



2023 Sherbrooke Lake Camp's Justice & Reconciliation Fund Project Report: Part 1

Executive Director, Jules Lawrence BScN RN CPedN C

The Beginning: Sherbrooke Lake Camp's Social Justice Learning Circle

Sherbrooke Lake Camp is situated on Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. Sherbrooke Lake Camp seeks to live by the principles of Peace and Friendship with our Indigenous siblings, the land, and all of our relations.

In 2022, as Sherbrooke began rebuilding its Board of Directors post COVID, we created working groups and committees to support volunteers in helping at camp. One of these committees created was the Social Justice Learning Circle. This is a place where our volunteer council members discussed how we as a camp can improve our commitment to justice as Christians and leaders in our community. An area for growth that we eagerly acknowledged was our lack of relationship with the neighboring Indigenous communities and also our inability to know where we start with that work. It was suggested by a member of the Learning Circle that we seek out further education by taking part in a KAIROS Blanket Exercise.

Kairos as an organization is “a movement of Indigenous, settler and newcomer peoples committed to ecological justice and human rights.” (Retrieved from: <https://www.kairosblanketexercise.org/about-us/>). This organization offers many programs and movements, however we sought out the opportunity to possibly facilitate a Kairos Blanket Exercise at Sherbrooke Lake Camp for our staff and volunteers. The Kairos Blanket Exercise is a 2-3 hour workshop where “participants step on blankets representing the land and into the role of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. They are guided by trained facilitators, including Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, who work from a script that covers pre-contact, treaty-making, colonization, resistance and much more. Participants read scrolls and respond to cues in the script. The KBE concludes with a debriefing, conducted as a talking circle, during which participants discuss the learning experience, process their feelings, ask questions, share insights, and deepen their understanding.” (Retrieved from: <https://www.kairosblanketexercise.org/programs/>). After researching this exercise and diving into the KBE website, we acknowledged that this is where we need to start – do the work within ourselves to understand where we land in reconciliation and justice for our Indigenous siblings.

In March of 2022, we contacted KAIROS in efforts to try to arrange an exercise for our young summer staff. Due to ongoing backlogs of COVID there was a delay in booking Sherbrooke Lake Camp, and further we needed to look at this opportunity to happen in 2023 rather. With the changes within The United Church of Canada and furthermore KAIROS Canada, our focus on working with our Atlantic representative, Michelle Skinner, was shifted as the organization prioritized having Indigenous facilitators directly involved in all aspects of the exercises offered.

In Spring 2023, I began working closely with Sunshine Paul-Martin to organize the facilitation of a Mi'kma'ki Blanket Exercise. In contrast to the KAIROS exercise, the Mi'kma'ki Blanket Exercise was developed by Sunshine Paul-Martin and her team to reflect local Mi'kma'ki impact of colonialism, as the East Coast of Turtle Island was the first to experience colonization, hundreds of years before our central and western provinces.

Sunshine Paul-Martin, from Eskasoni First Nation, is a L'nu'k Language and Cultural

Specialist in Millbrook First Nation who has been offering the Blanket Exercise with Kairos and independently for years. Initially, we had worked with Sunshine to host the blanket exercise on June 18th then June 19th, however we decided as a team to postpone until the Fall due to the recent wildfires that had impacted our area and the hesitation from many to go into the woods shortly following them.

The Community: Bringing People Together

Fall can be a difficult time to bring people together; from the business of school seasons to the end of the summer. We acknowledged that the change in date would be a barrier to many of our seasonal staff at the camp, and worked to expand our reach to those who we could invite and facilitate on site at Sherbrooke Lake Camp.

The first of these efforts were put into creating emails, posters and a registration, with the support of Sunshine, to advertise and advocate for folks to join us for a Mi'kma'ki Blanket Exercise. Emails were circulated from Sherbrooke Lake Camp to the 450 camper families, parents, staff, volunteers, Board of Directors and community members and sponsors. We used our Facebook and Instagram accounts to promote the event and asked folks to share as much as possible. We posted our posters and ads in local groups such as the New Ross Family Resource group, the Chester Our Health Centre and the lake's community group as well. As a United Church Camp, we had the advertisement circulated in the weekly newsletter for Bermuda-Nova Scotia and Fundy St. Lawrence Dawning Waters to push for our siblings in faith to join this experience as well.

The Camping Association of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island (CANSPEI), also worked to push registration through emails and social media as well. They included the exercise in their June, September and October newsletters, pushed it through Social Media and also circulated emails to their members and relatives.

In all of the circulated communications, it was explicitly stated that the costs of this exercise was being funded by the Justice and Reconciliation Fund of The United Church of Canada.

