about reintegration and how as Indian women we have been able to sustain ourselves and stay prison/jail-free. As you will read in the three other women's journeys, our lives are mirrored. We have been cut from the same Sweat Lodge tarp, and we have survived even though our thunder was stolen. Not all has been lost. For me it has been a long time since I have been behind the walls. I got out of jail in 1980, and when I was thirty years old I would end up in Pine Grove one last time. This time the judge cut me a break, and I was only in on weekends. I was spent like an old Hollywood harlot with nowhere to go and nothing more in life to conquer—but somehow I knew during that last time at Pine Grove that I just could not do this anymore. I had had enough. The change would come.

Like I said, I joined AA and went hard. After I found my Indian-ness, I started attending ceremonies such the Pipe and sweats, and I began fasting. I took my life quite seriously as you can tell from what you have read. I had no idea what being reintegrated meant until I began my education. From there life took a different direction. In 2003 I applied to a PhD program at the University of Saskatchewan and was accepted into the Department of Community Health & Epidemiology—like *seriously*. I have a grade five level education, maybe less for math, and I never made it out of grade nine. Again, someone saw something in me that I could not see in myself, and I was given a chance. So here we have it, I am nearing the end of my PhD. This is

my reintegration. I have reached out to my sistas, and I have worked with three other Indian women who have walked in my moccasins. They are my reintegration. I love my family, they are my reintegration. I am an Assistant Professor, that is my reintegration. I am a *kokum* and great-*kokum*, that is my reintegration. I have two university degrees, that is my reintegration. I have been clean and sober for twenty-two years, that is my reintegration. Need I say more?

You do not need to have a PhD to understand what it means when an Indian women is victimized, raped, beaten, lost to the street life, sexually molested, and you certainly do not need to read a book to understand what this has all meant to me. I have travelled full circle in my life. I have laid the demons to rest, and I have risen from the ashes. I am a strong Indian woman who has had a full life. I have no regrets. I live up to the standards I have put in front of me. I stand my ground, and yes I have successfully reintegrated—rather exquisitely—back into society as a productive human being.

My Conclusion and my Beginning

So there it is, my healing journey, my life story, and how I have successfully reintegrated. I have outlived myself because there was once a time when I thought I would die, when I would attempt suicide on a few occasions. There is much more of my life, but I plan on continuing this story with a book, so I have included only what was necessary here. I had no one to love me or to admire or to give me direction. My uncles stole my thunder through years and years of sexual abuse. From there the gates of hell opened up, and I would walk in and not look back. I lived hard. I grew hard. My child spirit, well she got the fuck out of Dodge and would not come back until I sobered up nearly twenty-two years ago. Yes, that is correct, as of April 1, 2012 I have been sober and clean for twenty-two years. In those years I have been to the mountain top, my child spirit came home, and more importantly I found my thunder. I am Circling Eagle Woman.

This is my life. I have given all that I can, and there is no more to give. My story is neither unique nor special, but it is surely a miracle because anyone who lives free of alcohol and drugs is a miracle.

Seriously, who would have thought that a prostitute from the streets could ever go this far in life? If someone would have told me forty years ago that I would be where I am now, I would have said, "Fuck you!" That right there is what successful reintegration is all about, and you will not learn about what you have just read in books or academic articles. All of this came from me and three other amazing Indian women who have survived the ills of life. We are *reintegration*. My life is neither peachy keen nor settled, but at least today I know how to deal with the crap that comes at me. And, while I still live in mayhem, I am sober and drug-free and have many positive outlets to use if need be. So, yeah, as a criminalized Indian woman I have made my mark in this world. I am alive. I can also now let go of the tag *criminalized Indian woman*. It is no longer my status. I am reintegrated. *I Found My Stolen Thunder! Hiy! Hiy!*

Chapter 6: Here and Back Again—Jasmine’s Story

6.1) Introduction

Jasmine is a free woman and has been prison-free for approximately eighteen years. Her healing journey is based on her life as a child, adolescent, and adult. She was born into an environment that was not rich, and she lived in poverty for many years. Spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental abuse came at her from all directions. She was never safe, nor did she live in a safe place. There was always mayhem and disorder. She would watch as her life would crumble around her, and there was nothing that she could do to stop it. Jasmine’s family were all *street people*, which means they were pimps, prostitutes, and thieves. For a long time, this is the only life she would know.

Jasmine is not an alcoholic or a drug addict, but she did do her fair share and started at a young age. There was no positive direction in her life. She lived in and out of foster care. There was no one to love and hold her or to protect her from the violent world that she lived in. She would eventually leave home at a young age, and her mother would die because she also lived in a dark and desperate world. Jasmine was surrounded by alcohol, drugs, and the street life. Eventually life would take hold, and Jasmine would take another human life with no memories to speak of. She would end up in the federal prison system. There Jasmine would learn to become a survivor of many life challenges. Her healing journey is amazing, and it has been a pleasure to have her take part in this research. The choices that she made in life were her own. During our time together, never once did she blame another human being for her actions. Enjoy her journey; it is a beautiful one.



Image 6.1: Jasmine's Medicine Wheel

6.2) Growing Up as an Outsider

My name is Jasmine. This is not my real name, but I am not using my real name because of family and work. I was born in the United States of America, and I carry dual citizenship because I am also a Treaty Indian. My mom was a Native from a reservation in southeast Saskatchewan, and my dad was a Black American. When I was two years old, my mom ran away

from my dad with us three kids and came back to Saskatchewan. Two of my brothers were both younger, and the youngest brother hadn't been born yet. In total I have four other siblings; three of us have the same father. The youngest brother and sister have two different fathers. My sister is actually the true Native as her dad was Treaty.

My life was always chaos from the time I can remember. My mom drank, and she drank *a lot*. The alcohol got in the way of her own life and of her life as a mother. Mom was a really bad drunk. She was almost a skid row drunk where you would find her in an alley with her skirt hiked up to you know. But obviously she had been abused as much as I had been abused. I saw her drink vanilla extract, Lysol, and hairspray. When she drank vanilla we would say, "Mom's baking."

I spent my whole life being abused. Before the age of thirteen, being abused, well I thought it was normal. And the thing about that was everyone around me was the same as me. Many of my friends, like me, lived with abuse, and it was sad. It was normal to be beaten so bad by the ones you love, and from what I saw, all my friends and family had the same lifestyle. I thought that this was normal. It was so sick. Abuse was rampant.

In my world I felt like an outsider because of my status as half-Black, half-Indian. I grew up in an Indian world where everyone around me was an Indian. I tried to fit in, but it was hard. If we didn't shut up, mom's biggest threat was always that she would give us to welfare or give us to the Indians. So we would say, "No, I don't want to go to the Indians," not understanding that mom was an Indian or that we were Indians too. I was very young. Crying my eyes out, I would say "Please Mom, please don't give us to the Indians. We'll be good." How strange we were. It's so funny now when I think of it.

There were points of stability, but they are really hard to find. There was a little sanity amongst the mayhem, for example, at Grandma and *Kokum*'s house. From one day to the next, we didn't always know if we were going to have food. But we just loved going to Grandma's house because they would feed us. Grandma was my mom's mom, and *kokum* was Grandma's mom, great grandmother. I am so grateful that I had this connection because I think now of my brother's kids and how they won't have the opportunity to know these great women.

There was also some stability in the foster homes. I was in about twenty different foster homes starting at the age of two or three, lasting right up until I was fifteen. There, we also knew we were going to eat and have a warm bed. And there was always going to be somebody around. I once called welfare myself because Mom had been gone for three days, and we were hungry and I couldn't think of another way to take care of my brothers and sister. It was so hard to watch them crying because their bellies hurt and there was nothing to eat. All I know for sure is there were lots of foster home placements. Or I would run away, and my aunt would take me in.

Mom, she had a golden tongue—she could talk people into anything. She always had a lot of friends; people were always around her and had so much respect for her. My mom had a wicked sense of humour and people loved her. I don't know how she did it, but she would go downtown with not even a penny in her pocket and stay drunk for days. I used to remember going to look for her downtown and sitting outside bars waiting for her, and we would wait for hours. We would all be sitting outside the bars, and if people would see us and we were hungry, they would feed us.

It was a chaotic lifestyle, and it was always changing from day to day, minute to minute. This gave me the ability to adjust to almost any situation. No matter what the circumstances, my ability to adjust has served me well in a lot of life situations. In going from foster home to foster

home, the ability to adjust quickly was an absolute necessity. Sometimes we stayed with family, but five rambunctious kids were beyond the ability and means of most of our family, who were poor and had problems of their own. For example, foster homes were a means to an end for me. You immediately had to adjust. You didn't have time to fuck around and be weird. I made a point of adapting, and I could adapt very well, and it wasn't always the best way. But it was the only way at the time. People looked at me and figured I was a good girl, but that wasn't always so, especially when backs were turned. But, as crazy as life was, we could never wait to get back home to our mother. It was true unconditional love, the desire to always be with my mother. I mean home was home, and our mother was our mother, and that's where we always wanted to be no matter how bad the circumstances.

Family Dynamics: A Life of Abuse

Sadly, we were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused, and I just recently found out that my youngest brother was also a victim. Mind you I always suspected it, but he would never talk about the abuse. A situation with his sister-in-law brought it up, and I found out by accident when he described the argument to me. It was a strange way to find out that my suspicions were founded in reality. I just wish that he would have shared this with me long before the white bitch used it as ammunition against him. It makes me so angry to think that someone would use his abuse as a weapon in a petty argument.

I did my best to be there to protect my siblings. I was the oldest child. I was expected to look after my brothers and sister, and I did the best I could. But when you are only a year older than the oldest boy, and three years older than the youngest boy, it makes it pretty difficult. When I was around twenty years old, a validation of my efforts to protect my family came when

one of my brothers told me, “Jasmine, I always knew you were standing between Mom and us and you took the beatings for us.”

You know, I think my mom didn’t like me very much. She loved me, but she didn’t like me because I was a girl. When I was eight or nine, she would say stuff like, “Guys are going to come around and sniff around you,” and “You’re just going to be a whore,” and meantime, guys were already sniffing around me. Mom was always beating us. I remember one time it was 9:01, and I was one minute late getting home. I remember looking at the clock when I came in. I said, “Where’s Mom?” and they said, “Oh, she went out looking for you.” I said, “Looking for me? I was supposed to be home at 9:00, and it’s one minute after nine.” Mom and the asshole (my sister’s dad) finally showed up half an hour later, and she started screaming at me about where I’d been and stuff like that. And then she took an extension cord and forced me to take all my clothes off, except for my panties, and proceeded to just whip me with the extension cord. I mean, I had welts up and down my body, all over my back, on my face. Needless to say, she kept me home from school the next day because I was pretty bruised up.

She once threw me out a second story window when she was mad at me for one stupid reason or another. She beat me with sticks, with her fists, and sometimes it would take nothing, it seemed. A beating could be initiated when I didn’t do something fast enough, if I bought the wrong kind of bread, if I turned left instead of right, or if she didn’t like the fact that my eyes were brown. I’m being facetious at this point. You know the sad part was I always thought it was really my fault that I was being punched in the face or kicked in the stomach. I thought that I must have been a really bad person for her to do this stuff to me. I mean it happened so much that *I must* have been a bad person that deserved this.

A turning point in life came when I was about thirteen or so. She came after me. She had a belt, and I was sitting in the chair. She started beating me with this belt—the buckle side—and I was just sitting in the chair. I didn't cry. I just sat there, and she kept hitting me, and hitting me, and hitting me, until she was exhausted and couldn't hit me anymore. I just looked at her and said, "Are you done? Do you feel better now?" My whole body seemed to be on fire from the beating. Yet I didn't cry, and that was the last time that she hit with that kind of intensity. I think I scared her. It must have been that empty look in my eyes: she couldn't see the pain and fear that she usually got when she went off on me. You know, I was getting bigger; I wasn't a little kid anymore. I was big for thirteen. Not in terms of height, but in terms of being fat, and I was fat all my life. I don't remember not being fat, and so she stopped hitting me after I turned thirteen. She would slap me occasionally or something like that, but not like the beatings when we were kids.

There were always people around me that I truly loved. I loved my grandma and my *kokum*. I loved my *moshums*: *Moshum* with the truck and *Moshum* with the cane. My *moshum* with the truck is my mom's father, and my *moshum* with the cane is my mom's grandfather, my great grandfather. I loved my aunties, my uncles, and my cousins. We always looked forward to people coming over. I think that because we were half-Black, my family thought we were special and cute. And the cousins nowadays want people to say something because I am so dark. They get a kick out of introducing me and seeing the reaction on people's faces when they find out we are related. "All my relations" is so apt for my family.

United States of Poverty

My mom left once when I was in kindergarten, but she came back. She decided to go back to my dad, and we just picked up and went to live with my dad in the United States. There was the four

of us then—my sister was still not even a thought...or as they say a twinkle in her daddy's eye. My dad had accepted my youngest brother, even though he was not his biological kid.

When we went back to my dad, we were living in a one bedroom little tiny place. The four of us kids slept on the couch, and mom and dad had the bedroom. It was going okay for a while; we learned a lot, that's for sure. We ran into our first drag queens during this time, and we really liked them. Dad hated them, but we used to like them and hang out with them. They were good to us and gave us things, made us laugh, and made us feel as though we were special. The girls downstairs taught me how to do the tea pot, a dance where you put one hand on your hip and you put the other hand out like a spout. It was fun. But then Mom's demons surfaced, and she had to go and get drunk yet again. I remember her sitting there and dad just beating on her because she was drunk, except that she came home with no underwear and stuff like that, and that was it. His jealousy was kind of warranted. She had been gone for days.

One time, there was a curtain between the wall and the living room—I don't remember what for. I went to get my mom for something, and I opened up the curtain. They were fucking, and I came out and told the boys what I had just seen. You know when you make the circle with a thumb and finger and poke a finger through the circle to show that they were poking (fucking). My dad came out of the bedroom and just tore into me and started to beat the shit out of me. Like I mean it was an accident. It wasn't my fault they were fucking during the day. He just tore into me. It was kind of weird.

We were living in the poverty area, in one of the southeast states. And I mean we were outside playing with things we should not have been playing with. We were playing with these worms, and they turned out to be maggots for God's sake. We didn't know what they were, but we were playing with maggots. I learned more and I saw more Black people than I had ever seen,

ever. My reaction was like anyone else's. When I saw so many Black people, I was no different. You know being from a south Saskatchewan city where you didn't have a whole lot of Black people at that time... Mind you there is a lot more now, but back in the day there were very few Black people in our city, and most of the Black people that I did know were like me, a Black and Indian mix. And now here we were in a state that had lots and lots of Black people. It was very weird to me. But it also told me I had a different side of me other than the Indian side, and it made me feel an extreme sense of duality. I had a sense of duality because I knew nothing about my Black side other than my dad was Black. I didn't know what it meant to be black—I still don't. Most of my life is still centered on the Indian and white ways of life.

School was okay. I was a voracious reader, and I taught myself to read when I was young. I was taking buses by myself by the time I was six or seven years old. And I look at now and see how kids get driven around until they are fourty. I was pretty independent. I could forge my mom's signature on the welfare cheques when I was ten. If I got the cheque first, that meant we had food; if Mom got the cheque first, that meant we starved. The people at the Tom Boy Store knew what I was doing, and they aided and abetted me. So they never questioned me about the cheques I brought, even though I was only ten, eleven, or twelve years old. We were always so poor, always on welfare; we never knew where our next meal was coming from.

There were actually people in the neighbourhood whom we would go to if we were really, really hungry. They would feed us. We grew to trust them, and they wouldn't tell on us: they would just feed us up and send us home. I don't know if it was because we were charming kids, but I always remember there were people willing to feed us if we were really hungry. I remember my mom took off before Christmas one time, and she had been gone for like five days. We were off school, and I don't know where mom was, and the cheque came so I cashed it

and went downtown by myself. I was nine, and I bought the boys presents. You know, little cheap shit because if we wanted to eat you couldn't spend the cheque on what we really wanted. I had to remember the food, and I had to have money left over because if my mom came home and there was no money, there would be hell to pay. But on Christmas day, we got up, and I was like nine and didn't believe in Santa Claus. I think I did a little bit. Someone knocked on the door, and it was Mrs. H. who lived behind us. I played with her daughter all the time, and she said, "You know I think Santa Claus left this on our doorstep by accident." She had this huge box filled with wrapped toys for us all from Santa Claus. I even made a turkey.

My Whole World Turns Misty Blue

I couldn't believe how many people looked out for us, and how many looked the other way. Like Mrs. H. knew we were alone, but she didn't call welfare, which would have been better. I kind of think it would have been better if we had been taken away from Mom a long time ago because she couldn't care for us. She needed us because she needed someone to love *her*. I think it would have been better off if we were taken away from her from the get-go. I wonder if I would have been the same; I wonder if I would have ended up in prison. I don't know. What would have happened? Because I was supposed to go up for adoption when I was twelve years old. They had a couple of foster homes lined up for me with the intention of my being adopted. One was outside of Regina, and one was inside of the city. The one in the city was only about five or six blocks from the foster home where I had been staying. And they were going to place me there permanently. But of course when they asked me what I wanted to do, in the end, I chose to go back to my mother. And so I threw myself back into the vortex.

My mom's longest period of sobriety that I can remember lasted for eighteen months. I remember that once she started drinking again, I blamed myself. If only I would have been a

better kid, if I would have done this or that, or just been better, maybe she would not have to drink. People say that when your whole life is based on a sick and twisted relationship, then your behaviour is dictated by this dysfunctional relationship. I just picked myself up and did the best I could under the circumstances. I remember that even when she was sober, we still got beat and yelled at, but it wasn't as wicked or venomous. When she was sober she had a little compassion.

When she drank, she would get so fucking drunk, it wasn't even funny. She would talk to herself and go sit beside the stereo, and she would play her soul music. We must have heard the same song about seven million times, "Misty blue, my whole world turns misty blue," over, and over, and over, and over again. She would sit there drunk out of her ever-loving mind, and then she would start to say, "Hurry up, hurry up" ad nauseam. All of us kids would start freaking out because we knew what was coming next. We would say "What Mom? What Mom? What do you need Mom?" "Hurry up, hurry up," she would say. And we would frantically answer, "What do you need Mom?" We knew that an explosion of violence was about to erupt, and we were trying to find out what she needed before she would explode. When she was drunk, she had no stopping point. We didn't know how far she was going to go, and that's when I would send the boys away and just try to deal with it myself. Why are we not dead? I really don't know.

She always had favourite kids too. Second brother was her favourite. He was the one that she loved the most, and I really don't know how she felt about the other boys, but her love for that brother was just out of this world. Maybe that's why he is doing so well now, because she instilled in him that he was the best and that he was the good one. I remember they used to say that the youngest boy was going to be the pimp, and I was going to be the hooker. The oldest boy was going to be the drug dealer, and the good one would be in law enforcement of some kind.

My brothers may have dabbled in this and that, but in one way or another our lives would be defined for us.

I thought I was going to be a hooker because that is what I saw all around me. I was surrounded by women who were hookers, and most of the friends I grew up with would end up on the streets. So it was there it was, black and white. But when came the time to fulfill my destiny, I just couldn't do it. I could not turn a trick, but the sexual abuse went on. I was abused by strangers, by family, and I was abused by my mom's boyfriends.

Trailer Rape from Hell

The worst abuse was when I was six or seven years old, and we had just moved into this house. We had no TV and this guy said, "I'm going to go and get a TV. Can I take one of the kids with us?" And my mom said yes, and he took me and the youngest boy. And he ended up raping me over a period of probably ten hours. And I'm not talking about molestation. I am talking trying to stick his fucking cock into my baby vagina. Sticking his fingers inside me until I was bleeding, and all the while I was plotting to get me and my baby brother out of the trailer home from fucking hell.

We were locked in. I couldn't figure out how to unlock the door—it had one of those flip switches underneath the door handle. I was trying to get out and trying to get out. I remember banging on the windows and banging on the doors. No one was coming, and I was wondering why the fuck we were in the trailer. And then he was raping me. My poor little brother had to watch all this. I remember him getting a pen and trying to stab this guy in the ass. At some point during that night I was looking for a knife, and he saw me and caught me and took all the knives and put them way up high. And I remember at one point lying on the couch, and he was lying behind me and was holding me like I was his lover. Then the next morning he just dropped us off

in front of the house and fucked off. I was thinking if that was today, he probably would have killed me. It is amazing that he didn't just kill the both of us.

This thing is, Mom knew that he had us. I came home, and I'm crying and bleeding all down my legs from where he hurt me, and Mom just took me to the bathroom and gave me a pad and said that everything would be okay. That's it. That's all I got. What really tore me up a couple of years later was when Mom was in a car accident. She went through a windshield and she had like two thousand stitches on her face. The guy that she was in the truck with at the time was the guy who had raped me. I mean he hurt me so bad, and she still had him in her life. How could she do that? I just didn't get it. And I remember saying that I was going to tell my uncle because I knew he would kill him, even though he was molesting me too. I was his, and I knew uncle would kill him. My mom wouldn't let me tell him, but I always wondered how many other kids were hurt by this sick fucking bastard. I don't understand why he did this to me when he had my mom. My mom would have fucked him in a minute. My mom was very promiscuous.

In and Out of Foster Care

Then there was school. I estimate that I went to twenty-one different schools between kindergarten and grade ten. I went to three different high schools for grades nine and ten. Once over the period of one month, I went to four different grade schools. I attended school in Regina, Winnipeg, and Indianapolis. My attendance at school was dictated by where I was at that point in time. If I was in a foster home, then my attendance was perfect. If I was at home, then my attendance was all over the place. Somehow I always managed to pass. But I was in and out of school. Sometimes I just wouldn't go, and sometimes I would look after the kids, but I always passed. Everyone always said I was bright. I thought I was stupid because my mom said so. Teachers would say, "If she applied herself, she would do better." I just didn't have time to apply

myself; my life was going in and out of foster homes. Apply myself, my ass. It makes me sad to think that my teachers could see what was happening in my life and never did a damned thing to help me “apply” myself.

