



# RESEARCH TO PRACTICE NETWORK

## Indigenous Women, RCMP and Service Providers Work Together for Justice: A Response-based Safety Collaboration in the Yukon

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Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: Parts 2/3 Winnipeg

Witness: Allan Wade

Submitted by: Jennifer Cox

Add'l info: P02-03 P03 P0501

Date: OCT 05 2018

Initials

63

I/D

Entered

54

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## Indigenous Women, RCMP and Service Providers Work Together for Justice: A Response-based Safety Collaboration in the Yukon

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April 2013

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# **Indigenous Women, RCMP and Service Providers Work Together for Justice: A Response-based Safety Collaboration in the Yukon**

## **Introduction**

This article provides an overview of the application of response-based practice in the Together for Justice project in Whitehorse and in Watson Lake, Yukon. In this project, Catherine Richardson and Allan Wade facilitated a number of community meetings involving primarily Kaska women, Yukon Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and community service providers with an interest in reducing and eliminating violence against women. The goal of these meetings was to address violence against Indigenous women, and inform RCMP members how they can improve the safety of Indigenous women by providing a positive social response. To begin, the paper presents the background and contextual realities of violence against Indigenous women in the Yukon and the history of policing in this context. As well as citing various problems, the author includes a view of Indigenous women's resistance and efforts to create safety in communities.

## Background

The Kaska women live in the mountainous region of the Upper Liard in the southern Yukon and northern British Columbia. They speak Kaska and occupy four main areas around Lower Post, Upper Liard, Watson Lake, and Ross River. They belong to the Wolf or Crow clans and maintain a traditional economy related to hunting, fishing, trapping harvesting plants, berries and living on the land. Over generations, the Kaska women have resisted the Hudson's Bay Company, the gold rush, the U.S. military, road construction and mining development in their lands. Today, they strive to keep their children inculcated in Kaska culture and language and are trying to create a safe community for the young ones. The Liard Aboriginal Women's Society is comprised of Kaska women with the mandate of bringing healing to their people.

They know that being an Indigenous woman in Canada is accompanied by various periods and intersecting points of oppression and vulnerability. This point has been highlighted in various documents produced by groups such as Amnesty International, the United Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada. Indigenous women are more likely to be a target of violence because they have less social privilege and are easier to harm with impunity (Amnesty International, 2009, 2004). Aside from other risks associated with being a woman, Indigenous women often deal with violence and sexism in their communities, along with issues such as polluted water, toxic mould, poverty, political dis-empowerment, inadequate access to quality food and housing, lack of health facilities and care for the ill and aged.

This means that overall Indigenous people are more likely to die at a younger age, often related to violence and brutality. This relates to both men and women. These situations are not only linked to poverty but also "impoverization" due to the federal neglect and dishonoured treaties. This disadvantage stems from a context of racism and a history of colonization, including a shortage of land and resources, historical institutionalization, and social exclusion in relation to civil rights. Only recently did the Kaska people win a legal challenge against the Yukon Territorial Government to "free entry mining" in the court of appeal (<http://www.kaskadenacouncil.com/newsarchives/current-news>). This means that the government must now consult with the Liard First Nation over mining practices.

## The Resistance of Indigenous Women in Canada

One of the recommendations of the National Aboriginal Women's Association's "Collaboration to End Violence" (2011) is "the need for all responses to be community engaged and community led" (<http://www.nwac.ca/home>). The engagement and resistance of the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS) sits solidly within a tradition of Indigenous women taking action to improve life for their people.<sup>1</sup> However, violence, discrimination and inequality against Indigenous women still needs to be addressed. Along with other political challenges, the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society is acting, together with RCMP and community service providers, to increase safety and address violence against women in Yukon communities.

The Together for Justice project evolved as response to various violence-related community concerns in and around Watson Lake, both historic and recent. For example, the apprehension felt by Indigenous community members was galvanized when two local RCMP members were accused, investigated, and then acquitted for sexually assaulting a nurse at a party in the community. These events transpired simultaneously with concerns about RCMP conducting investigations into the actions of its membership and the implications of this investigation for transparency and public trust.

