



# Youth Perspectives on Anishinaabe Knowledge Protection

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**Abstract**

This study explores youth perspectives on protecting Anishinaabe knowledge through intergenerational engagement with Elders. Four First Nations youth from northeastern Ontario were trained to interview Elders, focusing on the tension between sharing

and safeguarding cultural knowledge. Findings highlight the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission, emphasizing learners' responsibilities to respect and protect the knowledge they receive. Elders employ strategies to protect knowledge, including withholding

details, using the Anishinaabe language, and exercising discretion. Risks of exploitation, particularly through social media, underscore the need for protective measures. Fieldwork revealed the significance of respectful engagement, adaptability, and informal interactions in fostering relationships. Youth reflections demonstrate the transformative impact of participating in the project, deepening their cultural identity and inspiring efforts to learn and pass on Anishinaabe knowledge. This study underscores the critical role of youth-led initiatives in cultural continuity.

**Keywords:** Anishinaabe, youth and Elders, intellectual property rights, knowledge protection

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### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2023, four First Nations youth were trained to interview Elders about protecting Anishinaabe knowledge as part of a larger study titled *Indigenous Research Sovereignty and Governance Anishinaabek*

*Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Expressions, and Intellectual Property* funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada. The overall research project sought to address an existing tension in Indigenous communities: the need to protect knowledge from external interests and the need to share it internally to support the revitalization of Indigenous societies (McGregor, 2014).

There is limited protection of Indigenous knowledge by conventional intellectual property systems because of how Indigenous knowledge is created and transmitted (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2020). Of great concern to Indigenous peoples is the concept of public domain that is implicit within intellectual property rights regimes. That any aspect of Indigenous Knowledge will eventually be accessible in the public domain is at odds with how certain types of Indigenous knowledge, such as sacred knowledge, should be protected (Young-Ing, 2010; Brown & Nicholas, 2012).

Indigenous communities have been seeking and generating knowledge to support their existence as peoples and nations for millennia (Absolon and Willet, 2004, McGregor et al. 2018). The terms traditional knowledge and Indigenous knowledge are often used interchangeably,

for example in Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018). Key characteristics of Indigenous knowledge are that it's oral, specific to place, can be expressed in different ways, held collectively, changes over time, and that different members hold different types of knowledge (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018).

This study focused on the First Nations people from Manitoulin Island and the north shore of Lake Huron, located in northeastern Ontario, Canada, known as Anishinaabe. The intentional involvement of First Nations youth was an approach highlighting the critical role of intergenerational knowledge transmission for the survival of Anishinaabe knowledge (McGregor, 2013). This approach, which allowed the youth to learn research skills while developing relationships with Elders, was emphasized during earlier engagement sessions when Elders stressed the importance of passing on their knowledge to younger generations. While the overall study examines the tension between sharing Anishinaabe knowledge and protecting it from exploitation or misuse, this paper focuses on youth perspectives on Anishinaabe knowledge protection.

According to Yang & Warburton (2018), Elders play a crucial role in Indigenous communities by sharing traditional teachings, life skills, and cultural practices through storytelling, sharing circles, and oral history. Elders can foster intergenerational relationships and empower youth to connect with their heritage and community (Yang & Warburton, 2018). Intergenerational connections are crucial for Indigenous communities' health, well-being, and cultural continuity. These connections are crucial for transmitting cultural values, histories, and teachings to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of traditions and language, and strengthening identity. Elders, in their role as guides, can help younger generations understand their roles and responsibilities, thereby reinforcing their connection to their cultural foundations and the land (Rowe et al., 2020). A scoping review conducted by Okpalauwaekwe and colleagues (2022) found that Elders help youth strengthen their cultural identity and connectedness by sharing their knowledge about histories, traditions, languages, and ceremonies. The review also found that mutual learning can occur with youth gaining cultural knowledge and Elders listening to younger generations' perspectives. Research on a land-based, active living program found that culturally relevant programs can benefit Indigenous youth by promoting

mental health, cultural identity, and holistic wellness (Walker et al., 2021). The youth in this study recognized that receiving knowledge from Elders fostered a sense of responsibility and cultural continuity.