In the last bit before I left home, I had been in foster care for quite a while. Henry and Gladys were my foster parents, and they are still a big part of my life today. They consider me their kid even though I was a rotten kid. I had a temper, and I could lose it at the drop of a hat. Even with my temper, people always still liked me for some reason. I guess because my outbursts were so far apart. I would stuff my emotions. It would build, and build, and build, and I would keep shoving stuff down, and shoving stuff down, and shoving stuff down. I would just explode, and then I would be okay for a long time. I mean it could be about a year where I would be okay between incidents. Then something would happen, and I would lock and load. I lived by insanity, and it kept me sane. But you know again, the foster homes meant stability. When we went to foster homes, we would get clothes, get fed, and we would go to school every day. When we were at home, we wouldn't worry about keeping the house clean—we could be kids. And sometimes if I got really tired of looking after the boys, I would phone welfare and say, “Mom's not home. Come and get us.” Or if there was no food, they would come and get us, but we always ended up back home again. Foster care was like a filtration system. We would get cleaned up and a bit structured, and then off we would go, back home to the mayhem.

6.3) Death, Family Split, and my Nomad Days

My mom died when I was sixteen years old. I was told that she committed suicide, but I'm not sure. I left home for six months on my sixteenth birthday. I couldn't take it anymore. I went to a girl's group home in Saskatoon through welfare. It was a place for girls sixteen to twenty who were transitioning from being at home to being on their own. This place was called Winter Star,

and I really liked it there: we were given our independence, we were expected to act like adults, had the comfort of having someone to talk to and stuff like that. We all had to go to school and get jobs. I really liked it there, and I was so happy being away from Mom. At one point, I was ready to leave, I was ready to be out of there.

And so about five months later, I got the phone call that my momma had died. So I went back home and lived with my auntie. We were living in a motel. My auntie had come back from British Columbia for the funeral and brought her son with her. We buried my mom. I barely remember burying my mom. I remember being in the back of the limo with my brothers and distracting one of them by saying, "Look at all the people." The amount of people that came out to the funeral was just incredible. I thought so anyway.

There was Joanne Thatcher, Colin Thatcher's wife. She knew my mom; my mom used to clean her house. There was an ex-nun and her husband. There were all kinds of street people. There were so many people. We were at the Regina Indian and Métis Friendship Centre. It was kind of crowded, and I felt proud to see all the people at the funeral for my mother. And I remember saying, "I want the coffin closed. I don't want my brothers to see my mother dead." I walked in to the chapel, and the goddamn coffin was open because people had to see her. Why did the people have to see her dead? But that's people in society: they want to view the body for the last time. I pushed my little brother back out of the room, and after that it was kind of a blank.

One of my other brothers found her dead. He came home from school, and my little sister was alone with my mom for I don't know for how long. The two boys ended up going into foster homes, and the youngest brother went to live with a great uncle. My sister ended up going into foster home and was adopted. One of the boys had a really good foster home, someone who

wanted him and cared for him. The other two weren't lucky in terms of foster homes. At first, one of them went to live with a teacher from one of the schools, but his wife hated him, and one day they ended up saying he had to leave because of her. I can't remember their names, but I guess I should not mention them anyway for research's sake. This brother was very independent. Eventually he went to school, worked, and earned his own money.

After being rejected from the teacher's home, he ended up going to live with another foster family. If I remember correctly, the home he went to live in may have actually been family or cousins. At some point he went to a weekend soccer tournament in Saskatoon. Just before the tourney, he phoned his social worker and said, "I think these people are getting ready to move." So the social worker phoned them, and they said, "No we aren't moving." And so he went to the soccer tournament. When he came back, they had moved. All that was left in the house was his little pitiful stuff in the basement where he slept.

So he ended up going to live on his own as he was sixteen and was legally allowed to live outside the system. The youngest and eldest brothers ended up getting a place together and lived that way for some time. Prior to that the youngest boy was living with one of our uncles, but he didn't stay there long. Me, well I was just kind of roaming around the country. You know, never really having a home; just hitchhiking from place to place. I would get a little unsettled and move onto the next place.

Never a Place of my Own

I lived in Vancouver, Calgary, Saskatoon, and I lived in Winnipeg, as well as Regina. I was just all over the place just drifting and drifting, never knowing where I would end up one day to the next. I drink, but I am a one-day drunk. I can only drink for one day because I can't stand how it makes you feel. I never really had a problem being addicted to anything, but if the drugs were

there I would do them. I also had a variety of jobs here and there. I like to think I was a good worker. When I worked, I worked hard and I mostly enjoyed what I did. Then when I was twenty-four, I found a job in a bush camp. I had questionable friends, you know. You have to consider how I lived, of course. I wouldn't have friends that were normal—whatever normal was. I was a magnet for sketchy people, and it's where I felt comfortable. I believe it was because of where I came from and who my people were.

Not sure where I was, maybe Alberta, but I was having a virtual nervous breakdown. I was coming from a hospital, it was after a breakdown. I lived in the hospital for about two weeks. I lived in the psych ward, and they had me all drugged up. I phoned my aunt in northern Saskatchewan, and she said, "Come on stay with me here." And so I went there, and she was there to pick me up at the bus station, and it was good to see her. I remember she told me not to worry about the mosquitos because they were big enough to carry my luggage. That was funny—I laughed for once.

So I would live in this little town in northern Saskatchewan, and I would get a job. I got this job at a truck stop, and I worked at a restaurant. I liked living with my aunt—we actually had fun. One side step though is we always lived with someone and never really had our own home, but it was okay. We would go out to party and get drunk every now and again. It was okay, but I still never felt I had a place of my own. One of the sad things is that I never kept a whole lot of people from my past. My brothers, they still had school friends from grade school. My friends all eventually filtered out of my life, and it was a little lonely. Just the way my life was a little empty.

6.4) The Human Life I Would Take

I ended up going back to Calgary. I ended staying with this girl: she was my *girlfriend*, but we were also girlfriends. I was into this, here and there. My life may have been lonely, but it most certainly was not dull. We partied a lot. Like I said, I was never really addicted to anything, but if alcohol and/or drugs were there I certainly would not turn it down. This girlfriend of mine had all kinds of strange friends. And at this point, my life was where my future would be altered forever. I would take a life and not have many memories about what actually happened.

I did have a criminal record of sorts. I got caught shoplifting food for my friend's kids and ended up getting a conditional discharge. It was also interesting that [the drug] Halcyon was involved in that crime. I lost four days of my life that time. We thought we were going to be held up for the shoplifting, so we took all the drugs that my girlfriend had in her purse. I don't remember how much, but we could have died from the amount of Halcyon and Valium we consumed in the back of the paddy wagon on the way to getting booked and charged. We wanted to get rid of the drugs before we were searched when we got arrested. Once we did that, I blacked out, and when I woke up it was four days later. I don't remember anything from those four days. Anyway I ended up having the charges waived in Calgary a year or so later and pled guilty for a conditional discharge. That meant that all I had to do was "keep the peace" for six months and my record would get erased.

One Fateful Drug-Induced Night

My girlfriend met this strange guy in the psych ward. She told me how weird he was: he liked to get beaten and stuff like that—he was just a sick fuck. One fateful night, we ended up getting drunk and we were doing Halcyon. If you don't know what Halcyon is, it's a drug that is used for sleeping. But if you don't pig out and take too much it's a pretty good high. However, when I

took the Halcyon, I totally blacked out. It's not one of those drugs that keeps you on your toes, like cocaine, which is a more interactive drug. Halcyon knocks you on your ass, but like I said, it's ok if you don't take too much. Once the Halcyon hit my stomach and kicked in, that was it: lights out. And when I came out of the drug-induced night, the guy we were with was dead.

I came to an interrogation cell. All I had on was my housecoat and nothing else. No shoes, no undies (panties), nothing. I remember little flashes from the night before but not a whole lot. I remembered just enough to convict myself. For all I know I might not have even done the crime. I even went under sodium pentothal (the truth serum) therapy to find out what happened, but it didn't do anything to help me. I blacked out again from the drug and only remember one thing from the whole interview. All I remember is the doctor saying, "Don't go to sleep," and me saying bitchily, "I'm not sleeping. My eyes are just closed because I'm trying to remember." The people involved in my case said that I was in a major blackout, and that I didn't remember taking his life. It was just not there. Total submission of my mind, and it was not mine to remember. You know, maybe it's because it was so traumatizing. The guy was a freak and was into freaky shit. Maybe he just pushed me over the edge. You know, don't get me wrong murder is no answer, but when you live with abuse as long as I have in my life, something is about to snap. And I did that night, I snapped. One of the theories was that being in control after having been so abused during my life was a situation of revenge meted out to a totally innocent person. I keep wishing that I could remember because it's hard to have such a horrendous thing happen, and you can't justify—not sure if that's the right word—what happened. It can get really overwhelming when something like this happened, and you can't give yourself or others a concrete reason to have committed such a terrible act.

I Plead Guilty

I ended up pleading guilty to second degree murder. I was originally charged with first degree murder, but there is no way in hell I would have planned something like this on a totally innocent person for no sane reason. My lawyer explained the difference between first degree, second degree, and manslaughter. I told myself that it was second degree. Looking back now, I realize that it was manslaughter. With the Halcyon, there was mental break. I don't care what anyone says, I didn't plan to kill this guy. It wasn't planned. One of the Crown's arguments was that because of the time it took me to go from the bedroom to the kitchen to get a knife and come back, it was intent for premeditation. Apparently, he had been stabbed, a lot of times. I don't remember how many, but it was a lot of times. The court was saying that I had time to think about it. You know, going to the kitchen, getting the knife, and going back to kill him. Well that was enough time to form intent, but I didn't think so. The psychiatrist had to prove that I couldn't form intent because I was in a major blackout. Being in a blackout disables a person from remembering facts and/or reality. Second degree murder is a charge where the crime just happens without intent, and I said, "That's it, so that's what I am going to plead guilty to." I never thought of not pleading guilty. I just pled guilty because it seemed easier to deal with at the time. Because I could have been in the system waiting forever, so I plead guilty in order to move on to a quick trial.

My so-called girlfriend came to visit me once while I was in prison. And I just looked at her through the glass with this phone in my hand. I didn't know what to say, and she never came back. I had already been in prison for a couple of years, and I get a letter from someone with a newspaper clipping saying that she had died of a drug overdose. Another woman I knew sent the clipping to me thinking I might want to see it. It was funny because I had just gotten another

letter, and it was from my auntie in Saskatchewan. And I remember she told me, “Her day will come, and she will get what she deserves.” This woman did not do me any justice at the beginning after being charged and never helped me at all. And low and behold she died: karma’s a bitch! Holy cow that is so weird.

6.5) My Incarceration

I sat in remand for a little under a year, and I wound up being transferred to Prison for Women (P4W). I received a sentence of Life Ten to the board, which means I would be eligible for parole in ten years, but I would be on parole for the rest of my natural life, till I die. I remember being flown to Prison for Women in shackles, and those are feelings you do not easily forget. Try going to the bathroom on a plane with belly chains and leggings. I would pull one side down, and because your hands are chained to your sides you had to let go to pull the other side down, at which point the first side would snap back up. Eventually after twenty minutes I finally got to pee. The guards got a little antsy because I took so long. I told the female escort, “You try it. Maybe you should come in here and pull my pants down.” She declined but didn’t complain about the length of time again. Try wiping your fuff (vagina) with your hands shackled to your sides...forget about it!

P4W, it’s not open anymore. It’s the one that was not fit for bears. So I went to P4W in Kingston, Ontario, and started my time. I remember walking into this sickly pink foyer. A guard sits in a cubicle surrounded by bulletproof glass and by all kinds of gadgets. It was the beginning of the noise. There is one thing about prison: the noise of prison can drive you crazy. It never stops: people talking, people yelling, the sounds of radios on what seems like five hundred different stations, the clang of the doors being opened and slammed shut, the jingles of the keys, the sound of walkie-talkies. And noise, noise, noise. I really value silence now.

The P4W building is old and made of limestone. Apparently the limestone for the prison was actually sourced in Kingsley. Then there is this incongruous twenty-foot tall fence surrounding the whole prison. The fence is made of concrete and encircles the whole prison. Across the street you can see Kingston Penitentiary (KP), a prison for men. At KP there are towers on each corner of the prison walls. A solitary guard sits in the tower 24/7, and this guard is armed to the teeth. I didn't know what to expect; I never went to prison before even though my relatives had been to prison. The only time I went to prison was to visit family, and that was it.

The Fish Range

Inside P4W was nasty. The place was old and decrepit. One of the first people I saw was this plump, motherly, grumpy-looking guard. That day, I would have guessed that she was on the rag, but she was too old! She looked at me and said, "What the fuck do you want? Get the hell out of here!" I said, "I would be glad to go," because I was in shackles and belly chains, plus I was wearing three inch high heels. Yes, three inch high heels with shackles and belly chains no less. But she turned out to be one of the guards that truly wanted to make a difference for the women. The man and woman who escorted me to the P4W were RCMP officers, and they were really nice to me. One of the RCMP officers said, "You are going to be fine. It will take a while to adjust but take your time, and just mind your own business and do your own time, and you will be fine. You hear that? Do your own time." But it wasn't really fine. It would never be fine. I was in prison—how the fuck is it going to be fine? I was being incarcerated because of a life I don't even remember taking.

I remember all the barriers: one, two, they just kept coming and opening. So there I was in P4W. I knew that I would end up in prison at some point in my life, but this was now a reality. The first set of doors was just the front door. Then there were two sets of doors that were barred

and controlled by the guard in the pod. The sets of doors were such that one set couldn't be opened until the other set was closed. And everything was painted this sickly Pepto colour, dismal pink. I guess they thought that women would want pink doors. We made it through the second set of doors, and there were all these people coming down for lunch. And I looked over to see this girl holding hands with another girl that looked like a guy, and she—the femme girl—had this huge fucking shiner. All I could think was, “Holy shit.”

They took me to Admitting and Discharge. I was stripped down, and I did all the things they show on TV. I was told to squat, bend over, cough. They then stuck their gloved hands in my vagina and my asshole. Great job if you like that sort of thing. Then I had to take a shower, and they gave me this really gross smelling shampoo. The shampoo was the kind they give you to get rid of lice, and you had to wash your whole body with it. Then they put me in what they called “baby dolls.” Baby dolls is this garment that is rip proof and looks like they just took two pieces of cheap quilted material with three spaces put your head and arms through. It was basically just two rectangular pieces of cloth sewn together. I had no underwear on, and they took my shoes. Then they took me to seg (segregation), and left me there until I was classified the next day. Classification would dictate where you lived in the prison.

The next day, they gave me my package. In the package was a pillow, bedding (the bedding was so worn you could almost see through it), two pairs of jeans, two t-shirts, two pairs of socks, a pair of runners, a bra, two pairs of used panties, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a little black comb, and a box of tampons. Then they took me to the living unit known as B range, or the fish range. A fish is a new prisoner. A range is where the majority of the women would go. B range is two-tier cells like you see in the movies: the really old fashioned cells with the bars. The cells were just little tiny concrete cells with a bed, a tall cupboard, and a toilet. The stainless steel

toilets had a sink attached to them with push buttons. There was no hot water in the cell. If I remember right, B range had twenty-two cells, and A range had about fifty cells. At the end of each range there was a shower and bathtub. I think there were two on A range, and one on B range.

From there I was taken to my cell. My cell, yeah *my* cell. I'm sitting there looking around, and I cried. That's the first time I cried in a long time. I just sat there and cried. I was by myself. The doors actually had shams on them, and you could shut them. They had the bars, but they had these curtain things that you could shut for privacy. I sat there, and I just cried my eyes out and nobody came. Nobody was there to comfort me. I was totally alone. At that point in time, I decided that I was going to do my time and do everything I could to get myself out. I sat there and talked to myself saying, "I'm never coming back, I'm never coming back." That day, I was changed forever. So I put on my big girl panties, stopped crying, and started to investigate what I would need to get out.

Doing my Own Time

I spent the next few days adjusting. I always had my ability to adjust. Anywhere in the prison that you wanted to go, you had to walk up to a barrier and say, "Barrier please." You did this to get through a door, and you had to wait to do everything. There was a time for this and a time for that; everyone just settled into the rhythm. Some days I didn't want the rhythm, but I didn't want to make waves so I got into the rhythm. I woke up, lined up, and put a barrier around my life.

I think that first moment when I sat in the cell by myself crying was the moment of knowing I was never going to come back. And I decided to find out how *not* to come back. Really this was not me. Fuck, I was in P4W for murder. I always knew that I would spend some

time in prison, but I had done it good. In no way had I ever expected to be in P4W. I thought that I would be at Pine Grove doing time for something small. Shoplifting or drugs, but not murder.

Murder. I was a fucking murderer, and I was having a hard time figuring out how to get rid of this label. Now I faced the fact that yes, it was me who did this, and that I had fucked up my life. Now it was time to un-fuck my life. I was the least violent person I knew, and now I was sitting in this stupid cell trying to figure out how the hell I got here, and how the hell I was going to get out. I knew that basically, I was a good girl but really just confused is all. There were days when self-loathing overwhelmed me, and I had to find some way to deal with this tag that I would live with for the rest of my life. I would have to forgive myself before I moved on. Ironically, it is the one thing that I have not managed to do after all this time, twenty-six years.

So after settling in and getting to know people—knowing who you can approach and who you can't approach—I learned to do my own time. Because that is just the way it is: do your time and shut the fuck up. I watched, and I learned. I learned what doing your own time really meant. I watched other people doing other people's time: they were so mixed up in other people's lives, and there were always drugs everywhere. Drugs were always trouble. Drugs and addiction aren't my problems so that was an easy one to stay away from. But trying to live around people who are stoned and not get into trouble can be really hard. You know, because of how sketchy their lives are. And usually with drugs come insensibility and violence that can have no rhyme or reason. It could be hard to separate yourself from the fallout of drug use.

Everybody was always involved in other people's shit. It was like a soap opera, so I just sat back and decided who I was going to be friends with and who I would stay away from. How you were going to be treated in P4W was decided in the first month. You decided how your time was going to go, and once you decided, then that's how they treated you for the rest of your time,

and it became very hard to change that afterwards. You come in, and you meet someone who offers you drugs, and if you say yes or no, then that's how it's going to be. If you walk in and decide that you want to fight, you start getting into people's faces, you try to be tough, and that's who you are. In prison, once you've made your choice, it's very hard to break away from that.

And so I decided to let them know that I don't do drugs. I actually did drugs twice when I was in there: I smoked a joint, but I didn't like the feeling of not being in control of the situation. You know, that is how my whole life was before I went to prison, and I realized that I had to take control of my life. I couldn't let others dictate how my life was going to be because I spent all my life just floating around adjusting and being what other people wanted me to be and doing what other people wanted me to do. I think it was really weird to find this stuff out in prison, but I did. I would usually just slide in and be what other people wanted me to be. I didn't know the word "no" before that and how to say no. But in P4W, I learned how to stand up for myself. I could let people walk all over me, or I could say, "Fuck you, and I won't let you walk all over me." That is how it was. I looked after me, for once.

I only ever had one fight the entire time I was in P4W. But I *had* to fight because I had established myself as my own person, and you couldn't talk me into what you wanted me to do. I did what I needed to do for me. Simple. I stood my ground, I went to school, I got my GED, I worked in the office. I was the only inmate trusted to work alone in the office of one of the directors. I learned computers, I worked on the computer, I worked in the library, I worked in the kitchen, and I ran the canteen. As a matter of fact, when I quit the canteen, they begged me to come back because when I was there stock wouldn't disappear and stuff like that. But I never "ratted" anybody out—I never *had to* rat anybody out. I established my ground rules with the guards; they could ask me anything they wanted, but I wouldn't give nobody up. So I lived by

the rules of both of the worlds and managed to get by. Over time and because I was not a shit disturber, I made my way into a wing where I had my own room, which had no bars except for on the windows. The room actually had its own door with a little window so the guards could still see you when you were sleeping. One thing about prison is that the lights are never out—they are never, ever out. Now I make sure that when I sleep, it's dark in my room. I really love the ability to sleep in total darkness. I love the dark. I also like the quiet now because there was no quiet in prison, maybe in segregation, but overall it was a noisy place.

One of the things that amused me was this tram tour bus that used to go around doing the sights and sounds of the Kingston area. They would drive by the front of the prison and blare out through a sound system, "And this is the Prison for Women, where 130 of the most dangerous women in Canada reside." We would be sitting there, and somebody would be crocheting booties, and we would all just laugh. I'm not sure why, but they eventually took that out of their tour guide script.

Well I guess in prison if you looked in the right places, and you had the right drive, you could make it. I was lucky to not have to go back. I didn't have a drug problem, I didn't have kids to worry about, and it was okay. Not having kids is one thing I regret. I always wanted about a dozen, and I thought I would be pregnant by the time I was fifteen—that's what my mom always said. But it meant that I didn't bring a lot of baggage with me in prison like some of these other women. And also I was fairly independent. I wasn't like a lot of the women in there that needed someone. They needed a relationship; they needed someone to love them. So they would take whoever came along. Life was lonely in prison. Always has been, always will be.

They had different ranges in prison. As I mentioned there was B range, which was a fish range, there was A range, which was the range where everybody would go, and there was a wing

where you could earn your way. That is the place I went to, and as I said it was a privileged area. It was still all the same. You still had the guards looking in on you, and you had no privacy and stuff like that. But it was a privileged area where you had your own door and room rather than a prison cell. A range was the source of all the trouble. It was where all the dope came in, and where relationships were violent. There were always all kinds of shit happening on A range. It was always interesting so to speak. It was sad to see so many women so fucked up. You know, they come in fucked up and stay fucked up until they either die or get out. While I was in P4W, six of my friends committed suicide within a period of years, and of those six, I think four were from Saskatchewan. The official roll call is Marlene Moore, Sandra Sayer, Marie Ledoux, Careen Daignault, Pat Bear, and Johnny Bear. It really fucks me up sometimes to think that for their offenses—one girl was in for fraud, I think—they all served the death penalty. It's as if the prison system executed them. Marlene "Shaggy" Moore was famous (or rather, infamous) for being the first woman designated a dangerous offender. If you would have met her, you would have seen that she was the most pitiful little thing that you ever met. I don't know how she could harm anybody. When I first met her, she was sad, and she was so sick. She had to carry around a urine bag—it was really quite sad.