Tragedies, such as the death of Raymond Silverfox in prison in 2008, have contributed to a climate of fear and mistrust against RCMP in many Yukon communities, alongside issues such as reports of sexual harassment of women officers in the force. According to Yukon chief of police Peter Clark, "the RCMP and others have advocated for legislative amendment that would see investigations into serious matters involving RCMP to be conducted by independent external agencies. The federal legislation, which has been requested by police and public alike, is now being considered by Parliament and is likely to be soon passed into law." (Personal communication, October 2012)

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1 The women of LAWS are situated alongside other compelling acts of community development and decolonization. Indigenous women activists such as Bridget Tilley, Eva Saulis, Glenna Perley, Jeannette Corbiere Lavelle, Yvonne Bedard, Sandra Lovelace have fought against gender discrimination for Indigenous women in Canada (Hundert, 2011; Moran, 1988; Silman, 1987). Their efforts have created more safety and justice for Indigenous women, resulting in amendments to the Indian Act, the implementation of Bill C 31, and acknowledgement of Indigenous women for whom justice was not done, such as the murdered and missing women.

Together for Justice (TFJ) began as a social change project, initiated by former Liard First Nation chief and LAWS Executive Director Ann Maje-Raider, together with LAWS members and the Watson Lake RCMP. Their shared goal was to address the violence and the inadequate responses to victims of violence in their communities, including physical and sexualized assault as well as intimate partner violence. While concerns have been raised about all forms of violence, this project begins by addressing violence against Indigenous women who exist at the intersection of both sexism and racism in the north.

There is an understanding that, by creating the appropriate conditions of safety in the community, all women will benefit. This project takes place within a greater vision of healing and creating healthy communities for the benefit of everyone, starting with the most vulnerable. The work takes place with the understanding that making life safer for mothers also makes life safer for children. The fact that this project is initiated by the Kaska women and is centered around appropriate cultural responses sets this project apart from other concurrent initiatives such as “Sharing Common Ground”, a project of the Commanding Officer of RCMP in the Yukon, the Minister of Justice for the territory, and Council of Yukon First Nations (<http://sharingcommonground.gov.yk.ca/>)

Typically, the Indigenous experience is appended as an afterthought to documents addressing wide spread social concerns such as intimate partner violence. Often these documents neglect the implications of colonialism and racism as central to the analysis. These particular nuances are often left out of reports and statistics designed to present the issues at hand. For example, there are no conclusive Yukon-generated statistics that relate to violence against Indigenous women and the incidents of racism experienced in the processes of disclosure, reporting, treatment and justice proceedings.

The following statistics that relate to violence in the Yukon Territory are gathered from the 2006-2009 federal census and do not include discernment of Indigenous women and girls in their numbers:

- The highest levels of spousal violence in Canada, in 2008, along with NWT and Nunavut. The Yukon holds the highest rates of charges being laid for spousal abuse (83% of assaults are against women; 17% against men).
- The Yukon had the highest level of assaults in Canada. Common assault

(pushing, hitting) comprised 77% of assaults, while the percentage of incidents of major assault (with a weapon or causing bodily harm) comprised 21% of all assaults (Family Violence: Spousal Violence in Canada, 2008).

- Compared to the provinces, rates of sexual offenses against women are 2 to 3 times higher in the Yukon than in the provinces.
- Indigenous women experience spousal assault at rates more than three times higher than for non-Aboriginal women, or for men (Thus requiring a particular focus and analysis)
- Rates of sexual offenses in Canada were 82 per 100,000; in the Yukon 240 per 100,000.

In the Yukon, NWT and Nunavut, the rate of admissions in 2009/2010 were six to eight times higher than in Manitoba, the province with the highest rate (670 admissions for 100,000 women) (Burczycka & Cotter, 2011). Statistics from April 2008 indicate that the number of women who accessed shelters to escape violence in Canada (in April 16, 2008) were 31 per 100,000; in the Yukon the rate was 234 per 100,000 (Department of Justice, 2008). Executive Director, Barb McInerney, of Kaushee's House women's shelter in Whitehorse notes "This summer (2012), we had a 127% occupancy rate. I don't know what is going to happen when winter comes!" (Barb McInerney, Personal Communication in Whitehorse, October 8, 2012).