An article by McGregor and colleagues (2024) underscores the transformative potential of youth-led initiatives, particularly those rooted in Indigenous knowledge, culture, and worldviews. The article calls for support for such programs, which empower Indigenous youth to lead initiatives that honour their cultural heritage, address community challenges, and contribute to global solutions. Involving Indigenous youth in research is one approach to empowering them and understanding their perspectives. A scoping review by Melro and colleagues (2025) recommends that youth be engaged early in the study development, ensure the study meets their needs and interests, and be flexible. The review identified five levels of youth engagement in research: participant, involved, consultant, partnership, and youth-led.

An example of youth-led research was a project in Sturgeon Lake First Nation, where girls were actively involved in all aspects of the study through a participatory, community-driven research approach (Gaspar et al., 2019). The girls co-created the research questions and

contributed to analyzing the data. They also participated in translating the study's findings and presented the findings at conferences. Their involvement was grounded in authentic engagement, cultural practices, and mutual learning, ensuring the research was community-driven and reflective of their lived experiences. Another example of youth-led research was a food study in Alexander First Nation, where high school student co-researchers made significant contributions to the study (Genuis et al., 2015). The student co-researchers built rapport with participants by articulating personal and cultural connections and used culturally appropriate conversational techniques to encourage responses. The youth co-researchers contributed to the analysis of findings, identifying themes and providing insights into cultural practices. Urban Indigenous youth can play a central and transformative role in research as collaborators and co-researchers rather than merely subjects or participants (Bird et al., 2017). A study in Saskatoon empowered youth to determine how data was collected and shared while supporting the development of leadership and advocacy skills. The study positioned urban Indigenous youth as stewards of their stories and active contributors to research that informs social transformation, resilience, and wellness strategies (Bird et al., 2017).

## Methods

Four First Nations youth were trained to conduct semi-structured interviews with Anishinaabe Elders. The training involved an overview of Anishinaabe knowledge systems (McGregor, 2013) and local research principles (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre, 2003). These principles, referred to as the Seven Grandfather Teachings, include respect, wisdom, love, honesty, humility, truth, and bravery (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre, 2003). Special attention was given to understanding data ownership and protection (Schnarch, 2004). The training also addressed historical trauma, specifically the impact of Indian residential schools (Bombay et al., 2014) and the potential for interviews to trigger traumatic memories. The Principal Investigator (L. McGregor) developed an interview guide to ensure consistency for the interviewers. The informed consent process was prepared in written format, and the youth interviewers had to be able to explain it to Elders in plain language. Youth interviewers were taught that consent was ongoing, and to respect direct or indirect refusal. During the training session, mock interviews were conducted with Elders to build trust, foster a supportive environment, and clarify what

Anishinaabe knowledge means. This process aimed to ensure Elders could get to know the youth, and the youth could gain confidence in their interview skills. At the end of the training session, a Learning Circle was held, and each participant reflected on their experience either being interviewed or doing the interview. Learning circles are a group discussion process in which participants, including the facilitators, share their feelings, experiences, and insights in response to specific topics (Nabigon et al. 1999). The Learning Circle follows Anishinaabe Sharing Circle protocols except that what is said in the Learning Circle can be shared, with permission (Nabigon et al. 1999).

Following the training session, the youth aimed to interview two Elders each. The Elders were identified by the youth as people who were knowledgeable about Anishinaabe ways of life. In three instances, the youth was related to the person they interviewed. While this could pose ethical issues in mainstream research, being familiar with the researcher would be considered a strength as Anishinaabe Elders often prefer to share their knowledge with younger family members. The youth followed cultural protocols, including offering tobacco and bringing gifts, and sought informed consent before proceeding with the interviews

While conducting this fieldwork, the youth encountered unexpected challenges, including weather disruptions and scheduling difficulties. Directions to the Elders' homes were sometimes imprecise, often relying on local landmarks and oral instructions (e.g., referencing a tree or using time-based directions), which required resourcefulness to locate dwellings. Despite these challenges, seven Elders were interviewed during the winter and spring of 2024.