There were only two women whom I ever met and whom I was truly afraid of, and you would never know what they were going to do. One of them was a little old woman who was about in her fifties. She was like an old spider sitting there, spinning her webs. I just hated her. She ended up getting out. She was twenty-five years to the board, but she managed to appeal and have the charges reduced to manslaughter, and she ended up with eight years. She had poisoned her husband. I guess she had poisoned his vitamins, and she'd killed him. And because she didn't

poison all of the vitamin pills, she didn't know exactly which ones were poisoned. She couldn't know which one he would take, and yeah, he took the wrong one and died.

I found the lifers easy to do time with because they had everything to lose. The lifers are less likely to do a lot of shit because everything they do, no matter how small, can affect when they get out. The short-timers are the ones to watch out for. They can escalate their behaviour. One woman I knew in prison started off with theft when she was seventeen years old. Since then it's been like twenty-six or twenty-seven years, and I'm out, but she's still inside. Every time it gets close to her getting out, she does something to stay in. So it was the lifers I liked; they did their time, and if you didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother you.

Becoming Selfish in a Good Way

One of the things that I learned to save my life is that if you look long enough and hard enough, you can find what you need. All you have to do is watch for what you need and grab onto the opportunities when they are offered to you. I also realized that you had to learn to be totally selfish. You have to know that you are number one. I spent so much of my life before prison trying to please everyone that I sacrificed my life for the lives of others. And I mean becoming selfish in a totally good way. I learned the power of NO. It took me a long time to learn to say no when something wasn't in my self-interest. It's a totally good way to live your life. You can help people out along the way, but you have to look at how it's going to affect you. You absolutely shouldn't give your life up for someone that really couldn't give two shits about you. The women in prison are in there because they were selfish in the bad sense. They only thought of themselves in the most harmful way, and they had no problem stepping on your face to get what they needed. Some women, for example battered women, have given up their control and have given it to someone else, usually a partner. They didn't put themselves first but gave their control

over to someone who only had their own self-interest in mind. These women give up their control for *love* and lose their selves in the process.

The battle of self was always there. For some of the women, if they didn't do their drugs, they would curl up and die. They didn't know how to look for the opportunities. They were weak in spirit and most had no support. It was bullshit. And there is a saying that goes, "the more they could shine on the man." That's an old phrase, and it's bullshit of course. One of the things that I discovered is that a lot of Native women didn't apply for parole; they just did their whole time. I couldn't understand that. I used to bug them about why they didn't take parole or apply for parole.

Creating Opportunities for Myself

I took all the opportunities that were offered to me when they were in my own self-interest. I also fought some *opportunities* offered to me because they really weren't opportunities—they were a stepping stone to failure. I even took a couple of university classes through Queens while I was there. And then I transferred to a correctional centre in British Columbia, and I was in the minimum security area. It was a beautiful place. But looking past the beauty, a prison is a prison is a prison. They are there to take your control away. So I had to work with the system, keeping in mind what I needed to get what I wanted. I was the only lifer in the minimum security, and I mean it was *minimum security*. No fences, no locks on the doors, no bars. But I also saw it as a chance to take all the opportunities they gave me. It was really hard because I was doing time with people who were only doing two weeks. It was kind of annoying. You know, someone was doing time for two weeks, crying the whole time. Fuck, I was sitting there thinking, "It's been seven years since I've been in prison, and you are crying over two weeks?!" Fuck. Then again I guess I had to look at it from their point of view, but it was really hard. I established a

relationship of trust, because if someone put their trust in me, then I would do everything I could to nurture that trust.

I was even working the system finding and creating opportunities where opportunities didn't exist. At one time—I didn't even know until much later—I caused a major conflict, and the guards were threatening to walk out because of me. I had this job in the prison office answering phones. The guards figured that the job should have gone to a union person rather than to a con. Fuck that. I got the job, and I did good. In the meantime, I had no idea this conflict with the guards was going on. The director believed in me, so she fought for me, but it eventually ended. But because I fostered the notion of trust, I created my own opportunity. It actually worked for me in the end.

One of those times is actually an example of a time where I gave away my own self-interest and sacrificed it for someone else. A couple of months before the parole hearing where I was applying to get day-parole at seven years, I got into a fight. What happened was that someone was picking on a pregnant girl. The Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women (BCCW) allowed women to keep their children in prison. They could have their babies with them up until the child was two years of age. And this one girl was being picked on, and I didn't like it, so I resorted to violence for the first and only time while I was in prison. She threw the first punch, and I flipped out. In the ruckus, a guard ended up getting slugged because she got in between us.

I lucked out and was happy I wasn't sent to segregation and sent back to the secure side of the prison. My punishment was that I was banished to my room for a couple of weeks. But it did work against me because instead of going home at seven years, I ended up having to serve an extra year. Instead of being released to a half-way house back home, I was given what's called a limited day-parole. I was given 240 hours per month of time away from the prison.

So I made an opportunity. I ended up getting a job on the outside working with an agency called Alternatives in Action, which would prepare men and women who were in prison to get jobs. We did resumes and workshops, and we also went job hunting for them and lined up jobs for ex-cons and stuff like that. It was okay. I worked there four days a week, and I did 140 hours a month in order to get out of the system. I worked hard. I went to socials and things like that. I didn't drink—it just wasn't my thing. You know, it was one of those things I didn't do. I've seen so many girls get out only to come back in because they fucked up their parole by drinking. As I said before, Native women didn't take parole. Maybe that is why—so they wouldn't have shit to deal with. They would just be out and free.

The thing is the system bent over backwards for me. When those women were killing themselves, of course people were worried. Right after Maria Ledoux died, a Saskatchewan girl, they realized that taking us far from home was a great fault in the system because there were no federal prisons in Western Canada for women. So what the feds did was to hook us up with a one-time visit. They flew my aunt, my little cousin, one of my brothers, and my sister to P4W for a family visit. That was the best visit ever. I was so happy to see my family. I couldn't believe they were there. I watched as they came walking from the main building to the house we were visiting in. I remember I stepped out the door, I ran back in, and I came out again to run back in. I was almost bursting with happiness. I know I must have looked a little loony, but my family was at P4W to visit, and I could not believe it. It was a great visit: just what the doctor ordered.

Then one day, they called me, and it was on my day off. I could sleep in as long as I wanted to because I was known to be a real bitch in the morning. Nobody liked to come and wake me up, and they used to get the new guards to do it. I was called to the office, and I said, "What the fuck do you want?" You learned to talk like that. And they said, "You are going

home.” And I said, “What?” Then they said, “You got your parole.” And I said, “Fuck off, I didn’t see the parole board.” I went back to my room, and the director came up and said, “Seriously, you are going home.” Within three days, I was home. I had a pass for a week back to Saskatchewan, and I got to visit with my family. That pass was the first time I went home in seven years. In my eighth year, I got parole, and I was so fucking happy. I couldn’t believe it—I was going home. I was nervous to get home, and I would end up in the men’s halfway house. I absolutely hated it there because I found out that the guy next door had raped his sister-in-law to death.

This halfway house was not fit for bears, and putting women in there was extremely retarded. But that’s the feds for you: a real bunch of fools. There were men in there that had killed women for the sake of it, and it was a scary place to be. There was this one guy that Sandy talked about who was out on parole and killed a young girl. He was a fucking leach. That scared me when I was in there, so I just bitched and bitched and bitched. Finally after six months, they put me in the YWCA, and I stayed there for the rest of my parole. And like when I was incarcerated, I took advantage of all the things offered to me, and I worked. I worked hard, and I stayed a model inmate. I did what I was supposed to, and I stayed out of prison.

6.6) My Reintegration as I Understand It

For me, my transition from prison was good. I mean, I should have never wound up in there, but anyway I did. I took a charge of second degree murder like you butter your bread. Just like that. I had no support and got life in prison with the possibility of parole in ten years. I got out in eight, and it was life changing. I have been working at the same place for seventeen years and have been out for just about that long. I never had a criminal record to speak of, but I got life. Wow

that amazes me! What a system of justice we have—there is no justice. I made my way through and out of P4W. I did my time both in P4W and while I was on parole living at the YWCA.

Like I said, I did what I had to do, and I have been successfully reintegrated for over seventeen years. I never did one thing to fuck up my parole and to end up back behind bars. I never want to go there again, ever. I ended up going back to school for a secretarial course, and even before I finished the course, I got a job. I still feel like I live two lives because at my job where I work, they don't know my past and that I was in prison. I wish that I could live one life and that I could tell them. But because of the nature of the work, I cannot. There are some things that just have to stay silent, and I just need to accept where I am at. Maybe one day I will be able to say something, but for now it is what it is. The fact that I got the job after being in prison is all that matters: it's my reintegration. I look at my friends who are like me, and who have gotten out. None are working a straight job. All of them are working with the system jobs that have to do with women in prison and stuff like that, and they are not really happy.

I would like to conclude by saying that I have no regrets about my life. I lived through hell, but how many criminalized Indian women live to talk about it? Well, not too many. I lived with sexual abuse, being raped, being abandoned, being hungry, and being lost in a system where I would find out who I am. As I looked back, it was hard. I mean dealing with the past is never easy. I am happy that I was asked to be part of this, and the other Indian women were also great. It helped that I knew Sandy. I never really felt any anticipation. The Sharing Circles were awesome. I know I was not supposed to speak out of turn, but I was so excited that I would blurt things out. But no one said anything, and they just let me talk. I believe that this kind of research is important and/or will be important for other criminalized Indian women. I am happy the

women are going to keep the Circle going, and if I can make it, I will come to the odd meeting. I just want to say, "Thank you."

Chapter 7: Good Warrior Woman Today—Donna’s Story

7.1) Introduction

Donna Gamble is one of the strongest women in my life. She comes to me with so many great experiences that life has to offer. She is humble, she is traditional, and she is a warrior in her own right. For years Donna lived on the streets of Saskatoon in violence and mayhem. She lost all concept of self. She was raped as a child, and her path would become dark and full of addiction. Her life was marred by addictions, prison, and abuse in all forms. She was not dealt a fair hand, but she took what she was given and turned herself into an amazing speaker, supporter, mother, and *kokum* (grandmother).

Donna is using her real name because it is her hope that other Indian women who have survived similar situations will learn from the lessons of her past existence. Donna brings richness to this research that solidifies the theory and methods. She understands that there is no need to be classified as a criminalized Indian woman. Donna’s family is her main focus. Her husband is her life partner, and her relationship with her mother has been restored. She has gone full circle, and life does not get any better. She went from the street life to finding out who she is as an Indian woman and now practices her Indianness through ceremony. I am so happy that this has brought us together. I love her. Donna is a miracle.

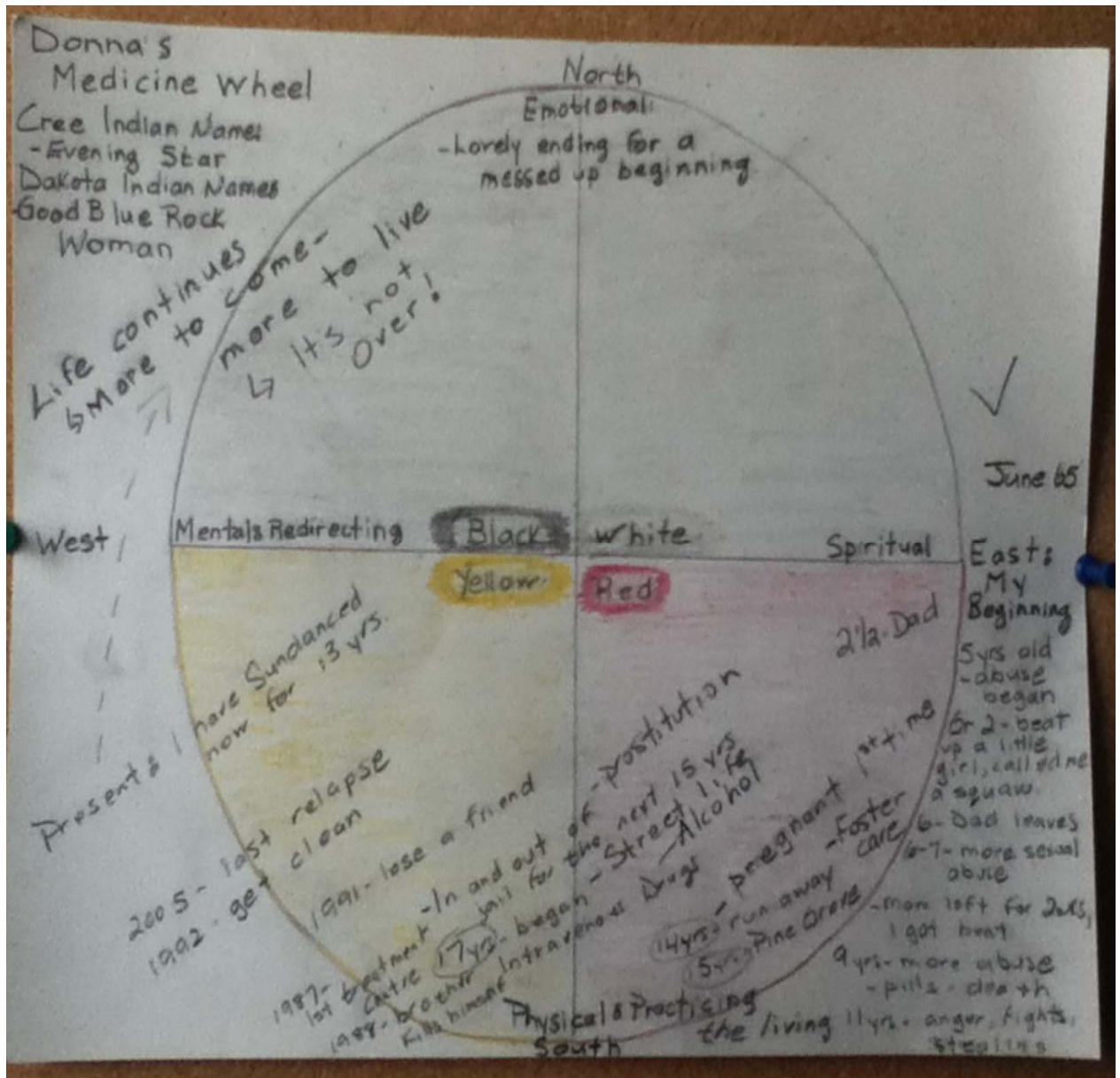


Image 7.1: Donna's Medicine Wheel

7.2) My Childhood as an Emotional Escape Artist

Hi my name is Donna Gamble. I am using my real name because I have nothing to hide from anyone. Like Sharon, I am okay today if people know who I am. For me, it is important to have

women know it is okay to be who you are and where you come from because at the end of the day, you will be stronger in life. Besides that, I have done videos and speak quite openly and honestly about my experiences, so using my real name is not an issue for me. When Sharon asked me to be part of this research I jumped at the chance. I have known Sharon for many years, and I'm happy to have her back in my life today. I will start somewhere at the beginning and do my best to share my story with you. I hope that whoever reads my story will be able to learn from my example and find the joy that I have found.

Before you can understand my adult life, my background and such, you must understand my childhood. I come from addictions, family violence, sexual abuse, and yeah, I knew at a very young age that I wasn't going to tell on anybody because it was the way I was trained. So, I was told not to talk, not to feel, don't touch, don't do this, don't do that. By the time I reached eleven years of age, with all the violence in my life it became what I perpetuated with those around me, especially at school. I felt powerful. I felt invincible, and that I could do anything, and naturally I ended up in Kilburn Hall.

I was in and out of foster care from the time I was six years old, and my child spirit disappeared. I always thought it was a time of evolution for me, a place where I would learn to be colder and stronger, but it was not all good. I do want to include one good time I remember from when I was two, and my half-dad was holding me. I remember him saying, "Look my girl, the man stepping on the moon." He said, "this will be you too, you can do anything you want by the time you are big." So remembering those words and all the stuff that happened afterwards was harsh.

I was five when I was abused, and it wasn't so much the abuse itself but it was afterwards that affected me so badly. My mom and dad came in where they found a man on top of me. My

dad laid a licking on him, and my mom opened the door and said, “Now go to sleep,” and she closed the door. There were no hugs. There was no compassion or questions like, “Are you okay, do you need anything?” It was just, “Okay, now go to sleep.” How do you sleep after being raped at five years old? I mean really how do you do anything? You are five years old and you have just been raped. Now let me tell you, that right there is some fucked up shit.

After that I noticed no one touched me, nobody held me, and nobody could really look me in the eyes. And I was only five. I felt something had changed drastically, and a year or so later my dad left us. He left us, he married a little white woman, and they had pretty little white kids. Based on what I heard at school from a very young age I was a *squaw*, and apparently this had something to do with my brown skin. I could never figure that one out and didn’t bother. There were lots of people that knew I had been abused, but it was their belief that I deserved it. Yeah, at five years of age I deserved to be raped and violated, right? So, my dad left, and my mom went from bad to worse, if that was at all possible. She went crazy, her addiction kicked in, and there was always abuse, abuse, abuse. Her partners or our babysitters were abusing and molesting us, my brothers and sisters, and no one was there to care.

I was six when my mom left us alone for the first time. I was pretty proud that I was taking care of things. My mom was gone for two weeks and I was stealing food, but there was no tension. It was okay without my mom there—we had quiet. We did have a break-in, and I hid my siblings in the closet and told them to lie still until I told them to come out. My little brother was getting older, and when I looked up I saw him watching as those guys who broke in—well, they were abusing me. My brother was sitting at the top of the stairs, and I remember “shssing” him by putting my finger up to my mouth. He just sat there and watched. For me that was a pivotal thing to have him witness what was going on.

One day Mom came home, and she found out that social services had been in the house. I had lied to them; I must have been pretty good because they left us there. Shortly after mom would be gone for a month, and when social services found out, this time it was not a good situation. But you know, nobody in my family really helped us. Even my grandmother on my dad's side would say, "Your mom wanted you, you can deal with it." I was six! I really tried to deal with it, but social services came and took us away.

I was in and out of foster homes a lot. At the first foster home, they made us eat off of the floor on a newspaper, away from their family where they would all sit at a big oak table. It was a big table, but there were only three or four of them sitting there. But we had to eat on the floor by the dog. And for me, it validated all that I had been hearing that we were bad, so I took that in and added that to my store of resentments. I would learn to hide my feelings and became a great emotional escape artist. Something happened to my little brother because at one point we would be separated. That one really affected me because I felt I was older, and I should have looked after him better than I did, and I felt it was my fault. That would become my dark passenger. I should have been able to look after my siblings. There was a drastic change in my brother. It was inevitable—or was it? I really don't know what happened, but it had to be pretty bad. It would make me *wicked*.

When Hate Kicks In, I Kick Out!

When I was nine years old, we were in a hotel or motel. My friend, she was a little white girl, I really loved her, and I thought she was the most beautiful thing. We were playing, and it slipped out that the abuse was happening. That this guy was crawling into the bed, and he would do his thing, and I never understood why my mom would not do anything. I understand now that she was probably high, or passed out. But anyway I let it slip, and my friend called her, told her that

I've got to tell my dad. I said, "No, no." But she told her dad, and he called in the cops. When the cops came I begged them to take me with them because I knew what would happen if they didn't. But they didn't take me, and sure enough, as soon as they were gone I got a beating. We moved from that motel and into another one. A couple of weeks later my mom took me to a movie—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. You know that big Indian that ends up running away at the end? That was my first role model of a tough Indian. Right in the middle of the movie she says, "He is dead." And even though I knew who she was talking about I said, "Who is dead?" She said, "The guy who was abusing you, he hung himself." And from that point on I never said shit, as much as I talk now, I didn't after that. It came to this point in my life where words would not be sufficient and I stayed silent.

It was a few weeks later I found some pills. One of my cousins would move in with us, and I was digging through her stuff and found the pills. I went to the bathroom, and I started to take the pills one at a time. I knew what I was doing because I had watched *The Apartment* with Shirley McLean and Jack Lemmon, and I wanted to go to sleep just like Shirley McLean did. So, I was taking them, but I came out of the bathroom and saw my little sister sitting on the bed. She was really small, sitting on the edge of the bed watching cartoons, and I thought, "Oh my God, I can't leave her because she might follow what I do." So I told her to go get Mom. I was so freaked out. I didn't want to leave my little sister. She got Mom, and they took me to the hospital. The doctor told me, "You know you can't eat other people's medicine. They are not candy," and I remember thinking, "You are such a stupid head, you are so stupid. You know I was crying for help!"

After that I didn't talk much till I was eleven. I was getting violent, and I was starting to fight back. My mom's beatings got worse, and she was becoming more violent. She tried to kill

me once when I was about eleven years old. She thought I was drinking so she made me drink a whole goblet, the old school goblet of wine. Then she made me drink the whole thing of whiskey. And I remember that was my first taste of booze. After that I would be at parties where kids were drinking, but I would pour the booze out and pretend to be drunk. I swore I would never be like my mom. She thought I had been drinking, she gave me a drink, and I drank. I remember the feeling, and I said, “Fuck it.” Wow! And just maybe I would fall asleep and never wake up, but I always woke up. I had blackouts right from when I started to drink—I had mean blackouts from the get-go.