- In 2007, Statistics Canada reported the rates of sexual assault per 100,000 for Canada at 65; for Yukon at 193.6
- The average rates of spousal homicides in Canada were 4.6 per 1,000,000; in the Yukon the rate was 30.4 per 1,000,000
- 98% of the 556 individuals accused of a sexual assault in the Territories were male. Men comprised 87% of the 918 individuals accused of a family violence offense (Department of Justice, 2008)

Again, while these statistics indicate the high levels of violence against women in the Yukon, they are not conclusive in their accuracy and likely underestimate the actual rates of frequency and levels of violence against all women and against Indigenous women in particular. The 2011 report "If My Life Depended On It" (Moorecroft, 2011), states that many women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous,

do not report violence, for various reasons. Her findings are consistent with those in the research literature related to social responses to disclosure. Research on social responses shows that reporting violence does not necessarily make a woman's life better, but rather may open up a whole series of professional interactions in which the victim is acted upon further (Andrews & Brewin, 1990; Andrews, Brewin & Rose, 2003; Kelly, 1988). As such, it is not clear whether women reporting violence will experience increased safety, dignity or justice. What does seem clear is that communities who have overtly structured positive social responses to victims are more likely to be successful in creating safety (Wade, 2013, Personal communication, Together for Justice proceedings, Watson Lake, B.C.).

## Racial Discrimination

Many scholars have documented that Indigenous people are given lesser quality care and treated less equally than other Canadians (Coyes, Doxtater, Geddes & Krepakevich, 1996). Reports and documents such as the Amnesty International Report on the Stolen Sisters and No More Stolen Sisters document aspects of this inferior care or neglect. Some scholars attribute this neglect or poor treatment to racism (Sinclair, 2007) or colonialism more broadly (Churchill, 2003; Richardson and Wade, 2008).

Sharene Razack in "Timely Deaths: Medicalizing the Deaths of Aboriginal People in Custody" (2011) articulates a theory for understanding why Indigenous people in prison have not always received the care and treatment accorded other citizens. Seen as people whose hold on modern life is tenuous, Aboriginal people are often considered to be beyond help. They are, in this sense, already dead. It is remarkable how many deaths in custody occur because the police will not touch, or closely monitor Aboriginal people in their care, assuming that such people are simply irreversibly damaged (Razack, 2001).

Razack would apply this analysis to explain the state's mishandling reports of over 500 Indigenous women who have gone missing or been murdered in Canada. The identities of these women have been denoted publically as sex workers or prostitutes, making them perhaps doubly disposable, or doubly dead. Recent hearings in Vancouver on this issue have revealed serious flaws in the process



(Native Women's Association of Canada, 2012). And while Razack's conclusions may sound harsh, it makes sense in the context of some of the more cruel and brutal public reports of state violence against Indigenous women such as "The prison guards deliberately ignored her screams and pleas for help" (CBC Radio, October 9, 2012).

A recent report shows that the number of Indigenous women who are using self-harm or trying to take their lives in prison has risen from 8 incidents in 2006 to 214 in 2011 (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/10/11/pol-prisoner-self-harm-harris.html>). They attribute this rise to the deplorable conditions, such as overcrowding, linked to recent federal cutbacks. It has also been noted that Indigenous people in Canada have the highest levels of incarceration and face the longest sentences for the least serious crimes (Dr. Robina Thomas, personal communication at the University of Victoria, October 9, 2012).

## Disclosing and Reporting Violence

Recent Canadian research found that even though most women who called the police did so because they needed immediate protection, police responded to only about half of those calls (Barrett, St. Pierre & Vaillancourt, 2011). When police did respond, they left the perpetrator in the home about 75 percent of the time (Barrett et al., 2011). This is by no means unique to Canada. A recent study in Great Britain showed that as little as 26 percent of reported intimate partner violence incidents ended with an arrest, and only 7 percent of perpetrators were charged (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2008). Additional Canadian research found that police only removed perpetrators from the home 27.3 percent of the time and that men who are charged are not always required to remain in custody. (Barrett et al., 2011).