The youth had several opportunities to reflect on their experiences of interviewing Elders, including bi-monthly debriefing sessions. Once all the interviews were completed and transcribed, the youth researchers along with senior members of the research team (L. McGregor, S. Manitowabi, and C. Peltier), met with a graphic facilitator (P. Hubbard) to discuss common themes on protecting Anishinaabe knowledge. Using grounded visualization,

the youth discussed their research experiences, reflected on what they learned, and determined common themes. Grounded visualization blends grounded theory and visualization to consider "particular instances and general patterns and both encourage multiple views and perspectives for building knowledge" (Knigge & Cope, 2006, p. 2022). Themes were depicted on a poster by the graphic illustrator with the assistance of one of the youth researchers who is an artist (N. Anwhatin). Several weeks later, the youth presented this poster to the Elders for their feedback. The Elders' comments were overwhelmingly positive, although they suggested changing the one of the terms on the poster (*aadziwin*, meaning way of life) to *bimaadziwin*, meaning good way of life, to reflect its fuller meaning. The finished product was a graphic poster that illustrated the youths' perspectives on Anishinaabek knowledge preservation (see Figure 1).

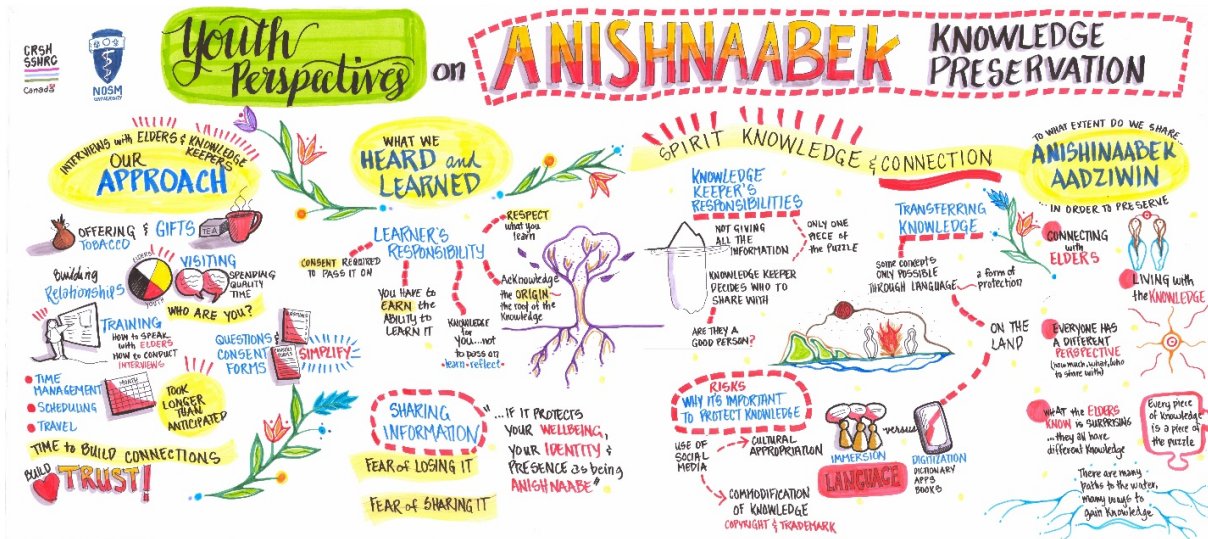


Figure 1: Graphic illustration of Youth Perspectives on Anishinaabek Knowledge knowledge, risks of sharing, and lessons learned.

The poster was illustrated from the left to right as the youth reflected on their experiences interviewing Elders and what they learned. First, they described their approach to conducting interviews which

included relationship building, visiting, offering tobacco and bringing a gift, then going through the informed consent process. Next, they described what they heard and learned during the interviews including their responsibilities as learners. The youth also discussed Knowledge Keeper’s responsibilities, the risks of sharing their knowledge, and what they choose to share with others.

## Results

The findings can be categorized into five main themes: relationships and responsibilities, diverse sources of knowledge, characteristics of Anishinaabe

### *Relationships and responsibilities*

In this study, the youth had a dual role of both researcher and learner. Interviewing relatives and community members provided unique opportunities to discuss topics not typically addressed in everyday life, including intellectual property rights and the protection of Anishinaabe knowledge. Before beginning the interview, visiting would occur until the Elder cued the youth to explain why they were there. These interactions reinforced the importance of maintaining family and community ties and exploring different perspectives within the community. This process taught the value of building and maintaining relationships through formal and informal engagement sessions.