Shortly after that my mom was beating me up, and she tried to burn me. I did something wrong, but she beat me up, and I took off. She found me at my friend’s fort. I woke up, and she was beating me up with a log so I crawled into the back of the fort. My friend said, “Oh, burn her out, she’ll come out,” and in my mom’s insanity, she did. She lit the mattress on fire. I remember screaming at her, “Watch me die, just watch me die you bitch!” That’s when I had total hate. The hate kicked in, and that was it. I couldn’t give a flying shit—I just really felt empty.

Locked Up and Locked In with Social Services

My mom actually called social services, and they came and got me. They put me in a home, and of course I didn’t stay. I didn’t even stay a night. I left, and I went with this gal. During that time a lot of things happened with her, but she disappeared. When we were together, she disappeared. Luckily for me I got caught by the cops, and I ended up in Kilburn Hall. So I was in there out for about six months. Every time I got out, I booked it to my mom’s to go and find her. After about six months they gave up on me, and they sent me to Roy Wilson Centre. I was there for about two-and-a-half years. That place has 24/7 lockup. Within the first two months, I got locked in the hole for about a month. I believe the longest I was in the hole was for two whole months. And

when we were in the hole, we had to work our way out. One Christmas time a bunch of girls escaped because it was such a lonely place to be. So anyway I did my time there. I would get away now and again.

I went to Regina once, and I was raped there. I didn't know Regina very well, and I wanted out of the city but couldn't friggng find my way out. I was going in damn circles around the main streets, and all I wanted was out. The second time I went to Regina I managed to get out okay. I left Regina to find my mom, and I ended up hitchhiking all the way to Alberta. I hitchhiked to my *kokum*'s first to have a visit. She told me where mom was, so I hitchhiked to Alberta. And along the way there were a couple of crazy things that happened, you know these rapes and shit like that. Then I found my mom, and I stayed with her for a while.

From there I went on a campaign—I was going to prove to the world that I was not like my mom. I went to find myself a man. I fell in love with now deceased Rick the Prick. I was fourteen, and he was eighteen, and I thought we were going to be happy forever. We were happy, but it sure wasn't forever. I had fun with him. He treated me pretty good; he never raised a hand to me. We were like kids. I wanted to get pregnant, and we did even though people thought it was a mistake. I wanted to be pregnant; I wanted to prove to the world I could be a good mom. I knew I could be because I babysat and cared for my siblings all the time—so childcare was easy, right?

So I ended up pregnant. At that time my mom almost ended up in prison. She got out and quit drinking for a while. She came and found my baby sister and me, and we were living with her. Then social services found out where we lived—they followed my sister home. The social services worker said all of us Indians didn't know how to take care of our children, and that we were no good. She just trash talked about us Indians. She was constantly on us; she was like my

Grandma Pitzy. So we ended up back in the homes. I ended up in a home in Prince Albert, and when it was time for me to have my baby, the social services worker took my baby away from me. She told me that if I didn't look after my baby good she would prove me an unfit mother, like she did my mom. And she would do what she had done to us, just put my baby in home after home. I didn't want that, so I signed a paper. I let my baby go. After that I drank.

Hitting the Streets

I drank like a fish. I was like an accident waiting to happen, but the accident never happened. The only thing that did happen is I ended up meeting the wrong people, the wrong time, and they took me to Saskatoon. So we came to Saskatoon and the guys' sister said, "Well, if she is going to live here, she is going to work." I thought they were finding me a job. Yeah I was a little naïve to say the least. And they put me out—but it was not the first time I was out. When I was eleven I ran away from Kilburn Hall, and I met a white guy in Saskatoon. He was a really tall guy. He lived on Broadway Avenue, and he asked me if I needed a place to stay. So he took me home and gave me a room and fed me and raped me. Afterwards he gave me money. Same thing happened when I was raped in Regina: they threw me a few dollars, and I felt like I was in that foster home again where I had to eat off the floor like a dog.

So it wasn't the first time, but it definitely became a biz. When I hit the street I didn't even really know what was going on. All I was told was to put on a dress, wear makeup and stilettos, then off to the street. I honestly had no idea what was in store for me. I didn't know this life would take hold and have its way with me. I didn't know it was going to be my destiny to live and nearly perish on the streets. Let me tell you though, I learned fast what the hell was going on. Life as I knew it would change, and change drastically. I didn't know what I was doing half the time. Once the drugs and alcohol took over, well that was pretty much it, my life would

become a war zone. I became bitter at heart, and my soul would fly away. If there was anything I could have done differently, trust me I would have, but there was nothing. Life would become surreal, and I would stay lost for a long time.

It just didn't seem like I could get away, so I just did what I had to do. I waited for three weeks, and I got to tell you, they actually terrified me. The woman, she was a freaky bitch. I didn't know how the connections worked here in Indian country because I was a kid. She knew my mom, and she threatened me. She said that if I took off, she would shoot my mom and shoot my dad. So I was scared, and I just stayed where I was. But three weeks later, they had this war going between her and another family. I thought, "These people are frickin' crazy!" I had to get away, so I booked it. I called my dad and asked for a bus ticket, which he bought, but they found me there at the bus station. I used to think, "How the hell did she find me?" You realize that you can fart and someone across the city would know. I mean you just didn't hide from street people: they had built-in sonar and could track down an Indian's ass in a snowstorm. Then again I was just naïve. But her brother told her to just let me be, so I got on the bus and went home. Needless to say, because of my boozing, I ended up back on the street.

7.3) Darkness Would Prevail

When I was seventeen, I met up with a court worker, Ms. Levene. She helped me out for a while. She put me in a Native Survival School, and it was the first time I had been around Indians. It was nice being around a lot of Aborigines. A famous Métis writer was there, and I had read her book when I was eleven years old. So she was, like, amazing! Her book explained everything in my family, so yeah it was kind of like my bible, or dictionary I guess. But, anyway, I was at the Survival School and the woman that put me out on the street when I was fifteen had come in. I heard screaming in the hall so I went out, and there she was dragging another girl out the door.

This girl was like eleven or twelve years old. She was dragging her out, and she saw me standing there and said, “I am coming back for you, you little bitch!” She was a freak.

I went and hooked up with family and stayed there, so I tried a few times over the years to quit the booze. I tried to get it together. I thought, “I will move up north and get myself a good Indian man, become a good Indian woman.” My only role model for being a woman was Pocahontas—except no tripping through any ponds. My life was so disorganized. I didn’t know which way was up, around, or under. I could feel the rage, and it was getting worse. There were times when I would question why I was here or there or wherever. I didn’t know what the hell was happening with me, and I ignored it because in the end I would make stupid choices. I was—am—an alcoholic.

Then I remember I got clean for a while, and I had this beautiful baby. Her dad, I really cared for him and I thought we would become something. He made promises anyway. Needless to say it didn’t pan out, but when I had her she was my little dark angel. But when I was in having my fourth daughter, my little angel was being abused by my mom’s ex-boyfriend. I remember at that time I went to my counsellor, I was seeing a counsellor. I was in school, and I went to my counsellor, and he said, “You had better report it.” I said, “You had better fucking report it!” And so he did, and we did the adult thing. We had to sit there and watch her tell us what was done to her. The guy had been making her suck his dick, and she showed us. Two weeks later this woman came to my door and said to me, “They can’t prove it, he is denying it.” It was her word against his so they couldn’t charge him.

The Rage Hits

I remember that was when the rage hit. I had had enough. I actually got a shotgun, and I was walking down the road. I think back then a cop pulled up and said, “Where are you going,

Donna?” I was on a first name basis with the cops because I drank and caused shit, and they would get to know me. “Where you going Donna?” I said, “I’m going to do some laundry.” He said, “You know, I don’t think you should because you have your little girl at home.” He knew where I was trying to go. I mean who goes to do laundry with a shotgun? He said, “I will drive you home because you have to take care of your girls.” And that kind of snapped me out of it. So I got in, and he never asked me what was in the duffle bag and drove me home.

So I sold what I could and gave away the rest, and I came back to Saskatoon and talked to my dad. I told my dad what happened with me having kids and such. That was one time I saw him with emotion. He said, “A baby having a baby [...] This is babies having babies.” And he talked to one woman, and her neighbour wanted to adopt. I wanted to make it an open adoption, but ultimately they cut me off from my babies. The Aboriginal woman I thought my girl would be safe with turned out to be a pure bitch from hell. She told lies, and I trusted her. There was another lady who kept my angel. I just quit seeing my baby when the one who was keeping my angel just cut me off. I just quit going. So I used, and I used hard, and I drank hard. That’s when a guy hit me behind in the head. He was fixing, and he wanted money. I said, “Fuck you, get a job!” And he hit me from behind, and we fought. It wasn’t long after that when I tried to get rid of him. I would be charged with attempted murder.

From there I literally felt my spirit disappear. It was like it was leaving me. It was like I was watching it float up into the air. I was so lost and so messed up, but I didn’t care. You know my first time in Pine Grove was at fifteen years of age. Not long after that, it was like a couple of years after, my brother committed suicide. I always thought it was my fault, because I found out afterwards that my brother had walked in when I was stabbing some guy, trying to kill him. I tried to hide what I was doing because I saw the look on his face—it was like I died or

something, and I yelled at him to get the hell out. I said, “Get out, just get out.” I think he saw... I think he saw that my spirit had left my body. I remember he looked at me like I was someone else. Two years later he committed suicide.

My Fight with my Creator

I always took my brother’s suicide as my responsibility and blamed myself. I was getting tired of being where I was, and I was screaming at whomever he was—God, Creator. So I was standing out there on my corner, telling the Creator, “Listen you fucking asshole if you can’t deal with me let me go!” I was screaming at him nightly and then all of a sudden, all these things were happening. A woman walked up to me and, you know, not giving me pity but, asking, “Can I hug you?” I was like, “What the fuck are you on man?” but the touch and her hugging me, it did something to me I cannot explain. It was something I wasn’t expecting and did not expect to feel, because I didn’t feel. I had stopped feeling from the sexual abuse. I took pride in not feeling, and I took pride in being a big mouth and saying whatever the fuck I wanted, and fuck you all. Later on I met another guy who wanted to do his thesis on people like me, and I said, “What the fuck, I guess so, it will be my last will and testament,” because I already put money down on a gun, and I was going to go shoot my mother and my first pimp in my family. So I had plans, and I thought I will do this last will and testament for him and everything. Then he introduced me to a guy who used to be a Hell’s Angel, and I met him. Well fuck, if he can change why can’t I?

Between the two of them they got me to go to Angus Campbell, and on October 6, 1987 that was the major pivotal point for me. Because I met some awesome people who did not look at the colour of my skin and because every time I opened my mouth and said something derogatory they reminded me that it was not who I was, it is what I did, it is only what I did to survive. They were great, but I struggled off and on with relapses. A lot of those people were so

helpful, but it was really two people in the program that kept me going.

In 1991 they had the first Aboriginal liaison outreach workers here in Saskatoon. I met this dude that is like my dad now—he was great. I also met nurses, one in the south and the other in the north, and one of them I met in Pine Grove. There were many court cases, and it wasn't the lawyers who helped me, or legal aid, it was actually this one broad I met inside Pine Grove who helped me. She told me what to do, and how to deal with the court because I had no clue when I went up on this attempted murder beef. I always look back, and it was always someone else taking control, because I should have been doing time, and I was ready to just do whatever. I didn't give a shit, and I ended up dealing with it and getting a suspended sentence. That is a miracle right there, because as I said I should have been doing time. I always think it is because of all these people around me. They always say watch out for all these people praying around you, because your direction is going to change. You know people are praying for you when good stuff begins to happen.

7.4) Given a New Chance in Life

I did my remand and went through court and was done. I got a suspended sentence, and I was in shock. During that trial was the first time that I spoke in court; usually I would not really care what happened and just took the consequences. I remember this one judge. I would go in front of him, and he was always shaking his head at me because I had known him since I was fifteen. At that time I was using somebody else's birth date, and they put me in Pine Grove on remand for someone else's charges. But no, this time it was a woman judge, and it was the first time I had seen a woman as a judge. Maybe that's what did it. I don't know. I said, "I am sick and fucking tired of *change*," and I literally spoke to her like that. I said, "I don't want to fucking *change*, I don't want to quit. You know I have not gotten any help from any of you." I just went on and on.

I could not shut up, like all the pent up stuff, like feeling like this is not justified. When I was eleven years old, I shouldn't have been the one at fucking Kilburn Hall. I am not the one that should have been doing time at Roy Wilson. I was angry, and I felt that nobody was listening to my fucking life. And if they were, they were doing all the fucking wrong things, like putting me in foster homes. They didn't even like us there, you know! So, yeah, I was pretty pissed, and I started speaking out. I even surprised myself, the shit that was coming out of my mouth. I think I even surprised the judge.

Anyways, the judge said, "You know what Donna, you are right; I will give you a chance." She is the one who gave me the suspended sentence. I think if I had gone in front of any of the judges I knew I would have been screwed. But she did, she gave me a suspended sentence. After a year of being clean I wrote her a letter, and she wrote me a letter back, and I still have that letter to this day. Someone gave me a chance, and you know from my memory maybe it was rose coloured glasses. I don't fucking know, but I always felt that there was some kind of honour, a family, with those I ended up hanging with. There were a lot of derelicts too, but a lot of people I hung with were honourable, you know? Honour amongst thieves, even as a woman on the street. I remember five women dragging me into the women's can at the Baldwin and giving me the what for on how I should take care of myself, what I should do to take care of myself physically, and in regards to guys taking my money and not being a doormat. You know I am always grateful to those people for showing me that.

So when this judge let me go I felt like it was my responsibility to be honourable. Because you know the other thing is if you are being honourable, you start to figure out who is really solid and who is bogus. I was tired of the fucking solidity that was supposed to be on the street, and of the people who I thought were solid but were not. They were bogus. There were

only a few who were truly solid, and I found out as I got older who they were. And no matter what, whether it was dope, money or whatever, those few people didn't turn their back on you. But based on those teachings, I wanted to do the same thing with the judge because she took a risk in court. I know the Crown wanted to give me fourteen years; they wanted me gone. And I didn't want to go because my friend committed suicide out there in Kingston. I grew up with her in Kilburn Hall, Roy Wilson Centre, and Pine Grove. I grew up with her, and she killed herself. I knew that I didn't want to go because if she couldn't survive, then I didn't know if I could either. Well I know I would have most likely still been on the street, in prison, or dead. That was my reality all the time. And here this woman judge must have seen something I didn't, and I got a fucking break for once in my life.

Making Peace with Family

I went into recovery, but it took me a while. Spirituality itself is a whole different story. It was when my *kokum* was dying—I went and helped my mom take care of her—that I started thinking about the good things that I ignored all of my life like my *kokum*'s teachings, and little things like taking care of myself. You know I was always finding ways to get food on the table and stuff. Yeah, and when I moved up north I remember the one profound thing my dad ever said was, “Sooner or later you got to quit running and come home.” I thought it was a profound statement considering that's what I did all my life. So I came home and started dealing with some shit I had never faced, particularly where my mom was concerned and regarding my dad leaving. I wrote letters specifically to my dad. Not so much my mom—me and my mom have hammered that one head to head, because that is the way we roll. I know where I get my spunk from, that is for sure.

Actually, it was in 2007 when I was forced to stay at her house because the job I applied

for was in Rosthern, where we came from. So I was forced to stay with her for a couple of days because we always agreed that we are more than just mom and daughter: we are sisters, and she is my big sister. We actually sat down, and we hashed through a lot of things, even the abuse, the first abuse. She doesn't even remember closing the door on me. Some times she just doesn't remember. I don't know if she just blocked it out, if it was the alcohol that made her memories leave, but she just doesn't remember. And, I have come to the conclusion that it is *my* reality anyway, not hers. And just the fact that I can voice my opinions without her thinking that I am trying to attack her, that was our biggest hurdle, and that's where we came together. I am able to say, "Look mom, I am not trying to attack you when I talk about these things, it's just because I need to get them out, and you are the one person who—you are my mom—I don't need you to verify if they are right or wrong, it is my reality." Carrying my perceptions from when I was a little girl into adulthood, that messed with me. The vows that I made when I was little—don't trust, don't talk, don't feel—I said, "Those are mine." But coming back together with my mom, and hashing things out, allowed me to let go of those perceptions. It's like when I pay homage to you, I need you to do that with me. So we are good on that, and I had no regrets by the time my dad died.

It's weird, I ended up taking care of the people that I had the most conflict with. My dad's mom, my grandma, never went to Residential School, but she went to the convent. She was the only brown face in there, and she used to take the fingernail brush and try to scrub the brown skin right off my sister and me. I understand now about the catechism—she was trying to save me, and I see that in other people who went to Residential School. I understand those people. She was trying to save my sister and me, so she wasn't crazy. I'm glad I took care of them, her and my dad, before they died. Individually Grandma and I made peace. I ended up not being so angry

with her, because I used to really hate that old bitch; I thought she was the craziest old bitch in the world. I couldn't call her *kokum*, I remember getting beaten by her for that. She didn't like anything to do with Indians. I didn't even know that side of my family is Métis; I didn't know there was such a thing as Métis. She was Métis, but we didn't do the Cree thing on that side of the family, and it was actually in 1995 when I found out that my dad was Métis. I always thought he was just French. He sat me down and showed me all the pictures, and particularly the one of my grandma in the convent, and she was the only brown face. And I actually look exactly like my grandma. That is weird.

I have made peace with that, but I also made peace with them. I have made peace with some of the things that I felt were abuse, or not liking who I was. In their own way, they were actually trying to take care of me. And my dad, I'm glad my dad left because he was abusive. He used to take us and toss us across the room, or he would put the gloves on us and make us hit our mother. And I was only four or five years old when this all started. And I'm glad he left because he might have killed my mom. He might have killed my mom, and I don't know if I could live with that. But yeah, in the end, I am good to go.

My Vacation from Downtown

I am bouncing around here a bit. Okay, as far as being incarcerated, the longest time I ever did in Pine Grove was six months. But I was in and out, in and out. The door was ever-revolving. I used to do things just because. And of course, I didn't know any better. I was young. I had no direction. I had no family support. My family was as fucked up as I was. I remember doing and signing bad cheques at the age of sixteen. The truth be told, the longest I have ever done was six months. I was just sixteen years old when I got sentenced. My dad came that time, and it was the first and last time he ever came to court. And I remember the judge, the nut, turned around and

said, “Well, I’ve got to make an example of you.” And I thought, “Why? I’m sixteen. I didn’t know it was illegal to do cheques!” I really didn’t know. It was like I was stupid, naïve. I remember when the judge said he was going to give me six months, I turned around and looked at my dad, and my dad said, “Don’t you fucking cry.” I was shocked.

I did my six months, and I knew I didn’t want to do it anymore. After that I was just gnarly, especially when the prostitution thing came out. I was in there for solicitation a lot. And in the end I was naïve again. Once I had a shotgun behind me, and the police kept asking, “Whose gun is this, Donna?” I said, “I don’t know,” so I got charged. I went to court for that gun and even though the guy who owned said it was his gun, the Crown wouldn’t drop it. So I did forty-five days. But still, it went on my record—they wouldn’t drop it even though the guy admitted it was his in court. I wasn’t going to say anything. He said, “Tell them,” and I said, “I’m not going to fucking tell them because I don’t want to be tagged a rat.” Yeah, that’s me, good ole solid Donna. I was just going to go and do whatever. I used to think going to jail was my vacation away from downtown. I would be able to rest my arms because they were fucked. I had started fixing dope by the time I was seventeen. I just got progressively worse with the dope. Whenever and wherever dope was around, I would go hard. So jail, yeah, I needed these breaks.

Services are still a crock of shit. They talk about rehabilitation, but there is no rehabilitation because nobody, nobody, wants to do the follow-through with the relapses and the craziness in-between. Because there is craziness, especially for women. I don’t know if it is because we have our time, or just so much chaos going on in the emotions and in the mind that can get all confusing. So, I don’t have transitions of going through all of the insanity, but I did. You know, many Aboriginal people start a program but few finish. We know the program is the way to go, to stay clean and stuff. We are addicts. How else are we going to change? Let’s get

fucking real. But all of a sudden they go traditionalist, and they drop the addictions.

My Recovery from my Other Life

For me in order to improve my life, to the fullest, the best that it can be, I am going to take what I can use from out in the world and not from behind bars. I actually like both the program and ceremony. I have been dancing for thirteen years. The job I'm in now is a real dream job, and I feel like I have come full circle. To jump back a bit—there were women on the street I never liked. Bunch of bitches, two-faced bitches, everyone on the street. I was a loner, but it was for a reason. I didn't trust anybody. I grew up not trusting anybody. Remember now, the sexual abuse nearly killed me, and my spirit had left my soul. So I just stayed by myself. It was so much easier to dislike everybody equally. I would get into the racism and would fight with my own relatives. It was the way shit was on the street. I had really blond hair back in the day. This broad would call me a honky, and I would tell her to shut up, or else. Well, she didn't shut up, and I would say, "Shut up you Black bitch," and we literally scrapped it out. We would have a knock down, drag out the beef right there. You looked after yourself in whatever way possible, and if it was your own people then so be it. I didn't care. I would kick anyone's ass to protect myself.

I never knew where I fit in until I started my recovery through twelve-step programs. It was the twelve steps that gave me a template to deal with my family when I moved up north, helping my mom take care of my *kokum*. She lasted two weeks before she died. I started going to sweats; I started talking to my mom. I started to work on issues with my dad. I wrote a letter to my dad, and my dad would say, "I can't read this fucking letter," and I would say to myself, "Okay, you are saying you love me." I had to learn to read in between the lines with him. And the last time I took care of him, he was basically making amends for all the shit he had done to my mother. He had put my mom out on the street when she was only eleven years old. My

grandma too, she started talking Cree and doing things I never heard her do when I was a kid. Life became different. I went to Sweat Lodges, and I met an old lady who was awesome. I really lucked out, and I got connected with some people that I met. This one old lady told me, “Go wherever you end up. Just go sweat wherever you can meet people.” Her perspective was she wanted me to find a husband.