Come the day of the event, we had **39** people registered for the Mi'kma'ki Blanket Exercise. "The following question is voluntary and does not impact your experience during the Mi'kma'ki Blanket Exercise, however it gives us the ability to acknowledge how Sherbrooke and CANSPEI is engaging diverse individuals to employ with the camping community. Do you identify with any of the following":

Reference:

https://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/forms-formulaires/self_identification_preview-eng.pdf

Of these 39, we had a variety of disclosed diversity, which included:

- 1 Individual who identified as being Jewish
- 8 Individuals who identified as being part of the LGBTQIA2S+ Community
- 6 Individuals who identified as having a disability
- 3 Individuals who identified as being a visible minority
- 2 Individuals who identified as being senior
- 2 Individuals who identified as being First Nations, Mi'kmaq, Metis or Inuit - otherwise Indigenous in Canada or elsewhere

Although we initiated this project to deepen our understanding and relationships of our young people, those who attended were a variety of ages and from diverse backgrounds. For the actual event, there were **29** folks on site. This included

- 8 United Church Camp Representatives
- 1 Outdoor Recreational Ministries (ORM) Representative, which works with camps in the Atlantic Regions
- 2 local neighbors to the camp
- 5 Camp Representatives (non faith-based)
- 6 folks from international backgrounds
- 3 UCC Ministers
 - 1 from New Brunswick who drove specifically for this event
- 8 UCC members
 - 3 from Cape Breton who drove specifically for this event

The Exercise: Growing, Learning and Moving Together

Our exercise began in the late afternoon on a warm sunny day in Franey Corner, Nova Scotia. In the classic Nova Scotian way, folks were welcomed with tea, coffee, treats and cookies. The Sherbrooke Lake Camp Chair of Camp's Board of Directors welcomed folks with the Executive Director, acknowledged our land and thanked our facilitators for their time and talent. In our lodge, we began by introducing ourselves in the circle before we began.

Over the next 3 hours, Sunshine walked the group through the colonization of Turtle Island and brought us closer to the timeline of colonization in Mi'kma'ki. Using blankets on the ground to represent the land, and scripts divided out to participants we engaged in an exercise to better understand colonial impact through the years. She and her co-host Brian, used audio and visuals to reflect on the local impact of history on the Mi'kmaq people as we watched the land blankets go from 100% indigenous owned, to present day: 0.02% Indigenous owned on Government permitted reserves only. We learned as a team of other tragedies in our backyard, from missing and murdered Indigenous women and children (MMIWC) to language loss. Sunshine also brought a bright celebration into the room as well, sharing about the Indigenous school and language program in Eskasoni, Unama'ki (Cape Breton Island) and the successes of the North American Indigenous Games hosted in Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia). Throughout

the exercise, there was an abundance of tears, gasps and loss in people's faces. Sunshine also brought moments of laughter and warmth as well.

In the debrief, folks expressed a lot of sadness, frustration and fear around the history learned throughout the time together. Our diverse population in the circle shared a lot of valuable thoughts that stemmed from a yearning to change. From young future United Church Camp staff hoping to learn more, to an elder in the United Church promising to. Folks reflected on how this tragedy reminds them of the current tragedy in Gaza and how the impact of children never fails to break our hearts. Camp staff reflected on how our campers are given a safe place to learn and play, and how that wasn't the case in Residential Schools and Day Schools as shared by Sunshine and Brian. Folks also reflected on the future, looking towards self education, promotion and engagement with Indigenous causes and empowerment.

29 strangers entered a space in hesitation, some knowing a lot about the blanket exercise and others knowing nothing. When we wrapped up, there was laughter, tears, warm embraces, a quick bite of food and plates to go - this is how we grow and gather at Sherbrooke Lake Camp.

The Reflection: Putting this Together for Other Organizations

In future, I would encourage groups to book with Sunshine or their facilitators ahead of time and try to find a date that isn't connected to any holidays or other. Although the activity is quoted to be 2 - 3 hours with an hour-long debrief, I would suggest giving yourself much more time. We had 27 participants and 2 hosts, and the exercise lasted from 2:00pm - 5:15pm with our debrief only being permitted for about 45 minutes due to dark roads and folks looking to safely travel home. I would schedule breaks in for folks to grab water, granola bars etc to support their physical health throughout. If possible as well, I would schedule the event earlier in the day as well with a full meal afterwards to share in as a group.

In your registration, I would happily include what we did and would share our registration form (we used Google Forms) for future organizers. We provided emails leading up to the event and then on-site Check ins on the day-of that included a photo consent form and name tags. Our ED followed up with anyone who required mobility assistance and other needs.

We provided a printed list of mental wellness resources after the session to support folks in seeking self-care, which often is needed as our emotions settle in the days following the debrief. Sunshine provided an emailed list to our ED with follow up resources for our participants as well.