The Elders who were interviewed emphasized that learners have responsibilities for the knowledge they receive, including acknowledging its origins and sharing only what is appropriate. Much of the knowledge shared is personalized, meaning that it is specific to the learner. Elders determine what knowledge will be shared and with whom, and it is important to ask for permission before sharing what is learned.

This principle of ownership and control of knowledge, a fundamental aspect of Anishinaabe research ethics, underscores the respect and responsibility that learners must uphold in their interactions with Elders and the knowledge they receive. Learners must know the protocols when engaging with Elders, including offering tobacco, bringing a gift, and listening quietly. Learners will be asked who their family is and should be able to articulate who they are in relation to the Elder. Learners must also earn the knowledge by helping out, as noted by one of the Elders who was interviewed:

Elders are not being helped or plowing. They want zhoonia [money]. That's what they want - that money. 'Oh, are you gonna pay me?' 'Are you gonna pay me to do this?' and that's not right as

Anishinaabe. We need to help one another.

Part of relationship building in personal and research contexts is assisting others without expecting something in return, which is a core Anishinaabe value.

### ***Diversity of Knowledge***

The youth researchers were encouraged to seek out different Elders and to go back to the source for fuller understandings. Consulting multiple Elders is important, as each may possess different types of knowledge, such as land-based teachings, hunting, crafting, ceremonies, or medicinal plants. Not all Elders will have answers to every question, so visiting several Elders ensures a broader understanding. Interpretations of teachings can vary among individuals, making it important to revisit the person and understand the different facets of the shared knowledge. For example, one Elder emphasized returning to the Anishinaabe creation story to understand the roots of teachings.

Elders possess unique and varied knowledge, but some are not consulted within their communities. One Elder interviewed was not typically sought out for wisdom, yet she emphasized that in their tradition, people are encouraged to seek knowledge from a range of Elders, not just

'high-profile' or ceremonial leaders. This underscores that each Elder might not know about all topics and that valuable insights can be found by engaging with a range of Elders.

### ***Characteristics of Anishinaabe***

#### ***Knowledge***

One of the Elders described how some knowledge originates from the spirit world, so people might consult medicine people, sweat lodge conductors, or drum carriers to seek answers from the spirits. He explained that spiritual knowledge is present and accessible through ceremonies. He described how spiritual journeys begin before birth and are nurtured by parents, community, the land, and ceremony.

During several interviews, the youth learned that Anishinaabe knowledge is transmitted through various means, including language, land-based experiences, stories, art, and songs. Some concepts exist only in the Anishinaabe language and cannot be directly translated into English, and vice versa. Direct experience on the land is essential, as not all knowledge can be learned by reading about it; personal experience and putting the knowledge into practice are necessary for deeper understanding.

### ***Knowledge Protection***

Elders often chose to share only certain pieces of information, sometimes withholding details as a form of cultural protection, as described by one of the interviewees:

The way I look at it sometimes we don't tell the whole truth to Zhaaginaash [white] folk. We tell them a story but leave something out. Same as when you're making something, you know it's made by Anishinaabek when you put a little different colour bead in it. Something like that, you leave out some stuff that could be used differently.

This Elder noted that they intentionally leave out parts of a story or a teaching until they trust the person seeking knowledge and then decide if they are a 'good person.' This is because once knowledge is shared, it cannot be reclaimed or controlled, so recipients are expected to respect and honour the teachings. During the interviews, some information was shared off the record, reflecting cultural norms around knowledge protection and Elders' concerns about recordings.

Another form of knowledge protection is to discuss it in the Anishinaabe language. Almost all of the Elders who were

interviewed were bilingual. They stressed the importance of learning the language to fully understand Anishinaabe concepts and meanings. In this quote, another Elder describes his concerns about the appropriation of stories:

And that's important for us to know that there are other dimensions to our language which we learn about through discussion with the ones that know. We have our own people, through the knowledge keeper. We heard them say 'who are these people that have these kinds of stories?' We don't want them to be appropriated. We don't want them to be stolen. It's important for us that we keep that within our bundle because it belongs to us. It's a gift. It comes up within our brain, it comes from what we think, it comes from home.