She really thought I needed a man in my life, and for that matter many people tried to get me a husband. I went all over to ceremonies, and I ended up in the Sundance through my brother. He wanted me to go to a ceremony with him, the Sundance. I went, and at the Sundance I was amazed because there were some old-school dudes, standing there Sundancing. These people were all sitting around just taking care of each other in a way I had never seen: being gentle to each other, fanning each other down, literally rubbing each other’s legs and feet, because by the fourth day it gets pretty tiring. The Sundance is not an easy ceremony by any means. I thought to myself, “I’ve got to have that.” I wanted to have that—I wanted to do this. My first time, they had a race for the skirt; I didn’t get it, I was never much of a runner that way. This skinny girl got it, but ironically she showed up at my door three months later and gave me the skirt. So I danced, and like I said it has been thirteen years now. I don’t see my life as changing, I see it as progressing. But I also see that in my recovery, in the beginning, people said I had to change a whole 180 degrees. And I did, I tried being a chameleon, and I ended up on my ass and drunk because it just didn’t fit. And somewhere during that time I lost my voice. And even after one particular relapse I remember I went to treatment, and I actually ended up in court.

Actually, that was not long ago, that was ten or twelve years ago, I ended up in court. I went after my boyfriend because I found out he was with my baby sister. And he took advantage of her—he’s a big alcoholic. I was mad so I went after him, and I ended up in jail, another

attempted murder. I thought, “This is it, I am done.” But you know what? The people that showed up were all the people in the program. In particular a judge who is in the program, who knew me. As a matter of fact, he gave me my first Christmas present that ever meant something in recovery. There is this one story I always tell about my mom, and I had told it to him. It was before Christmas, we had nothing, and I remember I was eleven years old, and it was the first time I saw the pain in my mom’s face because she had nothing. She worked as a waitress in a fricking bar. She was trying to stay sober, but you can’t do that shit. She was working at the Queen’s as a waitress and trying to maintain herself. We had no money for Christmas at all, and back then there was a pride thing asking for help. There were resources at the church, but she didn’t want to go to the church and ask them for help. It ended up that somebody did go to the church or something, because they showed up at the door with a box of stuff. And we went outside to the backyard and dug up a little pine tree, put it in a plant pot, and we decorated that. I stole stuff from school to decorate that itty bitty tree: Charlie Brown Christmas. And my mom borrowed ten bucks, and she drove us around looking at Christmas lights along the river. That was the best Christmas because my mom stayed sober for us. I told that story to this judge in Moose Jaw, and he said, “Well I want to take you somewhere Donna.” And he and his wife took me and my boyfriend at the time to this Christmas light thing in Moose Jaw. He picked us up in a limo, and we drove through the Christmas lights and drove around the city looking at lights. The funny thing is he was the judge presiding when I went up to court. Nobody else would have let me go based on my record, but he did. He said, “You need to go to treatment,” and they let me go to treatment.

When I went to treatment, I couldn’t even walk down the hall for about two weeks. A counsellor had to walk me down the hall. Something hit me like a terror. In the end, when I was

able to walk on my own, I always believed it was the terror that I never allowed myself to feel. I always felt anger—that's cool, that's kosher, but never fear. I buried a lot of stuff. You know, over the years I had to face a lot of stuff, but there is still a lot there. People don't understand; some people get upset with me. "Why won't you do this or that?" Because I fucking won't, because I know where I am inside of myself, and I am totally fucking terrified just to leave the house some days. But I get up and do it anyways because I am ballsy like that. You know what I mean? Fear of failure, fear of success, I don't know. The way forward will show itself when it is ready, and I ain't pushing it because I remember doing that in recovery, pushing it. You know I bought every fucking self-help book there was. That ended up being my first relapse, because I was trying to push things. But now I won't do it. If it comes, it comes, and I let it go.

Most recently, because of this new job, I'm facing off with a lot of issues in my life, and I am learning that women are triggers for me. In particular this one with her kids, she can't get her kids back and keeps being told she will get them back, but she can't. And of course now they are saying she's got no bond with them—of course she's got no fucking bond, you have had them for three years. And if you want to be fucking straight, the bottom line is the kid has no bond with the caregivers. So she fucked up—how can you justify this? I find myself falling between being stupid and uneducated, but there is that other part of me that just fucking knows. I just have to learn how to use their language, and as long as I stick to what is written in their books, I will never fucking fail. That is the thing I've got to keep telling myself.

And that is where the ceremonies come in. I need to be at the ceremonies in order to empower myself. I need to be surrounded by women who have been there and done that. That is the key. In the beginning years, I didn't necessarily know that. I thought I was on my own because I thought I was the only whore out there, and the only one talking about it too because

this is a secret. Big fucking deal. It was my business, it was something I did, something I went through, and unless you got the fucking balls to come and ask me, fuck off. Basically, that is the way I feel. So there has been some secrecy about the prostitute thing. And I have had some triggers, but I am doing all right. Last week—and I haven't done this in a very long time, in the beginning during the years of my recovery, about every second week I did this—I screamed and I screamed until I felt nothing. That's what I used to do in the corner, and I scared the shit out of people. I would just scream. I had no shame in my game. You know, what the fuck? What more can I do to myself? Screaming was a good thing, and the other night I found myself screaming. Because I am tired of the depression—and I know what depression is, it's anger turned inside—and I am so tired of trying to fit my shit into everybody else's. I think it's because of my age too. I don't know, I am starting be more assertive, you fucking change.

Speaking Our Language: Always Room to Learn

I was at a conference of the Central Urban Métis Federation Incorporated, and I sat in the back listening. I don't look like a hooker, right, which is ironic, because I used to think I had a sign above my head. Every time a car slowed down beside me I thought they were trying to pick me up. Anyway, I was at this meeting of service providers within the city. And I was hearing snickers, and these were all the people in services. And I get up, I had just had it, so I stood up and said, "You know, this is fricking weird, I am going to say this." They tried cutting me off, and I said, "No, this is a forum, I am going to say something. I have every right." I looked at the woman who was organizing it, and she nodded. So I said, "All you here provide services of some sort. You are supposed to be working with people like me, and frankly I can't trust any of you other than the woman who has just come from the federal institution," I said, "and the woman who invited me here."

I said, “The rest of you can kiss my doo doo. Do you think I am going to refer people that I know to you? They are going to come to me because I have been there, done that. I will treat them with honour, dignity, and respect.” I said, “All I heard was shit today,” and I will say it like that, it was shit. I said, “I sat here as one woman, hooker from 33rd, well you know, you white people, your husbands have been coming to my community all my life. Get them out of our community because they are the consumers.” I said, “You made a statement that if it wasn’t for johns there wouldn’t be prostitutes. That part is correct, but to state that if there was no prostitute, the johns wouldn’t be there, that is bullshit. All I hear you saying is, ‘Kill them all, shoot them all, get rid of them.’” I said, “That is all I am hearing you saying, that if there were no consumers there would be no business.” I just went on. I was really angry, and I went on more appropriately, I hope. Well anyways, who cares? In the end even the woman who was actually facilitating, she didn’t hear these comments from the back of the room. I said, “Well you should have been sitting where I was sitting, because it was a crock of shit, and if any of those people come around my people or see them with any of the people I know, I will let them know, because that’s the way it goes in Indian country. Sooner or later you burn your bridges. I hope you lose your funding, and it goes to someone who will help.” I said, “You have to pay attention to the way you approach things. We all do. I had to pay attention to how I approach things, I have to be appropriate, and I have to speak in your language. You need to learn to speak in our language too. And you have to show people you actually care. All I heard was get rid of the hookers. I heard the same thing from the hecklers, so it was a crock of shit,” I said. In 2011 you think people would have more sense, but it’s going to be a long journey. I will never give up, especially on criminalized Indian women because I was one of them.

It was bogus. There were only two of us. My friend and me, she’s alright. She just got out

of the federal pen, and she was terrified being in front of this forum. But you have to back her, because frankly, like I said, “I think you are all a crock of shit except for her. She is the only one. You are asking her about rehabilitation. She knows from an inmate’s experience. You say, ‘Well we are doing this and this,’ but no, there is no rehabilitation.” No disrespect to the woman who brought me there, her intention in bringing me there was more than just for appearances. What I mean is, I really don’t know why she brought me there because my job deals with sexual health, and this forum was about truth and reconciliation for women who are incarcerated. I feel that I was just being used as a token or a showpiece. And I believe that if I can give the appropriate message to probation officers to start using some fucking material, like the Gladue report, and/or to make sure that there are Elders in the courtroom that can be of spiritual assistance, that is what we need. We need more Elders, period. For everything. You know when a woman loses her kids, and if she is an Indian, then there should be Elders available at all costs. The Gladue report is not a get-out-of-jail-free card; it deals with Indian people, or is supposed to deal with Indian people, in a different way where there would be appropriate ways of sentencing on lesser charges for instance. Elders are supposed to be used to decide for the Ministry of Social Services what the best interest of the child would be. And if I can’t give that information, I am just a token Indian. And I am not going to be a fricking token Indian, so give me all the information or piss off and let me create from my experience, or put out there what needs to be heard. I have learned today that you cannot fight fire with fire, but you can fight with a good strong spirit, and that is what I have. I may be a little rough around the edges, but what I have learned through twelve-step programs and ceremony is that I am a good woman today. I know today that reintegration is important, and more programs are needed to help the sisters that are still locked away. My reintegration is simply right here: the story I have shared with you. I am successfully reintegrated

back into society.

7.5) Who I Am Today is a Warrior

I lived on the street for many years. I lived in and out of the prison system for many years, and I am grateful that I never did end up in the federal system because, like many of my Indian sisters, it's possible that I would have never made it out. You know there were a few criminalized Indian women that killed themselves in the Prison for Women, and really, have you heard much about it? No, because Indians are expendable, especially the women. They live in a world that just shuts the fucking door and throws away the key. I never wanted to be what I was, but that is the way shit rolls. I never had a chance, so I took what I needed and said, "Piss on the rest!" I lived in the shadows of other Indian women who were bigger and worse than me, and at that time in my life they were my heroes. It is what it is, and I lived for the moment.

You know, I have no regrets in my life. Sharon, Sandy, and Jasmine, and I, we are all cut from the same cloth, and each of us has made our mark in this world in one way or another. I am so happy to have been asked to be part of this important research. As a criminalized Indian woman I know I have successfully reintegrated back into society. The last time I ended up in jail was in 1996 for another attempted murder as I previously said, but it was dropped down to assault. He was my man at the time, but we ended up working it out. From 1996 up to now I do ceremonies, and I have my family back in one way or another. Life is damn good today, and I am very blessed like that. Yeah, for sure I come from the street, but let me tell you, there is nowhere else I would have ever wanted to come from. My life on the street has definitely made me the woman I am today.

My days are not perfect, and I still have those, "Fuck you, get out of my way!" days, but they are few and far between. I think menopause might have something to do that, because I ain't

no spring chicken anymore. But I know how to deal with it, and I am so happy that we are going to continue on with the Sharing Circles that Sharon started at the beginning of our interviews. I felt so at peace. You know, I could come and talk how I wanted and not be judged. That is what all criminalized women need: a place to call home, and a place where they will be shown absolute respect. When I started to Sundance it was like the gates of hell opened up, and my life took a change for the better. I would just listen real hard to the Sundance songs and let the music course through my body, and I just let the healing begin. It's been a long process, this life of mine, but it has been a great one, and like the other women in this research, we are all miracles!

One final thought. You know, after all that I have been carrying and keeping stuff in hiding, it is a miracle. I most likely still have shit that is hidden in me somewhere, but it does not hinder my healing journey. If anything, I learn from it or will learn from those hidden secrets. I get glimpses through dreams, and certain smells, but they are there, and I know they are there, but they will make their way up. I am not going to force it. I've still got time—I'm only forty-six. I have the world at my ass, and I will do whatever it takes for me to maintain my life and learn to move away from tags like "criminalized Indian woman." The way I see and live it, I have successfully reintegrated back into my society. That's it!

Chapter 8: Changed Forever—Sandy’s Story

8.1) Introduction

Sandy is a loving mother and grandmother. She has been prison-free for eighteen years and is doing everything possible to maintain a healthy and positive lifestyle for herself and her family. Sandy embraces her life and lives with the hope that she can show her children and grandchildren that living an addiction-free life is full of worth and meaning. Sandy is involved in twelve-step programs and would love to attend a Sweat Lodge in the near future. I have known Sandy for approximately 30 years, and I love her. Sandy is one of those women you just want to be around because she is an amazing role model for other Indian women.

Sandy was brought up in a middle-class household where alcohol abuse was a major reality. She was the victim of physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional abuse. Sandy was not raised by her biological family. Her caregivers were extremely strict, which pushed Sandy to do unhealthy things and to make bad decisions. Sandy would frequently run away from home and would miss school because she simply did not want to be there. Sandy was viciously abused and raped time and again by a variety of different men. She would lose her sense of self and would not have trust in men. Her healing journey as she understands it began after she took another human being’s life.

At first, Sandy was a little anxious about participating in this research; however, something very positive happened for her at the first Sharing Circle, and she quickly became an eager participant. Sandy had never worked a Medicine Wheel before—her only contact with tradition occurred when she was in prison, where she spoke to Elders and learned that she was okay and had a right to be on this earth. Sandy is not using her real name and wishes to stay anonymous due to family ties and work circumstances. Sandy is an amazing woman, and it is an

honour to know and have worked with her.

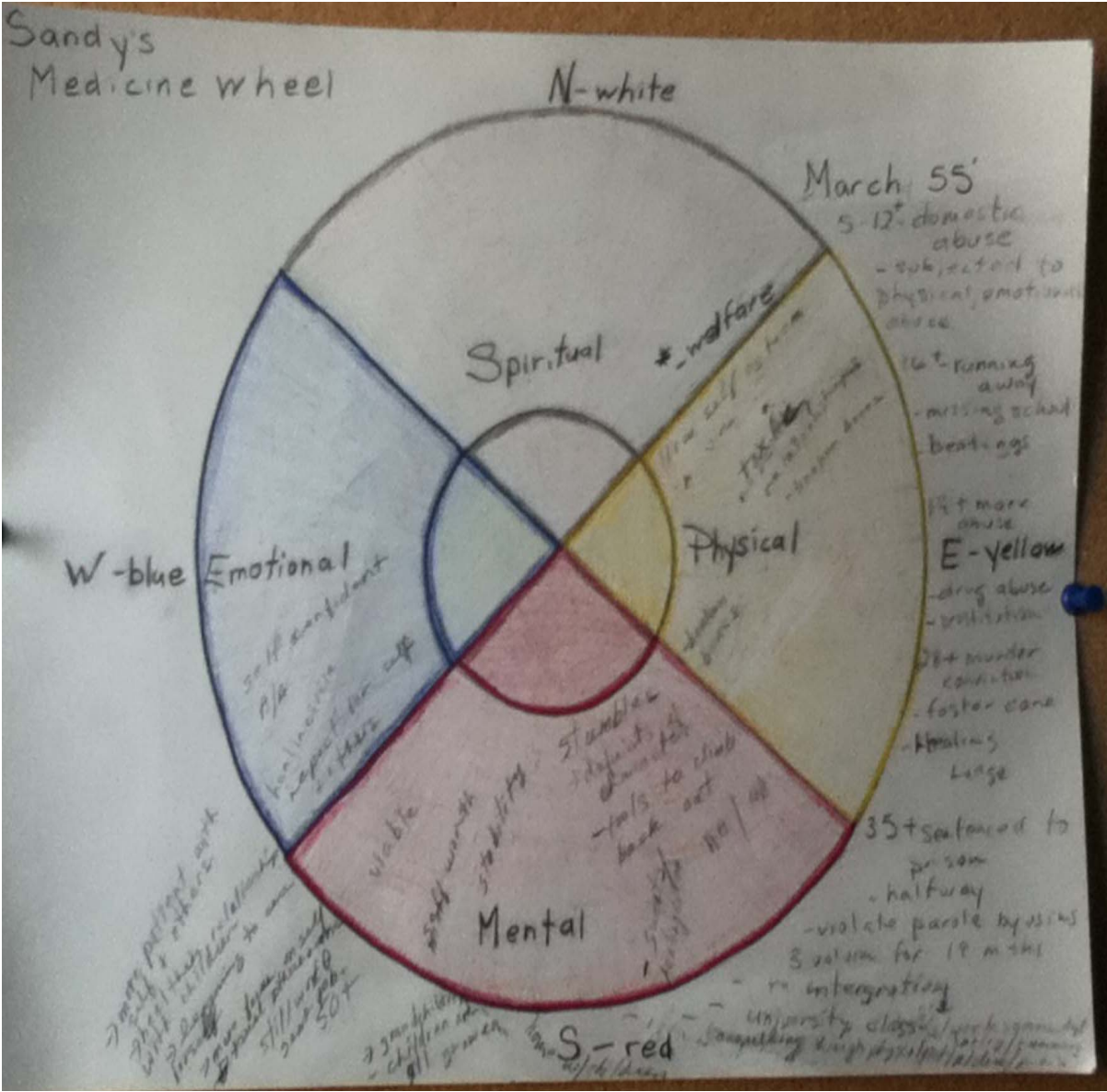


Image 8.1: Sandy’s Medicine Wheel

8.2) Abandoned and Abused

I was taken away at a young age from my biological parents and siblings. I was raised in Eastern Canada. My memories of my first twelve years are very vague due to the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual abuse that I lived through. But I remember some parts of my childhood.

Kindergarten stands out in my mind because I remember this teacher was crying, and we were all playing with these symbols. I remember the teacher had a big tummy, and we were playing. I thought I was going to have a good experience my first time in school, but here my teacher was sitting in the classroom crying. So it was confusing for me, and all I wanted was to have fun. For example, on a few occasions my adopted mother was laying in a pool of blood, and I thought she was dead. I remember having an out-of-body experience, and it was like looking down over her as I was in shock.

In my early teenage years, we moved back to the Western provinces where all the abuse would continue. I was put in private schools and was missing school due to the abuse and a low self-esteem. One of the beatings I recall was being belted so hard I was cut through my jeans. My legs were actually bleeding, and I never told anyone at the school because I felt that I would get into trouble. I remember sitting in the bathroom at school, but I never attended class that day.

My Biological Parents

Now that I was back in my home province, I found a relative that would assist me in finding my biological parents. I found out who my biological parents were, and I found that both of them were working professionals. I felt like I was living in two different worlds. I felt a lot of rejection with my real family; I felt abandoned, and I felt like a stranger. I never belonged in this family because I wasn't raised by them and didn't fit in. So being with my real parents never worked out. I felt like an outcast. And this only reiterates all my abandonment issues that I have today. But it is something I work on all the time.

I remember being put back into school by my biological parents. Because of my low self-esteem, I would go out the back door. I felt like I never fit in anywhere, even in school. Back in Eastern Canada, my adopted parents put me in an influential and recognized music school where

I would excel. However, when I moved back with my real parents, they put me in classes where I met this music professor. I was really young at the time. I noticed he was giving me looks, and I remember thinking that he was angry at me. After he finished having me play a piece of music for him, he moved me up five levels. Obviously he heard something in my music. He then offered me to play at a very prestigious place in Western Canada, but I never went back because I was too afraid, and I didn't want to play in front of large crowds. For that matter I never went back or received any music lessons again because he baffled me. I actually thought he was going to beat me because the nuns who had taught me music before had beaten me. I ended up going back home to my adopted parents because they had always been there for me and will always be my parents even though I suffered abuse. Aside from missing school, I started to run away from home because I just got tired of the abuse I sustained daily.

A Dark and Vicious World

Then I met my eldest child's father, who was way older than me. When I became pregnant with his child, both of my sets of parents were thinking of charging him because I was underage and pregnant. After the birth of our child, the abuse from him continued and got worse. The first beating I received from him, I remember I was in -40 degree weather. He kicked me with his cowboy boots, and he beat me bad. I was all bloody. I escaped to a neighbour's house, and I called my biological dad to come and get me. I was in stocking feet when he found me, and I could hear wolves. I was so afraid of him coming after me, and I was also afraid that the wolves might attack me. It was such a relief to finally see my father's car.

After leaving this man, I again encountered him in a downtown area where he forced me into his car, but I swiftly escaped through the other door. I ran into a building, not realizing it was the RCMP. These two burley men came around the corner in trench coats and wrestled him

to the ground. They escorted me upstairs to their offices. I learned that the men were in fact detectives. They could not believe that I would be with someone like him, being that I was so young and beautiful. They drove me home and told me that I would be okay. It wasn't much longer when I heard my ex at the door, at which time I escaped yet again to the neighbours who lived behind us. I ran to the bathroom and hid in the bathtub, where for the first time in my life I would be beaten in a bathtub. There was no one there to help me. The police did not help me either. I was alone. Another time and another beating: my ex forced me to this place where he beat and raped me. I came to with a big goose egg on my forehead and my pants off. There were people in the next room, but again no one helped me. It seemed the louder I yelled, the less people helped me, and/or they just didn't want to get involved. It didn't matter whether I was being raped or not—they just wanted to be left out of the mayhem.

Then we moved to another city where I used alcohol and drugs to deal with life and with my low self-esteem. It was like Valium was the answer to my dreams; it took away all my worries. I had no idea how the addiction would take hold of me. I eventually started using harder drugs including intravenous (IV) drugs, and to support these habits, I would eventually sell drugs and myself. Although it's something I am morally against—prostitution—it was the drugs that lured me into that dark and vicious world. I continued to live in abusive relationships. I would move from one relationship to the next, and I believed the men loved me and would take care of me. Their way of love was to beat me to a pulp.