A Canadian study reported that "stay of proceedings" was the most frequent disposition for intimate partner violence cases (Beckstead, 2006). In the U.S., the intimate partner violence victims surveyed by Belknap, Melton, Denney, Fleury-Steiner & Sullivan (2009) rated criminal justice system personnel (including prosecutors, legal advisors and the police) as the most unsupportive of all potential social or institutional supporters. A particular concern voiced in the study was that women who reported higher levels of violence also reported lower levels

of support from the police. A study by Proulx and colleagues in Canada (2006) reported that Indigenous mothers who were abused by their intimate partners were reluctant to seek help from professionals because of their overwhelming fear of losing their children to child protection authorities.

## Demographics

Together for Justice meetings have taken place in Whitehorse, on the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dun and Ta'an Kwachan peoples. Many of the Yukon's approximately 7,580 Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Metis and Inuit) live in the territory's capital, Whitehorse. Some of the meeting participants were also from the Teslin Tlingit or the Carcross Tagish First Nations. The second location, Watson Lake, located in the southeastern Yukon near the B.C. border, is home to approximately 1200 citizens. Many residents are Kaska Dena, part of the Kaska Nation. The Kaska extend into British Columbia, with communities at Fort Ware, Good Hope Lake and Lower Post and Yukon communities of Liard First Nation and Ross River Dena Council. A number of Kaska participants travelled from Ross River, Good Hope Lake and Lower Post to take part in the meetings.

In Whitehorse, service providers included representatives from Kaushee's Place Transition House, Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Council, Yukon Aboriginal Women's Circle, Yukon Status of Women's Council, Victoria Women's Centre, Les Essentielles from the Women's Directorate, Victim Services, RCMP and other agencies dealing with violence, crime, and justice issues. The project includes an official evaluator, a note taker and a consultant hired to assist with the development of a protocol agreement between RCMP and LAWS.

## Goals for the Project

The Together for Justice Project (TFJ) is designed firstly to improve community policing, and to develop better relationships between Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Indigenous women. A main goal is to create a protocol agreement between these two parties. This would help ensure a culturally

appropriate, mutually respectful relationship between women and the police, fostering safety for Indigenous women. The protocol agreement was recently finalized between the Watson Lake RCMP and LAWS. It was signed in a ceremony at the Two-Mile hall on March 3, 2013. This document was a result of a two-year collaboration between the signing parties with the support and witnessing of Elders, service providers, youth and shelter workers.

One of the desired outcomes of a more effective approach to dealing with cases of violence is perpetrators being held accountable for violence but also offered culturally appropriate treatment. While this has not yet become a reality in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories provide an example through the work of Rebecca Latour and the Justice Department establishing a culturally-based treatment program for men who have used violence in intimate partner relationships.

One project activity included several members of the Together for Justice team visiting incarcerated Kaska men in the Whitehorse Corrections Facility. The men were asked to share their views on how men can create safety for women and what kinds of interventions would be helpful to help men heal from historical violence. This conversation was inspired by a new DVD released in the NWT in which men talk about how they have desisted violence. In the communities where an officer showed this film, the rates of men's violence have dropped significantly.

There are various approaches to encouraging violence cessation. Together for Justice participants hope to change men's use of violence both by prevention and appealing to their sense of what is right as well as through deterrence and sentencing if necessary. There was a consensus that there need to be culturally-centered programs for both women who have been harmed and for men who have harmed.

In the cases where Indigenous women have been violated by non-Indigenous men, women have few options aside from engaging with police and the law to create safety and enforce justice. The issue of Caucasian men targeting Indigenous women has recently received more media attention in both Canada and the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 86 per cent of cases of rape or sexual assault reported by Native women, the perpetrators are described as non-Native men. Analysing the particular social context around violence is one of the goals of the project.