This passage emphasizes the importance of protecting cultural knowledge through language. It highlights that understanding deeper dimensions of language comes through dialogue with knowledgeable community members. The Elder stressed that stories and teachings are sacred gifts that belong to their people and should not be appropriated or stolen as they originate from their thoughts, their homeland, and their heritage.

A cautionary tale of sharing images through social media was shared by one Elder. She described a family member's experience of finding images of their dance regalia online, which were posted without permission and presented as if the poster had made the regalia. The Elder recounted this incident to the interviewer:

We seen some stuff that was made a long time ago. And others claimed [they] made this! ... [My daughter] confronted them and corrected the notion. Needless to say the person was pretty embarrassed. You know, a lot of artist's work don't end up getting credit sometimes... So that's why we have to be very careful - *kaanaakoogaagoo.*"

This quote highlights the importance of being cautious about sharing cultural images online which could result in exploitation. Another Elder expressed concerns about external entities, such as corporations, attempting to trademark or copyright Indigenous cultural elements. These risks highlight the importance of protective measures and careful consideration when sharing cultural knowledge publicly.

***Youth reflections from doing  
fieldwork***

The youth reflected on the highlights of the fieldwork included visiting different communities, participating in cultural practices like crafting and language learning, and spending extended time with Elders beyond formal interviews and maintaining those relationships. For example, one visit involved two to three hours touring the community, sharing a meal, and engaging in daily life. These immersive experiences deepened understanding and fostered a stronger connection to the youth's cultural heritage. Returning to cultural practices, visiting elders, and participating in communal activities fostered a reminder about ongoing learning. Informal interactions, such as laughter, shared meals, and simply spending time together, were considered as meaningful as formal interviews. These moments served as reminders to youth to continue engaging with Elders and cultural traditions and highlighted the importance of balancing research with genuine community involvement.

The interviews sometimes evoked strong emotional responses. When participants showed signs of discomfort, the youth interviewers paused the conversation, stopped recording, and allowed space for the participants to express themselves or take a break. This approach often led to longer interview sessions, such as one that extended to four hours, but ensured the

well-being and comfort of the Elders. The youth reflected on their experiences during bi-monthly meetings which helped to improve their methods and learn from each interaction.

Elders expressed a desire to share their knowledge more broadly, but in practice, they sometimes requested to pause interviews to share sensitive information off the record highlighting the importance of trust and discretion in these exchanges.

These lessons encompass the importance of respectful engagement, the value of diverse perspectives within the community, the need for adaptability and persistence in facing challenges, and the significance of maintaining family and community ties.

### **Youth Reflections**

The youth were asked to reflect on their experience of being a researcher and learner. One of the youth has been working part-time as a Research Assistant on this project and provided her thoughts:

This project has been an unforgettable learning experience for research about protecting Anishinaabe knowledge and our

culture. This topic does not come up in everyday conversation, but being a youth researcher has opened this door. Being a researcher and Anishinaabe learner at the same time has taught me a duality of the ethics of western approaches and Anishinaabe teachings - utilizing the more technical aspects like informed consent, along with visiting and being respectful. It made the research more meaningful to me, being able to practice research protocols I learned in university and project training while the elders and knowledge carriers continued with their usual humour and lightheartedness that I have been surrounded by all my life. It is important to be a dual researcher and learner; to have good intentions and be a good listener. This project has made me feel more connected to our people and communities through visiting, interviewing, and learning. It has made me want to hear more stories told by our Elders and knowledge carriers. I learned that each Elder has their piece of knowledge they carry that has been carved by their different paths in life. This has made me reflect on my path as an Anishinaabe woman and how I can

help with protecting and passing on our Anishinaabe knowledge for future generations.”

Another youth participated in this project while working at a full-time job. He offered the following reflection:

Working as a dual learner and researcher has broadened my understanding of what it means to be Anishinaabe, both in how to carry yourself day to day, but also in how important it is to spend time with Elders and family. Before being a part of this project, I was aware that a lot of knowledge was being lost, especially the language. But to the extent it is, I would say the weight of what that meant really resonated with me after partaking in this project. It's definitely opened my eyes and had me reflecting on how I want to spend my time on Mother Earth. Working full-time makes it challenging to participate in cultural activities, especially during certain times of the year. Learning the language is a new aspect I want to focus on moving forward, and I will slowly try to figure out how to incorporate it into my life. As well as thinking of ways to try and encourage younger people to engage with elders and others.”