8.3) All for the Sake of Love

It's like I always ended up with losers who didn't work, and I ended up supporting them. I seem to be a magnet for the wrong kind of men. Or it's just my low-esteem kicking in, and perhaps I

think I deserve to be with total losers. The men I was with never earned a single dollar, and so they lived off of me. Then you know of course I would have another child. You would think that I would learn after the first one but obviously not. You know, how can you possibly feel good about yourself? It's just the same shit, different pile. And then the beatings would come, and I would stay stuck in this dark fucked up place with nowhere to hide and nowhere to go. I just settled in and accepted what I got, abuse or not. Beating after beating, hospital visit after hospital visit. I felt so hopeless.

I remember this one time I was with my man, and we walked into the bar. And this guy says to me, "Hey Sandy hi, how ya doing?" I remember thinking, "Oh please, God no, don't talk to me. Please." But this guy, he comes over and talks to me, and I didn't know what to do. I just stood there. And again, he goes, "Hi Sandy." Then suddenly I said, "Okay, I'm okay," and I'm like, "please don't talk to me, or I am so going to get it." I don't know if I got beaten up in the bar, but I got the shit kicked out of me, and my nose broken so badly that I was put in the hospital. That's how bad it was. The next day, I could vaguely hear the nurses talking. They said, "Is she ever sleeping a lot. She's so young and healthy." They said, "Maybe we should do a test. Are you pregnant?" I said I wasn't, but they did the test, and sure enough, I was pregnant. He had beaten me so badly that the bones in the back of my skull were moved or cracked or something. That's what can happen, so they had to do an emergency surgery. So when I found out I was pregnant and that my nose was so badly broken, I got an abortion. I didn't want another child. I mean the guy was devastated over this, but how can I trust him? He was so jealous because someone had said hi to me. You know I should have been able to talk to other people without the fear of getting the shit kicked out of me. I was terrified, totally undeniably scared shitless when he was around because I couldn't make a move without him knowing where the

hell I was or what I was doing. And again no one offered me any direction or offered me any help.

There have been a couple beatings from other relationships when I had both my hands broken to protect my face. My nose was broken four times, and I've been knocked out cold countless times, all for the sake of love. I recall that after one beating where my hand was broken, he left, and I sat there wondering where the hell I had gone wrong. I loved him, and I thought it was my entire fault. In all my relationships, I questioned and blamed myself, not understanding I didn't deserve to be abused. He would eventually end up in jail, and when he wanted me to be with him, I found out he was living with another woman. This man would end up dying in a house fire. So at least I wouldn't have to worry about any beatings from him. I don't mean to be harsh, but I have to be real.

The abuse continued in other relationships. In one of them, I was stabbed in my left artery inside my hip and had to have surgery. I never told anyone because I was afraid to speak out and because no one helped me in the past. I felt so alone. These relationships never worked out due to the fact that I never had support. I felt ugly. I felt like an outsider. My adopted mother would always tell me that I was ugly, and she said it so many times that it became normal for me. It was all I knew. No one was ever there for me: I was in the world all on my own. I began to believe what people said about me, and my self-esteem took a dive for the worst. I recall being at my adopted parents when they were out drinking, and I remember holding this shotgun to my chin. The only reason I'm alive is because I didn't know how to use the gun. Although I left the gun out in the open, the subject was never brought up.

The New Year's Incident

There was another incident where I was raped and choked unconscious by a friend of a friend. We ended up going to my friend's home who is now retired. I decided I wanted to go home but couldn't get a cab because it was New Year's. The guy we were with, I thought he was a gentlemen, and he offered to walk me home. It was -40 below so when we arrived at my place, I offered him to come in and warm up and also offered him a beer. He then asked if anyone was at my home, and I said there wasn't. I never thought anything of the question. He asked me to show him my townhouse, and I was naive enough to do it. The first bedroom we came to, he was choking me unconscious to the ground, and he raped me. For a month I had such dark bruises. They looked like hickeys you get on your neck or wherever—he choked me that hard. After he was done, I asked him if he wanted a beer and said that I would have one too. But he said, “You don't drink,” and I said, “It's okay. I'll have a drink with you.” As soon as I got downstairs, I wrapped an afghan around my body and ran outside in search of help. I got to my neighbour's house, but she didn't want to get involved since she worked at a store. I had to plead and plead: “I just want to use your phone. I won't call the police. Besides I don't trust the police. They've never helped me before.” I told her I wanted to call my dad to come and get me. My father and the police came. The guy actually went back to the party we had come from, and he was arrested there for rape.

I wrote an eight page statement that was meant to be read in court. The prosecutor asked me if I wanted to read my statement. He had me go over my story in preparation for my upcoming court, but I refused to read the statement. The prosecutor was baffled by my recollection as it was almost identical to my written statement. I said, “Of course. It happened to me.” The hospital staff advised me to have blood tests taken that proved I hadn't been drinking

that night and wasn't drunk. Sure enough, the accused testified that I was drunk. He said I was drunk and grabbing his privates, but the blood tests showed otherwise. I hadn't been drinking. During his trial, he got sentenced to two and a half years. As a result of reliving the nightmares from this rape, I tried to commit suicide by taking several bottle of pills, and I was hospitalized. The nightmares were that intense. So years later while I'm going to university, I was watching the news one day, and I saw his name. He had raped another girl, and the uncanny thing is the young girl looked so much like me. As a result of this rape he received a six-year prison sentence.

Then I ended up in several relationships that were pretty much bad from the start. I knew nothing about being in a relationship: I was young and inexperienced. I mean you would think I would know something because my caregivers were married, but it was an extremely dysfunctional family. I was raised in mayhem without even knowing it. I never wanted for anything and got what I wanted but not what I needed. Life would be chaos after chaos. I'm pretty sure my lack of knowledge about relationships is because I was abused as a child. And to this very day, I can't handle anyone touching me.

8.4) My Life-Changing Experience

This is what I've been worried about...discussing this part of my life. I have so very few memories of what actually happened that fateful night. I was charged with first degree murder. I don't like talking about this mainly because it brings up issues, but also I honestly have such vague memories. I just don't remember. You know it's not one of the things I want to remember or that I remember well, but I will do my best.

Jekyll and Hyde

I partied a lot. It was something I was accustomed to and that I knew all too well. I mean I did a lot of hard partying and drugging back in the day. I was out and about as usual. Trying to make a few dollars and have some fun. I arrived at some party house, and there were these guys. All of a sudden, one guy, he's calling me names, saying that I'm a fucking bitch. He's demeaning me as a woman. I didn't know it back then because that's what I was used to. It was normal at that time. I do know for sure that he started to scare me, and I said, "Is there a phone here?" He said, "Yes, it's in the living room." I said, "Do you mind if I use it?" Then all of a sudden, out of the blue, he is the nice guy, and he is giving me drinks, being nice to me. He reminded me of Jekyll and Hyde. He would change from moment to moment, be nice and then be an asshole. It was very confusing and scary for me. He was either being nice to me or putting me down. I didn't understand, and I think I was scared sober. Not sure, but I was afraid for sure. So now I am thinking, "How am I going to get out of this house?" It was really a small house. He must have noticed that I was trying to leave, and he told me that I was not going to get out of this house alive and called me a fucking bitch. So after the Jekyll and Hyde thing, he hits me, and I don't really remember, but either my jaw or upper arm was broken. Something didn't feel right, but I was too afraid to care, and I was still trying to figure out how I was going to get out of this one. I just wanted the hell out of there. There was this one other guy that was being nice to me. But this guy decides he is leaving, and he does offer me a ride home. But Jekyll and Hyde slams his arm to the door and tells his friend, "She is not fucking going nowhere." And the guy just leaves and doesn't even try to help or never called anyone for help. I thought, "What the fuck? Just get me out of this house." But he just left me there to fend for myself, and that I would. My life would be forever changed.

I remember him bragging about how much money he made and what a nice wife he had. I was getting more and more afraid because one minute he would tell me how beautiful I was, and the next minute he is calling me a whore and a fucking bitch. It was like having two different people in the room at the same time, and it was scary. I remember making an excuse to go use the phone saying that I would change the music so I could call the police. So I picked up the phone and there was no dial tone. I looked across the street, and there were no lights on in the neighbourhood as it was very late. So I went back to where he was in hopes of calming him down. It was then I was told to strip and so I would with a fear that totally took over my being. I then got dragged by my hair. My hair was down to my waist, and I got dragged through the living room and the kitchen, through the house. If you ever get dragged with no clothes on, bare skin across a bare floor, that hurts, let me tell you. I don't remember much about the bedroom. Maybe I am blocking it out, or just choose not to remember because it was traumatizing. I know what happened. He raped me, that much I know. But then it goes blank after that. Sometimes I wish I could remember, but then again I am happy I don't remember killing another human being.

Who is Going to Believe Me?

What came next is kind of bizarre. I remember walking to the bathroom and washing my hands of blood. I could see the blood, that was clear. The blood was clear, I could see it—it was all over the place. Although a life was taken, I have no memory of taking that man's life, and the only memory I have is like looking at his body in a big bubble. I believe I had an out-of-body experience, and it was like I was floating over top of him looking down. It was very eerie. The first thing I thought of is, "Who is going to believe me?" Because no one knows me, and I am nothing to the community. Who is going to believe I was defending myself when I don't even

remember killing him? So I proceeded to clean up the blood on everything I touched and/or where I was sitting. All I could think of was getting the hell out of there, and I was wearing shoes with a slight heel. It was cold. However when you're all messed up it's hard to run or walk in heels. But I did, and I had nylons on, so I jogged back. I was also on my third straight day of being awake because I was using drugs and alcohol. I had been partying hard. I remember I took off my shoes to jog because I used to jog all the time. And being in shape, that helped me to get away. I mean I didn't have to worry about that guy raping me again or, for that matter, raping anyone again. I know that may sound cold, but being raped time and again just doesn't go right. It takes away part of who you are as a woman and makes you feel worthless. Well it was over. So then, I actually had to jog approximately twenty-five kilometers to where I lived. I went to the place where I was living, and I felt so dirty. I ran the water to get in the tub, and when I tried to get in the tub I was so stiff and my feet were sore from jogging on the sidewalk with no shoes. I recall I could barely even get into the tub because I was so sore. I remember feeling an overwhelming veil of depression, feeling dirty and feeling absolutely empty. My back was all scraped, my arm was sore, my jaw was sore. I eventually went to a doctor just so the abuse I had encountered could be documented later for the court.

Later on after being charged with murder, my lawyer says, "You are so tiny and slim." He said to me, "When you see someone going to court with a real serious charge for first degree murder, you think of them as really big and tough, honestly." I replied, "You want my honest opinion? I would think they were guilty." My lawyer replied, "I just want you to know that is how the public will perceive it." However, he did get me out on bail. I had no criminal record to speak of, but I ended up with eighteen conditions. I ended up getting six years with that charge. I remember standing in the courtroom, and I would not cry. I think I was too shocked. I didn't

want anyone to see me cry, but I was in shock. I honestly thought I got twelve years. They were asking for eight to eleven years, but for some reason I thought I got twelve years. In reality I got six years. I was in so much shock, and I went to the bathroom, and of course a guard came with me to make sure I didn't run. That's when I started my sentence. I started my six years, and then from there, it was pure hell because my kids had never been away from me, and they all ended up in foster homes and were abused in these foster homes. It is just awful because even today, my kids have been seriously affected by my jail sentence. But I also know that I cannot blame myself. I need to move on and be positive for my family. The ironic part is my criminal record was erased at a later time, once I was released due to being diagnosed with battered women syndrome.

8.5) My Healing Journey

I was fortunate enough to end up in a Healing Lodge where I learned about my culture. I would work with Elders. Although it is something I had never practiced, nor has my family, I was still willing to do whatever it took to get my life back in order. My life would change for the better due to the skills I learned while I was in the Healing Lodge. I realized that there are trustworthy people in this world. I could not go to school at the Lodge, but I did partake in ceremonies such as Sweat Lodges, Shaking Tents, and Sharing Circles. The Elders at the Healing Lodge were instrumental in giving me the tools I needed to be a good productive citizen.

I ended up in a men's halfway house on parole. I met this lifer in there. One day he offered me a ride to class, and I accepted it. Then another time he shows up unannounced and starts driving to the outskirts of the city. I asked him where he was taking me, and he answers with a blank stare, "I must have taken the wrong road." It was creepy. I found out that he was charged with the first degree murder of a young mother. And I think he was out for a year and a

half and was charged again with first degree murder. It gave me the shivers as I realized this and wondered if he had picked up that young mother he murdered. I was fortunate that day, and I never got into his vehicle again. And for that matter I was moved to another facility for my safety. Today women no longer stay in co-ed halfway houses.

Life was difficult. I am a survivor of abuse. As I mentioned earlier my caregivers would beat the shit out of me, and the men in my life would beat the shit out of me. I was stuck in a never-ending cycle of abuse. My self-esteem would also take a beating. I never thought I was worthy, and I just took what was dished out, violent or not. However, my psychologist and parole officer were instrumental in helping me with my self-esteem. I didn't have a high school grade twelve diploma, and I could never concentrate in school. There was always too much going on in my head, and there was no room for school. I would, however, take a GED course and pass with flying colours. After that, I was accepted into a university science department, and from there my life would be forever changed. I was getting my life in order, and my kids were home. I felt good about me, and I felt proud to be in university. I would eventually work in the science department over the spring and summer. Life was good.

Today I am a contributing member of society, and I have held the same job for a number of years. I have a good relationship with my family members. To maintain my sobriety I attend AA meetings, and I now have a home group. In addition, I am now attending the Sharing Circle that has come out of Sharon's dissertation research. This is the first Sharing Circle that I have found since coming out of prison, and it has helped me immensely in my life. Although Sharing Circles were introduced to me in the Healing Lodge, none were available once I was released. I believe that there needs to be more Elders and ceremonies for women. Once you are done your parole, there is zilch as far as programming goes.

One of my practices today is do journal writing. When I am thinking negatively or positively, I write that down. I put them in columns. When I am done, the positive will shine over the negative and the light is turned on. I have successfully reintegrated back into society. The most important thing for me is a healthy family connection, which means being a good role model by maintaining my sobriety, working, and encouraging my children to pursue education. Today my grandchildren are my world. My grandchildren are my medicine. Thank you!

Part Three

Chapter 9: Discussion—Warriors in Our Own Right

9.1) Introduction

The journey up to this point for me and the three other Indian women was moving both emotionally and spiritually. It was ceremony. They opened my heart and my eyes to a new place of recognition. Although I knew these women and their histories, it was different to hear them in their own voice, and especially more emotional when reading their stories. I would be sitting in my office editing their work, and I would burst into tears because there were things about these women I did not know, and it made my heart heavy. On the flip side, it has been the most positive research I have ever taken on, and it was beautiful.

This chapter consists of three main parts: (1) a discussion about who criminalized Indian women are that stems from the life histories presented here; (2) reflections on the research process and the methodology used in this research; and (3) reflections on what our stories revealed about what it means to be healthy, what we need to be healthy, and what healthy reintegration means to us. In the first part, I summarize our life histories into a narrative that attempts to identify the common elements of our lived experiences as we understand them. In the second part, I discuss how the research intertwined with the personal interviews, Sharing Circles, and the Medicine Wheel. In the third part, I explore some additional reflections that came out of the interviews by asking the women three research questions, which were a good fit for the women participating in this project. I wrote the women's answers to the questions in a simple style to show what each of the women thought, including me.

In my heart of hearts and from my soul, I am honoured because through this research process—which was itself ceremony—we brought forth so much respect for each other. The stories, the interviews, the Circles, and the Wheels are all part of our Indian way; throughout this

project, we sat in ceremony. The passion these women held was so great, and when they spoke it was incredibly powerful. Now is their time to blossom and to shine. It is important to acknowledge their perseverance and how they have found their way from prison to this moment in their lives. They have learned to live a healthy lifestyle and to give back to their family. Their first day out of prison was their first day of living in a new and prosperous world.

9.2) Reflections on Who Criminalized Indian Women Are

Who are criminalized Indian women? We are clearly unrecognized in the world, and once we are placed behind walls, we are forgotten. We are women who have lived the worst conceivable pasts. We are women who have lived through extreme circumstances: violent relationships, alcohol and drug addiction, child sexual abuse, suicide attempts, incest, and denial of heritage. We have lived as prostitutes and have been abused mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We are women with no firm ground or foundation to stand on. We feel that we are alone with nowhere to hide and nowhere to go. We live in an ever-turning cycle of misery, pain, and abuse. But we are women who have persevered. We are women with a rich and colourful story to share. We are warriors.

Many of us have either been in Residential Schools, reformatories, or foster homes. As a result of this, we never experienced nor learned the proper skills needed to be successful mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters. Our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were also in Residential Schools, which left us with scars that never healed. These intergenerational impacts have been passed onto us because the effects of trauma were never dealt with and became cyclical. Unresolved issues would promote self-destructive behaviours in all of us. Violence and abuse became so much a part of our lives that many of us would perceive it as

normal. Many of us believed that we deserved to be abused and violated. Living with violence and abuse became a part of who we were.

For many of us, alcohol or drug abuse became a way to find solace and to cope with our pain. Alcohol and drugs became means to an end. It is easier to wash away years of pain and fear rather than to begin to heal. When addiction took hold of us, it went right to the core of our person and did not let go. An addiction is like a bad relationship that has no balance but is always willing to stay with you even in the insanity of it all. Our addictions to alcohol, drugs, and even men would take the pain and suffering away for the abuse that was heaped upon us. We all gobbled up men like they were candy. We all fled to the street. Although many of us might be addicts, our families were still very important to us. We lived in poverty and would do pretty much anything to feed our addictions at the same time as caring for our families. There is no cure for alcoholism or drug addiction; however, there is a way to heal, but it would be up to each of us to take the first step to recovery.

At one point or another in our lives, many of us became involved in prostitution in order to survive. It is not easy turning tricks—many of us would face childhood trauma, physical and sexual abuse, and some of us would come close to death. Everything about prostitution was detrimental to our health in one way or another. A life of crime would end up controlling many of our lives. The furthest thing from our minds was our own health. We were merely sustaining life, no matter the cost, whether legal or illegal. Many of us with children would do anything in order to feed our children, and if it meant breaking the law then so be it. Both the broader research literature and our own stories revealed two main reasons for Indian women committing crimes: 1) to keep our families together under extreme poverty when no other opportunities were available; and 2) for self-preservation, due to a lifetime of exposure to racism, resulting in

“violence, violence against us, and in turn our own violence” (The Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2001, p.6). Unfortunately, current programming for women incarcerated in Canadian prisons, in particular the individualized approach to treatment (including psychotropic medication), biased classification systems, limited pre-release planning, and gender stereotyped employment training, does little to address the real reasons why Indian women end up in prison (Maidmont, 2006; Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2012; Pollack, 2008; Shantz et al. 2009).

Once we were incarcerated we would become ghosts behind dark prison walls. We became hopeless. We became powerless. We would go to prison young and come out feeling old, lost, and with nowhere to turn. We are women who have lost our way in society and who have been pulled away from our own people and our own children. Prison was not a remedy for us, and prison did not restore what was lost prior to our crimes, just added one more weight. Being incarcerated and trying to hold on to what we had left of our health took a long time to sort through. If we have learned anything, it is that women like us have to *want* to change. We have to *want* to live prison-free. And that can only happen once we begin to heal from our past experiences and traumas.

As you have read in each of our stories, we suffered child sexual abuse and incest at the hands of uncles, brothers, and strangers. We accepted what happened; we owned it, and we embraced this abuse. We said, “No more, you cannot hurt me any longer.” We made a choice to be positive rather than hold onto it and stay sick in our souls. This simple concept of ownership made us strong. We never had to look back: it was over, and life would begin anew, fresh. We could walk tall. If you were to sit back and watch a baby grow, our healing journeys were the same way. You watch that baby struggle, and if they fall they might cry, but they will get up

again to continue their journey. Once we left prison we had to learn to crawl, to walk, and to talk. It is like crawling uphill in a thunderstorm with torrential rains beating you to the ground. You hope that you will not get struck by lightning. There would be times when we would feel the wrath of the rain and lightning, but we never gave in. We weathered the storm.

What we all experienced in our childhoods gave us the courage to heal from the inside out and to learn to love *ourselves* so that we would be able to love others. Once we made the choice to stay prison-free, life took hold and we moved forward no matter how tough the situations might have been. There was no turning back, and we picked our battles. There was no one to abuse us any longer. We turned up the heat, and we lived a *real* life that brought us to the Creator, each in our own way. We believed change was possible. We had hope.

9.3) Reflections on the Research Process

Over a six-week period I gathered my data by, for, and with the Indian women, which took place in three phases. First, I set up and hosted four Sharing Circles – the ceremonies that became research. Each Circle took approximately two to three hours, but without a time limit. Second, during the third and fourth Sharing Circles we constructed our Medicine Wheels. Third, individual interviews were held in my office at the First Nations University of Canada. These interviews were, as Shawn Wilson (2002) describes, our version of research as ceremony.

Sharing Circles

I wanted the Sharing Circles to be a positive experience that each of us could learn from and take away something good at the end of the day. The Sharing Circles were held in our Spiritual Room where the Elders teach and where other ceremonies are held through each semester. Prior to each of the Circles we would do a Smudging Ceremony. I had no idea how things were going to turn out or what the Creator had in store for me. I must admit I had my

reservations about everything; I felt insecure and my self-esteem kept being hurt. I was fearful, but I did not show it. I would eventually talk about it, and I kept a journal. This is something I learned in AA: to write it down, own it, and move on.

In the end the Circles were wonderful and amazing, and the experience was gratifying beyond anything I could have imagined. I believe for each of us it was an epiphany. There was hope, there was flexibility, and none of us ever gave up no matter how difficult what may have transpired throughout our lives. No one said it was going to be easy, but we are products of our successes.

The Sharing Circles went well. One of the women kept talking out of turn because she was so excited to be there and could not contain herself. In view of the fact that she was new to Circles, we just let it go. Eventually she would calm down and stop talking. I had explained about one person talking at a time, and at the end of the Circle I explained again, and she was okay. She apologized, but really there was nothing to be sorry for; she did nothing wrong. She just had to sit tight, be patient, and her turn would come. This was not a formal Sharing Circle—really, there are no formal Circles per se. A Circle is a ceremony, and it is that simple. There were not ten or twenty people in this Circle, and it was pretty casual. Besides, Sharing Circles are not about giving people heck, they are about learning, and learn we did. It was divine.