## The Intervention

It is at this point of concern between Indigenous women experiencing violence and experiencing safety that TFJ focuses its primary intervention. While creating safety in the short term (which may include having charges “stick” against perpetrators), the broader goals are to create more equality, safety and respect for Indigenous women. It is obvious that Canada needs to support the larger healing initiatives of the former children who were subjected to the institutions euphemistically called residential schools. It is also clear that more programs for both women and men are needed, and that these should be culturally-grounded and relevant to Indigenous Yukon communities.

There also needs to be a shift in the orientation of child protection interventions to adequately address violence and create safety (for children and mothers) in ways that support the broader healing goals of Indigenous communities rather than a child protection approach that isolates and alienates Indigenous mothers who are targets of male violence. Such interventions should support these mothers in their parenting role. Many community members have stated that such programs must be “on the land” (Maje Raider, personal communication 2012). This means that programs that support women, children and men in Kaska territory must respect their culture and tradition and involve teachings of respect. It is important that an aspect of such program delivery take place outside, in the bush and alongside traditional Kaska activities.

## Participation

In order to create a solid, dedicated force to address the issues, participants were told that a commitment was required to attend all the sessions in their community, that this was not a “drop in.” TFJ was designed to maximize the safety and intimacy needed for the difficult conversations it would take to address violence. In fact, it became increasingly noticeable that when new people joined in throughout the process, they tended to present information that had already been treated in earlier meetings, which sometimes created discomfort for the seasoned participants.

Facilitators Richardson and Wade (2008) have researched and documented many of the negative social responses received by Indigenous women who disclose violence. Along with researchers Linda Coates and Nick Todd, they apply a linguistic analysis to ensure that violence is not misrepresented in professional and clinical settings in order to maximize the justice, the healing, and the dignity experienced by someone who has been harmed. This approach and understanding was integrated into the Together for Justice curriculum practice.

## A Curriculum Based on Response-Based Practice

Response-based ideas arose from direct service with people who had endured violence, including Indigenous women and men who were violated in the so-called residential schools (Coates, Todd & Wade, 2000; Richardson & Nelson, 2007; Wade 1997, 2000, 2007). In the course of our clinical work we noted that victims invariably resist violence and other forms of oppression, overtly or covertly, depending on the circumstances (Coates, Todd & Wade, 2003; Todd & Wade 1994; Wade, 1997, 2000). We found that engaging clients in conversations that elucidated and honoured their resistance could be helpful in addressing a wide variety of concerns (Epston, 1986; Kelly, 1988; Richardson, 2007, 2005; Todd and Wade, 1994; Wade, 2000). This required a significant shift in theory and practice, a shift that honoured women and their history of resistance to violence.

Response-based practice has been helpful to Aboriginal women in the Yukon for more than ten years. According to Kaushee's Place shelter Executive Director Barb McNerny:

Response-based practice has offered a way to analyse abuse and see where women have actively preserved dignity for themselves and others. In the shelter, it gave workers the ability to weed out colonial practices that are based in western medical and psychological models that blame or pathologize women. The response-based approach has brought women a way to engage in self and social analysis that brings grace and honour to our sense of self and how we perceive our responses to the abuse around us. (Personal communication, Whitehorse, October 2012)

Response-based practice is based on a shift in focus from considering the effects or impacts of violence to the acts of resistance which are responses to violence. We found that focusing on victims' responses allowed us to better identify and

construct accounts of their resistance. Accounts of resistance provide a basis in fact for contesting accounts of pathology and passivity, which are typically used to blame victims.

Todd extended this line of thought to work with men who use violence against women, an approach which has since guided the work of the women at the Calgary Women's Shelter in their work with women and men (Todd & Wade, 2004). Coates (1996) has studied the connection between violence and language using an integrated response-based practice with a program of critical analysis and research (Coates and Wade, 2007). Richardson (2003, 2004, 2005) applied response-based ideas to her work on the development of Métis identity, Islands of Safety (a child safety planning process in cases of child welfare involving violence), and developed the "Medicine Wheel of Resistance" as a framework for understanding Indigenous resistance to oppression.

The Together for Justice framework was based on the following response-based principles and understandings, which have largely become the ground for the work.