The project had significant impacts on the youth researchers in increasing their understanding about Anishinaabe knowledge and their desire to continue learning.

### **Conclusions**

We have drawn several conclusions from this study about protecting Anishinaabe knowledge. Engaging youth in the process of interviewing Elders fosters meaningful intergenerational relationships, strengthens cultural continuity, and facilitates reciprocal learning. Elders stress the importance of learners assuming responsibility for the knowledge they receive. This includes acknowledging the origins of the knowledge, applying it ethically, and sharing it in culturally appropriate ways.

Anishinaabe knowledge is inherently diverse and context-specific. Each Elder contributes unique perspectives shaped by individual life experiences and areas of expertise. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, it is essential to consult multiple Elders, recognizing that no single narrative captures the full scope of Anishinaabe knowledge systems.

Anishinaabe knowledge is deeply rooted in spirituality and conveyed through language, land-based experiences,

storytelling, visual arts, and songs. Many concepts are embedded in the Anishinaabe language and cannot be fully conveyed in English, highlighting the critical role of language revitalization in maintaining this knowledge system.

Elders utilize various strategies to safeguard Anishinaabe knowledge. These include selective sharing, use of the Anishinaabe language, and withholding sensitive information. Concerns about cultural appropriation and exploitation—particularly in digital spaces such as social media—underscore the importance of discretion and culturally grounded ethical practices when sharing knowledge publicly.

Conducting research in Anishinaabe contexts requires respect, adaptability, and perseverance. Informal, relational practices—such as visiting, sharing meals, and engaging in everyday conversation—are as important as formal interviews. These interactions contribute to trust-building and reflect the Anishinaabe value of relationality.

Participation in the project deepened the youth participants' understanding of their cultural heritage and strengthened their relationships with Elders. They expressed a growing awareness of the tension between Western research ethics and Anishinaabe epistemologies. The experience inspired a

commitment to preserving and transmitting Anishinaabe knowledge, particularly through language learning and encouraging intergenerational engagement within their communities.

Overall, the study underscores the transformative potential of youth and Elder engagement initiatives in protecting and transmitting Anishinaabe knowledge while fostering cultural identity and cultural continuity. Connecting youth and Elders is vital for fostering intergenerational connections, cultural continuity, and mutual learning in Indigenous communities. The Elders emphasized the importance of following traditional teachings, learning Anishinaabe history and language, and the importance of ceremonies, helping the youth strengthen their cultural identity and connectedness. Through these interactions, the youth gained a sense of responsibility and cultural connection, while Elders benefited from hearing younger generations' perspectives.

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## About the Authors

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**Nevada Anwhatin (member of Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory)** graduated from the Anishinaabemowin language program at Georgian College and has worked as a research assistant for several research projects. Nevada is also a visual artist and operates her own business called Seven Flowers Studio.

**Kristen McGregor (member of Anishinaabe, Whitefish River First Nation, Crane clan)**. Her focus is to help her community and people, along with continually learning from the Elders, knowledge carriers, researchers, and many others she connects with. She graduated from Queen's University in Kingston with a Bachelor of Science, specialization in Kinesiology. She is currently a research assistant and a negotiations coordinator for the Whitefish River First Nation Lands Department. She is assisting on projects involving protecting Anishinaabek knowledge and land use.

**Kyanna Sinclair-McKeever (member of Obashkaandagaang Washagamis Bay First Nation)** is a graduate of Cambrian College, and former police officer now working as a community program leader. Passionate about youth empowerment, she supports Indigenous youth in developing leadership skills, improving wellness, and exploring talents through sports and land-based learning. Committed to being a positive role model, Kyanna strives to create meaningful change and inspire the next generation within her community.

**Miles Sutherland (member of Whitefish River First Nation, Ojibwe, Cree).** Throughout his life, Miles has enjoyed playing ice hockey, running, hunting and making maple syrup with his large, extended family. As a grass dancer, he continues to travel the pow wow trail across Turtle Island. He recently graduated from Carleton University with a degree in Biomedical and Electrical Engineering and works as a Field Service Engineer.