



Looking After Each Other
A Dignity Promotion Project

Looking After Each Other Gathering

May 16, 2024

Final Report



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Introduction

The Looking After Each Other dignity promotion project is a community-led initiative that aims to promote dignity by shifting social attitudes about FASD, in order to promote understanding and dignity towards people with FASD and their families, and people who use substances during pregnancy.

On May 16, 2024, the sixth Looking After Each Other (LAEO) gathering took place at the Keesh Conference & Gaming Centre and the grounds of the National Indigenous Residential School Museum on Long Plain First Nation, just outside of Portage la Prairie MB. The Gathering, held in partnership between the Manitoba FASD Coalition, the Portage la Prairie FASD Coalition, and the Portage Friendship Centre, brought together FASD coalition members, service providers, program participants, and Elders and Indigenous leaders from across Manitoba.



Special Thanks

The planning committee would like to thank the Portage Friendship Centre and the Portage la Prairie FASD coalition for hosting the Gathering, and for all of their hard work to make the event a reality. We would like to especially thank Kim Wozniak for taking care of all of the “behind the scenes” details and keeping everything running smoothly, and Daphne Spence for her tireless work planning every detail- the gathering could not have happened without you!

Thank you to all of the Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Grandmothers who attended the event, led prayers, and shared their wisdom and Teachings. Thank you to all of the Portage Friendship Centre staff who set up the tipis, led dream catcher making, drummed, looked after our Elders, and helped in countless other ways throughout the day. Thank you to the staff from the Manitoba First Nations Police who set up their tipi for the Gathering. Thank you to Ron for keeping the sacred fire, and to David for being the event photographer. Thank you to Little Spruce Café for catering breakfast and lunch for the Gathering. Thank you to our presenters- Russ, Dallas, Sam, and Sue- for sharing your stories with us. Thank you to the Happy Eagle Singers drum group for drumming in the morning, and to Colin James and the rest of his drum group for drumming during the pow wow demonstration. And finally, a big thank you to the pow wow demonstration dancers, Sam, Amaria, and Paisley!

Pipe Ceremony

The morning began with the lighting of the sacred fire as the sunrise fog began to clear into a beautiful sunny day. During the Pipe Ceremony, Elders led prayers and shared Teachings. Nookomis Debbie Cielen offered a water blessing song, and invited all attendees to face each of the four directions- East, South, West, and North- as the song was sung.



Sharilyn Knox, the mayor of Portage la Prairie, brought words of welcome to Gathering attendees, remarking on the importance of coming together to learn from one another and look after each other.

Everyone was invited to place tobacco in the sacred fire.

Welcome, Breakfast and Opening Remarks

Russ Hilsher and Twyla Gilroy, the MC's for the day, welcomed everyone to the Gathering. Russ shared that he is happy to have us all together, but wants to continue to see more people with FASD coming to our gatherings.

A prayer for breakfast was offered by Elder Angela Roulette, and a spirit dish was offered to the sacred fire.

The room was filled with visiting, with many folks excited to re-connect with one another, and to meet new friends.

After breakfast, Russ and Twyla began door prize draws; everyone was excited to have a chance to win a beautiful ribbon skirt made by Daphne!



Nookomis Debbie Cielen provided background information about the history and purpose of Looking After Each Other. Debbie reflected that the project began exactly 10 years ago, with a diverse group of Manitobans coming together to recognize the importance of ending stigma towards people impacted by FASD. Since then, the project has accomplished a lot, including research, documentaries, and a language guide.

Nookomis Debbie shared that in 2023, community partners discussed the priorities of LAEO moving forward, and identified four key themes that we hope are reflected in this Gathering, and that will influence the work of LAEO moving forward:

1. **Centre the voices of people with lived and living experience-** “nothing about us, without us”- prioritizing the inclusion and perspectives of people with FASD, their families, and people who use or have used substances during pregnancy
2. **Public awareness and education-** sharing accurate, up-to-date, strengths-based, inclusive, and dignity-promoting information about FASD
3. **Expanding the circle-** making new connections with people who don’t already know about FASD, and connect with broader conversations about disability
4. **Culturally grounded support-** promoting cultural supports for people impacted by FASD, and creating opportunities for cross-cultural learning

Morning Presentations and Networking

“If we want to learn something, first we need to listen... Stories are a great way to be together.”
- Sam

Russ introduced Visions and Voices, a program that supports adults with FASD to share their stories and raise awareness about FASD, and introduced the day’s two presenters, Sam Jackson and Dallas Parisien.

Sam shared his story of connecting with his culture, being mentored, and learning to dance, and about how he learned that because of FASD, his brain may not have the same kinds of connections and paths as other people, but his brain can learn to make new and different connections that work for him.