- The quality of social responses is the single best predictor of individual and community outcomes in cases of violence and other forms of adversity.
- Accurate information and accurate descriptions are the first indispensable step in forming effective social responses.
- Individuals are active and spirited beings who respond to one another and to positive and negative events, including violence.
- Dignity is central to social life and to individual and collective wellbeing. All forms of violence are an attack on the dignity of the person. Recovery from violence is largely a struggle for dignity.
- Violence is social in that it involves at least two people, a victim and an offender. Complete descriptions should include the actions of both people; the perpetrator, in committing violence, and the victim, in resisting violence.
- Violence is unilateral in that it involves actions by one person against the will and well-being of another. Descriptions should reflect the unilateral nature of violent crimes.

- Individuals respond to and resist violence, overtly and covertly, directly and indirectly - physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Violence cannot be understood unless the resistance of the victim is taken into account at all points.
- Descriptions are formed in language. Language can be a tool for liberation or oppression. Language is the central tool for all criminal justice and professional work - and daily life.
- Violent crimes, victims and offenders are often misrepresented in criminal justice and professional settings, and in the media. Careful analysis of descriptions is central to ethical and informed social responses.
- Complete analysis must take into account (a) the nature of perpetrator actions in context, (b) victim responses and resistance to those actions, (c) social responses to perpetrator and victim, and (d) perpetrator and victim responses to social responses.
- Voices of Indigenous women and Elders must be considered in all interventions to ensure they are helpful and respectful

At the end of the process, the RCMP took up some of the key aspects of response-based practice, including the importance of accurate and descriptive language use in police interviewing and RCMP training manuals. Many of the officers left the process with a heightened attention to avoiding victim-blaming and honouring the dignity of those who have been harmed.

## Facilitation

The facilitation process drew upon various approaches to team building and group process including aspects of Indigenous knowledge and family therapy. For example, the facilitators used interviewing and reflecting team approaches inspired by Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo of the Milan Team, as well as Norwegian psychiatrist Tom Andersen, to elicit multiple perspectives on difficult situations. The engagement was based on the philosophy that problems exist between people, not inside people. With a focus on interaction and strengthening relationships, the parties were invited to explore each other's roles, positions and points of view in relation to the problem of violence against women.

The facilitation involved structuring the meetings with the appropriate attention to ritual and ceremony; each session was opened and closed by a local elder. The land, territory, elders and ancestors were acknowledged in each session. At times, there was an introductory talking circle where people shared information about where they come from, their family's cultural location and how this topic became important to them.

The facilitators used trust-building activities, energizers (such as Kaska aerobics and food gathering), small group conversations as well as more traditional lecturing and conversation. Participants had the opportunity to make presentations about their community work and forward motion in safety activities. Interviews based on a reflecting team format (Andersen, 1987) were used to elicit perspectives on the issue in a way that was structured for safety and respect. For example, in one interview, the facilitators sat with two groups respectively. A group of four RCMP officers played the role of Indigenous women, responding to questions about their concerns for safety in the community. They were invited to share their views and experiences of dignity (or humiliation) in interactions with RCMP in community. Then, a second group of Indigenous women role-played RCMP officers talking about their experiences of working with Indigenous people in the community. These "officers" were invited by RCMP to wear their jackets and hats as they assumed this important authoritative role.

What was striking about this particular activity was the level of trust, openness, playfulness and mutual respect that was experienced by participants in the room. This was accomplished through hours spent together in process and dialogue, with many heartfelt experiences being shared, as well as commitments to future cooperation and the desire for creating communities of hope, respect and safety.

One example of community cooperation and strengthened relationships arising from Together for Justice was experienced at the "Gathering Around the Fire" (funded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada) at Lower Post in August 2012. Designed as a gathering with structured healing ceremonies in relation to tragic acts of violence experienced in the incarceration experience, First Nations peoples came together from several communities to confront the past and reclaim their dignity. RCMP were invited in to this gathering, which they attended with a spirit of helpfulness and service. Although their activities involved assisting with setting up, moving tables and chairs, and assisting



participants a number of officers described the healing they experienced in the shift from being seen as “the person in the uniform that forcibly took children from their families” to members of a new generation that do not condone such violence and who can be judged on their actions today. Community members reported experiencing “good service” after their actions with RCMP. One man stated, “I have never experienced this type of kindness by police in B.C.”