The Sharing Circles were also utilized as a vehicle to release our anger, sadness, happiness, or whatever other emotion would crawl out of our souls. Even more importantly, the Sharing Circles would not be a place to gossip or fabricate stories—as I said, it was meant to be a positive experience. During the second Circle, Donna needed to vent, and so she did. In fact, she vented quite frequently in the Circles. She spoke her truths and left all of her negative feelings in the middle of our Circle to let the Creator take care of it for her. Once this happened, it opened

the door for the other two women, which turned out great. I could sense their sadness, but I could also see their ashes rise from the earth with each breath they took. It really was a beautiful sight to see and to experience. It was like watching a rose bloom. We talked about what reintegration meant to each of us. The Circles were a window into our worlds, and we would clean those windows so that we would always be able to see the good in ourselves and in all people.

The Medicine Wheels

The Medicine Wheels would be a transformation from poverty to magnificence. The Wheels are a metaphor for our lived experience and for how our lives have been lived from birth to the present. The Wheels will also carry on after we are gone to the Spirit World; our children and grandchildren will continue to carry the Wheels so that they might teach their children and their grandchildren. The Medicine Wheels came as part of the Circle process. I taught the women to put one together that showed their life histories and healing journey. I decided to include the making of Medicine Wheels in this research because over the years I have listened and learned how to make them. At the beginning of this whole process, I developed my own so that I would know what I was doing to assist the women. Medicine Wheels have profound meaning. Your wheel is a story of who you are from birth to death, and perhaps beyond. It is a spiritual tool that can help you to develop your psyche and your inner child; it is a process of recovery.

I had asked them if they wanted me to draw a picture of my Wheel on the board, and they all agreed. I then explained that I wanted our Wheels to have the same format just in order to be cohesive. One of them would turn out very differently, and that too was fine. It is what it is. We talked more about the Wheel, and I explained that it comes from the heart and soul, that it is part of who you are, and that it has to be celebrated. The Medicine Wheel is a tool that Indian people have used for generations. Each Wheel is different, but they are all round and have four

directions, four elements, four seasons, four animals, and four colours signifying each race of people. And of course there is much more to the Wheel that was explained in detail. It is important to note that there is no room for racism or discrimination in the Wheels; we simply acknowledge all of Mother Earth's people. In constructing the Wheels we talked about our addictions (if we had any), we discussed our childhoods, we laughed, we cried, and we healed together.

The Interviews

I was not sure how the interviews would play out, and organizing to get the women to Saskatoon was a bit tense at times, but it all worked out in the end. We sat in privacy, and they told some amazing tales of woe and discovery. The interviews were stressful for a couple of the women, but our humour knocked that right out of the park. I could feel their emotions, and I would ask if they were okay. If necessary we would stop, and they would breathe. It was not easy sitting so long, and I knew they were hurting, but I also knew that at the end of it all they would be different women. These women were going to a dark place that was hard for them, and I was making them remember it, but they would reign over the darkness. Their childhoods were horrendous, and they all suffered years and years of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse. They would be raped, pillaged, and would embrace the violence because there was no other way than to just live through it and live to tell the tale. Listening to their life stories was like watching a tornado open up in the sky, swirling around, madly destroying everything in its path. The most significant thing for me was how much we all shared in common; we had all been through those storms.

Our healing journeys came out of the interviews – truly research as ceremony. The interview process was like a Sweat Lodge. I was the willows, and they were the tarp that covered

the lodge to embrace the prayer of Grandfather Rocks as they heated, at which time we would all sing and cry in prayer. It was a beautiful thing, it really was. I listened to their beautiful stories with an open heart and mind. I sat in awe as they spoke and shared their innermost beasts with me. I hope they know how much I love them. This is research beyond anything I could have ever imagined doing. In the end we all became warriors in our own right. We came to be brilliant, talented, amazing, beautiful, and breathtaking women. It was our calling to live through all of the mayhem. It was our destiny because we are *alive*.

I would often sit back in wonderment. I could not believe I was actually doing this research with these women. There were so many times that I almost gave up—but giving up is not my forte. I will never give up and from reading the stories of these fine Indian women, they will never give up either. We are a team. We have built a foundation where the sky is the limit. We are keeping it real.

9.4) Reflections on Research Questions

Following the amazing experience of the Sharing Circles, Medicine Wheels, and interviews, I asked each of the women—including myself—to complete three questions about the research process. The research questions were developed to fit the concept of healthy reintegration. The other women and I are all cut from the same cloth. We all came from the street and lived in the same violence. It is funny because you do not know how similar you are until you see it in writing. Of course I know the women, but when I got right down to reading their stories I had a sense of peace even through the pain. Some of the similarities to emerge from the women's stories and through our Medicine Wheels were sexual child abuse, incest, abandonment, foster care, prostitution, drug/alcohol addictions, and living on the street. Even as I looked at the constructed Wheels I could see that many parts of our lives were almost exactly the same, but

certain life events might have happened at different times. I was the eldest, but my hurts and angers were the same as even the youngest woman in the Circle. Living in that pain took us to many bad places and situations that were so wrong at so many levels. But I felt like we were one heart and soul. We made connections with each other that I never thought possible. We all walked in each other's moccasins through this process, and we each spoke our truths to the best of our ability. We did not hide a single thing. We stepped out into the light and we came to believe. We talked about our issues like there was no tomorrow, and we shared so many stories. We have released our demons, and each of us has found our thunder again. It just does not get any better than this.

I have the utmost respect for each of the women. When you stand back and look at our Medicine Wheels, think of what transpired in our Sharing Circles and read our stories, it is amazing how we wove our webs. We are so closely connected to each other, and we are all miracles. Through this research we all answered the same questions and came up with similarities woven through each of our healing journeys.

What Did Our Stories Reveal about What It Means to Be Healthy?

Sharon: “First of all, I had no idea that the simple term health had, or would have, such a big impact in my world. My health was something that I never worried about or cared about. You know, I mean really, it just was not something that concerned me. If I got sick I handled it with alcohol and/or drugs, or penicillin. Simple as that.”

Jasmine: “Sometimes change is hard—well we know it's hard—but we hide in our addictions if we have them and we get lost in the mist of those addictions, too afraid to look to really at our surroundings. So, realistically, I think being healthy is to be whole. Being healthy is to know who you are and where you are going in life. I think being healthy is finding your identity and

being totally independent once you have been released from prison. That is what being healthy is, staying prison-free, forever. We go to prison, we are forgotten about, and so we forget ourselves.”

Donna: “I would say my view on being healthy has everything to do with family. If our family is safe, happy, then the women are happy and that is what counts. You need to have backup, for a lack of a better word; if I didn’t have the backup, i.e. ceremonies, twelve-step programs, and my family, I wouldn’t be healthy. It’s okay for me to say, ‘Fuck no.’ It’s okay for me to say what’s on my mind and to not behave by screaming in a non-lady-like fashion to get my point across—I’m going to be heard. So, as long as I have my voice and my supports backing me up, then I am healthy.”

Sandy: “I believe what is needed is structure, family supports, and support from other people. You have to want change to make change. Being healthy to one person might not be the same for another. For me it’s being healthy from the inside and the outside. If you have a strong mind the rest will follow. It’s important to maintain a positive healthy lifestyle.”

What Did Our Stories Reveal about What Was Needed to Be Healthy?

Sharon: “Hmm, what I believe is needed to be healthy? Well, my past has made me who I am today. It has given me a rich and vibrant way of analyzing my life. I have the capability to make sound judgments today rather than living in dysfunction. I believe in order to be healthy you need to know who you are and where you come from.”

Jasmine: “I believe what is needed to be healthy is to have a strong mind. To be strong from the inside out and to always have the courage to want change. Strong mind, strong person, but you can still be sensitive and not hard on yourself.”

Donna: “I believe that Indian women need to be healthy from the inside out and that way they can find their health. Indian women need that fire the Elders speak of that comes from the heart. Then we will all be able to get what is needed and what is healthy.”

Sandy: “What I need to be healthy is to take care of me because if I do not look after me then others will suffer. I have grandchildren now, and I need to be on task and take care of business to show them a positive lifestyle. I believe what is needed to be healthy is for us as women to know that we can be loved without contempt.”

What Did Our Stories Reveal about What Healthy Reintegration Means?

Sharon: “What healthy reintegration means to me is simply staying prison-free. I believe to maintain healthy reintegration that I had to learn to love myself and know that I was worthy. I had to find my *identity*, and I had to learn to explore my inner child so to speak. I had to understand that jail was not a good place. Healthy reintegration is being able to sustain life outside the walls of prison and/or jail.”

Jasmine: “Healthy reintegration is being able to look at the path you are on and being able to determine that path and to know exactly where you are going or where you want to go. It is not going to be easy, I know this, I have suffered many impositions in my life, tried to take my own life, but I still never gave up, I am still here.”

Donna: “Hmm, well, without repeating myself a million times, healthy reintegration is being able to maintain your life outside of prison. It is living clean and sober for all eternity. It is living with balance in whatever way you choose. For me, I do ceremony, I Sundance, I fast, I sweat, I do all the cultural things I am able to do because I find peace in my heart and soul doing it. Healthy reintegration is doing things like this research I have been doing with Sharon. Healthy reintegration is taking part in whatever is good for you.”

Sandy: “Healthy reintegration means living a proactive lifestyle not filled with mayhem and abuse. Today I have a healthy lifestyle by being a good role model to my children and my grandchildren. That means contributing to society in a good way and giving back what you might get. It means having a positive future and not worrying about the past but dealing with stuff as it comes at you. Healthy reintegration is giving to yourself and owning your wrongs so that you can make the right decision.”

9.5) Conclusion

Every step I took with these incredible Indian women gave me more strength than I could have imagined. They made me brave. As previously stated, I truly did walk in their moccasins. I felt their pain. I felt their anger at what life did to and for them. I walked in their glory as each of them took a step closer to a Creator of their own understanding. They took my breath away and gave me love, compassion, and respect. They are all miracles in their own right, and they have successfully reintegrated from prison to live strong and healthy healing journeys. The beauty in their hearts and souls is to be commended. They gave the beautiful gift of their hearts. Not only did they survive life, but they have climbed to the mountaintop to each find their own thunder. Through their light, their hearts, and their willingness to be part of this research, I also found my thunder.

The following chapter concludes this thesis by discussing what policy recommendations could be drawn from this research. In particular, I outline how our Sharing Circle could be taken up as a model and replicated by, for instance, Correctional Services Canada in collaboration with formerly criminalized Indian women. The conclusion also addresses avenues for future research and provides some final thoughts on our collective healing journeys.

Chapter 10: Conclusion or Our New Beginning

When I began this research, I had many reservations and questions about what I would be allowed to do, and how technical or analytical I would have to be in my approach. Would I have to speak a foreign language? Would I have to act and be someone I was not? All in all, I did not feel good enough to conduct this research. I felt inferior because I did not have the same academic background or speak the same words as my classmates. I felt little, and some days I would feel belittled. However, as the years progressed so did my knowledge about what I wanted to do with my research. This research took me back to my past, and it brought me three other amazing criminalized Indian women. Together we would explore the concept of reintegration based on our personal stories and on our healing journeys, using Sharing Circles and the Medicine Wheel as our theory to discover good and wonderful lives. We developed Medicine Wheels that gave us the knowledge of our culture and of a Creator of our understanding. Some of us did not believe in a God or Creator, but through this research we have all found a way to develop the understanding needed to work with Medicine Wheels and to be part of Sharing Circles. The benefits have been tremendous. The experience we shared was a miracle, and the knowledge we gained is immense.

From the day I began this journey, I have been enlightened again and again. I would shake myself free from the remnants of a past gone by. I would rise from the ashes and stay alive so that I could share my life just as the three other Indian women have done in this study. And yes, these three Indian women would also rise with me from those ashes, and together we would breathe life into this dissertation. Yes, our thunder was stolen, *but we got it back*. We found our way from the darkness into the light. I have also found a new life through sharing healing journeys with three other criminalized Indian women who have also survived and who are

warriors in their own right. I love and admire their courage and their strength, and they have given me a piece of their lives that I will be forever grateful for. It is not easy telling your story, especially when there has been so much pain and suffering. We shared our lives together, we laughed, we cried, and we built a solid connection that has shed new light on all of my research questions.

10.1) The Need for Better Programs

Without a doubt, the most significant finding coming out of the Sharing Circles is that Indian women in general need to heal from the pain they have experienced throughout their lives in order to build happier, healthier lives for themselves. On a practical level then, Correctional Services of Canada (CSC) must take up this challenge and develop culturally appropriate programs that will actually address the needs of criminalized Indian women. While the CSC currently does offer some culturally appropriate programming, it has been criticized for being largely inadequate and difficult to access. The most recent annual report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator concluded that there were “concrete illustrations of the disconnect between theory and reality [...] in Aboriginal inmates’ access to spiritual and cultural services” (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2011). Among other conclusions, the report lists the following problems, which are seemingly out of sync not only with official CSC policy but also with current legal requirements:

- Aboriginal inmates have been routinely denied access to sweat lodges and sweat ceremonies for the past two years on a variety of poorly substantiated security and operational grounds:
 - Human resource constraints required to conduct individual security risk assessments precluded necessary approvals.
 - Perceived need to scan the firewood used for sweat ceremonies.
 - The sweat lodge facilities needed structural changes to allow for closer staff monitoring and security counts.

- Restrictions on inmate movement, assembly and association required numerous cancellations of planned sweat ceremonies.
 - Unreasonable restrictions on the use, access and distribution of matches and spiritual bundles, including tobacco and sweet grass, required for smudging ceremonies.
- Inappropriate questioning of claims to Aboriginal ancestry resulting in unsubstantiated allegations that offenders were trying to wrongfully gain access to perceived benefits associated with Aboriginal status.
 - And, the absence of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer at the institution has had adverse effects on the time and tasks that the assigned Elder could devote to serving inmate needs. (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2011, p. 33)

I want to clarify that I do not want to unjustly criticize the CSC. However, the legions of criminalized Indian women who are still incarcerated and suffering in this country need to be made a priority within the system. One does not need a PhD in order to see that our system has failed so many Indian women in Canada. The bottom line is that we need stronger program development and policies that fit the needs of criminalized Indian women both inside *and* outside of prison—and not just on paper, but in practice.

I also believe it is important to take a much deeper look at the concept of reintegration in order to understand what tools criminalized Indian women need for true, successful reintegration to take hold. There has to be a way to keep Indian women from continued recidivism and to assist them with healthy reintegration. We must develop approaches that can clearly identify the healing journeys of Indian women while understanding that their needs might be different than those of the rest of the prison population. Utilizing incarcerated Indian women's ideas, or even simply asking them what they need, would be a step in the right direction.

Taking Our Sharing Circle as a Model

While I do not have the magic answer, what I have offered here are four amazing healing journeys that might provide the CSC with the inspiration and perhaps even a model of what is needed to help criminalized Indian women build a bridge from the inside out. As this dissertation shows, putting Indian women's experiences at the center of any new policy or programming, will be key to their success. In our last Sharing Circle for this research, the other women and I collectively decided to keep the Circle going because what we have been able to accomplish in the Circle is far too good to pass up. It is this kind of support that we were missing both when we were incarcerated and even when we were out on the streets. I believe in my heart that Sharing Circles such as the ones we created for this research could be a stepping-stone for those Indian women who are still incarcerated and also for those who have been out for a number of months and/or years.

And while some Sharing Circles and support networks currently exist, there is nothing like the way we set up our Circle. Although it may seem like an ordinary support network, it is not because we built it with our hearts and souls. Our Sharing Circle is designed specifically by and for Indian women who have been incarcerated, and it is thus a safe place where such women are able to open up and speak about their experiences both in and out of prison. In support networks of the AA or NA variety, participants tend to be restricted to only talking about alcohol and/or drug issues. Since one cannot really give or share all of oneself in these meetings, any other deeper issues are typically left out. AA or NA meetings also only last one hour, whereas in the Sharing Circles, there are no time limits. Our Sharing Circles also have the advantage of being built in ceremony and of promoting pride in our heritage, which the women acknowledge played an important part in the healing process.

As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, the women and I are going to be taking an offering to an Elder and asking for an Indian or Spirit name for the Sharing Circle. We hope it will be the first step in bringing our Sharing Circle model to a larger community of criminalized Indian women so that they may benefit as we did. Our Sharing Circle process could be replicated across the country in jails, prisons, Friendship Centres, band halls, and anywhere Indian women need healing. The CSC could easily become an active partner in this endeavour and explore possibilities for taking on such programming in collaboration with women like us.

10.2) Further Research on Healthy Reintegration

Future research about healthy reintegration and criminalized Indian women is imperative because so little is geared specifically toward Indian women. As discussed in the literature review, much of the research on criminalized women in Canada does not focus specifically on Indian women who, for many of the reasons explored in this thesis, should merit a distinct research focus. The overall link between spirituality or ceremony and healing is equally under-researched. Likewise, very little of the literature speaks to the recovery and healing journeys of Indian women once they are released from prison.

It is clear to me that Indian women with lived experience could and should go back to speak in prisons in order to share their successes of living prison-free. This might have been done in the past, but it has not been done systematically and consistently. The CSC, for instance, could develop a plan in concert with successfully reintegrated Indian women to organize an ongoing array of presentations and speaking engagements. Indian women behind the walls desperately need such hope and could benefit tremendously from hearing about the lived experiences of more women like them.

The concept and role of tradition and ceremony was a topic of discussion during our Sharing Circles. Some of the women have taken part in a variety of ceremonial practices such as Sundances, feasts, fasting, sweats, and smudging and have found them to be a key part of their healing journey and reintegration into society. I believe that the potential for ceremony to play a role in the healthy reintegration of criminalized Indian women is an all-important avenue for further research. Such research could be done hand in hand with Elders, chiefs, councils, communities, allies of restorative justice approaches, and even those who are interested in abolishing prisons one day. While abolishing prisons is a long shot, I have learned that anything in life can be accomplished with hard work and dedication.

10.3) Criminalized Indian Women No Longer

I have just interviewed three of the strongest criminalized Indian women on the planet. They were simply amazing. Together we have also been able to remove the label and stigma that had followed us everywhere: we are no longer *Criminalized Indian Women* but are now on our own lifelong healing journeys. As I read each of their life stories, I was taken aback. Reading and reviewing their life stories made me cry because as I sat and read, I could honestly understand exactly where they were coming from and what they were talking about. Each of their healing journeys is amazing in its own special way, and each woman has buried her demons and found a Creator of her own understanding. Like me, they too would find their thunder. It is not easy letting people into your life when you have lost so much trust due to trauma, remorse, and addictions, but we came together as one. These three women opened their hearts, souls, and minds, and they let their spirits soar. This research has been an incredible learning experience for myself and for the three women who joined me in a powerful healing process. I will always and forever be grateful to my sistas for what they have shared with me. *Mikwec!*

References

- Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development of Canada (AANDC). (2012). *Aboriginal Women in Canada: A Statistical Profile from the 2006 Census*. Public Works and Government Services of Canada (PWGSC). Retrieved from: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1331664678840>
- Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF). (2001, Winter). *Healing Words: A Recognition of Being*, A Publication of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 3(2). Retrieved from: <http://www.ahf.ca/publications/newsletters>.
- Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba. (1991a). *Aboriginal Women*. Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, Volume 1, Chapter 13. Retrieved from: <http://www.ajic.mb.ca/volumel/chapter13.html>
- Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba. (1991b). *Child Welfare*. Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, Volume 1, Chapter 14. Retrieved from: <http://www.ajic.mb.ca/volumel/chapter14.html>
- Amnesty International. (2004, October). *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*. Retrieved from: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR20/003/2004/en/c6d84a59-d57b-11dd-bb24-1fb85fe8fa05/amr200032004en.pdf>
- Auditor General of Canada. (2003, April). Report of the Auditor General of Canada: Chapter 6—Federal Government Support to First Nations Housing on Reserves. Retrieved from: http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_200304_06_e_12912.html
- Bacquie, S. (2004, April 26). The Night Raid at Kingston's Prison for Women [review]. Section 15.ca. Retrieved from: http://section15.ca/features/reviews/2006/04/24/night_raid_kingston_prison/
- Balfour, G. (2012, May). Do law reforms matter? Exploring the victimization-criminalization continuum in the sentencing of Aboriginal women in Canada. *International Review of Victimology*. DOI:10.1177/0269758012447213
- Bernier, J. R.. (2010). *It's Like Jumping Out of a Plane without a Parachute: Incarceration and Reintegration Experiences of Provincially Sentenced Women in Atlantic Canada*. Retrieved from Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive). (Paper 1096)
- Bonta, J., Lipinski, S., & Martin, M. (1992). The characteristics of Aboriginal recidivists. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 34, 517–521.