Dallas shared about his life, being a parent, and how FASD has impacted his life. He shared about what makes a good support worker: showing up, being genuine, and wanting to help.

Another gathering attendee came up to share, as he was inspired by Sam and Dallas to reflect on his own experiences. The attendee shared how FASD has impacted his life, and how important it is to have people around you that understand.



Next, Sue Brook, a parent of adult children with FASD, shared about her experiences. Sue reflected on the concept of being “normal,” emphasizing that everyone is “normal,” and if a person with FASD has been made to feel “not normal,” then the people in their life need to do more to support that person to learn how to succeed. Sue shared the ways she has learned to support her children, and advocate for them over the years, including through challenges at school.

The morning also included time for networking, allowing for less formal opportunities to get to know one another. The noise of happy chatter filled the room during this time. Attendees commented on enjoying that the pace of the day was not rushed, and allowed for time to connect and share ideas. Attendees had the opportunity to explore the resource table, which included Portage Friendship Centre resources, information on FASD, and more information on the Looking After Each Other project, including [reports from previous gatherings](#), copies of the [FASD Language Guide](#), and the [“Seeing the Spectrum” report](#).

To conclude the morning session, the Happy Eagle Singers surrounded the room with beautiful drumming. Elder Debbie Beaulieu then offered a prayer before a spirit dish was offered to the sacred fire and lunch was served.



Afternoon Activities

MC's Russ and Twyla introduced the self-guided learning activity options for the first part of the afternoon:

- A guided tour of the National Indigenous Residential School Museum;
- Dream catcher making;
- Medicine teachings around the sacred fire



Museum Tour:

Tour attendees reflected on the tragic history of residential schools in Canada, including the school that operated just outside of Portage la Prairie from 1915 to 1979, and has now become the National Indigenous Residential School Museum. The museum displayed many artifacts found on-site and donated by residential school survivors, as well as displays that described Indigenous communities before colonization, experiences at residential schools, and Indigenous communities today.



Tour participants were able to also tour the museum grounds, which include memorials to the children who died at residential schools, and a healing garden in progress. The tour guides commented on the beauty and reclamation of holding the Gathering's sacred fire, tipis, Pipe Ceremony, and pow-wow demonstration on the grounds of the former residential school, commenting, "this is reconciliation."



Dream Catcher Making:

Chez Macdonald and Chris Everett, both InSight mentors from the Portage Friendship Centre, led a small group in dream catcher making. The workshop took place inside the National Indigenous Residential School Museum; approximately 20 to 30 people attended. Chez and Chris began by talking about the meaning behind the dream catchers. Some people took their project to finish at home, but most finished in the time given. More people still wanted to come and participate when the workshop was wrapping up. Overall, it was a very relaxed atmosphere with many interconnections.



Medicine Teachings:

Attendees gathered around the sacred fire in the afternoon to hear medicine Teachings. KooKoo Jeanna Emms set out medicines on her blanket, and offered Teachings to

those gathered around her. KooKoo Jeanna shared Teachings that had been passed to her by Elder Debbie Beaulieu about the medicines, their meanings, and why and how they are used. She also explained that there are more than just physical medicines- laughter, yawning, dancing, drumming, networking and conversing are also medicines. KooKoo Jeanna also invited others in the circle to share about the Teachings and uses of medicines that they have received.



Pow Wow Demonstration

Sam welcomed the attendees to the pow wow demonstration, and commented on the significance of dancing outside of a former residential school, stating, “I dance for those who can’t.” Colin James and his drum group, joined by MC Russ, drummed and three pow wow dancers demonstrated their styles of dance. Sam demonstrated the grass dance, and explained how the grass dancers would prepare the ground for the pow wow by flattening the long grass inside the pow wow circle. One of the youth dancers, Amaria, showcased the fancy shawl dance, and another dancer, Paisley, demonstrated the bear dance and the jingle dress dance. Sam then encouraged all attendees to join the intertribal dance. KooKoo Jeanna Emms invited others in the circle up to dance by proclaiming, “Come dance, it’s good medicine!” The demonstration concluded with a round dance that many attendees joined.





Closing

Russ and Twyla thanked everyone for coming, completed the final door prize draws, and wished everyone safe travels home. Elder Marina James closed the day in prayer.

Feedback on the Day

The following feedback was provided by some of the people involved in the gathering:

- “I enjoyed taking pictures. Touring the residential school museum was a cool learning experience. I loved the change of scenery. The gathering was very well put together.” -David Fehr, Event Photographer
- “It was great to see that people with living experience were included in this year’s event.” – Russ Hilsher, Visions & Voices Presenter
- “It was a unique experience to learn a lot and to meet new people. We need to more of these events.” – Dallas Parisien, Visions & Voices Presenter
- “It was very meaningful to have this year’s event on Treaty land and that we all stand united together for an important cause” – Chris Fillion