At this gathering, Kaska elders and community members worked as support people to assist community members at the gathering. Many Kaska members had not returned to Lower Post since the time of their internment as children. Many came with intense emotions and distress when remembering the violence that took place in that institution, on that land. Together for Justice Kaska participants worked alongside Health Canada and the RCMP to create safety and a sacred space for memorial, ceremony and healing. Many individuals, including RCMP, spoke about how this experience was transformational. The Together for Justice process helped clear a path for the close and cooperative relationships between the participating RCMP and community members involving a sense of inclusion, cooperation and belonging. After a two year collaboration, these groups embraced a shared sense of purpose and common goal, as well as mutual respect.

Similarly, in October 2012, in Whitehorse, the Together for Justice team, including RCMP, service providers and community members (some related to the families of the disappeared women) attended the Sisters in Spirit march and memorial at the Kwanlin Dun cultural centre. We walked together beside the river acknowledging the loss and the memory of the women who lost their lives to violence. The RCMP in Whitehorse are proceeding with a special unit to investigate the disappeared Indigenous women in collaboration with other RCMP jurisdictions. They have also created a Specialized Response Unit, to work with domestic violence cases and put more targeted energy into this social issue.

After two years, the Together for Justice process ended in March with the signing of a protocol agreement between the Watson Lake RCMP and the Liard Aboriginal Women’s Society. It is hoped that this achievement will serve as inspiration for other similar agreements, such as with the Yukon Women’s Coalition. However, it is important that each agreement emerges from an intensive relationship building process, where interpersonal connections are nourished and sustained.

The protocol will assist all parties to promote sustainability, even when the individuals in each organization come and go.

The accomplishment of the protocol agreement, after many ups and downs and painful, anxious moments in conversation, was celebrated on International Women's Day in Whitehorse. After a morning ceremony hosted by LAWS acknowledging and gifting all of the parties, LAWS received a framed copy of the agreement, which will hang on the wall of their trailer in Watson Lake. The signing was also celebrated with an interview spot on CBC north, coverage on CBC TV and in a Yukon newspaper.

While we have not yet arrived at the place where violence, policing (and counsellors) are obsolete, the Together for Justice initiative has turned the ship slightly but noticeably in that direction. As the explorer Ernest Shackleton said about his journey to Antarctica, because he turned the ship one degree to the left, everything was different.

## Next Steps

The protocol agreement includes a mechanism for both ongoing evaluation and for conflict resolution. Collectively, we have witnessed several steps forward. A Kaska band member was invited to sit on a Watson Lake hiring committee for a new Commanding Officer. The Kaska justice worker will continue to serve as a liaison with RCMP and LAWS will continue their relationship with regular meetings to evaluate progress and challenges. The two groups will continue to invite each other to their events, community dinners, ceremonies and gatherings. They will continue to lobby together for funding to create and deliver cultural training programs for RCMP beyond the current computerized version.

The Kaska women want to take the RCMP on the land and teach them about Kaska life and survival. The RCMP have made an ongoing commitment to participate in community, and to do ongoing outreach at the school with youth by supporting sport and recreational activities in the community. They will help to create safer spaces for young people seeking respite from violence. The Watson Lake RCMP have articulated a focus on community policing with hopes of reducing the need

for law enforcement. Many participants left the process with the question: “How will each of these activities contribute directly to creating safety for women?” That, after all, is the project.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge everyone who participated wholeheartedly in the Together for Justice process, and to Ann Maje Raider and Peter Clark for making it a reality. This work fits into a long history of activism and resistance of Indigenous women - building bridges and trying to make life better and safer for all children. Thanks also to Barb McInerny for her work creating safety in the Yukon and her editorial assistance. Living free of violence is a collective dream, crating a world that will be safe for the next generation of children. I acknowledge the work, contribution, and prayers of those who give their time and energy for peace and justice.

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