- Bopp, J., Bopp, M., Brown, L., & Lane, Phil Jr. (2004). *The Sacred Tree* (4th ed.). Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press.
- Bourassa, C., McKay-McNabb, M., & Hampton, M. (2002). Racism, Sexism and Colonialism: The Impact on Health of Aboriginal Women in Canada. *Canadian Women Studies*, 24(1), 23–30.
- Brennan, S. (2011, May 17). Violent victimization of Aboriginal women in the Canadian provinces, 2009. *Juristat*. Statistics Canada catalogue no. 85-002-X. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2011001/article/11439-eng.pdf>
- Brown, L. (1994). Community and the administration of Aboriginal governments. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Seven Generations* [CD-ROM]. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University.
- Burt, S., Code, L., & Dorney, L. (1993). *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.
- Cajete, G. (1994). *Look To the Mountain. An Ecology of Indigenous Education*, Skyland, NC: Kivaki Press.
- Campbell, A. (2004). *Punishment Through Exclusion: Ruling Relations and Maximum Security in the Creating Choices Era*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC.
- Campbell, A. (2006). *Federally Sentenced Women and Security Classification*. PrisonJustice.ca. Retrieved from: http://www.prisonjustice.ca/politics/security_classification.pdf
- Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. (2005). *Collecting Data on Aboriginal People in the Criminal Justice System: Methods and Challenges*. Statistics Canada catalogue no. 85-564-XIE. Retrieved from: <http://publications.gc.ca/Collection/Statcan/85-564-X/85-564-XIE2005001.pdf>
- Canadian Civil Liberties Association. (2012). Bill C-10—The Omnibus Crime Bill: Unwise, Unjust, and Unconstitutional [blog review]. Retrieved from: <http://ccla.org/omnibus-crime-bill-c-10/>
- Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2003, December). A Profile of Federally Sentenced Women: Who Are They? Protecting Their Rights: A Systemic Review of Human Rights in Correctional Services for Federally Sentenced Women. Government of Canada: Legislation and Policies. Retrieved from http://www.chrc-ccdpc.ca/legislation_policies/chapter1-en.asp

- Chansonneuve, D. (2007). *Addictive Behaviours Among Aboriginal People in Canada*. Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series. Retrieved from: <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/addictive-behaviours.pdf>
- Correctional Services of Canada. (2004). *Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge Operational Plan*. Women Offender Programs and Issues. Retrieved from: <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/fsw13/ohci-eng.shtml>
- Correctional Services of Canada. (2008). *Rates of Recidivism for Women Offenders*. Research Reports No. R-192. Retrieved from: <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/reports/r192/r192-eng.shtml>
- Correctional Services of Canada. (2010a). *A Solid Foundation...A Vision for the Future: 20th Anniversary of Creating Choices*. Ottawa, ON: Women's Forum.
- Correctional Services of Canada. (2010b). *Women Offender Statistical Overview, Fiscal Year 2009–2010*. Retrieved from: http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/wos_Stat_09_10/wos_stat_09_10-eng.pdf
- Correctional Services of Canada. (2012, last modified). *The Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women: The Creation and Mandate of the Task Force*, Chapter V111. Women Offender Programs and Issues. Retrieved from: <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/choices/choice9e-eng.shtml>
- Crow, R. G. (2004). *Stress and Burnout Amongst Aboriginal Peoples: Quantitative and Qualitative Inquiries*. (Unpublished Master's dissertation). University of Lethbridge: Lethbridge, Alberta.
- Dapice, A. (2006, July). The Medicine Wheel. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 17(3), 251–260.
- Department of Justice. (2006). *Backgrounder: Aboriginal Justice Strategy*. Aboriginal Justice Strategy Annual Report, 2005-2006. Retrieved from: <http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/ajs-sja/rep-rap/0506/1.html>
- Dhunpath, R. (2000, September). Life History Methodology: “Narradigm” Regained. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 543–551.
- Dufault, Y. G. (2003). *A Quest for Character: Explaining the Relationship between First Nation Teachings and “Character Education.”* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto: Toronto, ON.
- Expert Committee Review of the Correctional Service of Canada. (1996–2000). *Moving Forward with Women's Corrections: The Expert Committee Review of the Correctional*

- Service of Canada's Ten-Year Status Report on Women's Corrections 1996–2006*. Correctional Service Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/wos29/wos29-eng.shtml>
- Fortin, D. (2004, August). *Program Strategy for Women*. Programs for Women Offenders, Correctional Services Canada. Retrieved from: http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/fsw18/fsw18_e.pdf
- Garner, R., Carriere, G., & Sanmartin, C. (2010). *The Health of First Nations Living off Reserve, Inuit and Metis Adults in Canada: The Impact of Socio-economic on Inequalities in Health*. Statistics Canada: Health Division, catalogue no. 82-622-X —No. 004. Ottawa, ON. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-622-x/82-622-x2010004-eng.pdf>
- Giroday, G. (2011, October 20). Crime bill unfairly targets women, aboriginals, critics say. *Winnipeg Free Press*, Section A4. Retrieved from: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/crime-bill-unfairly-targets-women-aboriginals-critics-say-132223703.html>
- Gondziola, J. (2005, November). Problems from the Outset: Is Canada's Treatment of Federally Sentenced Aboriginal Women Systematically Biased? *The New Canadian Magazine*, 16–19. Retrieved from: <http://www.newcanadian.com/images/nov05/mag-sections/PROBLEMS-OUTSET.pdf>
- Gracey, M., & King, M. (2009). Indigenous Health Part 1: Determinants and Disease Patterns. *Lancet*, 374, 65–75.
- Hagemaster, J. N. (1992, September). Life History: A Qualitative Method of Research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(9), 1122–1128.
- Hannah-Moffat, K. (2010). Sacrosanct or Flawed: Risk, Accountability and Gender-Responsive Penal Politics. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 22(2), 193–215.
- Hanson, E. (2009). The White Paper, 1969 [review]. Indigenous Foundations, University of British Columbia. Retrieved from: <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-white-paper-1969.html>
- Hart, M. (2002). *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Healing*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Hatch, J. A., & Wisniewski, R. (Eds.). (1995). *Life History and Narrative: Questions, issues, and exemplary works*. Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.
- John Howard Society of Alberta. (2002). *Recidivism and Short Term Inmates*. Research & Publications. Retrieved from: <http://www.johnhoward.ab.ca/pub/respaper/recidv02.htm>

- Kilty, J. (2012, May). 'It's like they don't want you to get better': Psy control of women in the carceral context. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(3), 162–182.
- King, M., Smith, A., & Gracey, M. (2009). Indigenous Health Part 2: Underlying Causes of the Health Gap. *The Lancet*, 374, 76–86.
- Knight, D. (2001). *The Seven Fires: Teachings of the Bear Clan as Told by Dr. Danny Musqua*. Muskoday First Nation, Saskatchewan: Many Worlds Publishing.
- Kubik, W., Bourassa, C., & Hampton, M. (2009, February). Stolen Sisters, Second Class Citizens, Poor Health: The Legacy of Colonization in Canada. *Humanity & Society*, 33(1–2), 18–34.
- Lafreniere, C., Fontaine, N., & Comack, E. (2005, February). The Challenge for Change: Realizing the Legacy of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry Report [position paper], Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved from: http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba_Pubs/2005/the_challenge_for_change.pdf
- LaPrairie, C. (1992). *Dimensions of Aboriginal Over-Representation in Correctional Institutions and Implications for Crime Prevention*. Solicitor General of Canada. Supply and Services Canada, catalogue no. JS5-1/4-1992. Retrieved from: http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/sp-ps/JS5-1-4-1992-eng.pdf
- LaPrairie, C. (2002, April). Aboriginal Over-Representation in the Criminal Justice System: A Tale of Nine Cities. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 44(2), 181–208.
- LaRocque, E. D. (1994, March). *Violence in Aboriginal Communities*. Health Canada. Family Violence Prevention Division, catalogue no. H72-21/100-1994-E. Retrieved from: <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/H72-21-100-1994E.pdf>
- Lavallée, L. F. (2007, Spring). Physical Activity and Healing through the Medicine Wheel. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 5(1), 127–153.
- MacDonald, M., & Watson, L. (2001, February). Creating Choices, Changing Lives: The Transformation of Women's Corrections in Canada. *Corrections Today*, 63(1).
- Mahony, T. H. (2011, April). Women and the Criminal Justice System. *Women in Canada 6th Edition: A Gender-Based Statistical Approach*. Statistics Canada, catalogue no. 89-503-X. Retrieved from: http://ywcacanada.ca/data/research_docs/00000171.pdf
- Maidmont, M. R. (2006). "We're Not All That Criminal:" Getting Beyond the Pathologizing and Individualizing of Women's Crime. *Women & Therapy*, 29(3-4), 35–56.

- Monture-Angus, P. (2006). Confronting Power: Aboriginal Women and Justice Reform. *Canadian Women Studies*, 25(3–4), 25–33.
- Muchmore, J. A. (1999, April). Toward An Understanding Life History Research. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal, QC. Retrieved from:
http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED429956&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED429956
- Nabigon, H. (2006). *The Hollow Tree: Fighting Addiction with Traditional Native Healing*. McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, QC & Kingston, ON.
- Native Women's Association of Canada. (2004, October). *Background Document on Aboriginal Women's Health*. Health Sectoral Session. Canada-Aboriginal People's Roundtable. Retrieved from:
http://www.nwac.ca/sites/default/files/reports/NWACAboriginalWomenHealthBackground_000.pdf
- Native Women's Association of Canada. (2007a). *Federally Sentenced Aboriginal Women Offenders: An Issue Paper*. National Women's Summit, CornerBrook: NL. Retrieved from: <http://www.laa.gov.nl.ca/laa/naws/pdf/nwac-federally.pdf>
- Native Women's Association of Canada. (2007b). *Social Determinants of Health and Canada's Aboriginal Women*. Submission to the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Retrieved from:
http://www.nwac.ca/sites/default/files/reports/NWAC_WHO-CSDH_Submission2007-06-04.pdf
- Native Women's Association of Canada. (2012). *Gender Matters: Building Strength in Reconciliation* [report]. Retrieved from: <http://www.nwac.ca/gender-matters>
- O'Donnel, V., & Wallace, S. (2011, July). First Nations, Métis and Inuit Women. *Women in Canada 6th Edition: A Gender-Based Statistical Approach*. Statistics Canada, catalogue no. 89-503-X. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11442-eng.pdf>
- Office of the Correctional Investigator. (2011). *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2010–2011*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ocibec.gc.ca/rpt/pdf/annrpt/annrpt20102011-eng.pdf>
- Olphen van, J., Michele, E. J., Freudenberg, N., & Barnes, M. (2009). Nowhere to go: How stigma limits the options of female drug users after release from jail. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 4(10). Retrieved from:
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2685368/>

- Papequash, C. (2012). *The Yearning Journey: Escape from Alcoholism*. (Self-published book). Retrieved from: <http://theyearningjourney.com/>
- Parks, D., & Pate, K. (2006). Time for Accountability: Effective Oversight of Women's Prisons. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 48(2), 251–285.
- Perrault, S. (2009, July). *The incarceration of Aboriginal people in Canada in adult correctional services*. Juristat. Statistics Canada, catalogue no. 85-002-X. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2009003/article/10903-eng.pdf>
- Pollack, S. (2005). Taming the Shrew: Regulating Prisoners Through Women-Centered Mental Health Programming. *Critical Criminology*, 13(1), 71–87.
- Pollack, S. (2008). *Locked In, Locked Out: Imprisoning Women in The Shrinking and Punitive Welfare State* [research report]. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University. Retrieved from: <http://www.wlu.ca/documents/30852/lockedin-final.pdf>
- Pollack, S. (2009a, Spring). “Circuits of Exclusion”: Criminalized Women's Negotiations of Community. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 28(1), 83–95.
- Pollack, S. (2009b). “You Can't Have It Both Ways”: Punishment and Treatment of Imprisoned Women. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 20(2), 112–128.
- Pollack, S. (2012, June). An imprisoning gaze: Practices of gendered, racialized and epistemic violence [Published online before print]. *International Review of Victimology*. DOI: 10.1177/0269758012447219. Retrieved from: <http://irv.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/06/06/0269758012447219.abstract>
- Popick, J. (2006). Native American Women, Past, Present and Future. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*, 1(1). Retrieved from: <http://www.lurj.org/article.php/vol1n1/running.xml>
- Public Works and Government Services Canada. (1996). *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston*. (The Harbour Report). Catalogue no. JS42-73/1996E. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Communication Group Publishing.
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1: Looking Forward, Looking Back*. Retrieved from: http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071115053257/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sgmm_e.html
- Royal Commission to Investigate the Penal System of Canada. (1938). *Report on the Royal Commission to Investigate the Penal System of Canada* (Archambault Commission). Department of Justice of Canada.

- Rudin, J. (2005). *Aboriginal Peoples and the Criminal Justice System*. Research Paper Commissioned by the Ipperwash Inquiry. Retrieved from: http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/inquiries/ipperwash/policy_part/research/pdf/Rudin.pdf
- Sanderson, J. (1992). *A Cree Way of Life*. (Unpublished Master's dissertation). University of Saskatchewan: Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.
- Sangster, J. (1999, March). Criminalizing the Colonized: Ontario Native Women Confront the Criminal Justice System, 1920–60. *The Canadian Historical Review*, 80(1), 32–60.
- Shantz, L., Kilty, J., & Frigon, S. (2009). Echoes of Imprisonment: Women's Experiences of Successful (Re)integration. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, 24(1), 85–106.
- Sparling, L. (1999, Spring–Summer). Suitable place: positive change for federally sentenced Aboriginal women in Canada. *Canadian Women Studies*, 19(1), 116–121.
- Standing Committee on the Status of Women. (2011, March). *Interim Report, Call Into The Night: An Overview of Violence Against Aboriginal Women*. House of Commons. Retrieved from: http://ywcacanada.ca/data/research_docs/00000180.pdf
- Subways, S. (2008). Cultural Healing: Native American Activists Say Boarding School Abuses Harmed the Health of Generations [web post]. Champ—Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project. Retrieved from: http://www.champnetwork.org/solidarity_project/2008/12/en/cultural-healing-native-american-activists-say-boarding-school-abuses-
- Sugar, F., & Fox, L. (1989/1990). Nistum Peyako Seht'wawin Iskewak: Breaking Chains. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 3(2), 465–482.
- Sun Bear, Wabun, W., & Mulligan, C. (1986). *Dancing with the Wheel: The Medicine Wheel Workbook*. Prentice Hall Press: New York, NY.
- Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women. (1990). *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*. Correctional Service Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.csc-ccc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/choices/toce-eng.shtml>
- The Alberta Teachers' Association. (2006). *Education is Our Buffalo: A Teacher's Resource for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education in Alberta*. Edmonton, AB. Retrieved from: [http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Education%20is%20Our%20Buffalo%20\(PD-80-7\).pdf](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Education%20is%20Our%20Buffalo%20(PD-80-7).pdf)
- Wadden, M. (2008). *Where the Pavement Ends: Canada's Aboriginal Recovery Movement and the Urgent Need for Reconciliation*. Douglas and McIntyre Publishing: Vancouver, BC.

- Walker, P. (2001). Journeys around the medicine wheel: A story of indigenous research in a Western university. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 29(2), 18–21.
- Walsh, C. A, MacDonald, P., Rutherford, G. E., Moore, K., & Krieg, B. (2011, Winter). Homelessness and Incarceration Among Aboriginal Women: An Integrative Literature Review. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 9(2), 363–386.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing: Halifax, NS.
- Yellow Horse Brave Heart, M. (1995). The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief. *The Journal of the National Center American Indian and Alaska Native Programs*, 2(2), 60–82.

Appendix A: Photos of Segregation Unit at the Prison for Women



*Segregation Unit Upper and Lower Tier of Dissociation Side
(Source: Ontario Provincial Police)*



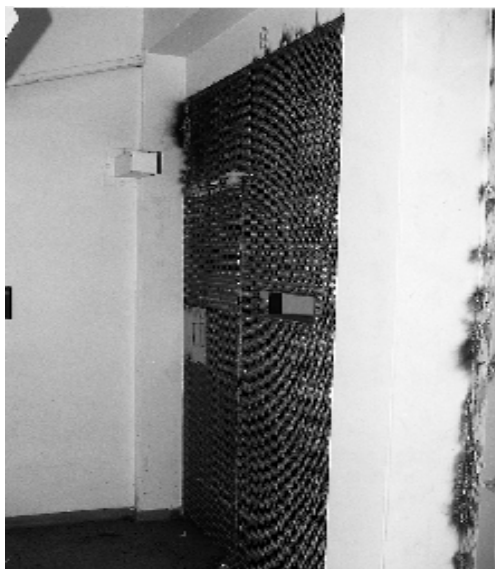
*Upper Tier Dissociation Side
(Source: Ontario Provincial Police)*



Interior View of a Cell
(Source: Ontario Provincial Police)



Exterior View of a Cell
(Source: Ontario Provincial Police)



*Cell with Heavy Metal Tread Plate
(Source: Ontario Provincial Police)*

Appendix B: Sharing Circle Outline

First of all, there is no right or wrong way to begin a Sharing Circle. There are no questions that are usually asked, and whoever is hosting the Circle will be the person to begin speaking. The Circle will be done in four rounds according to the concept of the Medicine Wheel and the four directions. The first round will be done starting with a Sweetgrass Smudge and prayer. After this we will continue on with introductions of each other. I will introduce my research and explain what, why, and how it will occur throughout each phase of the four directions. The second and third rounds will be more talking and building rapport with the women. Within all four rounds each of us will share our feelings of what is happening. We will talk open and honestly. It will be my role to let the women know that what is said in the Circle stays in the Circle, and that no one is to speak of anything outside the Circle. We will discuss respect, honesty, and dignity. We will discuss our time in prison/jail and what that means to us in the present. The fourth round will be the end round. Again there will be a Sweetgrass Smudge and prayer. In this round the women can talk about how they are feeling and can make their decision to be part of the research. Sharing Circles are a tool for healing once the individual has decided to change their ways. Sharing Circles can be held for a multitude of reasons from dealing with addictions, to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and even sexual abuse. Sharing Circles are a means to learn to let go of the past and move strong into the future.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

I _____ give my consent to participate in a study led by Sharon L. Acoose. I understand that the study is being carried out by Ms. Acoose and is part of their PhD Dissertation at the University of Saskatchewan—College of Medicine—Dept. of Community Health & Epidemiology. The title of the study is, *They Stole My Thunder—Warriors Who Were Behind the Walls: Experiential Storytelling with Criminalized Indian Women*.

I understand that the purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of my experiences of being in prison and how I have managed to stay out of prison. I would like to be able to explain the impact on my healing, and what staying prison-free means to me. Interviews will take place at the First Nations University of Canada—Saskatoon Campus—or in the home of Sharon Acoose.

___ I give my permission for the information I provide to be audio recorded.

___ I do not give my permission for the information I provide to be audio recorded.

The information from the tape recording or researchers' notes will be destroyed once the interview is transcribed (approximately two months from the time of the interview). All interviews will be stored separately from the signed, informed consent forms in a locked filing cabinet. All interviews done for this study will be destroyed in ten years time; that is, the files will be erased from all of Sharon Acoose's computers and the written transcripts will be shredded.

I understand that my interview will not be anonymous because other people will have access to Sharon Acoose's research report. I also understand that when the final report is written and presented, my identity will be confidential because no names or other identifying information will be given. I also understand that the information I provide will be used in public written and oral presentations.

I understand that there will be another person taking part in the transcribing of my interview. I feel confident that what I say will remain confidential.

I also understand that following the interview, should I feel the need to talk with someone (debrief); I will have access to Elders. If I need further assistance I will contact a counsellor of my choice.

___ I give my permission for the researchers to access my personal interview and/or video in which I have been answering questions and recording my thoughts about my experiences about being in prison and how I have stayed prison-free.

___ I do not give my permission for the researchers to access my personal interview in which I have been answering questions and recording my thoughts about my experiences about being in prison and how I have stayed prison-free.

As a participant in this project I have several rights:

- My participation in this interview is entirely voluntary (I can freely choose to participate or not).
- I am free to refuse to answer any questions at any time.
- I am free to stop the interview at any time.
- If I choose to stop my interview, I can decide at that time if the researcher may use any of the information I already provided.

- I understand that I have the right to ask that any information I give be “off the record” at any time, which means it will not be repeated, discussed, or reported at any time.
- I understand that I will receive a small gift for my participation.
- I understand that I may request a copy of the plain language summary and report of this research.
- I understand that I can contact the researchers or Research Ethics Chair at the University of Saskatchewan to have my questions addressed, or if I am in any way dissatisfied with the research.
- No coercion or pressures of any kind can be used to gain my consent.

Should I have any ethics concerns or complaints, I may contact The Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan:

Research Ethics Office
University of Saskatchewan
Room 302 Kirk Hall
117 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C8
Telephone: 306 966-2084

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the information provided for the study *They Stole My Thunder—Warriors Who Were Behind the Walls: Experiential Storytelling with Criminalized Indian Women* as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

SIGNATURE OF THE INVESTIGATOR

Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____

Appendix D: Data Release Form for Medicine Wheels

The researcher will carefully explain the criteria for the use of this form for the Medicine Wheels prior to the release of this form.

Researcher:

Sharon Leslie Acoose

910-541-5th Ave North

Saskatoon, SK

S7K 5Z9

1-306-651-4986 or 1-306-203-1081

warriorwoman51@hotmail.com

Information about the Study

The researcher and three other Indian women are working together on this research project to explore what healthy reintegration means to the women. Further, they will explore together via making Medicine Wheels how they were able to stay prison-free and reintegrate successfully back into society. The Medicine Wheel is one of the oldest spiritual techniques used by Indian people on Turtle Island. The results of this study will hopefully help and assist those Indian women still in prison and/or who have been able to stay prison-free. This research can be utilized as a tool for recovery and positive living outside prison.

Information About Dissemination

The knowledge gained from this study will be disseminated in a Medicine Wheel and will be utilized as part of the dissertation. Results of the study will also be included in reports, conferences, meetings & public presentations, as well as hopefully inside women prisons.

I, _____, release the Medicine Wheel about me in the study called, *They Stole My Thunder—Warriors Who Were Behind the Walls: Experiential Storytelling with Criminalized Indian Women*

I agree to the following release of the Medicine Wheels about me:

_____ Complete release for analysis, educational and/or academic purposes.

_____ Partial release to the researchers and research assistants on this project for the purposes of analysis and an interview with person who assisted me with my Medicine Wheel.

I hereby authorize the release of the Medicine Wheel that I developed to be used in the manner indicated above. I have received a copy of this Data Release Form for my own records.

If I have any questions or concerns I may contact the researchers at the phone numbers and e-mail addresses above.

Participant Name and Signature (or parent/guardian)

Date

Researcher

Date